

# Knowledge Into Action

## 'Tip' your volunteer recruitment effort

Malcolm Gladwell shares many intriguing facts and observations about selling products and disseminating ideas in his popular book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000, Little, Brown). Although the book was much discussed in business circles, the information is highly applicable to nonprofit situations, including increasing the success of volunteer recruitment techniques.

### The 'Stickiness Factor'

The "Stickiness Factor" is a good example of a recruitment technique. Gladwell recounted the attempt of a Yale University professor to encourage students to get a free tetanus shot as part of an experiment on fear. He produced booklets in several versions that described the seriousness of tetanus in ever-increasing vividness.

Questionnaires showed that the information campaign worked. Regardless of the amount of fear instilled, the majority of the students were educated about the dangers of tetanus. But, only 3 percent of the students actually went to the infirmary to get their shot. They were not translating their knowledge into action.

Finally, the professor included a map of the campus circling the exact location of the health center and listing the hours that the shots would be available – and that "tipped" 28 percent of the students into getting vaccinated.

Since, undoubtedly, many students had no real need of the map to find the infirmary, Gladwell concluded:

*...what the tetanus invitation needed in order to tip was not an avalanche of new or additional information. What it needed was a subtle but significant change in presentation. The students needed to know how to fit the tetanus stuff into their lives ... once the advice became practical and personal, it became memorable.*

How might a volunteer recruiter put an understanding of the Stickiness Factor to work? First, don't assume everyone knows what you might consider basic information about your organization, even who you are or what you do. In fact, this is as true for people who already have some contact with you as for those who are clearly newcomers.

Organizations change all the time, as do the needs of clients and service projects. It's quite possible for someone to be generally informed about your agency and yet be in the dark about recent developments.

You can apply this principle of "don't assume" to the way you recruit volunteers in some very practical ways:

- Beware of acronyms. Always translate any alphabet soup labels applied to projects.

- Explain anything that has a special name, especially if it's not descriptive. So rather than saying, "Join our Rainbow Project," the message will communicate more if it's worded, "Join our Rainbow Project and help children discover the world of books."

- Consider possible misconceptions people might have about your organization, either because of outdated information or by inferring something from your name.

For example, someone considering volunteering for a children's museum might understandably assume that volunteers interact with children. But if the available volunteer assignments are behind the scenes or focused on supporting parents, an applicant who wants to work with children will be disappointed. So, describe the volunteer work correctly.

Second, make sure your recruitment message means something to the prospective volunteer personally, or it won't stick. Stop concentrating on explaining the gravity of your clients' needs or the significance of your services. All this does is evoke guilt in people who simply cannot respond to every good cause. Besides, most nonprofits are worthy of support – so what makes your organization memorable?

The way to increase the response rate to your volunteer recruitment message is to develop a connection with personal interests, concerns, or hopes. Here are a few ideas:

- Most nonprofit causes are overwhelming in scope and some individuals understandably believe that they lack adequate skills to be of help. You can make a real impression simply by clearly stating: "Training is provided and volunteers receive ongoing support."

- Everyone today is stressed concerning lack of time. Prospective volunteers might believe that they have too little time to contribute anything meaningful. Again, some simple phrases added to your recruitment pitch can make a difference in response: "We offer a variety of volunteer assignments requiring different amounts of time and we can be flexible in scheduling your hours" or "Even three hours every other week can have an impact" or "We'll work together to find the right schedule for you."

- Given the number of single and divorced adults today, it is reasonable to assume that a percentage of your prospective volunteers are seeking social outlets. They want to meet interesting new people while doing good. Use photos to show volunteers of different ages, both genders, and other diversity.

Show volunteers interacting, rather than just individual head shots. If it works in your setting, note that you have designated some shifts for "singles only."

- Consider whether people might fear something about your organization: personal safety in your neighborhood, viewing conditions that are disturbing, or other concerns. Address these by pre-empting them. In a matter-of-fact way, note that volunteers are on a buddy system at night or provide a map showing the proximity of parking.

## ON VOLUNTEERS

Again, positive photographs can allay fears and attract prospects, as can audio clips of actual client voices. The content of what they say (perhaps explaining how much they enjoy being with volunteers) is not as important as the tone (gee, this person isn't scary at all).

### The 'Power of the Few'

A central principle in *The Tipping Point* is the "Power of the Few." Gladwell distinguished between Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen, each of whom play a different role in enlarging the number of people affected by a message or trend (creating a "social epidemic").

Although this oversimplifies the concept, Connectors are individuals who know an unusually large number of other people across many fields and interests. Mavens are those who are extremely knowledgeable and want to share their information with others. Salespeople are enthusiastic persuaders. If you want to be effective in recruiting volunteers, you need to tap all three types in your campaign.

Don't just indiscriminately broadcast your need for volunteers. Carefully define the people who have the highest likelihood of having the talents you need for the position and the potential to find the assignment attractive. Next, find a few Connectors who can cut your costs in time and effort by leading you to the right contacts. For example, who on campus might have the best database of student leaders' names?

Interestingly, Gladwell pointed out that the reason the Zagat restaurant guides are so successful is that "the reviews are the reports of volunteers – of diners who want to share their opinions with others." Volunteers already on board may be your recruitment Mavens. Ask them why they volunteered in the first place and why they remain committed.

Quote them liberally in print or record their testimonials in audio or video. Plainly ask them to talk to others about their satisfaction in volunteering with your organization.

Ask those volunteers who are the best communicators to become a Speakers Bureau. The Mavens have given you the content, the Connectors have provided the contacts, and now these Salespeople will articulate the message. You do not need a big recruitment budget or glossy brochures if you can initiate an effective word-of-mouth campaign. Start a social epidemic and infect prospective volunteers with your enthusiasm. ■

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