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## Volunteers Just Want to Have Fun

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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*Here is the Hot Topic superceded last month by the hurricanes – and now a welcome break for us all.*

One of the earliest issues of *Ms. Magazine*, back in the 1970s, had a memorable front cover. Drawn like a Roy Lichtenstein comic-strip painting, it featured a man telling a woman: “Do you know the women’s movement has no sense of humor?” She famously replies: “No, but if you hum a few bars, I’ll fake it.”

It is common to cast volunteering in a solemn, even spiritual light. Volunteers do serve those in need due to poverty, disease, war, or disaster, which naturally is incredibly serious business. But we do volunteers (and ourselves as leaders of volunteers) a disservice by focusing only on their halos and never the devilish twinkle in their eyes!

That’s why I was so tickled by the newest book we just announced in our online bookstore: [A Toolkit for Volunteer Speed Matching](#). Earlier this month, Heather Allen of Volunteer Centre Dacorum (just outside London) e-mailed to tell me about their delightful idea to adapt the current fad of speed dating to volunteer recruitment! Think “Bridget Jones vows to find the perfect volunteer opportunity”! How clever! And what was even better, the Centre immediately put their idea online and wrote this toolkit, which Energize is helping them to sell electronically. So anyone, anywhere can put this fun and upbeat recruiting idea into action.

Will *volunteer speed matching* be the technique of the future? Who knows? But does that matter? It’s of the moment and enjoyable, so why not grab it? In fact, we could do with more humor in our field.

*I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun.*

-- Thomas A. Edison

Volunteering is, by definition, a *leisure time* activity. By this I mean that people can only engage in volunteering when they are not at a paying job, caring for family members, or fulfilling some other obligation. Our competition when we recruit is not paid employment; it’s whatever the person does

in his or her increasingly rare free time. So the choice we're asking people to make is whether to do volunteer work or play golf, see a movie, or just plain rest.

Years ago Ivan Scheier made the point that we may have made a mistake patterning volunteering on the work model (notice we even say "volunteer work"). Perhaps, he suggested, we ought to use the recreation model instead. Think about it. The recruiting pitch might be:

*Have we got something great for you! You can enjoy being part of an organization that is making a difference, spend time with really nice people, feel good when you leave – and it doesn't even cost admission!*  
Do people need more work in their lives, or more play? Should we be using guilt to persuade people they "ought" to serve others or rallying everyone around a mutual benefit opportunity?

*The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter. -- Mark Twain*

Don't make the mistake of interpreting these references to recreation, play, fun, or humor with a lack of concern about impact. I'm quite serious about that. But every once in a while we need a different perspective. Volunteers do not have to copy paid staff, they can find their unique way to contribute to the cause. In fact, we ought to be challenging volunteers to think outside the box, approach problems with a "what else can we do about this?" attitude, and experiment with options that may be unorthodox.

*It's kind of fun to do the impossible. -- Walt Disney*

Earning a living may mean having to grit your teeth and do some things you don't like on a job. So if volunteering is not about money, shouldn't it be a pleasure to do it? It's possible to approach even the most sobering of situations with humor. Hospice folks will tell you that they laugh a great deal, even in the face of death – maybe because of it. We can consciously craft volunteer roles to relieve tension, provide a break in the day for staff and clients, or stimulate creative thinking. Staff doesn't always have the time to do this but it could dramatically change the tone of many of our organizations to charge volunteers with this challenge.

*Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh. -- George Bernard Shaw*

*Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it and then move on.*  
-- Bob Newhart

Laughter really is the best medicine. Look at the healing work of Dr. Patch Adams and his Gesundheit! Institute ([www.patchadams.org](http://www.patchadams.org)) as just one example. You can encourage mentors, tutors, and other

one-to-one volunteers to incorporate fun into their “work” with clients. Read a funny book together and watch the student enjoy the learning more (let the teachers do the boring stuff!). Rent a silly movie to watch with that homebound senior or lonely child – bet it’s a lot easier to bond during time spent together giggling. Now think of how much easier it would be to recruit volunteers to spend a few hours smiling.

*He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh . –*  
The Koran

*Laughter is the closest distance between two people . --*  
Victor Borge

At the National Conference on Volunteering and Community Service last month, we once again heard a line of speakers extolling the role of volunteers in dealing with “serious social problems.” For years this has made me uncomfortable for various reasons. Serious social problems (which I impertinently refer to as “SSPs”) are in the eye of the beholder, as are different ways of tackling such problems. Who am I to tell my fellow citizen that serving the hungry is of greater good than making sure the library stays open? Or that visiting a prison has more significance than ushering for the orchestra? Must we sanctify community involvement and perpetuate the stale concept of “charity” (we who have so much to give to those who have so little)?

What our communities need is elbow grease – group effort towards the common good, rallying together, finding like minded people and working shoulder to shoulder. Having fun while putting forth this effort is the reward along the way to the goal. So is making new friends, feeling satisfaction, improved physical health, and all the other perks of volunteering. We ought to revel in it. Volunteer speed matching? Bring it on!

*To love what you do and feel that it matters – how could anything be more fun? --* Katharine Graham

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**Submitted on 15 December 2005 by Carl Bromley, Local4All.com  
President, Kittanning, PA USA**

Hooooooooeeey! I can imagine our local nonprofit leaders running me out of town if I tried to make it more fun. But then, I think the volunteers would track me down and bring me back just for the fun of it! ;-)

**Submitted on 24 October 2005 by Jim Woods, Dublin City South Volunteer Centre, Manager, Dublin  
Ireland**

Some time ago I gave a presentation to television executives on the benefits of releasing their staff

for employer supported volunteering. At the end of it I asked these people in their starched collars and pin striped suits why do people volunteer. Of course all the usual good citizen, giving back to society suggestions came up. What a look of amazement on their faces when I actually suggest that it might be "FUN" for the volunteers!!

***Submitted on 10 October 2005 by Lori Tsuruda, People Making a Difference® (PMD), Founder & Executive Director, Boston/MA USA***

If you compare volunteer recruitment to dating, then charities have been leading with their needs, only attracting a fraction of the population, versus leading with their benefits/fun. Since online databases enable people to search countless listings of needs and causes near them, I feel that existing databases serve people who seek unpaid work on issues of which they are already aware and care.

I support matching volunteers based on their passions, personalities, and skills. In this way, volunteers can enjoy the activities themselves, as well as contributing to the fulfillment of nonprofit missions. For example, if someone loves the outdoors, then s/he might like to blend being outdoors with a volunteer role that offers an opportunity for mutual benefit, like monitoring a special place for incursions of invasive species. If someone loves to cook, then s/he might like to become ServSafe® certified like people in the restaurant industry and find nonprofits that seek meals prepared for their clients. If someone likes arts and crafts, then s/he might enjoy helping clients with them. Furthermore, some people enjoy leading or belonging to social, professional, faith, etc. groups that can have beneficial impacts such as organizing and hosting specific drives for in-kind donations.

***Submitted on 5 October 2005 anonymously***

It's refreshing to finally hear from my peers that volunteering needs to be more FUN! We aren't competing amongst other volunteer opportunities or organizations; we're competing against time spent with loved ones, time spent on hobbies and more. By providing ways for volunteers to incorporate their own interests in our community service projects, we're creating a win-win situation for both nonprofits and volunteers.

Be eccentric and start a sing-a-long during a long painting project. Turn up a radio and dance with children while providing child care. Start a race between volunteers stuffing envelopes for a mailing. It all starts with you. They'll come back begging for more.

***Submitted on 5 October 2005 by Liz Adamshick, Adamshick Consulting, Trainer/Consultant, Homer OH USA***

Syndicated columnist Mike Harden once said that "humor is tragedy plus time". For volunteers who give their time and talents in settings that are often "tragic" (disaster/emergency response, domestic violence, etc.) it can be difficult to give oneself permission to "lighten up" in the midst of it all. Anyone connected to emergency response, for example, knows that at times, gallows humor is a coping strategy some volunteers employ that collapses the distance between tragedy and time, but also provides the needed outlet that allows these individuals to continue in their service. Finding a brand

of humor that fits with the setting is key, in my opinion. Humor is often the glue that supports team formation and effectiveness as shared experiences are discussed and retold beyond the moment of service itself. Volunteering engages everyone in experiences that are fundamentally human, and humor is part of the human experience, no matter what form it takes. We need to remember the joy that laughter can bring--psychologically, physiologically, spiritually, and emotionally. Thanks, Susan, for raising this issue!

***Submitted on 3 October 2005 by Nancy Hughes, VON Canada-Durham, Manager, Community Support, Oshawa, Ontario Canada***

Those of us working with the lonely, frail elderly and the physically disabled can easily find ourselves feeling burdened from all of their sad stories. Humor is so important to keep our spirits up so we are happy when we see the next client and also so we maintain our own mental health. It is important to ensure your staff and volunteers are provided with some "fun" time to give them energy to tackle more of the tough tasks we deal with daily. Keep smiling!

***Submitted on 3 October 2005 by Judith M. Williams, Kalamazoo Drop-In Child Care Center, Volunteer Coordinator, Kalamazoo, MI USA***

I really liked the fresh, fun and humor approach with regard to volunteering. I am a social worker by training and have been for 23 years. I've transitioned into a volunteer coordinator position. It is exceptionally refreshing working with relatively healthy people rather than "cases" and you are right...people need lots of opportunities to laugh (and even celebrate) or they will fade away from the volunteer experience.

***Submitted on 3 October 2005 by Lynn Heyman, Miami Children's Hospital, Director, Community & Volunteer Resource Miami, Florida USA***

At Radio Lollipop, an international volunteer program for children in hospital we call volunteering "Serious Fun".

***Submitted on 6 September 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA***

A new director was hired at the office. She challenged staff to rewrite the mission statement; to rethink the agency's purpose. It was fun to participate in the process and in the end the mission statement reflected a refreshed approach towards workplace attitudes. The winning mission statement read:

We will never compromise our integrity

Compassion always

Customer respect begins with self-respect We accept our responsibility to serve people in challenging times We have the moral courage to advocate for the needs of our clients Humor helps weather the tough time, encourages optimism and relieves stress

The inclusion of humor had been missing from the day to day grind. From the top down and the bottom up, staff and volunteers were recharged. The new statement gave permission for humor on the job-what a concept!

***Posted on 2 September 2005 by Maria Rizzo, Florida Hospital, Manager, Altamonte Springs Florida USA***

This was a great article. I agree when you talk about incorporating "fun" into work. With fun comes creativity and creativity opens doors to new ideas and ways to be innovative with your volunteer team and paid staff.

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