

RECRUITING TIPS:

Taking Notes from the Grassroots

By Kenneth B. Perkins

This article addresses the recruitment needs of local volunteer fire departments, but the most of the author's ideas and advice have universal application to the volunteer field.

Recruitment is often worried over as if it were an uncontrollable force beating down volunteer emergency service corporations. When this common problem is defined as uncontrollable, the definition will be real in its consequences. Recruitment is within the control of most units. This goal must be addressed beginning with examination of *organizational image* and *internal processes* that affect how recruitment is approached.

Effective recruitment begins when your organization believes it can control this goal. Organizations do not survive when they think of themselves as *victims* of forces outside their influence. The public should not be blamed for lack of "volunteer spirit." This easy-to-assume attitude results in a definition of your recruit pool as uninterested in public service and causes your efforts to become tentative, defensive and half-hearted.

Make sure your constitution and by-laws work for, not against, healthy survival of the corporation. Units need speedy and efficient application procedures. Do not limit your recruit pool to just those who live within a certain area. Accept individuals who *work* in your area, too.

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Another problem is when duties of officers are not clearly defined. This breeds conflict, the single biggest cause of internal problems. When duties are poorly defined, no one becomes a steward of new recruits. Corporations must provide meaningful responsibilities for new members so that they can invest themselves in the public service goals of the corporation. Investment of oneself in a volunteer group is the only motivation for continued participation. Direction and guidance is the job of the organization. Consider formalizing these procedures so that you know they are occurring properly.

You do not need everyone in the community as members of your organization. Don't worry about the attitude of the entire responding area. You only need a few dependable people, particularly those who can respond during daytime hours. The point is to learn exactly who is available during this time period and go after these individuals.

Women and minorities make great volunteer emergency professionals. Statistics show that once these individuals get into the service, they are as committed as white males. Women and minorities do not destroy the fraternal nature of the group. They enhance it. The entrenched "good old boys" will surprise you with how well they accept others unlike them. Veterans grow personally and can take on an expanded view of their own role as public servants when they have to work beside different but committed volunteers. Besides, the public will not take seriously a service based on a labor force of white males.

Women and minorities in your department are the best resources for recruiting others. They can target interested individuals; but do not hesitate to go into minority neighborhoods and educate them about

your service and the rewards for doing it. Most minority individuals have to be convinced your group is not prejudiced. The same is true for attracting females. They too have to be convinced you are serious.

You might ask, "Is my organization sending subtle signals that women and minorities need not apply?" Are the people in charge of marketing the image of your unit sexist or racist? If they are, you should know that recruit pools have picked up on this message and have defined your organization as one that is self interested, not public-service oriented. Sadly, many corporations prefer to be an inward-looking social club only. The days are numbered for these groups.

Do not waste your time anticipating a recruitment miracle. You will never have this problem solved, but you must always be working to control it. Some departments place their hopes in mass market techniques. Others rely on word of mouth, which is usually a cover-up for not really facing squarely the problem of recruitment. Use what works, but do not expect much from mass media tools unless they are grounded in systematic personal contacts. Keep in mind how *you* got involved. Probably you were personally asked to join.

Systematic recruitment can mean following through on "word of mouth." Put someone in charge of recruitment. Let their duties be to coordinate efforts of other members or to make personal contacts. This person should present an attractive image of the organization by good dress, hygiene, grooming, etc. A lot is to be lost if you present a disgusting image for your organization. Think about it: The little things are what people remember.

Use a simple compass to draw a circle around your building at a radius of several miles. Go door to door if necessary, but

somehow personally contact, with application in hand, targeted individuals. Tell them that the department or squad has targeted *them*. This strategy puts the organization in control of recruitment and paints a nicer public image.

On the subject of image, would *you* want to join the crew of a sinking ship? Think about all the subtle messages spread by your unit. What may look like an innocent appeal for help to you can be heard as an SOS.

Newspaper advertisements, open houses, etc. can be very effective so long as they communicate the right message. Emphasis should be on professionalism, training, excitement, meaningful service, and traditions. Be sure to emphasize that your group is an equal opportunity organization which does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, age, religion or creed. If a recruit proves undesirable, the corporation must be able to state why in legally defensible terms. As a word of caution, successful discrimination suits have been filed by individuals who were denied membership in organizations which could not give a defensible reason why. You can imagine what life would be like in your department during nasty litigation.

Invite leaders of civic, religious, youth development, educational and business organizations to your building. *Educate them*, pointing out their interests in emergency service. Be able to show these influential individuals exactly how they can help. Paint the picture as it really is: Everyone benefits and the costs are low.

Emphasize involvement of youth in your organization. Consider working with local high schools in establishing a credit course in fire fighting or emergency medicine. Young people could be recruited this way. Think about all the good rewards your group has to offer youth.

In redefining recruitment to be within your unit's control, do not forget that the image of your organization should be attractive, non-discriminatory, and public-service oriented. Eliminate internal processes which are self defeating. Market your service as being done by *volunteer professionals*. Approach recruitment in a systematic manner, not just by random "word of mouth" and not by, as one leader put it, "trying to recruit only those who show an interest in the department." Your group cannot afford to recruit like a church. And when all the media blitzes are finished, it is sincere personal invitations which get people into volunteer organizations.

As I See It

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than an education is only what we receive when we go to a school. Both education and career continue during our entire life.

By taking our volunteer jobs seriously, I mean we should choose jobs that we believe are worthwhile. It can be a cause we really believe in—peace, local government, the environment, homelessness, hunger—the list can go on forever. It can be a cause we have a particular interest in because a family member or friend has been afflicted (retardation, mental illness). It can be something we really want to learn about like the kinds of opportunities the American Association of University Women and the League of Women Voters provide; or it can be opera and other forms of art. Oftentimes when we volunteer, we can have a future paying career very much in mind. In fact, many people aren't lucky enough to work for money in the field that is their first love but they volunteer in the field they prefer with the hope that the volunteer work will lead to a paying position.

Part of taking our volunteer work seriously is developing a plan to affect those causes we really care about and at the same time to develop skills, knowledge and contacts that will improve our careers—paid or unpaid.

I encourage women to keep samples of their unpaid work—the newsletters they have designed, the cookbooks they have illustrated, the letters to the editors they have written. I also encourage them to keep an ongoing inventory of skills they have honed: public speaking, knowledge of local government, public relations. By so doing, women can demonstrate to themselves the value of their experiences as gratuitous employees and they can use that experience on their resumes should they need them.

By the same token, if we take a career approach to volunteering, we can develop goals and objectives by which to evaluate our own effectiveness and progress. We will know that when we gave testimony to the village board on an environmental question, we were improving our own ability as a public speaker and also improving public policy.

As volunteers, we must demand that the agencies we work for treat us as gratuitous employees. We must ask for job descriptions, orientation, training, advance-

ment, evaluations and recommendations. We should expect to have a voice in making decisions about our own assignments. We should feel free to seek out another volunteer assignment if the one we have is not giving us a sense of fulfillment.

Most volunteers will say they get more out of their volunteer assignment than they are able to give. I think this is a good rule of thumb. If you feel you are giving too much and not learning, growing and experiencing enough, you should sit down with your supervisor and ask for another assignment or find another agency which can meet your needs. You will be a better volunteer if you are stimulated and excited by your unpaid work.

More and more community Volunteer Centers are acting as employment agencies for the volunteer because they know that it is important to meet the volunteer's as well as the agency's needs. Some people love to address envelopes; some people hate it. Some people like to do academic research; others are bored by it. You need to match your interests and talents to the volunteer job just as much as you would hope to do to a paying job. Because you are donating your time, you have a right to demand that the work you do as a volunteer contributes to your own self fulfillment.

One of my dreams for volunteering in the years ahead is that men and women will share equally in policy making and direct service volunteering. I want never again to be on a board where a male says when the subject of managing the benefit comes up, "Let the girls do it, they do such a great job."

I agree with Freud that love and work make life tolerable. Volunteer work is the work you choose because you love it. Work for causes that are meaningful to you, causes that reflect your personal values; and you won't have to apologize. Instead, talk about your work. You are a volunteer because you want to make the world a better place in which to live. You should never feel put down because you aren't receiving a paycheck. True, if you need money, you may have to find a job that will pay you! But when it comes to evaluating your work, paid or unpaid, evaluate its worth to the community and to your own self fulfillment. Volunteers have the advantage of being able to look at those values exclusively. We should be proud of our choices; proud of the opportunities we have to serve; and proud of the service we provide.