Volunteer Data

Digging beneath the surface

Those who track donations of cash want to have the ability to search records to answer a wide range of questions about who donors are and their giving patterns over many years. To a development officer, it is self-evident that future fundraising will prove more successful by understanding both the profile of donors and which types of appeals work best in what situations.

Yet a majority of organizations still do not gather even the most basic information about volunteers engaged in their work. The most frequently asked questions are incredibly superficial: How many volunteers do we have? How many hours did they give?

While these two cumulative figures have some value, stop and think about how little they really tell you. Next, consider how much information lurks under the surface of volunteer involvement that can inform decisions from management to public relations to fundraising.

What can you learn from studying volunteer involvement much more carefully? If you formulate better questions, you will begin to monitor relevant data and then create reports that can be analyzed in many ways.

Relevant Data Set 1:

Exactly who supports us with donations of time?

Beyond a mere body count, you might collect information about the diversity of volunteers by age, race, gender, profession, education level, and other characteristics. You can then examine the data and ask questions such as:

- What is the comparison of who volunteers for us to our client population?;
- Our paid staff make up?;
- Our cash donors?;
- What does this tell us about the base of support we have in the community?;
- If there are differences between who volunteers and who gives money, or who uses our services, do we know why? Does it matter?;
- What level of skill do volunteers bring to our organization and are the assignments we give them making use of this level?;
- What is the connection volunteers have to our cause/mission? For example, how many volunteers have direct personal knowledge of the concerns we address? Is their connection personal, emotional, intellectual?

Relevant Data Set 2:

Do volunteers also give money? Do donors ever volunteer?

Studies have shown that there is a correlation between volunteering time and also making cash contributions. Is there a clear connection in your organization? If not, why not? Further analysis would inquire:

- Do we consciously ask volunteers to also give money? How?;
- Do we ask them in different ways than we do people who are strangers to us?;
- When in a volunteer's time with us is the person most likely to write a check, too? If the person stops being a volunteer, do the checks continue?;
- Did anyone start a relationship with you by becoming a cash donor and then becoming a volunteer? Do you ever invite donors to get more actively involved? Does such participation then affect the level of the cash gift?

Relevant Data Set 3:

What assignments seem most successful and why? And, which are a struggle and why?

Of course, "success" needs to be defined. Some criteria could be: Providing a demonstrably valuable service; Being attractive to a variety of volunteers and therefore easy to recruit for; supported greatly by the paid staff; etc. To analyze, ask:

- What factors seem most critical to the success or failure? The work itself? The benefits or social perks? The specific paid staff in charge?;
- What assignments are always vacant and why?;

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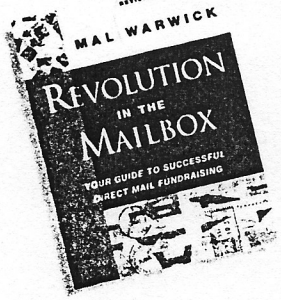

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- Where is there frequent unexpected turnover and why?;
- Might the dissatisfaction of volunteers in certain roles imply possible areas of poor client service as well?

Relevant Data Set 4:

What input do we ask/receive from volunteers?

It's common to say that volunteers are "community representatives" who bring an important perspective to the organization. So what do you know about their opinion of you? Do you ever ask for their input on anything? Consider these questions:

- What are volunteers thinking about you? Saying about you? To whom?;
- Might volunteers know more – or different things – about your clients than the paid staff? How would you find out?;
- Do you conduct exit interviews with volunteers who leave to learn what you are doing right or wrong?;
- What opportunities do volunteers have to give you suggestions?;
- Have you ever asked volunteers specifically to be community ambassadors on your behalf?

All of the data sets above naturally assume a database in which someone is entering facts and figures about volunteer involvement. There are dozens of software programs available for tracking fundraising efforts and results. Only a few of them focus specifically on the needs of volunteer program managers.

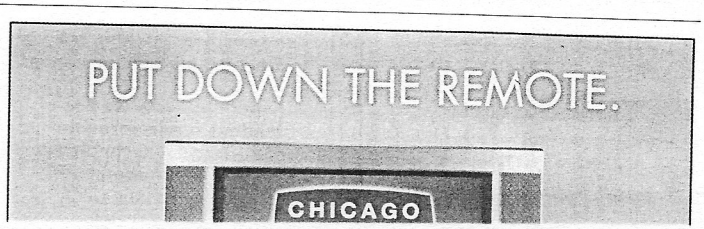
STATISTICS ABOUT VOLUNTEERS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS ARE DIVERSE ENOUGH TO WARRANT SOFTWARE RESPONSIVE TO THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF THE PROGRAM MANAGERS.

Some of the fundraising packages claim to include "modules" for volunteer information. Be cautious and check these out carefully. Too often the volunteer module is tacked onto the main program as an afterthought and offers little more than mailing list capability.

The point is to recognize that statistics about volunteers and their activities and achievements are diverse enough to warrant software responsive to the unique needs of the program managers. They are related to, yet different, from both personnel records and donor information.

A frequent complaint of volunteer program managers is being told that they cannot purchase dedicated volunteer tracking software because of the need to "integrate" all agency records into one database. That's a reasonable goal, but only if the IT department is willing to assess data needs with those who are knowledgeable about volunteers and then program the existing software to do the job. It is not acceptable to force the volunteer program manager to "live with" an inflexible software package designed to value money over time and talent. As just described, data about volunteers should be of sufficient value to the organization to warrant developing the best system to gather and report truly useful information.

Think through the questions you want and need answered to do the best management of volunteers and to generate the greatest benefits (tangible and intangible) for your organization. Then consider what data will be needed to answer these questions and how you will gather it (forms, reports from volunteers and supervisors, etc.).

Next, determine your software needs to store and search this data, and who will be responsible for entering it. Finally, decide who will produce the actual reports and analyze them, who will receive copies, and who will actually do something in light of what is learned. *NPT*

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