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Recruiting Strategies for Short-Term Volunteers

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Recruiting Strategies for Short-Term Volunteers

Abstract

Is there a need for episodic (short-term) volunteers in your Extension programs? A survey asked people why they weren't volunteering. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents said they would volunteer if the jobs were shorter in duration. Short-term volunteers will be more productive and will be more likely to continue in their service if they are recruited, supported, and valued as partners in the educational process. By using the information in this article, professionals who work with volunteers has the capability to increase the overall size and scope of their programs.

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Volunteers Are the Key to Our Success

Are you ready for short-term (episodic) volunteers in your Extension programs? A survey (J.C. Penney, 1987) asked people why they weren't volunteering. Seventy-nine percent of those asked said they would be more inclined to volunteer if the jobs were shorter in duration.

Episodic volunteering is becoming more prevalent in today's society due to more people working out of the home and generally busier lifestyles. In order for Extension programs to be effective and relevant in our communities, Extension professionals will need to become more reliant on the short-term volunteer.

What Is a Short-Term Volunteer?

Short-term volunteers may assist with special project, events, and activities. Often these volunteers will assist for 25 or fewer hours in a calendar year. When recruiting the volunteer, the type of position and length of assignment are important points to consider. Depending on the length of commitment needed for the position, it may require a different approach to recruitment, training, and support than you would use to recruit a traditional, long-term volunteer.

To make effective use of the short-term volunteer, follow these simple guidelines.

- Have short-term volunteer roles available for upcoming special events like camp, research projects, after-school programs, and county fair.
- Develop specific job descriptions for your short-term volunteer that lets them know the duration and tasks that must be completed.
- Provide these volunteers with a training/orientation session that is appropriate to the roles that they will be performing.

Improve Your Recruiting? Know Your Program!

A successful recruiting method is to know your program needs in a way that demonstrates an understanding of the needs of your volunteer as well. Designing your volunteer management program should be completed before volunteers are recruited. In addition, during the recruitment process, it is important for the volunteer to assess what they are qualified to do. That will help in

the eventual placement of volunteers. A volunteer self-assessment tool is useful in assisting the coordinator and the volunteer in assigning the appropriate roles for these individuals.

Because there are different ways to recruit volunteers for your programs, don't concentrate all your efforts on one method. For instance, news and press releases are just one way to recruit. Paid advertisements, company newsletters, word of mouth, etc., are other ways you might try. Other methods to recruit the short-term volunteer include:

- Pool ideas of salaried and volunteer staff on recruitment possibilities.
- Use all communication outlets: radio, TV, Web sites, newspapers, paid advertisements, personal contacts, billboards, etc.
- Mail preference questionnaires to past clients and community newcomers.
- Attend job fairs, recognition and award activities.
- Develop creative and attractive material for an upcoming project.
- Have current volunteers bring a friend.
- Contact clubs and service groups.
- Document successes--and share them!

In Curry County, Oregon, short-term volunteers were recruited for a 4-H after-school gardening program by using a few of these techniques. To begin, specific program goals were identified. Position descriptions were written that included the time of commitment, a list of responsibilities, and the training required. A few paid ads and an appeal to the Master Gardener volunteers resulted in the eight short-term volunteers needed to work on the project.

Keep Communication Lines Open

When volunteers have been identified for your programs, it is important to keep them updated on their responsibilities and other things they have committed to do. The more support the volunteer receives, the more likely they will be to volunteer in the future. Training and support can be simple as long as they provide the volunteer with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective performance.

Recognize Your Volunteers

Recognition is important--for volunteers and salaried staff. It should be planned as we prepare our recruiting strategies for volunteers. On-the-job praise is an important way to give encouragement to staff, both salaried and volunteer (Larwood, 2002). If we make recognition a habit, both publicly and privately, the message is sent to current and potential volunteers just how important they are to our organization. Effective and meaningful volunteer involvement demonstrates your appreciation for volunteers all year long (Fox & Penrod, 1989).

Measuring for Success

Once a short-term volunteer program is in place, it's important to measure and review the quality of his or her work to see whether expectations are being met. Appraisal and evaluation should be part of ongoing supervision, not saved for certain times of the year or done only when projects have been completed. In reviewing a volunteer's performance, identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas where more training is needed. Watch for signs of boredom and work with the volunteer to add new dimensions to their assignment.

It is important to develop a process or method of communicating the results of the evaluations. Whatever the process selected to evaluate volunteers, it should be interactive. This gives a chance to give and receive feedback.

Conclusion

Since incorporating a short-term volunteer strategy in Curry County, Oregon, volunteer numbers in all areas have increased by 18%, with nearly 70% of the new volunteers committing to short-term assignments. Return rates of these short-term volunteers for a second year averages 85%. By diversifying the volunteer base in this county, new and larger audiences have been reached.

If you are in looking to expand your volunteer and/or clientele base, maybe these tools for recruiting, supporting, evaluating, and recognizing episodic volunteers will work for you.

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