

Volunteer Motivations

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Background: *A research project in the Spring of 2019 revealed a variety of motivations influencing volunteer selection of projects to volunteer for. Themes across volunteer's individual decision-making strategies align closely with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.*

Awareness of this mental model is important for how projects are described on the public-facing website. It may also be useful to the organization in other unexplored ways.

I.

As an organization, New York Cares sits in the middle of a transaction based on time. It 'manufactures' and hosts a wide variety of volunteer commitments that display on the website; volunteers browse and commit to the opportunities that suit them. Seen this way, time is the capital that powers the transaction. Behind this transaction, though, lie strong volunteer motivations.

Volunteers use transactional language when talking about their choices. Phrases like "providing value", "win-win", and "tractable" crop up often when volunteers are evaluating their participation in a project. The language deepens when they describe *why* they are participating. They often mention creating an "even playing field", "giving 'in return", and "pledging" themselves. Common phrases are "give back" and "give back to the community".

A key part of this transaction is the individual volunteer's motivation for participating. These motivations fall along a shared spectrum. The spectrum spans from simple desires to more complex ones. This array aligns closely with a widely accepted theory of behavioral motivation developed by Abraham Maslow in the last century. Maslow created a classification system for behavioral motivations. These progressed from physiological needs (food, warmth, and water), safety needs (security through law and order), belongingness and love needs (affiliation with a group or another), esteem needs (recognition or

achievement), self-actualization (fulfillment of personal potential), and self-transcendence (furthering a cause beyond the self)

II.

The Mental Model

Basic needs

Some of the most easily clarified motivations that spur volunteers have to do with **time to fill**. People who are in between jobs, in the city on a temporary sojourn without a work permit, or newly retired, all use similar language. A recent college graduate says “I have a lot of time”, which sounds like the recent retiree’s slightly desperate comment that he’s “just looking for things to do”. A person switching from a demanding full-time role to a consultancy said “I’ve got a little bit of time, most of the spring and summer... So I’ve been trying to find the right opportunity to put some time into.”

Another basic desire is to **gain skills** for future employment. This is a motivation that New York Cares is aware of and already has some messaging around on the website. It fits in with the organization’s key demographic: 18-30 years old, in a transient city. During interviews people mentioned seeking skills, looking for “what kind of job they could do”. One volunteer getting a degree in speech-language pathology mentioned that by volunteering she was getting experience with the populations that she would be hired to work with post-graduation.

Belongingness needs

People also talk about coming to New York Cares because they want to feel **socially connected** and a **sense of belonging**. They say they volunteer because they “meet people” and “connect with people”. They use terms that imply belonging to a group, such as “other like-minded people”. Often they mention getting to “know the community”.

In volunteer’s mental models the term community can apply both to the whole of New York City and to the individual areas within it. When asked about New York Cares, half of the respondents mentioned the word community in the few sentences of their response. It seems that they feel connected to the city, but also to its individual parts. This comment sums it up: “We’re kind of like a lot of little communities together that form one big community.”

These smaller communities can present a sense of exploration for some users. “If it [the volunteer opportunity] is on a weekend, though, I want it to be in a new neighborhood that I haven’t been to yet. So

it's an opportunity to explore the city....” This was echoed by a number of users, particularly those who are new to the city.

Esteem needs

A more complicated volunteer motivation is the desire to **feel prestige or a sense of accomplishment**. People may self identify with altruistic volunteering, yet they gain some unspoken benefits.

These can include a heightened sense of self in comparison to those being served. “I really wanted to help people and sort of give back... I feel very privileged, you know, in my life.” Or, “people support others that may not have some of the benefits that they have”.

A sense of accomplishment can also emerge through framing volunteerism as a transaction that confirms success in life. The term ‘giving back’ is common. For instance, “I’m sort of giving back what my parents and I got when we got here.”

Self-transcendence

A number of volunteers spoke of wanting to move outside of the orbit of their lives. A common phrase is to “escape the bubble”. This varyingly refers to “[being] more involved in my community and outside of my industry”, “ something that interacts with people from different parts of the city and society” and most eloquently, to “**something that's more than myself**”.

An awareness of the (often unspoken) motivations for volunteering should be used to shape messaging to volunteers. Project descriptions should appeal to potential motivations whenever appropriate.

III.

Beyond the Mental Model

Often after looking at a project description volunteers engage in skills-matching. One volunteer stated the equation formally: “the intersection of demand for need and what I can actually do.” But more often the matching is direct and one-to-one: “I’m an immigrant [and] can help people practice English” or “as a recent college graduate, I have more to offer in that area.” People make this match both out of a need to be ‘useful’ and contribute to a project’s success, but also occasionally out of a worry that they will be in over their heads. When a volunteer with an MD encountered a Lego Robotics project she worried that she might not have the skills to help the kids with their projects. My favorite example of both of these is the volunteer who was learning English. She said “I choose no English. Like farming and packaging”. Her project choice

was based on a self-assessment of her own skills (with no self-deprecation), and how they could most positively impact the outcome of a project.

Summary:

Given this tendency for users to skills match it is important that project descriptions be clear as to what volunteers will be doing, and comprehensible at a glance. Experiential language and brevity are key to this in a project description.

Awareness of the (often unspoken) motivations for volunteering should be used to shape messaging on the website as well as across the organization.