

## **Functional preferences and reward Effectiveness in volunteer motivation**

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### **Keywords**

Functional theory, volunteer, motivation, altruism, reward.

### **Abstract**

*This study examines the relationship between individual volunteers' functional preferences and their ratings of a variety of non-monetary rewards. Participants, 95% of whom had volunteer experience, completed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) and rated 31 potential rewards. The results suggest that volunteers have relatively similar reward preferences, despite distinct differences in their functional preferences. Further, gender and volunteer experience have little impact on an individual's ratings of specific rewards. Also some rewards have almost universal appeal. Finally, some rewards appear to be enjoyed less than initially expected, suggesting that volunteers may find themselves disappointed.*

*In summary, the benefits of assessing volunteer functional needs may not offset the cost of gathering this data. In most situations, nonprofits may be best-served by offering identical, highly rated rewards to all their volunteers, since the top items have virtually universal appeal and tend to be relatively inexpensive as well.*

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### **Introduction**

In 2008, more than 26% of the American population donated their time to a variety of organizations; their mean involvement was 52 hours. The largest fraction of these individuals worked with religious organizations (35.1%), while 26% assisted educational or youth service groups, and another 13.5% were involved with social and community service organizations (*Volunteering in the United States, 2008*). This veritable army of volunteers provides an invaluable resource for Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs). Given their importance to these organizations, as well as the constrained resources available to NPOs, it is critical to fully understand what motivates volunteers to become and remain involved. While nonprofits' reliance on volunteer labor is not new, the pressure to recruit and maintain volunteers has continued to intensify (Wilson, 2000). The expanding need for volunteers, coupled with the low exit barriers associated with volunteering, makes the study of volunteer motivation both timely and important.

Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have received considerable research attention. Studies of extrinsic motivation initially focused on rewards and motivation in the for-profit arena, primarily within the domain of economics (Benabou & Tirole, 2003; Lazear, 2000a, 2000b). While researchers acknowledge that nonmonetary rewards can be important factors in worker motivation (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Merchant, Stede, & Zheng, 2003), these empirical studies have focused almost exclusively on the effects of monetary rewards, possibly because the

unquantifiable nature of nonmonetary rewards makes data collection more difficult (Merchant et al., 2003). Unfortunately, since nonprofit organizations are generally limited to providing nonmonetary rewards, this gap in the extrinsic reward research limits the applicability of existing research to the study of volunteers.

Given the numerous differences between volunteers and paid workers, simply exporting motivation research from the for-profit environment to the nonprofit world appears ill-advised. Even though the number of individuals volunteering each year is substantial, individual volunteers are not representative of the general U.S. population (Allen & Rushton, 1983; Auslander & Litwin, 1988; Smith, 1994). In addition, since most volunteers also hold paying jobs, their volunteer work may fulfill only those motivational needs that are not being met at work. Because of these and other differences between paid workers and volunteers, researchers have developed numerous theories specifically describing unpaid worker motivation.

In attempting to keep their volunteers satisfied and to increase retention, nonprofit managers often seek symbolic rewards that increase volunteer commitment and favorably impact volunteer performance; common examples include (a) thank-you letters, (b) prizes, (c) publicity, (d) appreciation dinners, and (e) conferences, though the complete list is surprisingly extensive and diverse. In one large study, Cnaan and Cascio (1999) evaluated seventeen different symbolic rewards, assessing the impact of specific demographic, personality, and situational variables on volunteer satisfaction, organizational commitment, and tenure. While they found that symbolic rewards do play a role in the three outcomes, none of the resulting regression equations contained more than two of the seventeen symbolic rewards they included in the analysis (Cnaan & Cascio, 1999), suggesting that individual responses to rewards are quite diverse.

Previous research has also demonstrated that individuals exhibit a wide variety of motivational needs, so it seems likely that when a large and diverse group of volunteers is considered (e.g., 510 participants from 105 human service organizations in Cnaan and Cascio's 1999 study), their differing motivational needs would mitigate the overall impact of any particular extrinsic reward on the outcome variables. Without systematically matching and mismatching rewards with individual volunteer preferences, it will remain difficult to determine whether rewarding volunteers in a personalized manner can favorably impact the outcome variables of interest.

The purpose of this study is to examine how individual factors, including reward preferences, influence the perception of various rewards. In particular, this study will attempt to determine whether organizations are better-served by matching specific rewards to specific individual preferences, or whether generic awards can be just as effective.

### **Theories of Volunteer Motivation**

Since the labor contributed by volunteers is essential to the effective functioning of nonprofit organizations in the United States, nonprofit managers have a vested interest in keeping their volunteers motivated. Research in the area of volunteer motivation has produced a number of theories, including altruism (Simmons, Klein, & Simmons, 1977), egoism (Schervish & Havens, 1997), and functional theory (Clary & Snyder, 1999).

### **Altruism and Egoism**

Much of the early research examining volunteer motivation centered on the dichotomy of altruistic and egoistic motives, found at opposing ends of the rational utilitarianism scale (Schervish & Havens, 1997). Altruistic helping behavior is any action in which the helper initiates the act voluntarily without expecting a reward from external sources (Bierhoff, 1987). Altruism explains actions through the motivational lens of selflessness, putting aside one's own personal interests to cater to the interests of others (Schervish & Havens, 1997). Much of the early altruistic research examined heroism (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981) and blood and organ donation (Simmons et al., 1977; Simmons, Marine, & Simmons, 1987; Titmuss, 1971).

The emotion of empathy, identifying with the need of another person, is commonly suggested to be the source of altruistic behavior. Empathy is typically directed toward specific individuals, which may make it difficult to examine altruism as a motivator for helping intangible groups such as the poor. Empathic motivation can also potentially lead to behavior that is at odds with the common good (Batson et al., 2002).

At the opposite extreme from altruism lies egoism, defined as acting in a manner that promotes an individual's self-interest. Egoism has been called "the most obvious motive for acting for the common good" (Batson et al., 2002, p. 434) as well as the only motive powerful enough to matter (Hardin, 1977). The benefits that an individual can receive from egoistic helping behavior include monetary compensation, recognition, avoidance of fines or punishment, reduced guilt, increased self-esteem, improved position at work, and many more. Although egoism is a powerful motivator, it is also unpredictable. Since its goal is an increase in personal benefits rather than the common good, when an opportunity arises that more effectively meets egoistic goals, the individual's contribution to the community project typically terminates (Batson et al., 2002).

While altruism and egoism both contribute to our understanding of volunteer motivation, they do not fully reflect the multifaceted nature of an individual's initial or ongoing decision to contribute time to an organization. Additional theories have been posited to further explain this phenomenon.

### **Functional Theory Background**

Functional theory proposes that individuals hold certain attitudes or engage in particular behaviors because those attitudes and actions meet specific psychological functions, and that different individuals can hold the same attitudes or participate in the same behaviors for very different functional reasons (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). Unlike previous theories of motivation, the functional approach proposed by Katz (1960) and Smith et al. (1956) focuses strictly on psychological variables as factors of attitude change. Focusing on psychological, rather than experiential, factors increases the likelihood that the behaviors observed in functional studies could be extrapolated to the general public. The topic of volunteer motivation is a natural application of functional theory.

### **Functional Theory and Volunteers**

Within the domain of functional research, the motivation to volunteer appears most closely related to existing work which applied functional theory to human resource management (Dulebohn, Murray, & Sun, 2000; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Piderit, 2000; Pratkanis & Turner, 1994), where functional theory research evaluated attitudes and their

consequences within the context of an organization. The practical questions explored include how to recruit individuals, how to increase their participation or their tenure, and how to improve their satisfaction with the task.

Although applications of functional theory to volunteers began in the early 1990's, standardized measures of volunteer motivation were generally absent from the literature (Clary & Snyder, 1991). Development of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) followed in an attempt to produce a measurement tool that could be applied to a wide range of volunteers. Volunteer work was proposed to fulfill six psychological functional needs:

- social (spending time with friends and gaining approval of admired individuals)
- career (job-related benefits or advancement)
- understanding (learning or practicing skills or abilities)
- values (expressing altruistic or humanitarian concern)
- protective (reducing guilt over feeling more fortunate, or escaping personal problems)
- enhancement (gaining satisfaction from personal growth or esteem)

Items for the VFI were initially derived from the authors' interpretation of these functions in conjunction with both quantitative and qualitative findings from earlier work on the motivations of volunteerism (Clary, Snyder, Ridge et al., 1998). Following significant testing, Clary et al. (1998) determined that the VFI is not only robust across varied volunteer opportunities and diverse samples, but also easy to administer and useful for addressing organizational questions regarding commitment and satisfaction.

More recently the VFI has been used to study gender differences among volunteers (Fletcher & Major, 2004; Switzer et al., 1999), satisfaction among volunteers in service learning (Chapman & Morley, 1999), and volunteer motivations in older adults (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998; Okun & Schultz, 2003). Functional theory encompasses many of the elements contained within the other major theories of volunteer motivation. This broad scope suggests that functional theory offers enhanced utility in dealing with the multifaceted nature of volunteer motivations.

### **Rewards and Volunteers**

In addition to donating time to a nonprofit organization, most volunteers also hold paid employment (Smith, 1994). This dual role means that virtually all of the personality profiles and demographic variable groupings found in the volunteer workforce are also present among paid employees. Even so, individuals with certain demographic characteristics or personality traits are more highly represented in the volunteer workforce (Allen & Rushton, 1983; Auslander & Litwin, 1988; Smith, 1994). This subset of individuals may exhibit different fulfillment needs than the general population of paid workers.

Volunteers are unlike paid employees because they typically accept their assignment with no expectation of monetary compensation. In cases where goal congruence between the individual and the organization is high, the volunteer might even resent an offer of monetary compensation, since that payment would reduce the funds available to meet the organization's primary objectives.

Despite these contextual differences, more recent theories of volunteer motivation suggest that volunteers, like paid workers, participate with the expectation of receiving

something of benefit in exchange for their efforts. Opinions on the impact of extrinsic rewards on performance and motivation vary widely between and within academic disciplines (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci et al., 1999; Lazear, 2000a), but extant research on incentives is consistent on two findings.

First, rewards which are salient and valuable to the worker will provide motivation as long as the reward system remains in place (Kohn, 1993b). Second, an individual's basic hygiene needs must be met to avoid dissatisfaction with, and hostility toward, the organization (Crewson, 1997; Herzberg, 1966; Wilkinson et al., 1986). In organizations with a paid workforce, some basic level of salary and benefits constitute two of the primary hygiene needs. These rewards are normally not available to organizations that utilize a volunteer workforce. The question of which, if any, basic rewards are required to meet volunteer hygiene needs, remains unexamined.

The assortment of methods available to recognize volunteer contributions is enormous; among the most common are appreciation dinners, recognition in the organization's newsletter, a certificate or plaque, gifts such as movie passes, and preferred parking (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Hahn et al., 2004; Klubnik, 1995; Spitzer, 1996). The motivational effectiveness of a particular reward obviously depends on the value that particular reward holds for the volunteer, as well as other factors.

Research linking the effectiveness of advertising appeals to the individual's functional profile has been conducted in both the marketing and volunteer motivation fields (Clary, Snyder, Ridge et al., 1998; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). These studies demonstrate that advertising messages that are targeted to match an individual's primary needs increase the attractiveness of the product or volunteer opportunity. In a similar vein, it appears likely that a specific reward would not be equally valued by individuals with different functional profiles, and that its attractiveness to a volunteer would vary according to the reward's ability to meet the individual's unique needs. However the proposition that functional needs are fulfilled to different degrees by various nonmonetary rewards has not been empirically tested.

## **Research Questions**

The present study examines several questions in an attempt to extend our understanding of the relationship between functional preferences and volunteer rewards. The most basic question which remains untested is simply whether individuals exhibiting different functional preferences also exhibit preferences for different rewards. Researchers and practitioners alike have speculated that individually customized rewards might prove more effective in motivating volunteers. Specifically it has been assumed that a reward tailored to an individual's personal functional preference will prove more motivating than one which does not fit the VFI preference. Confirmation of this belief would support the practice of reward customization, while its rejection would encourage NPOs to embrace the more cost-effective strategy of offering more generic rewards.

### **RQ1: Do VFI preferences predict recipient ratings of specific rewards?**

Existing research also suggests that individuals may systematically differ in their average assessment of rewards in general. In particular, it seems plausible that individuals with certain motivational profiles might respond more enthusiastically to any reward, while those with other preferences might be less energized regardless of the compensation. This question

also provides potential guidance to NPOs as they attempt to craft reward offerings which appeal to individuals with varying profiles.

**RQ2: Do primary functional preferences influence an individual's overall reward rating magnitude?**

A great deal of speculation has centered on potential implications of crafting reward packages to satisfy individual needs; this perspective rests on the assumption that no universally appealing reward exists, and that individuals with differing functional preferences will rate different rewards as most desirable. The opposing perspective holds that high quality rewards will be almost universally valued, regardless of one's profile.

**RQ3: Are highly rated rewards meaningful to volunteers regardless of primary functional preference?**

Finally, even without assessing functional preferences, some individual differences are typically evident. Specifically, it seems possible that certain rewards may be more appealing to men than women, or that some rewards may be more desirable for new volunteers than for more experienced participants. This knowledge is potentially useful in selecting appropriate rewards.

**RQ4: Does gender or volunteer experience predict an individual's ratings of specific rewards?**

**Results and Analysis**

Data for the present study was collected from students enrolled at a small private university in the Southwest. The use of student samples is sometimes inappropriate due to systematic differences between the student population and the general populace, however student subjects are appropriate in the present study for several reasons. First, student samples have been used in several previous studies of volunteer motivation; in each case, factor analysis of the data extracted the same six motivations present in the general population of adult volunteers, as well as in samples of older volunteers and individuals with doctoral degrees in psychology (Chapman & Morley, 1999; Clary, Snyder, Ridge et al., 1998; Ferrari et al., 1999; Switzer et al., 1999). Also, many NPOs utilize college students as volunteers. Finally, a majority of students enrolled in this particular university participate in volunteer work during their college tenure.

Participants were recruited in class and received extra credit for participation. The sample consisted of 148 students, of which 56% were male and 95% had volunteer experience. Each participant completed an online survey which included the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) and rated 31 rewards assembled from existing literature and a survey of current NPOs; the list included free t-shirts, thank you notes, a party with other volunteers, and many others.

**General findings**

RQ1 asked whether an individual's VFI preference would predict that individual's rating of specific rewards. An initial assessment of the data was performed, including tests for normality of the data (histogram), equality of variance (scatterplot of residuals), and independence of observations (Durbin-Watson test). Multiple regression was used to assess the relationship between VFI factors and individual rewards; the results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1:

*Individual Rewards and VFI Factors*

Rank	Reward	Predicting factors	R2	-value of model
4	Thank you from NPO	E	0.092	0.000
	Certificate of appreciation	U	0.090	0.001
	Prize (e.g. movie tickets or gift card)	E	0.084	0.001
7	Expense-paid day trip	E	0.080	0.001
8	Expense-paid overnight trip	E,U*	0.066	0.014
9	Party with volunteers & NPO staff	E	0.158	0.000
	In-house lecture on relevant topic	V,P,C*	0.139	0.000
	Local conference participation	E	0.108	0.000
	Out-of-town conference participation	E	0.137	0.000
	Newsletter publicity	C	0.120	0.000
10	Appreciation luncheon	E	0.092	0.000
6	Annual dinner	E	0.090	0.001
	Volunteer of the month award	E	0.066	0.003
15	Volunteer of the year award	E	0.083	0.001
	Service pin	E	0.125	0.000
	Free parking	C	0.045	0.015
14	Free basic medical services	P	0.078	0.001
3	Free meals at volunteer site	V	0.074	0.002
	Media publicity	C	0.091	0.001
	Reserved parking when volunteering	C	0.059	0.006
2	Thank you from people served/helped	U	0.051	0.010
13	Free t-shirt from organization/event	E	0.121	0.000
	Meet celebrities	E,U*	0.076	0.006
1	Meet people helped/served	V,U,P*,E	0.401	0.000
	Wall plaque commemorating service	E	0.091	0.001
	Promotion to leadership position	U	0.150	0.000
12	Invitation to attend workshop to learn new skills	V,U	0.264	0.000
	Selected for volunteer job rotation program	E,S	0.213	0.000
11	Selected as ambassador for nonprofit	V,E	0.207	0.000
5	Selected to Board of Directors for NPO	V	0.166	0.000
	Invited to speak at annual recognition dinner	U	0.056	0.007

\*coefficient is negative

In summary, in all 31 cases the relationship was significant at the .05 level; in 28 of the cases, it was significant at the .01 level. Of the 31 rewards assessed, "Meeting the people served" was the highest-rated, and 41% of the variance in this item was predicted by the respondent's VFI preference. Also the VFI factor most often retained in the equation was *Enhancement*, which was a significant predictor for 18 of the 31 rewards; interestingly, despite being present most

frequently, this function was the top motivator for only 8 of the study's participants. The second most common factor was *Understanding*, which was significantly related to 8 rewards. For more than half the rewards tested, although the relationships were statistically significant, the amount of variance explained was quite small (i.e. less than 10%).

RQ2 examined whether individuals with particular functional preferences tend to rate all rewards higher or lower than individuals with other preferences. This question considered whether certain groups place relatively little value on rewards of any kind; it also examined whether the overall rankings found in the previous analysis are being driven by a single group of extremely enthusiastic raters. For this analysis we identified the top motivating factor for each respondent and summarized the data (see Table 2).

Table 2:  
*Top Motivating Factors and Their Frequencies*

Top Ratings (primary motivator):	Frequency:*
Values	61
Understanding	18
Career	12
Enhancement	8
Social	3
Protective	1

*\*Some individuals rated two top motivators equally (a tie); these values were omitted from Table 2 and the analysis.*

Due to the small sample size within some groups, normality could not be assumed, so a Kruskal-Wallis test was used to assess differences between groups, and the Social and Protective groups were deleted due to inadequate sample size. The assessment found no significant differences among the remaining four groups ( $p=.765$ ), leading to the conclusion that there is no significant difference in the magnitude of ratings being made by individuals with different primary preferences.

RQ3 examined whether the highest-rated rewards are equally desirable for volunteers regardless of their functional preference; this item considers the possible existence of 'universal' rewards which have high appeal across all functional preferences. This analysis was conducted on the fifteen most highly rated rewards; for each reward a one-way ANOVA was conducted using each participant's primary motivator as the factor. A post hoc Tukey analysis was performed for "free meals," the only reward for which a significance ( $p=.023$ ) was observed. For this reward there was a significant difference between the Career and Understanding groups ( $p = .031$ ) and between the Values and Understanding groups ( $p = .033$ ).

RQ4 asked whether significant differences exist in reward ratings based on gender or previous volunteer experience. Multiple regression was used to examine this question, employing dummy variables for gender and volunteer experience (current, former, or none). The addition of these variables produced no major shifts in the overall model. For the gender variable, the reward 'thank you note from people served' was valued more highly by women than by men, however no other significant gender differences were found.

Volunteer experience did significantly impact ratings of four rewards. In the models describing 'expense paid overnight trip' and 'expense paid day trip,' the variable 'current volunteers' was retained in the regression equation. For the item 'local conference participation' and 'out-of-town conference participation,' the 'former volunteers' variable was retained. In both cases the coefficient for the demographic variable was negative, indicating that current volunteers are significantly less interested in trips, and former volunteers are significantly less interested in conference participation, than other participants. These results suggest that individuals who actually receive these rewards may find them to be less satisfying than originally anticipated.

## **Discussion**

This analysis of volunteers and their functional needs produces several interesting observations. First, individuals do volunteer for different reasons. Beyond the broad observation that some people volunteer to help others while some volunteer to help themselves, individuals follow a wide range of paths in deciding to donate their time and effort. Given the extreme variation evident in the decision-making process it seems prudent for NPO managers to deal with volunteers as individuals whenever possible, rather than lumping them all into a homogenous group.

The analysis also strongly suggests that a given individual will generally value some rewards more highly than others. This difference has long been theorized, and the proposed response has been to custom tailor reward packages to the functional needs of individual volunteers, a potentially time-consuming and difficult task. In particular, volunteer motivation scores predict 40% of the variance in the top-ranked reward ('meeting people helped or served').

However, it also appears that top rewards are consistently viewed favorably by a broad group of individuals. This finding suggests that despite their functional preferences, individuals tend to prefer the same types of rewards, simplifying the task of volunteer coordinators as they strive to reward volunteers in meaningful ways. Also, for the participants in this study, the four highest-rated rewards (meeting people served, free meals, thank you note from people served, thank you note from NPO) are generally inexpensive and relatively easy to provide.

Finally, while men and women differ very little in their reward preferences, more experienced volunteers tended to rate the more time-consuming rewards lower than their less-experienced colleagues. This finding suggests that some rewards may initially sound exciting, but are rated as less valuable when actually received.

In summary, the benefits of assessing functional needs may not outweigh the cost of gathering this data. In most situations, NPO managers may be best-served by offering highly rated rewards to all their volunteers, since the analysis suggests that the top items have virtually universal appeal and tend to be relatively inexpensive as well.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study utilized a sample of students enrolled at a single private university; because of the group's demographic homogeneity, caution should be exercised when generalizing the

findings to other groups. In addition, the students involved in this study all attend a university at which volunteer involvement is actively encouraged; the implications of using a sample from this type of environment are unknown. Students may resent what they perceive as the university promoting its own values or they may have self-selected an environment that matches their personal values and tendencies; either reaction could make the results of this study less applicable to volunteers in a broader context. To examine this limitation, a similar study could be conducted in a more diverse environment.

### Further Work

This study examined the relationship between individual volunteers' functional preferences and their ratings of a variety of non-monetary rewards. The results suggest that volunteers have relatively similar reward preferences, despite distinct differences in their functional preferences. It also appears that gender and volunteer experience have little impact on an individual's ratings of specific rewards.

This preliminary finding should now be validated with additional studies conducted within multiple NPOs. These samples would provide a wider cross-section of ages and backgrounds, as well as allowing participants to consider the rewards in the context of their current volunteer activities. Further questions remain to be answered, including the ways in which specific rewards impact job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and tenure with the organization.

Finally, this study assessed the impact of NPO rewards on volunteers. While the list of rewards was quite lengthy, it was merely a compilation of rewards currently being offered. Further research is needed to determine what types of rewards volunteers actually want. A clearer understanding of volunteer needs may go the farthest in helping NPO managers better utilize and retain their extensive volunteer resources.

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