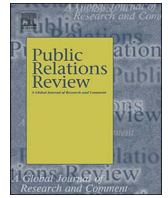




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Calling all volunteers: The role of stewardship and involvement in volunteer-organization relationships

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ABSTRACT

Millions of people in the U.S. volunteer, and understanding how organizations can retain and deepen relationships with these individuals is critical to the sustainability of the nonprofit sector. The relationship maintenance strategies of stewardship may help nonprofit organizations strengthen relationships with their volunteers, particularly if organizations are able to influence volunteers' feelings of involvement. An online survey of volunteers was conducted to see the relationships between stewardship, involvement, and organization-public relationship (OPR) outcomes. Our path analysis model indicates that stewardship strategies can positively contribute to volunteers' involvement and their evaluations of OPR outcomes. One of the few to test this model, this study contributes new theory to public relations literature and better informs the practice.

1. Introduction

With 62.6 million people engaged in volunteering in the United States – approximately a quarter of the national population – volunteerism is a pervasive activity in U.S. society (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). It is also important to the economy: The work of volunteers contributes an estimated \$172.9 billion in value to recipient organizations (McKeever, 2015). Given the incredible impact of volunteer contributions on nonprofit organizations, understanding volunteer behavior is critical to the health of our nation's nonprofit sector and our society in general.

Volunteer communication is a growing area of research in public relations. Volunteers represent key publics for nonprofit organizations because they contribute valuable time and energy to nonprofit organizations, and they ultimately care about the nonprofit's work (Farmer & Fedor, 2001; McDonald & Warburton, 2003). Building strong relationships with volunteer publics requires relationship management strategies that foster two-way communication (Bortree & Waters, 2008), and thus public relations theory has important applications for volunteer communication and nonprofit organizational success.

Previous studies have found that nonprofit organizations can build strong, positive relationships with stakeholders through a variety of cultivation strategies (Balsler & McClusky, 2005; Powers & Yaros, 2013; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016), and these stakeholders include volunteers (Studer, 2016; Waters and Bortree, 2013). Volunteers comprise a unique stakeholder group for organizations and require specific relationship management strategies that cannot be addressed by traditional employee engagement strategies (Studer, 2016). Because volunteers also bring different levels of interest and motivation to their volunteer experiences, relationship management strategies can impact the level of involvement they feel with the organization

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(Bortree & Waters, 2008; Millette & Gagné, 2008; Vecina, Chacón, Marzana, & Marta, 2013; Waters & Bortree, 2013).

Stewardship has been suggested as an effective relationship management concept that can – and should – be used to strengthen relationships between volunteers and nonprofit organizations (Hernandez, 2012; Moran & Mallia, 2015; Waters & Bortree, 2013). In organizational management literature, stewardship is a critical strategy whereby individuals perceive their relationships with their organizations as a “moral commitment and binds both parties to work toward a common goal” (Hernandez, 2012, p. 173). In this way, individuals who work for an organization, including volunteers, support the organization out of a deep commitment and personal values (Hernandez, 2012). Therefore, helping volunteers to view their relationship with their organization through stewardship is important for the continuation of the relationship. “Effective stewardship ensures volunteers know they are valued, their efforts are acknowledged, and that they connect more fully with the organization—resulting in increased involvement” (Moran & Mallia, 2015, p. 101). Increased involvement ultimately motivates volunteers to continue their relationship with the organization (Lammers, 1991; Moran & Mallia, 2015). However, despite this assertion from the practice, little research has tested the theoretical application of stewardship strategies to building volunteer-organization relationships through involvement.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to this gap in literature by understanding how organizations can retain their volunteers to the mutual benefit of individuals and the causes they care about. While stewardship has been shown to predict levels of involvement for nonprofit donors (Kelly, 2001), this study will extend the concept to the volunteer-nonprofit relationship, answering a recent call from the volunteer managers in the practice to use stewardship strategies to engage volunteers (Moran & Mallia, 2015). The study builds on prior work in public relations to test the different ways stewardship impacts involvement for donors and volunteers of nonprofit organizations. The findings of the present study will provide additional insights into the role of stewardship in building volunteer relationships for both theory and practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stewardship

Kelly (2001) defines stewardship as the fifth and most important step in the relationship management process. Stewardship creates an “essential feedback loop” (Kelly, 2001, p. 280) from organization to public that reinforces positive behavior and “ensures that the public relations process is continuous” (p. 281). The concept was originally applied to fundraising, which Kelly considers a specialty of public relations, as a way to ensure donors were communicated with effectively after making a donation as a way to ensure their ongoing connection to the organization. This strategy is crucial in fundraising because asking donors to give again is more successful and cost-effective for organizations than acquiring new donors (Kelly, 1998, 2001).

Kelly (2001) argues the same logic can be applied to the broader category of organization-public relationships. Stewardship can provide insights for organizations who wish to manage relationships with all stakeholders and build the strength of these relationships. She proposes that four key communications strategies comprise good stewardship:

- Reciprocity: Thanking and recognizing publics for their contributions.
- Reporting: Disclosing information about the organization, especially information pertaining to situations when publics were asked for support.
- Responsibility: Keeping publics trust and acting as a good citizen.
- Relationship nurturing: Communicating with publics continually so they feel informed and remembered.

Studies applying these four stewardship dimensions to the organization-public relationship in the fundraising field have shown that stewardship strategies are effective at maintaining and strengthening donor relationships. Waters (2009) developed a 16-item scale to measure the four strategies of stewardship. Using this scale, several studies have shown that donors rate every stewardship strategy positively (Waters, 2010), and major donors (who typically give significant amounts of money to organizations) rate these strategies more positively than annual donors, who typically give smaller amounts (Waters, 2009, 2011). These donors also rate relationship outcomes (trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality) more positively than annual donors, which indicates that stewardship strategies strengthen relationships between donors and the organizations they support (O’Neil, 2009; Van Puyvelde, Caers, Du Bois, & Jegers, 2012; Waters, 2009, 2011; Worley & Little, 2002). Waters (2008) also found that donors who have given multiple times to an organization rate the four stewardship strategies more positively than one-time donors. Other studies demonstrate that stewardship strategies effect behavioral outcomes like donating or donating multiple times (O’Neil, 2007; Worley & Little, 2002).

If stewardship strategies can strengthen relationships between organizations and publics, they can also be applied to the organization-volunteer relationship. Recent literature has advocated for the use of stewardship beyond donor relationships to include volunteer relationships. “Through consistent, meaningful communication, the organization would develop a stronger relationship with the volunteer, resulting in greater organizational capacity, stronger community connections, and increased donations. Stewarding volunteers is not unlike stewarding donors.” (Moran & Mallia, 2015, p. 100). Studies have found that stewardship strategies positively impact relationship outcomes for volunteers, and volunteers who also donate rate their relationships more positively than individuals who only volunteer or only donate (Waters & Bortree, 2013). For example, the strategy of relationship nurturing is an important way to engage and retain volunteers (Pressgrove, 2013), while reporting information about the organization to volunteers can help them feel included in the “overall organizational culture” (Waters & Bortree, 2013). Recognition – a form of reciprocity – provides volunteers with a sense of belonging to an organization and acknowledgement of their efforts, an important

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