

Why People Volunteer

The Top Three Reasons People Volunteer

By Thomas W. McKee

Why do people get involved as a volunteer in an organization? What is the motivation for people to take their time, money and talent to become involved? What does it take for volunteers to get involved and stay involved? The question is WHY?

Motivation is an inside job. People do things for their reasons, not yours, so our role is to create a organization culture that stimulates the inner motivation of each volunteer. What are the external stimuli we can use to arouse that inner motivation?

Most people respond to three levels of motivation.

Basic Level: Self-serving drive

Secondary Level: Relational drive

Highest Level: Belief drive

The basic level of recruiting is self-serving.

People often join an organization because it meets their needs. That need may be for business, for friendship, for belonging or many other self-serving needs. Most organizations offer an associate membership for business people who offer services for members. I have served on committees of professional organizations because I am able to meet with people who could use my services. Networking is an incredible opportunity and benefit of volunteering. When I volunteer, I get new business.

The wise recruiter looks for these kinds of volunteers because it is a win/win. The organization benefits from getting my expertise and high-energy enthusiasm (after all if I am looking for clients, I'm not going to do a poor job). I benefit because I meet people who know people who are looking for speakers, trainers and consultants.

Political volunteers often are motivated by this basic level. They get involved with a campaign because they see the personal benefit to them—usually something financial like taxes. If I help elect this candidate, it is going to benefit my business or my taxable income. Again, this is self-serving; however, it is another win/win for everyone involved.

Interns provide another example of this type of volunteer. They want experience

that they can use to get a job. Most of them are also looking for a mentor—and someone who can write a strong recommendation letter for them.

When we recruit at the basic level, we stress the personal benefits volunteers will receive when they work in our organization.

The second level is relational.

People also volunteer because of friendship. When a friend personally asks someone to volunteer, it is often hard to say, "No." If the friend is excited about a certain cause, he or she is the best person to do recruiting. Relational marketing is one of the most effective marketing tools. I.I.R. or investing in relationships is one of the strongest stimulators for our inner motivations.

Why do politicians shake hands and kiss babies? Harry Truman was a successful campaigner. He knew how to work a crowd. He knew how to shake hands with people. Harry Truman truly loved people and was so successful at campaigning. Bill Clinton was another great campaigner. During his first campaign for President, he was visited many college campuses. A TV network interviewed a group of college students after one of his town hall meetings on the campus, and they asked these students if they were going to vote for Clinton. Everyone said that they were excited about Clinton and wanted to get involved in his campaign. When the interviewer asked them what it was about Clinton's policies that they supported, many of the students didn't have a clue. They all were excited about the person, but they had no idea what he stood for. They had met the person and liked him as an individual.

Many people join an organization and work as volunteers because they were recruited by a friend. The advantage of having a recruiting team is that the synergy of brainstorming increases because we have just increased our sphere of influence. Two people only have so many contacts; however, a recruiting team of ten people can produce hundreds of potential volunteers.

The third level is belief.

The level of belief is the strongest level of commitment. When people volunteer because of their passion for a cause—they actually believe in our cause we have the strongest level of commitment. When people believe in the cause of the organization, even if that cause will cost them a great deal of personal sacrifice and pain, that is when the volunteer is highly motivated. This is true inner motivation that is on the level of Ghandi or Mother Teresa. People join and volunteer because they believe the cause is right. This is the highest level of motivation.

People often join an organization at level one (self serving) or level two (because of a friend), but in time they become true believers and passionate about the cause. This is our goal with each member of our organization.

In our organizations we find recruits at all three levels, and we can use each kind of motivation to enlist volunteers.

The Seven Deadly Sins of Recruiting Volunteers

by Thomas W. McKee

The scene: Tuesday night at our monthly membership meeting. A frantic staff member stands before the group of about 300 members and says, "If we don't get any volunteers for this program, we will assume that you aren't interested, and we'll just cancel it."

Some over-worked members feel guilty and raise their hands. Others groan and say, "The trouble with our organization is that no one wants to get involved." Others say, under their breath, "Good, it's about time we cancel some of our activities."

Sound familiar? We've all seen it happen. Well, if you are going to mess up in your volunteer program, you might as well mess up bad. By committing one of the following seven sins, you not only chase members away, but you burn them out.

Sin One: Expect Announcements to Get Volunteers

We needed people in our organization to volunteer for a short-term project. I made the announcement, wrote articles in our newsletter, had people who had been involved give a five-minute plug in several monthly meetings, and did a special mailing demonstrating the benefits for being a part of this special team.

The results were very disappointing. What was wrong? What had I done wrong? I thought that the challenge would motivate leaders to get involved.

I went to lunch with a person who was a mover and shaker and asked him, "Why didn't you volunteer for this project? I could see your name on it all the way." I'll never forget his response. Bill said, "If you wanted me, why didn't you ask? I'd be happy to work with you on this project, but I would never volunteer."

I learned an important lesson 20 years ago that I have not forgotten. Many

people will never volunteer. Why aren't people volunteering? Because people want to be asked.

Sin Two: Go It Alone

One of the most effective recruiters I knew was my father. He was an Eagle Scout as a teenager. When he and Mom were first married, he was a volunteer scout leader. As I was growing up, he was always active in volunteer organizations. To meet the demands of active recruiting, Dad established a recruiting task force from the organization in which he was recruiting. His team would meet once a month with a list of vacancies. With organization directories open, they would brainstorm possible people who could fill these positions.

Partnering is another effective way to recruit volunteers. Loaves and Fishes is a successful agency in Sacramento that feeds the homeless. They run the Mustard Seed School for the children of homeless families. This organization uses volunteers each day to take care of the meals and school. How do they get this many volunteers? They partner with local organizations—mostly churches.

Sin Three: Recruit Life-time Individuals—Not Short-term Project Teams

Mary was asked to be on the strategic planning task force for her association. She was told that the strategic planning committee would meet for a full day for training and development of strategy. She would then have six months to work on the strategic plan and then her job would be done. Mary not only said yes, but she volunteered to work with the implementation committee of the strategic planning committee—which was another two-year commitment.

Recruiting teams rather than individuals is particularly effective with younger volunteers. Many people are afraid of getting tied into a job for a lifetime and never being able to get out of it. They get burned out and then quit the organization as a way to quit their volunteer role. I accomplish three objectives when I put together a short-term project team of new volunteers with a model leader:

Objective one: Volunteers are more willing to say yes to a short-term commitment with an end-date in sight.

Objective two: Volunteers have the opportunity to catch the vision of the organization because they were working with a passionate leader.

Objective three: Leaders became mentors for future passion driven teams. We were always looking for new leadership.

Sin Four: Assume That "No" Means "Never"

Timing is everything. When we get the courage to recruit someone and then they say "no," we often feel rejection. I needed someone to be the head of our strategic planning committee and I felt that Bob was the perfect person. But when I asked him, he declined. He explained to me about a former business partner who was suing him, a teenage son who was giving him problems, and his Mercedes that was leaking oil (poor guy). He just couldn't see doing justice to the position. I asked Bob three years later and he was excited to fill the position.

Sometimes the "no" means, "not now." Sometimes it means that the prospect volunteer feels that he/she would rather do something else. When the answer is "no," I often ask if there are any positions in our organization that they would love to do, but were never asked.

Sin Five: Fall Into the BIC Trap

We often fall into the trap of following the BIC syndrome. Because we are in desperate need for a volunteer and need them quickly, we plead our case to anyone who "fogs a mirror" and at the last minute I get someone to be a "Butt In the Chair." Most times the chair is better empty than filled with the wrong person who does nothing or is high maintenance.

Sin Six: Be People Driven Rather Than Position Driven

Another variation of the "Butt In the Chair" method is just to say, "Please come and be a part of our group. We have a great time and we need your expertise." But we don't tell the prospect what we want them to do.

Joan was recruited by an after-school teen center in the inner city. She loved to do behind-the-scenes work and pictured herself scrubbing floors, painting walls and stuffing envelopes. But she was placed on the finance committee at the first meeting and was asked to go out and raise money. Although she had a passion for the cause, she was overwhelmed, disappointed and quit.

When I look at the volunteer team I think—"position." I ask, "What positions do I need to accomplish our mission?" "What do I want the team members to do?" And then I look for people who can fill those positions.

Sin Seven: Give the Position the Wrong Job Title

What's in a name? Plenty. We are calling our professional staff by the wrong name, and it is sending the wrong message to our staff, especially when we hire them. They come to the job with the wrong credentials and the wrong expectations. By the names we use for our non-profit professional staff, we are telling them that volunteer administration is not their primary job—which it really

is. We are recruiting professional staff, but not professional volunteer administrators. I see this in almost every non-profit organization. For example, most environmental association professional staff are Ph.D. biologists who are passionate about the environment. They look at themselves as environmental professionals who want to get involved in restoring wetlands. But they have to spend most of their time recruiting, motivating and training volunteers to raise money for wetland restoration. Graduate schools don't train biologists to be volunteer managers. Perhaps their sub-title should be "Manager for Environmental Services Volunteers."

Motivating Your Very Busy Volunteers by Thomas W. McKee

I received this letter from Gabrielle Rolf recently. I think that many of us identify with his question:

Gabriel's question:

Hello,

I volunteer for a Fire Department in Connecticut (USA) as an EMT-B. I am also an officer and work feverishly on motivating and retaining our current volunteer membership. As noted in some of your articles, volunteers live busy lives, have families and have become more aware of the risks out there as Emergency Responders. We are seeking some guidance on how to "pump up" the troops and get them invested again in our Fire Department.

Thank you in advanced for any words of wisdom.

Sincerely,

Gabrielle

Hello Gabrielle:

Thanks so much for your very significant question as I think a lot of people are feeling the same way you are. I have five suggestions for you to motivate your volunteer managers and to "pump up" the troops as you get them invested again in your Fire Department.

1. Emphasize the "risk" factor in recruiting. Don't apologize. Use the "Peace Corps" method--sleep with bugs, snakes and put your life at risk to make a difference in third-world countries." It seems to work for them, and the

people who volunteer know what they are getting into and are committed.

2. Capitalize on the "Hero" aspect of the fire department. Since 9/11 the status of the fire fighters has never been higher or more respected. Appeal to this sense of stepping up to the challenge of the volunteer fire department.
3. Tap into person-centered motivation. Research psychologists such as Daniel Yankelovich have documented the fact that in the job market "job incentives are so unappealing that employees no longer are motivated to work hard. As a result they withdraw emotional involvement." Researchers Patricia Penwick and Kedward Lawler took a survey from 28,008 readers of Psychology Today and found that money and status were not motivational, but the top motivational factors were personal growth, a sense they are worthwhile and a feeling of accomplishment.

This is good news for volunteer fire-fighters. You don't offer money. But you do offer status (being a volunteer fire fighter does have status--so you have that going for you). Many volunteer positions offer a sense of status; however, what you offer most are three person-centered motivational factors: personal growth, self worth, and the feeling of accomplishment.

One of the most effective volunteer managers I worked with knew how to tap into these person-centered motivational factors. Jim was the volunteer manager of a teen center. He didn't get paid for this position--he was a volunteer. Jim was self employed and ran a small successful vending-machine company. But he gave much of his time to managing a teen center and had a whole team of volunteers who would show up after school to teach computer skills, play basketball, shoot pool or just hang out with the kids. One day three of his volunteers stopped him to complain about the facilities.

They complained that the building looked trashy, it needed new equipment or at least some paint. Jim followed three person-centered motivation rules to solve the problem, and he was able to motivate his volunteers.

- o Rule One: Stop multi-tasking, turn off the CD running full speed in your mind, look the volunteer straight in the eye, and listen.
- o Rule Two: Determine the volunteers' real needs. What are they really saying?
- o Rule Three: Let those talking be a part of the solution.

Jim set up a breakfast meeting with the three volunteers. By the end of the breakfast meeting Jim arranged the three volunteer to visit two other teen centers in neighboring communities. The investigative team brought back from their visit new ideas, organized a painting and renovation project, and began to raise funds for some new equipment. Jim had a team of volunteers who were highly motivated.

When Jim listened to these three complaining volunteers (rule number one), he determined that what they were really saying was that they wanted to make a difference but were embarrassed by the looks of the building. They felt that Jim was a great visionary and loved kids, but he wasn't so sharp on details, and he probably didn't even see the need for paint. And they were right-on about Jim (rule number two). So Jim, met with them and empowered them to solve the problem (rule number 3). Jim knew the missing link of volunteer management : person-centered motivation.

4. Copy our free articles for your team of volunteer managers--those who are responsible for recruiting and managing the volunteers. As you check out most volunteer management web sites they are selling resources. Ours are free. Run off a newsletter or an article and hand it out to your volunteer managers to discuss at your next staff meeting.
www.volunteerpowers.com/articles. After your team reads the article, discuss these questions:
 1. What struck you the most?
 2. What did you see that you questioned, disagreed with, or wondered how it would work?
 3. What did you read that you feel we could use to help us in our volunteer program?

5. Take your volunteer team on a training retreat. Take advantage of a planning day. A suggested planning retreat schedule at www.volunteerpowers.com/resources/retreat.asp.

I hope one of these five ideas will work for you.

Tom

I hope that my letter to Gabriel will be of an encouragement and help to all of us who recruit and motivate the 21st century volunteer.

Thomas W. McKee is a leading volunteer management speaker, trainer and consultant. You can reach him at (916) 987-0359 or e-mail Tom@volunteerpowers.com Other articles and free resources are available at www.volunteerpowers.com. ©2003 VolunteerPower.com