

## Marketing Your Volunteer Program To Recruit Volunteers



# USING A CONSUMER-ORIENTED APPROACH: A Personal and Professional Perspective

By Dr. Jeff Totten

As a volunteer in my community, I've noticed that my volunteer efforts have diminished over the last year or so and that concerns me. As a marketing professor, I've looked at the entire volunteer administration process and have noticed a problem with volunteer recruitment. Last year, when I conducted a research study for the Volunteer Clearinghouse of Abilene, Texas, I saw the weekly column listing volunteer needs the Clearinghouse publishes in the local newspaper. The problem became apparent: Most agencies are not consumer (volunteer)-oriented. They are still production (agency)-oriented.

A bit of explanation is needed. In marketing, we refer to a company as production-oriented when it decides upon a product to make, how much profit it wants to make, and who to sell it to. The consumer may not want a product, but a company produces one anyway. The company is more concerned with its own needs than with those of consumers.

On the other hand, a company that contacts a possible consumer segment, identifies the needs and desires of those particular consumers, and then produces a product that will satisfy not only consumer needs but also company goals—is a consumer-oriented company.

Quite often, community agencies are production-oriented. They need the services of volunteers; however, they want volunteers on their own terms. They seek volunteers who will work at the agency's convenience—mornings or afternoons.

Quite often, the volunteer is asked to serve for a long period of time—five days a week, every Friday for six months, and so on. Now I realize that many agencies need volunteers during certain periods for certain lengths of time. For example, with

a Meals on Wheels program, you are looking at five days a week, 52 weeks a year, with one or two holidays off.

Still, community agencies need to be consumer/volunteer oriented. We all know about changing demographic trends and how much time demands are made on people today. People are busy, and the traditional market for volunteers—women who are housewives or socialites with a good amount of time available for volunteering—has diminished. Barbeito and Hoel wrote an excellent article in the summer 1977 issue of this magazine on pursuing nontraditional market segments.

As a volunteer, what I find frustrating is that most volunteer jobs are during the daytime when I work and tend to be long-term in nature. Now to me, once a week for six months is long-term. I want to volunteer because I enjoy the feeling, the "high" I get from having helped my fellow men and women. I get a warm feeling from volunteer work and feel good about myself. However, I can only volunteer for short, one-time jobs, like one morning spent weatherizing a house or an hour at lunch to deliver meals.

As a marketer, I suggest two possible avenues for agencies to consider in becoming more consumer/volunteer-oriented. First of all, if possible, adjust your time schedules to meet the needs of your volunteers. Let them do filing at night, or arrange a task that volunteers can "take home" and do overnight. Or use a spare room with limited access and let the volunteer have a key to it to work over the weekend.

In other words, be flexible. Work more with volunteers on timing schedules. For example, my Sunday school class decided in late 1984 that we wanted to do something locally to help people who are hungry (having been affected by TV exposure to starving Ethiopian children). One class member contacted the director of the Meals on Wheels program. Mrs. Blaz-

er, the director, worked with our class (working men and women) and designed a geographically compact route with ten to 12 stops that we could service in less than an hour during our lunch breaks.

We are now into our second year of running route #28 and have one of the best organized volunteer schedules around. Class members sign up for days that best fit into their calendars. So far, we've only missed a few days and can usually tell the office in advance the days none of us can cover.

Second, see if you can break tasks down into smaller units that can be done in a shorter period of time. Try to develop more one-shot tasks, jobs that can be accomplished by one volunteer in an hour or two during one visit. Try to recruit several volunteers for one major task, breaking down the time commitment into more manageable and appealing units.

For example, at a nursing home, one volunteer could be recruited to direct exercises for a month, another for six weeks, another for a month, and so forth—instead of trying to get one volunteer to teach the class for a year. Churches are finally doing this, asking Sunday School teachers to teach for one month or one quarter, rather than a year.

With flexible scheduling and shorter periods of involvement, I believe that agencies can entice more people to volunteer, especially those who have never been a volunteer. Today, many people, sad to say, are time-driven. By offering shorter involvement periods and more one-shot tasks, agencies can appeal to those of us who are busy, yet want to give of ourselves to help others. Also, agencies can reduce the chances of burn-out among long-time volunteers by giving them vacations from volunteer work.

The consumer-oriented approach to volunteer recruitment will help community agencies today in the age of the busy American.

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