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Encouraging Entrepreneurial Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Last week I had lunch with a number of staff members from Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning (<http://templeigc.org/index.htm>), a national resource started in 1979 "dedicated to strengthening communities by bringing generations together to meet the needs of individuals and families throughout the life cycle." It's a bustling, innovative place. The focus of my contact was their "Coming of Age" program (<http://www.comingofage.org/>), which – as it says on its Web site – "promotes age 50+ civic engagement and learning in Greater Philadelphia."

It was the discussion about the term "civic engagement" that sparked this Hot Topic. While Coming of Age and the Center itself are deeply involved in supporting volunteering of all sorts, these colleagues took pains to distinguish their efforts as "bigger than just volunteering." Pressed to explain further, they quoted research and observation that Baby Boomers want something "different" from traditional volunteer work, particularly more entrepreneurial, take-this-and-run-with-it opportunities.

On one hand, there are some uses of the term "civic engagement" that are indeed broader in scope. For example, it can include urging people to vote or even to run for office – to exercise their obligations and potential power as *citizens*. It can mean participation in school board hearings, protesting zoning changes, and other public action for the political common good. While one could argue that such activities also fit under the broad umbrella of "volunteering" (as they are voluntary and unremunerated), they also could be seen as the exercise of the responsibilities of citizenship rather than the "above and beyond" of volunteering for a cause.

But if you browse the Coming of Age Web site, you'll soon see that they are mainly urging *volunteer* involvement, though they prefer the phrase "civic engagement." Frequent readers will know that a recurring theme of my Hot Topics over the years has been the entrenched perception of volunteering as denoting low-level, free help. Renaming *volunteering* to *civic engagement* is simply one more attempt to make the presumed unappealing more appealing.

The Light Bulb Comes On

In the days following this lunch conversation, I found myself mulling over the implications. First I thought the usual: *if only volunteer program managers were better (or louder) at telling the story of all the incredible activities volunteers are already doing.* But then I saw the entire situation in a completely different light.

I am a strong advocate of applying targeting marketing techniques to recruit the best volunteers. To do this, I advise designing meaningful volunteer position descriptions first. And this process works.

But this traditional approach also reinforces the conventional idea that it is the role of the organization *both* to define the needs and to select the ways the needs will be met. This is fine up to a point. But it perpetuates the notion that volunteers are “helpers,” the enthusiastic labor bringing the organization’s strategies to life. Pre-developed assignments also do not welcome totally new approaches to the problems at hand, may not evoke discovery of unexpected talents offered by a prospective volunteer, and therefore can lead to squeezing square pegs into round holes.

What would happen if, instead, we crafted at least some of our recruitment messages differently? What if we described the needs but then put out a call for people with creative ideas for how to meet them? That would even go beyond civic engagement to *social entrepreneurship*, yet another 21st century phrase adding some pizzazz to volunteering.

For example:

- *Our community has a long list of elderly people living alone who have few family members or friends for support. We are providing services such as visiting nurses and home chore service, but this does not meet the need for socializing, or for feeling valued and wanted. So we are seeking volunteers with some great ideas for putting smiles on our clients’ faces. What can you do to make this happen?*
- *The number of arrests of juveniles for violent crimes is increasing. The police and the courts are doing what they can within the process of law, but clearly more needs to be done to prevent delinquency and to deter recidivism. As a member of the community, can you suggest some new approaches to this problem – and give your time and energy to test out your ideas?*
- *The community orchestra is always in need of more money and we run several fun and revenue-producing events throughout the year (with which you can help in various ways, too!). But we know that these events do not appeal to everyone who might want to support our vital performances. How would you put the “fun” into fundraising? Work with us to experiment with an event you would attend and see if you can challenge the amount of income produced now.*

Consider the premises on which these appeals are based:

1. It is possible that someone outside the organization may, in fact, have a great idea no one has yet developed inside it. Innovative thinking can come from the most unexpected places. Why not discover and harness it?

1. Some people (maybe Baby Boomers, but also others) are more attracted to being innovators than to filling an established assignment, no matter how valid the assignment may be. So offering a chance to be creative or experimental may recruit a totally new population of volunteers.
1. People who participate in crafting the goals and strategies of their work are always more vested in the outcomes (which is as true of paid staff as of volunteers). So this may be a counterbalance to the trend towards single-day service, which is the quintessential expression of “here’s my energy for a few hours, but not my commitment.”

But, But, But...

I can hear the objections now, so let me also clarify a bit more.

First and foremost, I would never suggest that you should word the invitation to be entrepreneurial as a promise to act on every idea offered. Of course not. Some ideas will be foolish, or expensive, or even illegal (not necessarily criminal, but against health and safety standards, for example). So your recruitment message must be clear in stipulating that you are seeking ideas, will consider them all carefully, but retain final say over what is done in the name of your organization.

The important thing, however, is to get a wide range of people thinking on your behalf! Even an unworkable idea can potentially have the seed of a concept that leads to something quite extraordinary. But only if you and others in your organization genuinely welcome out-of-the-box points of view.

Next, the person who has a great idea may be completely unable to strategize how to make it real. So you also do not want to promise that acceptance of a concept means the volunteer will be in charge.

You also do not have to ask for completely new approaches. If you definitely want to continue one-to-one at-home visiting, recruit for new ideas for activities to be done *during* the visit, or on different schedules, or whatever. Rather than a new fundraising event, elicit creativity for “fringe” activities to raise more money around it. And so on.

Finally, if you do not want to give new volunteers the reins to enact their ideas directly, allow them to be a think tank at the preparation phase, or advisors throughout the process.

Whether we are dealing in social entrepreneurship, civic engagement, donated professional services, *pro bono* work, or – dare we say it? – volunteering, our mission is to mobilize as wide a spectrum of community members as possible to meet real needs. We can rise to the challenge of living up to a new name. As long as we also shine a spotlight on what’s already being done by volunteers that’s worthy of note, and perhaps surprising to the uninitiated.

- *What do you think of this approach?*

- Are you already recruiting entrepreneurial or creative volunteers? How is it working for you?
- Has this essay suggested a need around which you might ask for strategic help? Please share.

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Posted on 21 November 2006 by Jayne Cravens, consultant, Bonn, Germany

It's all volunteering... but traditional volunteer managers and the formal associations that represent them, I'm sad to say, have ignored these emerging trends in "community involvement," and are being left on the sidelines. As I've said before (and will no doubt say again), wouldn't it be sad if two parallel groups emerge regarding volunteer management & support, all because of language and vision?

Posted on 9 November 2006 by Sue Irey, Community Volunteer Coordinator, City of Carlsbad, Carlsbad, California, USA

This may be one of the ways to avoid the Baby Boomer Bust as we meet the new era of volunteering.

Posted on 9 November 2006 by H Roberts, President, PLNJ Inc., Keyport, New Jersey, USA

In framing some of Susan's remarks, I would add that when we submit recruitment opps to newspapers, radio stations, Internet portals and local resources, like Volunteer Centers, that we connect directly with individuals who will edit and revamp our agency volunteer lists. All too often, the message becomes a short sound bite. It is an important step and PR opportunity to re-educate professionals from communication and marketing trades on what we hope to attract, encourage and ignite when inviting creative, forward-thinking talent to our agencies. Work closely with content editors.

Posted on 5 November 2006 by Jennie Gunther, Eldercare Inc., DT & Volunteer Manager, South Australia, Australia

I am really excited to read this discussion. This is the way in which I have been thinking myself, but have met resistance from colleagues - in fact, I was foolish enough to expound on this in a job interview for a high profile and conservative organisation. I did not get the position!

I do believe that this innovative approach is the way forward, both for volunteer satisfaction and for the continuous improvements that all organisations are seeking.

Posted on 5 November 2006 by Dick Goldberg, Coming of Age, Director, Philadelphia, PA USA

You write in reference to the Coming of Age website, "If you browse (it), you'll soon see that they are mainly urging volunteer involvement, though they prefer the phrase 'civic engagement.' Frequent readers will know that a recurring theme of my Hot Topics over the years has been the entrenched perception of volunteering as denoting low-level, free help. Renaming volunteering to civic engagement is simply one more attempt to make the presumed unappealing more appealing."

I don't think this is a renaming or an attempt to make something unappealing, appealing. So many traditions of service exalt volunteering that I am hard put to see that there is a widespread

perception that it is denigrated to being “low-level.” Also, I see “civic engagement” as casting a wider net. It includes an enriched and enriching experience for the person so engaged, often serves as a means for learning, can produce social change, recognizes in its very language that we all are neighbors in the same “village” and more. “Volunteer” is a beautiful word but it doesn’t always suggest these things. We use both “volunteer” and “civic engagement opportunity” on the Coming of Age website as well many of the other terms included in your “What’s in a Name?” handout out of respect to our colleagues and the language that they choose to use.

Posted on 5 November 2006 by Gail Barrera, Northern Colo. Aids Project, Volunteer Coordinator, Ft. Collins, CO USA

I am the volunteer manager at the Northern Colorado Aids Project and am wondering how I can apply this to our organization. My challenge has been to recruit volunteers because of the stigma about HIV and the people who are affected. I have gotten some response from some of the more liberal churches, but the market to target seems to be those who are already infected, which leads to another huge problem because it is a very small gay community and most of those interested are also clients. I find in general this is a really bad idea, but the agency has a history of allowing it. Any suggestions?

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