Volunteer Management in Arts Organisations:
A Case Study and Managerial Implications

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Abstract

Through highlighting best practice this paper aims to assist those involved in theatre management in forming effective strategies for recruiting and retaining theatre volunteers. It uses a case study approach to examine the recruitment, management and retention strategies adopted by a UK provincial theatre. Data were collected through in depth key informant interviews and through observation of volunteers at work within the theatre. The data was analysed by application to the Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes, 2003). Effective marketing strategies and volunteer management enabled the organisation to successfully recruit volunteers and move the volunteer through the stages of the Volunteer Life Cycle to the development of a committed volunteer. Findings indicate that the success of the organisation in managing its volunteers is dependent on the relationships established and developed between the volunteer and the organisation. Managing these relationships is as important to theatre management as recruiting volunteers.

Keywords
Volunteering, relationship marketing, theatre management

Introduction

Provincial theatres in the United Kingdom, facing increased competition for funds available to the Arts, are looking for alternative sources of income and other resources to supplement grants from the Arts Council (Hickling 2003). In England and Wales more than 26 million people contribute around 1.9 billion hours of voluntary activity, equivalent to around one million full-time workers (Research Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004). Like many other not-for-profit organisations, arts and cultural groups rely heavily on voluntary services (Palmer, 1997). There is an increasing use of volunteers in museums and galleries. It has been estimated that over half the total hours worked in American museums are done by volunteers (Prestwich, 1983). As the competition for volunteers becomes more acute and volunteer managers have become increasingly concerned with the recruitment and retention of volunteers, marketing techniques are playing an ever more important role in this sector (Wymer, and Starnes, 2001).

A great deal of research has been undertaken on volunteers (Bussell and Forbes, 2002) but surprisingly little is available on those who volunteer their services in Arts organisations. Much

of the research in Arts marketing has centred on audience and visitor studies (Screven, 1993; Johnson and Garbarino, 1999; Scheff, 1999; Rentschler, Radbourne, Carr and Rickard, 2001) or on fund raising management (Reiss, 1994). While audiences and visitors are essential to the functioning of museums and performing arts organisations, Drucker (1991, p.83) points out that such organisations have a *"multitude of constituencies and have to work out the relationship with each of them"*. Despite the fact that, for many arts groups, the role of volunteers is crucial (Steuer, 1997) the needs of this important customer group have been largely overlooked by marketers (Wymer and Brudney, 2000).

Through highlighting best practice this paper aims to assist those involved in theatre management in forming effective strategies for recruiting and retaining theatre volunteers. Bearing in mind that it is accepted that *"best practices almost always have to be adapted to local conditions"* (Galliers and Newell, 2001) this paper intends to provide a framework for volunteer management in regional theatres (it is not offering a blueprint for the transfer and uptake of best practice).

Volunteering

Much of the research on volunteering has concentrated on developing an understanding of volunteer motivation. A plethora of work has been undertaken to discover why people volunteer and what benefits volunteers gain from helping others (for example, Mueller 1975; Snyder and Debono 1987; Unger 1991; Nichols and King 1998; Wymer and Starnes 2001). There has also been much interest in identifying the socio-demographic characteristics of volunteers (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas 1994; Wymer 1998; Davis Smith 1999) as these are considered to be valuable variables in predicting the level of voluntary activity (Yavas, Riecken and Parameswaran 1981). It is suggested that an appreciation of why people volunteer and who is more likely to volunteer will enable organizations to establish meaningful segments of the volunteer "market". This knowledge could then be used to more effectively target particular groups (Yavas and Riecken 1985) and thus result in a more efficient recruitment strategy.

This is very much based on a transactional approach to marketing, with the emphasis being on recruiting the volunteer, or "customer catching". However, volunteering differs from other marketing exchanges in a number of ways. Perhaps most fundamentally, partners in volunteering receive benefits that are not economic in nature. These benefits are often intangible and so the relationship becomes the crucial element with the social rewards becoming most valued for the volunteer (Arnett, German and Hunt 2003). The volunteer invests time, social commitment and also an emotional element. The relationship is also important to the organization, investing time, money and commitment to the volunteer. Rentschler et al (2002) see this as an exchange of values for both sides. Therefore, a relationship marketing paradigm would seem to be more appropriate to the volunteer market as *"relationship marketing is about healthy relationships characterized by concern, trust, commitment and service"* (Buttle 1996, p8) and the aim of voluntary organizations is to develop a long-term relationship with their volunteers

As Morgan and Hunt (1994) point out, to establish and maintain a good relationship commitment must be demonstrated by both parties through each putting in sufficient effort to maintain the relationship and build trust. In relationship marketing the emphasis is on developing strategies, which will achieve an enduring bond between the organization and the volunteer, moving, the potential volunteer up the ladder of loyalty to becoming an advocate for the organization. Using a relationship marketing approach the organization's marketing objectives vary depending on

which rung of the ladder is being targeted. Rentschler, Radbourne, Carr and Rickard (2002) highlight the importance of the marketing mix to engage a prospect but to maintain the relationship the organization must build on shared values, mutual knowledge and interaction. Fulfilling promises, demonstrating commitment and developing trust is needed to acquire a loyal follower.

McCort (1994) also demonstrates how many of the challenges facing organizations can be met through relationship marketing approach. As such a strategy stresses mutually beneficial relationships rather than a single transaction. This relationship can become a salient attribute linking the volunteer to the organization and so build on the original motivation to volunteer. This ties the volunteer into the organization and increases volunteer loyalty. Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) suggest organizations could improve relationship-marketing success by strengthening the ties between the organization and those identities people find important. Creating social ties with the organization encourages supportive behaviour as does developing the shared values between an organization and its volunteers (Wymer and Starnes 2001). In their study of an art museum membership scheme Bhattacharya et al (1995) demonstrate how members of such a scheme identify with the organisation and through this develop a supportive relationship. Extending this study, Glynn et al (1996) explain how the intangible benefits (particularly those of a more psychological nature) are important in membership of an artistic institution. Understanding what values the voluntary organization shares with its volunteers could give the organization a competitive advantage when recruiting volunteers.

Relationships which develop within the organisation have been shown to be important in the retention of volunteers. Research has identified the importance of charismatic leadership to the success of small voluntary organisations (Pearce, 1993). Britton (1999) suggests that a project's retention rate depends on three factors: support network among volunteers and between volunteers and the coordinator, appropriate training and an efficient rota system.

Voss and Voss (1997) demonstrate that the motivation of "the customer" is important in determining the relationship. The strategies adopted by the organization are limited by the reasons for the individual volunteering in the first place. According to McCurley and Lynch (1994) the key to retaining volunteers is to meet their personal mixture of motivational needs. Organizations should understand the heterogeneity of their volunteer base and ensure that volunteer needs are met. In the donor market larger organizations are increasingly realizing the importance of retaining existing donors (Burnett, 1992) and are using direct marketing techniques to effectively maintain fund-raisers (Tapp, 1995). As money donors can be considered complementary to time donors (Callen, 1994) a relationship marketing strategy should also be considered in volunteer marketing.

In developing a long-term relationship organizations need be aware that the needs and viewpoints of volunteers change over time. Ewing, Govekar, Govekar and Rishi (2002) discuss the relevance of the product lifecycle concept. The organization may have successfully served its volunteers in the past but this may not work in the future. Indeed research has shown that volunteers' original motives often differ from their reasons for continuing to volunteer (Clary et al 1998, Starnes and Wymer 1999). Starnes and Wymer (2001) describe short-term and long-term changes in which volunteers move from a "honeymoon" period to becoming more committed to the organization.

Relationship marketing is not just about relationships with customers but offers a broader view of marketing. It acknowledges that the organization is involved in relationships with a number of parties (Peck, 1996) and several models have been presented to define the nature of the

relationships between these parties (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991; Millman, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Doyle, 1995; Gummesson, 1996). A number of frameworks have been put forward to categorize the parties involved. Bruce (1995) sets them into four groups: beneficiaries, supporters, stakeholders and regulators. Volunteers are listed among "supporters" alongside donors, purchasers and advocates. Kotler and Andreasson (1996) have four groups of "publics": input publics, internal publics, intermediary and consuming publics. They see volunteers as an internal public, grouped with paid staff, management and trustees.

People volunteer for specific benefits and will only continue with this activity if they are satisfied. In this way volunteers are no different from any other consumer of a service. The relationship between the volunteer and the organization is crucial. It is, therefore, valuable to consider marketing in the voluntary sector using a relationship marketing approach as that places the focus onto customer retention, orientation on product [service] benefits, high customer contact and commitment (Christopher et al., 1991), all of which are evident here. In particular the Customer Relationship Life Cycle presented by Gronroos (2000, p.237) has been shown to be of particular relevance to an appreciation of volunteering (Bussell and Forbes 2003, 2005). The volunteer does not act in isolation but is formed, challenged and channeled by the relationships that they encounter over the life cycle of volunteering.

Volunteers change throughout their time with the organization and this has an impact on turnover rates (Starnes and Wymer 2001). Wymer and Starnes (2001) believe that strategies for recruitment and retention are complementary. For them the process begins before recruitment ("antecedents of recruitment" p67). Bussell and Forbes (2005) suggest that there is a Volunteer Life Cycle consisting of three stages: volunteering determinants (attracting the volunteer), the decision to volunteer (recruitment, turning an interest and awareness into a positive action) and volunteer activity. Although the volunteer is able to exit at any stage the ultimate aim is a committed volunteer who will be loyal to the organization.

Methodology

This paper builds upon previous research of theatres in the North of England (Bussell and Forbes, 2004). Given the general lack of previous research in this area an exploratory research strategy was deemed to be the most suitable to *"discover significant variables in the field situation, to discover relations among variables and to lay a groundwork for later, more systematic and rigorous testing of hypotheses"* (Kerlinger, 1964). To identify the variables resulting in an effective volunteer recruitment and retention strategy a case study approach was considered most appropriate. From a sample of theatres used in a previous study one theatre was selected by the researchers using judgemental sampling *"to provide insight into an issue …because it is believed that understanding it will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorising, about a still larger selection of cases"* (Stake, 2000 p. 437). The selected case relies on volunteers to run front of house theatre at all performances. The theatre has successfully recruited a large pool of volunteers and volunteer management techniques adopted have resulted in a most successful retention strategy. It was, therefore, considered by the researchers (and other theatres who referred to it in the earlier study) to be having emerged as an example of best practice.

Data were collected through documents and material provided by the theatre management and the volunteer organisers, plus the theatre web site. In-depth key informant interviews with theatre management and those responsible for operational management of the volunteer scheme provided rich data. In addition in-depth interviews were held with a sample of

volunteers, selected through convenience sampling over a number of days' throughout the season. Interview schedules were developed from the results of previous research in this area to identify why people volunteered originally and why they continued to volunteer, the relationships between the various parties, recruitment and retention strategies. The schedule was kept flexible enough to allow other themes to emerge. A total of twenty in-depth interviews were conducted. All interviews were taped and, after transcription, the interview data was analysed using data reduction techniques (Strauss, 1987). Using data collected on each case within case analysis was undertaken (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To enable comparisons to be made while preserving the uniqueness of each case a cross-case analysis was then carried out (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Triangulation of data was obtained through observation of volunteers at work within the theatre. The data was analysed by application to the Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes, 2003).

The Case Study

The Theatre is situated within one of the English National Parks. During the main holiday periods it is a producing house and presents events during the rest of the year. In 1999 the theatre moved (from what was affectionately known as "The Blue Box") into a modern purpose built theatre with two stages: a small studio (approximately 60 seats) and a larger theatre (500 seats) complete with a licensed bar and self-service restaurant. It is extremely well supported, operating at 80% capacity overall. It has a flourishing Friends' group of over 1,000 with members throughout the UK and abroad and a vibrant Youth Theatre.

The theatre has always relied on volunteers to run front of house. All activities, apart from box office and the licensed bar, are carried out by volunteers. There is a volunteer database of more than 150, over 40 volunteers travel from outside the immediate area. Two-thirds of volunteers are retired. Three-quarters are women. Volunteer management is through a rota administered by two volunteers (within this there are two local rotas also run by volunteers) with allocation of roles and supervision carried out by a front of house manager and deputy (both of whom were previously volunteers).

Findings

The Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes, 2003) consists of three stages: need identification, the decision to volunteer and volunteer activity. Although the volunteer is able to exit at any stage the ultimate aim is a committed volunteer who will be loyal to the organisation. The success of the voluntary organisation in this process is dependent on the relationship established and developed between the volunteer and the organisation. In addition to this primary relationship there are many peripheral and indirect relationships which may be as essential in the process of developing a committed volunteer and managing their experience.

Volunteer Determinants

Volunteer attitudes towards the organisation are often formed by the messages received during the initial search process. This first stage of the Volunteer Life Cycle can be seen as transactional where little commitment has been developed. Although during the initial move from the 'Blue Box' in 1999 a local volunteer bureau was used and adverts were placed in the local press, unlike other voluntary organisations, the traditional AIDA format is not now widely

used by the theatre. Awareness is not reliant on traditional marketing tools and there appears to be little in terms of an integrated communications strategy to recruit volunteers as it is felt that there is no need to actively recruit because *"we get a steady stream of phone calls saying we would like to work/ volunteer"*. The most frequently cited source for volunteering is word of mouth. The majority of volunteers are attracted in the initial stages through contact with the theatre as a customer or through communication with existing volunteers. Many volunteers are also members of the Friends' group. The relationship with the local community is, therefore, significant.

It is also important that organisations understand in marketing terms why people want (and do not want) to volunteer and segment their markets accordingly. Volunteers seek benefits from the organisation. Volunteering at the theatre improved their social life (*"It was about meeting people. Coming from a strange place, I like talking to people"*) or allowed participation in an art form they enjoyed *" I was drawn to the theatre"* and *" we meet the actors"*. Two thirds of volunteers are mature or retired persons, reflecting the aging population of the area, although *"we get a number of youngsters of school age and up until they go to university"*. The occupations before retirement were mainly professional. Quite a number of volunteers have developed an interest in the arts and the theatre through their careers (drama teachers, painters, potters), hobbies (member of the local operatic society, amateur dramatics) and / or links with the theatre world through their children's employment (as professional actors or even working for the RSC). Those theatre volunteers who volunteered elsewhere tended to be in other arts or heritage related organisations (such as the local museum, running the operatic society, National Trust).

The organisation makes a promise in terms of what it can offer that fits the volunteers' needs. The theatre provides worthwhile and useful employment in specific front of house roles, a chance to meet people (other volunteers and customers), the opportunity to mix with well-known actors and the prospect of catching sight of performances whilst carrying out some roles. However, only minor economic incentives are given in terms of a set of free tickets to plays. In fact most volunteers were out of pocket having to travel to the theatre (some from as far as 40 miles away) and pay for parking.

The Decision to Volunteer

The next stage of the Volunteer Life Cycle involves matching volunteer expectations to the organisation's promise. A dialogue needs to be developed and it is here that the volunteer evaluates the organisation to establish the fit between their individual needs and the organisation's offer. For some the decision is linked to the reason for volunteering. The matching of the volunteer with appropriate opportunities is important. Some organisations use recognised tools and processes such as application forms and interviews. Often references are sought. At the theatre this matching process does not include formal application forms and interviews. Prospective volunteers are invited in for an informal discussion with the Front of House manager who explains the processes and systems and the commitment required (about six hours per week). No willing volunteer is rejected.

Having been made aware and reviewed the opportunities on offer some form of action takes place as volunteers commit themselves to a voluntary organisation. However, it is the level of commitment that was identified as having serious implications on how the relationship could be described. For the theatre the importance of the volunteers to front of house activity is crucial (a minimum of 10 volunteers are required for each performance, six nights a week and matinees) and as a result attendance is strictly organised through a rota administered by two volunteers.

Of prime importance to a new volunteer will be the initial experience and how the organisation presents its offer. The organisation's aim is that the volunteer will be satisfied and will continue with the activity. At this early stage volunteers may experience post purchase dissonance and exit, an experience not apparent at the theatre.

Volunteer Activity

At this stage of the volunteer life cycle a variety of relationships are established that can enhance or detract the experience of the volunteer. In the theatre these relationships are those that the individual volunteer develops with the organisation, the relationship between volunteers and paid employees, the interaction between volunteers and the volunteers' external commitments.

The organisation has a set of clear objectives and resources are managed to meet these needs. The volunteers are a vital resource. *"If we did not have Front of House volunteers the organisation wouldn't work".* The Front of House manager has calculated that using volunteers saves the theatre tens of thousands of pounds each year in wage costs. In an area of full employment the theatre uses volunteers instead of paid personnel*. "They come in black & white badges. As far as Joe Public know they are just paid staff and it does not say volunteer".* They are expected to perform their duties as professionally as if they were regular staff. *"In terms of quality control I just find that interesting because they are giving up their time willingly but you want a professional performance out of them and if you are paying for that performance you can be very direct in how you actually tell them what you are expecting and, if they don't come up with it, take certain actions. With a volunteer, it is down to the way you talk to them, deal with them individually and we have been very lucky but if you do get some problems you have to find ways of dealing with it".*

Training is seen as a means of maintaining this professionalism. The importance of training as a motivator and retention tool has also been identified by the theatre and the original system of "sitting next to Nelly" to learn the roles has been replaced by six weeks of induction training and a mentoring system, where an experienced volunteer is assigned to assist a new recruit. Ongoing training is obligatory. All volunteers had undergone training and were aware of the dates of their next sessions and the importance of this in maintaining a professional team. The relevance of professionalism throughout the theatre was supported by all volunteers and seen as a benefit as it ensured they were part of the professional theatre team. *"The staff are tremendous and make you feel part of it. There is no division between professionals and volunteers whatsoever, which you might expect, but there never is. They are always pleased to see you and help in any way."* Long-term volunteers (from the days of the 'Blue Box' where volunteer organisation was a little more amateur) acknowledged the improvement.

The primary relationship the individual volunteer develops with the organisation at the theatre and the main point of contact is with the Front of House Manager, a very charismatic and committed individual who sees "*Part of my role in managing is to sit and chat".* Without exception volunteers stated that this relationship was one of the advantages of the experience. Unlike other examples of volunteering, there is little contact with the administrative staff (box office, administration or marketing) by the general Front of House volunteer. The main contact is being with the bar staff and Front of House Manager or his deputy. However, the importance of volunteers to the theatre is reflected in the final night party, to which volunteers were invited and where the artistic director always acknowledged their role and, more importantly, how invaluable their contribution was in keeping the theatre operating. For the rota administrator the

relationship with administrative staff and Front of House Manager was on a more regular basis as they had to at times to call on her knowledge, understanding and resources.

Volunteers have specific roles within the theatre as front of house staff. These include health and safety provision, ticket collection and showing the audience to their seats, serving coffees and selling merchandise. Although a rota of attendance is used volunteers are allocated to roles according to the needs of the organisation. Thus an individual could be placed in an unpopular position or one where intermittent experience led to a steep learning curve on the night. "*One of the things we insist is they do the things they are asked to do when they turn up so they don't come and choose what they want to do. They are allocated. I go in and put a name against a job.*"

Most of the volunteers are like-minded people, based on shared professional experiences as managers and teachers or having a cultural interest in common. There are few Front of House tasks to be carried out during the actual performance, which allows time for volunteers to relax and socialise. Contacts made through volunteering by new arrivals to the area have led to enduring friendships and, in one instance, marriage. There appears to be very little friction evident between volunteers. However the rota gives volunteers opportunities to work with preferred people and some feel *"it is nice to be with your own little group"*.

Volunteers take great pride in the theatre and identify with it very closely. Several interviewees proudly informed us that last year theirs was runner up as the Most Welcoming Theatre in Britain. They have their own staff room where the rota is displayed. The rota organiser sends out a bi-monthly newsletter. All volunteers receive a Christmas card from the two rota organisers and their families. Contact is maintained with retired volunteers who continue to receive their free set of theatre tickets.

Despite the best management of a volunteer there are instances when, as with paid employment, natural wastage takes place. People move, retire or circumstances change. In this theatre age does not reduce enthusiasm and one issue is how to manage (gracefully) the exit of a volunteer or to accommodate someone who is keen but perhaps not as effective as they used to be. Roles can be allocated according to individual ability (or limitations) by the Front of House Manager but "*one of our problems is trying to address how we can persuade people they are too old to carry on*". However, there is an unwillingness to introduce an upper age limit as it is acknowledged that there could be a sprightly 80 year old volunteer who the theatre did not wish to lose.

Conclusion

The findings of this case study have implications for the management of theatre volunteers. It demonstrates that while there is much similarity with other examples of volunteering, as Wymer and Brudney (2000) have shown in arts volunteering generally, theatre volunteers are different. Therefore, the Theatre Volunteer Life Cycle (Figure 1) has been developed from the Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes 2003) to incorporate the unique aspects demonstrated by volunteers at the theatre.

Figure 1: The Theatre Volunteer Life Cycle
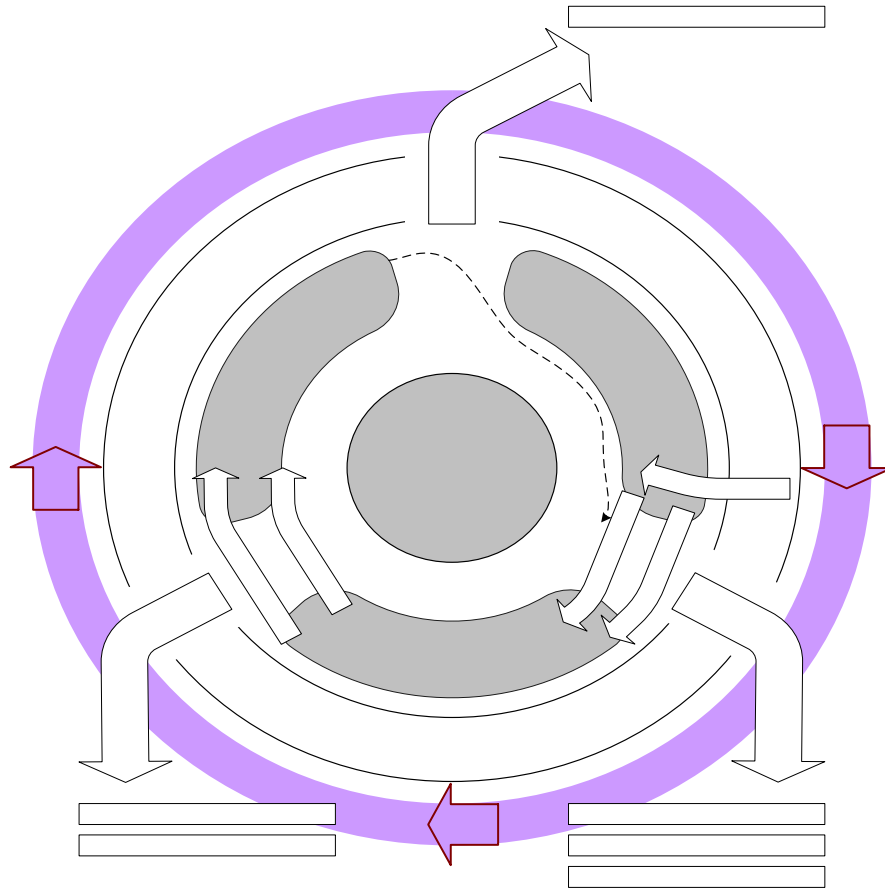
The first stage of volunteering determinants indicates that, despite the lack of formal marketing of volunteer opportunities at the theatre, word of mouth, networks and contact with the theatre continue to generate requests to volunteer on a regular basis. Several studies on general volunteering stress the importance of these aspects as an information source (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas, 1994; Wymer, 1997) but this would seem to be most relevant in theatre volunteering. Although appearing to have a comfortable number of volunteers a constant throughput of volunteers is required, particularly given the mature profile of theatre volunteers. It is, therefore, vital that the theatre maintains close relationships with the local community.

Evidence from the study supports the work of Bhattacharya et al (1995) and Wymer and Brudney (2000) in that individuals decide to volunteer because they identify with the theatre. Benefits sought are not economic but appeal to social and psychological needs. Interestingly, the time involved in the decision-making process is not extensive. There is very little evaluation of other volunteering opportunities. Attributes are not compared. The principle elements influencing the potential volunteer are time available and access. Even so, 40 volunteers travel from outside the area (often using a difficult road network) and there is evidence of some members of the Friends' group who would be keen to volunteer but live too far away. In recognition of this, "access" has, therefore, been added to the model. In terms of recruitment

the theatre may benefit from targeting current theatre-goers and those with ties to other arts organizations.

As Britton (1999) suggests, a great deal of the theatre's success is the management of the volunteer experience. The theatre volunteers consider themselves to be part of the organization. Although financial benefits are low (many incurring costs) they enjoy the social element, mixing in an artistic environment and being appreciated. The rota system and training enable them to perform in a professional manner. Consideration could be given to formalising some of the volunteer management issues. For example, in recruitment a simple application form could give essential details on experience and demographic details that could aid targeting. Job specifications would help match roles with individuals. Formal inductions could bring together existing and new volunteers and help in settling in. Continuing to provide evidence that their commitment is both appreciated and worthwhile is required.

An area the theatre needs to address is the role of the Front of House Manager, currently a main focus for the volunteer from initial contact through the experience. A charismatic and committed individual, his role in recruiting and retaining volunteers cannot be underestimated and consideration needs to be given as to how this can be maintained in the future. Maintaining the efficient organization of the rota system is being addressed by sharing the role to lay the foundations for a smooth transfer when the time comes.

Retention strategies are so effective within the theatre that the organization has a problem not affecting many organizations – how to encourage volunteers to leave. At the moment the theatre is managing this issue through task allocation but, with an aging volunteer force, a redundancy strategy will have to be developed.

In summary, the theatre's high recruitment and retention rate depends on an informal and reliable network for recruitment and an efficient and professional team approach supported by an understanding manager. This setup leads to a committed volunteer force characterized by identification with the organization and could be replicated in other theatres to develop their volunteer management strategies. The researchers intend to carry out further, comparative, research in other theatres to identify other examples of best practice and to test the Theatre Volunteer Life Cycle model in other establishments.

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