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GETTING MORE VOLUNTEERS

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

VOLUNTEERISM IS DOWN IN AMERICA

With volunteer rates the lowest in a decade, what can the nonprofit community do?

The Problem

Volunteering: the act of freely offering to do something.

The United States, once a powerhouse for volunteers, is experiencing a decline in volunteerism. Fewer volunteers is troubling the country that grew tremendous organizations like Rotary International, Kiwanis, PTAs and the Girl Scouts. It is the nonprofit community that is feeling the pressure, as a strong volunteer corps is often the backbone and an essential part of a charitable organization. Groups that are purpose-driven depend on volunteers for everything from fulfilling their mission statement to fundraising to even performing basic day-to-day office duties. Many organizations have no paid staff and operate only through a group of dedicated volunteers. The troubling trend has left many wondering what they can do to attract more volunteers.

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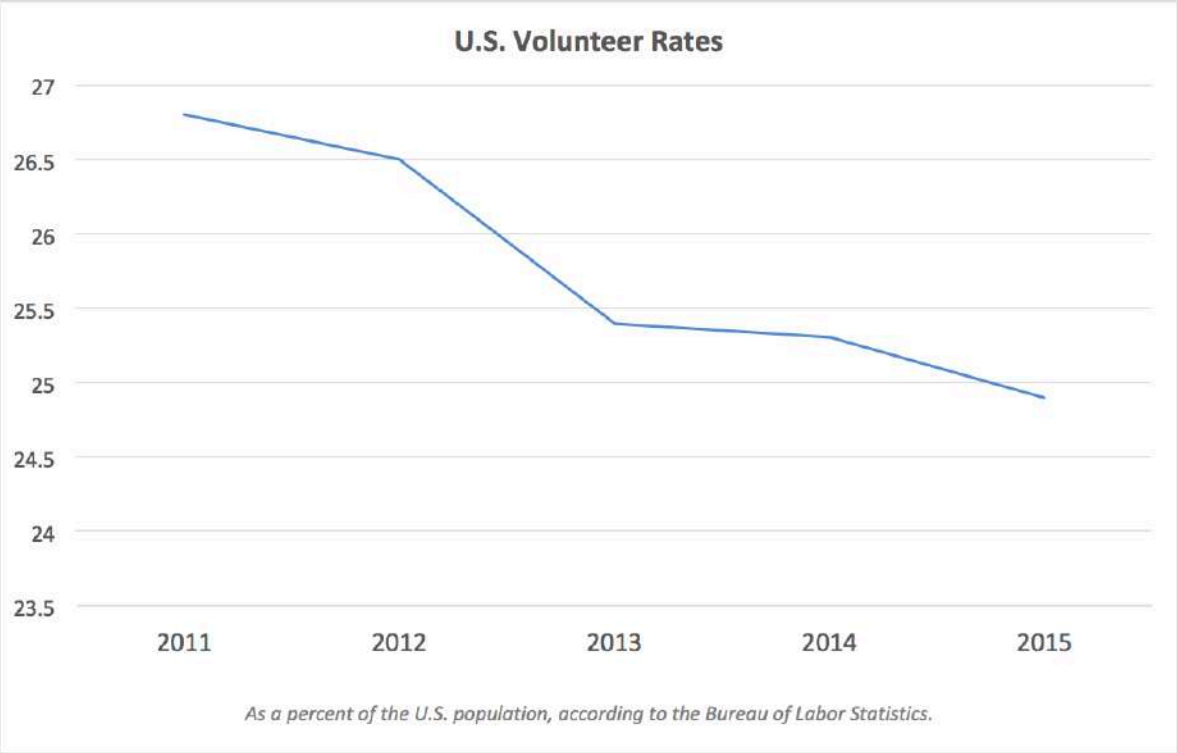
Background

The rate of volunteerism has been in slow decline for many years. Since 2002, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics has been collecting data on volunteerism in the United States. The most recent numbers show a peak in volunteer rates beginning in 2006. It began to diminish each year after that. Data shows that 25.4% of the population volunteered at least once in 2013, compared with 25.3 % in 2014 and 24.9% in 2015.[i] The number of volunteers hovers around the 62.6 million mark though even a slight percentage change can result in 134,000 less people volunteering.[ii]



Why it Matters

Social Impact

Volunteering has a positive impact in society in a variety of ways. Each nonprofit or group of volunteers helps another group in significant ways, so these social groups and aspects are dramatically affected without volunteers:

Children & Youth	Environment	Sports & Recreation
Animals	Faith-Based Groups	Community Groups
Seniors	Homeless	Political Efforts
Disaster Relief Efforts	Disabled People	and more…

In addition, volunteering has tremendous impacts on all of us as a society:

- Bringing communities closer together
- Building a strong, safe society
- Connecting with our fellow human beings
- Improving self esteem
- Paving the way for career choices in the public service sector

Economic Impact

According to the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, U.S. volunteers produce services worth $113 billion annually. This is a great contribution to the American economy that often goes overlooked when considering the value of volunteers.

Contributing Factors

Financial Stress & Time

One issue that does affect volunteering is financial stress. Single-parent households and homes where both parents work full time or have multiple jobs have little time left for volunteering.[iii] Like the story of the volunteer firefighters, people simply cannot devote a substantial amount of time to a cause when they spend so much time working.

Volunteer Age

Peak volunteer age may be maturing. Taking a long look at volunteer data that spans 40 years shows that volunteer rates typically rise after age twenty and reach the high-water mark at ages 35-40. The midlife rise in volunteerism may be credited to adults experiencing a secure point of their career, interacting strongly with their social networks and community.[iv]

After mid-life there tends to be a decline in volunteer rates that is associated with retirement. As people age they tend to face a certain degree of physical limitations and weakened connections to social networks. However, research shows that the rate of decline after age 45 is less sharp as other groups, which would indicate that more are staying in the volunteer force than in previous years.[v] Nonprofit organizations need to keep this age shift in mind when planning volunteer recruitment efforts.

Other Social Factors

Other social factors contribute to the lower rate of volunteering. One idea is that the digital age has presented a variety of online communities which people may be more drawn to than their own local communities.[vi]

The workday may also present a problem, as people tend to work longer hours now than they did a few decades ago. Families are relocating more often and aren't as tied to their communities as they before.[vii] The population that was once considered at the age to retire is oftentimes continuing to work fulltime later into life or they opt to take on a part-time job once in retirement.

Solutions

While there are a number of factors that contribute to a decline in volunteers, it is left to the nonprofit sector to encourage them back. One estimate puts the loss of volunteer hours at about $175 billion dollars of services wasted.[viii]

Nonprofits need to adapt to the shifting volunteer landscape by making changes that will attract volunteers to their organization.

10 Ways Organizations Can Encourage Volunteering

1. Show Appreciation

   Volunteers need to feel appreciated. The tried-and-true methods of an in-person or a handwritten "Thank You" are still important. But so is sharing appreciation on social media. Social media channels are excellent ways to bring attention to volunteers. Additionally, when sharing photos of volunteer activities, it's important to tag volunteers to really solidify their affiliation with the organization. In doing so they will reciprocate with their own photos and tags which brings even more attention to the cause.

2. Focus on *Why* Volunteers are Needed

   Organizations need to focus on the reason that volunteers are needed. A volunteer orientation, either in-person or virtual, is a great way to accomplish a deeper understanding of the intent of the volunteer and the needs of the organization. During an orientation there is ample time to explain why volunteers are needed as well as how they are part of the solution. If there isn't time for a lengthy orientation, a Volunteer Coordinator should take a few minutes while welcoming a volunteer to explain what the volunteer assignment is and focus on why it is important. A few extra minutes of explanation will give the

volunteer more insight into why they are needed and therefore create a better volunteer experience.

3. Keep it Flexible

Flexibility should be a cornerstone of every volunteer program. Volunteer schedules may vary, as will the organization's tasks, so assign tasks accordingly. For example, if volunteers with physical limitations sign up for a job, it is important to factor in those limitations when assigning volunteer duties. Similarly, if a parent could accomplish a volunteer task with their children along, they should be allowed to do so. Flexibility will allow organizations to attract a wider variety of volunteers, which will help to build a strong volunteer pool from which to draw from.

4. Manage Expectations

Don't expect too much of your volunteers, especially new ones. A volunteer assignment should be clearly explained and should not go over the stated amount of time. If a task takes longer, the volunteer should be encouraged to leave on time and not expected to stay late. Good volunteer management goes hand in hand with flexibility. If a volunteer is treated well and fairly that will help gain their trust and loyalty with the organization.

5. Up Your Tech Game

Technology is a necessary investment. Managing volunteers through

technology is an important step for organizations to take. Many

nonprofit organizations lack the resources for volunteer management software or other efficiency applications, however these help in the way of volunteer recruitment and volunteer retention.

Greg Baldwin, CEO of VolunteerMatch, contends that organizations need to invest in technology to in order for their volunteer program to truly thrive. He writes:

"Organizations that make volunteers central to their work and manage them well are able to generate as much as three to six times the community value from volunteers as the cost to management them. This is a smart way to maximize impact, but it requires up-front and ongoing financial investment in volunteer engagement in all sectors."[ix]

It is worth the time and investment to make volunteering as easy and as efficient as possible, using the digital tools that are available; especially if there is an increase of three to six times in services offered or productivity. Technological advances can come with a price tag, although it can be money well spent. Organizations may need to think creatively in order to fund the costs. However there are a number of creative ways to support these changes either through a sponsorship, a grant or allocating funds from another program.

6. Utilize Volunteers Wisely

If volunteering is a priority for the organization then it is critical to engage volunteers effectively. Volunteers want to arrive for assignments that are well prepared; they should not be left under-utilized with nothing to do. Each volunteer should be communicated with and given clear directions.

7. Accept Feedback

   A strong volunteer program solicits feedback from volunteers. Feedback can be gathered through a formal questionnaire or more informally such as a face-to-face interaction. Honest opinions are the most helpful, even if they are not as positive as expected. A key factor to quality feedback is timeliness. During or directly following a volunteer event is the best time to solicit a quality response.

8. Celebrate!

   Organizations should celebrate their volunteers often. Volunteers essentially increase the capacity of an organization to achieve goals and fulfill their mission. And that type of commitment should be celebrated well and often. An annual volunteer event is a wonderful way to show gratitude and demonstrate how vital volunteers are to the organization.

   Develop a volunteer reward system. When a volunteer reaches certain benchmarks, they should be rewarded with something small. Rewards could be a nametag, a discount on merchandise or the opportunity to volunteer in a more desirable position. There are other low or no cost ways to celebrate a volunteer like through an article in the organization's newsletter or a special recommendation on LinkedIn.

9. Assign Titles

   Some organizations assign titles to volunteers as a way to motivate them as part of the organization. Assigning a titled position to a truly

dedicated volunteer not only helps the organization, it can help bolster their resumes and LinkedIn profiles, which is a great motivator. If you really appreciate their work, consider offering to write them a recommendation via written letter or LinkedIn.

10. Keep it Friendly

Focus on the social aspects of volunteering, as it is a great way to network and make new friends. For example, if a particular volunteer position can be seen as social, the organization should encourage volunteers to enjoy themselves. If a volunteer has a positive experience, they are very likely to return and may encourage others to volunteer as well.

10 Tactics for Recruiting Volunteers

1. Beef Up Your Email List

   An email list is a time-efficient way to recruit volunteers. It is helpful to capture as many email addresses as possible at events in order to continually grow the email list. Segment your email list so that it is manageable, accurate and relevant. Set up separate lists for new volunteers, re-occurring volunteers, program volunteers and lapsed volunteers.[x]

2. Face It

   Face-to-face recruitment can be a great way to engage potential volunteers. There is no shortage of opportunities to interact with people: from job fairs to farmers markets and even sporting events. The event should be aligned with the mission of the organization in order to interact with a majority of interested people. For example, if a conservation organization staffs a table at a park or trailhead, people walking by and stopping at the table will share the same interest of protecting the outdoors.

3. Get Social

   Social media can be an excellent avenue to recruit volunteers, as there are literally millions of users. Correspondingly, there are a few necessary components that will make a social media post more effective. The post should contain a compelling photo along with a highly visible sign-up link. Also, creating a public Facebook event will

generate a lot of interest, either with volunteers specifically, or with their circle of friends. Creating a unique hashtag or using a currently relevant hashtag is also a great way for volunteers to find a cause.[xi]

4. Bulletin Boards

   Bulletin boards may seem old fashioned, but they are a very effective way of recruiting volunteers. Bulletin boards are best utilized in high foot-traffic areas and public spaces like libraries, coffee shops and recreation centers. Put some boots on the ground and get stapling.

5. Pick Up the Phone

   Phone calls to past volunteers may result in a re-gained volunteer. Taking a few minutes to call a volunteer to politely check-in could have a positive outcome.

6. Tap Local Resources

   Volunteer recruitment can be accomplished through local resources. Local radio stations are always seeking interesting local stories and can be a great way to reach potential volunteers. Likewise, local newspapers typically have sections that highlight volunteer opportunities.

7. Nonprofit Support Groups

   Nonprofit councils and associations can be a great way to find volunteers. Most areas offer a type of nonprofit association that provides training, job and volunteer opportunities and other capacity-

building initiatives.

8. Grow Your Network

   Building and maintaining relationships with key individuals in the community can be a great way to recruit volunteers. School administrators, church activity leaders and recreation coordinators can be valuable assets when developing reliable volunteer programs. Oftentimes these community leaders can organize a large group of volunteers, which are helpful at events and other activities where many people are needed.

9. Volunteer Websites

   Volunteer websites can help with volunteer recruitment. There are a number of websites (i.e. Volunteer Match) that function solely to match volunteers with their ideal volunteer job. Volunteer opportunities can be found by location or even virtually by interest. Organizations can post volunteer opportunities similar to posting a job listing.

10. Host a recruitment event

    A volunteer recruitment event gives potential volunteers the opportunity to learn about the organization and gives the organization a face-to-face interaction with the volunteer. Recruitment events can take the form of an open house style format where volunteers can get a glimpse of programs offered and potential volunteer positions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while nonprofit organizations face an uphill battle when it comes to recruiting volunteers, with the correct recruitment and management strategies a nonprofit can develop a large and devoted volunteer base. To achieve a strong and skilled volunteer program, an organization must agree on a strategy, invest in technology and work continuously on recruiting and retaining good people.

Organizations will need to reach out and work hard at compelling their target groups to volunteer. They will need to understand the key elements —that being appreciated, organized, flexible and professional, as well as utilizing technology appropriately —that will help maintain and continue to grow its volunteer base. It is only through these tactics that there will be a turn of the volunteering tide and the volunteer rate will again strengthen.

Volunteers help an organization fulfill its mission and provide services to the community. With the right volunteer program, the country can return to being the volunteer powerhouse that it once was… one volunteer at a time.

Resources

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