

Why Be Boring

When You Can Celebrate in So Many Ways?

Here's why to get rid of those formal volunteer banquets – and what to do instead.

By Susan J. Ellis

Does anyone actually like sit-down banquets? Dull speeches, poor food, boring table talk? Ever wonder why attendance at these things is so low? To add insult to injury, these meals are also expensive. More important, they miss the point.

Paid staff, volunteers, and administrators see only their part of the larger picture. The recognition event is your chance to enlighten, amaze, surprise, and educate them. They ought to leave the event with new understanding and pride.

Enough formal banquets! Let's transform recognition events. Here are some ideas:

Money doesn't matter.

It's a red herring to complain that your organization has no money for volunteer recognition. A recognition event needn't be costly. You can (and many do) hold a potluck meal in which volunteers happily contribute the food themselves. What's important is what happens when you get together. You want to let volunteers meet each other, recommit them for another year, and celebrate. Create buzz, laughter, and passion.

Plan the event *with* volunteers, not just *for* them.

Ask volunteers to evaluate past recognition events honestly. Even more important, contact volunteers who didn't attend the event and find out why. Then ask what they might like to do as a celebration. (Note: Most volunteers will tell you they don't "need" recognition and don't want the organization to spend money on it. So don't call it

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a recognition event. Refer to it as a "celebration of our efforts" and then ask volunteers what they're most proud to have contributed.)

Let volunteers speak.

Where is it written that the way to thank people is to call out their names and hand them a certificate while they silently come forward to shake some dignitary's hand?

Why not let volunteers prepare a presentation of their own about their work in the past year? You can ask them a month in advance to create a five-minute report, skit, song and dance, whatever. Or use the first 30 minutes of the event to let volunteers share ideas on the spot and come up with a performance (such as one titled "The Six Best Things that Happened This Year") to put on for everyone assembled.

Make volunteers feel individually appreciated, not just thanked as a corps.

Certificates of recognition that have nothing more than the organization's logo and volunteer's name may just as well be birdcage liners. If you must hand out certificates, at a minimum include the assignment the volunteer filled that year. Even better, add a sentence or two about what the person actually did: "Our thanks for how you always go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure our residents have a good time at the bingo game." "For scanning our paper files into digital storage."

"For your role in making sure your assigned child passed grade 4." (Sound like too much work? Ask staff who supervise the volunteers to give you these sentences or ask volunteers to recommend sentences about each other.)

Don't worry about capturing every single volunteer's name if you have a large group. In fact, the real danger is that you'll leave someone out – the true opposite of recognition! Instead, act as if everyone there is worthy of thanks, and ask them questions about themselves which they can answer by standing up. Ask, for example:

- Who fills more than one assignment here as a volunteer?
- Who has applied something they learned at orientation?
- Who has hunted more than 15 minutes for a parking spot?
- Who has met the executive director before tonight?
- Who is working at a paying job in addition to their volunteer job?
- Who recruited a friend or relative to become a volunteer here?
- Who speaks more than one language?

This is like an instant "poll." Once people rise several times, they feel quite included.

Use the time you have.

• Create a mix and mingle opening. Don't assume that people will meet each other without your help. First, take a little extra time with nametags. Write first names boldly so they can be read. Add identifying information such as the volunteer's job and length of time with your organization. Do this for any paid staff or board members who attend the event, too. You can get creative and ask everyone to answer one or two funny or unusual questions on

their nametags as discussion starters. (For a terrific resource about nametags, go to www.hellomynameisscott.com.)

- **Have something interactive for early arrivals to do.** Post newsprint sheets and have them write down their best memory of the year as a volunteer, or the funniest thing that happened during volunteering, or anything that makes them think back. Not only will more and more people arrive to add things to the sheets, but they'll all enjoy reading everyone else's comments. The next day, you can transfer these sheets to the hall outside your office and keep them up for a week for others to enjoy. Be sure to transcribe them for future use.

- **Project a self-running slide show with photos of people doing their volunteer work.** People love these, and you'll also have pictures to use later in recruitment and orientation. Photographs clearly state, "We saw you" – the best kind of recognition.

- **Designate a leader for each table in advance.** These can be staff members, board members, or volunteers. Prepare this group to make the event memorable for their table by introducing people to one another, seeding the conversation with fun questions, and so on.

Remember who the special guests are.

Don't put "dignitaries" — whether they're administrators, board members, or politicians — together at an honored front table. Scatter these folks around the room to prompt them to interact with the volunteers casually, or place their table in the back, and explain why to everybody. This is a volunteer recognition event: The most important people in the room are the volunteers. ■

Resources

Ellis, Susan, "How to Create a Staff-Volunteer Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

Forsyth, Janice, "Volunteer Management Strategies: Balancing Risk and Reward," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

Govekar, Paul, "Are You Making It Hard to Volunteer?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 5.

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

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