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ABSTRACT

Increasing needs for volunteers have led many nonprofit organizations to seek to understand the benefits sought by individuals from volunteering. This study examines empathy. Empathy is believed to be one of the causes of individuals engaging in helping or prosocial behavior, an activity which includes volunteering. What role does empathy play in the benefits sought by individuals from volunteering? The objective of this study is to examine this question.

The relationship between empathy and benefits sought by collegiate business students from volunteering are explored. Individuals who possess relatively higher levels of empathy appear to be more likely to participate in volunteering activity and hence, are likely to perceive that they receive a higher level of benefits from engaging in volunteering activity than individuals who possess a relatively lower level of empathy.

The sample was comprised of members of Generation Y pursuing higher education in business. Questionnaires were distributed to students enrolled in marketing courses. The most commonly employed measure of empathetic emotional response was employed (Mehrabian et al. 1972). Benefits sought by individuals from volunteering were measured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) developed by Clary et al. (1998).

The results indicate that while empathy plays a role in each of the previously identified benefits sought from volunteering, it plays a larger role in the “escaping from negative feelings” benefit. The findings suggest that although empathetic appeals to potential volunteers may be universally successful when attempting to attract young adults, appeals targeting young adults who are looking to volunteer to escape from negative feelings (protective benefit) may be particularly successful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David J. Burns, D.B.A. (1987, Kent State University) is Professor of Marketing and Director of Faculty Programs, Xavier University. He has co-authored several books, published over 95 journal articles and book chapters and presented over 200 papers. His research interests include mission integration, retail location and atmospherics, ethics, and consumer culture.