Your Web Site

Does it welcome prospective volunteers?

Your organization's Web site is the most effective recruitment tool at your disposal. Do visitors to your home page learn that volunteers are involved in any aspect of your work? Can they find information on the site about what volunteer positions are open and how to apply if they are interested? Is there an online application form, or at least the name, email address, and telephone number of someone to contact about volunteering?

If not, why not?

There has been a lot of attention given to the proliferating online registries of volunteer opportunities and it is very useful to use these free resources to post what you need volunteers to do. But as so often happens in the Web environment, prospective volunteers who discover you through a general listing – and even those who hear about you offline, too -- ultimately will click to your organization's own Web site to learn more. Will a visit to your site continue the recruitment process or become a dead end with no information pertinent to these visitors?

Start on your home page

The message you send begins on your home page. The home page should welcome all the diverse people you expect to visit your site and help them to find the facts they need. While successful printed material is all about target audiences and limitations, a Web site is all about providing as much information as you'd like.

By structuring this information in layers, the person who loses interest will exit, but the person who is really interested will read as much material as you supply. If prospective volunteers go to your home page and cannot find anything about volunteering, they will infer that volunteers are not very integral to your organization.

Your home page ought to direct traffic. Whether a potential or current client, job seeker, professional colleague, member of the press, student, researcher, financial donor, or volunteer, there needs to be some "clickable" phrase or button for each visitor.

When someone takes the time to click the button about volunteers on your home page, you are communicating with someone who wants more details. You should provide them with as much detail as possible.

Spend some time thinking about the design of a specific space on the site for volunteer news and recruitment. Multiply the value of the work you put into Web design by using these pages for volunteer recognition, as well as for recruitment.

For example, post photographs of volunteer events and activities immediately after they occur. Not only does this make those individual volunteers feel appreciated right away, it reinforces the idea of volunteers as active, year-round contributors for any site visitor, including paid staff, donors, clients, and, yes, prospective volunteers. This changing kaleidoscope of photos also enlivens the site, avoiding stagnant pages.

Use a multi-layered approach. Each heading should offer the option of clicking further for even more information. Organize the main page for volunteers with the following information:

• An introduction to volunteers at your organization. Show why they are important, what they contribute, and who they are. Give data from monthly and annual reports on volunteer achievements;

• What volunteers do. Give a list of volunteer position titles. If something tickles the visitor's interest, clicking on the title will reveal the full job description. Again, you can show photographs showing where this particular assignment works in the agency, as well as additional material such as personal testimonials from volunteers already in this assignment;

• Today's volunteer position openings. Here is where you can highlight current vacancies, being as specific as possible about desired qualifications, necessary time commitment, required schedule. You can even post a "wish list" of skills or schedules needed;

• How to apply. Explain the interviewing and screening process each applicant should expect. Ideally, provide an online application form that can be submitted via email. At a minimum, give the name of the director of volunteer services and an email address and telephone number.

Information for specific target audiences, such as community service ideas for students, corporate employee groups, faith community teams, etc.

The person who takes the time to go through these Web pages will be well-informed and eager to express interest in volunteering. Others will self-screen out.

For membership development

There are some different Web site considerations if yours is an all-volunteer membership organization or if you also have an all-volunteer support group such as an auxiliary or friends group attached to your agency.

Don't stop at simply explaining "how to join." Make sure the site's material is presented in a way that is welcoming to newcomers. Often information is posted for current members who already are familiar with the organization's goals, projects, and jargon. Whenever you mention a committee or a project, make it a "hotlink" and allow site visitors to click onto additional pages of information explaining this activity.

Consider organizing pages with the following topics of value to prospective members:

• Why we want you to become a member;

• How getting more members will help your organization to reach its goals or have an impact through projects;
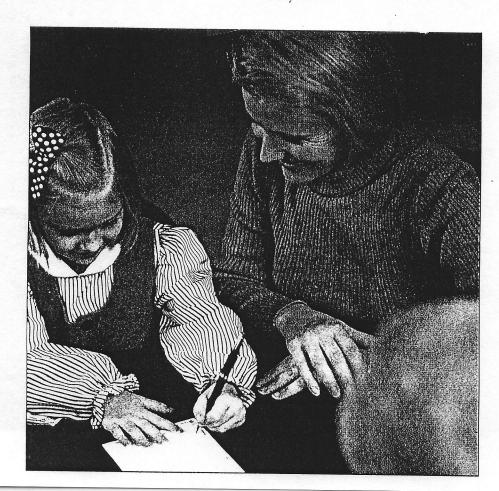
• Who you want as members;

• Express your wishes about finding people with specific skills, or clarify that all ages, both sexes, family groups, etc. are all wanted (or not);

• What are the benefits of joining?;

• Share both the tangible (discounts) and intangible (friendship) perks; and,

• What is expected of new members?

If you want members to work as well as to "join," you should say so, with areas such as:

• The membership process;

• Explain the steps (and timetable) from expressing interest to becoming a full-fledged member. Again, post an online application form or the email address of the membership chair; and,

• Want to test the water?

If it's possible for prospects to attend a meeting or help with a volunteer project before making the commitment to join as a full member, explain how.

The same advice as discussed above applies to combining new membership development with recognition of current members. Post photographs, press releases and other things that will give the visitor a sense of who is involved in your group and what you do.

Your Web contacts

Don't provide online application forms or email addresses if you are not prepared to respond promptly. Netiquette requires fast response to electronic communication. Answer emails within 36 hours of receipt if at all possible. Once you've established contact online, you can then schedule a face-to-face meeting just as with any other volunteer applicant. The Web is a tool to allow prospects to find you. Once you have made contact, you can then put all your regular procedures into place.

Once you have created a volunteer-friendly Web site, let people know about it. Be sure to include your Web address on all stationery, brochures, and newsletters, and mention that there is volunteering information on your Web site in all printed recruitment material. Why? Because most people go to Web sites because of something they have read on paper or been told by a friend, not because they were surfing the Web.

Finally, encourage applicants who telephone for an interview to check out the site before you meet. This will allow you to concentrate more time in person on learning about the prospective volunteer than on giving the facts about your organization.

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