

MOTIVATION

How to Start a Volunteer Program

Encouraging your company employees to volunteer in their community can improve morale and attract new business. 🔗

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The image shows the 'Inc.' logo in a large, bold, black serif font, centered on a light gray background.

Some of the 26,000 women who participate in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure to raise money to fight breast cancer. iStock

In the so-called war for talent, employee benefits are key. While you may not be able to compensate your staff with health coverage and vacation days, starting a volunteer program is a low-cost way to show employees you care about

them and their community.

According to a 2007 Deloitte study on volunteering, 62 percent of 18 to 26-year-olds polled said they would prefer to work for a company that offers volunteer opportunities.

"In terms of the war for talent, a number of businesses use this as a core strategy," says Chris Jarvis, co-founder of the Toronto-based company Realized Worth, which helps companies connect with their communities. "They improve morale, and that contributes to sales."

Even if you're not looking to attract new talent, getting involved with a non-profit in your community can expose your company to other businesses and potential customers in your area. Maximize that exposure, and you're bound to maximize your return on investment. In fact, a 2005 study out of Boston College's Center for Corporate Citizenship showed that 84 percent of company executives reported bottom-line benefits after they started a volunteer program.

This guide will teach you how to choose a charity that fits your business and get your employees excited about the new program.

How to Start a Volunteer Program: Choosing the Right Charity

No matter what your personal interests are, you need to make sure your employees have a vested interest in whatever volunteer program you choose. If you're the

outdoorsy type, but your employees are not, a community gardening program would likely backfire. At the same time, you do need to make sure your volunteer program is in line with your ideals and goals as a company. Striking this balance between employee interest and what works for the business can be a challenge.

"There are three horizons for volunteering: what the business wants, what the community needs and what the employees like to do," Jarvis says. "Find something that makes sense for your brand."

When it comes to staying true to your brand, ask yourself what resources you already have at your disposal and what your clients ultimately care about. If your customers believe in the cause you're supporting, they may be more likely to stick with you and spread the word to other like-minded potential clients.

Erika Edwards is the Vancouver-based retail campaigns coordinator for LUSH cosmetics. When the company began thinking about a volunteer program, it already had a line of lotions called Charity Pots, the proceeds of which go to 58 charities around the world. It made sense for their brand to capitalize on those partnerships.

"Our company really encourages involvement in ethical campaigns," Edwards says. "We thought, 'Wouldn't that be great to actually get our staff connected, rather than just send out a bulletin saying we donated this much money to this organization?'"

To get the program started, LUSH sent out a survey to all of its employees, including their 151 retail locations, and their manufacturing and corporate facilities. The survey asked whether or not the employees would be interested in volunteering and, if so,

what organizations they'd be interested in volunteering with.

While a survey is an effective way to gauge employee interest, Nikki Korn, a principal with the Boston-based Cause Consulting firm, says sometimes simply engaging representatives from several different departments can give you the cross-section of opinions you're looking for. Ask them what employees in their departments are already involved in. If any of those organizations are especially important to your employees, you may want to consider working with them.

Once you have taken branding and employee interest into consideration, focus on the needs of the community. As you vet potential non-profits to work with, ask yourself two questions: does this organization make a big difference in this community and will my company be able to make a big difference in the organization?

"Start with what you want to accomplish," Korn says. "You don't have to build a gym to change a school, but you do need to be respectful in pairing what you have with the organization's needs."

The more you and the non-profit you work with see eye-to-eye, the more likely your program will work. Tell the organizations about your business goals and your community goals, then ask them what they want volunteers to achieve. Ask if they can actually use all of your employees, and if they can't, you may need to find an organization that can accommodate your staff size.

"The worst thing is when companies come in and say, 'Here's what I have to offer, take it or leave it,'" Korn says. "It needs to be a two-way conversation to create the best

experience."

With all of this information in mind, you're almost ready to make a decision, but first, you need to think about the level of involvement you want your company to have.

Dig Deeper: Volunteering: The New Employee Perk

How to Start a Volunteer Program: Levels of Involvement

The amount of time your employees will spend on volunteering is a huge consideration. After all, time is money. Decide how much time you can afford to devote to volunteerism, and you will narrow down your search significantly.

There is nothing wrong with throwing a one-day event. "Organizations like Habitat for Humanity are totally built for employee volunteering," says Jarvis. But remember to keep your goals in mind. Will a quick gig give your employees that feeling of fulfillment for the whole year? Will it build loyalty to the program? Will it give you the community presence you're looking for? If you answer "no" to any of these questions, ask the non-profit about ways the company can stay involved after that single volunteer day. Could you hold the event every quarter instead of every year? Remember, volunteering can be a crucial team-building strategy, and as any business owner knows, it takes time to build a team.

Another option that Korn says is growing more and more popular is skills-based volunteering, in which companies volunteer by sharing their own expertise with people in the community. The Boston Beer Company, which owns Samuel Adams, started a program that gives employees a chance to teach crucial business skills to low-income entrepreneurs in the food and beverage industry. The company already had a list of small businesses it provides with loans, but in addition to those loans, the business owners needed practical education.

"Sam Adams did an assessment of their employees," says Korn. "The employees said they'd love to share what they do, but they don't necessarily have time to go off for a day." So, Korn helped Sam Adams develop a speed coaching program. The entrepreneurs in the program can come into the office and ask their most pressing questions to the company's lawyers, designers, packaging experts and more. "The entrepreneurs love it, because they get a lot of great advice, and there's also the opportunity to follow up for more mentoring," Korn explains.

While the first two strategies may work if you want to rally behind a single cause, some businesses find that the best way to get employees involved is to give them options. Take LUSH, for example, they're still in the early stages of developing the program, but with employees all over North America, it would be tough to find a unilateral cause to fit every employee. Even if they limit the program to just Charity Pot organizations, there are some retail stores that would automatically be excluded because they're located too far away from partner charities. What Edwards suggests, therefore, is that the company give employees an allotted number of paid hours each year to dedicate to volunteerism. Active employees would then report back to LUSH about their experiences. That model worked for Ben & Jerry's, a company that has

long been recognized for its commitment to community service.

Liz Brenna, who handles PR for the Vermont-based ice cream company, says Ben & Jerry's offers employees 40 hours of paid community service time throughout the year. In addition to those hours, the company also appoints Community Action Teams to set up single-day volunteer events. Brenna has found that having both strategies in play has been a powerful combination. "Everyone really takes advantage of the service hours," she says. "And the volunteer days build teamwork. You get to work with a lot of the people you don't get to work with on a daily basis."

Dig Deeper: Making Volunteering Cool Again

How to Start a Volunteer Program: Getting People Involved

"Whatever the volunteer effort is, you really need to figure out how to educate your employees about the issue and the impact they're having," Korn says. "It's great to do hands-on projects, but ultimately, it has to ladder up to a learning experience."

The first step to getting people involved and educated is finding a point person to spearhead the program, or, if your company is national, consider the Ben & Jerry's method of forming leadership teams across the country. The employee doesn't have to work full-time on volunteerism, but says Jarvis, "When it's built into someone's job description, that really helps." But just because you have a designated leader for the project doesn't mean the company's management shouldn't get involved as well.

"Our employees are always busy and worried about losing a day of work," Brenna says. "When our CEO is there, that pressure seems to be gone. It eases that guilt." The more support the program has from the top of the company, the more it can trickle down.

Before the event, send out e-mails to create buzz and explain your plans well in advance. Bring members of the organization in to talk to employees about the non-profit's needs. Divide employees into teams to talk strategy. Ask them to list any skills they have that could be beneficial to the program.

Then, at the actual event, you need to identify the people who are fully invested and the ones who may need some coaching, especially if you plan on building a long-term program. "People are tourists when they go for the first time, but they're willing to take the trip," Jarvis says. When you encounter people who have moved beyond that "tourist" stage, give them opportunities to train other, less-involved employees.

If you decide to give your employees paid time to volunteer independently, ask that they report back, so you can celebrate their work on the company's email newsletter or inner office website. If you do encounter a particularly active employee, you may want to consider making a donation to his or her charity and put your money where your mouth is. Allow your employees to lead by example, but make sure they know you're behind them all the way.

If you do work with a non-profit, ask that they follow-up with you and explain the impact the company had. This will help you keep the momentum for the program alive until the next event rolls around.

Dig Deeper: Using Charitable Donations to Motivate Employees

How to Start a Volunteer Program: Resources

The HandsOn Network offers tools and tips on starting a volunteer program, and their HandsOn Action Centers can even help you design the programs themselves.

United Way can help you find relevant volunteering opportunities in your community.

Jarvis's blog for Realized Worth provides valuable advice and news about employee volunteer programs.

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