

Valued Volunteerism

Your organization is nothing without its volunteers; you're proof of that. Here are telling trends affecting people who serve and encouraging tales of award-winning volunteer projects.

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Tracking Volunteer Trends

By Susan J. Ellis

As the world changes, so do trends in volunteerism.
Here's how to maintain a strong volunteer base.

YOU CAN'T JUST SIT IDLY by and watch the social, economic, and cultural trends that are reshaping volunteerism. As an association leader, you need to have a solution or two up your sleeve. Just think: If everything in the world is changing, how can volunteering stay the same? It can't, of course. And it hasn't.

Many trends will affect your organization's volunteer activities now and in the future. Following are some of the trends that I've observed along with their potential impact on your association and suggestions for response.

Macro trends

The population is aging. But don't expect baby boomers to retire in the traditional sense—or certainly not at age 65. Barring illness, someone aged 60 today does not think of himself or herself as old, nor does anyone else. As a result, organizations may find volunteers "aging in place," tenaciously clinging to traditional roles and responsibilities and entrenched in key leadership positions.

Now is the time to build in enforced rotation of board members, committee chairs, and other functions. This gives newer volunteers room to grow. Simultaneously, your association should find a variety of ways for veteran members to continue to be of support. This could mean developing meaningful roles for active (and homebound) volunteers in their 90s.

Uneasiness about terrorism persists.

And volunteers, who have always been the silver lining in the cloud of any disaster, realize that *doing* some-

thing is a way of taking back a sense of control. Is your association poised to mobilize these volunteers?

In the event of another terrorist attack, it's a good idea to have a contingency plan for volunteer-utilization in place—for the sake of the members as much as for giving aid. Consider partnering with local citizen response councils linked to the Department of Homeland Security.

The reach of the Internet includes volunteerism. The Internet has placed a growing wealth of volunteerism materials literally a click away. With a little bit of search engine skill, your members can find information on boardsmanship, volunteer recruitment and retention, recognition, community building, and so on. Does all of this information reflect your organization's culture, norms, and expectations? Probably not. That's why it is increasingly important that you use the Internet to manage and involve your volunteers and to build their base of knowledge. Make sure your Web site has information of value to association leaders; consider developing an area where volunteers can post questions and support one another.

Micro trends

Volunteers want short-term assignments. Reluctance to commit to a long-term volunteer assignment is so prevalent that it's moving from a trend to an established fact. Association members are stressed and time-starved. Yet associations have earned the reputation of rewarding good volunteer work with *more* volunteer work, meaning that we often burn out our best people.

The solution: Give volunteers what they want. Involve them in specific, time-limited projects. Consider ways to involve people who would be willing to do some work but don't want to be bogged down by endless planning meetings.

Single days of service, such as Make a Difference Day; Martin

Luther King, Jr., Day of Service; Join Hands Day; and United Way Day of Caring, are proliferating. Agencies are reporting that many volunteers use such single days of service to audition organizations with which they might establish a more ongoing relationship. Look for ways to tie your association to this type of civic event, whether as a site for volunteer service or as a project on which members can work together.

Additionally, examine your recognition practices. Do you give awards for longevity (the 15-year pin) or time spent in a year (500-hours award)? If so, be careful. You may be sending the message that service, indeed, has no foreseeable end or that you only value intensity of service. Continue recognizing those who have volunteered for a long time, but consider adding awards for rookie of the year or the volunteer who did the most in the least amount of time.

Volunteers prefer multitasking opportunities. Volunteering is a leisure-time activity in which members participate after filling the priority demands of a job or family. Volunteers, however, will complete all sorts of tasks if they enjoy what they are doing and the people they are doing it with.

Organizations that allow families to volunteer together, for example, may be more successful in recruiting. Be sensitive, though, to the changing definition of *family*. Your members may now consist of blended families from second or third marriages; single parents by choice; same-sex couples with or without children; grandparents raising grandchildren; older children caring for aging parents; and other variations on the theme.

Similarly, many people feel that they don't have time to be with their friends. Recruit friends to volunteer together—enjoying each other's company while helping your cause. Be creative in finding multitasking opportunities for members. For example, you

Volunteer Quotient Quiz

1. Volunteerism continues to decline because of today's hectic lifestyles. **TRUE FALSE**
2. Women are more likely than men to serve as volunteers. **TRUE FALSE**
3. Because they have more time on their hands, retirees are the most likely age group to volunteer. **TRUE FALSE**
4. The estimated hourly value of volunteer time is less than minimum wage. **TRUE FALSE**
5. You can double the number of your volunteers by simply asking people to participate. **TRUE FALSE**

ANSWERS

1. *False.* In the most recent numbers available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63.8 million people did volunteer work in 2003, up from the 59.8 million in 2002.
2. *True.* Women volunteer at a higher rate than men, a relationship that holds true across age groups, education levels, and other major characteristics. For 2003, 32.2 percent of women did volunteer work, compared to 25.1 percent of men.
3. *False.* The Labor Department finds that the age group most likely to volunteer is 35-to-44-year-olds, at 34.7 percent.
4. *False.* Independent Sector estimates that the estimated hourly value of volunteer time in 2003 was \$17.19 per hour.
5. *True.* Independent Sector calls it "the power of the ask," citing statistics that reveal that the percentage of people who volunteer *when asked* is 71 percent, compared to 29 percent who volunteer on their own.

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might connect a service project with physical exercise, allowing members to tone up while doing good works. Consider running periodic singles-only events to allow members to meet each other socially. Of course, make sure volunteer work continues to provide opportunities for your association's members to add new skills to their resumes or to demonstrate their talents to possible employers.

Volunteers are open to virtual volunteering or online service. Virtual volun-

teering is probably one of the first genuinely new forms of volunteering in a century. Jayne Cravens of the United Nations Online Volunteering Project calls it "volunteering in your pajamas." And while face-to-face contact will always be important, consider replacing at least some of your association's time-consuming and costly meetings with well-run list-servers or even chat rooms.

Members can fulfill many volunteer activities through electronic communication—from conducting

research to proofreading materials and from translating documents to running publicity campaigns. This means that your volunteers can come from anywhere on the globe—holding out an interesting potential for 24-hour services or campaigns.

The political group MoveOn provides one model for online mobilization. From holding bake sales to raising money, and from writing letters to the editors of major newspapers to mobilizing voter registration drives, these folks do it all by electronic communication, but with reminders, thank-you notes, and after-activity reports.

Make your own trends

Now that you are aware of some of the many trends influencing your association and its members, what should you do? You can ensure that your fellow board members weigh the relevance of these trends to your association. You can lead the charge for developing a strategic plan for volunteer development to keep your organization on the cutting edge. You can schedule a think tank and consider which issues your organization should embrace, avoid, or adapt in planning for increasing volunteer involvement.

It's your move. Your commitment now will allow future generations to fully participate in volunteer leadership in your organization. **AM**

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Volunteer Resources on the Web

Visit these online sources for more information on association leadership issues and trends.

- Association Xpertise, Inc.: www.axi.ca/services/resources.htm
- Better Together: www.bettertogether.org
- The Center for Association Leadership: www.centeronline.org
- Citizen Corps: www.usafreedomcorps.gov/content/programs/citizencorps/index.asp
- Dear Association Leader Archives: leipper.org/leadership/phpBB2/index.php
- Energize, Inc.: www.energizeinc.com
- FamilyCares: www.1-800-volunteer.org/learn/family.jsp
- Online Volunteering Service: www.onlinevolunteering.org
- Single Volunteers of America: www.singlevolunteers.org
- World Volunteer Web: www.worldvolunteerweb.org

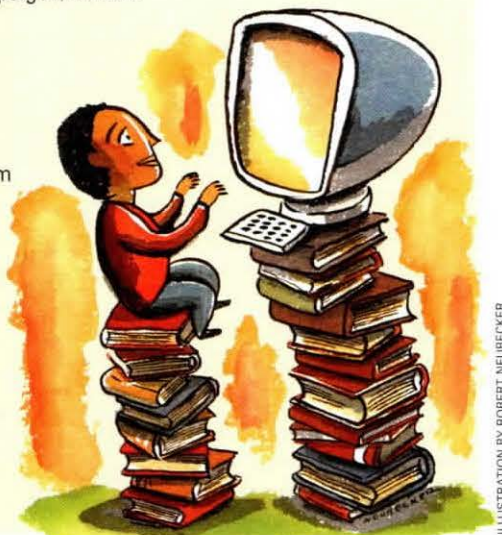


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