

Leisure serving or leisure seeking? The paradox of front-of-house volunteers in the UK heritage sector

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Abstract

The UK heritage sector is reliant on volunteers, who outnumber paid staff 2:1. Increasingly, volunteers are becoming involved in front-of-house roles, at a time when museums are facing increased competition for visitors. While, in the past many volunteers were found to be aspiring professionals, seeking work experience, the majority of volunteers, particularly in front-of-house roles are retired and are therefore more likely to be leisure-seeking. Thus, hands-on leisure service delivery in museums and heritage attractions is largely in the hands of unpaid, leisure-seeking individuals. This paper explores this paradox and examines whether leisure-seeking volunteers can provide a quality visitor experience for the visitors. The findings, taken from interviews with 200 volunteers and 500 visitors at museums and heritage visitor attractions across the UK, show that this paradox can be reconciled. Rather than a service encounter, interaction between volunteers and visitors is more akin to that of culture brokers, with both parties sharing information. Indeed, the interviews with visitors show that volunteers can provide a personal and enjoyable experience for visitors, which should be fostered and encouraged for the long-term benefit of the heritage sector. Interaction with visitors was found to be very rewarding for the volunteers. It provided a chance for them to share their knowledge through mutual learning and, for front-of-house volunteers such as room stewards or guides, a day without visitors is a very dull day indeed.

Introduction

Volunteers play an important role within museums and other cultural institutions worldwide. ICOM News, the newsletter of the International Council of Museums, recently dedicated an issue to friends and volunteers at museums across the world, including Norway, Singapore, Romania and Canada (ICOM, 2002). Canadian Heritage estimated in 2002 that 50 000 volunteers were involved in museums across Canada and museum volunteers and volunteer managers in the US are represented by their own association, the American Association of Museum Volunteers. Many museums in Australia and New Zealand are also dependant on volunteers. In the US and Canada, volunteering has become very professionalised, with the role of the volunteer teacher and interpreter or docent and these professional procedures have begun to influence volunteering in other countries, including the UK and Australia, over the past decade.

The UK heritage sector, in particular, involves a large number of volunteers and it has long been acknowledged that volunteers form the backbone of many museums and heritage attractions within the UK (Resource, 2002). In 1998, it was estimated that the 1188 registered museums and galleries, which responded to the Museums and Galleries Commission's DOMUS survey, involved 25,206 volunteers. Compared to their 12,590 permanent staff and 2,775 part-time staff this meant that volunteers outnumbered full-time equivalent staff by nearly 2 to 1 (Creigh-Tyte & Thomas, 2001). Indeed, another recent survey found that 93% of museums and heritage visitor attractions involve volunteers in some activities on a regular basis, that is at least once a week (BAFM, 1998) and an estimated further 38,900 volunteers work for the National Trust in England and Wales (Creigh-Tyte & Thomas, 2001).

However, research has identified the management of volunteers as presenting a challenge to museum and heritage managers, because many managers rely on volunteers and yet they are also unaware how to involve them effectively and do not understand their motivation. More recently, Croft has stated in her report to Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in the UK, that:

“Volunteering is at a low ebb.” *and* “Little thought is given to what volunteers themselves get from the process...” (Croft, 2001)

Background

Increasingly, volunteers within the heritage sector are being involved in front-of-house activities (BAFM, 1998) and are thus coming into regular contact with visitors. Museums and heritage visitor attractions are facing an increasingly competitive market coupled with a demand for publicly funded organisations to justify their existence, often in terms of visitor numbers. For museums and heritage visitor attractions the repeat visitor market is crucial and the most common form of enticing visitors is through word-of-mouth recommendation (Davies, 1994). As such the importance of the quality of service provided by front-of-house staff is explicit.

Research shows that the service encounter is the most significant factor in a customer's evaluation of a service firm (Gronroos, 1984). At a museum or heritage visitor attraction the service encounter, that is interaction between the visitor and paid staff or volunteers, is a part of the service product: the visitor experience. McCallum and Harrison call service encounters “first and foremost social encounters” (1985:35). The service encounter is a specific form of social interaction, where prior acquaintance of the individuals involved is not required. This is a relationship where it is socially acceptable for strangers to talk to each other as they have a shared purpose, for example in the case of a volunteer guide and a visitor it is the guide's role to provide information in a pleasant and easily digested manner. Yet such encounters are limited in their scope, and the conversation will focus on the service product. Moreover, each participant in the encounter has their role clearly defined and there are basic sets of rules, which allow these strangers to interact (Czepiel, Solomon & Surprenant, 1985). Both volunteers and visitors will have different expectations about the visit, and they will also have different expectations of what makes a satisfying encounter. For example, some visitors may prefer to visit entirely on their own with as little interaction with fellow visitors, paid staff and volunteers as possible. Others may seek the opposite experience and want to talk to everyone they meet.

The most satisfying service encounters occur when the people involved *interlock*, that is, both participants want the same outcome from the encounter and share the same expectations of each other's role within the encounter. Customers evaluate service encounters on the basis of a comparison with past experiences (McCallum & Harrison, 1985). It is thought that people organise their memories of previous encounters into templates, which govern subsequent similar experiences. Even if the encounter is entirely new, the nearest template will be employed. Previous experiences have set the standard against which subsequent encounters will be measured (Gronroos, 1984). Satisfaction will be achieved when the encounter either meets or exceeds these customer criteria. Since researchers have suggested that

volunteers are also customers (Wymer & Brudney, 2000), then it is equally important for the volunteers to experience satisfying encounters.

Since it is also known that word-of-mouth recommendation is the most frequently cited means of marketing museums and heritage visitor attractions to new visitors (Davies, 1994), while repeat visitors are the key audience (Black, 2000), then poorly managed, unmotivated front-of-house volunteers are detrimental to either encouraging new audiences or repeat visitors. Hobday (1998) notes that as museums increasingly need to compete with other leisure attractions there is a growing need to raise the esteem of front-of-house staff, whether paid or not. This is particularly significant as the staff at a visitor attraction, in this case the volunteers, who are involved in producing and delivering the visitor experience product, are also a part of it, as noted by Swarbrooke in his characteristics of a visitor attraction as a service product, presented in Box 1.

Box 1 The Six Characteristics of the Visitor Attraction as a Service Product

- Staff are involved in producing and delivering the product are part of the product
- The customers themselves are involved in the product process
- The products are not standardised
- The product is perishable and cannot be stored
- There is no tangible product to carry home
- The surroundings of the service delivery process are a feature of the product

Swarbrooke, 1995: 182

Volunteering has been considered as both unpaid work and a leisure activity. The economic model of viewing volunteers considers volunteers as unpaid workers, which may be appropriate for aspiring professionals, who are volunteering in order to gain work experience. The economic model promotes a top-down personnel approach to managing volunteers and this model has predominated within museums in the UK. In contrast, the leisure model considers the act of volunteering to constitute a leisure experience. This approach finds its origins in the UK with Hoggett and Bishop's study of voluntary leisure groups (Bishop & Hoggett, 1985), but this premise has been developed further by other researchers in the US and Canada (Henderson, 1984; Stebbins, 1996), who define regular volunteering as a form of serious leisure, as opposed to casual leisure. That is, volunteers make a commitment to the activity and/or organisation and the activity demands considerable personal effort on the part of the participant. The leisure model is gaining weight within the museums sector, not least as a result of the large proportion of older, retired volunteers.

Previous studies of volunteering within the UK heritage sector have found that volunteers are typically retired from paid work. A survey conducted by the National Trust for England and Wales (a registered charity, which owns and manages over 250 historic properties and gardens in England and Wales) found that 82% of their volunteers were retired, while 56% were aged over 60 years (National Trust, 1998) and a further study, conducted by the British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM), found that 66% of volunteers were aged over 60 years (BAFM, 1998). Both these studies went on to ask why respondents had volunteered. The most popular response to both surveys was 'to do something enjoyable'. In contrast, only 5% of

respondents to the BAFM survey saw it as “a qualification step leading to salaried employment in the heritage field”. Thus, it would seem that volunteering may well constitute a retirement leisure activity. However, this concept causes alarm for volunteer managers, who are concerned about involving volunteers, who might not be as reliable as paid staff (Pearce, 1993).

Therefore, the UK heritage sector is increasingly reliant on leisure-seeking volunteers to deliver their crucial front-of-house services at a time when they are facing greater competition from other leisure activities and when museums are facing increasing pressure to provide a professional product. This paper examines the paradox between front-of-house volunteers in the UK heritage sector acting as leisure providers, while seeking leisure themselves. The focus is on the volunteers, their motivations and how they view their interactions with visitors, which form part of the visitor experience.

Method

In order to investigate the role and motivation of volunteers, data was collected from 10 case studies across museums and heritage visitor attractions in England and Wales. The case studies were chosen from three broad groups: National Trust properties, open air museums and transport preservation museums. These three groups had been identified as the attractions involving the most volunteers in front-of-house roles (Hanna, 1998). Volunteers were involved in a range of front-of-house activities, from helping on the ticket desk or in the shop, to demonstrating machinery or giving guided tours. Visitors were also included in the study, so that the encounters between the two could be analysed from both sides.

A total of 200 volunteers and 500 visitors were questioned in this study. 83 volunteers were interviewed face-to-face on site and these interviews were supplemented by a postal questionnaire, as volunteers do not come in as regularly as paid staff (in this sample volunteers typically undertook one shift a week). The volunteers were questioned on their reasons for initially volunteering, why they continue to volunteer and how they viewed their interaction with visitors; they came into contact during the course of their voluntary activities. The visitors were questioned as they arrived at the attraction and asked to fill in a short questionnaire after their visit, detailing their views of the volunteers they met during their visit.

Both volunteer and visitor responses were analysed using a combination of content and template analysis. That is, a dictionary of key words was devised using a review of literature on service encounters, host-guest encounters and leisure experiences. However, key words were also allowed to emerge from the data, so that the analysis would not be too descriptive. The numbers reported in Boxes 3-6 refer to the number of citations of key words and concepts. One respondent might state several motives while another might only state one. In addition, the boxes only report on the most numerous cited key words.

Results and discussion

Volunteers' motivation

The volunteer sample displayed similar characteristics to the volunteers in previous studies as 63% were aged over 60 years and 74% described themselves as retired. 60% of respondents were male and 40% female, though the gender ratios varied from case study to case study and reflected the subject interest of the individual museum.

The case study respondents also demonstrated a high level of long service. 24% of volunteers had been helping for 5-10 years and 19% had been helping for more than 10 years. These results are particularly significant as two of the case studies had only been involving volunteers for less than five years at the time the fieldwork was conducted. In addition, the volunteer respondents had a high level of educational attainment, with 32% having continued their education beyond school-level. Given that the current proportion of the UK population holding a degree or higher qualification is 16% for men and 13% for women, this is significant (Matheson & Summerfield, 2001)

The most frequently cited motive for initially volunteering was interest in the history of the particular site or the subject of the museum. This was followed by a wish to keep active in retirement. The reasons given by respondents for initially volunteering are presented in Box 3:

Box 3 What initially motivated the volunteers?

	Number of citations
Pursue interest	89
Keep active in retirement	28
Opportunities for social interaction	17
To do something worthwhile	16
Work experience & work-like motives	14
Enjoyment & recreation	7

“I wanted to learn about art and the history and be with people. I’m even learning French as there’s quite a few French people.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

“I’ve always had a love of history and the year before I retired they were advertising for volunteers. I thought it would be nice.” (Volunteer, country house)

“Interest in railways, best steam railway in the country and company.” (Volunteer, steam railway)

“I’m retired so I’ve plenty of time and it seemed a nice thing to do – meeting people and something different.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

The high number of citations in Box 3 for leisure related motives, such as subject interest and opportunities for social interaction, compared to the small number of work experience or work-related motives reinforces the supposition that volunteers in front-of-house roles are a largely retired, leisure-seeking group of individuals.

However, it is acknowledged that the volunteers may continue to volunteer for different reasons than those, which initially attracted them to offer their services. Thus, volunteers were asked why they continue to volunteer, noting that a significant proportion have been regularly helping for more than ten years. These responses are reported in Box 4:

Box 4 Why do volunteers continue to offer their services?

	Number of citations
Social opportunities	59
Enjoyment	51
Colleagues	30
Doing something worthwhile	23
Learning new skills	23
Satisfaction	21
Work-like motives	15

Again, the number of leisure-like citations greatly outnumbers the number of work-like citations. However, social interaction has clearly replaced subject interest as the primary motive. In addition, to comments referring more generally to social interaction, 30 respondents specifically noted interaction with their fellow volunteers or colleagues as the reason why they continue to volunteer.

“There’s a nice lot of people here, no one’s been coerced, everyone’s come forward and it’s lovely to see someone surprised and pleased about it.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

“I enjoy meeting the different people. It’s something different, I can’t put my finger on it.” (Volunteer, country house)

“The friendly atmosphere, nearly all the volunteers are regular Thursday volunteers. The more you learn the more you enjoy.” (Volunteer, country house)

“I enjoy it. It’s a big boys playground, a hobby like golf.” (Volunteer, open air Museum)

Thus, it seems that the front-of-house volunteers in this study are indeed largely leisure-seeking, retired volunteers. However, they are primarily attracted to offer their services initially through interest in the history of the site or the subject matter of the museum, but they continue to volunteer because of the social networks they have developed and the social interaction their role affords them. It is perhaps not surprising that social interaction is important to people who have volunteered for front-of-house roles, but more specifically, how do they view their interaction with visitors? These responses are presented in Box 5:

Box 5 The role of interaction with visitors

	No of citations
Enjoy meeting people	56
Share learning	31
Answering questions	28
Welcoming	15
Help visitors	7

Volunteers view their interaction with visitors as an opportunity to meet people, share information with them and to welcome them to the attraction or museum.

“I like the interaction, unfortunately it’s not always there.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

“The more people who ask questions the more interesting. It’s a bit dull otherwise.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

“Every activity at is designed for visitor interaction. It can get very boring without visitors.” (Volunteer, open air museum)

Few volunteers cited *service* directly, though this was implied through welcoming visitors and answering their questions. Indeed, volunteers showed an awareness of their role in promoting the museum to the visitors:

“We’re trying to sell it, visitors feel it when you enjoy it yourself, you transmit enthusiasm.” (Volunteer, National Trust property)

“They [the visitors] thank you profusely for ‘making their day’. If you’ve enjoyed it then you’ll tell you’re friends, you get more advertising that way.” (Volunteer, open air museum)

While volunteers appear to be aware of the role they play in welcoming visitors to the museum or heritage visitor attraction and in the production of the overall visitor experience, the number of service encounter-related citations is still low and it seems, therefore, that service is not viewed by the volunteers as their primary role.

Rather than viewing their role as a participant in a service exchange, for the volunteers, enjoyment was the most cited benefit from interacting with visitors:

“We pride ourselves on welcoming visitors and informing them and developing a rapport with them.” (Volunteer, country house)

“I like seeing people’s reactions, seeing smiles and laughs, surprise, to share something and enjoyment with them. I haven’t had a dud one yet.” (Volunteer, historic ship)

Indeed, the volunteers seemed to perceive their role as that of participating in an information exchange, with the second and third most cited benefits focused on the role of shared learning with the visitors:

“The interchange of ideas...Quite often you get back more than you give out.” (Volunteer, open air museum)

Thus from the volunteers perspective, their role is that of an information broker, rather than a service-provider.

Benefits gained by the visitors

The visitor sample differed from that of the volunteers, with the largest proportion, 25%, aged between 35 and 44 years and working full-time, 47%. This reflects the high number of visitors coming as family group and shows that the visitors were typically at a different life stage from the volunteers. In addition, the visitors were experienced heritage consumers, with 55% making a repeat visit to the same

attraction or museum and only 8% not having visited any other heritage visitor attraction, museum or art gallery in the previous 12 months. Like the volunteers, however, the visitors also displayed a high level of educational attainment, with 48% of respondents holding a degree or postgraduate qualification.

The benefits gained by visitors from their encounters with volunteers are presented in Box 6:

Box 6 Benefits gained by visitors from interaction with volunteers

	Number of citations
Learning	93
Friendly	23
Added value	16
Helpful	15

Overwhelmingly, visitors commented on the learning benefits of interacting with volunteers:

“Gained additional ‘quirky’ knowledge not to be found in guide books.” (Visitor, National Trust property)

“Frequently they have a more detailed knowledge than is contained in the guidebooks.” (Visitor, open air museum)

Much less cited was the volunteers’ friendliness and the impact volunteers had on the atmosphere of the site:

“It made ... a friendly place and sympathetic to small children.” (Visitor, country house)

“A very friendly atmosphere.” (Visitor, National Trust property)

The ‘*added value*’ that volunteers can offer the visitor experience and their *helpfulness* were both also cited frequently. Added value typically took the form of additional learning:

“Added interest. Made the visit more enjoyable and memorable.” (Visitor, open air museum)

“The ‘added value’ of the information from the stewards” (Visitor, country house)

Helpfulness is the closest service concept that visitors regularly cited:

“They were very helpful and quite knowledgeable about the house and family.” (Visitor, country house)

“She was very helpful, lifting my son over the large step and taking him into the cabin area.” (Visitor, historic ship)

Visitors also commented on how friendly volunteers were and how this enhanced their visit:

“The human touch makes the place seem more friendly” (Visitor, National Trust property)

“Their friendliness and knowledge makes the place seem more interesting and I have wanted to take visitors there.” (Visitor, National Trust property)

The volunteer-visitor encounter

Overall, service motives were not often cited by volunteers, nor were service benefits frequently stated by visitors. However, the service encounter is primarily a social encounter (McCallum & Harrison, 1985). Indeed since the visitors are experienced heritage consumers they will have the templates necessary to enable them to engage in social interaction with the volunteers.

Rather than talking about their encounters in terms of a service exchange, the commodity both groups of respondents referred to was information and in particular anecdotal information. Indeed this is a mutual information exchange between two groups, who share similar characteristics, though are at different life stages. Smith (2001) has proposed suggested a specific type of encounter, which occurs within the museum context and where she calls curators ‘culture brokers’. The term culture broker reflects that the curator is specifically passing on cultural information or capital to the visitor. This study suggests that while volunteers are indeed passing on cultural information to the visitors, the visitors are passing information back. Volunteers do not have the monopoly on cultural information.

In addition, the social element of these encounters is significant. The volunteers make the visitors feel welcome and comfortable in their surroundings and the visitors talked about the friendliness of the volunteers. For both volunteers and visitors, interaction forms an important social role, which helps to meet volunteers’ motivational needs and contribute to a more personal visit for the visitors, adding value to their visit, through their friendliness and sharing of anecdotal information. It seems that there is no paradox in leisure-seeking volunteers contributing effectively to the visitors’ own leisure experiences. However, it seems that the positive interaction and mutual learning between volunteers and visitors may be due to the previous experience of both groups. First time visitors, who have not already developed a template by which to judge their encounters may not find such interaction so enjoyable.

Conclusions and implication of the findings

Volunteers are typically older, retired individuals, with an above-average level of educational attainment. They were initially motivated to volunteer by their subject interest, but social opportunities were more important in keeping the volunteers motivated along with their level of commitment. These front-of-house volunteers are engaging in a leisure activity and they consider their role at the museum or heritage visitor attraction as welcoming the visitors and answering their questions. However, this is not one-way learning. Volunteers enjoy learning as much from the visitors as they are able to inform themselves. The social interaction with the visitors constitutes a very important part of the volunteers’ motivation, which was illustrated by volunteers’ comments.

The visitor sample within this study consisted of regular visitors, who had a clear idea what to expect and have a high level of educational attainment. Thus, they are likely

to already have some degree of knowledge prior to their visit. The highest scoring benefit for visitors, from volunteer interaction, was *learning* (see Box 6), followed by *friendly* and *added value*. Thus, from the visitors' point of view, the volunteers' role is one of adding value, by providing additional information from outside the guidebook, which makes the visit more personal and providing a friendly face.

These visitors have already constructed a template, by which they are able to conduct the interaction and gain the most beneficial outcomes. However, occasional visitors, or first-time visitors may require some additional assistance in interacting successfully with the volunteers, as they will not have had the opportunity to construct a template from previous experiences. This may equally be the case with visitors who are not cultural peers with the volunteers, for example, visitors from overseas. The type of information that visitors hope to gain from volunteers will also help managers in designing information packs for volunteers and formal interpretation, such as guidebooks. Unusual anecdotes and 'historical gossip' could be retained for volunteers to pass on.

Managers need to be aware of volunteers' social needs, particularly on quiet days with fewer visitors, where volunteers may be spaced out around a site or building and have no one to talk to for hours on end:

"You're rather isolated from the other volunteers. I had hoped to meet people." (Volunteer steward, National Trust property)

Thus, consideration for the spacing of volunteers must be given. This is particularly important, as volunteers typically help out once a week (BAFM, 1998), meaning that if their one day volunteering a week is dull, this will be more noticeable than if they were volunteering every day and only one day in the week was dull. Managers must be aware at all times that their front-of-house volunteers are leisure-seeking.

For both volunteers and visitors, interaction forms an important social role, which helps to meet volunteers' motivational needs and contribute to a more personal visit for the visitors. Volunteers can provide a personal and enjoyable experience for visitors, which should be fostered and encouraged for the long-term benefit of the heritage sector. Interaction with visitors was found to be very rewarding for the volunteers. It provided a chance for them to share their knowledge and, for front-of-house volunteers such as room stewards or guides; a day without visitors is a very dull day indeed:

"It's lovely, I've never regretted it and I can't miss a day. You've got to treat them like friends, how you would like to be treated"

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