
Ideas for Recruiting Volunteers

Just ask

There are always people who are willing to volunteer to help. All you have to do is ask.

Engage people on your stakeholder list

Who on your list could have their interests met by volunteering their time? Know what motivates your volunteers.

Start with the resources in closest proximity to your office

Picture your office as the center of a bull's eye, with concentric circles around it. Then either walk or drive around the block or in tight circles and write down *everything* you see: stores, businesses, apartment buildings, parking lots, churches, etc. Learn more about the "mysteries." Doing this exercise will turn up a number of "neighbors" you did not know you had. Might there be business people to volunteer at lunch? What professional skills might be tapped at neighborhood businesses or schools? Might there be access to other types of resources – donated goods, storage space, etc. Do any of these neighbors share your goals? Making contact with your neighbors is much easier than approaching resources across town.

Don't go where there are "people," go where there are the right people

If you are looking for Latino men, you won't find any at the Polish-American Women's Club. Sounds obvious, but think how often you place recruitment flyers or give a speech somewhere simply because there is an audience, without analyzing who's in that audience. This also means avoid mass media recruiting (everyone hearing it and no one listening) in favor of mini-campaigns targeted at specific places where you have the best chance of finding people with the skills or characteristics you want.

If you feel you're in the right place to find the prospects you want, keep asking until you get a positive response

Advertisers will tell you that *repeated messages* are what eventually have an effect. So don't just give a presentation every three years and hope people remember they can volunteer with your organization! Give a speech, send a note the next month, send an announcement of your holiday event the month after, etc., etc. Not to nag, not to repeat the *same* message, but to keep your organization visible and welcoming.

Making something sound easy is not necessarily as attractive as making it sound challenging

Just like used car salespeople, we have a bad reputation. We say things like "this will only take you a few hours a month," or "the committee meets every other month," when the volunteer work is more demanding and time consuming than that. But we are afraid of "scaring people away." Stop a moment and think about that. If telling the full story of what the assignment entails turns off the prospect from the start, what makes you think he or she would have done the work once the full picture was revealed? Much better to allow people to self-screen themselves out of the picture than to engage someone who isn't willing to contribute what you need. Also, it's often more motivating to sign up for a role that is a bit demanding than to take on a task clearly meant for any warm body with a pulse.

To reach diverse volunteers you have to go beyond word of mouth

It's gospel in the volunteer world to note that "the best recruitment is when a volunteer invites a friend to volunteer, too." That's fine and good if all you want is body count. But if you seek greater diversity – of any kind – you won't get it simply by word of mouth. Why? Because people talk to people who are *like them* in age, economic level, values, and interests. Also, the listener pictures the volunteer opportunities in your organization in terms of who is explaining them. Therefore, you have to do proactive outreach to new places, new neighborhoods, new groups of people – in other words, to the very people current volunteers probably don't know yet.

Get listed everywhere

Never turn down a chance to list your volunteer opportunities anywhere, especially if the listing is free. Make sure you're on every Internet registry, in the databank of every volunteer center within 50 miles, known to student activity offices, on the list of any corporation with an employee volunteer program, on file with RSVP, Hands On, and any other placement program, etc., etc. Participate in Make a Difference Day, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, etc., etc. *But*, don't just list your agency's name and a bland, general, "we need volunteers" message. ***Be specific.*** (List several opportunities with different titles and qualifications.) ***Be current.*** (When you've filled a position, remove it from the list and put up a new one.) To do this, you need to record where you are listed, date every message you send, and put a reminder on your calendar to do the updating (a volunteer can help!).

Use your own agency's web site

If not your home page, then where?

Avoid competition for attention – surprise people in unexpected places

The Kiwanis, Rotary, and churchmen's club have a parade of speakers all year long. Some bulletin boards are so full of notices every message is drowned out. When you reach out to new recruits, be creative. Need volunteers to help with breakfast in your care facility? Go to the nearby factory *during the night shift's meal break* (get permission, of course!). They'll be happy to see you...who else visits them? Staff a table at a street fair in the neighborhood you most want to reach. Do something fun like face painting for children, provide take-away public education materials relevant to your cause, have volunteers wear costumes to match the theme of the event. Get noticed.

Be creative with your message

You are sharing an opportunity with prospective volunteers you don't want them to miss.