



A strong sense of community through volunteering

A [recent academic research paper](#), published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, has found that the way people volunteer with parkrun creates a real sense of community, at three levels.

Dr. Sarah-Louise Mitchell, from Oxford Brookes Business School, talked to parkrun volunteers in the UK to find out what motivated them to volunteer, what they felt got out of it and how they engaged with parkrun as an organisation.

The study found that parkrun volunteers feel they are part of a brand and community at three levels.

First, the big idea of parkrun, the brand, felt like it was 'on their wavelength'. Everyone who was interviewed knew about the parkrun brand and how the events are delivered - with a set start time, distance and being free.

The second point of connection was due to the feeling that parkrun events were 'on their patch' - i.e that it was an integral part of the community in which they lived, and that they could benefit that community through their parkrun contribution. When walking or running, people talked about visiting more than one location including whilst on holiday, but when volunteering they tended to stay loyal to the event nearest their home.

The third point of connection was the way in which they volunteered: the range of roles and flexible levels of commitment means that people can volunteer with parkrun 'on their terms'. With other volunteering commitments, people said they had to have one role, such as sales in a charity shop, and they had to agree how many hours/times they would volunteer which became difficult if their circumstances changed or they went on holiday. Being able to choose your role at parkrun, for example uploading the results or being a tail walker, and being able to vary that role each week was really valued. These features reduce the barriers for people to volunteer.



All of these factors suggest that volunteering at parkrun is a team activity rather than an individual activity, and fosters a real sense of belonging and community.

The respondents also commented that parkrun provided an easy, rewarding and enjoyable route into volunteering. As such, those who are looking for opportunities to volunteer for the first time could consider parkrun.

The findings should be of interest to any nonprofit organisation who is trying to recruit more volunteers to underpin the delivery of their service or intervention. It shows that recruitment and retention is helped if organisations can create a strong sense of community and a sense of 'team', help people identify with the activity and organisation, make it easy and flexible to volunteer, and ensure the volunteers know how much of a difference they make to the local community in which they live.

To read the full paper, click [here](#).