

# Do Recognition Programs Work?

Can you use recognition programs to increase income and results?

For years Katrina VanHuss supplied recognition programs to her nonprofit clients. And for years, when asked “Do these programs work?” she answered, “My gut says yes.” But she couldn’t say, “I know these programs work and here’s the data to support that.” Then, finally, Turnkey Promotions, the company VanHuss founded, worked with a client with enough data to study a recognition program.

## How Successful Was the Program?

VanHuss and her team tracked participants in one fundraising model over a two-year period.\* All the volunteer fundraisers raised at least \$250 each year, qualifying them for this nonprofit’s recognition program.

The results were both relieving and disconcerting to VanHuss.

To summarize the results: The recognition program worked – and how! The study question was: Do volunteers who accept recognition gifts raise more funds than those who don’t? The answer: Those who redeemed gifts raised 27% more than those not redeeming gifts, though all earned a gift.

**Those redeeming gifts raised 27% more than those not redeeming gifts.**

Then, Turnkey’s staff dug further into the data to see what behavior change might happen over a two-year period of exposure to a recognition program. The findings show that the first time a volunteer accepts a recognition gift, average income for the nonprofit increases by 29% over the previous year.

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Further, those accepting a gift each of the two years raised 9% more the second year than the first.

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And on the downside, those who didn’t redeem a gift in either year showed on average only a 2% increase, while those who dropped out of a recognition program showed a 6% decrease in money raised over two years.

## A Bump in the Road

Oddly, the reason this research became possible was a huge bump in the road for Turnkey Promotions and the organization on which the study was done. For several years Turnkey had provided recognition gifts in bulk for the organization’s staff to distribute to volunteer fundraisers. Then they switched to gift certificates. The shock was that redemptions were unexpectedly low. Quickly, Turnkey researched the issue by contacting volunteers whom they knew had earned gifts. Almost universally the reason for non-redemption given was (paraphrased), “Yes, they promised me a gift or certificate, and I never saw either one.”

**The reason for non-redemption was that the volunteers were promised a gift but never received it.**

So, what started as a program to raise money and increase volunteers’ ties to the organization became a broken promise, tearing down the very thing nonprofits strive for – keeping volunteer confidence. Clearly, this was a net negative effort. VanHuss and the organization’s leaders were stunned that certificate delivery had failed utterly and that gift delivery in the bulk shipment method had likely been failing for years.

So Turnkey offered to take responsibility for certificate delivery. This task was somewhat daunting as data collection was still a budding skill for the client organization. Often volunteer information was duplicated in data with multiple versions of name, address, and amount raised. Sometimes there was nothing but a name.

But, through data management and programming, Turnkey was able to provide a certificate delivery system that cleared duplicates and stayed outside staff hands for the most part, eliminating the certificate delivery road bump and the broken promise.

## Which Delivery Method Worked Best?

With the ability to track gift certificate delivery, Turnkey tested several different ways of getting the certificates to

\*The 3,798 participants were scattered through 182 fundraising events in California, all of which were structured in a consistent manner.

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the volunteers: by e-mail, through the U.S. mail, or as a last resort, routed through staff. The results were telling:

- **Certificates delivered by U.S. mail** were redeemed at 44%.
- **Certificates delivered by e-mail** were redeemed at 38%.
- **Certificates delivered by staff** were redeemed at 24%.

These results show that staff is the least effective way to deliver gift certificates. But staff delivery, in the context of other types of delivery, has improved at Turnkey. VanHuss theorizes the improvement is caused by word-of-mouth pressure by volunteers who received their certificates talking to other volunteers who did not.

The horrific news that Turnkey and the client organization were likely running a net negative program caused a process change for the better in terms of income. But another aspect of the experience may prove to be the larger upshot for the nonprofit organization.

Data collection shot up because of the change to program method. Once field staff realized that good data collection before their fundraising event would lessen their workload after the event, they started collecting more complete data. The first year of vendor-delivered certificates, 23% of those earning certificates had no contact information on file. The second year the “no contact information” percent dropped to 19%. And overall, program use with direct certificate delivery went up by 26%, which is good news considering that new users raise 29% more than non-users, and repeat users raise 9% more than they themselves did the year before.

VanHuss says, “In the course of studying our volunteers’ behavior, we found that staff didn’t push the communications through to the volunteers as we thought they would. And that meant the organization made a promise, then broke it. What a disaster.

“In fixing the problem, we stumbled across some real gold though,” she continues. “We found out how to fix the communications problem and also found a data goldmine. We traded staff reduced workload for great data collection, which helped us in lots of ways. The client organization is no longer ‘losing’ as many volunteers when staff members leave. And the organization is able to communicate with volunteers on all topics, not just recognition, more effectively.” 

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*Turnkey’s peer-to-peer programs spur nonprofit volunteers to action by shaping their values and motivations with recognition. Turnkey’s founder, Katrina VanHuss (turnkeyforgood.com), is the author (with Otis Fulton) of Dollar Dash.*

## How a Small Word Can Make a Big Difference

In their intriguing, down-to-earth book *Dollar Dash*, Katrina VanHuss and Otis Fullton describe a Harvard experiment in which researchers asked students what they thought of the university’s educational system. When a student gave a positive comment, the researcher said “Good.” At the end of the phone call, those students had far more positive feelings about the educational system than the control group who got no such positive reinforcement. That one word – “Good” – made a big difference in people’s attitudes.

The authors also compare two walk-a-thons. The nonprofit that gave out retail gift cards to its volunteer fundraisers caused the relationship to become a market one, resulting in lower fundraising. The other nonprofit made a point of giving positive reinforcement to its fundraisers at every opportunity, suggesting a higher level of commitment than they actually may have possessed. The result was more funds raised and a much stronger connection to the organization.

A large body of research shows that people actually infer their attitudes from observing their own behavior – not the other way around. Consider the uber-successful Ice Bucket Challenge. If you can get people to do something like pouring ice water over their heads, they’ll develop an attitude such as, “I support ALS.” They’ll do so even though they took the challenge for entirely different reasons, such as “This is fun.”

You can accomplish something similar by encouraging people to put your organization’s decal on their car window or bike helmet. If they display your decal, they’ll feel dissonance unless they support your organization through their donations.

## Recognize Your People & Measure Your Results

To learn more about recognition, motivation, and measurement, see these articles at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Productive Employees: Two Crucial Ingredients** (Vol. 13, No. 2)

**Four Steps to Evaluation Success** (Vol. 23, No. 2)

**Are You Offering the Right Perks?** (Vol. 35, No. 1)

**Measuring Outcomes in the Real World** (Vol. 30, No. 6)

**Why Your Employees Are Losing Motivation – and What to Do about It** (Vol. 29, No. 4)

**Creating a Values-Based Road Map** (Vol. 23, No. 2)

**Risk Trends to Keep in Mind as You Enlist Volunteers** (Vol. 39, No. 1)

**Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions** (Vol. 26, No. 4)

**A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout?** (Vol. 36, No. 1)