



Designing Better Volunteering Appeals: What Works and for Whom

Eva Maria Jedicke – University of Freiburg | Stephan Olk – Horn & Company, Düsseldorf | Adnan Zogaj – University of Freiburg | Dieter K. Tscheulin – University of Freiburg | Jörg Lindenmeier – University of Freiburg

With the increasing competition for people's time and attention, nonprofits need evidence-based strategies to design effective volunteering appeals. This study offers a model for optimizing volunteer recruitment messaging by testing which combinations of images, slogans, organizational credibility signals, and required time commitments motivate people to sign up. The research provides practitioners with practical insights to build tailored, targeted recruitment campaigns that maximize engagement by identifying what matters most to different groups of potential volunteers.

Which design attributes in volunteering appeals are most effective for attracting and motivating potential volunteers, and how do preferences differ across volunteer segments?

Slogans that match personal motivations, pride-evoking visuals, and manageable time commitments significantly boost appeal effectiveness. However, volunteer segments respond differently, requiring targeted approaches.

[#Nonprofitcommunication](#) [#Volunteerrecruitment](#) [#Volunteering](#)

Background

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Context



- **Nonprofits increasingly employ volunteering appeals to attract support** in a competitive philanthropic landscape. These appeals draw from the principles of social marketing and persuasive communication **to persuade individuals to donate their time rather than money, for social good.**
- While **previous research has explored the effects of individual appeal features** such as emotional imagery or accountability seals, **few studies have examined the combined influence of multiple design elements.** Additionally, **most existing work does not segment audiences based on motivational profiles**, despite the known diversity in volunteer motives.
- This study **investigates the relative importance of four key appeal elements: emotional imagery** (pride vs. guilt), **motivational slogans** (based on the **Volunteer Functions Inventory**), **accountability seals** (efficiency, effectiveness, transparency), and time commitment, using a **Choice-Based Conjoint design**. It also **segments potential volunteers using latent class analysis to better understand audience heterogeneity.**
- The study used a **Choice-Based Conjoint design** and two student samples. In total, **645** respondents were recruited via panel provider Prolific (Study 1) and social media platforms (Study 2). After data cleansing, the final samples included **212** (Study 1) and **202** (Study 2) respondents.

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Take aways & Learnings



- The quality of motivation experienced by individuals during exposure to volunteering appeals significantly influences their likelihood to engage. Appeals that support **self-determined motivation**—such as alignment with personal values and meaningful engagement—are more persuasive than those relying on external pressure.
- Messages that emphasize **personal growth and self-development** are the **most persuasive** across all volunteer segments. This **makes them a priority for volunteer recruitment strategies**.
- Pride-based emotional appeals **work better** than guilt-based ones, **reinforcing the need for positive emotional framing** in volunteer messaging.
- **Communicating a lower time commitment** makes volunteering **more attractive**, especially among those who are undecided or new to volunteering.
- Appeals **tailored** to specific audience segments **increase effectiveness**, with unmotivated, highly motivated, and semi-motivated groups each responding to different combinations of motives, emotional cues, and time commitments.
- **Including efficiency seals provides only marginal added value**; while they may slightly improve appeal credibility, they are not decisive for engagement.
- Future research could **test these findings in different volunteering contexts** and **with more diverse participant groups**. It would also be valuable to **explore** how appeal preferences vary by activity type and task difficulty, and to **assess** whether tailored appeals strengthen long-term engagement and volunteer identity formation.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2025/25 is published in September 2025 and has been written by Ashifa Agede from Centre for Health Systems Support & Initiatives for Development. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.