

Changing the Message but Not the Point

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Corporations spend millions of dollars each year to market their products in the most effective way to the most likely customers. As non-profit and service organizations, such segmenting can often feel too “corporate” or at odds with our mission or philosophy. We want to make sure that we are attracting the volunteers with the “right” intentions. Yet, there are pieces from the way that these more consumer-focused companies do business that we can make our own and, in the meantime, expand our reach and effectiveness of the mission.

Segmenting

There is no particular type of person with one background and demographic that is the only population for our programs. As a matter of fact, we all talk a significant amount internally to our own organization and between members of Catholic Volunteer Network about how we want diversity amongst our volunteers. Yet, how many of us use one brochure and one primary method of recruiting to attract these different folks. We often write our materials for our “base” of potential volunteers and hope that others will be able to read between the lines and see where they fit. It doesn’t take a substantial additional printing budget to be deliberate about the message that might appeal to different audiences.

If you take some time yourself or with your staff or volunteers to brainstorm different segments of the larger audience with whom you would like to share your mission and consider what are the different aspects of your program that might appeal more or less to them, you will find your message much more effective. Today’s electronic age means you can target these different populations with less effort and money. Sending personal emails with these highlighted areas or making adjustments to parts of your webpage can go a long way. If you do have some extra money and energy in your recruiting budget, try a target mailing or meeting with a new group on campus that uses your new ideas. Having key talking points for the different segments you are trying to reach for those who are the “faces of your organization” can help remind us all what to highlight which each group.

Messaging

The same photos, stories and statistics do not move everyone to the same action. We have all had small examples of this reality in our day to work- we know how we can best get across our idea to our supervisor or Board Chair. Some might be motivated by a plethora of statistics and pie charts showing a cost savings, while others might be convinced by a personal story or impassioned “pitch” of why this idea is such a great one. We learn these different styles and often adjust our own way of proceeding accordingly to be as effective as possible. This is a very simple way of contemplating the idea of messaging that corporations spend millions of dollars on each year. It also illustrates how we have already learned to do this in our ongoing work without compromising the values of our mission and philosophy.

Now is the time to translate that to recruiting efforts. I will be writing primarily of recruiting in a college campus environment, but some could certainly translate. A few examples:

Faculty - Key allies on any college campus can be some key faculty members. They are talking to students throughout the year as a professor and advisor and can often be the person that a student seeks out for advice on what to do after graduation. Giving faculty members the information that will resonate most with them and their discipline can only help when they are working with students. A recognition that the message is not likely the same for a theology or social work professor as a business or hard science one, can make the conversation more effective. Brainstorm some of the “non-traditional” departments on a campus that you would like to target and think about what would resonate with them when speaking to their graduates. Just because they are concerned about how their graduates will stay current in the field with “a year off” doesn’t mean that they won’t be open to hearing some job skills that can be learned during that time.

Career Center - This is often the first place a senior will turn when making that post-graduation decision. Many career centers today present post graduate service as a viable option to the students with whom they work, but there is still work to be done. Meeting the staff of these centers with concrete job possibilities and skills that will be learned can be very helpful. And if you have examples or testimonials from former volunteers on the role that being a volunteer played, they can be very illustrative to the staff. Remember this is not the only thing that the potential volunteer will hear about your organization, so a focused message is not counter to mission.

Non-traditional majors - I would venture to say that many of you have similar experience to JVC and most of your volunteers come from some form of the humanities or education- if I am wrong, good for you. These are, clearly, not the only students who can provide excellent service as a volunteer and be transformed. Follow a pattern as suggested with faculty to open the conversation with an engineering or architecture student. And, perhaps most importantly, stay connected to your current volunteers and former volunteers who came from these paths as they will understand what the message needs to be better than any of us.

These ideas may seem obvious, but they are often the things that we shy away from or don’t spend the prep time on before our conversations begin. Spending some time crafting the message in advance is a bit like tilling the soil- it ensures that the seed we are dropping has a greater likelihood of growth.