



The Members' Advisory Panel online discussion
Evaluation
David Coles – March 2010

Background

Between July 2008 and June 2009 YouthNet conducted research to explore volunteers' and organisations' experience of using Do-it and vinspired.com. One of the main findings of this work was that partners of YouthNet, such as Volunteer Centres and charities, wished to be consulted more on developments that affect them and the National Volunteering Database (NVD). To respond to this feedback the Members' Advisory Panel (MAP), an online discussion forum, was created.

The purpose

The purpose of MAP is to consult with our partners on issues that may affect them in relation to the NVD and Do-it. YouthNet can use their expertise and ensure that our products and services meet their needs.

There will be three or four discussions per year looking at a variety of topics.

February 2010 discussion

This discussion explored the possibility of developing a membership scheme for YouthNet partners.

A list to the questions that were put to the panel can be found in [appendix 1](#).

The format

There was one discussion group consisting of Volunteer Centres and national/regional charities.

The discussions started on Monday February 8th and finished on Wednesday February 17th with new discussion points being posted on the Wednesday, Friday and Monday.

They were held on the 'Basecamp' network in private discussion rooms.

The Participants

The participants were recruited through re@d-it!, attending regional meetings and by word of mouth.

Organisations	Name of participant
BACYP	Bianca Gallipoli
Barnet VC	Misha Bhatt
Central Surrey CVS	Julia Gallagher
Ealing CVS	Lizzie Saunders
Rochdale Volunteer Development Agency	Sarah Harper
The Scout Association	Ben Storrar
VC Camden	Sheila Norris
vinvolved Surrey	Chris Pearsall
Volunteer Centre Bexley	Lynne Regan
Volunteer Centre Colchester	Tania Morton
Watford YMCA	Julia Collar
Watford YMCA	Mary Green
National Trust	Chloe Cooke
Caterham VC	Marion Piggott
Telford and Wrekin VC	Beverly Harris

The results

Please see [appendix 2](#) the full transcript of the discussions.

The participants were told that if YouthNet did create a membership scheme we would consider renaming our partners to be called members instead. They were asked what they thought about being a member instead of a partner. There was a split between the group on this question with some participants saying that they would prefer to stay as a partner.

“I think that partner suggests a more collaborative relationship, as opposed to member, which to me signifies a supporting role. Partner, to me, feels more proactive” (Chloe Cooke, National Trust).

However, others said they did not mind as long as the membership offering continued to be collaborative.

“Personally I think this is an exercise in semantics. I don’t mind if I am a member/partner or the often used term affiliate. What really matters is a good working relationship built on trust and mutual benefit” (Beverley Harris, Telford and Wrekin VC).

When Felicity Jones, YouthNet’s Membership Services Manager explained the reasons why YouthNet might change the term from partner to member there was a more favourable response with Misha Bhatt from Barnet VC saying;

“I do understand and see why it is important that (you) have ‘members’ rather than ‘partners’ especially when you talk about an infrastructural organisation.”

The reasons Felicity gave included the following:

- YouthNet being able to offer a number of membership 'perks' such as training and a syndication feed and all members knowing what these are
- Organisations can feel confused by the term partner
- YouthNet want current partners to buy in to the infrastructure of the National Volunteering Database and feel part of something bigger
- Finally, the partners section of Do-it is not widely used, but if it was a 'members' area' this may help.

Participants were asked how YouthNet can ensure that their products stay relevant for partners, their answers included:

- Annual surveys/focus groups
- Best practice guides on Do-it or links to other relevant websites
- Close collaboration between YouthNet and its partners
- Use of social media
- Use of social networking websites (i-volunteer as an example of this).

Two further points were:

"1) The technical team need to be in sync with the latest technologies and innovations in terms of websites and contact resource management ... And 2) at the same time, the training and development team need to be prepared to offer different level of training- Basic, intermediate, advanced in various formats- online via net meetings, in-house face to face and through video guides" (Misha Bhatt, Barnet VC).

Participants expect YouthNet to be leaders in the latest technology and volunteering management software and are also expected to share this expertise with partners through various communication channels.

When participants were asked what specific benefits they would expect from a membership scheme there was a long list of ideas, these included:

- A regular newsletter
- Chat rooms/forums
- A members/partners only site
- Opportunity to create/comment on blogs
- 24 hour support
- More relevant data for partners
- Training places
- Notifications of forums and conferences relating to volunteer recruitment and best practice
- Online training resources
- Network meetings
- Do-it page where paid jobs within the network could be advertised
- The right to vote for trustees at the AGM

- An online area for members to share concerns, ideas and questions.

Step by step video guides were mentioned more than once with Marion Piggott from Caterham VC saying;

"I recall taking part in an exercise some time ago trialing an online training session. I would like to see this idea developed so that I can use it to train members of my team."

There was no consensus for what criteria organisations should be charged for being a member and what different types of packages YouthNet could sell. However several different models were suggested including: an income based approach, number of employees, what features the organisation would like to use with Do-it and a fee for Volunteer Centres and another for larger charities. Both positives and negatives were given for each model.

"Through an income based approach, it needs to be borne in mind that funding levels are so variable at present; you could calculate membership at one rate, then receive/lose a grant and end up needing to pay at another level instead! Even on an annual basis, adding and then losing features because your subscription rate changes would be difficult and create inconsistent practice/service" (Julia Collar, Watford YMCA).

"Another model could be a flat fee paid by all VC's and other org's which entails them to certain benefits and then each VC's , org pays additional for extra training, help etc...more like pay as you go!" (Misha Bhatt, Barnet VC).

It was put to the participants that they could already receive a free Do-it search box for their own website but the take up was very low and YouthNet wanted to know why this was. There was a uniform answer which was that organisations were unaware of this and would find this a useful tool to have on their website.

"I never knew there was a ready-made search box. It is very useful, but perhaps orgs don't know it's there" (Sheila Norris, VC Camden).

The final question asked of the participants was what did they think of this first MAP discussion. Although there was only one reply on this thread it was a positive response.

"This is my first MAP discussion and I have found it to be very useful to read some of the comments and to hear all of the views... Perhaps one of the changes would be to invite topics from MAP member" (Beverley Harris, Telford and Wrekin VC).

Conclusions

The initial feeling of most of the participants was that if they were to be referred to as members this would mean a loss of status and less equal relationship between YouthNet and the organisations that post on Do-it. However, when it was explained what the changes would mean there was more of an understanding as to why YouthNet would do this. There was also a strong feeling that many did not mind what their title was as long as the relationship was an equal one where YouthNet consulted and informed partners of changes that may affect them.

There were many ideas for YouthNet to take into consideration in regards to ensuring that the services Do-it offer stay up to date and also what could be included in a membership package. The overall trend showed that good channels of communication from YouthNet were important and the use of technology to improve training and best practice. It is also expected that YouthNet and Do-it should be leaders in internet technology and volunteering management software.

There was less of a consensus for what models could be used to sell a membership package with several ideas being presented but not one that seemed to answer all the questions.

It appears that with the free Do-it search box there is a lack of communication from YouthNet on the availability of this rather than a lack of usefulness that is stopping current partners using this service. Participants felt that this would be a good addition to their websites and would like this included in a potential future membership package.

Overall the first MAP can be considered a success with many points being debated and those taking part in the consultation giving their views of several parts of a potential membership package.