

Peace Corps Update 2012 Report – Draft 1

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1. Introduction

Peace Corps Update (Update), founded in September 2010, is a monthly e-newsletter that goes out to all RPCVs who have given the Peace Corps permission to contact them by email and to all PCVs who have an email address. The Office of Strategic Partnerships takes responsibility for editing and distributing *Update*, although subject matter for articles is sought from offices throughout Peace Corps headquarters. The publication covers topics of interest to the above audiences and is the only publication, drawing upon agency-wide topics, that goes out to all possible RPCVs and PCVs. It is typically two to three pages in length and mostly incorporates one-paragraph articles with small (100 by 100-pixel) pictures. The service provider hired to enable the Peace Corps to lay out, mail, and collect statistics on *Update* is Industry Mailout.

Update's purpose has not been formally defined. Ostensibly, it is to provide information about activities at headquarters to the larger Peace Corps “family” (the term used in the newsletter’s monthly opening message from the director). Each section has its own goals—whether to inform or to call to action. Further qualitative studies (outlined below) would be helpful to define the publication’s mission and vision.

2. Methodology

This report constitutes the first attempt at a longitudinal review of *Update*. Previously, only monthly statistics of click-through rates of the publication’s live links have been compiled. Click-through data, from January through December 2012, form the basis for most of the information and recommendations in this report. A summary compilation of this raw data may be viewed in the attachment. The total universe of clicks for this report tallies to 23,568 over a 11-month period.

Except where specified, data in this report draw from RPCV clicks. This course was chosen for several reasons: RPCV and the PCV data as provided by Industry Mailout are separate but do not differ significantly (proportionately) from one another. Additionally, RPCV data report on a universe over five

times as large as PCV data. Furthermore, none of the data collected for this report are automated; all data are hand compiled. It was therefore thought that entering only one set of data, rather than adding two separate sets (RPCV and PCV), would lessen the frequency of errors.

The December issue of *Update* experienced breaks in the links for an unknown amount of time due to changes in the way Google Analytics inserted its tracking code. Most data from this month are therefore unreliable and have been excluded. In addition, it is important to note that because the data-collection process relies entirely on hand compilation and because the array of raw data provided by Industry Mailout is extremely difficult to read, some errors in the data are inevitable. Nonetheless, this report holds that the data errors are not highly significant, especially as obvious anomalies have been caught and corrected in generating this report.

3. Limits to Methodology

This report weighs the success of or interest in an article based upon the number of clicks the article received. It is important to remember that *Update* includes articles with no live links and that the text of an article, even without a link, may be interesting and relevant on its own even without a call to action (that is, a click). There is no way, given the current data collection method, to assess how interesting or important readers find articles without links. Further study of *Update* to answer these questions is suggested below.

4. Readership

In January 2012, *Update* went out to approximately 33,000 RPCVs and 7,300 PCVs. The December issue went out to approximately 36,000 RPCVs and 7,000 PCVs. Of these, an average of 28% of RPCVs opened the publication while an average of 26% of PCVs did so. While there was little variance in this average for RPCVs, PCVs had an open rate that dipped to 22% in January and September and peaked at 30% in February. While no comparable data has been found on readership rates for newsletters, it is noteworthy that the opt-out rate for this publication is a consistent, startling 0%, with a rate of spam reported of less than 1/10,000%. In addition, the link to "Keep in Touch," to update one's records with the Peace Corps, regularly receives an average of 186 clicks and garnered 2,047 clicks altogether during the 11 months of this study. Given these facts and given that *Update* is a free, unsolicited publication, it probably experiences a commendably high readership rate.

5. General Trends

Update is primarily used for professional development. Peace Corps Response receives the largest number of clicks each month, averaging 804 clicks per month and collecting 7,427 clicks during the 11 months of this study; this is the largest number of clicks received by any section of the website. Nipping close on the heels comes *Hotline* with an average of 468 clicks per month and garnering 5,155 clicks in 11 months. An IGAP article focusing on careers at PSI also garnered 254 clicks. Two articles advertising Idealist.org graduate school fairs also received 300 clicks altogether, and an article on the State Alumni career networking site received the most hits of 2012, 836.

While *Update* primarily appeals to career builders, it is important to note that it also carries value for other reader interests. While 13,972 of all clicks recorded were directly career-related (those mentioned above), the remaining 9,596 clicks that *Update* attracted in this study period were not career-related. Readers, one can conclude, also have an interest in other types of information provided by *Update*.

The total numbers of clicks accumulated for each main section of *Update* in descending order follow:

- Peace Corps Response – 7,427
- *Hotline* – 5,155
- “Keep in Touch” (update your records) – 2,047
- Coverdell Fellows – 1,585
- 3GL – 1,165
- Director’s Message – 882
- Peace Corps Partnership Program – 790
- Master’s International – 665
- IGAP – 495
- ODNO – 494
- NPCA – 267
- Beginning-of-Year Footer, “Jobs” – 187
- Peace Corps Social Media - 132
- OIG – 97

These sections are discussed in alphabetical order below.

6. Contents

Typical monthly content for *Update* includes:

- An introductory letter by the Director.
- A one-paragraph article about Coverdell Fellows.
- A one-paragraph article about the Peace Corps Partnerships Program.
- A one-paragraph article about Peace Corps Response.
- A one-paragraph article about IGAP.
- A one-paragraph article about ODNO.
- An announcement about OIG.
- An announcement about the NPCA.
- An announcement about *Hotline* newsletter.
- Several paragraphs about 3GL/RVS (3GL).

Additional special articles may appear from month to month. For example:

- The January issue had a call for agricultural Volunteers.
- The June issue announced the AIDS-Free Generation Photo Contest.
- The November issue announced the Peace Corps Innovation Challenge.
- The December issue announced the availability of Shepard Fairey commemorative artwork.

The text of *Update* is full of live links where readers can:

- Learn more about a subject, such as read about Coverdell Fellows.
- Respond to a call to action, such as volunteer for PCR or for Speakers' Match.
- Utilize a service, such as peruse *Hotline* or sign up for a career event.

7. Changes in Format

In January and February, *Update* had a footer with live links to several options: 'Telling Your Peace Corps Story,' 'Transitioning Home,' 'Jobs,' 'Graduate School,' and 'Volunteer Opportunities.' In March, this footer was discontinued.

In response to requests from the field, the font size was enlarged in November.

8. Click-Through Rates and Recommendations

Beginning-of-Year Footer

One link on this footer garnered a strong number of hits during its two-time 2012 appearance in January and February. The link for "Jobs," which led to the page on the Peace Corps website, "Engage. Expand. Enlighten.," accrued 187 clicks in January and 190 in February, but ultimately led readers to *Hotline*, which has a more direct path elsewhere in the publication. Since there is a more direct route to researching jobs, and because the footer takes up a large amount of space that is not necessarily aesthetically pleasing, **this report recommends not reinstating the footer.**

3GL

The 3GL section has some of the most varied and creative content. This includes announcements on Speakers' Match, on Correspondence Match, on World Wise Schools, and on career services webinars. The Third Goal email address features prominently in this section every month, and it is important to note that website analytics for *Update* do not record clicks on email addresses. Nonetheless, it seems from the content provided by 3GL each month that this email has been useful in collecting 3GL "question of the month" answers.

3GL accrued 1,165 clicks in the 11 months of this study. This is significantly above the median number of clicks for each section of the publication, 728.

An area that seems to not be fulfilling its potential is the segment on RPCV career events. “Career Events” regularly received clicks of, on average, only 39 per month. This number pales in comparison to the interest shown in *Hotline* (468 per month) and Peace Corps Response (804 per month). One explanation may be that *Update* is a worldwide publication and the times during which career webinars are scheduled are not convenient for many readers. To take better advantage of the *Update* format, **3GL might consider pre-recording its webinars and making them available permanently to readers via a link.**

In addition, the January call to action, “You can connect to these exciting Third Goal initiatives by visiting www.peacecorps.gov/engage,” attracted a hefty 179 clicks. **It may be worthwhile to consider revisiting the approach of providing one link which leads to multifold 3GL services and information.**

Coverdell Fellows

This section experienced relatively high click rates for articles about specific programs: 367 for an article about the largest University Partnership schools in May, and 309 for an offering of partner university marketing materials in November. The section experienced lower click rates for stories about specific Fellows (e.g., 136 in January), with lowest click rates for general calls to learn about the program (e.g., 45 in April). Altogether, the section received a respectable average of 144 clicks per month and **this report recommends maintaining the current mix of Coverdell Fellows articles** since it is not possible to consistently generate highly newsworthy articles on a monthly basis, and, again, it is important to remember that clicks are not the only measure of interest.

Director’s Message

While the director’s message includes links in approximately half of all issues, these occasional links typically garner a large number of clicks: an average of 176 per article. This holds true even when the content of the article is not particularly newsworthy, as with the May article which discussed International Day of Families and World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (garnering 153 clicks).

This report recommends taking advantage of the prominence of the director’s message to promote links deemed to be of special importance. Currently the director’s message is generally planned three weeks before publication date. This goal would require planning the director’s messages months, rather than weeks, in advance.

Hotline

The Hotline announcement is a consistent heavy-hitter, attracting more attention than any other section of *Update*, save Peace Corps Response. As noted, *Hotline* received 5,155 clicks in this study, an average of 468 per month. The format of the *Hotline* publication will be changing however, so **it will be necessary to change the wording of the Hotline announcement.**

“Keep in Touch” (Update Your Records)

More than 2,000 readers used this function to update their Peace Corps records in 2012. ***This report recommends maintaining the “Keep in Touch” feature.***

IGAP

IGAP is a section that does not have many calls to action. It is therefore understandable that it received a relatively small number of clicks altogether in this study – 495, at an average of 99 per article. ***This report recommends that informational articles without calls to action be explored in a qualitative study of readers. (See below.)***

Master’s International

This section was discontinued as a regular feature during the middle of the year due to lack of original content. When original stories about MI students are available, this article typically garners approximately 133 clicks per article. In particular, for an article on top university programs (reported under “Coverdell Fellows” above), this topic received 367 clicks. ***This report recommends reinstating MI as an occasional article.***

NPCA

The NPCA announcement experienced generally higher clicks (mid-forties) when calling on RPCVs to register with the organization and lower clicks (mid and high teens) for invitations to participate in its annual gathering. Altogether, clicks for this section remain low, but because it is used some and because it also demonstrates goodwill between the Peace Corps and NPCA, ***this report recommends keeping the NPCA section as is. In addition, the NPCA might be invited to contribute one or two special, longer articles each year.***

ODNO

Like IGAP, this section is information heavy but has limited calls to action. Over the course of the year it received 496 clicks altogether, or 71 per article. ***Again, this report recommends that informational articles without calls to action be explored in a qualitative study of readers. (See below.)***

OIG

The purpose of this section is to show due diligence on the part of the agency to allow readers an avenue to report incidents of fraud, waste, abuse or mismanagement. It may be construed as a good thing that the click rate is extremely low (97 altogether in 2012) and ***this report recommends that the OIG section should remain as is.***

Peace Corps Partnership Program

For PCPP, readers tend to click on all links regardless of whether they promote a specific project or the PCPP program in general. PCPP receives a respectable average of 49 clicks per month.

This report recommends maintaining the PCPP format as is.

Peace Corp Response

PCR is the star of *Update*, consistently claiming the highest number of clicks—an average of 804 per month and 7,427 altogether. This report parsed clicks for specific opportunities versus clicks for PCR in general and found that both rates were high. ***This report recommends maintaining the PCR format as is.***

Social Media

Click-through rates for social media buttons are consistently negligible (typically 10 or fewer per month). Nevertheless, ***this report recommends maintaining this section*** as it is aesthetically pleasing.

9. Further Research

Due to the limits already discussed in analyzing only click-through rates, this paper recommends further study of *Update*. Specifically, three further courses of action are recommended:

1) A Usage Study

Such a study would glean qualitative data about how *Update* is read and used by its audience. Subjects would be shown a live version of *Update* on a computer and would be observed scrolling through the newsletter, reading it, and clicking and following links. After exploring the publication, subjects would be asked a series of questions covering such topics as:

- How did they react to the subject line?
- Why did they read the publication the way they did?
- Which articles did they find most/least interesting and why?
- How does the newsletter appeal to them aesthetically?
- What other types of information would they like to see in *Update*?
- What do they think of the way the articles are written?
- How often (if at all) would they like to receive such a publication?
- Etc...

2) A Survey

An article in *Update* could invite readers to take an online survey covering much of the same information as in the usage study above. The survey could be designed as a follow-up to the usage study and would serve to collect data from a more significant sample size.

3) A Focus Group

Since its inception, two competing theories have sometimes clashed regarding the style of the language in *Update*. While OSP would prefer to use informal language in the first and second person that, it believes, creates an atmosphere of community for the Peace Corps “family,” Comms has preferred to use a more formal language style that adheres to the third person. Neither department actually knows what the reader prefers. This paper recommends convening a focus group of RPCVs and providing it with two versions of the newsletter—in formal and in informal language—to ascertain the readers’ opinions on this subject.