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# Friends Will be Friends, Right Till the End. Friends organisations and how to manage them before they manage you

by Lynn Blackadder

From 2004

## Friends and volunteers

If memory serves, about seven years ago the British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM) said - in the preface to their excellent Volunteer Management Handbook - that there was a blurred line between Friends and volunteers. Both had the same aim, that of supporting an organisation they had an affinity with, so it wasn't necessary to make a distinction between the two. BAFM, I think, were probably referring to Friends who also volunteer. As many cv readers will have both Friends and other volunteers, I thought it would be useful to look at the roles of the two groups, and why it's important not to confuse them, focusing on the often tricky business of managing Friends who also volunteer.

## Time is money

The traditional model is that Friends give their money, whilst volunteers give their time. Of course, many Friends are volunteers too, but not all volunteers will be Friends. Is this distinction important? I think confusing the two can be problematic. First and foremost, Friends pay an annual subscription to support the organisation, for which they receive certain benefits - for example, monthly magazines, private views or performances, or reduced entry to shows. If they also volunteer, giving their time freely has no material connection with the subscription or the benefits received (risking their benefits being taxed). Though, of course, there may be a strong moral connection. Although it will depend on the type and size of organisation - especially if it is an entirely volunteer-run organisation - most Friends probably don't volunteer. Their wish to support their chosen organisation will mainly be about giving to a good cause generally, as well as receiving the benefits. If I'm honest, my now lapsed Tate membership was most valued because of access to the Members' bar!

The fact that Tate has a 'membership' rather than a 'Friends' scheme suggests a more modern approach to engaging supporters, and perhaps a conscious move away from the stigma I find is still often attached to the supporters groups of some of our older, establishment cultural organisations - for example, the British Museum, or the V&A. In institutions such as these we still find Friends helping out in front-of-house roles on information desks and as guides. No doubt, they are also behind the scenes, though probably to a lesser extent. The majority of these Friends will fit into a stereotype that most of us would agree is the traditional profile of 'Friend' - or, more

likely, a volunteer. This is because, whilst many of us will be Friends or members of all kinds of institutions, only those of us who have the time (not forgetting the inclination) to volunteer will do so. Thus the visible supporters will mainly be those who are retired - hence the unfortunate, but much used 'twin-set-and-pearls' label that is attached to groups of Friends and / or volunteers. Thankfully, with an increase in awareness of why people volunteer, and a diversification of those who do it, these sorts of stereotypes are being challenged. And cultural organisations are gearing up to manage the range of people who want to give their time for free - as regular readers of *cv* will be aware. However, I have for a long time been aware of the 'influence' enjoyed by many Friends organisations - and particularly those that have an on-site presence, usually through volunteering. It is a phenomenon that I find particularly intriguing, and one that I believe brings unique - but not insurmountable - management challenges.

### **Feeling the presence**

Because money changes hands, Friends are donors. Donors who also give their time (as volunteers) who have a deep-felt affiliation with their chosen organisation sometimes assume that their dual contribution endows them with certain privileges that extend beyond discounts in the shop and monthly glossies. In other words, they believe they are entitled to have a say in how the place is run on a daily basis. Sound familiar? Don't get me wrong. I certainly don't want to make a sweeping generalisation about Friends, members or other supporters who also volunteer. But I am guessing that more than half of those reading this are nodding in acknowledgement. It is simply a fact that some organisations struggle to manage enthusiastic Friends groups - particularly when there is a core group of volunteers within, or leading them - and hence a strong presence in the institution. It can lead to a tail-wagging-the-dog relationship not uncommon in volunteer management that can infuriate (and even terrify) management at the most senior levels.

Senior management who recognise the importance of the contributions of Friends, and the need to keep them involved, might worry that one disaffected Friend could start a ripple effect which is more like a Mexican wave: lose one, and you lose them all. I have more than once been astonished at the response and level of senior management input into sensitive problem-solving situations involving Friends. I heard recently of one organisation that considered automatically admitting Friends volunteers to their new volunteer programme without an interview or a security check, unlike regular volunteers. Management didn't want to rock the boat, and it was thought that Friends wishing to volunteer would refuse to be interviewed ('You're happy to take my money but don't trust me').

Integration of Friends volunteers and other volunteers can be problematic, as can introducing new volunteer management procedures which bring Friends volunteers and other volunteers under the same umbrella. Again, this scenario is often rejected by Friends, who see their role as different. Many Friends groups are as old as the institution they support, so naturally they may have a view of themselves as being in with the bricks and mortar. These groups will probably be harder to influence than those that are just starting out. Whilst these are challenging management scenarios, to try and avoid them is to risk alienating other volunteers and being accused of double standards because of the financial benefits attached to keeping Friends volunteers happy.

### **Some Friendly advice**

The trick is to communicate that everyone who volunteers is of equal importance, and to make clear the different roles that supporters have in the organisation:

- Clarify the purpose of your Friends (members or supporters) organisation as a group, its status (is it a charity in its own right?), its relationship with your organisation (voting rights at AGM?), and any privileges Friends are entitled to.
- Acknowledge that some Friends also volunteer, and in doing so come under the volunteer management function. If there are separate volunteering roles that Friends perform (e.g. guiding) make these clear (it is easier if all roles are open to all volunteers to avoid equal opportunities and 'them and us' situations).
- Publish your organisation's volunteering vision, clearly stating the value to the organisation of people who give their time.
- Clearly state that all volunteers are treated equally and are managed in the organisation in line with best practice.
- Regularly acknowledge the contributions of all your volunteers. Calculate how much time this adds up to each year and put a monetary value on it.
- Make sure there are clear communications channels for individuals (Friends, volunteers or the public) to make comments or suggestions to management about the work of your organisation.

In these challenging financial times, cultural organisations need all the help they can get. However, few things in life are free, and to ensure that this good will continues, we all need to think about the management implications that come with it. If you would like to share your experiences of managing Friends who also volunteer, **cv** would like to hear from you. Email [lynn@lynnblackadder.com](mailto:lynn@lynnblackadder.com).

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