
Volunteers: **Getting Ready for** **Them, Finding Them,** **Keeping Them**



by Bonney Brown, September 1999
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Getting Ready for Volunteers



Prepare your organization to bring volunteers on board.

There are a number of things that you need to have in place before bringing volunteers on board. You should have written materials about your organization to give to volunteers. You should also have a plan for training and managing volunteers.

Written Materials

You probably already have written information about your organization available to the general public. But, you also need written materials specific to volunteer recruitment and training. Make sure that these materials are clear and easy to understand. These documents should include:

Volunteer recruitment packet. You'll want to have this information formatted in an appealing way to help you attract new volunteers. The document should include:

- The organization's mission and goals
- An outline of the organization's programs and services
- A listing and description of the organization's volunteer opportunities
- A questionnaire for the potential volunteer to complete

Volunteer training packet or manual. This should include:

- The organization's mission and goals
- An outline of the organization's programs and services
- Clearly defined organizational policies and standards
- An agreement for volunteers to sign
- Job descriptions

The volunteer agreement indicates that volunteers will abide by the organization's policies and provide their services on a volunteer basis (without compensation). You may want to consider asking them to sign a liability release, too. Your organization can be held liable not only for injuries sustained by volunteers, but also for the actions of the volunteers. Defining policies in writing can help to safeguard your organization.

The job descriptions should clearly define tasks, expectations, and timelines for completion. Include information on who the volunteer reports to and who has the authority to make specific decisions.

Specific information for specialized jobs. Some jobs, such as providing foster care for animals in the volunteer's home, may require specific, detailed agreements with the volunteers. It's a good idea to clearly define guidelines in writing. For example, a foster care agreement might include the following information:

- That the organization is the legal owner of the foster animal
- What care the volunteer is responsible for providing to the animal
- Where the animal is to be kept – confined, allowed outdoors, allowed to mix with other animals in the household, etc.
- What to do in an emergency

*Responsibility and trust are
high motivators.*

•
Jonathan T. Scott

- Who covers expenses – food, vet care, supplies
- Who is responsible for arranging adoptions

Training

If you are recruiting a number of volunteers at once, you might want to schedule a group training during which you hand out the volunteer training packet or manual. In addition to this general training, make sure you provide training specific to the volunteer's job – be it animal care, use of equipment, or office skills. Here are some tips:

- Explain and demonstrate a task, then watch while the volunteer does it. Take the time to observe even those volunteers who have had prior experience; you may learn something new, or you may head off a problem before it starts.
- Allow plenty of time for the volunteer to ask questions.
- Pair up a new volunteer with a veteran.
- If necessary, provide written instructions and background information on the task or skill.

Let your volunteers know that you are always willing to answer questions. Remember, training is an ongoing process, and should include ongoing, two-way communication.

Management

To manage volunteers successfully, you'll need a volunteer coordinator and/or supervisor with good communication skills, a positive attitude, appropriate expertise, and adequate supplies/equipment to do the job. The right individual will be able to genuinely delegate responsibility, while providing safeguards to ensure that critical jobs are completed correctly in a timely manner. ("Trust but verify.")

The right fit. Assess people with care, and match them with appropriate jobs. Some people are seeking a challenge and an opportunity to take on a major project. Others are looking for an easy, stress-free volunteer experience. Take the time to find out what the volunteer is looking for and to find the right job for the individual.

The right attitude. Be tolerant of individual differences whenever possible, without sacrificing the quality of care provided to the animals and the service provided to the public.

If part of your larger mission is to encourage compassionate feelings and actions, then investing time in creating positive volunteer experiences is very important.

Finding Volunteers

Put yourself in the shoes of a member who wants to get involved. How easy is it? Are such efforts rejected or encouraged? When a member offers to help and receives no response, the disillusion that sets in can be destructive to the relationship.

•
Annette E. Petrick

Tell people what needs to be accomplished. Ask them to volunteer.

The only way to connect with new volunteers is to get the word out there. To reach as many people as possible, you'll need to employ a variety of strategies.

How to Get the Word Out

Word-of-mouth, flyers, and posters are inexpensive ways of recruiting volunteers. Here are a few suggestions:

Word-of-mouth:

- Invite current volunteers to bring a friend to a special get-together.
- Ask board members to provide a list of potential volunteers.
- Ask your members through your newsletter. Include a listing of your volunteer needs and provide a checkbox on the donation-response form for donors to request more information on volunteering.

Flyers and posters:

- A simple poster campaign is an inexpensive, but highly effective way to find new volunteers.
- Your flyer should list attractive, well-defined volunteer jobs. Offer a variety of opportunities, involving different skills and levels of commitment.
- Distribution is critical; you can have the world's most wonderful materials, but if no one sees them, they won't help a bit. Display posters and/or flyers in your area's vet clinics, pet supply stores, markets, health clubs, places of worship, libraries, etc.

Here are some other ideas:

- Open meetings – Host public meetings in each of the local communities.
- Local newspapers – Ask local newspapers to do an article. Take advantage of the free volunteer listings offered by some papers.
- Radio – See if your local radio stations will read a 30-second public service announcement seeking volunteers. You may be able to get on a talk show as a guest.
- Newsletters – Many companies have newsletters (electronic or printed) for employees. Request that local companies share information with their employees about volunteer opportunities with your organization.
- Local cable access TV – Most stations have community bulletin boards and community-oriented shows.
- Community organizations and clubs – Offer to speak to their group or ask to distribute literature to their members.
- Recruitment days – Set up an information table at local pet supply stores or community events.
- Best Friends Network – Complete an organizational questionnaire for the Network and we'll let Network members in your area know about your group's volunteer needs.

Remember, most people volunteer because they were asked.

Volunteer Placement

Once an individual expresses interest, you'll need to learn more about him or her to find the right job. This is usually done through a questionnaire. In addition to basic contact information and availability, you'll want to find out about prospective volunteers' past work and volunteer experiences, what they liked and disliked about these experiences, what they see themselves doing within your organization, and why they are volunteering. You may also want to ask them to sign a liability waiver.

The questionnaire should be followed by an in-person interview. Allow time to answer their questions, and be sure to provide them with a written copy of the organization's goals, policies, and volunteer guidelines.

Seek Out Qualified Help

The first person to raise his or her hand in a meeting may not be the best person for the job. If you have an important task, don't trust its completion to chance. Ask a specific person to take on the responsibility; select someone you know is qualified and will do a good job. This is particularly important when filling critical roles such as board member or committee chair. Asking someone to help can be a compliment.

Keeping Volunteers

*View volunteers as customers,
not as extensions of staff.*

•
Doug Ross



Provide a good volunteer experience.

How can you keep volunteers motivated and involved? You'll need to invest time and resources into managing volunteers in order to ensure that you are fulfilling their needs as volunteers. Here are some suggestions:

- Place volunteers carefully and do ongoing assessment. Don't assume that volunteers will be happy where you have placed them – make adjustments as needed. Volunteers' needs may change over time; a volunteer may be ready to become more involved, to take on a new challenge, or she may want less responsibility as time goes on.
- Share information. Keep volunteers abreast of developments within your organization and the humane movement in general. Share copies of articles and related information that pertain to their work, such as veterinary care developments, new dog training methods, or the latest adoption practices.
- Offer training opportunities. This may include an offer to attend a seminar or to receive a related publication.
- Provide encouragement and feedback on their performance. Always treat volunteers with respect and courtesy. Make time to listen.
- Provide needed supplies and equipment.
- Implement good ideas from volunteers.
- Do not waste their time. Any meeting should be productive and necessary.
- Show appreciation and recognition. Here are some ways to do this:
 - Thank-you notes (can be personal and handwritten or more “official,” e.g., signed by all the board members)
 - Certificate or award
 - Parties and get-togethers
 - Sincere in-person thank-you
 - Small gift
 - Article in the local paper
 - Mention in newsletter
 - Chance to participate in educational opportunities (seminar, conference)

Volunteer Resources

Web-Based Resources

Points of Light Foundation

A national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes volunteerism and contains information on training and managing volunteers.

1400 I Street NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20005

Phone: 202-729-8000

Fax: 202-729-8100

Web: www.pointsoflight.org

Action Without Borders

Lists thousands of volunteer opportunities in your community and around the world. You can search by subject, such as “Wildlife and Animal Welfare.” Organizations can post volunteer opportunities and find volunteers by looking through volunteer profiles.

Web: www.idealists.org

E-mail: editor@idealists.org

VolunteerMatch

A nonprofit online service that helps interested volunteers get involved with community service organizations throughout the U.S. You can either find or post volunteer opportunities.

Web: www.volunteermatch.org

Books

Volunteer Management: Mobilizing All the Resources of the Community

by Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch

paperback, 1996

Volunteers: How to Get Them, How to Keep Them

by Helen Little

paperback, 1999

Volunteers Wanted: A Practical Guide to Finding and Keeping Good Volunteers

by Jo B. Rusin

paperback, 1999