Susan J. Ellis

Volunteer Development

The potential for use of cyberspace

As we all grow more comfortable with the delights and frustrations of cyberspace (at the office and at home), we might take a moment to reflect on how we approach this new medium. In terms of the field of volunteerism, perpetuating outdated practices online must be guarded against.

There are several major volunteer program management areas affected by the Internet and the Web. The ideas below all relate directly to online activities within the *cyberspace environment* you control directly.

The power of email

Two years ago, this section would have begun with disclaimers about "If you don't have email, then ...." Today, we assume that an organization has the rudimentary capability of receiving and sending email. If not now, then next month. Similarly, the number of volunteers with the ability to access email has grown explosively.

First, make certain that you have added a line for "email address" on all volunteer (and client, vendor, etc.) application forms. Second, send around a memo to all current volunteers and ask them for their email address.

Repeat this step every six months, as people are going online quickly and others change email providers often. Then develop a database in which you can maintain your electronic mailing list.

Email is clearly a choice way to communicate individually with busy volunteers. But it has tremendous potential as a "mass mail" device, without any of the drawbacks: It is immediate, cheap, and easy. Consider just a few uses of email:

• Reminding volunteers that their data reports are due — and giving them the option of submitting their reports to you by return email;

• Special meeting notices or changes in dates, sites, etc. — with the option to R.S.V.P. online;

• Sharing of up-to-the-minute information on something of special interest (from telling volunteers to watch the 11 o'clock news for mention of your marathon to proclaiming the awarding of a hoped-for grant);

• Asking volunteers for something needed quickly;

• Keeping in touch with volunteers who do their work in the field and need to know they are part of the feedback loop.

For many organizations, once critical mass has been reached with a high percentage of volunteers online, costly newsletters will be a thing of the past. And, the best part is that electronic communication can be done in much shorter bursts of truly newsworthy items, rather than hunting for "filler" for an 8-page printed format.

As has been said many times before, the Web provides an equal playing field for any organization or business, regardless of actual size. Cyberspace outreach is accessible to everyone. To this end, a great number of nonprofit agencies have developed Web sites (and the rest will undoubtedly do so sooner rather than later) to inform the public of their services and to entice donors.

Unfortunately, the volunteer component of the organization is too often the stepchild in this process. Answer the following questions:

1. Does our Web site mention (anywhere) that we involve volunteers? Does this mention truly represent the value we place upon their role with our agency?

2. Do we present and explain the contributions volunteers make, both to give current volunteers some deserved recognition and also to attract new applicants?

3. If someone wanted to learn more about volunteer opportunities, does the Web site provide information on how to express interest? Is there a direct contact name and phone number? Email address? Initial expression-of-interest or application form that can be completed online?

4. Do we actively recruit volunteers on our site? For example, do we maintain a current list of open volunteer assignments, indicating the qualifications we are seeking? (And, are these updated frequently, which is one of the powerful benefits of online information?)

Please note that all of the above refers to on-site, in-the-real-world volunteers. Your Web site simply offers additional ways to recruit these people.
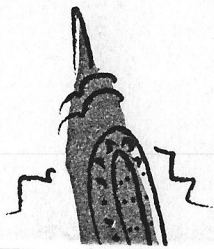
Another area to consider is "virtual volunteering," in which volunteers contribute their services online, usually through email. This is an emerging specialty, and you can learn more about it at: www.serviceleader.org/vv.

If you do not have Web pages offering useful volunteer-related information, you are missing a great opportunity to make your volunteers visible to the public. After all, who are better candidates to become volunteers than people who have sought out the information your site offers?

Internal communications

Apart from what you make known to the public, a Web site — and with it the ca-

pacity of email — offers endless opportunities for improved communications to and from volunteers. Private areas for volunteers can be established on the site, accessible only by direct URL or by password, in which the volunteer program manager can post all sorts of information:

• background information on any subject useful to volunteers in their work (articles, links to other helpful Web sites, etc.);

• calendar of training events, with online registration forms;

• handout materials from orientation and training sessions;

• updates to policies and procedures;

• changes to any volunteer handbooks or instruction sheets;

• thank-you notes or other motivating materials received by the office about volunteers

• minutes of, and even full audio tapes of, volunteer meetings.

The range of possibilities is enormous. Further, if your Web site is sophisticated enough, you can create special bulletin board areas for volunteers to communicate with each other, posting questions and carrying on discussion threads.

This relieves pressure on the volunteer office to be central in the communication cycle, receiving questions and passing them on to the right people. When volunteers can reach each other directly, the middleperson is cut out. (Which doesn't mean that a staff member can't moderate a newsgroup or bulletin board to make sure information exchanged is accurate.)

Volunteer outreach

One idea that has only recently begun to emerge is open to your experimentation. It involves asking volunteers to help you with outreach. You will discover that a percentage of volunteers have their own Web sites, either for their own business or personal use. Why not suggest that they post a message onto their own site letting people know that they support your organization (and why and how)?

You might even offer them an electronic version of your logo. The key is that they embed a hyper or "hot" link directly from their Web site to yours. In this way, you put your organization's name in front of whole new circles of people who might otherwise be unaware of what you do. And, it is a painless way for volunteers to add to their service contribution.

When you consider how this rather simple idea might be applied, you can see that mentioning such Web sites can greatly multiply your outreach for volunteers, financial donors, ticket buyers to events, participants in your marathon, or in-kind donations.

All of this is just within your sphere of electronic influence. The ways that cyberspace volunteerism resources can be tapped through external sites is another column for another day. If you can't wait for some of that information, check out: www.energizeinc.com.

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. Her email address is: susan@energizeinc.com