

This Issue: 8 Tips for Recruiting & Retaining Volunteers in Tough Times

January 7, 2009

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We thank [Susan J. Ellis](#), President of Energize, Inc., for writing this issue of Tools You Can Use.

HOW DOES a financial crisis affect volunteering? Will volunteering go up or down, or change in other ways as the global economy worsens? One thing is certain: Because volunteers are real people living in real communities, tight budgets will have an impact.

Therefore, here are eight recommendations that can help any type of organization looking to recruit and retain volunteers in tough times.

1. Don't start a volunteer program to deal with a crisis

Organizations that have not welcomed or invested in volunteers in "good" times are less likely to be successful in a recession because they will have to play catch-up in building an effective volunteerism infrastructure. Turning to volunteers because you can't afford staff is the worst possible reason to invite community help. It makes volunteer participation a "second choice" strategy reluctantly adopted in a crisis.

If you want to increase volunteer involvement, you must do the necessary planning: set goals, define volunteer roles, prepare the paid staff to team with volunteers, and designate staff to recruit, screen, place, and follow up with the

people who sign on.

2. Keep your volunteer coordinator

If your organization has a solid volunteer engagement plan in place now, you have a foundation for mobilizing more volunteer help. Ironically, exactly when many organizations want more volunteers, they lay off the manager of volunteer resources! Seen as a "soft" position unconnected to primary client services, this job seems easy to eliminate from the budget. It may be counter-intuitive, but it happens, and often.

3. Understand how hard times affect volunteers

Don't assume that in hard times people "can't afford" to volunteer. Even in a recession, no one wants to feel they're at the bottom of the totem pole—there's always someone in greater distress. News stories during the 2008 holidays almost universally reported rises in giving to programs helping the poor; in some cases the stories spoke of turning away volunteers who could not be accommodated. This pattern is predictable, even if reported with surprise.

Volunteering is especially important when people feel they cannot give money but can give time. Such substitution is particularly viable for people who are already committed to an organization's cause. And, as needs become more obvious and incontrovertible, it's easier to see the value of pitching in to make things better.

The organization that allows supporters to blend time and money may end the recession with more volunteers and ultimately bigger donors.

Substituting skills for money has been a pattern in corporate philanthropy, too. Corporate foundations may give fewer grants in a recession, but look to employee volunteering as an alternative or supplement to help nonprofits.

Does your development office recognize this pattern? Do they make sure that the invitation to donate time as a volunteer is extended alongside the plea for a cash contribution? The organization that allows supporters to blend time and money may end the recession with more volunteers and ultimately bigger donors.

It is true that volunteers pay for their volunteering expenses from their discretionary funds, not their grocery money. So as people have less money for all things, it may indeed become harder for volunteers to lay out cash to give time.

Smart organizations will increase the amount of funds available to reimburse volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses, especially transportation and gas. It might be time to do some fundraising specifically for this need, stressing to donors that

money to reimburse volunteer expenses is leveraged hundreds of times over by the value of the services made possible by the reimbursement.

4. Include current volunteers in planning for uncertain budgets

Your active volunteers already see what's going on and are affected by staff's concerns about possible lay offs. The worst thing to do is pretend it's business-as-usual when it's not. The second worst thing is to cut staff and then expect volunteers to fill in the slack—particularly if they were not consulted about the situation in the first place.

If there are serious financial shortfalls, call a meeting to discuss what's happening. Whether you meet with employees and volunteers together or separately depends on your organization's size and culture. Treat volunteers as the community resource they are by posing these sorts of questions:

- What might we do to raise more money this year from new sources? How could you help us do this? For example, does any volunteer have contacts with a large corporation which has never been a donor?
- What skills do you have that we have not yet asked you to use on our behalf? What do you see that needs to be done here that you are interested in tackling, and how? You are not obligated to act on every suggestion, but the responses might be very revealing.
- If we were to recruit new volunteers, what do you feel are the most important things we should ask them to do and what sorts of qualifications should we seek? What can someone do as a short-term project, through online service, or in another less traditional way?
- Where should we look for new volunteers? Can you help us do the recruitment?

If you must lay off staff, let the affected units strategize together for how they will realign work among the remaining employees, current volunteers, and possibly new volunteers. It is never as simple as "volunteers can fill the gap," especially when fewer people want to commit to a long-term, multi-hour per week assignment. But the right volunteers can be part of the response.

5. Turn financial worries and fear of the future into reasons to participate

We've become much more knowledgeable about the "spontaneous volunteering" that happens during natural disasters and other immediate crises. There's strong evidence that people who respond to an emergency by rolling up their sleeves and joining with others to do something are overcoming the feeling of helplessness or

powerlessness that a disaster evokes. This applies to other types of crises, too.

Through volunteering, especially with others who have mutual concerns or needs, people feel less isolated and more in control. This implies that, rather than ignoring the depressing news stories, we might recruit new volunteers by using the crisis.

Concerned about the future? Think what seniors on a fixed income today must feel. What better time to brighten their day with a friendly visit?

Kids know their parents are worried about money (you may be, too). Show them that having fun with an adult mentor doesn't have to cost anything but an afternoon.

6. Address unemployment directly by offering resume building volunteer opportunities

As unemployment increases, more people will a) be looking for new jobs; b) have lots of unwanted time on their hands; and c) welcome opportunities to build new skills that will help them in their job hunt. It's a real plus to be able to avoid a "gap" on a resume while job hunting—a relevant volunteer experience can do that while also providing some structure to a suddenly-empty daytime schedule.

Do you offer volunteer positions that allow someone to learn a new skill or apply expertise in new ways? Are you willing to write letters of recommendation for a successful volunteer?

Actively recruit unemployed people with the approach of:

You are still wanted for your talents! As you seek new work, spend part of those long days with us. Keep your resume current and help others at the same time.

Be flexible in allowing the new volunteer to search for work while helping your organization. This may mean accepting phone calls from prospective employers while on duty or adjusting the planned schedule to go to interviews.

Again, this type of welcome, coupled with work the new volunteer enjoys, may win you a long-term volunteer even after new employment is found.

7. Consider bartering as a form of volunteering

Under financial pressure, people's survival needs must come first. But the same pressure can elicit creative response in the form of mutual aid. The clearest example is barter, whether of goods for services or services for services.

During the Great Depression, barter was elevated to an art form as communities without available cash organized exchanges of unpaid work. What's interesting

about barter is that the value of the exchange is in the eyes of the parties involved, not necessarily the marketplace. So if it's worth it to me to walk your dog in exchange for a bag of vegetables from your garden, we have a deal.

The implication for volunteer management is to adapt this natural barter process to organizational or client needs. Instead of the model of recruiting an outside volunteer to "help" clients in need, we might organize mutual exchange among clients themselves. What can they do for each other, given the chance?

Or, what does your organization have that a prospective volunteer might value, especially if money is tight? For example, perhaps a sole practitioner accountant with a small office might be happy to consult with the board on financial planning, in exchange for the chance to schedule occasional presentations to accounting clients in one of your meeting rooms.

8. Remember that it's bread *and* roses

Unfortunately, some cultural arts, recreation, and environmental organizations limit their outreach during a crisis, feeling that it is unseemly to divert people from more pressing needs. While this attitude may be understandable, it is also misguided. It is precisely at such times that groups and institutions offering beauty, relaxation, and other spiritual nourishment have an opportunity to demonstrate their worth. It's a chance to break the elitist image and actively engage people as audience members, participants, and volunteers because it's a needed, reviving break from bleak times.

Naturally, basic human needs come first. But the old labor strike slogan of "we want bread and roses" still resonates. In other words, it's as important to feed the soul as the belly.

This may also be an approach that human services organizations can adopt. Why not recruit volunteers to raise the spirits of people in need? Maybe now is a good time to include some live music while people are in a food pantry or thrift store, or organize a "not-a-holiday" party just to give people some relaxation. Volunteers will respond to these sorts of new ways to serve, just as clients will appreciate a change from the more somber issues they are confronting.

By the way, this may be a great opportunity to allow clients to "give back." Who knows what talents lurk among the pool of people you serve? Or among the paid and volunteer staff who are rarely tapped for their performing, culinary, or other social skills? This is your chance to find out.

Where to Learn More

Books

[*Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide To Effective Volunteer Involvement*](#)

[*Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Collaborate Today, Thrive Tomorrow*](#)

[*The \(Help\) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management*](#)

[*Keeping Volunteers: A Guide to Retention*](#)

[*The Volunteer Recruitment \(and Membership Development\) Book*](#)

Free Resources

[Archive of monthly “Hot Topics” on trends in volunteerism](#)

[Volunteer recruitment articles and sites](#)

[Major web sources of information on volunteer management](#)

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Energize, Inc.

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[Susan J. Ellis](#) is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. The Philadelphia-based company has helped a wide diversity of clients in more than 20 countries since 1977. Ellis has written 12 books on volunteer management topics, has written the “On Volunteers” column for *The NonProfit Times* for two decades, and is co-publisher/editor of the international online journal, [*e-Volunteerism*](#).

Browse the 1,200-plus pages of free volunteer management information on the Energize web site and learn more about the innovative online training program, [*Everyone Ready®*](#), that prepares staff to work effectively with volunteers.

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Regards,

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January 7, 2009

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