

The One Job Volunteers Can't Do



What's the
one task you
should save
for the paid
consultant?

by Nick Levinson

There's one type of job volunteers can't do. Everything else, yes, they can do. They can raise money. They can recruit people for you. They can do drudge work, and they can do the core work of your mission.

They can get your message out. They can supervise other volunteers. They can help you select and screen staff hires. They can research, investigate, and report. They can explain, counsel, and listen.

They can handle money and finish the accounting. They can provide legal advice and other professional services.

You can give volunteers almost any type of job, except one. Don't ask volunteers to conduct scientific polls.

Why? Because scientific polling requires objectivity. Since volunteers are inherently enthusiastic and subjective about your cause, they're liable to prejudice any poll they conduct for you.

Studies have shown that seemingly little things affect the way people answer survey questions.

Even the name a pollster uses skews answers. People tend to say what they think the pollster wants

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to hear. To prevent such bias, pollsters can't be people who care how respondents answer their questions.

If caring about content is a bad idea, are volunteers useless in helping you with surveys? No it's just the direct, hands-on polling and canvassing they shouldn't do. They can still design the study (because joint editing, thoughtfully and sensitively done, can reduce biases). They can compile results, even sophisticated cross-tabulations of data.

If you asked open-ended questions, you might want to have outside consultants categorize the

answers, using scientific methods. But once you have the conclusions of your study, volunteers can apply the results to your problems and implement the necessary reforms, if any. They can edit and publish results, disseminating them to a variety of audiences. That's especially useful for studies on public policy.

Being blasé is the one thing volunteers can't do well. But that leaves so much they can do that you shouldn't have any trouble using enough volunteers to fill a phone book. Go ye, then, and fill your phone book. ■

Nick Levinson (P.O. Box 8386, New York, N.Y. 10150) hopes you didn't mind a little teasing, but there's a desperate need to get a lot of work done among nonprofits, so it's an abomination that volunteers are idle most of the time.