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Barriers to Volunteering: Hidden Messages in Your Recruitment

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Have you been successful in recruiting volunteers in the past but now seem to have hit a wall of apathy? Are there populations you'd love to involve but who do not seem attracted to your organization?

Maybe the problem lies in the hidden messages of your recruitment techniques. Consider the following key elements of volunteer recruitment and what image you are conveying to prospects:

Your language

Whether in a brochure, on a poster, or in a speech, your choice of words communicates much more than literal meaning. For example, what level of education is required for the volunteer assignment and what level are you implying with your word choice? If you need candidates with strong verbal skills, go ahead and use whatever vocabulary you wish. But if you are more interested in qualities of prospective volunteers other than formal education, review your words more carefully.

If the language of your recruitment materials is erudite (with words like "erudite"), people without confidence in their reading or writing skills will automatically feel excluded. This is also true for people for whom English is a second language.

The idea is not to "dumb" down recruitment material; just to consider whether you are unnecessarily implying that applicants are expected to have college degrees. Shorter, more common words will be most welcoming.

Another turn-off is jargon. Almost every organization evolves its own set of abbreviations, acronyms, and terminology that everyone already on board understands but becomes unintelligible to outsiders. The best way to avoid jargon is to give a draft of your material to someone who does not work in your agency - your spouse, the mail carrier, a colleague in another state.

Only distribute materials in another language if someone in your office is capable of answering the telephone, interviewing and generally working with volunteers who are non-English speakers. What you really want is bilingual volunteers fluent in both English and another language. So you can recruit them in English.

Finally, assess your use of the word "volunteer." As this column has recently discussed, the label of "volunteer" is not universally welcomed. Vary your vocabulary as fits your target audience. Use terms like community service, helping out, taking action, making a difference. Also remember that volunteer is a pay category, not a title.

Never head a poster "Volunteers Wanted." What does this mean? Unpaid workers wanted? To do what? Instead, emphasize the title of the assignment itself. Recruit for tutors, mentors, cyber deputies, origami experts, whatever.

Photographs and artworks

A picture is indeed worth a thousand words, but the wrong picture can do a lot of harm. The general public has many misconceptions about volunteering, with long-standing stereotypes about who volunteers are and what they do. So, be careful not to feed the stereotype.

The best approach with photographs is to use as many as possible, with a wide range of activities and types of people pictured. This is a bonus on a Web site, where it costs nothing to post additional images. On a short printed brochure, however, you'll have to make choices. It may be better to select a non-representational graphic rather than convey only one small component of your program in one photo.

Think about whether your photographs convey the right recruitment message. Do they picture the type of people you hope to attract? Depending on what matters to you, mix and match the following images:

- Men and women;
- A variety of ages and races;
- Volunteers actually doing something, not just sitting around or posing for the camera;
- Smiles;
- Business or casual clothing;
- Warmth and energy.

What you want is for someone to look at the pictures and think, "I could fit in there."

Where you place materials

There is no mystery to recruiting a diverse corps of volunteers: ask a diverse audience of prospects. If you want to recruit African-American men, don't give a speech at the Polish-American Woman's Club.

This holds true for where you leave printed material. When you leave flyers or post bulletin board messages in different places around town, you clearly imply your desire for volunteers from those locations. It's obvious that a flyer seen at a senior center conveys an interest in senior volunteers, while one left in a college dormitory welcomes young adults.

The same is true for racial, ethnic and income diversity. Do some research. If you want reading tutors who are bilingual in Spanish, place recruitment announcements in the library branch that serves the Spanish-speaking part of town. Similarly if you place an exhibit booth at a Kwanza event, you won't have to point out that you want to recruit African-Americans.

The people who represent you

Just as with photographs and where you recruit, unspoken messages are conveyed by the people representing you. Successful recruiters do not have to look exactly like the audience they are addressing. But they need to look comfortable in the environment and be genuinely welcoming.

They need to understand the expectations of the setting. Is this a place where casual clothes will seem insulting or where business clothes will seem officious? How prepared are these representatives for questions "off the script," particularly about the clients served?

If you are doing outreach to new audiences, it may work best to assign recruiters in pairs, making sure that the two representatives are different from each other, even if not a match to the target audience.

At least you will be showing that your organization already has variety. A slide show with many photographs of an array of faces will also convey your meaning.

The applicant's reception

It's amazing how many organizations totally undercut their recruitment efforts by ignoring what happens to prospects when they make the attempt to express interest in becoming a volunteer.

If you aren't sure how it feels to contact your agency for the first time, recruit a spy. Ask a friend or colleague to telephone or drop in with an inquiry about volunteer work. What happens?

- Does the voice mail system offer an option for contacting the volunteer office or does every caller have to know a person's name?
- If the right person is not in, how is the message taken on the phone? Is the prospective volunteer thanked for calling? Assured that s/he will be called back (or is the applicant asked to call back)?
- Is the receptionist or security guard friendly? Helpful?

When you are in the midst of a recruitment campaign, take a moment to inform the frontline personnel. It's amazing how helpful receptionists, secretaries, even custodians can be if they understand their role in the welcoming process. And don't overlook professional colleagues.

If they do not understand the importance of nurturing a potential volunteer making first contact, they may inadvertently sabotage the process by sounding hurried or disinterested on the telephone.

All of this in-house preparation goes double if you are trying to recruit a more diversified corps of volunteers. How ready is everyone if you are successful in attracting volunteers who look and perhaps act very different from what has been the norm?

It's just as important to assure the receptivity of volunteers already on board. How long will new volunteers stick around if they are treated coldly by the existing corps of workers? Don't leave good relationships to chance. Involve current volunteers in the plans to recruit a more diverse group of volunteers and engage them in running orientation programs for the newcomers. Do some team building exercises.

In the last analysis, if the work you are asking volunteers to do is truly meaningful and you are sincerely interested in involving a wide range of participants, your message will be communicated.

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