

Cultivating long-term relationships with volunteers

Salespeople know that it's easier to keep a current customer than it is to find a new one, and the same can be said of your volunteers. Those already in the fold understand your goals and mission and are already engaged in helping you bring them to life. That's why concentrating a good portion of your volunteer management efforts on keeping current volunteers engaged and active for the long haul can have a big payoff.

5 ideas for engaging hearts and minds

It isn't realistic to expect zero attrition among volunteers. But here are five things you can do to keep volunteers happy and engaged with your organization's activities and mission:

1. Use their time well. Your volunteers are giving you something very valuable — their time. Use that time efficiently by having well-planned and well-prepared activities for volunteers to accomplish.

Try to match their individual talents to your needs, rather than just randomly assigning whatever activity needs to get done. For example, if one of your volunteers has a marketing background, ask him or her to review the advertising and media strategies for an upcoming event. Or tap the skills of a computer-savvy volunteer to update your Web site.

2. Help them “move up.” Develop a “career path” for your volunteers the way you would for a new employee. This might mean progressing from the simplest tasks to responsibility for more complex projects or supervision of other volunteers. Increasing their role and giving them new and different things to do can help quell boredom and burnout.

3. Seek their input. Your long-tenured volunteers likely view your organization from a different perspective than your staff or board and are, therefore, a valuable source of insight. Set up one-on-one meetings periodically to ask volunteers how they think things are going and if they see any opportunities you could be capitalizing on.

You might not be able to implement every idea, but initiating the conversation communicates respect for their opinions. It also shows that you regard them as valued team members in reaching your nonprofit's goals.

4. ***Track outcomes.*** Keep track of the hours your volunteers put in, document the work they do and correlate this work with the nonprofit's outcomes and accomplishments. This information will help attract new recruits by showing how important volunteers are to reaching your goals. And the data reinforces long-term bonds with those who already volunteer because it shows that you value what they do enough to quantify it.
5. ***Show your appreciation.*** It's easy to take for granted the volunteers who show up week after week, and do what you ask of them efficiently and effectively. Let them know that you appreciate the time and skills they make available to your organization.

In fact, you probably can't say "thank you" too much. Board members should regularly send thank you notes, and volunteer managers should take every opportunity to express their appreciation. Formal volunteer appreciation events are good, but frequent, heartfelt "thanks for all your help" conversations are even better.

Everyone wins

Engaged and enthusiastic volunteers are an important aspect of every successful organization. Working to build deep and satisfying relationships with your volunteers allows you to spend more time developing volunteers instead of seeking out new ones. It also gives volunteers the opportunity to strengthen their ties to your organization.