

Ten Time-Tested Volunteer Recruitment Tips that Still Work¹

By Susan J. Ellis

I am finally working on the long-requested revision of *The Volunteer Recruitment (and Membership Development) Book* and so have been considering what things stay in the book, what is outdated, and what needs to be added. Learning new techniques to keep up with emerging trends can be fun and useful. But, as I work on the book, I am reminded how important it is to know the basics, too – the things that have been proven over time to work when applied consistently and properly. This is very true when it comes to recruiting new volunteers.

Recruitment is a critical activity for leaders of volunteer involvement and, of course, finding the *right* volunteers makes all the difference in the success and impact of the work to be done. The very first workshop I ever taught (in 1977) was on recruitment (no surprise). I remember giving pointers about such things as proper use of mimeograph machines (for all readers too young to know what that is, here is [a link](#) (link is external) to find out) and other quaint, now-archaic tools. But I also shared a number of *principles* that remain as valid today as they were then. And I expect these will never change.

Back in 2005, I recapped a few of these principles in a Hot Topic called "[Recruitment Maxims](#)" and I invite you to read that again as it still rings true. This month, I want to share some very specific recommendations that are too often neglected in the volunteer recruitment messages I see, whether online or on paper. I've only listed ten here – please share *your* tips, too.

1. **Be specific.** You will always be more successful in inviting people to do something they can picture in detail than to ask them vaguely to "give us time for free." This means never starting a recruitment pitch with anything like "Volunteers Needed." To do *what*?

If you doubt the importance of this, think about whether someone looking for a paying job would respond to a classified ad saying simply "Company XYZ needs employees." To do *what*?

2. **Titles matter.** I've just explained that "volunteer" is a pay category, not a work identifier. It also does not need to be an adjective in a title, as in "Volunteer Tutor" or "Volunteer Tour Guide." Unless you have a clear reason for calling attention to someone as unpaid, it's unnecessary to append the word volunteer to the role. Since we often recruit people seeking paid work experience, they will be more attracted to having a title that means something on a resume.

In the same vein, avoid titles that imply ancillary status, such as aide or assistant. If you are recruiting volunteers with special or advanced expertise, the roles you offer should reflect the kind of work they would seek in the job market, with titles to match. Yes, a volunteer can be a project *manager* or *director* – if that's what is required in the position.

3. **Describe expected or desired results as well as work activities.** What will be the *impact* of the volunteer effort? You don't need to show that volunteers are miracle workers, but all

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volunteer work is based on helping some cause or mission. How can one volunteer make a difference, no matter how small?

- 4. Instead of wide, cast-the-net recruitment appeals, concentrate on targeted mini-campaigns.** Publicity is not recruitment, though they are connected. Telling the public that you need volunteers is not the same as *issuing an invitation* to prospects selected for a reason. Unless you are looking for several hundred volunteers for a single day, avoid mass media messages. These will only waste your time with lots of inquiries and the need for careful screening.

Go where you are likeliest to find the best people. In other words, stop going to the obvious places where you can find "a lot" of people, but only a few will be qualified in the ways you need. Instead, if you need someone who is bilingual in English and Chinese, go to a Chinese social center; for someone who can teach beading, try the local arts and crafts supply store. Once you know *where* you will look, you can then create recruitment materials to match the source. Maybe all you need is a phone call with the director of the Chinese social center and then s/he will refer someone to you. At the arts and crafts store, the owner might let you put up a sign or some take-away cards in the bead section of the store.

- 5. Aim high.** Successful recruiters *expect* to find the best candidates and so go looking for them. Always begin by seeking the qualifications, or schedule, or other requirement you most want. Put your message in front of the most capable and skilled people and make it clear why you are approaching them. After all, fundraisers go to the people with the most money first, shouldn't we use the same theory when it comes to recruiting expertise?
- 6. Make sure it sounds as if someone would want to do this in their limited free time.** Volunteering is basically a *recreational* activity. When you invite someone to volunteer, you are asking them to share their disappearing discretionary time. In other words, do they play golf or volunteer with you? Visit with friends or come to your agency to work? Therefore, you want the volunteer opportunity to be appealing, even fun.

Mention that they'll meet great people, feel good about themselves when they leave, learn new and interesting things – assuming, of course, that they will. If appropriate for your organization, why not suggest they volunteer *with* a friend or relative and enjoy time together while helping others?

You do not have to make the work sound easy, by the way. It can be enormously satisfying to participate in a strenuous group effort. One of my favorite recruitment campaigns was used by the Peace Corps in the 1980s, describing the experience as "the toughest job you'll ever love."

- 7. Be clear that there is an application process.** One of the misconceptions the public has about volunteering is that anyone can just do it. And we confirm this whenever we say or write "To volunteer, call _____." This implies that all applicants will be accepted. Add a few simple words such as "to apply....," "to learn if this position is right for you....," "to discuss if you qualify....," or "to learn more...." You can also say, "we are currently seeking applicants for....," which shows that you plan to pick the most qualified people.

Also, be up front about what the application process will be and how long it will take. Is there any sort of background check required? If someone does not want to go through what your

process is, better to have him or her self-screen out than to surprise and disappoint you both later.

8. **Answer possible questions before they are asked.** Put yourself into the head of a person considering volunteering with you. What might they want to know – or have concerns about – that perhaps they are reluctant to ask? Try to offer the information as part of your recruitment. For example:
 - Might they be worried about safety if they serve in the evening? Make note that “we have a well-lighted parking lot available” or “all evening volunteers are assigned in pairs.”
 - Might they be interested but not sure if they can do the work? Be sure to include “we will give you training to succeed” or “beginners welcomed.”
9. **Different strokes for different folks.** Your volunteer opportunities will not appeal to everyone. No matter how effectively you describe the work a volunteer will do as a stream pollution monitor, no one who dislikes standing outdoors in water is going to be convinced to apply. Someone who really wants to help animals will probably not sign on to tutor reading. The person whose paid job requires weekend hours cannot take your Saturday volunteer shift. So don't be dismayed at turn-downs, but make sure you are talking to the people most likely to want to do the volunteering you are offering.
10. **Have more information available online because people WILL go looking.** You will note that up to now I have not said a word about social media or the Web. That's because everything above was proven long before the Internet dominated our lives and can be applied in the same way to recruiting in cyberspace. But today, there is one more incontrovertible truth: almost everyone checks almost anything out online before acting. From restaurants to plumbers to people to date, if the information cannot be found on the Web, it *does not exist*. Or at best is to be approached with caution.

Fourteen years ago, I posted the Hot Topic, “If Not Your Home Page, Then Where?” It is still completely relevant today. Read it and, if it makes you unhappy about how your organization's Web site presents volunteering, I strongly encourage you to request and fight for better and current information about volunteer opportunities to be visible on the site. Even if you recruit through online registries such as VolunteerMatch, Do-It, or anything else, prospects are going to click into the link you give to your Web site to learn more and to check out how the organization presents itself. If volunteers are invisible, all of your hard recruitment work will be undercut. Conversely, if prospects can keep reading more, they will end up self-screening themselves *in* as viable candidates. What can be better than that?

My list of top ten tips surely doesn't cover everything. In the comments, please share what recruitment techniques always work for you!

