



# TARGETED VOLUNTEER RECRUITING

By Rick Lynch



*(Author's note: This article is an elaboration on some of the ideas presented in an article called "Preparing an Effective Recruitment Campaign" that I originally published in the winter 1984 edition of VAL. For stimulating further thinking about this subject I am indebted to Joe Lovelady, ACTION state director in Montana, and Steve McCurley, internationally acclaimed author and trainer.)*

Today's volunteer administrator works in an environment in which the competition for volunteers' time is increasingly fierce. In addition to other agencies' volunteer opportunities, the volunteer administrator is competing with all other possible uses of a volunteer's discretionary or leisure time. Each year, the Harris poll asks Americans how much free time they feel they have, and each year since the pollsters began asking this question, the number of free hours reported has been less than the year before. People today feel they have 15 hours per week to call their own, about half as much as they reported 20 years ago. In the last 20 years, the number of people who hold more than one job is at an all-time high. The number of workers who put in 50-hour weeks or more has risen to 23 percent of the U.S. adult population. In more than 20 million families there are two-wage earners.

This loss of discretionary time is one of a volunteer program's greatest challenges, not only for recruiting but also maintaining volunteers. In the mind of the volunteer, the job has to have greater importance than visits to friends, going on picnics, and or just plain relaxing at

home. A friend of mine, for example, is a volunteer tutor of at-risk youth. In the last three weeks, she has missed a museum opening, a staff picnic at her place of work, and dinner with a friend to fulfill her volunteer responsibilities.

To attract and keep volunteers in such an environment, we need to keep in mind a very simple but fundamental truth: Volunteers only volunteer because they want to. For recruiting, this means that we need to offer them a job that they really want to do. When your recruitment efforts center on face-to-face methods with an opportunity for two-way communication, you have an opportunity to find out from the potential volunteer what he or she wants to do. When we use other methods, such as posters, public service announcements, presentations to large groups, or classified ads, we do not have the opportunity for two-way communication. In these cases, a marketing concept known as targeted marketing can help us succeed.

When a business wants to market a product effectively, it is in a similar position to a director of volunteer services who wants to recruit volunteers. Both are trying to influence another person to do something voluntarily. In one case, we are asking for the customer's money, and in the other case we are asking for the volunteer's time. If our business were the only place in the world to spend your money, it might do to advertise it by saying, "Customers are needed. There is an opportunity here for you to spend your money. Please bring lots of it." In a competitive environment, however, such a marketing strategy is unlikely to work very well. Nonetheless, lots of volunteer programs

continue to do exactly that in recruitment campaigns that say little except "Volunteers are needed."

A more systematic, targeted approach proceeds according to eight steps. To follow this approach, answer each of the following eight questions.

## 1. What is the job that needs to be done?

Before you start to recruit volunteers for your organization, you first must define the jobs you are offering. This may sound obvious, but sadly, people don't always do this. They begin recruiting with the vague idea that we need help. One volunteer recruitment brochure I read even said that the volunteer would sometimes be expected to "find something to do." While there are some advantages to this flexibility, we are less likely to get someone to give some of their leisure time to a job they can't clearly see themselves doing.

If you ask a person, "What would it take to get you to volunteer some of your time for an agency in the community?" the answers you will get tend not to be about the recruitment method you employ but about the nature of the job you want them to do. They will say things like "It would have to be a challenging job," or "It would have to be a job that enabled me to meet and be with other people," or "It would have to be a job that enabled me to learn new skills," or "I would have to feel like it was a job that let me make a difference in people's lives." My point here is that it is the job that motivates people to volunteer. The job has to be something someone wants to do and wants to do more than any other use of his or her discretionary time.

## 2. Who would want to do it?

The next step in targeted recruiting is to identify the types of people who would want to do the job that needs to be done. By asking this question, we are more likely to get the kind of committed volunteer we want and not just a warm body or two. This means identifying target groups to whom we can send our recruitment message.

This second step is one most of us skip because we have had experience with successful volunteers from a variety of backgrounds. A frequent answer to this question is "Lots of different types of people would want to do that. Young, old, rich, poor, white, black, men, women all might want to do that." As we will see, however, if we can define these groups before we begin our recruitment efforts, we will have a much easier time recruiting them. The reason for this is that messages sent out to appeal to people in general often wind up speaking to no one in particular. By defining a target group, we can stress aspects of the job experience that would appeal to that particular group.

I was once asked to help a person who was having difficulty recruiting volunteers for the job of escorting children to school. The children lived in public housing in a large city, and the way to school was a gauntlet of gang members selling drugs and offering the choice of "Join our gang or we'll beat you up." The volunteer administrator was frustrated because she had had success in recruiting volunteers for other jobs. She found this one hard to fill because she had never asked this second question. When she began to consider who would want to do the job, she began to identify target groups she had never tried to recruit before. She identified that one kind of person who would want to do the job was men who wanted to prove their toughness. The target groups thus included karate students, bouncers, football players (not quarterbacks or punters), and former Marines.

## 3. Where will we find them?

Once we have determined who we are trying to recruit, we can ask, "Where will we find them?" (If we haven't done step two, it is impossible to ask this key question.) If we are after a certain type of professional, are there professional societies or clubs where such people might be found? If we are after members of a given age group, where do such people congregate? Other questions to ask in this step include: Where do they work? Where do they spend their leisure time? Where do

they shop? Where do they worship? What neighborhoods do they live in? What newspapers do they read? What radio and television stations do they listen to?

Let's imagine, for example, that the job we want done requires that the person be a lawyer. In response to question two, we decide that one target group would be up and coming young lawyers in large law firms who want to impress the boss with their community commitment. In implementing step three, we would identify law firms in which the principals might be impressed by such a person, those who want an image of being community minded. We could then take our recruitment effort to that business. If there are no such socially minded law firms in town, we might ask what kinds of stores lawyers shop in (for clothes, cars, groceries, for example) and ask the store if it will let us set up a recruitment display or print up a recruitment message on its bags.

Again, if we simply begin trying to recruit anyone in the general community, the answer to this third question is "everywhere." This makes our job more difficult because it will be harder to focus our limited recruitment efforts. People who are everywhere are also nowhere in particular.

The answer to question two often implies the places to look. To continue our school escort example, if we identify former marines as a target group, we might take our recruiting effort to a veterans organization. If we identify self-defense experts as a target group, we might focus our attention on karate clubs. These may be places we had never thought of going to recruit volunteers, and they may well turn out to be a source of the kind of person we need.

One highly effective recruitment campaign resulted from identifying a target group of young, single people. In step three, one place the volunteer administrator thought to find them was in singles bars. This led to a program called "The Singles Connection," advertised in singles bars.

## 4. How will we communicate with them?

The next question is how to communicate with the target group. Again, the answer to this question is often implied by the answer to question three. If "where they are" is in a particular neighborhood, we might go door-to-door. (This may seem humorous to you—it would have to me a few years ago—but I found this to be quite

effective when I was recruiting volunteers for a fire department. I thought of the method because the answer to the question "Who would want to do this?" was "People who live in the district and want to feel safe." Where they were was behind the doors of the houses in the neighborhood. This implied knocking on those doors as a method.)

If "where they are" is at a particular club, we might try to get an opportunity to speak to the membership of that club, or we might ask the club if we could put a poster on the bulletin board. If "where they are" is at work, we might try to get ads on the radio stations the target group listens to while it commutes. (Radio stations can give you information on the target groups they reach.) One volunteer administrator in Los Angeles who was trying to recruit youth who had time to spare during the day realized that where they were was at the beach. This implied the method of setting up a booth there, which proved to be highly successful.

## 5. What are the motivational needs of these people?

In this step we ask what some of the needs and desires of the target group are. What will motivate them to volunteer their time for our agency? Although individuals in the target group will have different motivational needs, we can make some informed guesses about the majority of individuals' needs in the group as a whole.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and effective targeted recruitment campaign today is conducted by the U.S. Army. When service in the Army became "voluntary" (as opposed to mandatory), the Army faced a problem: how to attract young people to a dangerous, low paying job. This came at a time when the Army's major activity had been the Vietnam war, an action that was highly unpopular with the age group it was trying to recruit. Despite the obstacles of offering unpleasant discipline, bad food and ugly clothing, the Army has succeeded in maintaining an all-volunteer force. It has done so through a very sophisticated application of this step.

Next time you see an ad for the Army, look at it closely. It is likely you will see one of several motivational themes at work. One of the first and most successful themes it uses is to appeal to the desire of young people to get ahead and make something of themselves. One variation on this theme is to stress the message that by doing two years of service in the Army,

you will be able to get the money to go to college. These ads, some of which can still be seen, appeal to youth who want to make something of themselves but who are from backgrounds that make going to college difficult. Another variation on this message is that the Army is a good way to gain job experience so you will "have an edge" over competitors in the job market. A third variation on this motivational theme is that the Army helps you find your hidden talents and enables you to reach your full potential.

There are other motivational themes used by the Army recruiters. Evidently they realized that young boys often feel that their father never appreciated them fully, so there are a series of advertisements and posters based on the premise that going into the Army is a good way to impress your dad. Another message is that the Army gives you some of the world's greatest toys to play with, an ad aimed at youths with technical interests. Still another is that the Army is a place where minorities can attain respect. In the wake of the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, the Army found that patriotism was again a motivating factor in young people's decision to join the Army.

There are many variations on each of these themes, each aimed at the motivational needs of various sub-groups of the 18- to 25-year-old age bracket. The point we can learn from this as an agency recruiting volunteers is that we shouldn't rely on one message sent out to appeal to people in general. Each message is targeted.

A good example of targeted volunteer recruiting using a motivational theme comes from a Retired Senior Volunteer Program in Arkansas. The motivational theme it identified was the need of many seniors to feel that they still have something to contribute to society. The program printed a poster that said at the top, "Remember when you changed the world?" Under this heading are two pictures of young people in the 1940s, a woman in an Army uniform and a man in a business suit and haircut of that era. Below that, the poster says "Well, you still can in R.S.V.P." The same people are pictured 40 years later as RSVP volunteers.

## 6. What will we say to them?

Having done the previous steps, we are ready to create our recruitment message. This message may be sent in many forms—such as classified ads, one-on-one conversation, posters, or public serv-



ice announcements—but it should feature the motivational theme and it should contain four elements:

**a. The statement of need.** The first element of an effective recruitment message is a statement of the need or the problem we want the volunteer to address. To feel enough commitment to an agency to want to give some of her precious discretionary time, the volunteer needs to know why she is asked to do the job. Most recruiting messages seldom talk about why we want the person to do the job, however. They only talk about the activities the person will be performing on the job. This leaves it up to the potential volunteer to figure out what the need for those activities is. Those who don't may decide not to volunteer, where they would if they knew why the job was important.

In many volunteer jobs, the need refers to a problem that exists in the community. For volunteers involved in direct service, the statement of need will be the need of the clients to be served. "Our senior nutrition program needs volunteers to help cook hot meals for seniors one day a week" is not the kind of statement I'm referring to. Such a statement only conjures up the picture of sweltering over a hot stove. Those who don't figure out that there may be a problem of senior malnutrition in the community will be unmoved by such a statement. A few examples of statements of need are listed in abbreviated form below.

—*Nutrition center volunteer:* "Many elderly in our community cannot afford to get a balanced diet and are suffering from malnutrition."

—*Hospital volunteer:* "Many patients in the hospital for long stays are lonely and depressed."

—*Crisis clinic volunteer:* "Some people in our community encounter personal crises so agonizing that they do harm to them-

selves and other people."

—*Literacy volunteer:* "Many people from all walks of life are unable to take advantage of the full benefits of our society because they are unable to read or write."

—*Campfire leader:* "Many girls and boys grow up without self-confidence and other skills to become competent, successful adults."

—*Fire Department emergency medical volunteer:* "People in outlying areas who have heart attacks cannot be reached from the main station in time to save their lives."

—*Mental health receptionist:* "Clients coming into the center are often embarrassed, confused and uneasy."

—*Art museum docent:* "Many people who visit the museum would like to know more about the exhibits than text panels can communicate. Sometimes their lack of knowledge causes them to miss a great deal of the meaning and beauty of the exhibits, and their interest in returning to the museum wanes."

The statement of need, at some level, ought to make the sympathetic, non-psychopathic listener think "That's terrible. Somebody ought to do something about that." Once you have them thinking that way, recruiting is as easy as convincing them that they are somebody.

Here is an example of a recruitment message that works on this basis:

*Children are being abused.*

*Somebody ought to do something about that.*

*Be somebody. Call the Coalition for Child Advocacy.*

Some volunteers are recruited to do things that do not directly affect the agency's clients. Some clerical types of volunteer jobs, for example, exist to meet the needs of staff or of the agency more than they address problems in the community.

The statement of need in such circumstances should emphasize the needs of the staff in the context of their work in addressing the problems of the community. A few examples are listed below:

—*Volunteer Center clerk/typist:* "When people call up wondering what they can do to help make the community a better place, staff are sometimes limited in their responses because the information we have is not filed systematically."

—*United Way envelope stuffer:* "A key part of our being able to support agencies who are working to solve the problems of our community is a direct mail appeal, which is hindered by lack of staff time to

stuff and address envelopes.”

—*Public television phone worker*: “Citizens who enjoy the programming available only on public television depend on pledge drives to keep us on the air, yet we have far too few staff to mount such drives.”

—*Community Action Agency bookkeeper*: “In order to continue our efforts to improve the lives of the poor, we must account for our grants properly, a skill none of our staff have.”

These kinds of statements enable the potential volunteer to understand why his or her time is being requested, and why it is important that something be done. Being told the why enables a volunteer to see that his life will have a purpose if he volunteers. He is not just stuffing envelopes, for example, he is helping to solve community problems.

### **b. The plan for meeting the need through volunteer efforts.**

The statement of need leads naturally to the second element of a powerful recruitment message: the plan for meeting the need. This is where we tell the volunteer how he or she can help solve the problem. In other words, this is where we describe the job to be done. By describing these job activities in the context of the need, we make our job description more compelling.

In this part of the message, we want to make the job as vivid as the constraints of time and space allow. The purpose here is to allow the potential volunteer to imagine him or herself doing the job. Making this part of the message vivid is largely a matter of adding details to the description of what it will be like to do the work.

### **c. Addressing any volunteer fears.**

The third aspect of an effective recruitment message is to address any fears the potential volunteer may have about doing the job. For example, a potential crisis phone worker may feel that he does not have the skills to do the work, even though it sounds exciting and important. In such a situation, the message should stress that training is provided and supervisory support is always available. A potential volunteer at a shelter for abused women may fear that she may herself be vulnerable if an angry man comes to the door. Again, the recruitment message should include the safeguards the agency has designed for the safety of volunteers and clients.

Potential firefighters may wonder if they have the necessary physical strength to

do the job. Counselors of at-risk youth may fear having their belongings stolen. In other cases, the potential volunteer may fear an excessive time commitment. Wherever there is a potential for the volunteers to feel they might not be able to do the job or might not want to do it, the message should address the fear.

**d. Benefits to the volunteer.** Most people volunteer primarily to meet a need, but doing something worthwhile isn't the sole reason people volunteer. Our recruitment message therefore needs to show how they can meet other needs that might be satisfied by the volunteer experience. This fourth aspect of an effective recruitment message, the statement of benefits to the volunteer, helps people see how they can help themselves by doing activities that help the agency serve the community.

People volunteer for various combinations of reasons besides helping other people, some of which are listed below:

- To escape loneliness
- To feel useful or important
- To establish a “track record” to help them get a job
- To make a transition from prison, mental illness or other situation to “the real world”
- To “test the water” before making a career change
- To make new friends
- To get to know important people in the community who might help with a career
- To develop new skills
- To impress their present employer
- To gain knowledge about the problems of the community
- To maintain skills they no longer use otherwise
- To spend quality time with some members of the family by doing something worthwhile together
- To gain status
- To escape boredom
- To be part of an effective group

To be as effective as possible, the recruitment message needs to show the potential volunteer that whatever combination of needs she has can be met by doing an important job at the agency.

This last section of the message is particularly important in recruiting volunteers for clerical or staff support jobs such as the legendary envelope stuffer. People don't volunteer to stuff envelopes for the sheer joy of creasing paper or the satisfaction of creating mountains of mail. They do it for some other reason, such as the joy of socializing with a group of other people while they do this important but not very

exciting task.

If the recruitment message is presented in a one-way format, it should list some benefits the volunteer administrator thinks will appeal to the target group. One advantage to the targeted approach is that we identify potential motivators in step five. Although not everyone in our target group will respond to the same motivational theme (not all single men would respond to the theme of having a child love you, for example), it gives us some ideas of what benefits to stress in our message. This is particularly true of recruitment efforts such as posters or public service announcements where there is no opportunity for two-way communication.

If it is being presented in a two-way format, where the recruiter has an opportunity to talk to potential volunteers about their needs, skills and desires, the benefits can be tailored specifically to the audience. Because each volunteer has a different combination of motivations for volunteering, it is helpful if the recruiter knows something about the person to do the most effective job of encouraging him to volunteer. If the person wants to meet new people, for example, we want to stress jobs that allow him to do that.

## **7. Who will do it?**

The volunteer administrator should manage the recruitment effort, but this does not mean he or she should do all the work. If you are going to engage in recruitment methods that utilize one-way communication, such as classified ads, public service announcements or posters, you will save yourself work and get a better product if you recruit a volunteer who is an expert in those media. If you are going to use methods that require two-way communication, recruit a volunteer to be the spokesperson for your program who will appeal to the target group.

Sometimes volunteer administrators feel that they should be the one to do the face-to-face recruiting. Often, however, another volunteer is more able to make a persuasive case than a paid employee of the agency. If the volunteer is being recruited by a paid employee, she may have, in the back of her mind, the idea that the employee is trying to get her to do something that someone else is paid to do. A volunteer, on the other hand, speaks from a purer position, free from the taint of suspicion that he is trying to get a person to do part of his job for free.

Further, a volunteer may sometimes be easier for the target group to relate to. The

28-year-old director of a Senior Companion Program in Michigan, for example, always has a current senior volunteer do the talking when recruiting new people. If the potential volunteer is of a minority group, she has a volunteer from that group make the case. She is often on hand to answer questions, but she trains her volunteers to do the whole process themselves. This brings us to the last question.

### 8. How will they know what to do?

The last step in preparing for the recruitment effort is to prepare volunteers or staff who will be delivering the recruitment message. In general, you will want them to be able to present the message in a positive way that will appeal to the target group.

In particular, volunteers and staff who will be engaged in making the recruitment effort should be trained in the overall concepts of targeted recruiting with particular attention to the motivational needs of the target group and the benefits most likely to appeal to those individuals.

Because each volunteer has a different combination of motivations for volunteering, the recruiter needs to know something about the likely needs of the target group to do the most effective job of encouraging them to volunteer. If they are likely to be people who want to impress their employers, for example, it would be good if they knew the agency regularly thanks employers for the contributions of their employees.

In identifying the motivational needs of the target group, we make some educated guesses about this, that a young person may be motivated in part by the desire to gain job experience, for example. If we are doing recruitment through one-way communication efforts, such as making formal presentations to service clubs, this may be as far as we get. In the case of methods involving two-way communication—speaking to small groups or one-on-one appeals—we need to train the recruiters to test those assumptions and to listen for clues about the motivations of the individual. This is particularly important when we are using the targeted approach to recruit volunteers from particular groups for the sake of increasing our organization's diversity.

### Recruiting for Diversity

Today, many agencies are trying to diversify their volunteer staff, recruiting types of people who traditionally have not volunteered for the agency. Agencies are seek-



ing volunteers who are from various minority groups. Some are seeking a few good men. In such cases, the targeted approach is helpful.

When recruiting a target group for its own sake, the sequence of steps would be different, however. In this case we start with a group already defined rather than with a job to be done. After identifying the likely motivators of the target group (in step five), we should then go back and design jobs that would appeal to those motivations. Remember, the nature of the job is the most important factor in motivating people to volunteer some of their free time for your agency.

Nonetheless, remember that each individual from the target group is unique. We may be reasonably safe in assuming that, as a group, most seniors are patriotic, for example, but this is a dangerous assumption to make about any individual senior volunteer.

Even if your targeted appeal focuses on a given motivational theme, it is best to test your assumptions about the individual who responds to the appeal. Spend some time with her to find out what kind of benefits might appeal to her, perhaps suggesting a few from the list above. Identify some things the potential volunteer is concerned about and enjoys doing, and other clues to what it is she wants to do. This may lead to the modification of the existing job description or the creation of a whole new job.

For example, a person might be recruited because he is a singing star in our city, and we want him to help us out in fundraising through his contacts in the entertainment industry. As the recruiter talks to him, she gets the feeling that he isn't very concerned with the problems our agency addresses and that he feels the effort we are proposing will just be more work. In listening to him, however, she discovers that what he really has always wanted to be was an accountant, that while he was

studying accounting in college he sang in a band to work his way through school, became a star and got sidetracked from his life's ambition. The recruiter knows that the agency needs help in accounting for its finances, and asks him if he would be interested. The agency hasn't considered recruiting a volunteer for accounting, but he seems much more enthusiastic for this job than the fundraising idea, so this forms the basis for developing a new job description.

In recruiting for diversity, don't overlook the key role of the spokesperson. A good place to start is with the board of directors of your organization. If you want to recruit African Americans as volunteers, for example, it is helpful if that group is represented on the board (and in the paid staff). Those in board roles can be used as the spokesperson in step seven. ■