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Six leadership skills you can gain from volunteering

Voluntary work can offer rewarding experiences and opportunities, particularly for ambitious marketers who are keen to develop leadership skills and build strong networks within the industry.

By [Maeve Hosea](#) 2 Jul 2015 12:00 pm



“I began my career as a barista almost 17 years ago and today, I lead a team to deliver marketing plans and creative assets for Starbucks in the UK and beyond,” says Jimmy Curtis, senior marketing manager for Starbucks EMEA. “I am in no doubt that my volunteering in and outside of work has been a key part of this success.”

For ambitious young marketers, voluntary work is a key ingredient in the recipe for leadership. As well as profiting from the sense of making a difference and contributing to a larger purpose, volunteering can help develop a wider perspective, creative thinking, excellent networking as well as hone leadership qualities.

While climbing the ladder at Starbucks, Curtis has volunteered for book readings, supported the Parents and Teachers Association at a local primary school, as well as

organised and facilitated employability workshops for 15- to 16-year-old students in disadvantaged schools.

“Voluntary experiences have grown my confidence in my leadership capabilities and have showcased the positive impact volunteering can have for everyone,” he says.

Indeed, as many marketers have learned early in their careers, volunteering can build a number of capabilities that they might not get to practise very often in their day jobs.

1. Developing a personal brand

The softer skills of confidence, positivity, authenticity and personal brand are critical to any successful career. Business leaders will inevitably need to use them to gain the trust of their teams, colleagues and professional network.

Carolyn Fursse, director of publicity and marketing services Northern Europe at Discovery Networks, says voluntary work helps to keeps her energised, grow professionally and, crucially, build her confidence in communications, leadership and people development. She has achieved this by giving advice, tips and insights to charities she admires.

Fursse has been volunteering for Phoenix Futures, after being matched with the charity by the Media Trust. While Phoenix Futures, which facilitates a journey of recovery for people with drug and alcohol addictions, receives communications guidance and support around strategies and general motivational advice, Fursse is developing her people skills.

“Doing this has made me value my expertise even more as I see companies that are crying out for help in these areas,” explains Fursse. “It’s also so inspiring to meet with people who are extremely passionate about their organisations, and have such an appetite for developing their skills further.”

2. Learning from new environments

Getting involved with people in the voluntary sector is an eye opener in many ways. While they might want guidance in areas, charity workers, who are often highly skilled and have a clear vision of what they want to achieve, have plenty to teach too.

One of the most important lessons for young marketers is arguably the often-limited resources they are presented with in such scenarios and how that challenge can be a springboard for effective marketing.

“You can learn more than you think by working with charities and social enterprises,” says Catherine Cherry, marketing director, UK, Ireland and Netherlands at Sony Mobile Communications. She donates the time of her marketing team to small charities as part of an annual ‘challenge’ event in partnership with Pimp My Cause, a web-based platform bringing good causes in need of professional marketing support together with experts.

“Part of it is having the chance to apply your marketing expertise in a new environment. Working with small budgets forces you to think creatively and challenges the return on investment in every idea,” says Cherry.



Volunteering can provide opportunities to use skills that are not usually utilised at work

The brand donates two days per year to the partnership: one for creating the marketing plan and the other as a follow-up day, where it brainstorms creative ideas that the charities can execute based on their plan. The people involved range through all levels, from Cherry herself at director level, to marketing assistants and executives. She recommends that young marketers volunteer because of the guaranteed learning opportunity the initiative offers.

“For less experienced marketers, it’s a wonderful opportunity to learn from others, to work with senior people they wouldn’t normally get to spend time with and to work across the entire marketing plan – unlike their day jobs, which often focus on specialist functions.”

3. Building confidence and passion

Giving is at the core of volunteering but there is much that can be gained from it too. Yes To Life is a charity that works with cancer sufferers to help them access an integrated approach to their treatment. Approaching its 10th birthday, it is aiming to improve its loyalty offering for supporters.

Loyalty programme Nectar works with Pimp My Cause under the banner of Loyalty for Good and is mid-way through a nine-month project with Yes to Life. It has helped with the charity’s anniversary celebration in June this year, as well as a project to strengthen its relationships with both the business partners it works with and the people who make donations to the charity.

Nectar partner manager Jeannine Trim, who has worked for the loyalty brand since graduating in 2011, has cultivated a passion for the cause while working on a series of pro bono campaigns for Yes to Life. “I was really attracted by how different its approach to cancer is,” she says. “Added to that, the brief fits well with what we do because they want to build relationships with not only people donating to them, but other businesses.”

Trim works with a team of seven other Nectar marketers from different levels within the business on the project, meeting weekly and receiving training concurrently. “You will

learn new skills on the training scheme and you will be able to implement them straight away, which is helpful,” she explains. “It gives you confidence in ideas; confidence that you are the expert – you may be a young, comparatively inexperienced marketer, but you are still an expert in your field.”

4. Reflecting on yourself by connecting with others

Nine years into his marketing career, Jack Lowman, senior head of marketing at The Prince’s Trust, is a volunteer mentor. This involves inspiring and coaching a young marketer at L’Oreal, who graduated from university in 2013. They meet every six weeks and reflect on her progress in that time.

He says that by opening up a conversation with someone in this way, it is possible to improve your skills of understanding and this is a real asset in the office. Lowman met his mentee as part of the Google Squared Digital Training Programme.

“We revisit what she has learned during her Google course, discuss any pressing issues at work, with her career and life, and I share as much as I can to support her with whatever is a priority for her,” explains Lowman.

He volunteers in order to build skills to make himself a more rounded person. “The work is a process of digging deep and seeing where she wants to go in her future. Volunteering like this is powerful – it helps you reflect on who you are and what you stand for, so being able to bring that back to the business is very valuable.”

5. The opportunity to make a difference

With the transition to digital, charities and social enterprises need good marketing more than ever.

Andrew Nixon-King, programme manager at Liberty Mutual Insurance, has volunteered for a number of organisations including Glad’s House, which supports children living below the poverty line in Kenya, and Wise Up Workshops, which provides drawing and talk therapy to children. He has donated his website and search engine optimisation skills, as well as inbound marketing strategies to improve performance.

His intention behind volunteering is about giving back in a small way, but it has also made a meaningful contribution to his own career development agenda.

“Volunteering has boosted my self-confidence and self-esteem because making a corner of the world a better place really adds a sense of accomplishment,” he explains. “It has also tested my ability to lead under tough time-sensitive circumstances, with limited resources and no direct authority. I’m certain these added value experiences will help progress my career in the future.”

Nixon-King has gained confidence from working on projects which have made a very tangible difference to people’s lives. This in turn has helped him with motivation, given him inspiration, made him a more rounded person and prepared him for future leadership.

“A good leader has exemplary character – it is someone with honesty, integrity, vision and the ability to make a difference,” says Nixon-King. “Volunteering without doubt adds character and helps build upon these core leadership values.”

6. Stepping outside your comfort zone

Many marketers find volunteering gives them the opportunity to use skills they have but do not get to use.

“I really enjoy helping charities out in my spare time because with an operational role at work, I don’t always get the chance to do the strategic things,” says Alison Esposti, head of acquisition at Giff Gaff.

Esposti has taken part in a number of long-term voluntary projects. Most recently she has been working with Data Unity on everything from how they generate revenue, to their corporate identity.

“Volunteering allows people to flex skills and keep them fresh and I believe that by doing so, you are being smart with your time,” she says.

This sentiment is echoed by Jennifer Jacobs, customer marketing manager at Freesat, who has recently invested her free time in the development of the Inspire Conference. The event is organised by the Marketing Academy, [which provides scholarship and apprenticeship programmes for future business leaders](#). Marketing Week is a media partner of the organisation.

The project has enabled Jacobs to do things that she would not be able to do in her normal role, such as presenting to top decision makers, leading team work and writing brand strategy.

“A great thing about Inspire was that although I took on the email marketing, which is my area of expertise, I was given the freedom to work on the whole brand strategy for the event,” says Jacobs.

“It is really good to do something out of your comfort zone because you never know what challenges you are going to get in your career,” she adds.

Jacobs can draw upon this experience to help in her work. “If I was to do branding work [in my day job], I would be quite terrified,” she says. “But at Inspire, the structure is pretty much flat and you can bounce ideas off one another without having to report to anybody or get sign-off.”

There are a plethora of good causes out there, each requiring varied expertise. Getting involved takes energy and requires commitment but while they pursue a project with passion, those giving their time for free are keeping their career on course and speeding their climb up the ladder.

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