

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION

The Touch of Care That Makes a Difference

By Pat Sims



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Down to Details

Volunteer recognition may bring to mind parchment certificates or annual banquets, complete with silver teacups, with a guest speaker from the community. These ideas are better than nothing, but this is 1988. It is time to be creative and humanistic with the way we say "thank you" to our volunteers.

There are two cue words that can be applied to all areas of volunteer recognition (and volunteer administration): *professionalism* and *humanism*. It is not necessary that the volunteers know these words, but they should feel the results of them.

Professionalism

The first—professionalism—can be demonstrated simply by maintaining a folder and file card on each volunteer. The folder contains a list of all recognition the volunteer has received (along with the date), copies of volunteer hours, letters of recommendation, evaluations, contracts, etc.

The file card lists basic data: name, address, phone, birth date, special requests and an ongoing list of all volunteer activities. This card is reviewed weekly.

What's the reasoning behind all of this record keeping? So each volunteer has the confidence that all data is being kept,

and that the staff is familiar with the volunteer's needs and continually tries to match this with available opportunities.

Humanism

Humanism is the second cue word and the fun part of a volunteer program. A person can only be thrilled with a paper certificate so many times, so change it! Play with it! Mold it! Turn it into a chocolate kiss or an orange with a face drawn on it.

Recognition, when possible, should be personally tailored to the volunteer with feeling. Look into the volunteers. If you don't work closely enough with them, check with staff or the participants. For example, if the volunteer camp counselor loves teddy bears, strategically place a teddy bear sticker on the front of her next thank-you note.

When recognizing volunteers, there are two general rules to follow:

1. The recognition should be ongoing—not just at the beginning or the end.
2. Recognition should follow a precise system, but at the same time be caring and flexible, taking individuality into account. For example, keep records of each form of recognition given to the volunteer, but don't hesitate to slip a candy kiss on top of his or her gloves. It's the humanness, the spontaneity behind the forms that makes a superior volunteer program.

It takes time and money, but over the months the results will show. After all, you're thanking your most valuable resources.

Recognizing volunteers expresses an agency's appreciation of those individuals who are involved and committed. It also motivates volunteers to continue or increase their involvement, promotes volunteer programs and encourages others to "try it out."

It is important to remember that volunteer recognition will not make or break a program, but it signifies an added touch of care that can make it all worthwhile to the volunteer. Even if volunteers quit the pro-

Pat Sims, now deceased, was the Campaign, Illinois, Park District's coordinator of volunteers when she wrote this article.

The Beginning

Recognition of a volunteer starts with Day One—the interview, the orientation, or the early arrival before a program or special event. This is the opportunity to make volunteers feel welcome from the beginning. It is a chance to answer questions, give them a job description and a sheet with phone numbers, show them where they can put their coats or lunch, introduce them to the people they will be working with, and give them a manual or a volunteer staff T-shirt. It is a chance—from the beginning—to say “You are significant to our agency.”

Following the interview, a new volunteer with our agency will receive by mail a packet from the Champaign Park District containing a welcome/thank you note, a contract outlining the predetermined dates and times of volunteering, a sheet for keeping track of his/her volunteer hours, a map and list of phone numbers (if not already distributed during the interview), plus a few freebies such as a sticker or a bumper sticker.

In most cases, the volunteer is met at the first assignment by the volunteer coordinator or the person who conducted the interview. Then the new volunteer is introduced to the staff he/she will be working with, the building, the restrooms, refrigerator and so forth. This component seems to be very popular with our volunteers, as it alleviates the fear of walking into a room full of strangers, thus easing some of the first day “back outs.”

Individual Recognition

Individual recognition is a one-on-one appreciation of volunteers. In our agency, we use it with volunteers who teach classes, coach a team, chair an Adopt-A-Park group, work with Special Olympics and so forth. The key to individual recognition is to make the volunteers feel that the sign of appreciation was designed especially for them.

Some examples of volunteer recognition include:

- Individual post cards (using stickers or clip art) mailed to the volunteer's home saying, “Hey, you're doing a great job!” or “We are really glad that you are here!”
- Birthday cards. When the volunteer is interviewed, the second question asked (following name) is birth date. This information should be categorized into the computer or other record-keeping system, and then make sure that the volunteer gets a birthday card. This takes time, but it has big payoffs.

- Food. A plate of chocolate chip cookies, brownies or a sandwich bag filled with M&Ms always works wonders.
- Small yellow “post-it notes” of thanks stuck to lockers or desks, car windshields, purses and so forth
- A fresh cup of coffee waiting upon their arrival
- A mention in the agency newsletter
- Time to listen to their problems or good ideas
- Their pictures clipped from the local newspaper
- A letter of recommendation
- Balloons on a tree which mark their care of it
- Praise for their work to their boss

Even if volunteers quit the program, they will remember the good growth-producing experience they had with an agency that recognizes their efforts.

In Champaign, a Volunteer of the Month Award was initiated in October 1985. Each month an outstanding volunteer is selected to receive a small engraved paperweight. The award is presented by the president of the Board of Commissioners at one of its meetings. As a follow-up, an article in the local newspaper's “People in the News” column features the volunteer and his/her related work.

In summary, the key component for success in individual recognition is individualization. Treat the volunteer as if he/she is your number one priority.

Group Recognition

When dealing with group recognition, the thank-yous do not have to be any different than individual recognition. However, large numbers often necessitate modification. Some examples of group recognition include:

- A Community Service Award via the municipal government, a parks and recreation association, a community betterment group or a civic group such as Kiwanis or Rotary

- A framed certificate of appreciation which can be hung in the group's office
- A group picture of the volunteer team either after the project or in action during the project. Frame this with autographed thanks and present it to the group.

The Big One

The large special event should be held annually for all volunteers who have helped throughout the year. A special event that families can attend is preferable to a breakfast or banquet.

The Champaign Park District has had success with a volunteer splash party. The district's pool is reserved after hours for all volunteers and their families and friends. The staff provides home-baked cookies while soft drink distributors and grocery stores donate watermelon and pop.

The staff is in charge of setting up and cleaning up. There is a free swim, water games and door prizes all wrapped around festivities and appreciation.

Having fun is not the factor that will keep volunteers volunteering. However, having fun can help prevent burnout, keep volunteers coming back, and more so than anything, let them know that they are appreciated.

Budgeting for Recognition

There is a common misconception that the volunteer program budget should be low; many say, “We're not paying the volunteers.” However, a good volunteer program for volunteers, will need to include expenses for recognition as well as for promotion, training and supplies. In our agency, it must also be included in the master Park District budget.

In 1985, we had an \$18,000 line item expense figure for the volunteer program. This did not include any grants or sponsorships used to defray program expenses that year.

Final Thoughts

It is the little things that do the trick in effective volunteer recognition. It is the small but personal things indicating the agency's caring that assures volunteers they play an important part in the Park District.

We can have the perfect recognition program ranging from gold pins to hotel banquets, but if there is not that element of humanism, the efforts are wasted.

In the final analysis, the enthusiasm you give equals the enthusiasm you'll get. Enjoy!