



## Opinions That Matter

*Volunteers are a good information source*

Despite the common wisdom that volunteers are "community, representatives," does your organization tap them for insight about the community or for feedback on how well you are doing? Useful input from volunteers does not necessarily surface spontaneously, so you may be overlooking a critical source of information close at hand.

Volunteers bring different perspectives to an agency than do employees or clients. This other point of view may result from being less vested in formal professional procedures, or from being younger or older, or from simply having the distance that a part-time schedule allows.

Of course, for volunteers to be of greatest help they need accurate information on which to base their opinions. On a regular basis, keep volunteers informed about new services, changes in personnel, issues impacting your agency. Consider whether periodic meetings to inform volunteers about plans for the future might not yield positive results. Add volunteers to your newsletter mailing list or to in-house memo distribution.

Volunteers are too often the invisible

constituents of the organization, affected by decisions reached, but not consulted. Establishing channels for input is especially important at times of change or transition, when volunteers may feel affected by what is happening, but "out of the loop."

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Here are a few simple strategies for getting useful feedback from volunteers:

- Ask them. It can be done informally and formally, but be sure to solicit the opinions of volunteers. Their point of view can be valuable on any subject from the proposed new logo design to what clients think about a particular service offered. Remember that volunteers often are in a great position to hear what

clients are saying.

- Schedule time as often as monthly for administrators to meet representative volunteers individually and in small groups as a "think tank." This doubles as meaningful volunteer recognition.

- Make sure that any agency program evaluation includes the surveying of volunteers as well as employees and clients.

- During orientation, be sure to explain to volunteers how and when to express opinions, both critical and complimentary. Have you determined the best method? How might paid staff react to unexpected

- Train volunteers in recognizing the difference between rumors or overheard conversations and comments made by clients or visitors that should be reported to paid staff. This is not an exercise in spying. Everyone has a stake in the best customer service possible. Volunteers are often on the front lines and can observe things employees may not see or notice.

- Consider asking for specific data, such as giving reception desk workers a checklist of "warning signs" to report: excessive waiting periods, outbursts in the waiting area, confidential information discussed in the open, etc.

- Recruit active direct-service volunteers to serve on agency planning and evaluation committees -- and expect them to participate fully.

- Suggest to the communications/public relations staff that the volunteer perspective be reflected in publications such as newsletters. This might be done by guest columns written by volunteers or by periodic interviews. Certainly, any article featuring a special program ought to include quotes from volunteers involved.

- Use the volunteer recognition event as a time to encourage assessment by volunteers as well as to thank them. This is usually an event that board members and top adminis-

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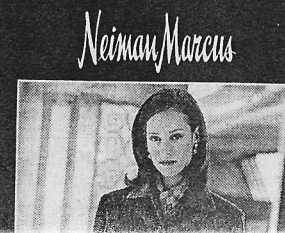
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## ON VOLUNTEERS

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trators attend, so you have an important captive audience listening to what volunteers have to say.

### Gaining insight, not just opinions

Not all volunteer ideas will be creative or even realistic, which is also true of employees' opinions. But, they may carry a kernel of insight, especially if the volunteers are more similar to the population served than are the staff.

*Use exercises such as Force Field Analysis or techniques developed for Quality Circles to stimulate targeted thinking.*

You may find that some volunteers do their assignments routinely, without much thought, or focused only on their particular unit. Or, their assignment may be done off-site so they have few opportunities to connect with what is being done by the rest of the organization. Thus, be prepared to train

people in giving input. For example, don't ask vague, general questions like: "What do you think of X?"

Instead, guide the discussion with questions like: "Can you identify two positive and two negative aspects to this program?" or "Given your knowledge of this neighborhood, how might you expect local residents to react?"

Volunteers -- and paid staff -- may react to this quest for feedback with surprise. If indeed volunteers are "different" from the employees, the tradition may have become one of deference to the "professional" opinion. The thinking may be, for example, how can a bus driver or even an architect offer advice to a social worker or doctor in a hospice? It may help to identify the frame of reference volunteers bring that employees may not possess.

The volunteers, for example, may have personal experience with the problem or service in a way the paid workers do not. Volunteers may be skilled in good business practices, marketing, and other areas of expertise that would help the organization to see issues in a broader context.

Don't assume everyone values -- or even knows about -- the background of volunteers. Bring this out in the open.

Another way to elicit useful feedback is to conduct focus groups with some structure. Use exercises such as Force Field

Analysis or techniques developed for Quality Circles to stimulate targeted thinking. If necessary, give "homework" assignments, asking volunteers to consider questions in advance and come prepared to discuss their responses.

Show initiative in setting up a feedback loop. You may encounter resistance. This might surface in seemingly innocuous actions as someone saying they don't have time for regular meetings with volunteers.

Designate someone on staff to be responsible for volunteer input. The organization's coordinator of volunteers can implement many of the ideas above directly.

It is important to record the opinions,

observations, and suggestions made by volunteers and submit summary reports. Circulate these to key decision makers and provide some written follow-up response that can be circulated to volunteers. Once volunteers see that their comments have been passed along and some even implemented, you will have established a pattern of input that stimulates better and more creative ideas -- even without being asked.

*Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, Inc., a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism.*

## Nonprofits Raised \$91 Billion

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may offer many more significant marketing opportunities in the future.

Other findings of the study show that membership organizations raised a total of \$46 billion in direct/interactive donations and sales and that social services raised \$24 billion.

The report also shows that the area in which nonprofits showed the most leadership was growth rates of direct/interactive expenditures. Social services ranked second among the 51 other industries and led the nonprofit sector with a growth rate of 11.2 percent, nearly

twice the national average.

Education led the way among nonprofits for advertising, with \$3.2 billion in expenditures.

The report indicates that there are 1,956,223 direct/interactive jobs in the nonprofit sector, with that number expected to grow to 2,460,340 by the year 2003, a sector-wide growth rate of 5.7 percent, compared to the national average of 1.9 percent. It also shows that 14 percent of the people making a living by direct/interactive jobs work in the nonprofit sector.

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