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# Recruiting and Engaging Baby Boomer Volunteers

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**Abstract:** Baby Boomers are different from other generations of volunteers. Boomers have different view of both retirement and volunteering than previous generations. To successfully engage Baby Boomers volunteers in Extension programs, several adjustments will be needed. Recasting retirement as a means of developing a new perspective on aging and civic engagement; providing unique experiences and an opportunity to volunteer with family and friends; scheduling volunteer activity to fit a busy lifestyle; developing marketing strategies that target Boomers; creating Boomer-friendly volunteer incentives; and offering episodic volunteer roles will all contribute to a larger volunteer Boomer corps in Extension programs.

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## Introduction

When working as volunteer coordinators, Extension professionals have generally employed the same volunteer administration practices and principles to all types, classifications, and generations of volunteers. In short, many Extension educators have operated from the assumption that volunteers were similar, regardless of demographic, programmatic, generational, or motivational differences.

Many volunteer programs in the United States were developed specifically for "civics" or "war babies" or utilize one specific generation of volunteers. A recent national study found that the average age of 4-H volunteers serving in direct contact roles with youth was 46.33 years (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2005). Therefore, today's "typical" 4-H volunteer is a young Baby Boomer. Extension Homemaker membership, conversely, could benefit by an increase in membership from the Boomer generation. In order to coordinate a successful volunteer program, Extension agents must be both comfortable and adept at working with multi-generational volunteers, but most especially, with Baby Boomers.

The Baby Boomer generation, born from 1945 - 1963, was so named because of its exploding ("booming") birth rate. In the 1930's and early 1940's, new births in the United States averaged 2.3 to 2.8 million annually. In 1946, the first year of the Baby Boomer generation, new births skyrocketed to 3.47 million. The birth rate continued to grow, with a peak at 4.3 million in both 1957 and 1961. In 1964 (the final year), 4.0 million babies were born in the US. A significant drop to 3.76 million births in 1965 broke the cycle (Rosenberg, 2006). Boomers, the largest generation in history, provide Extension professionals nearly unlimited potential for volunteer service.

Volunteers, as with the rest of society, can be divided into generational classifications. These generations display more differences than similarities. Successful Extension educators will need to learn how to market

their volunteer opportunities to Boomers, as well as tailor specific volunteer roles to the interests of this huge demographic.

Gambone (2002) identified five generations of Americans. These generations, differentiated by historical points in time, are demographically different, based upon their distinctly different upbringing and environmental conditions. Gambone's generations include:

- 1901 - 1931-Civic
- 1932 - 1944-Meditating/War Babies
- 1945 - 1963-Baby Boomers
- 1964 - 1981-Diversity/Generation X
- 1982 - 2001-Millennial/Generation Y/Generation Why?

Additionally, Rosenberg (2006) identified the newest generation:

- 2001-Generation Z

## Characteristics of the Baby Boomer Generation

Boomers are distinctly different from their parents and grandparents. Boomers will retire earlier, stay healthier, be more physically active, and live longer than any previous generation. They have greater wealth and more expendable income than other generations of retirees. Boomers exhibit greater independence, are more skilled, and have a higher level of education.

Many Boomers will seek volunteer opportunities as a means to remain active, use their skills, and pursue interests that they have not previously had time to do. Boomers will seek volunteer roles that allow them to use their own skills and interests. They will look for a good fit between the needs of the organization, the expectations of the role, and their own interests. Boomers need (and expect) to see the results and impact of their volunteer service and affiliate with the *needed skills* of the role.

## Boomers and Retirement

Baby Boomers require new recruitment strategies as well as a new vision for supporting adults in volunteer service (Lindblom, 2001). Boomers have a different set of motivational factors and influences, as compared with Civics or Mediators. Therefore, different recruitment strategies are necessary to engage them as 4-H and Extension volunteers.

Boomers' views of retirement are distinctly different from those of Civics and Mediators (Lindblom, 2001). Boomers anticipate more time for volunteer activities and will select those that make good use of their time. They anticipate doing what they *want* to do, not what they *have* to do. Boomers feel comfortable making choices and saying "no" to volunteer roles that don't make effective use of their interests, skills, resources, or

abilities. Volunteer activities should offer flexibility to accommodate their busy lifestyles. Boomers plan to give up serving on boards in their retirement. They are likely to seek activities different from their occupational careers and will pursue volunteer roles that are an interest to them. Retirement will provide an opportunity to try something new and different.

Mack and Waldman (2002) recast retirement to develop a new perspective on aging and civic engagement. The notion that retirement was the last and most unproductive stage of one's life must be changed as Boomers retire younger, healthier, more active, more highly skilled, and with greater resources than previous generations. Many will find volunteer service an appealing way to spend retirement. Retirees will seek appealing volunteer opportunities as a means of staying active, being useful, contributing to their communities, and spending time. Extension professionals who successfully engage Boomers in programs must be able to recast retirement using factors which may motivate retirees to volunteer. These include:

- Having more control, more freedom and more time for personal interests and pursuits. *"I'd like to apply the skills and knowledge I've acquired over a lifetime and use them to help someone."*
- The notion of life as a journey with a future. No one wants to think of retirement as the beginning of the end. *"I like to think of myself retiring to something as opposed to retiring from something."*
- Continued participation in life by learning, giving back or mentoring. *"One of the best things you can do is to teach others what you know."*
- Being a part of something "larger." *"I would love to be part of a movement to make a difference, something bigger than just one person doing my best."*

(Mark & Waldman, 2002).

Boomers will seek challenging opportunities, flexibility, unique experiences and an opportunity to serve with family and friends. Boomers anticipate a busy retirement and will make time for volunteer activity only if it fits into their busy lifestyle. Before recruiting and engaging Boomer volunteers, the organization must be "Boomer-friendly" (Lindblom, 2001). Extension programs must determine if the infrastructure necessary to recruit and retain Boomers is in place. To determine if your county program has the necessary infrastructure to support the Boomer generation, consider the following questions.

1. Will staff be available to orient, educate and supervise Boomer volunteers?
2. Are there a variety of volunteer positions offered to Boomer volunteers?
3. What types of tangible and intangible incentives are available for Boomer volunteers?
4. Do marketing materials adequately represent and target the Boomer generation? (Lindblom, 2001).
5. Are shorter term, more flexible volunteer positions available?

Boomers will seek volunteer opportunities in which they can make a meaningful contribution *in a limited amount of time*. Recognition based upon hours of service is not a motivating factor. This generation focuses on *quality* rather than *quantity*. Boomers need to understand the impact of their afternoon spent volunteering rather than receive a reward for the number of hours they've served. Boomers will not be satisfied with fulfilling a role based solely on the needs of an organization. Rather, they will focus on how their skills and interests can fulfill the needs of the organization or program and make a difference (Lindblom, 2001).

Boomers are busy people. Two-thirds of volunteers 55 and over discovered volunteer opportunities through their involvement in faith communities, because someone asked them, or through participating in their children's activities (Lindblom, 2001). The best way to recruit a volunteer is to seek those individuals who are already actively involved in volunteer opportunities and to directly ask them to do something that they have an interest in and a talent for doing.

Incentives for Boomers will be much more important than traditional volunteer recognition activities or rewards. Incentives that Boomers find appealing include both tangible and intangible forms. Tangible incentives include asking someone to return a service for a service; prescription discounts; accruing "time dollars" to be "cashed in" for other services; frequent flier miles, free or discounted tuition; and providing transportation. Intangible incentives include companionship or opportunities to volunteer as a group; and offering service opportunities that can be performed at the volunteer's home (Lindblom, 2001).

Extension professionals must create a successful match between the volunteer's interests, skills, and abilities, and an important volunteer role. Educators should not begin recruiting Boomers until the organization's infrastructure is in place to support their involvement. The following factors should be considered when recruiting Boomers or focusing marketing and recruiting campaigns directly to them.

- Marketing materials must depict Boomers.
- Recruitment efforts must encompass more than slick marketing materials.
- Volunteer opportunities that can involve an entire family or social circle will be more attractive.
- Time flexibility is critical.
- Boomers will seek opportunities where they can contribute directly to their community and have observable impact.
- Incentives (rather than recognition) will be a significant motivating factor for Boomers.

Wilson and Steele (2002) studied the impact that marketing messages had on the Baby Boomer generation. They determined that marketing strategies employed for other generations had limited success with Boomers. Because Boomers expect to spend their retirement years being physically active, using their skills, and cultivating their interests, they will not respond well to generic appeals to altruism. The following marketing messages are examples that should have greater appeal to Boomer audiences:

- "Life is a continuing journey with never-ending opportunities to learn, give and grow."

- "Everyone has something to offer. How can you put your skills to work?"
- "Everyone needs to be needed. We need you."
- "Your experience, wisdom and talent are needed and valued."
- "We can help you find an outlet for your skills and experiences."  
(Wilson & Steele, 2002).

Mack and Waldman (2002) identified a number of descriptors that have been found to have greater appeal to the Baby Boomer generation. Whenever possible, these descriptors should be included in recruitment and marketing campaigns. These descriptors include: experienced, advisors, coaches, wise ones, mentors, advisors, the giving years, my years, "call me a *master* not a senior citizen."

Conversely, statements that had anything to do with physical limitations or the finiteness of life were found to be deterrents to recruiting Boomers. Likewise, some Boomers expressed a fear of being dismissed or concerns about not having enough to do. The following descriptors were found to have the least appeal and could be deterrents to potential Boomer volunteers: elderly, retiree, retired people, older boomers, older people, senior citizens, later life (Mark & Waldman, 2002).

Senior volunteerism issues are complex, requiring volunteer-driven organizations to rethink their structure and values, and to reframe their message to effectively market programs, services, and volunteer opportunities to Boomers. In order to attract and retain more highly educated and skilled Boomers, "status quo" thinking must be replaced with new internal and external paradigms of operation.

## **Marketing Volunteer Opportunities to Boomers**

Wilson and Steele (2001) identified seven factors that should be considered in order to market volunteer opportunities to boomers. These factors include: Organizational Strategies, Structure, Resources, Technology, Funding, Partnerships, Culture, and Values. Extension professionals should consider these factors when determining how to most effectively market their volunteer opportunities to the Baby Boomer generation.

### **Organizational Strategies**

#### ***Change the Image of Aging***

New perceptions about the capacities of adults over 50 must be created by providing opportunities to effectively use their time, talents, and life experiences. The words "older," "senior," and "retired" are turn-offs to Boomers. Volunteer roles need to be refined to reflect a more challenging, meaningful experience that has an impact on the community.

## ***Repackage the Way Volunteer Opportunities Are Presented***

Extension must change the concept of asking someone to volunteer. (Asking someone to contribute his or her education, skills, interests, or abilities is a compliment!) Distinctions between paid and unpaid service should be downplayed. The skills needed and the role to be performed should be the focus of recruitment efforts and marketing strategies. Boomers should not be asked to volunteer; they should be asked to apply their skills to a particular task in order to meet a community need. Usage of the word "volunteer" should be reduced. (To Boomers, the word "volunteer" conjures up negative images of a certain type and generation of people, e.g., retired women or mothers.) Position descriptions should be redesigned to be more challenging, include development opportunities, supervision, and benefits.

## ***Emphasize the Needs and Characteristics of Potential Volunteers***

Extension educators should focus on the skills and interests of the volunteer, rather than on the task to be completed. Rethinking the match between the volunteer and the task will aid in the recruitment process. The impact on the volunteer and the community should be described. Volunteer opportunities should be paired with educational or part-time employment programs wherever possible.

## ***Plan New Approaches to Find Volunteers***

Recruitment strategies that were successful with other generations will not appeal to Boomers. Use of high-profile media and technology to market volunteer opportunities is an important first step. However, mass media and Web site announcements cannot be the only marketing strategies incorporated to recruit Boomers. Mass media is useful as a marketing strategy to develop awareness but is not an effective recruitment tool. Don't wait until Boomers retire to recruit them! Targeting pre-retirees with corporate volunteer release time, part-time work, and part-time volunteer corporate programs; second career preparation through volunteer education and work experiences; and presenting educational programs at civic and community meetings will all be successful strategies to recruit Boomers as Extension volunteers.

## **Organizational Structure**

Changes in Extension may be necessary in order to reflect the importance of volunteerism. This could be accomplished by elevating the stature of Extension educators who are competently serving as volunteer administrators, as well as of effective volunteers in the organization. Identifying a volunteer career ladder with increased levels of responsibility and incentives should aid in volunteer retention.

Removing barriers to volunteering by creating a broad and flexible range of volunteer opportunities will provide Boomers with greater choices and is likely to result in a larger, more diverse and highly skilled volunteer cadre. These volunteer opportunities could include a combination of episodic activities, on-going roles, removing income and age guidelines, improving information access, and providing opportunities to volunteer with families, couples, grandchildren, friends, teams, and groups. Including volunteers in feedback systems and incorporating input from Boomers in the redesign of programs and local committees will be important for Boomer retention.

## **Organizational Resources**

Resources can be expanded by creating new funding sources, including demonstration grants and innovative awards. Using available technology, creating corporate and community partnerships, and developing community and volunteer leadership will aid in volunteer recruitment. Identifying volunteer benefits and

incentives that are meaningful to Boomers is the final category of organizational resources. Examples include providing transportation, medigap insurance, housing options, and life-long learning opportunities.

Boomers will expect Extension to be technologically advanced. Both hardware and necessary software packages should be made available for their use. Use of the Internet as a clearinghouse of volunteer opportunities, Web site development, maintenance, and user-friendliness will be expected. Use of technology as an incentive by using the volunteer's computer skills, providing Internet access and free e-mail accounts, and providing learning opportunities to upgrade computer skills and use of the Internet as a networking opportunity for volunteers and clientele will be a valuable incentive. Additionally, technology experts should be recruited for leadership roles and for board positions in Extension.

## **Organizational Funding**

Corporate partnerships are essential to Boomers! Funding interests should be carefully matched with the capacities, talents, skills, and interests of Boomer volunteers. Volunteer and program impact evaluation will be essential to external funding opportunities.

## **Organizational Partnerships**

Partnerships will focus on new ways to work with businesses. These could include corporate-sponsored volunteer vacations, release time for current employees, employee volunteer sabbaticals, and fees for service benefits (using volunteer services as employee benefits.) New partners must continue to be sought. New partners will include collaborations for life-long learning and online career and volunteer development opportunities. Neighborhood and grassroots organizations are an underutilized means of meeting community needs and accessing volunteers.

## **Organizational Culture & Values**

Organizations will need to offer more flexible and customized volunteer roles in order to appeal to Boomers. A seamless format for moving between volunteer and paid workforce opportunities will have greater appeal and will also communicate to both paid and unpaid staff that volunteerism is valued in Extension. Volunteer opportunities should be structured in order to be responsive to the diversity of the Boomer generation.

Extension professionals who plan for and provide professional development opportunities in volunteer-led programs in these seven target areas will assist in the transformation to a service-centered, volunteer-driven organization.

## **Types of Volunteer Roles that Appeal to Boomers**

Extension agents who identify volunteer roles and the specific skill set that is necessary in order to execute those roles will be the most successful in recruiting Boomers. Boomers will not respond to generic appeals for volunteer service. Rather, they will be more likely to serve a cause, fulfill a need, or execute a specific task, based upon their individual interests and skill set. Because they were born into large families and educated in big classes, Boomers are conditioned to work on committees, participate in group activities, and enjoy team efforts. All of these have widespread appeal to Boomer volunteers. In particular, Boomers enjoy fundraising activities and coordinating big events.



## Conclusion

Agents should use different skills and administrative strategies when working with multi-generational volunteers. Baby Boomers are demographically and motivationally different from other generations and will seek different volunteer experiences. Boomers expect to maintain busy schedules during retirement. Volunteer service provides a good opportunity for meaningful retirement activity. Boomers will seek volunteer opportunities that will use their skills, fulfill their interests, and fit their schedules. Boomers will expect to be able to make choices when selecting volunteer roles and will also anticipate episodic volunteer opportunities.

Successful Extension professionals will adapt to the expectations of Boomers and ensure that the infrastructure of their program will adapt to meet Boomer's expectations. Finally, if volunteer involvement is a priority of Extension in the next decade, administrators will need to adequately recognize and reward Extension professionals who competently administer effective volunteer programs.

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