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More

Working Together to Recognize Volunteers...and More

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2014

April has rolled around again, bringing National Volunteer Week to North America (and to other countries over the next months). Most of us have learned the value of showing appreciation all year long, but this designated week gives us the chance to consider how we thank the time donors who are so important to us. In addition, it raises the issue of how ridiculously busy most leaders of volunteers are and how great the potential is for working together to accomplish common objectives.

One such opportunity caught my eye when I was reading a new thread on the online discussion forum, [Administrators of Volunteer Programs in the Performing Arts](#) (AVPPA). It was posted by Hannah Heller, the coordinator of [visitor services at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts](#) in New York City:

Hello! We are rethinking volunteer appreciation here at Lincoln Center and would like to propose a possible exchange program with all of you. We'd like to offer free tours of our campus (valued at \$18/adult) to your volunteers in exchange for free admission to your institutions. We are finding that our volunteers appreciate feeling thanked in more than one way, and hopefully a broad exchange such as this one will contribute to that sense of continual gratitude. And who knows, our volunteers may come back to us with some new learnings from other institutions that may inform and improve our own practices!

If you're interested please contact me directly and we look forward to a fruitful partnership!

It's too early to report how many AVPPA members will join in this collaboration, but bravo, Lincoln Center! Just look at the multiple levels of value in this idea:

- Volunteers who give their time to the arts care about all forms of cultural opportunities. You can bet that having the chance to visit another institution will be appreciated and seen as fun (as opposed to another boring luncheon).

- While for the volunteers the tickets they receive in thanks give free admission to something for which they would otherwise have to pay (a gift with clear monetary value), for the participating institutions this is not necessarily a major expense. Comp tickets are commonplace and a number are set aside each year for many different reasons. If the comps are themselves an *exchange* for something of comparative value, both institutions have covered the cost of thanking volunteers through barter, not cash outlay.
- Key to Hannah's proposal is the *intentional* element of an exchange between groups of like-minded volunteers and, by extension, cross-fertilization among cultural arts volunteer initiatives. So there's a "gift" to each organization as well. This also means that there's an extra measure of recognition for volunteers here. They are not just being given a present of a ticket for something. They will be *ambassadors* for their home organization and are being asked to report back afterwards to return more value to the arts setting they care about (or will have the chance to return the experience when they act as reciprocal tour guides).
- Using the AVPPA discussion forum to float the idea is also wonderful. It costs nothing to ask and, by making the request openly, the potential is there for discovering possible partners beyond what Hannah might be expecting. Further, it spreads the idea to everyone on the list, no matter where located, and that means others might try to generate a similar exchange in their community.

Beyond the Arts



I can just hear the responses now: *But it's so easy for the performing arts to give away tickets! What can I do in a nursing home, literacy program, crime prevention service, or other setting?*

You're right that it is not immediately obvious what thank-you experience might be offered by settings that do not give performances or tours. But maybe we ought to step back and look at our settings with different eyes.

First you must believe that volunteers have chosen your site for a reason. They are not mindlessly giving their time, so why should we not tie recognition into their interest in our mission?

Here are a few ideas to consider.

Talk with Volunteers

Have you ever asked volunteers about what opportunities they would love to have? I first learned the power of this direct approach years ago with volunteers at the Philadelphia Family Court. What did *they* want? They really wanted to see some of the institutions to which the kids on probation were often sent, but which normally are not open to the public. For the cost of renting a bus, we organized several "field trips" over the years to those institutions. Volunteers felt special because they were allowed in and seeing these settings first-hand definitely helped them in talking to the teenagers on probation.

Interestingly, this also reminds us not to immediately discount the idea of a tour, regardless of our type of facility. Many people love “behind-the-scenes” visits and might want to walk through a new wing of a hospital, a residential facility of any kind, a food distribution center, etc. Don’t assume that the environment you take for granted is not interesting to someone who has not seen it before. Hey – we made court volunteers feel recognized by taking them through a detention center!

Find a Common Thread

Seek out several organizations like yours and brainstorm ways you can thank volunteers collectively. Off the top of my head:

- Hold a forum on an important issue in your field. Hospitals, for example, ought to want their volunteers to be informed about the Affordable Care Act (U.S.) or new developments in nuclear medicine or AIDS care today. Invite the volunteers of several hospitals together to hear a knowledgeable speaker on the subject, but then break into smaller discussion groups and let them meet other people who give their time to healthcare. You can invite hospital administrators to attend and perhaps “staff” a display booth about their hospital and thereby talk with volunteers from their facility and from others, too.

Only volunteers are invited to attend this event – it says so on the ticket. But you can then make a news story out of it and talk about it in recruiting new volunteers, especially if this is something that will occur annually.

Note that “healthcare” can bring a lot of organizations together, not just hospitals. If you pick a geriatric health issue, for example, you can include nursing homes, senior centers, area associations for the aging, and more.

- Another approach is by neighborhood. Throw a big block party for all the volunteers working in any agency located within, say, a two-block radius. Nametags indicating where each person gives time are key to this idea, as what you want to do is generate a sense of common purpose to improve or maintain this community.

Please share collective recognition you’ve already done or brainstorm with me and submit some possible ideas.

“Togetherness”

Finally, what ought to be attractive about all of this is that it can *share the work* of volunteer recognition, with far *greater results*. I’ve said before that VRMs too often spend several months a year being, essentially, wedding planners. Also, recognition events are usually done *for* volunteers, rather than *with* them. What’s really important? The menu, the color scheme, the entertainment, the gifties? I think it’s far more important to bring a community together to celebrate its accomplishments. If your “community” is expanded to include a group of devoted individuals from a nearby organization, what could be better?

Every VRM needs and wants to thank volunteers. So why are we doing it in isolation from each other? Exchanges such as what Hannah proposed are there for the asking. So are reciprocal tours, speakers, and other things unique to each setting. When more than one organization gets together, there are more brains and hands to do the tasks necessary. And, of course, it can be exciting for the right volunteers to help in planning and running the event too, since it is so much more than a party.

- What do you think?
- What ways can you think of to collaborate with like-minded or nearby organizations?
- Do you already have examples of this type of collaboration?
- How do you, or can we, engage volunteers in deciding what is the best form of recognition for them?

Related Topics: [Recognition](#)

Submitted on 06 April 2014 by Ms. Regi Mezydlo, CVA, Director, Volunteer Engagment, Chicago Zoological Society/Brookfield Zoo, Brookfield, IL, USA

For several years, the Volunteer Coordinators of Chicagoland's Cultural Institutions (VCCI) have offered tours to our volunteers of each other's facilities during the month of April. Nearly 35 institutions - museums, nature centers, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens large and small - are participating this year. Our group meets quarterly and works on a number of collaborative projects.

Submitted on 03 April 2014 by Deirdre Araujo, Manager Volunteer Services, Exploratorium, San Francisco, USA

Of course!

I'm happy to say that we've been doing this for a while in the Bay Area, at least among cultural institutions.

In fact, we'll be exchanging tours with Aquarium of the Bay during NVW, and hosting their volunteers together with ours on the 23rd. We're dedicating all of April to volunteer appreciation in one form or another.

Thanks for sharing

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