

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Recruitment Maxims

## Recruitment Maxims

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

March  
2005

Sometimes we get into old habits and need a gentle (or hard) shove to climb out of a rut. Similarly, we can spend so much time thinking about “new” things that we overlook what has moved from standard to stale under our very noses. So this month, I decided to focus on volunteer recruitment – a subject of enormous importance and challenge to all of us.

In the interest of full disclosure, many of you know that one of my most popular books is still [The Volunteer Recruitment \(and Membership\) Development Book](#), which I first wrote in 1998 and have revised twice, mainly in order to keep current with Internet recruiting techniques. Because of my writing and training on this subject, I constantly hear questions from colleagues that provide a barometer of what is really going on at ground level. And my sense is that it is very easy to repeat the same old messages to the same old places in the same old ways (usually with the same or diminishing results).

There are many places to learn about volunteer recruitment and clearly many of you are very good at it. But every day it's possible to see amazingly dull recruitment messages, all of which start with some variation on “XYZ agency is seeking volunteers.” We simply must begin to think and act like marketing experts and approach the challenge of recruitment as a golden opportunity to educate the public about our cause, generate excitement about our organization, and discover the human riches of our community.

Volunteer recruitment does not mean wheedling, arm twisting, or asking for a favor. The best approach is that you are sharing an opportunity with prospective volunteers that you don't want them to miss! When someone sees or hears a recruitment message from you, their reaction should be described with adjectives such as surprised, intrigued, and enticed. Getting a smile or a laugh is fine, too. (Volunteering is too often presented as formal and serious.)

So, I'd like to propose a few maxims of recruitment – principles to remember whatever your organization or your recruitment technique. Then I hope you'll share *your* maxims, too.

***Don't go where there are "people," go where there are the right people.***

If you are looking for Latino men, you won't find any at the Polish-American Women's Club. Sounds obvious, but think how often you place recruitment flyers or give a speech somewhere simply because there is an audience, without analyzing who's in that audience. This also means avoid mass media recruiting (everyone hearing it and no one listening) in favor of mini-campaigns targeted at specific places where you have the best chance of finding people with the skills or characteristics you want.

***If you feel you're in the right place to find the prospects you want, keep asking until you get a positive response.***

Advertisers will tell you that *repeated messages* are what eventually have an effect. So don't just give a presentation every three years and hope people remember they can volunteer with your organization! Give a speech, send a note the next month, send an announcement of your holiday event the month after, etc., etc. Not to nag, not to repeat the *same* message, but to keep your organization visible and welcoming.

***Tell the whole truth from the start.***

***Making something sound easy is not necessarily as attractive as making it sound challenging.***

Just like used car salespeople, we have a bad reputation. We say things like "this will only take you a few hours a month," or "the committee meets every other month," when the volunteer work is more demanding and time consuming than that. But we are afraid of "scaring people away." Stop a moment and think about that. If telling the full story of what the assignment entails turns off the prospect from the start, what makes you think he or she would have done the work once the full picture was revealed? Much better to allow people to self-screen themselves out of the picture than to engage someone who isn't willing to contribute what you need. Also, it's often more motivating to sign up for a role that is a bit demanding than to take on a task clearly meant for any warm body with a pulse.

***To reach diverse volunteers you have to go beyond word of mouth.***

It's gospel in the volunteer world to note that "the best recruitment is when a volunteer invites a friend to volunteer, too." That's fine and good if all you want is body count. But if you seek greater diversity – of any kind – you won't get it simply by word of mouth. Why? Because people talk to people who are *like them* in age, economic level, values, and interests. Also, the listener pictures the volunteer opportunities in your organization in terms of who is explaining them. Therefore, you have to do proactive outreach to new places, new neighborhoods, new groups of people – in other words, to the very people current volunteers probably don't know yet.

***Get listed everywhere.***

Never turn down a chance to list your volunteer opportunities anywhere, especially if the listing is free. Make sure you're on every Internet registry, in the databank of every volunteer center within 50 miles, known to student activity offices, on the list of any corporation with an employee volunteer program, on file with RSVP, Hands On, and any other placement program, etc., etc. Participate in Make a Difference Day, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, etc., etc. *But*, don't just list your agency's name and a bland, general, "we need volunteers" message. **Be specific.** (List several opportunities with different titles and qualifications.) **Be current.** (When you've filled a position, remove it from the list and put up a new one.) To do this, you need to record where you are listed, date every message you send, and put a reminder on your calendar to do the updating (a volunteer can help!).

***Use your own agency's Web site.***

Back in 2000, I wrote a Hot Topic called "If Not Your Home Page, Then Where?" It is still completely true today. See: </hot-topics/2000/august>

***Avoid competition for attention – surprise people in unexpected places.***

The Kiwanis, Rotary, and church men's club have a parade of speakers all year long. Some bulletin boards are so full of notices every message is drowned out. When you reach out to new recruits, be creative. Need volunteers to help with breakfast in your care facility? Go to the nearby factory *during the night shift's meal break* (get permission, of course!). They'll be happy to see you...who else visits them? Staff a table at a street fair in the neighborhood you most want to reach. Do something fun like face painting for children, provide take-away public education materials relevant to your cause, have volunteers wear costumes to match the theme of the event. Get noticed.

Use this Hot Topic as an excuse to assess how you do recruitment now and what you might do to spice it up. If it becomes more enjoyable for you to do, you'll generate more enthusiasm from the public, too.

Related Topics: [Motivation](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [Benefits of Volunteering \(for the volunteer individually\)](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

***Submitted on 8 March 2005 by Robyn Cooper, Volunteer First Aid Service, St John Ambulance, Executive Officer, Perth, Western Australia Australia***

A useful maxim for us has been "Ensure that our 'product' (the volunteering experience) is one that people want to 'buy' (give their time/energy to). This encompasses every aspect of volunteer recruitment...targeted marketing material which sells the benefits to the volunteer, processes which facilitate rather than hinder the prospective volunteer joining, activities which deliver on the promised benefits, and data collection which identifies why people have elected to 'buy' or not to 'buy' the volunteering experience.

The best recruitment campaign in the world will not provide new volunteers if the grass roots experience is not fulfilling, relevant and enjoyable.

***Submitted on 7 March 2005, Teresa, New York USA***

My biggest problem is not finding people as much as it is getting them to attend the 5 hour mandatory orientation. (It used to be a 1 1/2 day training but has been decreased in the hope that it will help but its still a challenge) So, if anyone has ideas of how I can get the volunteers to attend trainings, I would really appreciate it.

***Submitted on 7 March 2005 by Christine Nardecchia, Volunteer Services Administrator***

Are marketing professionals ever told to "think like Volunteer Administrators?" Why not? If our collective marketing expertise could be bottled, we would not only be wealthy, but sought after in every industry. We are experts at the win-win deal, people brokers, relationship-builders and networkers. That's the maxim; building and portraying programs clearly and concisely enough to bring people TO us.

***Submitted on 3 March 2005 by Susan Lebovitz, SAFEHOME, Volunteer Manager, Overland Park, KS USA***

It sounds so trite, but I tell prospective volunteers that if I can match their "passion" with a need our agency has, it's a win-win situation. That way, they know that we can think creatively how they can benefit the agency, rather than necessarily trying to fit into the printed volunteer categories listed on the application. Its those listed opportunities that bring them in, but sometimes when interviewing, a special skill emerges and it's good to be flexible enough to use it!

***Submitted on 3 March 2005 by Lyne, Foundation for Senior Living, Director of Community Partnerships, Phoenix AZ USA***

An overlooked Recruitment venue is often the vehicles your organization has. Think of your vehicles as a billboard on wheels. Let the community know your need for volunteers. Keep it short: Help \_\_\_\_\_ by volunteering, and list your phone number.

***Submitted on 3 March 2005 by Ann Babb, Community Coordinator, ABC Head Start, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada***

I couldn't agree with you more. In addition to being the coordinator of our volunteer program I also do the marketing and public relations for our agency. I market for volunteers, increased awareness and funding; outcomes may be different but the principals are the same and I find that having this inclusive vision has helped increase positive outcomes in all three areas.

What I try to reflect in our marketing strategies is my own personal and professional commitment to our agency's mission and vision. If I believe in the value of what this agency does then it shows in everything that goes out of this agency with respect to marketing.

***Submitted on 2 March 2005 by Mikki Heydorff, Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, Volunteer Programs Coordinator, San Marino, CA USA***

The most important maxim when recruiting new volunteers is don't waste people's time! Be straight forward and clear on what the volunteer job is -always write a job description. If potential volunteers know when, where, what and how long the opportunity will be, they will be able to make an informed decision and your volunteer program will be more successful in the long run.

**Submitted on 1 March 2005 by Gail Orser, Guideposts, Prayer Dept. Manager, Pawling, NY USA**

Great article. We are just beginning a big campaign to recruit additional volunteers. I read most of the Volunteer Recruitment material but I appreciated your thoughts and will use them as we make a plan on where to recruit and what to say. Thank you.

**Submitted on 1 March 2005 by Sue Staggs, CAPP, Executive Director, Richmond, TX USA**

*What's the most important recruitment maxim or tip you'd like to share?*

Everyone wants to be needed. Often adults find themselves working hard in jobs where they can not see any way they make a difference. In cause recruitment of volunteers, we need to show people how they are needed, and how their time and efforts will be appreciated.

**Submitted on 1 March 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., Pres., Keyport/NJ USA**

*What's the most important recruitment maxim or tip you'd like to share?*

We have found that attending workshops or conducting workshops on topics as they relate to non profit management and volunteerism are outstanding tools for recruiting potential volunteers. Well coordinated workshops can attract a diverse population with varied educational and employment experience. Workshops tend to attract individuals with a curiosity for the profession and a desire to contribute. For a practitioner it can be a marvelous eye opener that leads to sophisticated dialogue and recruitment. An agency investment.

*If you've been in the field a while, has anything changed in how you do volunteer recruitment or in what seems to work best these days to invite people to participate?*

Five years later, our approach to recruitment is quality over quantity. The self-education that people skills are key, that volunteer applications are vital and that the screening process is just that--a process requiring a combination of flexibility and predictability. As the field 'grows up' so must the professionals that contribute.

**Submitted on 1 March 2005 by Anne Dixon, Tulsa Mayor's Citizen Corps, Volunteer Recruitment Coordinator, Tulsa, OK USA**

*What's the most important recruitment maxim or tip you'd like to share?*

Don't assume that all volunteer recruiting websites are honest. Research the website and the foundation (and directors) that may be funding the website. Since they usually want your EIN, your organization doesn't know or have control on how it might be used (or misused).

---

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025