

# Voluntourism: an analysis of the online marketing of a fast-growing industry

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## Abstract

*Background: The combination of tourism and volunteering can be an appealing package for a diverse range of individuals wishing to combine travel with opportunities for participation in international health care, medicine, education, or other development related work. The focus of this study was to assess how organisations offering voluntourism placements (a combination of volunteering and tourism) use internet marketing to promote their products (organised volunteer opportunities). Method: A thematic analysis of the content of the internet advertising by organisations offering voluntourism placements. Results: Internet marketing is adaptive platform for marketing via social media, search engines, websites, blogs, direct emails, and display marketing offering appealing imagery and testimonials as a means to recruit prospective voluntourists. Conclusion: This work identified how the marketing of voluntourism is targeted to appeal to key motivators (curriculum vitae enhancement). The identification of the marketing tactics used also raises some questions about the drivers of this growth industry and the ethics involved in offering and promoting such placements.*

**Key words:** Volunteer, Internet, Marketing, Ethics

## Introduction

*"Of course, when you're not working at the hospital, you can be swimming, scuba diving, surfing, basking on the beach, learning about marine life, exotic birds, and even tortoises"*  
(GoAbroad.com 2014)

Although voluntary work combined with tourism (hereafter, "voluntourism") is a relatively new concept, its origins are embedded in the short-term, relief-oriented model of the short term medical mission (Chung, 2004; (Campbell, Sullivan et al. 2011; Wearing and McGehee 2013). Voluntourism in the context of this work relates to voluntourism in an international, low resource setting involving volunteering in various fields such as medicine, education, development or environmental conservation (Tomazos and Butler 2009; Wearing and McGehee 2013). Voluntourism activities can accommodate a range of skill levels, but leans towards minimal professional skills with an emphasis on providing an intensive, semi-technical approach to delivery of service (Tomazos and Butler 2009; Birman and Kolkun 2013). A recent review of voluntourism activities by Wearing and McGehee (2013) concludes that although there have been radical developments in the field there is need for a critical analysis of

voluntourism activities. The impact of voluntourism on the host communities is now under question. And some argue that there room for improving standards in voluntourism, for example preparatory training, post placement debriefing and evaluation (Wearing and McGehee 2013). Given the exponential growth in this activity, we examined the role of online marketing and the opportunities this offers both to voluntourism organisations and voluntourists to share stories (via Facebook, Twitter or blogs, for example) and thereby promote certain placements.

In the past decade the voluntourism market has grown rapidly with an estimated 1.6 million voluntourists a year, amounting to 1.7-2.6 billion \$USD industry in 2008. A recent report on United Nations Volunteering reveal the growing trend towards international (versus national volunteering), with steady increases year by year. The popular region for volunteering is in the Sub-Saharan African region followed by Asia and Pacific (United Nations, 2014). Options for volunteering in international settings are now offered via a growing range of independent agencies. The GoAbroad website ([www.goabroad.com](http://www.goabroad.com)) offers links to 938 organisations that offer 5568 volunteer abroad programmes.

Vecina and Fernandi (2013) question what drives engagement in voluntourism: "the pleasure or the pressure?" (Vecina and Fernando 2013). Given the deliberate nature of participation in voluntourism activity, the psychological determinants of not only who engages in

voluntourism, but what is achieved personally, is highly relevant (Brown 2005; Vecina and Fernando 2013). Personal gains for the voluntourist have been well documented including perceived mental and physical wellbeing, increased social support (Vecina and Fernando 2013). Yet, voluntourism placements are also considered attractive for many other reasons, including the opportunity to gain 'first-hand' work experience, (which can contribute to curriculum vitae's) (Hubli and Noordhoff 2013). For some people, the appeal may also lay in the dual benefits of travelling to unconventional or "off the beaten track" sites and to 'doing something useful' (hereby implying a more productive alternative to mainstream leisure tourism) (Sarisbury and Blozie 2011; Golub and Diament-Golub 2013).

As Wearing and McGehee (2013) described, a series of factors, including potential gains to voluntourists have converged to support the growth of voluntourism as an industry and practice. These range from global humanitarian and political events, to an intrinsic response to the consumer-driven world where the expectation and reward of investment is personal gain. Similarly, the increased perceived global connectedness promoted via social and broadcast media among younger generations, may raise the profile and potential of this industry (Singh, McCool et al. 2011; Johnson, Bailey et al. 2012). Work by Singh et al. (2011) reminds us that contemporary students are more likely than ever to have travelled overseas, to have international students as classmates and to be linked, digitally at least, to several international friends or colleagues (Yudkin, Bayley et al. 2003; Singh, McCool et al. 2011). Moreover, travelling has never been as affordable, fast and convenient as in the recent years making brief, long distance trips a possibility.

Linking the idea of volunteering with the playfulness of tourism and discovery of exotic locations can be seen as the perfect "kill two birds with one stone" opportunity for young people, particularly during their studies or in the period between study and paid employment (Sikka 2009; Kostovich and Bermele 2011). However, compared with the recent interest in drivers for uptake of voluntourism, there has been little focus on how voluntourism opportunities are actually marketed and what this might mean in regard to the costs and impacts for the host community, pre-departure training, and other ethical considerations (Wearing and McGehee 2013). Our paper describes how

voluntourism is framed in the context and medium of online advertising.

#### Methods

A qualitative analysis of the content of internet marketing of organisations offering voluntourism opportunities was undertaken between November 2012 and January 2013. Websites and links eligible for inclusion in the final data set for analysis included all website listed on the GoAbroad.com website. This site was selected as it is one of the largest databases connecting potential voluntourists to placements. Information from each of the website was downloaded and saved for analysis of the dominant themes and motivating and facilitating drivers promoted for each organisation (GoAbroad.com 2014)

Data analysis was conducted by initially reading each of the websites to generate a coding framework (first line of analysis). Subsequent reviews of the data were conducted to determine the dominant and more idiosyncratic themes with the website.

#### Data analysis

1. Identification of the various motivators and facilitators of voluntourists from the existing literature.
2. Thematic analysis of websites listed on GoAbroad.com in order to:
  - a. Identify how the identified motivators/facilitators are targeted in the internet advertising; and,
  - b. Identify the techniques by which Internet advertising targets prospective voluntourists.

#### Results

In total, our search identified and reviewed 30 websites linked to the GoAbroad website (GoAbroad.com 2014). Qualitative analysis of the website content explored how internet advertising of voluntourism opportunities draws upon mainstream marketing techniques to create and meet demand for their product. The concept of a "tailor-made experience for the modern multi-tasking adult" was common and expressed variably throughout the sites. Focus on making voluntourism, a flexible, "prêt-à-porter" experience, was persistent, with emphasis on flexibility, bespoke arrangements and exceptional opportunities to engage in a one-off experience as well as optional extras within the "package" deal.

Table one presents the common marketing strategies identified in the analysis and categorised by key factors (personal, interpersonal and broader voluntourism factors); intention (intrinsic drivers to voluntourism) and external (extrinsic) skills and experiences oriented factors.

**Table 1 On-line Voluntourism marketing strategies**

Personal	Intention	Gaining skills and experience (personal/professional)
	Egoism	Volunteering with a desire to leave a legacy behind
	Altruism	Genuine desire to give themselves in service to others through their time, money and talents.
	Travel with a "purpose"	Volunteer wishes to add purpose to their vacation. Occasionally voluntourism trips have been labelled 'guilt-trips' as people volunteer to avoid feeling guilty about a self-indulgent holiday or how privileged they are.
	Organisational goal	The volunteer agrees with and therefore wants to support the missions of a particular voluntourism organization
Interpersonal	Destination	Opportunity to travel to an area which we would be otherwise not possible
	Authentic experience, cultural immersion, cross cultural understanding and global awareness	Opportunity to interact with local community beyond superficial customer experience
	Encouraged by others	An individual is motivated by encouragement from others
Voluntourist facilitators	Enhancing relationships and seeking camaraderie	A young couple volunteer together to travel and work before study or individual volunteers in hope of meeting like-minded individuals which they can socially interact with.
	Security/safety	Individual and/or caregivers need to be assured that they will have a safe and enjoyable experience.
	Project content'	Important as international voluntourists spend a considerable amount of money, time and labour volunteering and sightseeing. Also important in terms of viability as a project may require a specific skill set.
	Price	Total cost of an individual's volunteering experience. This includes the cost of the project and additional costs for example travel, food, and insurance.
	Time	Length of the project and flexibility of start and end dates.
	Location/accessibility	Ease of access to the site of project. 'Location/accessibility' relates to price since different locations will have different costs. This will depend on volunteers' home location or travel arrangements before and after undertaking the voluntourism.
	Life cycle	Stage of life e.g. student versus young adult recently retired individual, etc.

**Motivation for voluntourism: a marketing opportunity**

It was evident that organisations target a broad range of individuals, although there is evidence of a specific targeting of material towards youth, particularly students or young professionals. Targeting a broad range of individuals appears to be necessary since overly stringent criteria or market segments that are too specific could be limiting potential voluntourists.

Global Volunteer Network includes a downloadable PDF titled "10 Reasons People Volunteer" presented as a banner on the homepage (Network 2014). Diverse options for preference of field of work (e.g. medicine or education) were also offered, allowing the voluntourist to identify projects "tailored" to their interests or fitting some specific objectives. Some of the "medical opportunities"

include projects as short as a week long, with projects of 1 to 2 weeks being commonplace (including some "March break" specials for a week). There were no specific skills requirements presented within the webpage, reducing perceived competency barriers but also framing volunteer work as something requiring little or no skill. Rather the emphasis was firmly on the opportunity to "make a difference" by being involved in the activities. Little or no mention of orientation, pre-departure training was included within the sites reviewed.

*Market segmentation: diverse opportunities to suit skills and experience*

The overt promotion of attainment of new "skills and experiences" are targeted throughout the majority of websites reviewed. Skills were framed in terms of what you will develop while voluntouring versus pre-requisite skills necessary prior to volunteering. This approach lowers the

barriers to voluntourism while increasing the potential personal gains arising from a placement. An example is *Projects Abroad* that has subcategories called “*Volunteer abroad*” and “*Intern abroad*” (Abroad 2014). The “*Volunteer abroad*” includes very low-skilled general projects involving sport, building, conservation, performing arts and language teaching. *Intern abroad* includes projects in fields of medicine and healthcare, law, journalism, international development, business, veterinary medicine and dental care. In the latter case, Projects Abroad states that “we have medical internships to suit people of all levels of qualification and experience” (Abroad 2014).

The acclaimed skills and experiences were promoted as a result of engagement in a wide range of volunteering opportunities and promoted as something to “set you apart from the rest”. However, voluntourism is becoming so common place in some fields that some students report that a voluntourism experience is something that “everybody seems to do” which can increase the pressure to conform and have participated in a similar experience too. Some organisations offer certificates or references following their engagement within an activity, which are marketed as career boosting opportunities. Another example with *Project Abroad* is the “high school special” (targeting 16-19 year olds specifically). This broadens the market by also involving younger prospective voluntourists but also frames voluntourism as advantageous when applying to colleges (Abroad 2014).

Another selling point is the chance of overseas experience in a developing setting in exchange for “first-hand experience” and some associated credibility. Although some organisations offered language courses as part of a project, language requirements are rare and when language is mentioned it is usually as potential courses on site and not as a prerequisite. Other organisations also marketed the possibility for students to complete a thesis or achieve mandatory credits while volunteering, another “killing two birds with one stone” opportunity.

*“Lasting from two weeks to one month, these programs are designed to make the most of your short time abroad while contributing to your community service credit requirements or college applications.” (GoAbroad.com 2014).*

#### *The authentic experience*

The desire for an “authentic experience”, “cultural immersion”, “cross cultural understanding” and “global awareness” is marketed to consumers in a variety of ways. This also frames voluntourism as a more “authentic” experience than “regular” tourism, thereby framing tourism as comparatively inauthentic. Images or videos portraying volunteers “immersed” in the local culture, sometimes in local dress is also common place. It is meant to exhibit the potential for “authenticity” associated with voluntourism. Various accounts of intimate experiences with the local culture

are both presented on the websites or via links to Facebook and YouTube for wider dissemination. *Projects Abroad*, for example, offers specific experience on a “culture & community project”. Some sites promise the opportunity to have a “impact” on a community or an individual’s life, and becoming an “integral” part of a community, are evidenced below.

*“Whatever type of volunteer placement you choose to do with Projects Abroad you will receive a unique perspective into the culture of the country in which you are working. By choosing a Culture & Community project, you will become an integral part of a local community abroad” (GoAbroad.com 2014)*

#### *Challenge and stimulation*

The opportunity for personal challenge and a stimulating experience appeared throughout the majority of voluntourism websites as an essential element of the motivation or inner desires for undertaking a volunteering activity. The promise of a specific adventure component within a project or overseas placement was widely promoted. Global Volunteer Network offers a project where volunteers climb to Mt Everest base camp before or following volunteering at a local orphanage.

The perception of personal accomplishment as a reward for voluntourism was also clearly targeted within the advertisements. For example, one organisation encouraged volunteers to: “leave your mark behind and let your experience leave a mark on you”. In some cases logo t-shirts were produced for the voluntourists to wear after their return home. This can provide a badge or marker of the “volunteer spirit” or perhaps a self-proclamation “I’ve done that” while also serving as an embodied advertisement for the organisation. Similarly, several organisations draw upon the experiences of previous volunteers as marketing strategies, drawing upon their stories of how this experience changed them, alongside testimonials or endorsements on websites, YouTube, and blogs. Blogs are widely used, tending to be written by volunteers reporting in-situ, on the project and the experience. Video clips of the project site and locals are also posted alongside blogs or personal testimonials.

In addition to the various strategies used to promote the range of adventure opportunities, the family experience package was also advertised. Project Abroad has a link on their website for “volunteering as a family” and “group trips”.

*“Our overseas tailor made trips are suitable for groups from all areas of society: college students on a summer break, students from a class or university department, sports teams, work colleagues or even a group of friends looking for a truly original volunteering experience!” (GoAbroad.com 2014)*

The continuum of engagement with volunteering was evident across the websites, with some clearly appealing to the “deeper” motivations of a prospective voluntourist with references to “altruism”, “purpose” and “helping”. References may include photos, videos and evocative descriptions portraying how the volunteer

engages with the host community. For example, quotes from Global Volunteer Network (Network 2014) read “make a lasting difference to a community in need” and “make long term change in your community of choice – it’s not just a vacation”. A quote on a student oriented travel website (STA.co.nz) read “Make your travel meaningful” and “give something back”. VE-global includes a list of global values displayed on its homepage which would appeal to the more “altruistic” volunteer with emphasis on “lasting results”. Those examples support the motivation to “make a difference” and it is a significant selling point. That said the “lasting results” are generally not described and there is greater emphasis on the motivation to ‘make a difference’, rather through which intervention the impact was made.

*You have the opportunity to help children in need. Children who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS, children who have been abused by their parents and children whose parents are not able to provide for them. These kids need love, attention, life skills, and education so they can have successful futures free from poverty and filled with the same opportunities as others (Network 2014).*

Similar bold statements are commonly applied where there is a strong appeal to emotion and pity from repetitively emphasizing the despair of the children or the community that need “help”. (Network 2014)

Duration of travel is an important factor, which was used as a facilitator. The implications and benefits of “short” term trips versus longer term trips were a key topic addressed in the promotional websites. Although the definition of short-term can differ, voluntourism placements are generally short-term with some organisations offering trips as brief as one week. Some websites offered flexibility in terms of volunteers choosing specific start and end dates tailored to personal schedules. One organisation (VE Global) required a minimum of four months; however such guidelines were rarely observed. The majority of organisations ensured optimum market potential by offering bespoke opportunities for volunteering to cater for the diverse ‘needs’ of volunteers..

‘Location and accessibility’ of the locations where voluntourism was offered was also variously targeted. Three strategies were commonly offered to mitigate the perceived burden on volunteers: added extras such as airport pick up and transfer, providing onsite accommodation and local food. The latter were often included as an assurance of the “authenticity” of the experience, and as a convenience. Costs of travel to the destination of voluntourism activity were rarely included in the service price. Voluntourism placements for “March break” targeted the North American market by offering specials during standard vacation periods. In addition, popular destinations are also advertised, meaning that some countries are

more heavily targeted as host countries, potentially because they are particularly attractive and offer specific tourism opportunities. Security and safety are generally acknowledged within voluntourist websites, with the promise of local in-country staff and 24-hour phone support available in the volunteer’s home country. The provision of accounts from many former volunteers also can act as a way to frame the experience as “safe”.

Finally, celebrity endorsements are the ideal ‘cherry on top’ embellishment to any website. Its presence is likely to indicate quality, prestige and even safety of the activities. For example, *Project Abroad* (2014) offers live online information sessions for volunteers with recommendations, endorsements and testimonials that establish confidence in the safety of the service. Endorsements from notable persons appear to provide a badge of confidence in the organisation. Global Volunteer Network’s testimonial from Bill Gates reads “*I’d love to see more young people taking action to help the poor and disadvantaged. Two places to get started are Network for Good and Global Volunteer Network*” (Network 2014)

#### Discussion

This study was undertaken to describe how voluntourism has been marketed via online media. Over 30 websites were analysed to elicit both dominant and idiosyncratic marketing practices for this rapidly growing industry. This analysis contributes to international academic interest in the ethics and practice of voluntourism; the present paper offers an analysis of the dominant on-line marketing approaches used by voluntourism agencies. Although this work does not directly attempt to explore the impact of voluntourism in the host communities per se, we argue that how the projects and activities are promoted assists to set up the expectations of volunteers and drive an increase in placements, both of which are likely to impact on the benefits, or otherwise, for the host communities.

We identified several pervasive trends; primarily, the emphasis on personal gains to the volunteer that overshadows the community. Text, photographs and videos represent the possible experience, the adventure and the personal gains to the volunteer as the primary content whereas information about the host community was markedly less pronounced. In the marketing of voluntourism the “experience” takes most of the space, in which community this occurs is secondary and various settings can work for an experience. The diversity of experience options available feature prominently compared to information relating to the communities with whom the volunteer will be working or staying.

Consistent with marketing literature, successful companies reduce barriers to investment (i.e. increasing the number of volunteers) and emphasize consumers potential gains. In the case of for-profit voluntourism organisations, increasing the number of volunteers is critical. Price in particular, provides a competitive edge within the market, both as an absolute value but also as a measure of what the ‘package’ includes. Organisations offered promotional specials to cater for different budgets and aspirations of the consumer. Multiple placement opportunities, often to the same region or country, raising

competition in terms of price and other 'added extras'. References to the host community culture, expressed needs, preferences and evaluations of benefits from the activities are seldom addressed. Again, the intrinsic value of gaining a novel cultural experience is well described and carefully constructed in online marketing by voluntourist organisations. An overriding theme across the websites is that experience is waiting for those who accept the challenge and the rewards are plenty, not the least in terms of preparation for professional life.

This research has identified how the core drivers for voluntourism (motivators and facilitators) have been targeted through online media advertising. Online marketing is an efficient, malleable marketing approach for the potential voluntourist. Websites are amenable to rich and evocative enticements, via photographs, blogs and short videos are presented from the settings being promoted.

### Conclusion

Voluntourism is growing in popularity for

many reasons, not the least being the perceived opportunity to gain 'real life' experience across a wide range of professional areas (Withers, Browner et al. 2013). It is important to note that voluntourism is a practice that has evolved from the culture of medical missions (specialist volunteer services). Genuine need for supplementary capacity to address unmet health needs, for example, legitimize this enterprise. Indeed, many reports indicate the perceived value of this practice among the medical community (Holt 2012). Similarly, voluntourism opportunities are eagerly sought for career enhancement as well as a genuine desire to experience how others live and contribute meaningfully to their communities. However, further research is recommended to investigate the implications of this activity on host communities (asking the question of who really benefits). We question whether it is time to explore the potential value of ethical guidelines (Wall 2011), pre-departure training and evaluating the impacts of activities (Martiniuk, Manouchehrian et al. 2012) as potential strategies for addressing the underlying ethical implications of this activity.

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