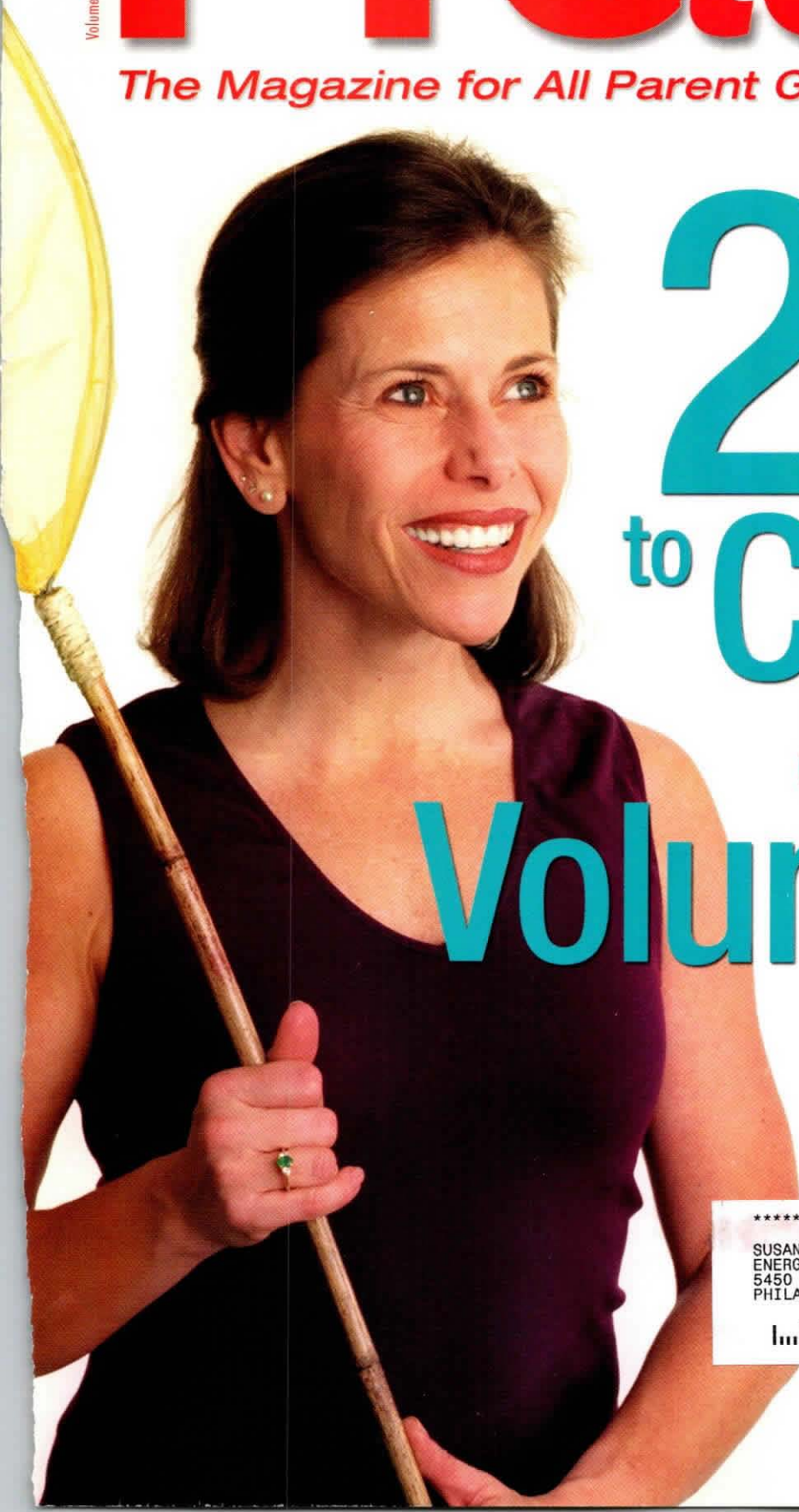


A Survival Guide for Cochairs • Make Your Playground More Fun

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25 Ways to Catch & Keep Volunteers

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25 Ways to Catch and Keep Volunteers

by Craig Bystrynski

5 Things Volunteers Love

“We’re so glad you’re here.”

A warm welcome can win your volunteer’s heart. Introduce her to others. Show her where the restroom is and how to use the copy machine. Include her in conversations. If the work environment is pleasant, your volunteer is much more likely to participate again.

“We’re doing this because...”

Help your volunteer understand how her role relates to your overall goals or mission. Working on the assembly line is no fun if you can’t see the finished product.

“Thank you so much.”

Let your volunteer know you appreciate

her help, whether she donated an hour or a week, whether she did the most difficult task or the easiest. She could have spent time with her family or at the gym or with the Girl Scouts.

“Whatever works best for you.”

People have different styles and abilities. Whenever possible, let volunteers take ownership of the process. Give them the goals of the project or the desired outcome, and let them choose their own way to get there. Don’t say “we do things this way,” especially if there’s no compelling reason to stick with the status quo.

“Your hour’s up.”

New volunteers are almost universally concerned that the time commitment will be too much. Want to impress a new volunteer? Ask her to spend an hour helping out, then remind

Tips to lure them in, keep them happy, and avoid the pitfalls that will keep them from coming back.

her when the hour's up. (And don't forget to say thank you!)

5 Things Volunteers Hate

"We don't need you after all."

Your volunteer shows up on time and ready to help. But when she gets there, she discovers there's no work to do. Maybe you have enough help already. Maybe the task changed and you're going to do it a different way at a different time. The reason doesn't matter. The message to the volunteer is: "Not only don't we need you, we didn't care enough about you or your time to tell you before you drove over here."

"We just need to run to the store."

When the volunteer shows up to do some work, all of the materials to do the job are not yet in place. While organizers gather everything that's needed, volunteers end up standing around, waiting. The message: Volunteering with your group is a big time-waster.

"Good night, and good luck."

Being given a job to do without proper instruction or the tools to do the job properly can be very frustrating—especially if you leave your volunteer on her own to figure things out for herself. Most people won't submit to that kind of experience twice.

"Just another hour—or so."

You ask the volunteer to donate an hour of her time. But it turns out to be the great elastic hour—it stretches and stretches until the job is done. She might stick around to see things through, but she'll think twice before committing to help out again.

"You're doing it all wrong!"

It's OK to tell a volunteer when she's doing the wrong thing, but presentation matters. Be helpful rather than confrontational. Anything that sounds like "You're dumb" will cost you one volunteer—and maybe more if she tells her friends.

5 Things That Keep Volunteers Motivated

"That's a great idea."

Nothing is more motivating than making your own idea a reality. An atmosphere that encourages new ideas not only energizes volunteers; it keeps your group fresh and injects excitement, too.

"We're all in it together."

If your volunteers feel like part of a team, they'll be more motivated to do their part. A team atmosphere means making sure everybody feels wanted and participates. And it's crucial to break up cliques.

"You're really good at that."

Use people's talents, not just their time. Not many people will get excited about constantly being on the cleanup committee. But if you let the person who loves carpentry build your carnival booths or the one who's interested in graphic design create your newsletter, they're much more likely to do a great job and want to continue.

"How did that go for you?"

Check in with volunteers occasionally. Make sure their needs are being met and they haven't become disgruntled. Personal contact lets them know you care about them individually, and it catches potential problems before they become significant.

"We did it!"

When things go right, share your successes with your volunteers. A shared sense of accomplishment can be a powerful motivator.

5 Good Ways to Find New Volunteers

"Position available."

Write help-wanted ads. Create a flyer or section of your newsletter with descriptions of the jobs you need help for. Include the duties of the position, likely time commitment, and other pertinent

information. You're more likely to find a good match for your position if you publicize it well.

“There’s a lot you can do.”

You already know that one of the biggest fears of volunteers is that they’ll be sucked into a black hole of never-ending time commitment. One way to address this fear is to create a list of all of the things that volunteers can do in one hour to help your group.

“Would you help?”

The No. 1 reason people say they don’t volunteer is because “no one asked.” Asking doesn’t mean a newsletter ad that says “new officers needed.” It requires a personal approach, and it works best if you have a specific task in mind. “Jim, we need ticket-takers for the carnival. Can you spare an hour to help?”

“Bring your friends!”

People are much more likely to participate in a group if they know someone who participates already. You can use this to your advantage by asking existing members to issue personal invitations to people they know.

“Thanks for your interest.”

Don’t let volunteer surveys sit around for weeks before you respond, even to people who expressed interest in an event that is months away. People are much more likely to follow through later if you make a connection now. Also, this is an opening to ask for more involvement: “I know you said you’d help with the spring carnival, but I wonder if you could spare an hour to help children pick out books at the book fair in October?”

5 Ways to Get the Most Out of Your Volunteers

“Let me show you.”

When you have a new volunteer, have an experienced volunteer work with her to show her the ropes. Your new volunteer will get up to speed faster and, if your mentor

does her job well, will feel more like a part of the team from the start.

“It’s all written down.”

Create a binder with information on your most common activities. Include resources, tools, and key steps. Don’t forget items like tips for using the copy machine, how to handle cash, etc.

“Let’s work together.”

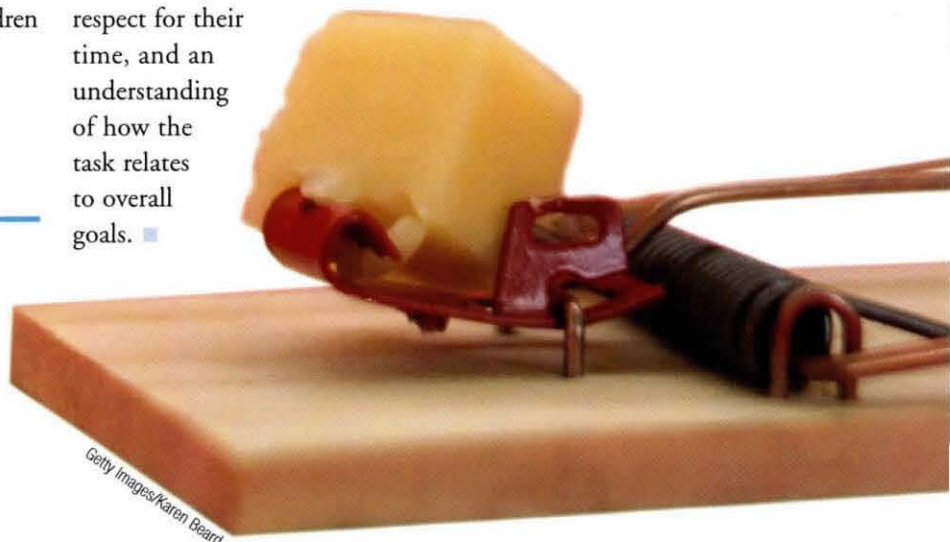
Two heads sometimes are better than one. By sharing one job, two people can often put more energy and creativity into the work. This tends to work best if you have, for example, a chairman and a chairman-elect—one person as the final decisionmaker in case of disagreements and the other preparing to step into that role next year.

“You can do this at home.”

It’s common for people who aren’t familiar with parent groups to think every job needs to be done at school during school hours. Make a list of “flex-time” and “work at home” jobs to attract people who can’t help out during the day.

“This is what you can expect.”

Set expectations from the start. You don’t have to be formal and businesslike with volunteers, but let them know that you expect punctuality, a positive attitude, that they abide by school and group rules, and maintain confidentiality, if applicable. Likewise, make sure your committee chairs know what volunteers expect from them: the tools and training to do the job, a positive work atmosphere, respect for their time, and an understanding of how the task relates to overall goals. ■



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