



## The Volunteer Life Cycle: A Key to 4-H Volunteer Involvement<sup>1</sup>

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### Overview

A key responsibility for Extension 4-H agents is to engage volunteers and expand their involvement in 4-H programs (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). This includes volunteers that provide direct service to youth and those that support program functions. An important aspect in the volunteer development process is understanding volunteer behavior. This article will set the stage for developing a systematic approach to engaging and empowering volunteers by providing an overview of the Volunteer Life Cycle and describing how the ISOTURES model can be utilized towards volunteer retention.

### The Volunteer Life Cycle

What is the Volunteer Life Cycle? The Volunteer Life Cycle (VLC) represents the stages of volunteer behavior (Figure 1). The VLC starts with the determinants associated with volunteering, continues with the decision to volunteer, moves on to the volunteer activity itself, and then arrives at either a committed volunteer or the end of a volunteer's service.

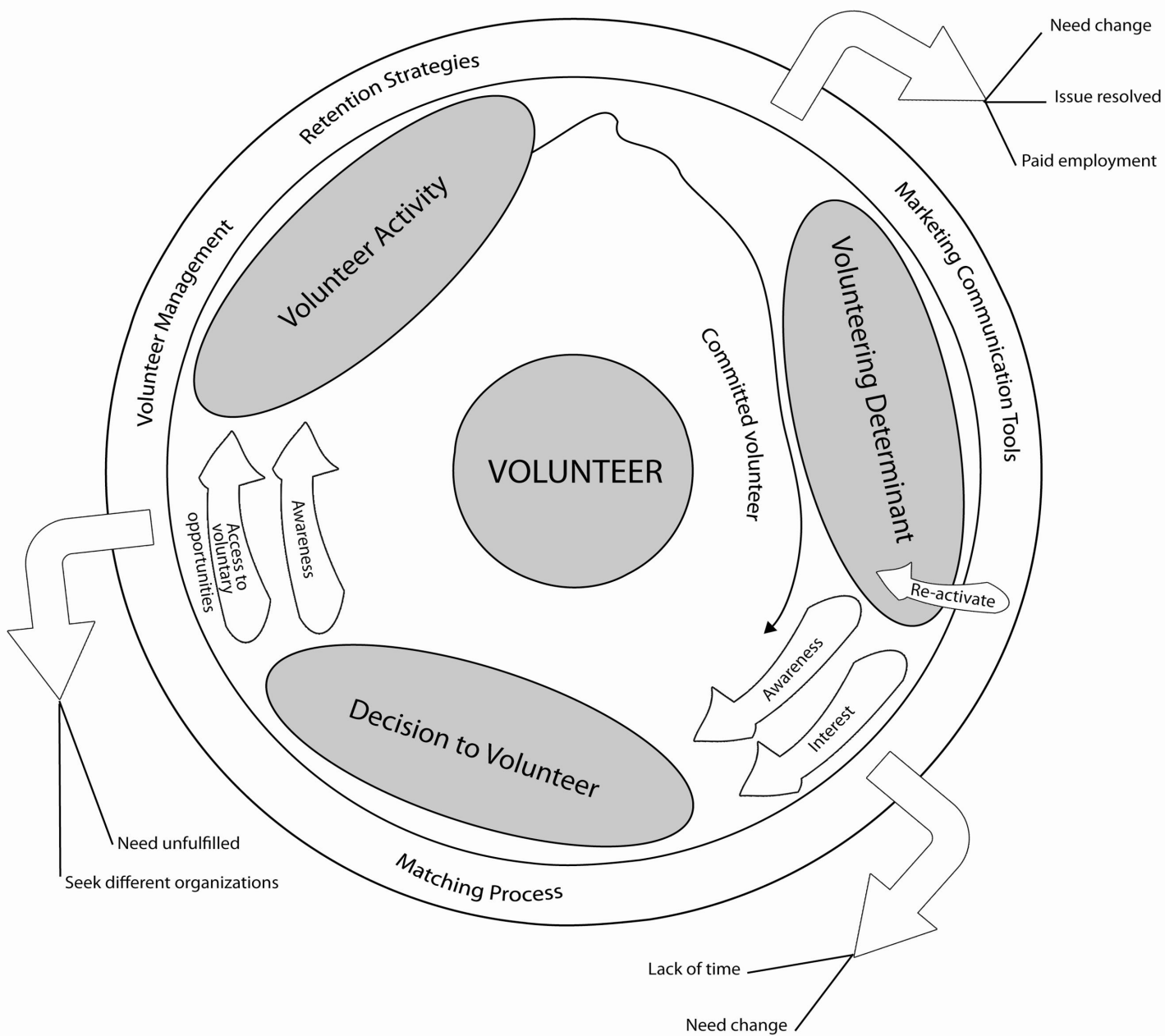
### Consumer Behavior vs. Volunteer Behavior

The VLC concept is similar to consumer behavior represented by the customer relationship life cycle. Each stage in the customer relationship life cycle provides a different marketing challenge focused towards consumers. In the 'Initial Stage', the marketing objective is to create interest in a product of service. During the Purchasing Process Stage, interest should be converted into action. The Consumption or Usage Stage should invoke a positive experience for the consumer. Perceived Service Quality should then translate into resale, cross sales, and enduring customer relationships; poor experiences, on the other hand, usually result in product abandonment and loss of future sales (Gronroos, 2000).

The phases of a customer relationship life cycle closely relate to volunteer behavior. The goal of both customer relationship and volunteer behavior is to develop long term loyalty. Creating customer interest in a product or service is analogous with making the public aware of volunteer opportunities. Similar to products and services marketed to potential

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**Figure 1.** Volunteer life cycle (Bussell and Forbes, 2003)

customers, the general public has many volunteering options providing. Moving consumers to action through the purchase process is consistent with the

general public making a volunteer choice. A consumer's response to consumption of a product or service is similar to the response a volunteer would have from a volunteer activity. A high level of satisfaction from a volunteer experience is likely to result in volunteer retention and is the same as perceived service quality by a consumer. Likewise, a poor volunteer experience usually leads to unfulfilled needs by a volunteer and retention is unlikely.

### **Determinants Associated with Volunteering**

The first stage in the volunteer life cycle is that of volunteering determinants. This is the stage at which the general public becomes aware of volunteer opportunities in 4-H. There are two important tasks that are relevant at this stage: a needs assessment and a marketing plan.

When a new Extension 4-H agent begins work in a county, and periodically thereafter, a needs assessment or situational analysis related to volunteer involvement should be conducted. A thorough situational analysis provides the basis for priority setting and helps identify new opportunities for volunteer involvement. A comprehensive needs assessment includes the following:

1. Consult with the County Extension Director (CED) for their input related to the extent of the 4-H volunteer program.
2. Working with the Regional Specialized 4-H Agent (RSA), request and review all data related to the county 4-H volunteer program including a) existing volunteers and their roles, and b) county demographics.
3. Together with the CED and RSA, identify key stakeholders, county youth leaders, community leaders and advisory council members.
4. Request a copy of any previous needs assessments conducted on behalf of the 4-H program.
5. Consult with the 4-H Advisory Committee, key stakeholders and community leaders for their input related to the 4-H volunteer program.

The information collected from the needs assessment can now be used to develop volunteer opportunities in the 4-H program. Refer to *Engaging Volunteers through ISOTURES: Identifying Opportunities for Volunteer Involvement* in the **4-H Program Handbook** or at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for more detailed information.

Armed with opportunities for potential volunteers marketing becomes important. Marketing is about public awareness. Effective 4-H marketing describes:

1. The history of 4-H and its role in youth development.
2. The benefits to youth.
3. The value to the community.
4. The role of volunteers.
5. The benefits of volunteering.

There are a number of methods to market 4-H. Some of these include print materials, public service television, newspaper articles, blogs, facebook, youtube, speaking engagements, an open house, and the county 4-H website. The point is to use all available communication channels.

### **The Decision to Volunteer**

Having raised awareness of the 4-H program and the role of volunteers, it is important to move awareness through to the next stage which is the Decision to Volunteer. The decision to volunteer or not, is about motivation (McCurley & Lynch, 2006). There are many studies related to why people volunteer (Arnold and Dolenc, 2008; Clary, Snyder and Ridge, 1992; McCudden, 2000; McEwin & Jacobsen-D'Arcy, 2002; Mueller, 1975). Each of these authors has added to the knowledge base of volunteer motivation; however the work of Esmond & Dunlop (2004) provides a comprehensive guide to volunteer motivation. Their development of the Volunteer Motivation Inventory (VMI) will be used to describe this aspect of the volunteer life cycle. In the VMI, key categories describe the motivations of volunteers based upon research of more than 2,400

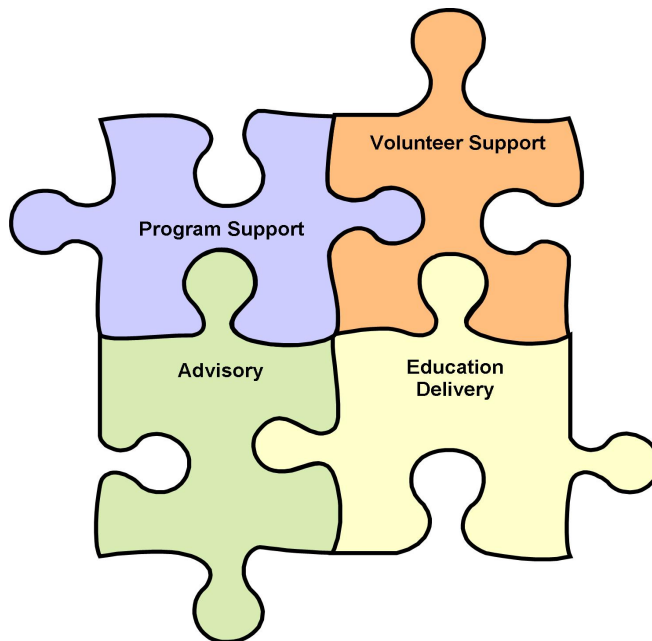
volunteers from 15 different nonprofit organizations:

1. Recognition – Describes a situation where a volunteer enjoys the recognition that volunteering gives them. They enjoy their skills and contributions being recognized, and this is what motivates them to volunteer.
2. Social Interaction – Describes a situation where a volunteer particularly enjoys the social atmosphere of volunteering. They enjoy the opportunity to build social networks and interact with other people.
3. Reciprocity – Describes a situation where a volunteer enjoys volunteering and views it as a very equal exchange. The volunteer has a strong understanding of the 'higher good'.
4. Reactivity – Describes a situation where a volunteer is volunteering out of a need to heal or address their own past issues.
5. Self-Esteem – Describes a situation where a volunteer seeks to improve their own self esteem or feelings of self-worth through their volunteering.
6. Social – Describes a situation where a volunteer seeks to conform to normative influences of significant others (e.g. friends or family).
7. Career Development – Describes a situation where a volunteer is motivated to volunteer by the prospect of gaining experience and skills in the field that may eventually be beneficial in assisting them to find employment.
8. Understanding – Describes a situation where a volunteer is particularly interested in improving their understanding of themselves, or the people they are assisting and/or the organization for which they are a volunteer.
9. Protective – Describes a situation where a volunteer is volunteering as a means of escaping negative feelings about themselves.

The implications of this research for 4-H is that:

- (1) volunteer programs must have episodic,

short-term and long-term options for volunteering; (2) recruitment strategies need to be comprehensive. In the fact sheet *Understanding Volunteer Management in 4-H*, a puzzle was used to illustrate multiple opportunities for volunteer involvement (Figure 2).

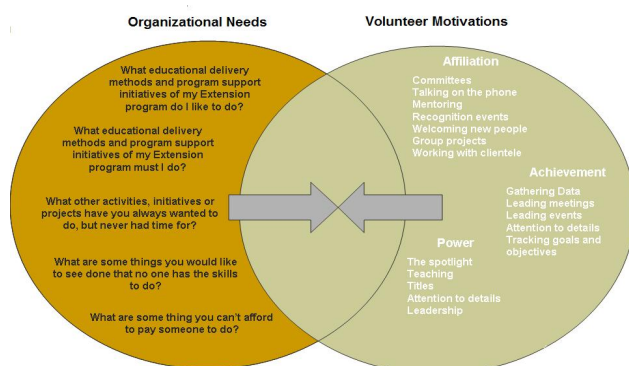


**Figure 2.** Volunteer opportunities may include program support, volunteer support, education delivery, or service in an advisory capacity.

There are clear benefits available from volunteering, but why do some people volunteer when others do not? A crucial element here is a personal invitation; people volunteer because someone they value asks them to serve. People are more than four times as likely to volunteer when asked as when not (McCudden, 2000). This personal contact is extremely important, as it reduces the perceived social risk that deters some people from volunteering (McKee & McKee, 2008). Some people may want to volunteer, but volunteering may conflict with their paid work and their family commitments; individuals have finite resources to devote to organizations. For some, the image of volunteering or the fear of not being accepted by an established group might be a turn-off.

Potential volunteers will likely approach the 4-H program. There is an interest already based upon the awareness of the 4-H program, but the outcome may not necessarily be certain. Much depends on their

reception and the skill of the 4-H in assessing motivation. Is the Extension office and 4-H program welcoming? If not, it may deter the volunteer. Does a plan exist for how volunteers will be involved in the program? If not, there is a risk of losing that opportunity. Successful 4-H agents maintain a current list of volunteer tasks that varies in intensity and duration. For example, you've got someone who comes into the 4-H office and they say "I'd like to help out, what can I do"? An immediate need and role for the volunteer must already exist. In the EDIS factsheet *Understanding Volunteer Management in 4-H*, overlapping circles were used as an illustration. The goal is to match the interests, skills and abilities of a potential volunteer with a role in the 4-H program (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Matching program needs and volunteer roles requires evaluation of potential volunteer interests, skills, and abilities and maintenance of a plan for volunteer involvement.

### The Volunteer Activity

People who were provided with an appropriate volunteer role pass on to the third phase of the Volunteer Life Cycle, which places the emphasis on volunteer management. Having acquired volunteers and placed them in a specific role, 4-H must seek to retain their support. In a dynamic and changing environment, where the number of nonprofits and charitable organizations is growing and the competition for volunteers is intense, 4-H must support volunteers in fulfillment of their role. ISTOURES is a nationally recognized leadership and volunteer development model that encompasses the same concepts that would be used to hire new

employees. This systematic approach to volunteer administration emphasizes that we:

- **I**dentify how volunteers will be involved in the 4-H program;
- **S**elect the most appropriate volunteer for a volunteer role through effective recruiting strategies and screening;
- **O**rient volunteers about Extension and their specific duties;
- **T**rain volunteers and staff to increase their capacity;
- **U**tilize volunteers through empowerment;
- **R**ecognize volunteers for their contributions;
- **E**valuate volunteers by focusing on results;
- **S**ustain volunteer involvement (Boyce, 1971).

Completely implementing this model will support volunteers in the completion of their role. In addition, the likelihood of retention will increase. The *4-H Program Handbook* and the EDIS website (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>) contain details of each element of the ISOTURES model.

### Extending the Volunteer Life Cycle

If it takes more effort to recruit a new volunteer than to maintain a relationship with an existing volunteer, how can 4-H agents lengthen the volunteer life cycle? McKee and McKee (2008) ask us to consider the following:

- The 21st century volunteer seems to have a short attention span (influence of media and life's distractions).
- Volunteerism is a hot trend right now, and people are fulfilling their desire to volunteer with short-term "day of service" projects such as Martin Luther King Day, Random Acts of Kindness Week, Join Hands Day, Be the Change Day, Make a Difference Day, and National Family Volunteer Day.

- All 4-H agents are time deprived. The 21st century demands a faster pace, and crams more and more things into the to-do list with less time.
- People volunteer because of their stage in life. Their kids are playing soccer, they are retired and travel a lot, or perhaps they are fulfilling a volunteer requirement in order to graduate from school.

When 4-H professionals plan carefully, the long-term commitment from the 21st century volunteer can be extended. Strategic volunteer leadership has four stages. While reading these four stages, notice the recurring word "passion". The bottom line is that volunteer leadership is "passion management." Passion is great—but it can be fickle. 4-H professionals must first awaken the passion for their mission (stage one), channel that passion for a very specific role (stage two), sustain the passion--the momentum (stage three), and finally empower the passion (stage four).

### **Stage I. Awaken the Passion—Recruitment**

- Market your mission and vision in a way to excite people to volunteer for your mission.
- The goal is to promote the cause (mission) and get people to have a taste of 4-H to fulfill their passion to get involved and make a difference.
- Give people a taste of the 4-H mission to ignite their passion.
- Think strategically about the big three: marketing, branding, and recruiting.

### **Stage II. Channel that Passion—The Passionate Beginner**

- Capitalize on the fact that new volunteers are excited.
- Develop a top-notch training program for your volunteers.
- Communicate expectations and don't be afraid of asking for high commitment.

- Give lots of feedback.
- Avoid the four words that volunteers hate: "Oh, by the way." Give volunteers all relevant information in advance.

### **Stage III. Sustain the Passion—The Talented (and fragile) Veteran**

- Be aware that this is the stage when many volunteers quit serving.
- Give tons of feedback. Write lots of personal notes to recognize and reward your volunteers.
- Give your volunteers a listening ear.
- Keep asking the volunteer, "How can I help you?" Make sure that they have the resources that they need.

### **Stage IV. Fuel the Passion—The Empowered Volunteer**

- Delegate and empower. This final stage is all about empowerment. Volunteers often quit because they don't like to be micromanaged.
- Turn projects over to volunteers and let them run.

## **Conclusion**

The volunteer life cycle is an excellent illustration of volunteer behavior. Volunteer behavior goes through three stages. First it starts with the Volunteering Determinants Stage, where a potential volunteer becomes aware of opportunities within the 4-H program. It moves to the Decision to Volunteer Stage where volunteer interests/motivations are matched to a need in the 4-H program. In the final stage the 4-H agent skillfully manages the relationship between volunteer and 4-H program to enhance volunteer satisfaction while at the same time fulfilling the mission of the county 4-H program. Expanding volunteer involvement can be an effective strategy in meeting the goals and objectives of an Extension program. To do so, understand how your role as a volunteer administrator impacts volunteer behavior. Become familiar with the volunteer life cycle and its importance to the 4-H program. Build passion for volunteerism with the four stages of

strategic volunteer leadership. Utilize the ISOTURES model to ensure a lengthy volunteer life cycle.

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