

How To Make A Museum Volunteer Out Of Anyone

By Nancy Johnston Hall
and Karla McGray

WANTED: VOLUNTEERS FOR SCIENCE MUSEUM
(FOR EVERY KIND OF JOB IMAGINABLE).
ANYONE AND EVERYONE QUALIFIED.
THOSE INTERESTED PLEASE APPLY

This ad could easily have been written by The Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM), an institution dedicated to the premise that anyone has a valuable talent or ability useful to the Museum.

The Science Museum of Minnesota is currently dispelling the myth that the typical volunteer is the white, middle aged woman with school age or grown children, and extra time on her hands. Karla McGray, Coordinator of Human Resources of SMM, is looking for ways to involve any member of the community in the Museum's program -- people who might even be surprised themselves to discover there is a place for them at the Museum.

There are several reasons why this approach is a natural and necessary one for SMM. The Museum is in the process of a major expansion program. This expansion includes a domed Omnitheater and three floors of exhibit hall space connected by a skyway to the present Museum in St. Paul.

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In an effort to make this new facility a "people" museum (as opposed to an electro-mechanical museum), involve the community at a maximum level and provide interpreters for the increased Museum program space, the natural solution was a full scope volunteer program (or "human resources" program as SMM has chosen to call it). In making the decision to add this human dimension to all Museum programs and exhibits, the SMM staff has designed the entire Museum with a strong emphasis on participatory activities which can be enriched by volunteer individuals. In this way the volunteer program is an integral part of the overall interpretive design of the new facility.

This humanistic approach pervades the whole Museum in several ways. "Man" is the theme which will unify the three sciences represented -- the physical, cultural and biological. Each of the three floors will explore one aspect of man. The first floor deals with man's own perceptions of himself and the physical world, the second with man as a cultural being, and the third with man as a living animal.

Therefore, any subject which deals with Man is appropriate for study in the Museum. As a consequence, a volunteer with almost any area of interest can fit into this far-reaching program. A volunteer need not have a science background nor an academic background to feel comfortable with his or her own contribution.

The Museum will be seeking many levels of volunteers. A very important group will be the interpreters and demonstrators who will assist the visitors in adding depth to their museum experience. These volunteers will dramatize, and personalize Museum programs. In addition to interpreters and demonstrators, the Museum will be using maintenance volunteers - individuals who will virtually help to keep the Museum running. The biology labs will need animal and insect caretakers, plant growers and even beekeepers. Volunteers with mechanical and electrical abilities will assist in keeping exhibits in good operating order and contribute their expertise in alternative ways of planning exhibits.

Those volunteers with expertise in specialized areas may be used as volunteer trainers. Volunteers with educational backgrounds may provide in-service workshops on communication skills and learning theories. A specialist from the Heart Association might train volunteers to work in an exhibit area on the circulatory system. Or a professional potter might assist in training a volunteer to demonstrate for visitors how primitive cooking pots were made. A volunteer from the Weavers Guild may teach or interpret Mayan back strap weaving.

Karla McGray will also be looking for "volunteer managers" to assist her in coordinating this complex volunteer Program. "A person with extensive volunteer experience and knowledge of basic management skills could very easily function in a volunteer-volunteer management position here."

Besides recruiting people with a wide diversity of talent, training and interests, the Museum will be making a special effort to involve many age levels of volunteers and many sectors of the community in its volunteer program.

Physically handicapped persons, for example, will be recruited to be an essential part of the Handicapped Resource Center in the new Museum. The Resource Center, located near the Museum entrance, has been developed as a place where the handicapped visitor can find information on specially designed equipment and programs and obtain general advice on how they can maximize their visit to the Museum. This area is an excellent place for the handicapped volunteer -- one who understands the unique problems which face the disabled visitor.

The exhibits and activities in this area will also give the non-handicapped visitor an opportunity to understand what it is like to

have a disability. With the help of audio-distortion equipment, for instance, the visitors can discover for themselves what deafness is like. Formal or informal presentations by handicapped volunteers will add significant meaning to this program area.

The Museum is also exploring programs in the Twin Cities area for mentally retarded persons. Hopefully this versatile facility will serve to provide itself as a resource for programs seeking ways to involve mentally retarded individuals in meaningful experiences in the community.

A variety of ethnic groups from the metropolitan area will be recruited and can offer special enrichment to the cultural exhibit areas. By sharing cultural crafts and traditions, these volunteers may add a new dimension to programs on an on-going basis or for special events related to ethnic holidays.

During the next year, the Museum will be inviting senior citizens to volunteer, informing them that they are very much needed. This thrust will be a part of the Museum's involvement in a statewide "life long learning" program supported by Vice President Mondale. The Museum feels that this particular group can enrich almost any area by sharing personal life experiences of historical value or contributing special acquired skills. In the Weather Station an older person may recount the "great Drought" of the 30's or share the experience of the Armistice Day blizzard. A retired television engineer could act as a consultant on the Communications Center and interpret this area to visitors once it is in operation. The Museum is already borrowing the knowledge and help of a retired 3M Company scientist in setting up a physics workshop.

This workshop will also be used by volunteers from the other end of the age spectrum. Interested junior high and high school age students will be able to work on special projects here with the aid of "advisor" volunteers from the scientific or educational community.

Staff members in the Museum have been assessing ways to involve children more directly in the Museum as volunteers. Traditionally this group visits the Museum with parents or teachers and is not given the opportunity to share their own perspectives with others. Being in the Museum environment as a volunteer would help to stimulate a young person's enthusiasm for learning and enhance his personal growth while facilitating other children in learning.

The Science Museum of Minnesota will approach the corporate and business community with information about volunteer opportunities uniquely designed for working individuals. Exploring the concept of "release time," the Museum hopes to assist companies in fulfilling community involvement contributions. For companies not affording their employees this benefit, evening and weekend commitments will be negotiated for those individuals needing personal satisfaction and gratification outside of their work experience.

To aid many parents who would like to volunteer, the Museum is exploring the possibility of developing a day care situation, perhaps even in the Museum itself. This may be an area to involve University child development students or a 4H student needing to fulfill a child care project. It's an exciting concept and could facilitate unpaid staff in making their volunteer experience easier to arrange.

For every volunteer, involvement with the Museum will be an educational experience. Ongoing in-service workshops and training programs conducted by specialists and staff will provide valuable experiences for volunteers interested in acquiring additional job skills. The Science Museum will be keeping detailed records of training and skills acquired by each volunteer. These records will help the SMM staff in writing job recommendations for volunteers seeking future employment and can be a valuable addition to their resumes. The Museum plans to negotiate with Twin Cities Universities to offer its volunteers the opportunity to have their experiences evaluated and assessed for college credit.

Volunteering at The Science Museum of Minnesota will also be a form of community education. A volunteer will be able to select or be placed in an area of interest, expand his/her knowledge in this area through an intense training program and spend as much time volunteering in this area as he/she chooses. When the volunteer is ready for additional growth, he/she can either receive additional training in the same area or select another area of interest and add on to their skills with a new program. This "add-on" educational approach allows the volunteer flexibility plus the opportunity to increase his/her knowledge and skills at a speed that is comfortable for them.

The Museum will be making a special effort over the next year and a half to develop this Human Resources program and recruit and involve volunteers from many diverse communities. Each volunteer will have something special to contribute drawing from his or her own personal

or professional background. In bringing this variety of personal experiences to the Museum programs, SMM will be a continually growing and changing place. The Science Museum of Minnesota's all-inclusive volunteer program drew this response from Barbara Fertig, Coordinator, Center for Museum Education, "To my knowledge, no other museum or science center is attempting to involve so many kinds of volunteers on so many levels...(it) points an exciting new direction for museums."