



Tips for Effective Volunteer Communications

Using communications to build a strong volunteer program
by Ken Wells, Founder of StoryBoard HTX

Step 1: It's A Conversation

Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction? - Amos 3:3

But enough about me. Let's talk about you. How do you like my hair? – Gary Shandling

Too often we treat volunteer communications as a monologue; 100% about our mission or the volunteer tasks and 0% about them. Successful volunteer programs are **relationships**. Two-way conversations build relationships and communications is the way you hold that conversation.

Step 2: The Volunteer Experience

A great dinner is about the overall experience, not just the food. Volunteering should be an experience, not just a task. Your cause is the most important thing, but if you don't meet your volunteers' needs, you are likely to fail in your mission. To meet those needs you need to understand and build your program around why they volunteer and why they quit.

The Volunteer Functions inventoryⁱ was created in 1998 to define the six reasons people volunteer:

- **Values** -Expressing/acting on important values and helping those less fortunate.
- **Understanding** -Seeking to learn more about the world and/or exercise unused skills.
- **Enhancement** - Seeking to grow and develop psychologically.
- **Career** -Goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering.
- **Social** -Volunteering allows the person to strengthen one's social relationships.
- **Protective** - Volunteering to reduce negative feelings or to address personal problems.

Volunteers quit for three main reasons, according to volunteer expert Tobi Johnsonⁱⁱ:

- **Changes in life circumstances** – They move, they change jobs, their interests change, etc.
- **Poor program operations** – It's disorganized, their work doesn't have meaning, etc.
- **Poor team culture** – They don't fit in, they feel isolated, there is a clique, etc.

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A successful volunteer experience is based on knowing why people want to help and changing the things that make them leave, or at least communicating the compensating factors.

Step 3 – Recruitment

If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. - Alice in Wonderland

VolunteerHouston.org is an amazing resource for recruiting volunteers, as well as a lot of valuable insight and training opportunities.

Recruitment starts knowing **why** you want volunteers and **what** traits you want for each role. Create:

- **An inventory of volunteer positions and candidate profiles** – With your staff and experienced volunteers, identify all positions and the ideal qualities of the perfect volunteer for each position.
- **Volunteer job descriptions** – Create a job description for each of those positions. This clarifies the task for both you and your volunteers.

How do you attract your volunteers?

- Word of mouth/reference
- Online
- Corporate volunteers
- Annual events
- Colleges
- Others

Almost all organizations say word of mouth (volunteers recruiting volunteers) is the most effective way, followed by referrals from supporters.ⁱⁱⁱ A survey of New York organizations found 93 percent said word of mouth was effective with another 89% saying referrals were effective.

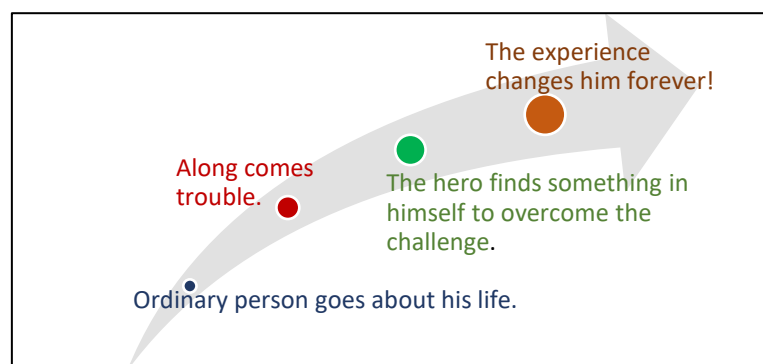
Get The Process Right – Researchers in a famous study cold-called 500 United Way offices to volunteer. Nearly half the time, no one took down their information. When they did, 70% never got a call-back.^{iv}

Step 4 – The Hero's Quest

A Hero is a person who says yes to the adventure. - Kendra Levin

The Hero's quest is a famous concept for describing the elements of a successful story arc. Your organization has a lot of heroes – served population, staff, donors, and volunteers!

As an exercise with your staff, have everyone sit down and describe the epic movie in which a volunteer saves your nonprofit. What big challenge causes him/her to volunteer? How does the volunteer solve your problem? How is he/she changed by it?



Use this exercise to shape your communications strategy with volunteers and change their status from “warm body” to hero.

Step 5 – Training

“The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you.” — B.B. King

Training is communication. Think about training as the way you:

- Cement the bond between volunteers and your program.
- Start everyone off on the same foot.
- Make sure you are complying with any necessary rules, such as background checks, etc.
- Document that your volunteers have received important information before they start.

Consider using video to make your training consistent and effective. Video allows you to communicate information consistently, so each volunteer receives the same information. A simple, but quality training video can be done with your phone, a computer and inexpensive or free software. A google survey or other online survey tool allows you to document that the volunteer went through the training.

Contact us at info@storyboardHTX.com for help or to learn more.

Step 6 – Retention

Do what you do so well that they will want to see it again and bring their friends. - Walt Disney

Keep coming back. It works if you work it. – 12 Step Saying

Your communication with volunteers defines their experience and determines whether they come back. Tailor your message to the audience with a focus on how they receive and understand information. Are they in college? Are they retirees? Are they new volunteers or veterans? Are they also donors?

How do your communications deepen the conversation and relationship? Identify your communications channels and how you use each one. Here are some options:

- One-on-one communications
- Volunteer e-newsletter
- Social media page
- Thank you's & recognition
- Surveys
- Volunteer committee
- Seek feedback through a feedback@email
- Volunteer events

Develop a volunteer lifecycle plan: Starting with the point where they first hear about your organization to the point where they are your ambassadors, sharing your message and introducing other people to your mission. New York Cares, which helps connect about 50,000 volunteers with New York nonprofits, developed a Volunteer Lifecycle Plan^v to manage volunteers as a process. It has six stages:

Recruiting	Training	Motivating/ Retaining	Recruiting Leaders	Onsite Project Experience	Community Building
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Once you have a plan, you can identify your strengths and weaknesses, set goals, and have a way to measure improvement over time.

Step 7 – Ambassadors

“Always Remember to take your Vitamins: Take your Vitamin A for Action, Vitamin B for Belief, Vitamin C for Confidence , Vitamin D for Discipline, Vitamin E for Enthusiasm!” - Pablo.

Volunteers come to you with little more than enthusiasm and a desire to help. Over time, they can become your strongest supporters. According to AmeriCorps, volunteers are twice as likely to donate than non-volunteers. Their enthusiasm is still your most effective recruitment tool. For many organizations, volunteers move on to the board; in a few, they wind up becoming executive directors.

Volunteers are your storytellers: Your communications plan needs to include your volunteers. Whether it is a written testimonial or a video clip, volunteers are often better representatives than your staff. The staff is paid; volunteers aren't. That gives them more credibility for some people. People may also relate to volunteers and be able to see your world through their eyes. For organizations which work with youths or other sensitive groups, volunteers allow you to tell a story without violating privacy concerns. They can talk about the experience in moving, heartfelt terms.

Video is an incredibly powerful way to use volunteers as storytellers. Interviews are good, but video of them interacting with the people you serve is better. Use a cell phone to capture real moments. Don't worry if it looks shaky or rough. That gives it authenticity.

Cultivate your future ambassadors: Identify your volunteers who have the best qualities to represent your cause and help them grow into the role. Communicate and cultivate so that you have a core of volunteers who understand your message and can talk about what you do accurately and confidently.

Reward them for bringing in other volunteers: Recognition is the most effective reward with volunteers. Share their successes to create a culture of volunteer ambassadors.

Volunteers define your reputation with the people you serve: In the hotel business, it doesn't matter what the company policies are; their reputations depend on the front desk staff, the housekeepers and the wait staff. In other words, success is in the hands of the people who interact with the customers. Enthusiastic volunteers are often the representatives who work most closely with the people you serve.

Volunteers are donors too: This has two aspects. Volunteers are literally donating their time (and that time has been estimated to be worth an average of \$28 an hour), so they deserve the same attention as your financial donors. Additionally, many financial donors want a hands-on experience with you as they decide whether to contribute. Find a way to give it to them. Even if they only come once, make sure they leave the experience with a positive opinion.

ⁱ Clary, E. Gil; Snyder, Mark; Ridge, Robert D.; Copeland, John; Stukas, Arthur A.; Haugen, Julie; Miene, Peter (1998). ["Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional approach"](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. **74** (6): 1516–1530.

ⁱⁱ Tobi Johnson, Reduce High Volunteer Turnover Rate with This Surprising Retention Tip

ⁱⁱⁱ Prepared by The Siena College Research Institute for The New York State Commission on National and Community Service 20112012, New Yorkers Volunteer 2012 Survey Results.

^{iv} Charles J. Hobson; Kathryn L. Malec (1999) Telephone Contact of Prospective Volunteers with Nonprofits: An Operational Definition of Quality and Norms For 500 Agencies.

^v Getting Attention; A Volunteer Communications Strategy: 13 Steps to Driving Recruitment, Engagement and Leadership (Case Study).