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Make New Friends But Keep the Old...

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As the traditional Girl Scout song lyrics say: “Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other is gold.”

In the past few months I’ve conducted training for or consulted with a variety of predominantly-volunteer organizations, including fraternal benefit associations, hospital auxiliaries, faith communities, and service clubs. All of these shared a common concern: recruiting new members. But it quickly became evident that the challenge was not just to spread the word to the general public to find new people. Rather, it was equally – if not more – important to find ways to revitalize the involvement of inactive members. Why not start with the people already interested enough in the organization to remain on the membership rolls and pay dues?

In articulating the issues, a pattern of missed opportunities emerges – times when intentional outreach in new ways might have motivated new volunteering. Here are a few examples, many of which are equally relevant to assuring that agency-based volunteer programs also keep welcoming additional volunteer involvement.

Separating Age Groups with Little Follow Up

Almost universally, volunteer-run organizations separate their primary adult groups from special programs aimed at young adults or even teenagers. This is fine for programming purposes, but almost always leaves a continuity gap when the young volunteers reach the ceiling for their age group. Are they automatically – and personally – invited to move to the next level?

The biggest gap is usually after a high school project, when the teens are assumed to be going off to college and not really interested in becoming members of the adult group. Therefore, no serious attempt is made to keep them engaged in the work of the organization. Think about the fallacies here:

- Not every high school grad goes off to college or leaves town to do so. Is there some reason an 18-year-old could not become an “adult” member if s/he is able to participate?
- Even leaving the area to go to university doesn’t sever ties. College students return home many times during the year and, today, are more connected to family and friends than ever before through e-mail, blogs, text messaging – you name it. Again, why assume a student would not be able to participate reasonably often in organization activities? And what about developing some virtual assignments to keep them involved?
- If no attempt is made by the organization to retain college students, the high school activity will recede in memory as something done “when I was young,” and not as something to maintain through adulthood.

Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that a majority of college-age people will not be interested in being active in the larger volunteer organization while they are pursuing the adventures of young adulthood. Nevertheless, the manner in which they “end” their teen involvement will influence their attitudes about the organization in the future. A clear statement of “you are very welcome to return to us at any stage in your life” **will** be heard and remembered. This seems vital, especially for organizations that have chapters all over the country or world. And today’s cost-free e-mail contact allows for ongoing communication periodically over the years, too.

All of this applies as well to such traditional teen-involving agencies such as hospitals, nursing homes, recreation projects, and others. For that matter, whenever a young person “graduates” out of a youth program as a *participant*, it would be great to openly say something like: “Now that you’ve experienced this opportunity, we hope you’ll keep it mind that in a few years you, too, can ‘pass it on’ by becoming an adult volunteer for future young participants.” It can’t hurt to plant this seed, even if the graduate serves in a totally different organization a decade later.

Life Changes

A related issue is what happens when organizations – especially faith communities – are family-based. Commonly, families join a congregation when children are young, often specifically to give them some religious education. As time passes, however, the children grow up, yet their maturing skills may not be recognized or utilized. They remain permanently typecast as someone’s son or daughter, rather than as adult individuals. For example, if the recordkeeping system places all data under the “head of family,” it follows that a single newsletter or other communiqué will go out to that person who, in turn, is assumed to pass on the information to everyone else at home. That may be a faulty assumption.

Pay attention to your members/volunteers and what’s happening in their lives! Think about all the things that happen to people that suddenly (or gradually) change their availability to serve, their ability to serve, or their desire to get more involved. Things like death of a spouse or divorce, earning a new academic degree, changing careers, downsizing one’s home, helping to raise a grandchild, illness, and other major life events.

Each change is an opportunity. Not to “ambulance chase,” but to offer volunteers the chance to increase (or temporarily decrease) their participation to match their new circumstances. Besides, isn’t it a form of recognition to care enough about volunteers to discuss how changes in their lives affect them?

Also keep in mind that people who have been members for some time, but have never done any volunteer work for you, may actually feel that they missed their chance. They still see the “we need help” notices, but are a bit embarrassed to surface after years of non-involvement. So make a point of directly contacting people on the membership roster whom you have never met. These are not “cold calls,” and may be surprisingly well received as a renewed welcome.

Dues Renewal Notices

Talk about missed opportunities! Almost every organization I know does a terrible job of communicating anything other than the bill when sending the annual dues notice. Think about it. This is a message to your *members*. To people who clearly are in your circle already. Why not use this chance to learn something about them? Adding even two questions to the dues notice each year can be very useful in identifying possible volunteer recruits.

- Ask some questions to update your files – beyond change of address. For example: *Have you had any major changes in your life in the past year?* You can give a checklist of things like retirement, divorce, graduation, etc.
- Find out who these people are. Ask just a few questions such as: education and subject majored in, occupation, place of work.
- Maybe ask: *How can we make it easier for you to volunteer?*

Please note, however, that you should *not* do any of this if you do not have a plan to *follow up* the responses you receive! The whole idea is to get a starting point for new conversations with your members about their participation in your work. When people take the time to respond to your questions they expect some reaction. Not getting any will doom your efforts to survey your members next year.

More Missed Chances to Communicate

Use this Hot Topic as a chance to identify other opportunities to issue an invitation to join in. There are many more. To get you thinking, here’s a brief list.

- Do you give people information about volunteer opportunities in your lobby or waiting area?
- Do you include a recruiting message in your e-mail signature line?
- Do you bring targeted handouts about volunteering to any meeting or event?
- Are there notices of new opportunities posted where volunteers keep their coats and personal items?

- Do you invite clients to come back as volunteers at some point in the future, or extend that invitation to their families and friends?
- Do you contact lapsed volunteers after a year of absence and see if they would like to rejoin (only with volunteers that you miss!)?

What's on your list? What have you done to reconnect with volunteers who have lapsed in some way?

Related Topics: [Motivation](#) | [Recruitment](#) | [Retention](#)

Submitted on 25 May 2007 by Carol Glass, Saint Joseph's Hospital of Atlanta, Director of Volunteer Services, Atlanta, Georgia USA

About recruiting: We advertise our volunteer program in the hospital on the "wrap" for the free newspapers given to the patients.

Submitted on 23 May 2007 by Kathleen Richardson, Southeast Steuben County Library, Volunteer Coordinator, Corning NY USA

Since stepping into this Volunteer Coordinator position in 2001, I've done very little recruiting. We treat all volunteers as valuable members of our library family. A former volunteer has invited staff members and several volunteers to his upcoming wedding. Some staff takes their volunteers to lunch. We've attended funerals, remembered birthdays, and celebrated births.

Four teens started with us six years ago, at age eleven, each accompanied by a parent because of their ages. Each parent eventually decided to volunteer, too. Now the teens are about to go off to college and we would welcome them back anytime. Increased responsibility is offered to teens and adults alike over time.

Special care is taken to match volunteers to a task they'll enjoy and take pride in. We check back with them regularly to see if it's working for them. If not, we reassign. One volunteer who started out shelf-reading decided she disliked that job. We finally settled her in book repair, a brand new skill for her in her 70's. After three years, she's really good at it and is now teaching a highly capable 12-year old how to repair books.

A half-dozen or so adult volunteers have been hired by our library. Also, we encourage all teen volunteers to fill out applications for Page positions. One volunteer became a page, then left; she's now 21 and has been hired here fulltime.

Our volunteers number over sixty each month and they are family to us. This brings them back. They bring family and friends. Our volunteers are our best recruiters.

Submitted on 1 May 2007 by Hillary Roberts, President, PLNJ Inc., Keyport, NJ, USA

An insightful topic, and I am surprised to learn that the idea of keeping in touch with youth volunteers as they move into higher education and/or careers isn't exercised.

This year, I was contacted by an Americorps volunteer from 2001 who has since earned her Ph.D., married, celebrated the arrival of her first child and moved back to the east coast. She contacted me for volunteer assignments, non-profit job leads and for a lunch date! Another, a young man who I placed in a volunteer tutoring position while he attended high school, contacted me to pledge 5% of his sales earnings to this agency as a "give back" and lastly an art major I met during my stint at the local Volunteer Center who contacted me for a job reference.

Maybe good communication skills are easier for some. Susan certainly points out frequently the various modes of electronic communication we can all use and learn from but communication should be personal and mutual. 4,000 emails a year used to frighten me, but I've come to realize what they represent: an intelligent network! There is every reason in the world for a non profit/charity to stay in touch with its pool of volunteers and community supporters. We should be honored by the endorsement!

What I am most proud of (in the context of this hot topic) is having two members on our Board who originally came to us their last year in high school. When they decided to attend college locally, they applied for Board posts and are two of the most enthusiastic, active Board members we have. Volunteer Managers must be talking heads; facilitating the BEST form of communication they are capable of and setting both a standard and a protocol for welcoming others now...and in the future.

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