



Volunteerism Vectors



What are the newest volunteer trends, and how can you benefit?

By Bruce Glasrud

Evolutions in the workplace. Revolutions in communications. Complex predilections in consumer behavior. All these factors are driving important changes in volunteerism. They strongly signal that you'll need to alter the ways your organization attracts and involves volunteers.

In an increasingly hustling and bustling society, increased claims upon everyone's time aren't news to anybody. Yet time constraints are not, nor will they be, the key factor in the decision to make a volunteering commitment. More important are such factors as the collapse of traditional workplace loyalties and society's fixation on immediate gratification.

Let's scan those and other impending trends as we look at the new volunteer ethos emerging. It's vital to understand this volunteer mindset if your nonprofit is to survive, much less thrive. Here are a few arising volunteerism trends to take into account

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Consumer Volunteers

Historically, volunteerism has been a fairly balanced buyer's and seller's market for volunteers and nonprofit organizations. The balance is decidedly moving toward a seller's market with volunteers having the apparent advantage.

The reason is that our society has shifted from a producer economy to a consumer economy. With that change, mostly younger *consumer volunteers* are replacing the mostly older *producer volunteers*. Therefore, both the conceptual and concrete language with which you recruit and involve volunteers must become less organization-centered and more consumer-centered.

The tricky thing is that consumer volunteers will still pretend they're producer volunteers. Oh, they'll talk about how they're motivated to meet community needs and such. Don't let that fool you for a second! Consumer volunteers aren't attracted to your organization by your — or even your clients' — needs. They're drawn by the opportunity that your volunteer job can offer to fulfill *their* needs in some way.

For that reason, you'd better come up with better sales pitches than "Volunteers Needed!" Producer volunteers responded to that sort of thing, because they were gratified simply to be of assistance. Not so with consumer volunteers. To recruit them, you must clearly show how volunteering for your organization will personally broaden or educate them.

Sure, they still want to "feel good" about what they're doing. But their fulfillment needs exceed simple
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emotional gratification. The fact that you need volunteers is important only to your organization. If you were an automobile dealer, you wouldn't sell many cars by advertising "Buyers Needed!"

Treat today's potential volunteers like shoppers out buying volunteer opportunities, because that's essentially what they're doing. Generate consumer-centered recruitment messages to reach them. Marketing to — rather than appealing for — volunteers will be the key to your recruitment success.

Tradition Omission

As one volunteer generation ages, many of the volunteer jobs they do are aging as well. Much of your emerging volunteer workforce won't be turned on by the types of volunteer jobs the WWII-era generation was content to do.

Your task is to channel both your old-hand and spanking-new volunteers toward more contemporary ways of volunteering with your organization. To make this transition, you must abandon any archaic volunteer jobs — or obsolete ways of doing those jobs — that keep your organization stuck in time.

Choiceful Choosiness

The next trend will be for highly individualized involvement. Many volunteer job descriptions will look like a pick-one-from-each-column menu. Volunteers will negotiate and, essentially, contract with you to carry out their selections. They'll expect you to provide a wide array of opportunities from which they can choose.

Short, Short, Short Volunteering

Our society has a short attention span. With downsizing in bad economic times alternating with job-hopping in good times, we have spawned short-lived loyalties. Hence, many volunteers prefer shorter-term volunteer commitments.

Increasingly, volunteers will sign on more readily for the casual, occasional, episodic volunteer job. Some volunteer tasks can readily adapt to that time window. Others

may require considerable modification to attract volunteers. Job-share volunteer opportunities, anyone?

A Situational Society Makes Situational Volunteers

Despite the rhetoric over ethics these days, we live in a society in which "situational" ethics — and a situational approach to life — prevails. Volunteers will increasingly sway to-and-fro with whatever "hot" cause grabs their attention. There are only two ways you can benefit from this situational society trend:

- **Become a "hot-hot-hot" organization, issue, or cause.**
- **If you're a "hottie" organization, don't rest on your laurels.** The greatest failing among non-profit organizations is to let their "hotness" slip away — and then complain when their situational volunteers slip away as well.

A digital camera should become a standard-issue tool for volunteer recognition.

Demanding Demands

Volunteers, as "consumers" of your volunteer jobs, will be pickier about the way you involve them. Foremost, they'll want opportunities to feel they make a difference, however they define it. They'll also expect you to have a well-managed volunteer system. They'll have little tolerance for make-work projects or time-wasting inefficiency.

If you fail at your end of the bargain, volunteers will surely "vote with their feet." And in our communications-linked society, it's easier than ever to get bad-mouthed in the community by disgruntled volunteers.

More Mission-Minded & Less Organization-Oriented?

It's not that volunteers will no longer have passion for a cause. Many people will have plenty of it. It's just that they may not have passion for your organization's vision — or your organization's version — of that cause. Some

folks will be, in effect, "free-agent" volunteers focused on furthering a specific cause rather than on the organization supporting that cause.

These free-agent volunteers may strongly challenge your methods. Some may have more expertise in your mission arena than do you or your staff. Many of these volunteers will expect greater participation in the planning, decision-making, and evaluation processes. They won't be satisfied with the recognition baubles and banquets of old. In return for their work, they'll require shared power. Talk about heavy-duty volunteer recognition!

Some organizations will be unwilling or unable to share power with their volunteers. Thus, they will limit not only the number of volunteers willing to work with them but also the crucial exchange of ideas necessary for nonprofits to grow and thrive in our 21st-century communities.

True Believers

The same societal trends that create free-agent volunteers will spawn a contrasting group of "true-believer" volunteers. The lack of loyalty in the for-profit workplace and other societal areas will produce in these volunteers a need to be intensely loyal — to something else!

If you want to use true-believer volunteers, you must be prepared to become an intense organization. And you'd better be ready to rely *only* on true-believer volunteers. You don't have the option of combining organization-dependent, true-believer volunteers with organization-independent, free-agent volunteers. Talk about oil and water not mixing!

To cultivate intense loyalty, you need to instill intensity into every part of your organization. Study up on intensity and commitment in various organizations. Investigate the dynamics of religious cults for some examples. The Marines also offer an excellent case study of esprit. It won't be easy to pull this model together. Yet, for some nonprofits, it will produce results.

The Mother of Invention

As you know, nonprofits are the fastest growing sector of our economy. There's an unspoken reason for much of that growth. People who couldn't find an outlet for their energy and talents at existing organizations have themselves founded many of the new nonprofits. The prospective volunteers that just blew out of your door because your volunteer jobs were too narrow and stodgy may come up with their own solution. That new nonprofit organization may have been started by discontented volunteers to fill needs they felt your organization wasn't addressing well. Competition for funding — and for other volunteers — may well have its roots in the stagnation of your own organization's volunteer methods.

Virtual Volunteering & Computerized Connectiveness

Virtual or cyber volunteers can perform many duties without being in your office. They can enter fundraising data, craft annual reports, and write grant proposals from their own homes and transmit their work to you via the Internet. This is only the beginning of what volunteers will be able to accomplish with future technology.

Many nonprofits have been slow to use the Internet to modernize their volunteer programs. Most of you have posted on your Web page the fact that you involve volunteers. Quite a few of you furnish an e-mail link to your volunteer coordinator to request more information. Some of you provide job descriptions and volunteer applications on your Web site. That's good for starters, but let's ratchet it up.

For example, a common complaint is that it's hard to get volunteers to show up for orientation and training. Why not offer such training by e-mail or via your Web site? Orientation presentations in MS PowerPoint, volunteer hand-

books in Adobe Acrobat, and video training can be delivered over the Internet and viewed at the volunteer's convenience. Want to make sure your volunteers "did their homework"? Simple! E-mail them a quiz and have their supervisor follow up with them when they report for their assignments.

As another example, scheduling volunteers is usually a major headache. The Internet is coming to the rescue to handle much of that chore. Tomorrow's answer to telephone tag will involve matching volunteers' online appointment calendars with your organization's schedule and needs. All those Palm Pilot organizers that folks are carrying around these days will simplify the task. E-mail can also confirm volunteer assignments, provide instructions, record volunteer hours, and a whole lot more.

Don't forget about volunteer recognition. Someone needs to design some snazzy e-mail thank-you notes and some of those cute animated e-cards specifically for volunteers. A digital camera should also become a standard-issue tool for volunteer recognition. What a quick and easy way to catch your volunteers in the act of making a difference! You can e-mail them the pictures for keepsakes, and you'll have some great shots for your annual report as well.

Advanced computer technology will provide expert systems to help you create and deliver programs and services. Eventually, artificial intelligence will guide your actions and help you make more informed decisions. As technology evolves to support your organization in serving your mission, don't forget to envision how your volunteers can also use that technology. Tomorrow's volunteers, especially gen-X and gen-Y, will rate you by the technology you offer them in their efforts to make a difference. More and more, harnessing technology will be the key to recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Baby-Boomer Boom or Bust

Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement, a

report from the Harvard School of Public Health, contains some interesting demographics on boomer volunteers. (Download a copy at <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/reinventingaging/Report.pdf>.) The report has some sound advice on attracting baby-boomer volunteers.

However, the report doesn't address one boomer vector that has profound implications for nonprofits. Baby boomers are just beginning to come to grips with their mortality and think about what sort of legacy they've left the world. They have a mythos that they changed the world. Much of that dream, however, hasn't been fulfilled. As they confront the fact that they're not going to live forever, many boomers will feel they dropped the ball with social change. Having raised families and had careers, they will now turn their attention to making a difference so that they can mend their legend and perhaps make amends for turning into yuppies.

Organizations prepared to offer authentic opportunities for boomers to leave a legacy will prosper in terms of both volunteers and donations. Much of what this article has outlined is what you'll need to know to recruit and involve this important group as volunteers. ■

Resources

Ellis, Susan, "How You Can Benefit from Volunteer Trends," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 5.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Advance to the Future or Retreat to the Familiar?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 6.

Levinson, Nick, "The Withering Volunteers: Bring Them Back Alive," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 5.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs online: Volunteer Management (www.snpo.org/li).

Bruce Glasrud (futurer@aol.com) is a futurist, specializing in anticipatory strategies for nonprofit organizations and foundations, and is president of Third Sector Horizons.