

Revitalizing Recruitment

By Brenda Clifton

Recruitment is both the bane and wonder of volunteer programming. The approach we take to recruitment can be likened to facing a 40-foot climbing wall, and wondering how we're ever going to scale it. And, if we scale it, we have to turn right back around and climb it all over again!

Reality

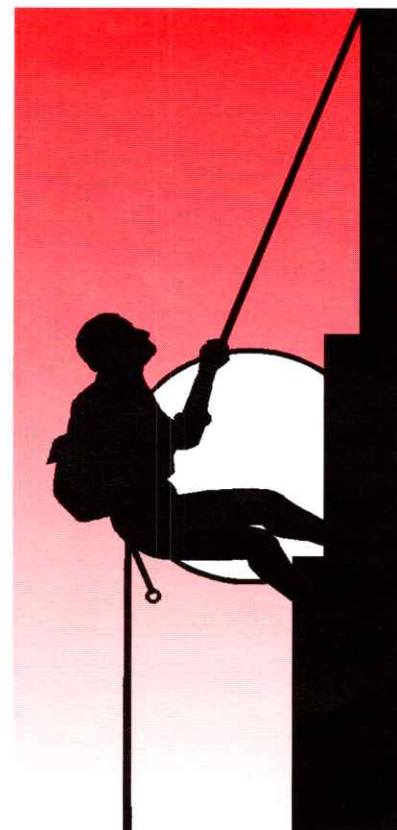
Effective volunteer program professionals realize that what worked in the past guarantees no success for the future. More importantly, they understand that there are specific factors that affect and influence how and from what pool we recruit volunteers. In our fast-paced, information-packed society, all bets are off if we try to assume we need to educate volunteers emotionally. We no longer have to create a moral or "karmic" commitment to do the right thing. Instead, we have to create opportunities—and enticements—that convince volunteers our organization is the place to get involved in something they've already decided to do. We also need to get much better at creating opportunities that provide a tangible payback—career steps, skills building, personal development or connections. This may be a difficult mindset for volunteer program professionals who've been around when volunteers used to get involved simply because "it felt good." There's nothing wrong with the warm, fuzzy promotion. It's just that it severely limits the pool of volunteer resources. Especially when you need to engage today's young, hip, middle-class urban professional. "What's in it for me" is a reasonable question that

should be anticipated. We also live in a results-oriented society. Volunteers no longer simply want to deal with tragedies. Society's approach more often tends to be "Stamp It Out-Eradicate!" And why not? We have the technology. We have the tools and scientific knowledge. We're closer than ever to some major breakthroughs on serious diseases and social ills. Are we recruiting volunteers in a way that promotes and demonstrates that accomplishment?

Most important, two major factors continue to force volunteer professionals to re-evaluate their recruitment strategies: the absolute necessity of developing strategic marketing plans and the death of the structured volunteer program. Not everyone agrees that recruitment is marketing; but how you speak about what your organization does engages the volunteers you need. That's why recruitment is so often out of the order of things when developing a volunteer program.

Imagine this conversation: Volunteer Manager: "We need volunteers." Executive Director: "What for?" Volunteer Manager: "Lots of stuff." Executive Director: "What kind of stuff?" Volunteer Manager: "You know, lots of stuff." Executive Director: "Can you be more specific?" Volunteer Manager: "Well, I know we need them."

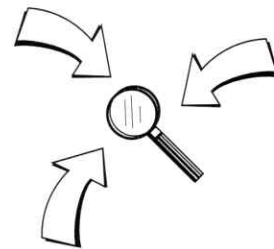
While that conversation is an exaggeration, it can be very difficult to hold off on actually recruiting volunteers until we're sure where they will fit, and what we will actually do with them once they arrive. The death of the structured volunteer program was inevitable. Time is the great commodity and people give



what's left of it sparingly. When we ask volunteers to dedicate their time to us, it is important to be prepared to be flexible. The opportunities that used to be filled by one person for five hours three times a week now will may have to be done by four people working two hour shifts five days a week. And as difficult as it is to reshape volunteer positions, we have no choice. Relying on one demographic population like, say, seniors, can be the death knell of a successful program. What if the weather is bad and those same seniors can't or won't drive?

Hooks

Hooks are the methods volunteer program professionals utilize to invite and engage people to volunteer. Hooks should represent the organization's very own unique appeal.



They should reveal what it is about the organization that makes it THE place to volunteer. Hooks don't rely on past successes. They focus on current trends and incentives that appeal to the markets we want to tap into. Hooks provide new ways of looking at traditional volunteer jobs. Job-sharing with flextime, short, one-time or episodic opportunities instead of long, tedious, repetitive opportunities that appeal to no one. Hooks reflect the climate and environmental change of an organization, both internally and externally, and are sensitive to the community. Hooks should reflect the bigger picture, not a limited, tunnel-vision view of immediate 'must do' needs. While those immediate needs are important, keeping an eye on the bigger picture will help generate longer-term commitment from volunteers. And, depending on the market that the organization wants to engage as volunteers, hooks should have an element of excitement and intrigue.

Energizing Our Recruitment

Most volunteer program professionals do what they do because of their passion. Do we put that passion into the 'ask' we send out to volunteers? Since we know that most people are aware of what's available, are we giving them the opportunity to share that passion with our organization? Another consideration is that different generations share very different values and perspectives. What appeals to each impacts how we get them energized about volunteering.

It's very difficult for organizations with limited budgets to develop tan-

gible benefits for volunteers. Some possibilities that might not cost a lot but are of great value to volunteers are access to technology (computers, cell phones, palm pilots); education credits; personal development and training opportunities; potential employment and resume building; discounts to attend local community events; and reduced costs for stuff (prescription drugs, food, insurance, equipment, supplies).

Jumpstart Recruitment

Recruitment needs to be reviewed regularly. It can't lie stale and stagnant and every once in awhile get a dusting off. An internal evaluation is one way to assess the effects of quickly changing demographics and trends. Volunteer Center of the Pikes Peak Region uses a "recruitment strategy grid" to simplify the process. The grid's questions consider the major components of recruitment: targeting, marketing, message, assessment, unique appeal and planning:

- What should we do first? (planning)
- Why would anyone want to volunteer here? (unique appeal)
- Who can/should do this? (assessment)
- Where will we find them? (targeting)
- How do we reach them? (marketing)
- What shall we say? How shall we say it? (message)
- What materials and/or resources do I need? (funding, staff, in-kind)
- What baggage do I need to get rid of? (old methods)
- What do we have to offer?

(benefits, experiences)

Be competitive! It's isn't easy, but successful volunteer programs have the ability to see and know they have serious competition for people's time. And there are lots of choices out there. Knowing when you need to target certain groups, rethinking how you present opportunities to the public, and getting creative about what those opportunities are is necessary. Moving away from old job descriptions with titles like "nursing home aide" and replacing them with new ones like "wheelchair pilots" can zap some energy into oft-perceived mundane, everyday, but necessary jobs.

Prepare

Finally, prepare internally for the new volunteer. Make sure staff understands that volunteers are changing. They may be younger, they are definitely more "hip," and they have great expectations. Help staff understand how to respect the different values and perspectives new volunteers bring. In technological terms, be as current as the volunteer program budget will allow. Have up-to-date computer equipment and software that's functional. Know and accept that volunteer time will be limited. Technology capability is a draw and helps volunteers do what they do quickly.

The ability of the volunteer program professional to marshal volunteers' talent, to capture their time and ensure services are delivered is a goal worth achieving. ♦

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