

New Volunteers Are Closer than You Think

Don't overlook hidden treasure right around the corner.

By Susan J. Ellis

Never assume people know you're looking for volunteers.

This statement might seem obvious, but ask yourself what you've done in the past year to invite people near you to volunteer. Recruiting volunteers through online matching sites and social media can pay off, but these strategies have their drawbacks. The problem with casting such a wide net is that many people see your message but only a few are likely to be viable candidates, especially if the "friends" of your followers on social media live ever farther away. You'll have much better luck if you look close to home.

The key to proximity recruiting is this: Don't take for granted that people know you need help. They may know you have a volunteer corps, but do they feel personally invited to become part of it? Do you help them discover that their interests might match volunteer opportunities?

The best part about recruiting people already in your organization's circle of contacts is that they aren't strangers who know nothing about you — they simply may not know about your search for volunteers. Here are some places to find prospective volunteers, but only if you're intentional about getting the message to them.

Lapsed or One-time Volunteers

When people leave their volunteering positions, it doesn't mean they no longer care about your mission. Ideally, in fact, former volunteers are out in the community saying good things about you. What happens to that goodwill if you act as if they've dropped off a cliff when they leave? Think especially of volunteers who come to you for a set time frame or participate as part of a group. These people include, for instance:

- **service-learning students** fulfilling an academic requirement for a single semester
- **a team of corporate employees** working on a specific service project
- **the church group** that sings Christmas carols in your facility once a year.

Many people feel sorry, even a bit guilty, to have to leave a volunteer role because of changes in their lives. Students may not even realize that they can continue volunteering with you after their school is no longer involved. This is



especially true if "interns" are coordinated by someone other than the person in charge of volunteers. Individuals in a team of volunteers may feel anonymous and therefore flattered at your invitation to keep in touch on their own.

So, ask every departing volunteer and the individuals volunteering with a group if they're willing to be on your e-mail list for periodic updates and notices from the office of volunteer services. This isn't the same as being added to an organization-wide newsletter or donor solicitation list (though you may want to ask them about that, too). I'm recommending a specific "volunteer alumni" database that you keep for purposes of finding volunteer help.

Three or four times a year, send everyone on this list a "Volunteering Update," sharing what's been going on. Include a list of current openings, particularly short-term projects that someone can accomplish relatively quickly. Say that you would love to hear from anyone on the list who might be qualified and interested in any of these roles, and ask them to tell others about these opportunities. Include a "wish list" of items you'd like donated for clients or for the volunteer department.

Your Neighbors

Have you ever made a point of contacting the people who live and work across the street from your facility? On the floors above and below your offices? How about around the corner or within a half-mile radius? Some of them don't even know you exist. Even if they know about you, are they informed about what your organization does? And then, are they aware of the volunteer opportunities they could fill today? Remember: Don't assume people know!

Outreach to your neighbors should be done in a special way. Always begin by noting that you're neighbors. Consider inviting them to an "open house" or tour simply to be a good neighbor. Make it clear this is specifically for the neighborhood. Make them feel like "insiders" and consider it a worthwhile goal simply to inform them of the work you do. Educated neighbors will look out for your safety, be

“Do you act as if volunteers dropped off a cliff when they leave?”

“In your waiting room, show photos of volunteers in action.”

friendly to those who enter your building, and think about you when they have something to give away. And when they learn what they might do as a volunteer, who knows how they might respond? After all, there's no commuting time involved and, at a minimum, some neighbors might be happy to be on call for special occasions or emergencies.

The People Who Know You

Sit down and make a list of all the people who come into contact with your organization throughout the year. How might you inform them of current volunteering needs? Some examples:

Make sure every visitor to the building sees some sort of “could you be helping us?” message. This might be a bulletin board in the lobby, reception area, or client waiting room, showing pictures of volunteers (double duty as recognition) and notices of open positions.

Don't forget attendees at your events whether educational (workshops, community forums), recreational (performances, galas), or anything else. Have a booth or display as participants leave the event (which is when, ideally, they're feeling good about you). Again, display pictures of volunteers in action and ask people to sign up to “learn more.” Then follow up.

Many board members work for large companies and are in professional associations. Do they recruit volunteers for you? Why not? Request their assistance as recruiters and give them tools to do outreach, tailored to where they'll be delivering your message. This means special flyers mentioning the name of their company, short articles for their in-house publications, maybe offering to go on site and exhibit in the employee cafeteria, or anything you and your board members dream up. After all, if they care enough to give their volunteer time, why wouldn't their employees and colleagues be interested, too?

You probably ask your vendors to make a financial donation each year. But do you also invite them to give their time? Do you urge them to tell their employees about your volunteer opportunities? Why not?

The people your organization serves may be a great resource for “paying it forward” to help others. Of course this depends on what you do and for whom, but make sure clients are aware of volunteering as a way to say thank you or to support your cause. Find the most appropriate way to issue this invitation for your setting. For example, if you're in a facility that conducts exit interviews when discharging patients or residents, ask to include a one-page

information sheet about volunteering, which might interest their family members, too. Arts organizations can place notices in programs or tour guidebooks. Again, if you have a client waiting room, make the most of people's time there by providing interesting information about volunteering.

More than anything, it's vital to be specific. It's not enough to vaguely mention the organization's volunteer corps with a universal (and impersonal) “ask us about volunteering” notice. Describe all vacancies and include desired qualifications, time commitment, and other pertinent details. Give a URL where someone can learn even more.

Date all fact sheets, bulletin board notices, articles, and other informational materials you distribute. Make sure no materials are older than one month. (Hint: Even if your volunteer opportunities remain somewhat the same, still change the date every month to make sure they feel fresh.)

Enlist paid staff and current volunteers in this recruitment effort. After all, they too will benefit from its success. 

Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc., and longtime supporter of the Society for Nonprofits, passed away on February 24 after a courageous battle with cancer. Since 1977, Energize, Inc. has helped a wide diversity of clients across North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Israel, and Australasia to start or expand volunteer efforts. Ellis has written 14 books on volunteerism and dozens of articles. She was co-publisher of the international online journal, e-Volunteerism (e-volunteerism.com), and dean of faculty for the online volunteer management training program, Everyone Ready®. Browse the 1200+ pages of free volunteer management information on the Energize website: energizeinc.com.

Reach Out to Engage Volunteers

For more on recruiting and involving more people as volunteers, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Inside Out: A Fresh Perspective on Finding Volunteers (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Maintaining a Teenage Volunteer Network (Vol. 36, No. 1)

The Volunteer Leader as a Facilitator of Change (Vol. 36, No. 3)

Service Learning: Informing the Art & Science of Leadership (Vol. 28, No. 2)

Maximizing Volunteer Participation (Vol. 28, No. 2)

Common-Sense Answers about Volunteer Involvement (Vol. 34, No. 1)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management (snpo.org/li).