

Building a successful museum volunteer services program

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Volunteers can be a museum's most effective assets when it comes to marketing, fundraising and community support. For most museums, a strong, viable volunteer program is essential to its successful operation. They give extra manpower on a daily basis, at events, with programs and in a variety of other capacities where staff does not have the time, talent or resources to accomplish a task. They provide valuable resources that might otherwise not be available.

If volunteers are so significant to museums, why does museum staff often have trouble with recruiting and retaining them? Why do volunteers disappear? Why do they stay around? How do they decide that your museum is the place that they want to donate their time? How do you find the volunteer gems that your museum needs?

Volunteers want to get more out of their service than simply accomplishing a task. They want to socialize, learn something new, make professional connections, or satisfy their religious obligations as part of their volunteer time. David Eisner, CEO Corporation for National and Community Service

Questions the volunteer candidate may be asking when thinking about serving in your museum: how do they fit into the picture, how can they be useful and how much time will it take? Can they give tours? Can they work with artifacts? Can they interact with the public? Are there social activities? Does it cost?

For a brand new programs or a program that is going through a transformation, there are building blocks and milestones that you can use to establish a strong foundation. The first step is determining the needs of the museum. There are general, universal museum volunteer positions such as greeters and docents. Then there are positions that are specific to your museum; curatorial and exhibit assistants, children's area, café host, grounds guild, tour guide, etc. After these positions fall into place, ask staff and board members, "If you had a volunteer with you all day, what could they do for you?" The answers will present the next layer of volunteer positions.

Once you know the needs of your organization, prioritize which volunteer positions you need to fill first. But in tandem, look at the museum's strategic goals. Many times staff

feel desperate for assistance and are willing to accept any "warm body" that offers to help. It is dangerous to adopt this attitude. Volunteers are looking to fulfill many types of needs when they offer their time. The museum's volunteer program may or may not be able to fulfill those needs. If it can, it is often a good match. If not, there is the potential for disaster. It is essential to keep the museum's goals and mission forefront in every Volunteer Services Program. Ideally a Volunteer Services Program will be integral to the museum's strategic plan.

What kind of volunteers does your agency need?

Typically volunteers come in two varieties: skilled or general. Skilled volunteers include: doctors, lawyers, teachers, graphic designers, carpenters, etc. These people have a very specific ability they can offer to the museum. Their talent can fulfill a need such as building a Web site, writing curriculum, or constructing an exhibit.

On the other hand, a general volunteer is someone who has the desire to be useful to the museum and can accomplish certain tasks such as answering the phone, assisting with bulk mailings, greeting visitors and the like. Their skills are such that they can assist with a variety of duties or some very specific ones.

"One-shot" vs. "Long-term"

One-shot volunteers are interested in short-term volunteer activities that do not require a sustained commitment. They help with events or activities once a month, a quarter or a year. They can be counted on year after year for the museum's fundraising event, but not to answer the phones every Tuesday. These folks may be people who work full time and are raising a family or who travel a lot.

Long-term volunteers are willing to make a commitment to the museum in the form of docent, tour guide, or curatorial assistant. Typically they are the life-long learners that want and can make a substantial commitment with their time and talents month after month.

Both types of volunteers are essential in fulfilling the goals and mission of the museum. Ideally the Volunteer Services Program will have the flexibility to accommodate both types of volunteers.

Mission Statement

A mission specific to the Volunteer program should frame the program within the context of the overall museum mission. Make sure it is attainable and a staff decision. If the volunteer program is already established, let the volunteers help create the mission or “freshen” up an existing one.

Service Areas

When a potential volunteer looks over a list of service descriptions, they are looking for the least amount of commitment they can give. They are looking to “dip” their toe in the water. A well-written service description can seal the deal. The description should be clear and concise but leave room to grow. Every service area needs a description.

Volunteer Reference Manual

The Volunteer Reference Manual should have a variety of information in it specific to your organization but at a minimum should include the history of the agency, policies and procedures for the volunteer program and museum, cover non-discrimination and harassment and the evaluation process including a discipline system. The volunteer manual is critical to the successful operation of the volunteer program. It is a legal document in that it holds the resources necessary to keep volunteers and the museum safe and running smoothly. Dr. Bill Wittich has an excellent resource in *The Model Volunteer Handbook*, which can be found at www.energize.com.

Marketing Materials

Organized program materials are indispensable in giving the right impression about your program. Does your volunteer program information answer questions? Are the answers clear and concise? Are your materials such that potential volunteers can instantly see themselves volunteering in your museum?

Have packets on-hand so that you do not miss an opportunity to recruit a potential volunteer. Have interest cards at the admissions desk to capture would-be volunteers. The very best recruitment tool is current volunteers. If they enjoy the program and what it offers, they will tell their friends and family and will recruit new volunteers for you.

Benefits that volunteers receive as part of their service are important. Do they get special perks such as assigned parking, free tickets, complimentary membership, a special uniform, discounts, or educational opportunities not available to the general public? If you can offer unique tangible or intangible perks it will make your Volunteer Services Program even more enticing.

Interviews, Forms and Background Checks

Depending on applicable state laws, appointing volunteers can be as time-consuming as hiring paid staff. The process should include an application, interview, orientation and evaluation. Consider consulting a human resources professional for input on forms, interview questions and handling the paperwork.

Interviews

Interviews are an excellent way to really get to know each potential volunteer. They are also an opportunity for the volunteer candidate to interview the museum. Questions to consider are; what draws you to our museum? What are

some of your special skills or talents that are going to make you a great volunteer? How many hours a day/week would you like to volunteer? What is important to you when you think about volunteering? Design the questions in such a way that you get a chance to learn more about the volunteer, gather information their view of your organization and their placement as a volunteer. Volunteer interviews are a definite time commitment, but they are fundamental to the success of the program and of the volunteer.

Forms

Volunteers create a lot of paperwork. You should have an application and skills inventory for each volunteer. These will come in handy when you are trying to match a volunteer to an area or staff member. Other forms to consider are a medical release, request for a background search, a liability release form, and emergency contact information.

Devise a system to keep all of the information orderly. One such way is to keep each volunteer file together with a cover sheet that shows what information is contained within each packet. Excel spreadsheets are a great way to compile all of the information electronically for easy access later. Keep in mind that this is sensitive information and should be kept private and secure.

Background Checks

Many Volunteer Service Programs are now requiring background checks on their volunteers. Online resources are available to perform these. Once such company is American Checked; they offer a product specific to volunteers for a very nominal fee. Because cost and staff time are important factors, you have to decide if performing background searches on your volunteers is important to the success of the program.

Keeping them engaged

Recruiting, training and rewarding volunteers is a never-ending cycle. It is important to keep the program fresh and engaging for the current as well as new volunteers. It can be hard to do. Keep yourself involved with your volunteers by visiting with them, enjoying their company, and making friends. Manage by walking around. Ask them questions. Ask what they want to do, how do they want to help? Is there some project they want to take on? Would that one volunteer who has been hosting a gallery rather take on your filing system? Will they be better suited working with the exhibits department designing the next major exhibit? Will they be wildly successful at giving tours?

Continuing education is essential to keeping volunteers engaged. Offer classes, access to reference materials, education opportunities such as fieldtrips, hands-on activities, and tours.

Social activities are opportunities to share time and get to know each other. On a fieldtrip at a banquet or potluck they can tell stories about volunteering, kids and grand kids, weddings and divorces. By making connections and building friendships with each other they strengthen their bond with the museum.

Keeping, training and rewarding the volunteers that you have are easier than finding new ones. By offering continuing education, social activities, reward systems, and

benefits they build friendships with other volunteers, feel appreciated and connected to the staff and will hopefully stay with the museum.

Volunteer Manager Resources

Keeping yourself engaged and involved is imperative! There are excellent online resources for volunteer managers as well as volumes of information in the library. Your best and most easily accessible resource is other volunteer managers. They are the people that will keep you going when you get down, will give advice and let you talk “shop” for hours on end. Many areas have a group of volunteer managers that meet on a regular basis. Once such group is the Central Oklahoma Volunteer Administrators (COVA). Their Web site is www.covaokc.com. Visit Yahoo Groups for several list-serves for Volunteer Resource Managers.

In addition to the above building blocks, you as the Volunteer Manager need to become a capacity builder, employee law aficionado and demonstrator of cultural competency. All the volunteers—board members, long-term docents, single opportunity volunteers—should be able to speak about the mission of your museum, general programs, and exhibits and who to call for more information.

If you take the time to build a strong foundation for your Volunteer Services Program, you will attract a strong, powerful cadre of talent that will take your museum to remarkable levels of success.

Questions to Ask

What does your agency need?

Does your museum need a new Web site, help with events, a speakers bureau, administrative assistance, help with educating the public, or marketing and PR? Explore where volunteers can support the museum’s mission and goals.

Poll the Staff

What do they need help with? What do they NOT want to do? What can they NOT do either because of lack of time or lack of skill?

Who does your museum serve?

Who are your visitors and what do they need? Do they need tours, educational materials, presentations, or research services? Are they families, scholars, or “go-seums”?

Visit the Past and Present

What is the volunteer history of the museum? Have there been volunteers before? How were they utilized? What kind of program was it? Was it effective? Why? Why not?

Investigate Volunteer Service Programs at other museums. How do they utilize volunteers? Will they share resources with you? Share volunteers? Share educational materials and opportunities? Do you see ways they don’t use volunteers that you could? Do they use volunteers that you don’t need to? What do they have that you want?

Nurturing and Growing the Program for Success

How will your volunteers know they are successful? How are you going to know when you get “there”? Is your goal to have “X” number of volunteers in a year? Is it to give 300 tours in a school year? Is it to see 50,000 visitors in a year’s time? The volunteers are there to help the museum

succeed. Set goals for the program and for the volunteers. Ask for their input when setting goals. They want to celebrate those accomplishments just as much as the staff.

Volunteers are the only human beings on the face of the earth who reflect this nation’s compassion, unselfish caring, patience, and just plain love for one another. Erma Bombeck

Other resources

American Association for Museum Volunteers
www.aamv.org

American Background Checks
www.americanchecked.com

Charity Channel
www.charitychannel.com

Corporation for National and Community Service
www.cns.gov

Independent Sector
www.independentsector.org

Points of Light Foundation
www.pointsoflight.org

Volunteer Squared
www.volunteer2.com