

People Who Need People

Effective recruitment for volunteer programs

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER



Sooner or later, every volunteer program manager finds herself asking how to find the people she needs to do all the work that needs to be done. And while it's perfectly appropriate to develop a strategic recruitment plan for volunteers, recruiters need to ensure the program is already running smoothly before they arrive.

The fact is that a well-run program is the best volunteer recruitment tool. Volunteers who enjoy their experience within an organization are sure to speak of it among their acquaintances, helping spread the word throughout the community. A sensibly structured program, along with the opportunity to make a positive impact and to learn additional skills, attracts the types of

people who make strong volunteer programs. Chaos, on the other hand, often attracts chaos. Clear expectations and organization attract effective volunteers who want to be strategic about where they can have the most impact.

Digging to find help, organizations often fall back on fool's gold, simply bringing in more warm bodies. The real gold is harder to find, but worth the effort. By paying more attention to the structure of the existing program rather than simply piling on more people, organizations can avoid the "crisis/chaos spiral," in which coordinators must continually replace volunteers who are leaving because their time and efforts were not well-spent or well-received. Recruitment

of new volunteers should take place only after the foundation of the program is well-developed and can support the increase in numbers.

Before launching an extensive recruitment plan, program managers should work to strengthen the essential building blocks of their programs: getting buy-in from leadership; involving staff in development of the program; clearly defining the role of volunteers; identifying the requirements and screening process; developing and providing volunteer training; implementing the tools to make the program easier to manage; creating a process for acknowledging volunteers; acquiring the appropriate equipment for volunteers; and

[volunteer management]

developing and maintaining excellent lines of communication between management, staff, and the volunteer team.

Bringing in new volunteers before the program is ready is a recipe for disappointment, frustration, and high turnover.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

When the organization is ready to bring on new volunteers, take a few final steps to make sure you're presenting an appealing, accurate image of your program.

A thorough review of all recruiting materials is in order. Try to look at the organization through the eyes of an outsider, and be honest about what you see. Better yet, enlist a friend or relative to act as a sort of "secret shopper" of your program and recruiting process. From the website to the application, from the description of the opportunity to the orientation, how does your program rate?

How does everything look? Is it inviting? Do the materials present a professional, well-

run, and organized opportunity to participate, or does it appear to be a desperate cry for help? Does the process make it easy to get involved, or are there obstacles and confusing steps at every turn?

Start with a review of all brochures and pamphlets. It's nice when they can be professionally designed and printed, but when restricted budgets make that a challenge, all printed materials should still be neat, easy to read, clear of all typographical errors, with photos that don't look like fuzzy blobs.

Where People Seek Info about Volunteering

YOUR AGENCY

- Information from staff (make sure staff know what to tell visitors/callers)
- Voicemail system for organization
- Volunteer space (visitors will assess whether volunteers are appreciated in the organization)
- Website (make sure information is easy to find and very clear)
- Information posted at the organization
- Word-of-mouth from current volunteers
- Board members

MEDIA

- Classified advertisements in your local paper/magazines
- Newspaper/local magazine stories/interviews about your agency
- Radio PSAs (public service announcements)
- Radio – stories/interviews about your agency
- Television PSAs
- Television – stories/interviews about your agency

COMMUNITY

(See expanded list, p. 55)

- Presentations to community groups/service clubs
- Community events – tabling
- Fliers and posters at community groups
- Presentations to local businesses (especially those around your neighborhood)
- Joint advertising with local businesses (they may be willing to develop an advertisement that simultaneously promotes their service and your volunteer opportunities)
- Volunteer referral services in the community, including volunteer centers (*pointsoflight.org*)
- Yellow Pages

EDUCATIONAL/GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

- On-campus recruitment
- Specific department recruitment
- High school – mandatory community service hours
- Support for persons with mental disabilities
- Support for persons with physical disabilities
- Court-ordered programs
- Employment assistance programs
- AmeriCorps and VISTA
- Youth internship programs through local city government and community groups

WEBSITES

- Your agency's website
- Volunteer recruitment sites
 - *VolunteerMatch.org*
 - *SERVE.net.org*
 - *usafreedomcorps.gov*
 - *idealist.org*
 - *UnitedWay.org*
 - *dosomething.org*
 - *singlevolunteers.org*
 - *seniorcorp.org*
 - *cns.gov*

Group Volunteer Recruitment Sites

- *onebrick.org* (This site is great if you want to organize a large project at your site. This is a good way to get people interested in longer-term volunteering.)

Community Sites

- *craigslist.org*
- Your community-specific bulletin boards and websites
- Ask for links to your volunteer program on websites of other community groups and businesses

Animal Adoption Sites

- *petfinder.com* (It has a volunteer recruitment section. Make sure your group has a home page on the site!)
- *pets911.com*



Looking for Help in All the Right Places

The best (and easiest) place to start getting ideas on where to recruit is to ask your existing volunteers how they heard about the opportunity. Do a brief survey of volunteers already on board. Where did they hear about your organization? What motivated them to volunteer? What are their feelings about the process, the recruitment materials, and what makes the organization an attractive option for people looking to get involved? Your existing volunteers will likely have some great insight into what works, and will provide a great starting point.

Does the organization capitalize on every opportunity to acknowledge the impact of volunteer involvement and the ongoing need for assistance? Any contact with the public ought to include a snippet about volunteer opportunities. Volunteering information on the website should be easily accessible. The phrase “and volunteers” should be added to anything that promotes the work of the organization, i.e. “the organization, staff, and volunteers.” Volunteer involvement should be engaged, praised, and solicited at every turn.

Next, look at the descriptions of the volunteer opportunities. Do they detail specific ways to help? Do descriptions of the positions accurately portray what volunteers do?

What about the benefits of volunteering? Do your recruiting materials offer more tangible reasons to participate in your program than simply feeling good? What skills and knowledge will be gained by participants? People often feel inspired to help because they know the need, but it’s smart to create a program in which volunteers can benefit through learning new skills.

Take a look at the application and evaluate its usefulness as a tool. Is it strictly for information gathering, or is it the basis for making decisions about whether to invite the prospective volunteer to participate in the program? If the latter, does it ask the necessary questions, ones that will help you assign volunteers appropriately, or are the questions soliciting answers that won’t have any impact or relevance at all?

If you don’t have it on your application already, ask incoming volunteers where they learned about your organization’s volunteer opportunities. Track the answers to determine what seems to be working and what doesn’t in order to focus energy where it’s likely to be most productive. There is no reason to spend time, at least initially, on recruiting methods that don’t seem likely to yield the desired results.

The recruiting plan will be dictated by the type of volunteers and skill sets you’re seeking to acquire. If the organization needs people with specific skills and abilities, the recruiting will need to be much more targeted toward a specific audience. If the program has the ability to train the general public to do the required work, the recruitment process can be much more broadly based.

For instance, a spay/neuter clinic needing volunteer help with pre- and postsurgical care may be better served by focusing efforts on local vocational training programs, or preveterinary programs in local schools. Shelters seeking professional dog trainers should contact local training businesses rather than inquiring of the public generally. On the other hand, if the shelter is primarily seeking dog walkers or cat socializers and can provide the training needed to get people of varying experience levels up to speed, a general call to the larger community may be in order.

There are a variety of volunteer recruitment resources on the Internet where you can list and promote your volunteer opportunities; volunteermatch.org, idealist.org, unitedway.org, and dosomething.org are some of these. These sites allow you

Expanded List of Community Sites (from *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations* by Betsy McFarland)

- Advocacy groups
- AmeriCorps programs
- Animal-friendly areas—dog park/runs, obedience training clubs
- Associations of retired executives and teachers
- Business and professional organizations
- Chambers of commerce
- Churches and religious groups
- Community service restitution programs
- Conferences/special events
- Corporations and small businesses
- Employment assistance programs
- Families
- Job seekers
- Job Training Partnership Act and other job training programs
- Military units and retired military personnel
- New residents of the community
- Parents’ groups
- Pet food stores
- Public agencies and retired personnel
- Realtors (welcome wagon packages often include volunteer information)
- Rehabilitation agencies/programs
- Schools, especially service-learning programs
- Scout troops or other youth groups
- Senior citizen groups
- Senior Corps programs
- Service organizations such as Kiwanis, Rotary clubs and Junior Leagues
- Sororities and fraternities
- Students seeking internships and service opportunities
- Student vocational training programs
- Unions and trade associations
- United Way
- University/college/community college organizations
- Veterinary clinics
- VISTA volunteers
- Volunteer centers

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Hilary Anne Hager is the former shelter activities coordinator for Everett Animal Services in Everett, Wash. In April, she took on a new role as director of the National Volunteer Center at The Humane Society of the United States.

to post your opportunities, requirements, process, and contact information to allow interested parties to connect with you directly. More and more people utilize the Internet to find volunteer opportunities, which makes this low-effort method of recruiting well worth the time.

Research indicates that the No. 1 reason people decide to volunteer is because they were asked. A more active approach to recruiting volunteers requires outreach to the local community to make "the ask." Consider recruiting existing volunteers or board members to help with this activity so the effort is shared and more ground can be covered. Be sure to



train the ambassadors in some key talking points about your organization and the volunteer program so that everyone is on the same page. It's also important to focus not only on why the organization needs help, but on what the volunteer stands to gain (emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise) from getting involved.

Taking the message to the people will require presentations to local service groups, schools, business alliances, neighborhood groups, individuals, and tabling at local events. This is where having well-developed and attractive collateral material to hand out will be important, in order to make it easy for interested parties to take the next step toward working with an organization that is professional and reflects that professionalism in its materials. Animal organizations also have an easy way to target animal lovers in the community by reaching out to local animal-centered businesses. Veterinary hospitals, groomers, and doggie day cares all cater to animal lovers, some of whom may have even adopted their companions from you. Animal fanciers, breed rescue groups, and 4-H clubs may also have members interested in spending time in your organization.

There are also opportunities to partner with local media to get the word out. Many news outlets have a community page on their websites—suited to listing events like volunteer orientations—and many smaller local papers are always looking for great stories about what's happening in the community. It may be possible to pitch a story about the volunteer program, or solicit free advertising space in those smaller papers to promote the opportunities to their readership. Local radio stations may be willing to promote your work through public service announcements as well.

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, the message was "If you build it, they will come." This principle holds true for volunteer programs as well. A well-run program and a corps of highly effective, engaged, and satisfied volunteers will usually generate the number of additional new volunteers needed to complete the required work—when done well, the program itself will do most of the recruiting it needs. 