

Inside Out: A Fresh Perspective on Finding Volunteers

When you look with new eyes, the possibilities are boundless. Use these tips to get started.

By Lisa Kay Schweyer

You need to find a way to replace retiring volunteers. Fewer and fewer people are offering to volunteer. Increased program needs require a whole new set of volunteer skills.

Sound familiar?

In trying to keep up with various projects, impending deadlines, and continually recruiting new volunteers, we sometimes get so close to our work that we might be missing the bigger picture. Taking the time to step outside can bring a fresh perspective. Once you have that new point of view, marketing your program and recruiting new volunteers becomes much easier.

This article will provide you with some ideas on how to take a quick assessment of your volunteer program and connect what you learn to recruiting new volunteers.

First, I want you to imagine going to a new restaurant for the first time. What do you notice?

- You look at the outside of the building. Does it seem nice? Is the parking adequate?
- You go inside. How does it smell? What's the decor like? Are there lots of people waiting?
- You meet your servers. Do they greet you in a pleasant manner? Do they return when they say they will?
- The food arrives. Does it look appetizing? Is it prepared the way you requested?

Since it's your first visit, your perspective is fresh. You have few preconceived notions.

In order to take a fresh perspective about your volunteer program, look at your organization and program as if you were visiting it for the first time. Take a good hard look at what you actually offer volunteers.

Remember how you assessed the restaurant. Ask yourself the following questions about your organization and volunteer

program and make note of your responses. We will refer to your answers later when we review some different ways to look at marketing.

Does your organization's mission appear on any of the volunteer recruitment materials? Newsletters?

Do you offer volunteer training? Computer skills development? Other skills volunteers might need when applying for a job?

Do you allow volunteers access to your professional journals and listings of new jobs?

Are you willing to send volunteers to advanced training or conferences?

Do you provide volunteers with mentors or buddies?

Are you willing to write letters of reference for your volunteers?

Do you ask clients to write thank-you letters to the volunteers?

Now that you have your list, let's take a look at how you can use this information to market your program to potential volunteers. The reasons most people want to volunteer fall into one of three categories:

1. **They're committed** to the organization's mission.
2. **They want to build** career skills.
3. **They're looking for** social interaction.

Let's see how you can match those three motivations to what your organization offers:

1. Commitment to the Mission

Many people believe so much in what your organization does, or have been personally touched by the organization's services in such a way that they want to be involved themselves. Often they will mention wanting to "give back."

Such volunteers usually just need to know your organization is in need of help. Providing an updated list of volunteer opportunities as well as an explanation of how each activity is a benefit will usually be your best recruitment tool. This group of volunteers can also be your best ambassadors within the community and great "recruiters" of new volunteers.

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RECRUITMENT IDEAS FOR VOLUNTEERS COMMITTED TO YOUR MISSION

Use your organization’s newsletter. Include a “learn more about volunteering” coupon for your readers to use or pass on to someone they think might be interested.

Check your organization’s client list. If appropriate, send a special mailing to current and past clients. Who better to give back than someone who has received your services?

Create materials that specifically include a description of how the volunteer job promotes the mission.

Now refer back to the checklist you answered when assessing your program. Do you include the organization’s mission on your volunteer recruitment materials? This is one way to help connect with those volunteers who are motivated by your program’s mission. Do you ask clients to write thank-you letters to volunteers? This is a great way for volunteers to learn how their efforts have made a difference.

2. Building Career Skills

Some individuals become involved in a volunteer activity to gain skills they can transfer into a paid position. Offering free training or taking the time to provide advanced training can be the reason they decide to give you their time.

Look for ways to include some training for volunteers who are interested. It might be just 30 minutes a week helping them to learn a computer program or to read a financial statement. Or, you might be able to pay for a volunteer’s attendance at a training or conference.

RECRUITMENT IDEAS FOR VOLUNTEERS LOOKING TO GAIN JOB SKILLS

Post recruitment materials in the local unemployment or job-skills-training location. Be sure the posters include a prominent message that training and letters of reference will be provided to volunteers.

Partner with local schools to provide service-learning and internship opportunities for students.

Provide volunteers access to job listings sent to your organization and to job opportunities that come up at your organization.

3. Wanting Social Interaction

Wanting to get out of the house or have more social interaction is the third category. Find activities where these individuals can be paired with a partner or work in a group setting.

RECRUITMENT IDEAS FOR VOLUNTEERS WANTING SOCIAL INTERACTION

Contact local senior centers. Many times, senior centers are looking for projects for their clients to perform. A group of seniors can easily compile direct-mail packets or stuff brochures into envelopes while enjoying coffee and conversation.

Design a special promotion—“It takes two.” Mention how volunteers can get together with a friend while giving to the community. Volunteers can work together to make meal deliveries to your clients, for example.

If your program provides volunteers with mentors or buddies, you are already addressing the volunteer’s need for social interaction. If you don’t have this currently, you could ask staff to help “adopt” a volunteer—someone they will check in with on a regular basis or call periodically to see how they are doing.

Put the Pieces Together

Obviously not every volunteer falls neatly into one of these three categories. There can be several reasons why someone wants to volunteer and a variety of ways to recruit volunteers. The best way to find out? Ask them what matters to them most.

Your organization has many benefits to offer potential volunteers; it’s a matter of matching those offerings with the right type of volunteer. Good luck as you learn to view your organization with a fresh perspective. 

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Interns, Volunteers, Service Learning, & Beyond

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Training Programs Need More than Good Information (Vol. 21, No. 2)

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