10 Tips for Engaging a Volunteer Community

By Jeffrey Cufaude

Identify all the work volunteers can possible do.
Having a diverse mix of volunteer opportunities increases the likelihood we will fully leverage the time and talents that may be available in the volunteer workforce. Organizations would be well served to inventory all of the work that is done and to systematically identify the pieces volunteers are best or uniquely positioned to do and the pieces where it would be easy and/or desirable to tap into volunteer contributions. These pieces of work can then be developed into the various components of a comprehensive volunteer structure: work groups or project teams, solo assignments, advisory boards; task forces or committees; etc.

Recruit with a one-to-one philosophy.
Most volunteer involvement brochures and forms solicit interest in committees or task forces. But what we really want to do is to engage volunteers in those efforts for which they have passion and/or talent. Once we learn of those, we can then channel them to the appropriate opportunities within the organization. Imagine a brochure that asked a potential recruit to share her passions or interests areas, the top five skills or talents she possesses or would like to develop, the number of hours per week or month she can commit, and whether she would like to work on projects or serve on a committee or task force. We can then present the individual with customized volunteer opportunities that match her unique profile.

Connect volunteer efforts to the organization's purpose, goals, brand, and values.
As we orient individuals to their specific roles and responsibilities, we sometimes neglect to connect their efforts to the "bigger picture." Most volunteers derive part of their satisfaction from seeing that their efforts make a difference, and we need to intentionally cultivate their understanding of how that will occur. Equally valuable is helping individual's understand the unique brand identity and/or core values and how volunteers can sustain and advance those in their efforts. Volunteers often form the "front line" image at conferences and other association offerings; therefore, it is imperative they represent the values and brand the association is trying to advance.

Connect volunteers to each other.
While community is often a buzzword in the association world, we sometimes neglect the opportunities to help connect volunteers to each other and the volunteer community. The spirit of community is one in which individuals care not because they have to, but because they want to. The more interconnected individuals feel, the more like they are to (1) care, (2) to act on their caring, and (3) to recruit others who also care. Associations should examine all of their volunteer meetings, trainings, orientations, etc. through the lens of community, asking: what are we/could we be doing to foster a greater spirit of community among those present?

Think of volunteering as a professional development experience.
Good organizations help employees identify the lessons they are learning from their work experiences, how that knowledge can inform their future efforts, and how it contributes to their portfolio of skills. Good associations should do the same with volunteers. Whether it is part of their original motivation to volunteer or not, individuals gain valuable personal and professional skills. We can increase the meaning of their experience by providing opportunities for them to reflect on their efforts and what they have gained from them … think of it as a resume writing opportunity for volunteer efforts.

Don't waste volunteers' time.
Time is one of the most significant contributions a volunteer offers to an association. It is a gift we need to manage carefully. We need to be thoughtful and intentional about our agendas for meetings or conference calls, turnaround deadlines on projects, and other areas where volunteer time can be leveraged or wasted. Associations should examine the "defining moments" of a volunteer's experience and identify any unnecessary time wasters that could be eliminated.

Manage volunteer transitions.
When individuals move from member to volunteer, and from minor to major volunteer contributions, they feel a greater connection to the association: they become a part of the association family. What happens to individuals after they leave a significant project or position of leadership in the association? How does the association continue to communicate with them and involve them? How do we help volunteers indicate what role or contributions they would like to make in the future? How does the association track such information? Once you become part of the "inner circle" being disengaged from that information loop can be unsettling. We need to more intentionally manage volunteer transitions if we hope to reengage them again in the future.

Remember that attention and recognition are the currencies you control.
Paid employees get a paycheck every week or every other week. Associations often dole out recognition far less frequently, saving up awards and tributes for end-of-the-year events. Volunteer recognition and encouragement needs to be more frequent, ongoing, and personalized whenever possible. The form should be commensurate with the nature of the volunteer contributions and reflect the message you wish to send about the volunteer's efforts. Yes, sending out the mail-merged thank-you note is better than sending nothing. But the underlying message is "we care enough about your generosity that we mail-merged you this letter." Contrast the likely value of that effort with a short handwritten note in which you personally comment on the specific contributions the volunteer made. Which would engage you more?

Ask for feedback on their experience.
In some aspects, volunteers are the customers of the association's volunteer experience. We owe it to them (and future volunteers) to solicit their feedback on what worked and what didn't work. Creating a simple evaluation form and using it on an ongoing basis can help the association measure progress in key areas over time. An evaluation should contain: (1) a mixture of short objective statements whose ratings can be tracked over time; and (2) open-ended questions that allow volunteers to express themselves freely. One simple, but telling question can be asking volunteers: "What adjectives best describe your volunteer experience?" Keying these in as a list and then doing a simple word sort will give you a quick sense of your association's volunteer experience.

Don't forget the fun!
Doing the work of the association is serious business, but the way we go about it doesn't have to be dry and boring. We must engage not only volunteers' minds, but also their hearts. Making volunteer experiences memorable will keep them coming back for more. One of the simplest ways we can do that is to include some elements of fun and play whenever possible into the volunteer experience. Bland training of association facts and figures can become a highly charged game show with grab bag prizes; dull committee meetings can be livened up with short, but energizing team builders. One association went so far as to have a Fun Committee whose sole responsibility was to inject a little fun in every offering of the association. As you might suspect, it was **the** sought after committee appointment.