

How to Identify, Recruit and Motivate Volunteers

A non-profit board member once asked me to name an outstanding volunteer and discuss the characteristics that make a great volunteer.

I immediately thought of **Jim Wolfensohn** who contributed so much to Carnegie Hall and **Brooke Astor** who brought so much to The New York Public Library – outstanding, energetic people who were willing to devote an enormous amount of time to their volunteer assignments, acts as public spokespeople, reach out to their own personal contacts, and contribute the type of leadership gift that sets the pace for others. You're probably thinking, "well that was nice for Carnegie Hall and the Library, but I don't have a Brooke Astor or a Jim Wolfensohn." Neither did they until they identified and recruited them.

The perfect volunteer finds you: knocks on your door one Thursday afternoon at 3:00, asks if seven days a week is enough time for you, writes a million dollar check that night, never needs instructions and never gets bored or frustrated with the work. But the perfect volunteer doesn't exist. It's up to you to find and motivate them. Is it hard? Yes. Is it worth it? Absolutely, because the work, wisdom and drive of talented volunteers is invaluable. Their leadership and labor is what makes our work succeed. Especially now, when the need is so great and budgets are so tight, the ability to recruit and motivate good volunteers is one of the most cost-effective skills a fund raiser can perfect.

To identify volunteers, don't try to do it alone. Ask a group of those closest to your organization to help: your Development Committee, last year's event committee, a group of major donors. Don't expect them to pull names out of a hat. Prepare a list of potential people to jog their memories. And don't confine that list to people you already know about. Instead, make it as expansive as possible, including:

- Lists of board members and top donors to other organizations in your area.
- Constituents (such as grateful patients if you're a hospital).
- Social lists (such as private club lists or area social registers).
- Business leaders and other successful people who get things done – even if they haven't been involved with your organization before.

I find that, in one meeting, people can handle reviewing a list of up to 150 names. Determine the characteristics you're looking for and have the meeting's participants sort these names into "Yes's," "Maybe's" and "No's." In a follow-up session have them thoroughly discuss the "Maybe's." You'll end up with a list of top candidates for the job.

To recruit volunteers, the first thing you need is the right person or team to make

the approach. The peer-to-peer approach is the best.

- Is there a board member or other volunteer who knows the prospect, even if just barely?
 - If not, is there someone with your organization who knows the prospect, even if just barely?
 - If not, is there someone with your organization whose personal prestige opens doors?
 - Or, will the prospect meet with your board chairman and/or executive director out of respect for their role in your excellent organization?
- If the prospects have never been involved with your organization, consider holding a cultivation cocktail party or suggest that the recruiters bring their prospects on a tour – to see the students, attend a performance, or visit the emergency room and meet a highly committed doctor or social worker. As soon as the recruiter (or team) has set the appointment, they need you to prepare a good recruiting package. Don't forget to include a description of the volunteer job.

To motivate your volunteers once they are on board, keep the following in mind:

- First and foremost, they need to stay excited about your organization's mission, so consider taking a "time out" from meetings to highlight a new program, teacher, medical break-through or other success story. Invite volunteers regularly to visit rehearsals or classrooms to see your organization in action. And don't forget a retreat for strategic planning and building camaraderie.
- Because volunteers need to know what's expected of them, make sure to provide clear instructions and thorough training. Your case statement and a written plan for your campaign or event, with job descriptions, time-lines and policies will help. A training workshop for a group of volunteers (don't forget refreshments) can be fun as well as educational and get them excited and eager to begin.
- Volunteers need good follow-up from you, so it's very important that you are organized and keep in touch on a regular basis.
- They also need goals so they can evaluate their progress and challenges to reinvigorate them when they get tired.
- Specific terms of job commitment – which make for consistent, orderly turnover – are the best way to keep a group fresh and keep individual volunteers motivated.
- Some volunteers need to be involved in meetings and decision-making to stay interested, while others don't want to be so sort out who's who and work to accommodate each.

- Finally, above all, like everyone else, ***volunteers need compliments and encouragement. So let them know you appreciate them.*** Let them know they're doing a great job. Recognize and celebrate their successes. Remember they are donating a good deal of valuable personal time, and don't just assume that if they are doing a great job they will know it – continue to support them every step of the way.