

# Are You Making It Hard to VOLUNTEER?

You may be turning people off without realizing it. Two surveys provide insights into how to attract – rather than repel – volunteers.

BY PAUL L. GOVEKAR

People don't volunteer in isolation. Volunteering with an organization is part of a larger social network. This means there is an organizational component to volunteering. How easy, or difficult, does your organization make it for a person to volunteer?

Two recent studies, one in marketing and one in management, shine a light on this issue. Both studies use the concept of "facilitation" to explore the interaction between volunteers and the nonprofit organization. The studies define facilitation as helping people become volunteers and assimilating them into the organization by providing information and social or emotional support.

A facilitator, then, is a person who serves a boundary-spanning role between the organization and a potential or new volunteer. A facilitator provides the volunteer with information and social support, reducing ambiguity and enhancing assimilation into the organization. Nonprofits that facilitate volunteer involvement not only make it easy to volunteer but also give volunteers the support needed to remain an active part of the organization.

## What Does the Research Show?

The studies surveyed over 1,000 volunteers in Indiana and Ohio. The following statements were scored on a nine-point scale with "very strong agreement" at one extreme and "very strong disagreement" at the other.

*Statement 1:* I know at least one person who is familiar with a volunteer organization and has provided me with information about becoming a volunteer.

*Statement 2:* I have a friend or family member who is a volunteer or part of a volunteer organization.

*Statement 3:* There is someone available to provide me with information and support should I decide to become a volunteer.

*Statement 4:* I know someone who would volunteer with me if I choose to become a volunteer so we could support each other.

*Statement 5:* Having someone to provide me with information and support would make a difference in my decision to volunteer.

The first study looked at the importance placed on these statements by volunteers compared to non-volunteers. It found that people who volunteer experience higher levels of facilitation than those who do not.

The second study compared volunteers to donors. It revealed that while facilitation was important to volunteers, a similar set of statements was not important to individuals who donate money, rather than time, to nonprofit organizations.

## What Are the Implications for Your Organization?

Using the statements in the survey, ask yourself the following questions to see how well your organization facilitates volunteers.

*Statement 1* concerns how ready your organization is to accept volunteers. Rate your organization with the following questions:

- **Does your staff understand** your volunteer program? Can they explain the program to a stranger?
- **Do staff members know what volunteer vacancies** are available? Do they know the requirements of these positions?
- **Do staff members know how to set up an interview** for a potential volunteer?
- **Is there someone available at all times** who can explain your volunteer program in detail to anyone who makes contact?

*Statement 2* reminds us that an individual often decides to volunteer

*Do you use your volunteers' talents to recruit others?*

after interacting with a current volunteer. Here are questions to ask yourself:

- **Does your organization use your volunteers' talents** to recruit others?
- **How many family combinations** (such as brother/sister, sister/sister, brother/brother, husband/wife, and uncle/nephew) do you have among your volunteers?
- **If your current volunteers aren't asking** their relatives and friends to volunteer with them, why not?

*Statements 3 and 5* highlight the importance of having someone available to support volunteers and potential volunteers. Ask these questions to see how well your organization fulfills that need:

- **Does your organization** have a volunteer coordinator? If so, is this position an extra duty of an already overburdened employee, or is this person dedicated solely to your volunteer program? Your organization may not need a full-time volunteer coordinator, but exploring this question will help you by either confirming or refuting the necessity for this position.

- **Whoever acts** in the volunteer coordinator capacity, does this individual have the information necessary to explain your program in detail to a potential recruit? Then, if someone does decide to volunteer, what type of support can you offer?

- **Do you have training specially designed** for volunteers?

- **Do you provide a mentor** for new volunteers?

- **Does your full-time staff welcome** volunteers?

*Statement 4* makes it clear that people are more likely to volunteer along with someone they know. Use these questions to see whether your organization builds on this important fact:

- **Do you have a "buddy volunteer" option** to your program?

*Do you have training specially designed for volunteers?*

- **If two people volunteer together**, do you make sure that, if appropriate, their duties and volunteer times are complementary?
- **When you do your scheduling**, do you ask whether some volunteers would like to work with each other, and why?

Use these questions as a starting point to ease the transition from potential volunteer to dedicated volunteer. As these new studies confirm, you will improve your volunteer program if you

make that journey as smooth and painless as possible. ■

#### Selected References

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