

# How To Recruit Volunteers

## *11 Timely Tips To Attract And Retain High-Quality Difference Makers*

*Scott Holdman, Pat Traynor, and David Hunnicutt*

**V**olunteers improve lives, strengthen communities and foster a greater sense of civic engagement.

According to the national report, *Volunteering In America*, “Today, Americans are making more time to improve their community through service. In fact, people of all ages are volunteering on college campuses, through religious communities, at schools, and in social service organizations in a wide range of volunteer activities.”

And the actual number of Americans who are giving freely of their time and talents is impressive.

In fact, according to the National Center For Charitable Statistics, “Some 25% of Americans over the age of 16 volunteered through or for an organization between September 2010 and September 2014.” This collective service involved more than 62 million Americans and resulted in almost 8 billion hours of volunteer service. If you had to put a price-tag on this, it’s estimated that the total number of hours contributed would be worth a staggering \$184 billion (*Volunteering In America*).

Not only are U.S. volunteers dedicating significant amounts of time to advancing the greater good, but the time they’re contributing is not being wasted.



Researchers consistently tell us volunteer labor does indeed have a tremendous impact. From teaching and mentoring children, to helping older individuals live independently to working with communities recovering from hurricanes and other similar disasters, volunteers represent an available pool of talent—one that’s ready and willing to take action.

In this article, we’ll take a closer look at what volunteering really is and who’s doing it. In addition, we’ll share some timely tips that can help you attract and retain these wonderful people to help your organization move the needles.

As a result of reading this article, you should have at your disposal a rudimentary blueprint that can point you in the right direction when it comes to partnering with this amazing group.

# What Volunteering Is And Who's Doing It

By definition, a volunteer is simply a person who gives freely of their time and/or talents to help others in need.

While straightforward, this definition doesn't necessarily provide the important insight we need to have in order to better understand the psychological constitution and extraordinary levels of dedication these people possess.

Interestingly, the word "volunteer" has its roots in the 1600s. With French origins, this word literally means to voluntarily raise your hand in a combat situation. And this is where real insight is imparted.

To think that someone would freely and willingly step forward in the midst of battle to "volunteer" their life to save others is indeed remarkable. And, without overstating the obvious, this is really the true spirit of volunteerism.

With this understanding firmly in mind, you should be conjuring up some pretty inspiring images of the potential impact that eager and dedicated volunteers can have on advancing your organization's cause.

And now that we have a better idea of what volunteering is actually all about, let's take a closer look at who's doing it.

Earlier, we shared with you that the best estimate concerning volunteering in the U.S. is about 25%. What's interesting is that this 25%

benchmark remains fairly consistent across all age ranges. Indeed, the *Corporation For National And Community Service* approximates that 26.4% of young adults (ages 16-19) presently volunteer; 29.8% of middle-age adults (ages 45-64) also give of their time while 23.8% of older adults (ages 65 and older) make this sacrifice.

This consistent distribution across age ranges should be considered good news. To be sure, no matter what type of talent you're looking for, this information lets you know that about 25% of any given age category is willing to help.

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## Timely Tips To Attract And Retain Volunteers

Because volunteers represent a remarkable pool of extraordinary talent—replete with the potential to significantly advance the greater good—you'll want to make sure you have a bullet-proof strategy in place to recruit and retain the best of the best. Here are 11 timely tips.

### HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #1: Make Sure Your House Is In Order

First and foremost, if you want to attract great volunteers, you'll need to make sure that your house is in order.

When you issue a call for assistance, the very first thing people will do is visit your website. If your website is outdated, uninspiring or just plain “janked,” you've got problems. Remember, there are scores of very talented and motivated people who are actively looking to make a difference in other people's lives. When they come to your site, you need to be ready to engage them.

Specifically, your website should have an easily-identifiable section relating to volunteers. Within one simple click, potential prospects should be viewing your organization's information highlighting what you're looking for and how they can get involved (more on that in a bit). Perhaps most importantly, you'll need to provide everyone with an opportunity to complete an application—or at the very least a form to leave their name and contact info so you can get back to them.

Too many times, nonprofit leaders fail to address this important item first. As a result, all of their other efforts are wasted and fall on deaf ears. And, even if volunteers are in fact attracted, they're usually not the caliber the organization is looking for.

### HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #2: Expect Great Things

Recent research tells us there are millions of hard-working, bright, talented and motivated people looking for opportunities to make a

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AT-A-GLANCE

Timely Tips To Attract And Retain Volunteers



#1: Make Sure Your House Is In Order

#2: Expect Great Things

#3: Be Concrete

#4: Describe The Impact The Volunteer Will Make

#5: Explain How They Will Learn And Grow As A Result Of The Experience

#6: Leave No Stone Unturned —And Ask Boldly

#7: Use An Application Process

#8: Harness Testimonials

#9: Target Families

#10: Give Volunteers A Platform To Share Their Stories

#11: Ensure Everything Goes Smoothly

difference. The best of the best want to be not only engaged, but challenged.

For example, consider the tens of thousands of people each year that take their precious vacation time to travel to disaster sites—all in the name of providing assistance. The reason these folks risk life and limb is because they inherently understand that when you are challenged, you are changed.

*“As a nonprofit leader, your job is to challenge your volunteers in a way that brings out the very best in them.”*

As a nonprofit leader, your job is to challenge your volunteers in a way that brings out the very best in them. In so doing, you create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby your volunteers will rise to the level of your expectations—and this is where the magic happens.

Ask any successful volunteer coordinator and they'll tell you, high expectations are the key to attracting—and retaining—great volunteers.

**HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #3: Be Concrete**

When potential candidates come to you, they're looking not only to be inspired, but to better understand the concrete details of what will be required of them. The last thing that a highly-motivated, willing soul wants to do is let you down.

In light of this, you can help to “pre-qualify” great candidates by sharing with them the specifics of what you're looking for and hoping to accomplish.

Answering the following questions can help you to develop a more detailed description of what volunteering for your organization looks like.

- What will the individual be doing?
- What skills are required?
- What kind of hours are involved?
- What kind of risks are associated with the tasks being proposed?
- What kind of personal values should the person bring to the table?
- Is this a long-term commitment or something less?
- Will additional training be required?
- Is this a direct service opportunity?
- Will they be working in groups or independently?

These are but a few of the questions that need to be answered in order to offer the potential volunteer the concrete details they'll need in order to more confidently raise their hand.

**HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #4: Describe The Impact The Volunteer Will Make**

The fourth way to attract and retain volunteers is to articulate the specific impact that will be made.

Perhaps the first thing worth mentioning here is that, according to the 2016 Burk Donor Survey, volunteers reported placing a very high priority on the desire of wanting to give back in order to advance the greater good. In fact, 51.6% of survey respondents indicated

that this was their primary motivation for accepting an assignment.

Because of this, you would be wise to describe—up front—the specific impact the volunteer will make. By proactively sharing this information, you are capitalizing on the most important driver of what motivates a volunteer—and thus increasing the likelihood that you will actually secure the individual's services.

And while articulating the impact up front is a very good idea, making sure that you deliver on this promise is even better. In fact, if you do this successfully, your chances of retaining your volunteers for a very long time grow exponentially.

**HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #5: Explain How They Will Learn And Grow As A Result Of The Experience**

The fifth way to attract and retain a great volunteer is to not only share with them how—through their service—they will advance the greater good, but also how they will be different as a result of being involved in your organization's cause.

If orchestrated properly, each and every volunteer experience allows an individual to learn and grow in meaningful and remarkable ways. Certainly, for those who see their assignment through to its completion, they will experience these emotions firsthand. The problem is, however, the culmination of their experience may be months down the road.

By sharing with the volunteer the tangible ways they'll be different—especially in terms of personal learning and growth—the more energized the individual will be and, hence,

the more likely they'll fully commit to the volunteering experience.

This can be done in a variety of ways including casually through conversation, more formally through written materials or vicariously by hearing the successful experiences of others. Regardless of the approach, the outcome will be the same—complete support and engagement.

**HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #6: Leave No Stone Unturned —And Ask Boldly**

The sixth way to attract and retain quality volunteers is to leave no stone unturned—and to ask boldly.

Said another way, if you want to secure great volunteers you have to go and get them—and that's what we mean by leaving no stone unturned.

*“Remember, there are scores of very talented and motivated people who are actively looking to make a difference in other people's lives. When they come to your site, you need to be ready to engage them.”*

When you see the effort exerted by the nation's very best nonprofit leaders when it comes to finding volunteers, you'll get a very real and pragmatic understanding of how

relentless you'll need to be in order to attract and retain great people.

Specifically, there are a number of strategies that can be employed including:

- Presenting to service organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.)
- Posting notices in churches, university dorms, community centers, performing arts centers, libraries, etc.
- Attending church groups of all kinds
- Broadcasting a PSA on local radio or television stations
- Writing letters to the editor in your local newspaper or writing a guest column
- Having a booth at local art fairs, expos, etc.
- Asking your board for help
- Requesting your social network to spread the word, etc.

*“If you want to attract great volunteers, you’ve got to make yourself—and your organization—visible. There are no shortcuts or quick fixes.”*

As you can see, each one of these strategies requires you to roll up your sleeves and get in the mix. Again, if you want to attract great volunteers, you’ve got to make yourself—and your organization—visible. There are no shortcuts or quick fixes.

What’s more, when you get in front of potential candidates, you’ll need to crank

up the courage to ask boldly and without reservation—do not assume that people will naturally self-select. In fact, researchers associated with the 2016 Burk Donor Survey found that fully 25.1% of people accepted a volunteer assignment simply because someone asked them.

Two words: Ask boldly.

#### HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #7: Use An Application Process

The seventh way to attract and retain stellar people is to utilize an application process.

Logistically, every potential volunteer should understand they’ll have to complete an application process before they will be officially recognized as a representative of the organization. While many nonprofits are less than diligent when it comes to this step, not adhering to an application process should be considered a deal-breaker.

According to nonprofit blogger Susan Ellis, “One of the misconceptions the public has about volunteering is that anyone can just do it. And nonprofits confirm this whenever they say or write, ‘To volunteer call \_\_\_\_.’ This implies that all applicants will be accepted.”

To alert interested candidates, you should use verbiage like, “To learn if this position is right for you...” or “To discuss if you qualify...” By adopting this approach, you’re taking control of the situation and the process—thus ensuring only the most appropriate candidates become part of your organization.

Although this adds another potential step in the volunteering process, it is worth the time and the effort—especially in a litigious society.

#### HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #8: Harness Testimonials

The eighth way to attract and retain exemplary volunteers is to harness testimonials.

Make no mistake, testimonials are powerful motivators and convincers when it comes to securing great volunteers. Although straightforward in theory, capturing top-shelf testimonials takes some doing.

The first step is to identify your very best volunteers. The reason this is such an important step is because you want your best testimonials to come from your best people. There’s no question you can get a great testimonial from a less-than-great person. The problem, however, surfaces when others come to discover the individual is less-than-reputable—rendering the testimonial not only worthless, but compromising your credibility as well.

After identifying your very best volunteers, the next step is to ask them if they would formally offer-up a testimonial about their impressions and experiences with your organization. Be sure to get the testimonial in writing (or capture it on audio or video)—and then formally close the loop by acknowledging you’ve received it. One of the worst things that can happen is if an individual denies ever having said the words you’re promoting.

Armed with killer testimonials, you’ll want to make sure you promote them widely. They need to be included on your website, posted on social media, incorporated into your communiques and integrated into your presentations.

#### HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #9: Target Families

The ninth way to attract and retain ideal volunteers is by targeting families.

According to Nonprofit Hub, when most charities seek to recruit volunteers they do so by lumping individuals into generational segments. While common, researchers suggest there may be a better way.

In a recent study conducted by Indiana University’s Lilly Family School Of Philanthropy and Vanguard Charitable, investigators uncovered that parents’ volunteering habits profoundly impacted their children’s volunteering and charitable giving habits. This finding suggests that parents are inspired to make volunteering a family practice.

*“By sharing with the volunteer the tangible ways they’ll be different—especially in terms of personal learning and growth—the more energized the individual will be and, hence, the more likely they’ll fully commit to the volunteering experience.”*

For nonprofits who are able to accommodate family involvement, this represents a significant untapped opportunity—and one that can endure across all populations and demographic segments.



HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #10:  
**Give Volunteers A Platform  
To Share Their Stories**

The tenth way to attract and retain extraordinary volunteers is to provide them with a platform to share their stories.

Similar to employing testimonials, providing volunteers with the opportunity to publicly share their experiences with the community at-large can have a contagion-like effect. There are few things in this world that resonate more than passion, perseverance, dedication and caring. When these are present in an individual's narrative, energy and possibility take hold—and the result can be significant for your organization.

*“Providing volunteers with the opportunity to publicly share their experiences with the community at-large can have a contagion-like effect.”*

Again, this takes a certain amount of orchestration to make happen. But, by creating the opportunities for your volunteers to express what's on their minds and in their hearts, you can not only solidify their longevity, but attract all kinds of new supporters as well.

HOW TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN VOLUNTEERS #11:  
**Ensure Everything Goes Smoothly**

The eleventh way to attract and retain amazing people for your cause is to ensure

everything in the volunteering experience goes smoothly.

This is pretty much self-explanatory and makes sense in a number of important ways. Remember, people repeat behaviors that bring them pleasure and success. To the contrary, they'll avoid (like the plague) those experiences that cause them pain, frustration and/or embarrassment.

If you want to attract and retain great people, you'll need to become a strong conductor of the orchestra and make sure that the symphony goes according to plan.

Not convinced?

Consider this from Corporation For National And Community Service: “One out of every three people who volunteer in a year do not volunteer the following year. This means that of the some 65 million U.S volunteers, almost 21 million will not continue with their service in the next 12 calendar months.”

The only way for your nonprofit to thrive is by having access to an ever-growing pool of motivated talent. To ensure this happens, you'll need to do your part—make the experience positive, extraordinary and life-changing.

**Parting Thoughts**

In this article, we've shared with you what volunteering is and who's doing it. What's more, we've offered up 11 timely tips for attracting and retaining high-quality difference makers. By implementing as many of these 11 tips as possible, you can take immediate and significant strides toward advancing your organization's cause.

In addition, because volunteers are also more likely to give, by providing them with a great experience you can also expect your organization's charitable donations to grow as well. ●

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