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Think

Prospective Volunteers Are Closer than You Think

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

October

2013

Never assume people know you are looking for volunteers.

I know this statement might seem obvious, but ask yourself what you have done in the last year to make sure that you are really issuing an invitation to become a volunteer to the people in greatest proximity to you. Recruiting volunteers through online volunteer matching sites and social media can pay off, but the nature of such “cast-a-wide-net” campaigns is that many people see your message, but only a few are likely to be viable candidates for you, especially if the “friends” of your followers on social media live ever further away. So don't overlook buried treasure much closer to home.

The key to proximity recruiting is never to take for granted that anyone knows what help you need at any given point in time. They may intellectually recognize that you have a volunteer corps, but do they feel *personally invited* to become part of it? Do you help them discover that their skills and interests might match open volunteer positions or projects?



The best part about recruiting people already in your organization's circle of contacts in some way is that they are not complete strangers who know nothing about you—they simply may not know about your search for volunteers. Here are some places to find prospective volunteers, but only if you are intentional about getting the message to them.

Lapsed or One-time Volunteers

Just because someone has left a volunteering position does not mean they no longer care about your mission or do not want your organization to succeed. Ideally, in fact, former volunteers are out in the community saying good things about you. What happens to that goodwill if you act as if they have dropped off a cliff as soon as they leave? This is especially true of volunteers who come to you with a

set time frame for their service or who participate as part of an organized group: service-learning students fulfilling an academic requirement for a single semester, the team of corporate employees working on a specific company service project, the church group that sings Christmas carols in your facility once a year.

Many people feel sorry, even a bit guilty, to have to leave a volunteer role because of changes in their life they cannot control. Students may not even realize that they *can* continue volunteering with you after their school is no longer involved. This is especially true if “interns” are coordinated by someone other than the person in charge of volunteers. Individuals in a team of volunteers may feel anonymous and therefore flattered at your invitation to keep in touch on their own.

So, ask every departing volunteer and the individuals volunteering with a group if they are willing to be on your e-mail list for periodic updates and notices *from the office of volunteer services*. This is not the same as being added to an organization-wide newsletter or donor solicitation list (though you may want to ask them about that, too)! I am recommending a specific “volunteer alumni” database that you keep for purposes of finding volunteer help.

Maybe 3-4 times a year, send everyone on this list a “Volunteering Update,” sharing what has been going on in the period. Always include a list of *current openings* for volunteers, particularly short-term projects that someone with the right skills can accomplish relatively quickly. Say that you would love to hear from anyone on the list who might be qualified and interested in any of these roles, and ask them to *tell others* they know about these opportunities. Also include a “wish list” of items you'd like donated for clients or even the volunteer department.

Your Neighbors

Have you ever made a point of contacting the people who live and work across the street from your facility? On the floors above and below your offices? How about around the corner or within a half-mile radius? Some of them don't even know you exist. Even if they know about you, are they informed about what your organization does? And then, are they aware of the volunteer opportunities they could fill today? Remember: don't assume people know!

Outreach to your neighbors should be done in a special way. Always begin by noting that you are neighbors. Consider inviting them to an “open house” or tour simply to be a good neighbor. Make it clear this is specifically for the neighborhood. Make them feel like “insiders” and consider it a worthwhile goal simply to inform them of the work you do. Educated neighbors will look out for your safety, be friendly to those who enter your building, and think about you when they have something to give away. And when they learn what they might do as a volunteer, who knows how they might respond? After all, there is no commuting time involved and, at a minimum, some neighbors might be happy to be on call for special occasions or emergencies.

The People Who Know You

Sit down and make a list of all the people who come into contact with your organization throughout the year. How might you inform them of current volunteering needs? Some examples:

- Make sure every visitor to the building sees some sort of “could you be helping us?” message. This might be a bulletin board in the lobby, reception area, or client waiting rooms, showing pictures of volunteers (double duty as recognition) and notices of open positions.
- Attendees at events your organization sponsors, whether educational (workshops, community forums), recreational (performances, galas), or anything else. Have a booth or display as participants leave the event (which is when, ideally, they are feeling good about you). Again, display pictures of volunteers in action and ask them to sign up to “learn more.” Then follow up.
- Many board members are employers, or work for large companies, or are in a professional association. Do they recruit volunteers for you? Why not? Request their assistance as recruiters and give them tools to do outreach, tailored to where they will be delivering your message. This means special flyers mentioning the name of their company, short articles for their in-house publications, maybe offering to go on site and exhibit in the employee cafeteria, or anything you and the board member dream up. After all, if *they* care enough to give their volunteer time, why wouldn't their employees and colleagues be interested, too?
- Vendors from whom your organization purchases goods or services are often approached by fundraisers to make a financial donation each year. Almost never is that accompanied by an invitation to give time, or even the request to let their employees know about their options to volunteer with you. Why not?
- The people your organization serves may be a great resource for “paying it forward” to help others. Of course this depends on what you do and for whom, but make sure clients are aware of volunteering as a way to say thank you or to support your cause. Find the most appropriate way to issue this invitation for your setting. For example, if you are in a facility that conducts exit interviews when discharging patients or residents, ask to include a one-page information sheet about volunteering, which might interest their family members, too. Arts organizations can place notices in programs or tour guides. Again, if you have a client waiting room, make the most of the time they have in it by providing interesting information about volunteering.

Be Specific

More than anything, it's vital to be specific and make all of these outreach efforts timely, inviting applications for assignments currently available. It is not enough to vaguely mention the organization's volunteer corps with a universal (and impersonal) “ask us about volunteering” notice. Describe all vacancies and include desired qualifications, time commitment, and other pertinent details. Give a URL where someone can learn even more.

Date any fact sheet, bulletin board notice, article, and whatever informational materials you distribute. Make sure what someone picks up is never older than one month. (Hint: Even if your volunteer opportunities remain somewhat the same, still change the date every month to make sure they feel fresh.)

Enlist paid staff and current volunteers in this recruitment effort. After all, they too will benefit from its success.

- *Have you been successful in doing any of the outreach just suggested? Please share.*
- *Are there obstacles to this sort of outreach? What are they?*
- *What other buried treasure have you discovered in your volunteer recruitment journey?*

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Submitted on 10 October 2013 by Jane Scripps, Manager of Volunteer Services, North Haven Hospice WHANGAREI, Whangarei, New Zealand

Thank you for this Susan, sometimes it's as obvious as the nose on your face! And we don't see it! I will be happy to report back on success

Submitted on 03 October 2013 by Kaitlyn, Volunteer Coordinator, Greenwell Foundation, Hollywood, United States

I really loved the "Volunteer Alumni Database" approach to reeling in episodic volunteers to stay involved with an organization. It's nice to let episodic volunteers know we understand that they may have not had time to commit long term and we still want to include them in what we're doing. Every hour given to us is greatly appreciated. Being entirely specific about a position with position descriptions is the best way to recruit. If a volunteer knows exactly what is expected of them then they will be much more likely to commit. If you are organized with presenting your volunteering needs it leaves a better impression on potential volunteers as well. I love these articles! Thank you.

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