



Volunteer Engagement

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Quality
Service
Marketing

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Introduction

In May 2010, I wrote a blog post series that explored volunteer engagement and management. These posts clearly hit a nerve, and I was encouraged to consolidate and share this content as an e-book.

Volunteer engagement is a critical topic for nonprofits that need to capture the attention and availability of more unemployed and underemployed workers willing to volunteer time and energy. But the match of nonprofits and able volunteers won't work if volunteer talent is not effectively managed.

The following "chapters" are based on my original blog posts, with minor editing to fit an e-book format. (Each chapter title is linked to the actual post for anyone interested in reading submitted comments.) It is my hope that this concise treatment on the topic of engaging volunteers will be widely shared among the nonprofit community and used to stimulate discussion *and* action to improve volunteer engagement and management.

Chapter 1: [A Volunteer Story](#)

I was excited to be a first-time volunteer at a special holiday party for children and their families hit hard by the economy. When I arrived at the banquet hall I was stunned by the number of buses already in the parking lot and the constant stream of bus loads arriving from churches and community groups. I entered the fray and squeezed my way through the crowd to find volunteer registration.

The volunteer table was chaos central. I introduced myself, explained I had signed up to serve the dinner shift, and asked about the check-in process. After shuffling paper and unable to find the sign-in sheet, one of the volunteers handed me a volunteer button, pointed to the dining hall, and told me to just go in and help out.

The room was set up with rows of tables to accommodate hundreds of people, and there seemed to be hundreds more milling about. Two long buffet stations were set up at one end of the banquet room and were lined with volunteers dishing out turkey, ham, stuffing, potatoes, green beans, rolls & butter; other volunteers ran back and forth to the kitchen to replenish the serving stations. More volunteers cleared dishes while groups of guests waited to be seated. I attached myself to a volunteer who had worked the event before, then quickly learned the ropes to make myself useful. Fortunately there were more than enough - even too many - volunteers to help out.

At the end of my shift, I thanked my fellow volunteer for taking me under her wing. There was no official “sign out” of volunteers, so I just waved to the people working the volunteer table and left the banquet hall. It was my first and last time at the event.

As a long time volunteer involved in a variety of organizations, I was surprised by the lack of advance communications, on-site instructions, and post-event acknowledgment encouraging volunteers to return. The good news is the holiday party attracts an abundance of volunteers; the bad news is not all of them return. Note: the event is organized and hosted through the generosity of a private company, not by a nonprofit. Nonetheless, it illustrates that volunteer engagement requires more than a “if-you-build-it-they-will-come” approach.

“Sadly, most nonprofits do not view their volunteers as strategic assets and have not developed ways to take full advantage of them.”

- excerpt from [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) article [“The New Volunteer Workforce.”](#)

Effective volunteer engagement and management are critical for nonprofits that need to capture the attention and availability of more unemployed and underemployed workers willing to volunteer their time and energy. But the match of nonprofits and able volunteers won't work if volunteer talent is not effectively managed.

Chapter 2: [Understanding the Volunteer Experience](#)

Passion for the mission aside, employees and volunteers are not immune to becoming disenchanted with the nonprofits they serve. Unlike employees, however, it's easier for volunteers to leave when they become disengaged.

The [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) (CNSC) addressed the problem of volunteer turnover in a [2009 research brief](#):

“... over one third of volunteers (35.5%) drop out of service each year and do not serve with any organizations the following year. While new volunteers may be walking through the door of an organization, they may not stay, or they may be replacing an existing volunteer. This high rate of volunteer turnover stunts the productivity of nonprofit organizations as they focus on replacing volunteers instead of maximizing impact.”

Nonprofits cannot afford to lose this talent in a down economy when they're increasingly hard pressed to serve growing needs with fewer resources. That's why the volunteer experience is receiving renewed attention.

To better manage this experience, you need to understand who your volunteers are, what motivates them to become involved and stay with your organization, and what contributes and detracts from the quality of their experience with you. Volunteer motivations vary by individual and intensity; reasons range from wanting to “give back” ... to sharing skills and/or learning new ones ... to needing to feel needed ... to getting involved to stay busy. Regardless of their respective motivations, most volunteers choose to get involved in a particular organization because they share a belief in the cause/mission and wish to make a difference.

Nonprofits can learn about their volunteer talent through research and informal listening posts that include volunteer surveys, roundtables, staff and volunteer feedback, etc. Here are sample questions that will provide important insight on volunteer motivations and expectations:

- What about this organization appealed to you to get you involved?
- What about this organization keeps you involved?
- What do you expect to give and get from your volunteer involvement?
- What do you enjoy most about your volunteer experience here?
- What suggestions do you have for staff that can improve the volunteer experience?
- Would you recommend this organization to other volunteers? Why or why not?

Also consider exit interviews with volunteers who leave your organization – whether through rotating volunteer service (fulfilling board or committee term limits), burn-out, a negative experience, or other reason. Sample questions include:

- What do you know now about this organization that you wish you had known when you first became involved?
- What did you enjoy most about your volunteer experience? (and/or) What will you miss most about your volunteer experience here? [Note: ask only if the volunteer is leaving on good terms.]
- What suggestions do you have for staff to improve the volunteer experience?
- Would you recommend this organization to other volunteers? (Probe why or why not?)

Responses to these types of questions will enable you to build a knowledge base of volunteer motivations, expectations, and perceptions of your organization.

Chapter 3: [Intentional Volunteer Management](#)

“Too many organizations are thoughtless when it comes to volunteers.”
- [Susan Ellis](#), president of [Energize, Inc.](#), a volunteer training & consulting firm

Sadly, many former volunteers would agree with this statement. That’s why an intentional and proactive - rather than passive and reactive - effort is needed to effectively engage and retain volunteers.

Here are some guidelines to help you get started with intentional volunteer engagement and management.

- **Focus at the Board Level**
Volunteer expert Susan Ellis recommends volunteer involvement be a regular part of the board’s agenda so it can proactively focus on how to effectively recruit, engage, and maximize volunteer participation. “Don’t allow volunteer involvement to be the invisible personnel issue,” she says. She also suggests creating a board committee on volunteerism.
- **Learn who your volunteers are, their interest in your organization, and their volunteer expectations** (as described in Chapter 2).
- **Clarify and clearly communicate your organization’s expectations of volunteers and what they can expect from you.** Here's a great example: After meeting with a nonprofit organization's leaders, I received a follow-up letter inviting me to serve on their advisory council. This invitation described council members' responsibilities and stated what the organization promised them in return, including “Appreciation of your time and our commitment not to abuse your time or generosity.”
- **Find ways to connect your volunteers to:**
 - your organization’s mission, strategic direction, and goals. (Note: You can even include volunteers in your strategic planning process.)
 - your stakeholders (if applicable) to see your mission in action.
 - your other volunteers for mentoring and partnering.
 - your staff, particularly those with whom they’ll be working.
- **Provide the mission-focused training and tools your volunteers need to best serve the organization;** e.g., orientation, ongoing communication, recognition, etc.
- **Proactively listen to your volunteers – obtain their feedback, ideas, concerns – and respond appropriately.**

Volunteers require more than a simple “recruit ‘em and recognize ‘em” approach. Nonprofit leaders need to invest time and attention to engaging, managing, and retaining volunteer talent.

Chapter 4: [When Volunteers are Brand Partners](#)

What has been covered to this point applies to volunteers in most nonprofits. In some organizations, however, volunteers serve multiple roles that require different engagement strategies.

I can explain with this segmentation model from the [Drucker Foundation Self-Assessment Tool for Nonprofits](#) that identifies two types of nonprofit “customers”:

- **Primary customers** – the people and entities who benefit from a nonprofit’s services.
- **Supporting customers** – the people and entities who help a nonprofit provide its services.

For example, a Girl Scout and her parents are “primary customers” of the Girl Scouts in that they all benefit as the daughter develops new skills from her scouting involvement. If her parents participate as troop leaders, help chaperone troop events, etc., they are also considered “supporting customers.” This segmentation model helps a nonprofit understand and recognize who its “customers” are (in one or both segments) so it can engage them accordingly.

But don’t let the simplicity of this model fool you as volunteer segmentation can be extremely complicated depending on the organization. It is particularly complex in professional membership associations that offer professional development and networking opportunities through national and regional (chapter) affiliation such as the [American Marketing Association](#), [Society for Human Resource Management](#), and [Public Relations Society of America](#), to name a few. While all members of such organizations are primary customers, some may also be engaged as supporting customers on one or more levels as:

- **Local brand ambassadors** – recruiting and welcoming other members at the chapter level.
- **Chapter volunteer leaders** – serving on committees/councils/boards and providing member benefits at the local or regional level.
- **National volunteer leaders** – serving on national committees/councils/boards.
- **Volunteer speakers** – presenting at association-sponsored conferences and workshops.
- **Volunteer instructors** – training (for free or a small honorarium) at association-sponsored educational programs.

The important roles these volunteers play in delivering member benefits and supporting the association’s mission at the local, regional, and national levels can be taken for granted. Beyond providing token recognition for their service, some associations overlook the fact that these highly engaged volunteers help generate revenues via new and retained member dues as well as from conference and program

fees. That's why these truly "supporting customers" need to be recognized, valued, and respected as partners in delivering the brand promise.

How do you engage and manage volunteers who are also your brand partners?

- **Make volunteer involvement a focus of attention by the Board and executive staff.**
- **Recognize and acknowledge volunteer value.** To truly appreciate the impact of their involvement, analyze your volunteers' lifetime value. Note: most [volunteer calculators](#) measure this value in terms of manpower hour and benefit cost-savings. In addition, consider volunteers' economic contribution to revenue generation.
- **Keep volunteers informed of the organization's vision and direction.** You can't expect them to serve as brand advocates if you don't keep them in the communications loop.
- **Be sensitive to how operational/policy changes impact volunteer efforts to deliver on the brand** – you want to facilitate volunteer (and staff) efforts to deliver member value, not create extra work for them. Communicate all changes in operations or policy openly and honestly, sharing the rationale behind such changes.
- **Proactively seek and respond to volunteer feedback and ideas.**

Keep in mind that besides their individual and collective value as volunteers, these brand partners have strong influence on the frontline with access to fellow and prospective members who are your primary customers. Treat them carefully and with the respect they deserve.

Chapter 5: [The Volunteer-Staff Connection](#)

“Without a disciplined and respectful approach to recruitment, orientation, support, assessment, and recognition, we will have lower performance and a disenchanting volunteer.”

- [Francis Hesselbein](#) in [Hesselbein on Leadership](#).

A “disciplined and respectful” management approach applies equally to volunteers and employees. Both groups require:

- **an investment of time** for training and ongoing communication
- **attention** in terms of feedback and recognition
- **and the tools** (applicable resources) needed to accomplish the organization's goals and advance its mission.

The challenge for nonprofit managers is that staff engagement impacts volunteer engagement. Many nonprofit employees enjoy working with volunteers and vice-versa. Like it or not, volunteers pay close attention to the staff they work with and are sensitive to employee satisfaction cues. As one frustrated volunteer told me recently: “The organization seems to expect the volunteers to be a subset of their staff, and we know how they treat their staff. So in retrospect, why do we expect them to treat us volunteers any differently?!”

When it comes to volunteer engagement and management, keep in mind that volunteer relations and employee relations are closely related. The way employees feel will impact how volunteers feel, and ultimately, how your clients, donors, members, etc., will feel. And if your employees and volunteers don't feel valued, neither will your stakeholders!

Chapter 6: [Helpful Resources](#)

Here's a compiled list of resources I found in researching and writing about volunteer engagement and management. Please note it is far from comprehensive, and I invite you to share additional resource links.

- [Blue Avocado](#) – an “online magazine for community nonprofits”... here you can find [Susan Ellis's](#) article on [board responsibilities for volunteers](#).
- [Corporation for National & Community Service](#) – provides volunteer information and service opportunities.
- [Energize, Inc.](#) – Susan Ellis’s website written “especially for leaders of volunteers.”
- [QSM Blog interview with Susan Ellis](#): Nonprofit “Volunteer vs. Staff” Talent.
- [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) – “Strategies, tools, and ideas for nonprofits, foundations, and socially responsible businesses.”
- [Taproot Foundation](#) – check out founder Aaron Hurst’s blog post & comments on [different ways nonprofits use volunteers](#).
- [Volunteering in America](#) – “Information on volunteering & civic engagement.”
- [Volunteer Value Calculator](#) from [Imagine Canada](#).

About the Author



Sybil F. Stershic, president of Quality Service Marketing, is a marketing and organizational advisor with more than 30 years of experience helping service providers strengthen employee and customer relationships. A leading authority on engaging employees through internal marketing, she is the author of [*Taking Care of the People Who Matter Most: A Guide to Employee-Customer Care*](#) and the [Quality Service Marketing blog](#).

Sybil graduated with highest honors from Lehigh University and began her career in bank marketing. (The banks she worked for merged into oblivion.) She founded Quality Service Marketing in 1988 specializing in internal marketing & communications and mission-focused/customer-focused marketing planning. She also teaches marketing workshops nationwide to nonprofit and corporate professionals.

Active in leadership and professional development, Sybil is a former Chairman of the American Marketing Association (AMA). In addition to her continued involvement with AMA, she serves on the Advisory Council of the Global Facilitator Service Corp and is a member of BoardSource and the International Association of Facilitators.