

[News and Hot Topics](#) » [Should We Ask Volunteers to Give Money on Top of Time?](#)

Should We Ask Volunteers to Give Money on Top of Time?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

July
2004

Every nonprofit organization that involves the time and talents of volunteers also seeks financial contributions from private and institutional donors. It amazes me how often fundraising staff shy away from soliciting money from volunteers out of a sense that this is “double dipping.” Despite research showing that people who volunteer are more likely to also give cash than uninvolved people, the reluctance to ask for money from volunteers keeps the development office and the volunteer resources office operating in distinctly separate spheres.

It is assumed by many that volunteers and donors are simply different. One stereotype is that volunteers don't have a lot of money. This, of course, is only understood for frontline volunteers, since those engaged in things like planning the gala dinner are conversely assumed to be wealthy enough to pay for anything requested of them. Beware all assumptions! There have simply been too many news items about the little old lady with the 16 cats who dutifully fulfills her volunteer shift quietly for 27 years, dies, and leaves \$4,000,000 to the organization. Even if this fantasy comes true only rarely, the truth is that no one really knows who has money and who does not. Or, who wants to give *your cause* money and who does not.

But let's get back to “it just doesn't feel right” to ask faithful volunteers to give money, too. The correct response is that an organization can – and probably should – offer volunteers the opportunity to donate funds, but it has to be done in a way that is clearly different from soliciting people who are not already actively working for you. The key is to start by acknowledging that the prospective donor is a volunteer. It's true “recognition” to know this important fact. Nothing is worse than a volunteer receiving the same mailing sent to everyone, as if his or her service is invisible.

Try the following sorts of appeals:

We are so appreciative of the time and talent you share with us throughout the year as a volunteer. Thank you!

Please know that your volunteer contribution is of great value in many ways. Volunteers ensure that we can spend every dollar we have on needed services and still do more. We also know that giving us your time comes with various costs/expenses to you personally. But because you are so familiar with our work, you know that it takes both participation and money to accomplish our mission.

How can we ask strangers to contribute funds and not give you the chance to decide if you want to add a check to the ways in which you already help us?

Of course, there's no obligation to give money. It's completely your choice.

Done properly, a solicitation can (and should) feel like a thank you. Possibly this request for a donation should be sent only once a year, without follow up. The point is to include volunteers, but not to guilt them into writing a check.

Other Development Options

In some ways, however, it may be too limiting simply to write a distinctive letter to volunteers as part of an annual or special campaign. Why not consider unique ways that volunteers might add to the treasury? For example:

- Keep volunteers informed about your wish list for in-kind donations. A list (kept current) on a bulletin board where volunteers can see it regularly will plant the seeds to be on the lookout for you all the time. Volunteers themselves or their circle of friends, family and colleagues may well turn up the used furniture, extra computer printer, or supply of light bulbs that you really need. Many of these things are too small to warrant a public "campaign" to find, but there will be some volunteers who rise to the challenge of ferreting out the items you want on an ongoing basis throughout the year.
- Have volunteers do small fundraisers for a pot of money they can "own" and spend as they wish, within guidelines set mutually. For example, volunteers may want a fund to buy some personal items, a graduation present, or a special book for a client. These expenses can be approved by a representative council of other volunteers.
- Instead of giving comparatively insignificant gifts at a volunteer banquet, cut the costs and do something for the organization in the name of the volunteers. Let the volunteers know how much money is involved and let them decide what they would like to purchase or do. If it's something tangible, such as renovating a room or replanting the garden, have a plaque made that says: "Given in recognition of volunteer services contributed in 2004." If there's space, include everyone's name (even if it has to be in tiny print).

The Reverse Is Important, Too

The funny thing is that we might learn to ask volunteers for money, but rarely do we approach donors with the invitation to volunteer! People who become known to us through a fundraising campaign are typecast as check writers, not doers. Why?

Recent studies have shown that regular donors can lose interest in an organization over time, but that being given the opportunity to volunteer re-commits them to the cause. Interestingly, it's the recruitment *invitation* that matters, not if they actually volunteer or not. Asking a donor to get involved in person does several things: It implies that you see this person as more than a hand holding a pen; it offers the person the chance to see for her/himself how wisely you manage the budget; and it gives you access to more skills and talents.

There are various times at which you can discuss volunteer opportunities with donors:

- When you thank people for their financial gifts, include a message about volunteering options as information they may want for themselves or to share with family members or friends. If they care about your cause, so might others close to them.
- Keep donors informed throughout the year about volunteer opportunities, particularly ways they might be able to help at a special event, with a short-term project, or as a technical advisor (it helps if you ask donors some basic information about themselves such as profession).
- For long-time donors, make a personal appeal by letter or phone, acknowledging how much they have contributed over time and therefore you want to be sure they know you are interested in their skills as well as in their money.

Finally, avoid lost opportunities. For example, if you sell tickets to corporate donors for something like a table for eight at a special event, keep in mind that the employees who are given the chance to fill those chairs attend at no personal cost. So why not provide them with information about your organization, including current volunteer needs and an envelope for their own donation?

What has been your experience in approaching volunteers to give money and/or donors to give time?

Have you been on the receiving end of this type of appeal yourself? How did you react?

Related Topics: [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Fundraising](#) | [Motivation](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Monetary Value of Volunteer Time](#)

Submitted on 30 July 2007 by Leif Christiansen, Project Manager, CommUniverCity, San Jose, California, USA

I would refrain from asking volunteers for money. I believe that a volunteer's time is priceless to any organization, and asking them for a monetary donation might be asking too much. What I do is to create a mailing list which includes all of my volunteers (in addition to our existing contacts) and I attach a form which gives our contacts/volunteers a *choice* to donate--this is non-verbal and non-

pushy. One volunteer hour equates to almost twenty-dollars an hour...to me, that's sufficient [as a contribution]. As an Americorps volunteer for the past 5,000 hours of my work-life, I'd be offended if my Director tried to solicit money from me--and as a newly appointed Director of an Americorps program, I would NEVER ask my volunteers for money because them sustaining our program through volunteer efforts is quite enough.

Submitted on 11 August 2004 by Ann Robitaille, RAISE Home Support Service for the Elderly, Kitchener, Ontario Canada

What a fantastic idea! Don't know why we WEREN'T doing it, but we are going to START doing it [i.e., volunteer recruitment with our donors --via a small insert re: volunteer opportunities in the envelope with their income tax receipt] with our current fundraising/membership campaign! [We already offer our volunteers the opportunity to donate and/or become members] THANKS!

Submitted on 22 July 2004 by Jennifer, Girl Scouts, Wisconsin

It's absolutely OK to solicit donations from volunteers. In fact, according to all of the Fund Development training I've had, it's essential. Your current volunteers obviously see the value of the organization. I can't tell you how many times I've heard the phrase "Nobody ever asked" from longtime volunteers.

Submitted on 9 July 2004 by Kay Kobayashi, OD Consultant High Performance OD Consulting, British Columbia

I think it depends on the person and case by case. I volunteer for several NFP organizations and one organization which I know is desperately needing money to go on, I donated some money. But, for another, I know that they can collect from other donors and since I spend significant time for them as a volunteer, I do not.

I am curious to know how what percentage of executive directors and staff of NFP organizations contribute money to their own organizations.

Submitted on 7 July 2004 by Christy Trudo, Minister of Parish Life, United Church of Christ, Cleveland, OH

Churches have a lot of experience with this since volunteers (leadership and service) are also donors. One caution from this arena: make sure volunteers understand that their assignments are not dependent on their financial contributions. I'm guessing few organizations would want to create a climate in which some felt that more enjoyable assignments were based on monetary contributions

Submitted on 7 July 2004 by Robert Leigh, Chief, North America Office, United Nations Volunteers, New York, USA

Let me throw in a note of caution. Your title "Giving Money on Top of Time" suggests that motivations are the same for both types of volunteering. I wonder where are the skills acquired, contacts made, fun had, in donating money? I also wonder where are the tax breaks from giving time? Such

considerations need to be built into any strategy for combining the two forms of philanthropic behavior.

Submitted on 6 July 2004 by Betty Stallings, Trainer, Author, Consultant, Pleasanton, California

Great hot topic and suggestions! Volunteers should definitely be given the opportunity to give their time, their financial contributions, etc. Has anyone added the financial/in-kind contributions of all volunteers in their organization for a year (board level, program support volunteers, etc.) and added that figure to the "value" of volunteers to the organization. Too often I see the number of hours valued by the current Independent Sector figure for use in determining their value, but I have NEVER seen the total financial contributions added to that number. I don't advocate using the hours and dollar value as a way to share the impact of volunteers but if it is required in your organization, I would definitely recommend adding the financial contributions made by volunteers in your organization to demonstrate that volunteers give time and money.

And, yes, how can we do a better job of inviting our donors to be volunteers?

Submitted on 6 July 2004 by Margaret Brewer, Manager, Volunteer Services at the Aquarium of the Pacific, Long Beach CA

We are in the midst of an All-Staff campaign. Letters went out to 750 volunteers and 200 employees. I have received a couple (only a couple) of complaints from volunteers stating that they already give enough by giving their time. In my weekly email newsletter and in other communications, I have stressed three things: (1) the research that indicates those who volunteer their time are more likely to also donate financially, if asked to do so; (2) the positive impact that staff (both paid and volunteer) support has on major funders; and (3) each individual should give only what is comfortable for them. I would hate to have a volunteer feel left out, because they were not asked; it would be such a shame if a volunteer felt insulted because 'someone' decided not to ask. Our All-Staff Campaign includes prizes (every donation qualifies for the drawing) and is capped off with an ice cream social for all contributors. Our Development Department makes it fun and it works.

Submitted on 5 July 2004 by Jayne Cravens, Online Volunteering Specialist, UN Volunteers, Bonn, Germany

Within regular communications with volunteers -- a newsletter, for instance, simply saying "A reminder: financial contributions from volunteers are also welcomed! Visit [blah blah blah.html](#) to read about the different financial contributions can make and how to give", or something similar, is perfectly acceptable, IMO. No "hard sell" necessary -- just let volunteers know there are other ways they can help (just as you should let donors know about volunteering opportunities). Another great Hot Topic!

Submitted on 3 July 2004 by Mary Cefalu, Volunteer, Vision Literacy, California

Thanks so much for bringing up the point that volunteers should be recognized a bit differently when requesting financial donations. That is such a key point. I was a significant volunteer at a particular agency (president of the board for 2 years). After I left the board and moved on to other activities, I

started receiving normal direct mail appeals--it was as if my involvement with the agency NEVER existed at the level it had. It was quite disappointment to me. As a result, my donations have reduced significantly. While I still believe in the mission of the agency, I prefer to give now to an agency who also reciprocally believes in me as a volunteer for the agency.

Submitted on 3 July 2004 by Hillary Roberts, Pres., Project Linus NJ Inc., NJ/USA

Some time ago we added "committee interest" and "financial support" boxes to our volunteer intake card. Including both opportunities into the volunteer registration process during interview was a natural.

We have found that given the opportunity to contribute on a variety of levels, volunteers remain at the agency longer, share the mission with others and become the best advocates we could hope for.

The old proverb, "you won't know unless you ask" certainly applies here.

Submitted on 2 July 2004 by Ernie Pearson Civic, Fraternal, Church California

You're 100% on target! The financial form of giving is part of the volunteer spirit. The dollar amount may vary considerably depending on the individual volunteer's financial circumstances and that's OK. I've followed this practice for many years.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

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

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025