

It's Volunteers *and* Money

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In May 2001, I wrote a Hot Topic called "[Money Is No Object](#)," in which I highlighted something unique about volunteer involvement: we're the only ones in our organizations who can dream something up and not immediately have to ask "how will we pay for this?" This is pretty amazing and we should take every opportunity we can to expand what our organization's funds can provide. But this month I want to address the other side of the coin: we need sufficient money to assure success for volunteers.

What inspired this Hot Topic is how often we at Energize hear "we don't have the money" as a reason not to purchase something for professional development (books, online training, attending a national conference)...or not to provide transportation reimbursement for volunteers, provide even a small recognition gift, or anything else the volunteer program may need. And on the surface, with the economy in a downturn, it may even sound reasonable to spend little.

But there is more beneath the surface. Let's examine more closely what "we don't have the money" may mean:

- We're not interested, and this is an easy way to stop the conversation.
- We have not budgeted for anything like this and don't want to discuss whether we ought to add to the volunteer program budget in the near future to pay for something unexpected but valuable to us.
- We have not budgeted for anything like this and can't imagine finding funds for it, so why even discuss it?

Of course it's true that there isn't a pot of gold sitting untouched in the basement awaiting a way to be spent. But that just means "we don't have the money" *right now*. Every organization, whether nonprofit or government, *plans ahead* for raising and spending funds for anything it wants to do. Why can't volunteer-related needs be part of this process?

I can't count how many times colleagues have told me that they do not even have a budget allocated for volunteer program needs. Instead, they are in the awkward position of having to place a request for any and all funds beyond the most basic. So they can't do advance planning and usually end up with what's left after all the other organization's units are done with their spending.

Perhaps more serious is the frequent reluctance of volunteer program managers even to broach the subject of increasing their budgets. This is related to always looking to get something free or at the least cost, which contradicts the message that volunteers are valuable. Publishers, trainers, conferences, and even our professional associations can only cut their prices so far before undermining the quality of what they provide. Things like insurance or enabling funds do cost money. We need to be advocates for the importance of such resources to the ultimate success of volunteers.

As a profession, volunteer program managers generally don't like discussing money. We're happy not to be doing fundraising and feel much happier raising people. So we need to see this issue of resource allocation for volunteers as integral to our work and develop the skills to "make the case" for spending money on volunteers.

For an excellent overview and some very creative ideas, I highly recommend reading the article Betty Stallings wrote for *e-Volunteerism* called "[Generating Funds for Your Volunteer Program: The Mindset and Methods](#)." She looks at ways to underwrite an entire volunteer engagement effort. As her title suggests, it begins with a determined mindset. It also takes a little bit of courage because you may be challenging an initial refusal to consider spending money on volunteers.

So how do you ask for new funds? Here are a few pointers:

- Never ask for the money for *you*. Explain how this expense is an investment in *the success of the volunteer program*. Be prepared to describe the cause and effect. "If you pay for X, the result will be Y."
- State the full amount you need, but immediately break it down into smaller numbers. What's the cost per month? Per volunteer? Per project or program? Again, execs sometimes need a reminder that money spent on the volunteer office directly affects every department in the organization. If the IT department asked for \$100,000 for new computers, you can be sure they immediately explain for how many different desks!
- Clarify the payment plan. Do you need all the money on day 1? Do you need an initial payment and then the balance comes due later? This might mean you can spread a cost across two budget years, lowering the amount in any one year.
- Do your homework and tell how and why you eliminated other choices. In volunteerism, there are rarely too many services or products from which to choose, so one of your arguments can be "this is the only service of its kind."
- Remind decision-makers of how the service donated by volunteers adds to the organization's resources. Point out the high ratio of what is spent now on volunteers, against the value of their services. Then show how – even with adding in the new expense you're requesting – that ratio remains really high.
- Decentralize the expense by suggesting that the cost be shared within the budget of each unit that involves volunteers, not simply allocated to the volunteer office. Similarly, propose that some expenses be covered in the budgets of the public relations/marketing office, human resources department, education/training staff, or development unit, since all these management areas overlap with volunteer engagement in different ways.
- Involve volunteers in endorsing the request (testimonials, comments) and even in making the presentation with you. This reinforces the notion that the money is for *them*, not you, and reminds executives that volunteers are real people!
- If you're turned down, ask why, especially if your request presented good reasoning. This may be a chance to learn how your decision-makers think about volunteers. Then ask: "May

I raise this question again in six months?" In other words, you can accept the lack of available funds *today* (reality), but not the unwillingness to consider *finding funds* for this important request in the future.

The worst thing you can do is *not ask* for funds needed to support volunteers (again, not *you*). If you never ask, you will never get. Preparing a solid presentation for a legitimate, if unexpected, expense has benefits even if the initial response is no. First, you will be educating your management about the needs of volunteers and the costs associated with having a strong volunteer program. Second, you will gain respect as a program leader for the way in which you make the case.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the monthly Hot Topic essay for May 2008 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2008/08may.html>