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# Using the Web to Effectively Attract Volunteers to Non-Profit Organizations

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## Abstract
*Non-profit organizations often rely on volunteers to help staff and sustain organizational services, functions, and programs. The web is a critical vehicle for attracting these needed volunteers. The authors searched the available literature and reviewed close to 100 non-profit organizational websites to identify best practices of note. Fourteen best practices in web site design are forwarded and discussed.*

## Key Words:
web presence, best practices, volunteer resource management, recruitment,
non-profit organizations

## Introduction

An effective and robust web presence is seen as essential to for-profit organizational success (Waters, 2007). The need for a highly effective web site is not exclusive, however, to profit organizations; it is critical for non-profit organizations as well. The web site can be an effective medium for public relations, employee recruitment, informing the community of events or news, fundraising, and of primary interest in this paper, recruiting volunteers (Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober, & Keeping, 2003).

Volunteers are a vital resource for many non-profit organizations (Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, & Gliem, 2005). Volunteer programs' web sites provide volunteer resource managers (VRMs) a method with which they can reach their

intended audience (potential volunteers) with few reservations about prohibitive costs or physical distance. By not connecting in an effective way with potential volunteers via the web, non-profit organizations run the risk of not attracting and signing-up the essential volunteer talent they need. Our goal was to uncover the best practices for constructing or designing volunteer program web sites for the purposes of attracting and recruiting volunteers. To determine best practices in volunteer program web site design, the authors conducted literature searches on the topic, scanned close to 100 non-profit websites, and spoke with VRMs. From this search and examination, 14 key web practices of note were identified (Table 1).

**Suggested Volunteer Program Web Site Best Practices**

*Best Practice 1: The front page of the organization's web site provides a link to the volunteer program web page*

Table 1

*Recommended Best Practices for Volunteer Program Web Sites*

| Best Practice |
| --- |
| 1. The front page of organization's web site includes a link to volunteer program web page |
| 2. The organization's web site includes the organization's mission statement |
| 3. The volunteer program's web page provides the volunteer program mission statement Web site provides a description of the volunteer program |
| 4. The volunteer program's web site provides a clear, detailed description of the volunteer program |
| 5. The web site lists requirements for volunteering |
| 6. The web site indicates minimum number of hours required of volunteers |
| 7. The web site lists available volunteer positions |
| 8. The web site provides a job description for each volunteer positions |
| 9. The web site provides specific steps to volunteer (the process is outlined) |
| 10. The web site indicates if volunteer orientation is available and provides information on the next orientation session |
| 11. The web site allows visitors to apply online or download the application form |
| 12. The web site allows visitors to register for more information |
| 13. The web site provides contact information for the volunteer resource manager |
| 14. The web site indicates the type of training volunteers will receive beyond orientation |

Volunteer programs that are building a web site must first ensure that visitors can access it. A direct link from the organizational web site's front page to the volunteer program web page should be provided. This link should be in a prominent location so the potential volunteer is not searching. Accessibility is the first critical step to attracting volunteers.

*Best Practice 2: The organization's web site provides an organizational mission statement*

*Best Practice 3: The volunteer program's web site provides the volunteer program's mission statement*

Once visitors reach the volunteer section of the organization's web site, a mission statement for both the organization and the volunteer program should be presented. Mission statements signify the culture of an organization and communicate to the reader the purpose of the volunteer program (Vandijck, Desmidt, & Buelens, 2007). Most organizations develop a mission or vision statement early in the organization's existence. Non-profit organizations who recognize the vital importance of fostering a healthy volunteer program may consider developing a separate but related volunteer program mission statement. The volunteer program mission statement should support the overall organization's mission statement and provide an understanding of the kind of culture that the organization wants their volunteers to experience.

*Best Practice 4: The volunteer program's web site provides a clear, detailed description of the volunteer program*

To further attract volunteers to the organization, a descriptive statement with detailed and comprehensive information about the volunteer program should be

provided. This description may provide additional information about the program not apparent from the mission statement (e.g., potential positions for volunteers, targeted outcomes of volunteering, etc.). A detailed description gives the impression of a capable and focused volunteer program and reflects very well on the VRM.

*Best Practice 5: The web site provides requirements for volunteering*

*Best Practice 6: The web site indicates minimum number of hours required of volunteers*

*Best Practice 7: The web site lists available volunteer positions*

*Best Practice 8: The web site provides a "job description" for each volunteer position*

The website must be informative. The web site should give potential volunteers an understanding of their potential role through clear, detailed explanations of the different volunteer positions available. These descriptions should explain the requirements for volunteering as well as the minimum number of hours necessary to carry-out the position tasks. Additional information in this form acts as a realistic preview of the actual day-to-day duties of volunteering, presents the scope of work the visitor may be engaged in, and ensures that applicants have a good idea whether or not they will enjoy fulfilling their responsibilities.

*Best Practice 9: The web site provides specific steps to volunteer (the process is outlined)*

*Best Practice 10: The web site indicates if orientation is available and provides information on the next orientation session*

*Best Practice 11: The web site allows visitors to apply online or download the application form*

If a visitor to the web site decides that volunteering at the organization is right for them, they should be given a chance to act on this decision. According to McFarland (2005), volunteer programs can benefit from providing detailed, user-friendly guidelines for the application process. There are several ways to facilitate the application process. These include providing a short step-by-step instruction guide, providing specific information on volunteer orientation sessions, and enabling both web-based and mail-based applications.

*Best Practice 12: The web site allows visitors to register for more information*

*Best Practice 13: The web site provides contact information for the VRM*

The web site should have avenues for potential volunteers to obtain additional information and contact the VRM for specialized information/questions. By allowing potential volunteers to register for more information, VRMs can reduce the possibility of information overload and be strategic in the placement of information on the website. In addition, providing contact information for the VRM serves to involve the potential volunteer in the application process by giving them an avenue for getting answers to their specific questions. Fielding each potential volunteer's question allows the VRM more direct control over the recruitment process and incorporates a level of screening in the recruitment process that is otherwise not available.

*Best Practice 14: The web site indicates the type of training volunteers will receive beyond orientation.*

In addition to seeking the information necessary to make an informed decision, visitors may also be looking to see what development opportunities (e.g. continuing education programs on organization specific topics such as software and administrative training, bedside manner, or animal care and handling) are available. The training of volunteers, beyond what is provided during orientation, is suggested to help volunteers perform their functions independently and competently (McFarland, 2005). The availability of training may help sway visitors who have decided to volunteer, but are considering positions at different organizations. Visitors to the web site may look to such additional training as a potential benefit of volunteering at a particular organization.

**Implications for Volunteer Resource Managers**

As VRMs begin to harness the potential of their volunteer program web sites as recruitment tools, we advocate adoption of the best practices listed. While many benefits can be gained through the use of these practices, they should be carefully implemented, with care taken to adjust each practice to each particular volunteer program. An example of an organization and volunteer program that have several of these practices adapted for their use is shown in the San Francisco SPA's web site (Figures 1 and 2). First looking to Figure 1, note that there are two separate ways to access the volunteer program web site; one link ("Volunteer") in the box entitled "Make a Difference," and another (not pictured here) using the drop-down menu accessible by clicking the "Support" button. Following either of these links brings you to the volunteer program's front page (see Figure 2).

*Figure 1.* A sample of a volunteer-based animal welfare organization web site (i.e., the organization's front page).
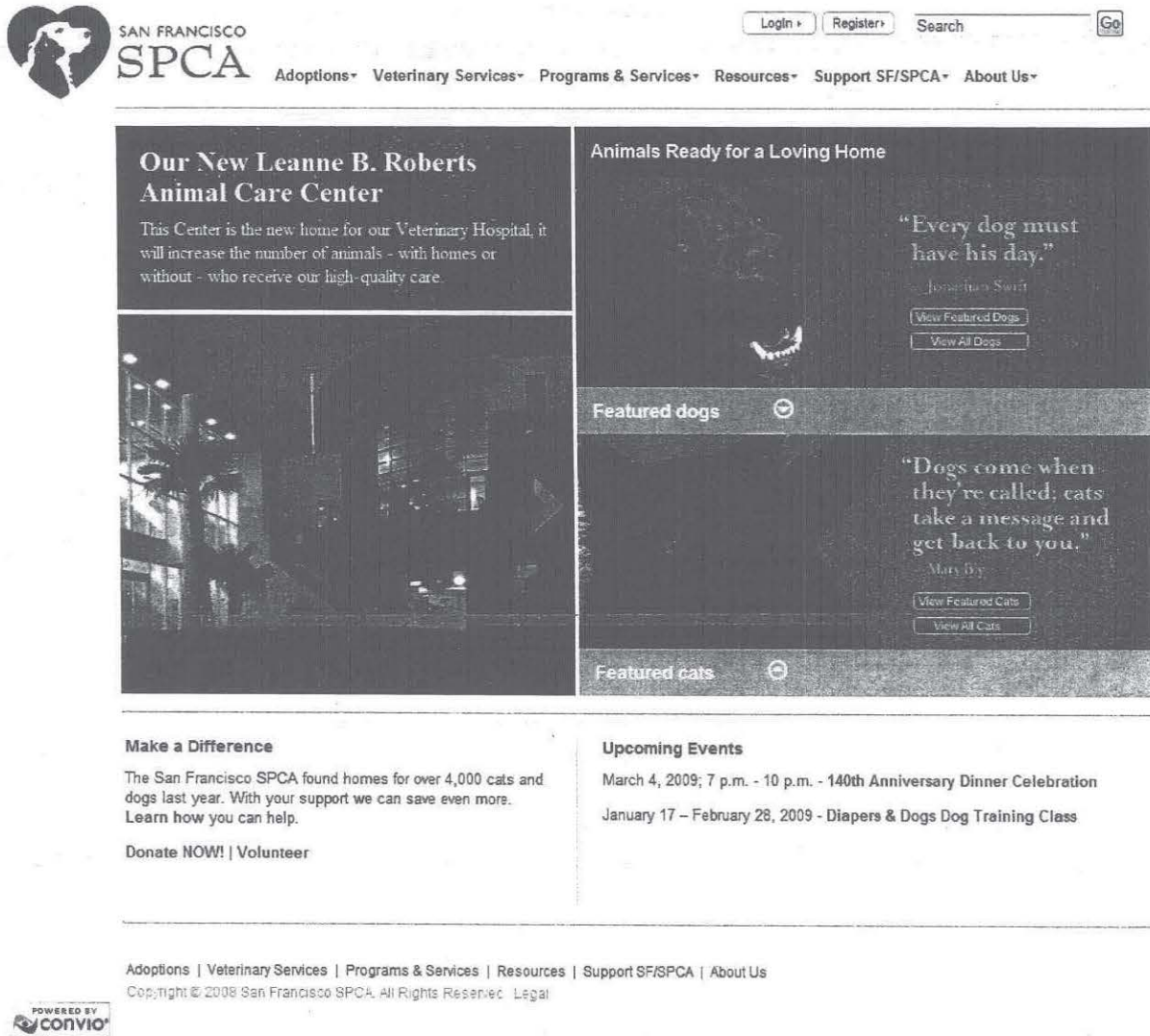
*Figure 2.* Sample volunteer program front page.



Note that the volunteer program front page incorporates several important pieces of information, including the volunteer program mission statement; requirements to volunteer; minimum number of hours required to volunteer; a description of the volunteer program; and contact information for visitors to attain additional information. This information allows the volunteer to assess their personal fit with the volunteer program's aims, determine if they are capable of fulfilling the minimum requirements, and ask for additional information if desired.

We include a second example web site, that of the American Cancer Society (Figures 3, 4, and 5), to illustrate another way in which the practices put forth in this article may be utilized. Again, note the multiple links to the volunteer program web site from the organization's web site front page. Looking to the volunteer program web site (Figures 4 and 5), we see that the volunteer program vision statement is given prominent placement, emphasizing its importance. There is also a link to apply to volunteer available, as well as links to additional information on the various volunteer opportunities available. The information provided in each of those links is similar the information provided in the first example. The key difference between the two examples is that the layout of the web site itself was customized to incorporate the best practices differently.

*Figure 3*. A sample of a volunteer-based health organization web site (i.e., the organization's front page).

*Figure 4.* Sample volunteer program front page.



My Planner

**Employment &
Volunteer
Opportunities**

Careers

Volunteers

It is the policy of the American Cancer Society not to discriminate against any employee or any applicant for employment because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, marital status or veteran status. This policy shall include, but not be limited to, the following: recruitment and employment, promotion, demotion, transfer, compensation, training, layoff and termination.

# Volunteers
**Save Lives.** *Fulfill Yours.*

**Our Vision**
We, the volunteers and staff members of the American Cancer Society, empower and mobilize communities to prevent cancer, save lives, and diminish suffering by distinguishing the Society as the organization of choice for meaningful volunteer engagement.

What's it really like to volunteer with the American Cancer Society? Today, there are over three million different answers to that question, because each of our valued volunteer partners has a unique story to tell. Your volunteer role could be as valuable and rewarding as theirs. To learn more about the experience of volunteering for the Society, check out Andrew Salner's story and others like his, and hear how giving a little time is rewarding within itself.

Search jobs now    Go ▶

Sign up now to volunteer    Go ▶

Save lives.
*Fulfill* yours.™

Being a member of the American Cancer Society team is a unique opportunity to put your special talents to work for the good

*Figure 5*. Sample volunteer program front page (cont'd).

discriminate against any employee or any applicant for employment because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, marital status or veteran status. This policy shall include, but not be limited to, the following: recruitment and employment, promotion, demotion, transfer, compensation, training, layoff and termination.

∾ **Your Privacy is Important**
If you have concerns about sharing sensitive information, please read our policies on protecting your privacy

more

American Cancer Society, empower and mobilize communities to prevent cancer, save lives, and diminish suffering by distinguishing the Society as the organization of choice for meaningful volunteer engagement.

What's it really like to volunteer with the American Cancer Society? Today, there are over three million different answers to that question, because each of our valued volunteer partners has a unique story to tell. Your volunteer role could be as valuable and rewarding as theirs. To learn more about the experience of volunteering for the Society, check out Andrew Salner's story and others like his, and hear how giving a little time is rewarding within itself.

**Why volunteer?**

Volunteering for the American Cancer Society means you have an opportunity to save lives and fulfill your own. When you volunteer, you can:

- Make a meaningful difference in your community.
- Help cancer patients and their families.
- Have flexible options and opportunities that fit your schedule.
- Build relationships and networks that last a lifetime.
- Learn and grow personally and professionally.
- Involve your family and friends.

**Interested in volunteering?**

**Yes**
I'm ready to volunteer. Let me tell you about myself and my preferences.

**Maybe**
I need to know more about the kinds of opportunities you have.

**Not sure**
Tell me more about why I should volunteer for the Society.

volunteer

Save lives.
*Fulfill* yours.™

Being a member of the American Cancer Society team is a unique opportunity to put your special talents to work for the good of others, in an innovative and people-centered professional environment.

Laura Reeves
Chief Talent Officer
Watch a video message from Laura Reeves

Although these examples provide illustrations of several of the best practices outlined, there are many ways of accomplishing these best practices through web site development. If possible, Information Technology (IT) professionals who focus on web design can provide VRMs with numerous options that can be tailored to their specific program's needs. Articles such as those referenced for the best practices section can be used in consultation with the IT professional to ensure that the volunteer program web site is designed effectively for each specific volunteer program.

VRMs should also consider looking to research and trade articles both within and outside the nonprofit sector for the latest information on new web practices to consider and which of those practices may be most effective at bolstering outcomes important to volunteer programs, such as volunteer retention, donations and volunteer satisfaction. Although we found very few of these studies, over time new knowledge will accumulate.

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Anna Currie is an incoming Ed.D. candidate in Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University and currently a Business Education Teacher in the public school setting. She is also the school's VRM and a "professional volunteer" herself. Her research interests include social responsibility via the Internet and the relationship between youth and media.