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Improving Generation Y Volunteerism in Extension Programs

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Improving Generation Y Volunteerism in Extension Programs

Abstract

Members of Generation Y have many positive attributes that make them attractive to Extension volunteer administrators as a potential source of labor. However, they think differently, have unique needs, require new management styles, and have less tolerance for unpleasant working conditions than previous generations. Additionally, they are engaged primarily through the use of technology. This article gives strategies for recruiting and managing this group of hard-working, self-assured, team-oriented, capable, and creative group of volunteers through technology and other means.

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Current Volunteerism Trends

All generations, genders, and backgrounds participate in volunteering, although some groups are better represented in terms of participation and hours per volunteer. Women aged 45-54, parents, and full time employees represent some of those groups with higher volunteer rates. Generation Y (also known as Millennials), however, has the lowest percentage of volunteerism of any group (CNCS, 2010). This article outlines positive, practical steps for improving this trend.

Introducing Generation Y

In 2012, members of Generation Y are between 11 and 30 years of age (Howe & Strauss 2000). They number somewhere between 72 and 78 million members in the United States, rivaling the Baby Boomers in size (McMahon, 2010; Hofmann, 2007).

This group is not altogether selfish, lazy, or spoiled, as some might assume (PrincetonOne, 2008). In fact, they are used to working hard and doing interesting things (Duan, 2009). They are also bright and self-assured, and able to multi-task (Davie, 2008).

Generation Y has many attractive characteristics for Extension volunteer administrators, including ambition, teamwork-orientation, positive attitudes, strong work ethic, and respect (PrincetonOne,

2008; Wharton School, 2006). They seek to maintain lifelong links with institutions they have been a part of and have been taught their whole lives the importance of giving back (Wharton School, 2006).

Recruiting and working with this group is not without challenges. Members of Generation Y think differently, have unique needs, require new management styles, have less tolerance for unpleasant working conditions, and are engaged primarily through the use of technology (PrincetonOne, 2008; Duan, 2009).

Taylor and Anderson (2008) showed that former 4-H participants may be a large, untapped source for potential donors to Extension programs; the same may hold true for volunteerism. In 2009, Culp presented strategies for recruiting and engaging Baby Boomers. Now, it is time to look at how Extension can work with the next large wave of potential volunteers.

Managing Generation Y

Members of Generation Y hold a different set of values and demands than previous generations (Trunk, 2007). They demand flexibility and expect work to accommodate their family and personal lives (Davie, 2008). They look for, and trust, leaders in authority positions, and prefer clear direction and instructions from these leaders (Duan, 2009; Wharton School, 2006).

Generation Y has a lower tolerance for being unsatisfied than previous generations (Duan, 2009). They do not want their jobs to grow boring, so occasionally rotating them to different functions can be helpful in breaking up the monotony (Davie, 2008). They also prefer to be in charge of projects (Vetter, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009).

Being constantly reminded of what to do when growing up, Generation Y may have a lower sense of personal responsibility. Mentorship programs have performed well in addressing the concerns of this generation and can help them develop into the leaders they desire to become (Wharton School, 2006).

Utilizing Social Media

Generation Y was born "plugged in" to Tweeting, Facebooking, blogging, instant messaging, texting, and Web 2.0 technology (Duan, 2009; Newman, 2009). Recruitment strategies should be shifted from printed materials to online social networking sites (CNCS, 2007).

Social media can be used for more than recruitment of volunteers. Generation Y wants managers who are approachable and who offer constant appraisal and feedback (Duan, 2009; Matthews, 2008). They care what their manager thinks and seek relationships with people within institutions they are involved with (Wharton School, 2006). Social networking may represent a way for Extension agents to connect with Generation Y volunteers and to thank them for a job well done. Good deeds done for Extension could be posted on their Facebook wall or Tweeted for their entire social network to see. Volunteering for Extension should be a social affair (Vetter, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009).

Web and Smartphone Accessibility

Potential volunteers expect access to information and resources around the clock and want to be kept up-to-date (Burkham & Boleman, 2005). To create and maintain constant connection with Generation Y, Extension personnel will need to develop skills in the use of online technology and contract with others for the creation of websites, smartphone apps, or technology platforms. Technology can be a medium that brings generations together (Kolodinsky, Cranwell, & Rowe, 2002).

Websites and smartphone apps such as VolunteerMatch offer prospective volunteers a searchable database of nearby service opportunities and the opportunity to read about and review organizations and allow users to connect with volunteer administrators. Registration for nonprofits is free and takes approximately 15 minutes to complete (VolunteerMatch, 2011). Smartphone apps can be created quickly for a relatively low cost (Kharif, 2009). These apps can be used to list upcoming volunteer opportunities or provide volunteer training and tracking.

Virtual Volunteering

The physical presence at a certain place and a certain time precludes some prospective volunteers from serving, but virtual volunteerism, a steadily growing trend, overcomes this dilemma (Conhaim, 2003; Gardyn, 2006). Tasks such as mentoring others, website design or maintenance, performing research for staff, and proofreading or translating documents, can all be performed remotely via a personal computer or smartphone (Conhaim, 2003; CPCS, 2011).

A volunteer could connect with a student via videoconference to give advice or tips on their livestock project. Or 4-H record books could be scanned and placed online, reducing the travel expense of judges having to meet in a central location.

Episodic Volunteering

Generation Y looks for instant gratification. They have busy schedules, much busier than their parents had at their age (Hoffman, 2007). Offering episodic volunteering opportunities may be a way to attract this age group. Episodic, or random, volunteering involves volunteers who may be involved with a single or short-term project, activity, or event (Burkham & Boleman, 2005; CNCS, 2006). Availability of flexible volunteer opportunities assists in volunteer recruitment (Vetter, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009).

Many organizations, realizing the potential of episodic volunteers, are creating shorter, more flexible opportunities (CNCS, 2006). Orientation sessions should be kept short, and directions should be clear. Due to the short-term nature of their service, any issues should be resolved immediately (Burkham & Boleman, 2005).

Voluntourism

Voluntourism is a combination of volunteering and tourism, and is a rapidly growing trend (CNCS, 2008). Offering service activities during spring break or summer vacation might be an attractive option for students.

Volunteers are able to participate in meaningful service, have a deep impact on a community, develop new skills, interact with others, explore new places, create friendships, and derive

satisfaction from vacation time. Host programs benefit from additional skill sets, renewed energy, new ideas and are able to create ambassadors for the program across the wider world (CNCS, 2008).

Voluntourism efforts can include working on farms, ranches, or other agriculture settings; assisting with 4-H programs; building a community garden; conducting nutrition or health education programs; or many other areas which are served by Extension programs.

Conclusion

As Generation Y continues to come of age, the paradigm for Extension volunteer administration will continue to shift. Extension personnel should become familiar with Generation Y's wants and needs in order to tap into the potential of this service-minded population.

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