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Friends

Keeping Former Volunteers as Our Long-term Friends

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

October

2015

I spent last weekend at one of those “milestone” high school reunions that makes everyone realize how time flies. While many of our classmates ignored the event, those who attended had fun on memory lane, generally amazed that we remembered one another and many specific events from many years ago. It made me think about how often we miss opportunities to stay connected to volunteers who leave their positions with us.

Are you still in touch with people who volunteered with you in the past? Why not?

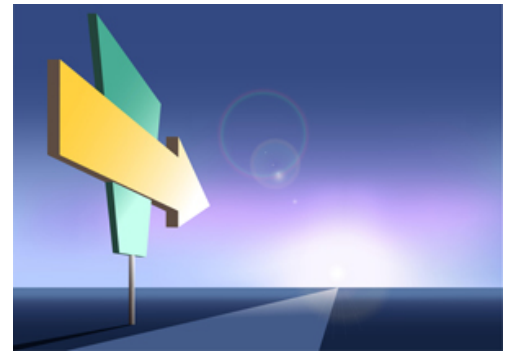
Our colleagues in fundraising definitely plan for the long term. Every new money donor is seen as having future potential, even if there are lapses in time between donations. Those who write checks are “cultivated” for regular and ever-larger contributions, culminating in a planned gift at death. But over in the volunteer resources office, volunteers say goodbye at some point and, more often than not, we sever ties with them completely.

This was understandable maybe 20 years ago, when staying in touch with a growing list of lapsed volunteers was time consuming and costly. In those days we had to produce printed newsletters, address envelopes, and pay postage – not to mention maintain a mailing list. The development office had to do this, too, but the resulting money raised seemed worth the expense.

Stepping Away or Leaving for Good?

People have many reasons for leaving volunteer service but only a small percentage depart because they are unhappy with their experience in your organization. Of course, some volunteers do leave because of dissatisfaction and, in turn, you may be very relieved to see some disgruntled people depart.

It is far more common that volunteers reluctantly discontinue their service because of changes in their personal or professional lives – not because they no longer care about your mission, cause, or services. They leave because of external circumstances which may, in fact, be resolved or improved at some point in the future. Do they know that you might welcome them back as volunteers again? Or do they – and you – shut the door to this option because leaving a volunteer position means “ending” the relationship?



Now consider the opportunities we miss with students who come to our organization for service-learning or internship experiences. The semester ends, we evaluate their contributions with their faculty liaisons, we say good-bye, and they leave forever. Why do we assume that just because their formal academic placement is over they no longer have any interest in our work? Have we typecast them as transient “students” or do we see them as young adults? Do we offer them new ways to stay involved with us, continuing both to share their talents and to keep learning in new ways? And, despite some skepticism about this, the same question is valid for how we might transition court-ordered service into non-required volunteering.

Then there are all the people who participate in single days of service or special events, often with a group from their faith community, place of work, or civic association. Yes, they become acquainted with you because of the group activity, but isn’t it possible that some of them might become very interested in your organization personally? Do they learn of volunteering they might do as individuals? Do you see the possibilities?

Why Stay Connected with Former Volunteers?

If departing volunteers were successful in their positions – and especially if you put effort into training them to be so – isn’t it a no-brainer to hope they might return to give more time in the future? But even if resuming their previous roles is not a realistic possibility for most former volunteers, there are still many ways such alumni might be of help over time. For example:

- Some may be happy to be on-call in peak busy seasons or in emergencies (extra hands in a pinch) or even to substitute temporarily if current volunteers need to be away for a brief time. Also, former volunteers may be delighted to help at special or annual events.
- Experienced volunteers might be willing to train new volunteers or be available by phone or e-mail to answer questions from newbies.
- Since social media shows no signs of slowing down, why not make sure that past volunteers are in the loop to like, repost, retweet, and otherwise pass along the online messages your organization wants to broadcast to as wide a circle as possible? Also, as virtual volunteering can

be done anytime, anywhere, perhaps there are online service opportunities that a formerly onsite volunteer might be able to complete for you.

- There are limitless ways that past volunteers can be a vast think tank for you – invite ideas, comments, contacts, information, and more. Also, share your “wish list” of items or services needed so that these alumni might help you to find new donated skills, in-kind gifts, used furniture or equipment, and more.
- Make sure this group is informed about current vacancies in volunteer positions so they can help you spread the word to potential applicants.

How to Stay Connected with Former Volunteers

The first thing to do is to ask every departing volunteer (except those whom you have asked to leave, of course!) if s/he wants to be kept informed of what is happening over time with your activities. Would s/he perhaps occasionally be willing to come back to help with some things? Get permission to add the person to your “Volunteer Alumni” e-mail list (noting that anyone can remove their name from the list at any time). Make this same offer to every individual who comes on site during a single day of service activity – and also to those who participate in special events but are not usually seen as “volunteers.” This includes runners in the marathon, guests at the banquet, or people at the rally. Of course have a system for entering these names and e-mail addresses into a database that can be kept updated and searchable.

While these days you might decide to create a Facebook or LinkedIn group, or an online discussion forum (as with Yahoo Groups), for the Volunteer Alumni, I still believe in the value of a **quarterly or semi-annual e-newsletter**. In fact, you probably should be producing this for all *active* volunteers and then just keep lapsed volunteers on the recipient list. What should you write about? Just a few ideas:

- Share the goals and priorities of volunteer engagement in the next period. Describe what is in the planning stages and then actively solicit ideas and input from readers of the newsletter. Ask specific questions and set a deadline for responding. Not the vague “what do you think?” but rather: “Does anyone know if this idea has been tested somewhere else?” “What community groups should we be sure to invite to this event?”
- Celebrate achievements of volunteers – concentrating on the impact of their contributions, not merely a statistical report of how many hours they served.
- Vacancies in volunteer positions, especially those that are hard to fill, such as odd shifts or geographically distant. Ask for help in finding viable candidates, including ideas for where to post recruitment notices.

- Requests for contacts and referrals to help you find all the things you need.
- In the next newsletter, be sure to thank everyone for the input they gave you from the last mailing – and what happened when you followed up.

At least once a year, invite past volunteers back just to say hello and see what's going on. They may be former volunteers, but there's no reason they can't be current friends!

Two Important Caveats

In case you were wondering, you do **not** need *permission* to do this! It is a valid management and communication technique to produce a regular update message for volunteers and share it with a growing mailing list. Defend your right to keep in touch with those who are committed time donors.

Also, this is not meant to be a fundraising pitch! So resist any efforts to merge this mailing with other communiques that might be published by the development office or marketing department. They are welcome to ask current and past volunteers if they also want to be on those mailing lists, but the messages you want to send are very different than what might be sent to the general public. And you want to place volunteering front and center, not watch it be pushed to the last page as an afterthought.

High school reunions tend to happen in five or ten year intervals. You do not need to wait that long to continue contact with volunteers who care about your organization.

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on October 1st, 2015

[Sybil F. Stershic](#), President, Quality Service Marketing, Alburtis, United States

Very helpful post, Susan, with great tips for engaging former volunteers. I especially like your last point about not diluting the volunteering experience with fundraising pitches tied to re-engagement efforts. I hear too often from frustrated volunteers who contribute their time in lieu of money -- when they're continuously asked to give they wonder if the organization values their time and effort as volunteers.

Submitted on October 1st, 2015

[Susan J Ellis](#), Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

And they are right to wonder!! Thanks, Sybil.

Submitted on October 5th, 2015

Ram Sundar, Bangalore/Karnataka, INDIA

Susan! U have spoken my heart out. I have been a passionate volunteer for past three decades now due to my age I have restricted to my comfort zone but do reach-out to the needy as & when required many times I will be eagerly waiting to lend my helping hand to the organizations I had worked as volunteer for years but no one keeps in touch nor keep me looped to the social media but only praise my services as & when I meet them during any events or social gathering which makes me feel left out. Hope your touching & useful article reaches out to the volunteers like u have rightly said at least we can be "Long Term Friends"

Ram Sundar

Submitted on October 6th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thank you for your heartfelt post, Ram -- I hope you will speak up when you next meet your former volunteer site colleagues to tell them you are interested in returning. They may feel that you are happily retired and don't know you wish to stay active. Good luck!

Susan

Submitted on October 5th, 2015

Laura, Indianapolis, United States

This is so helpful! I've been wondering how to discover which former volunteers would like to stay connected in this way. So many of our volunteers engage right after college and step away when they begin families. It's hard to know who wants to come back on board and when. Your post has inspired me to add a "would you be interested in volunteering for our organization in the future?" question to the volunteer exit survey. I'm also giving them the option of telling me why they are stepping away so I have some context when following up.

Submitted on October 5th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia PA, USA

Good ideas, Laura -- though not everyone knows when they leave if they might volunteer again. So "would you like to be kept informed about volunteer activities?" might feel like less pressure. In terms of finding former volunteers, maybe you can use social media to put

out a call for "Were you ever a volunteer with XYZ? We'd like to know how you're doing."
Have some fun with it.

Submitted on October 6th, 2015

Anonymous, Fort Wayne, USA

Good ideas thanks for the information!!

Submitted on October 7th, 2015

Charlene , Winston Salem, United States

Lot of food for thought! I plan to generate a list of our inactive and archived volunteers to send holiday greetings to. Thanks!

Submitted on October 7th, 2015

Andy Fryar, Operations Manager, Better Impact, Adelaide, SA, Australia

Thanks Susan - very insightful as ever.

It reinforces one of the key common factors that Rob Jackson, Fraser Dyer and I found in our e-book of short articles (Turn Your Organisation into a Volunteer Magnet) written by successful VMs a few years ago.

This notion that people are fundamentally drawn to other people, whether that is their initial reason for volunteering or not, cannot be overlooked. The fact that they are no longer fully active in a program, in this day and age, should be no barrier to keeping that contact going

Submitted on October 7th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Hi, Andy -- We still have your book available for free in our A-Z Library: [Turn Your Organisation into a Volunteer Magnet](#).

Submitted on October 19th, 2015

Susan Godfrey, Volunteer Coordinator, Great Lakes Science Center, Cleveland, Ohio , USA

I have an easy way of keeping in touch with past volunteers. When I built my volunteer database, I included a query which sends me a list of every volunteer's birthday monthly. I email a birthday wish to past and present volunteers. Recently I sent a birthday greeting to a

former teen volunteer who is off at college. He is interning at NASA in Maryland working on Gravitational Astrophysics projects. I tracked down his NASA email address. He was thrilled to get the birthday wish on his NASA email address. He will never forget his time here at Great Lakes Science Center.

Submitted on October 20th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Nice touch, Susan! Maybe you could add a mass e-mail year-end "update" with new year's wishes -- and include an invitation to let you know if alumni volunteers have any interest in helping out again. That way the birthday wish can continue to be individual -- and "pure."

Thanks for sharing.

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