

Pictures, Pictures, Pictures: Using Photos to Capture Your Volunteer Story

Showcase your organization’s volunteer corps with multi-purpose photos.

By Susan J. Ellis

Not that long ago, creating a collection of multi-purpose photos required all sorts of equipment and a budget for developing and printing the shots. While it still takes creative skill to snap a great image or an expressive portrait, everyone can gather a large library of photographs and videos for many purposes. Think of the following situations in which including images of volunteers might make an impression of what volunteering really looks like in your organization.

Use Photos for What Purposes?

Recruitment

Help prospective volunteers actually “picture” themselves in your setting. Take real photographs of volunteers at work, not obviously staged promotional shots. Show the office, recreation hall, or patient room where the service happens. Of course, you won’t show client faces, but that

doesn’t mean you can’t include someone’s hands or the backs of people in a circle.

An archive of many different images – kept current – provides you with choices for what to print in a brochure, post to the volunteer pages of your website, include with a press release, or add to any slide show for different audiences.

Recognition

Forgo the usual “certificate” of appreciation and instead give each person a framed photograph of her- or himself doing the volunteer work for which you’re giving thanks. What better way to show that “we see you”? Matte the photos with a printed message such as “you fit right in” or “thanks for all you’ve contributed here this year.” Bet those pictures go on display in volunteers’ homes, too, so be sure to include your organization’s logo!

Even more useful are self-running slide shows at recognition events that offer the year-in-review, projected either as people gather for the party or during the event. Real pictures of real happenings with real volunteers and paid staff working together. Everyone gets excited to see people they know in the shots. The cumulative effect is to educate all viewers (including the executives who attend the event) about the range of activities accomplished by volunteers during the past year.

Hint: Record the voices of the *beneficiaries* of volunteer service (clients, staff, visitors, etc.) making comments about

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the volunteers who helped them, and use those audio clips as background to the slide show.

One more idea: Catch people doing something right or good! Include the photo in a thank-you note right after you witness the positive moment. Definitely do this for staff as well as for volunteers.

Special Events

It's become common at weddings and other events to scatter disposable cameras on dinner tables and encourage guests to capture whatever images they think are fun, moving, or special in some way. Yes, there may still be a professional photographer taking formal pictures, but these spontaneous shots can save wonderful memories. Even without encouragement, it's impossible to *stop* guests from snapping photos on their phones . . . and almost immediately posting them to Facebook, Instagram, or some other picture-sharing platform. Use this to your organization's advantage and encourage such photography at any special event you sponsor.

Perhaps the most well-organized videotaping in our field is that of Volunteering Queensland TV on YouTube. Most of those videos are planned and produced by skilled volunteers.

Recruit & Train Volunteer Photographers

You don't have to be the one taking the pictures. Recruit volunteers onto a photography team. Some may want this to be their primary assignment, others may be willing to be on call for scheduled photo opps.

Before you add a volunteer to the photography team, do the same sort of screening as with any other volunteer position. Ask to see samples of the applicant's pictures. If,

“Catch people doing something right or good.”

after viewing these portfolios, you feel additional training is needed, schedule some with a professional photographer (another volunteer?) who can give your new team member some basic “tricks of the trade.” The goal is to have candid, quality photos that anyone would enjoy viewing. 

Susan J. Ellis, longtime contributor to Nonprofit World and president of Energize, Inc., passed away on February 24, 2019. Since 1977, Energize, Inc. has helped a wide diversity of clients 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.

For More Insights (NonprofitWorld.org)

Volunteer Screening: Changing Trends in Changing Times (Vol. 34, No. 2)

The Best Way to Tell Your Organization's Story? Capture It on Video (Vol. 35, No. 4)

Building Trust with Your Volunteers (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Keep Your Volunteers Happy with Dynamic Training (Vol. 31, No. 4)

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

Are You Making It Hard to Volunteer? (Vol. 22, No. 5)

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

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