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VOLUNTEERS



mailing address
540 N. Lake Pine Drive, #2
Marblehead, Ohio 43440

office
419-732-1770

cell
419-260-3949

email
cathy@creativeoptionc.com

web
www.creativeoptionc.com

VOLUNTEERS

Why do we need a whole article on volunteers?

Only a few of the biggest organizations are likely to have the resources to pay staff for a campaign effort, so in reality we are all volunteers. The campaign manager, the campaign committee, the spokespeople, everyone. So why should we spend time discussing volunteer recruitment and retention? Because successful campaign efforts are very people-intensive endeavors. We need people for voter contact, for research, for events, for fundraising, and more. Unless the people leading the campaign effort take the time to recruit a cadre of helpers, they will end up doing too much and burning out before the end.

There are so many people needs on a campaign that you might think about designating someone to serve as a volunteer coordinator. Look for someone who is well-organized, friendly, and welcoming to assign to work with other campaign leaders, identifying volunteer needs well in advance and making sure people who might want to help are plugged in while they are still enthusiastic. When planned ahead of time, volunteer efforts can be both productive and rewarding. Every campaign task is more pleasant when enough people are available and adequately trained to do the job.

It should be remembered that volunteers are not free. While they are not directly paid the way staff or vendors are, it still costs money to run a volunteer program. Materials, food, parking, T-shirts or other identifying wearable items must all be purchased. Campaigns running on shoe-string budgets have even more need of a strong volunteer corps than others, but there will always be expenses.

Unless the people leading the campaign effort take the time to recruit a cadre of helpers, they will end up doing too much and burning out too quickly.

Planning

During campaign planning, a volunteer coordinator should be analyzing the tasks ahead to determine how much time each will take, what the deadlines are, what skill sets are needed, and whether people can work from home or will need to come to another location. In other words, when volunteer recruitment is approached systematically, you can be certain not only that you have enough volunteers for a task, but you have the right people for the job, are prepared for their arrival, and are not wasting their time.

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An important rule of thumb is to recruit twice as many volunteers as you need for any task. For example, if you have ten phone lines for an evening phone bank, you need to recruit 20 people who promise to be there at the appointed time. Even if you remember to call all 20 the night before to confirm, you will still have about 50% who don't show up for one reason or another. Go ahead and prepare additional work just in case more than 10 people do arrive, but that happens only rarely. Figure out how many you need and recruit double.

Recruitment and Training

Just as it is difficult for people who don't have a strong personal cash flow to ask others to contribute money to a cause, it can be difficult for busy people to ask others to help with a gift of time. That is why we must keep in mind that people have all kinds of different reasons for volunteering and often even the busiest of

people would rather be involved in a cause they care about than sit on the sidelines. If we can identify what motivates another person, we can address ourselves directly to that and thereby gain their assistance. And, of course, the most effective means of asking for volunteer time is in person or on the phone, rather than with a letter or email. Sign up sheets at events are helpful, but only to the extent that they allow us to phone someone later to ask them for something specific.

A passionate interest in the success of the organization is only one reason people might be willing to volunteer for the campaign. Others might be looking for:

- A social or professional networking opportunity, or just a chance to enjoy the company of others,
- An opportunity to gain marketable experiences, build their resume, and develop references as they prepare to enter the workforce,
- Public recognition for community service,
- A sense of personal expression or achievement, or a chance to learn something new, and
- The challenge of doing something difficult.

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Whatever the reason for their interest, all potential volunteers need to be directly asked to do something specific, be given a clear description of the task and time commitment, and be engaged very soon after they commit. Campaign leaders can look for volunteer recruits among their staff, board, and Friends groups. Care should be taken to never take these individuals for granted. Other places to look for volunteers include:

- Teachers' groups,
- Personal friends and family of board, staff, and Friends, and
- People already active in other organizations, such as unions, neighborhood organizations, churches, social or civic groups, senior citizens organizations, and business and professional groups.

One good tool is a card or sheet that potential volunteers can sign at events. When asking people to volunteer, there is some specific information to get:

- When are you available? (Weekdays, evenings, weekends, etc.)
- How much time can you contribute?
- What kinds of tasks are you interested in helping with? Phoning? Door to door canvassing? Setting up yard signs?
- What neighborhood or precinct do you live in?

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The Gallup Organization has reported that the number one predictor of employee happiness is whether they agree with the statement "I know what is expected of me on a daily basis." This must go double for volunteers. People need to know what is expected of them. As campaign leaders, we must define the tasks we are assigning to others, being clear about the timeline, and time commitment. We must provide written instructions where possible, explain to whom the volunteer is to report, and provide contact information for someone who can answer questions or make decisions. Even simple things, such as how the phone system works, or what the dress code is, should be explained.

Volunteer Retention (Appreciation)

Every person who does something for the campaign should be thanked right away, verbally and with a note if possible. Sending someone a note that says "Thank you for agreeing to help with our door-to-door canvas" can make a big difference in terms of the volunteer's enthusiasm and willingness to sign up for another task.

In addition to showing appreciation at every opportunity, the following ideas can help retain volunteers throughout the entire campaign:

- ❖ Make the tasks manageable, or break them up into manageable pieces. Asking a volunteer to “raise money” is not nearly as appealing as asking them to help throw an event, or send a letter to their personal list. Whenever possible, allow each volunteer to develop a sense of ownership for the task.
- ❖ Respect their time: Plan ahead, have materials ready, be clear with instructions, start on time, and end when you say you will.
- ❖ Respect their talent: honor initiative, involve them in planning where you can, ask their opinions, give credit where credit is due, put them on “insider” email distribution lists, comp them to events.
- ❖ Insulate volunteers from internal squabbling: don’t argue in front of volunteers or vent to them about decisions others have made. If the work can’t be satisfying and fun (and sometimes it isn’t!) at least make sure that the atmosphere is enjoyable.
- ❖ All volunteers are not created equally. Protect the morale of hard working volunteers by reassigning or speaking with those whose work is substandard or who don’t cast the campaign in the best light.
- ❖ Feed them! Make sure there is coffee, donuts, sandwiches, or something available whenever volunteers are around. This doesn’t have to cost a lot. Many restaurants and others will donate food for an effort like this, and keeping volunteers fed can be a volunteer project in and of itself.
- ❖ Make sure the work space is comfortable and safe, has adequate parking, clean bathrooms, wheelchair accessibility, is well-lit and kept to the right temperature. You don’t want to be losing volunteers because the headquarters is too cramped or too hot or because there is no running water in the bathroom.
- ❖ If the campaign is a sure winner or a sure loser, be clear with volunteers that their effort is important to you personally. If they are able to trust that you believe what you are doing together matters, they will have a reason to follow your lead.
- ❖ Recognize achievement visibly. If you have a wall, consider hanging pictures of volunteers working, display a big map showing territory covered, or a big thermometer showing calls made or dollars raised – anything that visibly demonstrates progress toward a goal.
- ❖ Volunteers love Election Night parties. Even as campaign leadership is exhausted and wanting to go home, you must organize and attend a get together for watching returns. You need these people next time, so make sure you recognize their efforts during the gathering.

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Conclusion

An active, committed, diverse, and engaged corps of volunteers is a message unto itself. When you have many people out working on your campaign, you communicate that you have a vibrant effort, capable of victory, because so many people think that what you are doing is important. People are the campaign’s most valuable asset. Take care to offer respect and courtesy to every potential volunteer and you will be able to recruit and retain the people you need to get the job done. Do this early in the campaign and you will have many to whom to delegate in the last critical month when the amount of work threatens to overwhelm.