Keeping Volunteer Information Up-to-Date

By Jayne Cravens

Keeping track of information about volunteers is a challenge. At *minimum*, an organization has to keep track of currently-engaged volunteers' up-to-date email address and phone number. Organizations also need volunteers to report what they are doing as volunteers, what they are accomplishing, and how many hours they are contributing -- each day, each week or each month. Organizations also want to keep information up-to-date about volunteers that are not currently engaged, that are taking a break from volunteering but could be interested in coming back at some point. Having this up-to-date information about volunteers is vital to the sustainability of volunteer involvement; without this information, it's impossible to show, beyond anecdotes, the [value of volunteers](). It also makes retaining volunteers and recruiting them for new assignments very difficult, if not impossible.

Organizations struggle with keeping very basic contact information about their volunteers up-to-date because email addresses and phone numbers change so frequently (my mother has had the same phone number for the last 45 years, while mine has changed probably a dozen times in the last 25 years), and volunteers often forget to notify organizations they are helping about such changes.

In addition, organizations need volunteers to report in about their activities, for internal program reports, budgeting, program proposals and donor reports - and organizations all lack the resources for one person to sit at a computer and type in this information for all volunteers.

The easiest way to keep volunteer information up-to-date is to:

- make volunteers responsible for their own information - and make that responsibility clear to them,
- create frequent opportunities for volunteers to view and update their information themselves during their regular interactions with the organization, and
- develop consequences for not keeping information up-to-date, and rewards for doing so.

Organizations: your goal is to get all of the information you need about volunteers, regularly, with minimal effort on your part.

Tell new volunteers about their requirements for keeping their information up-to-date during their first volunteer orientation, frequently remind volunteers of these requirements (reminders at least a few times a year), and make sure they understand why you have these requirements. Volunteers won't see these requirements as heavy-handed if they understand from the beginning why having their contact information up-to-date is so important to the organization (for instance, do they

realize that having the volunteer coordinator tracking down volunteers with incorrect contact info takes away from that person being able to work with and support other volunteers, or being able to mobilize volunteers quickly for a critical situation? do they realize that without this information, the organization may not see the value of volunteers and eliminate support for such in an effort to save money?). If you establish from day one that keeping their information up-to-date is part of their commitment as volunteers, you will find that volunteers will make this duty a priority.

Some suggestions on how to keep volunteers' contact information up-to-date, as well as how to track other information (number of hours contributed, accomplishments, challenges, etc.):

- Require volunteers to sign in onto a paper sheet or via a computer *every* time they come onsite for an activity or a meeting. EVERY TIME. If your resources allow, create a screen on a computer at the check-in point that shows each volunteer his or her contact information at the time of sign in and asks the volunteer to make sure his or her data is up-to-date. If several volunteers arrive at once, you need to make sure sign in goes as quickly as possible; volunteers don't want to stand in a long, slow-moving line just to sign in. If you don't have time to then sit at a computer later and update this information, recruit a volunteer to do it (and ask them, later, to write a blog about their experience, their impressions, etc. - this both highlights that person's work and emphasizes the importance of keeping information up-to-date to your volunteers).
- An alternative to this previous step: if your time and resources allow, at that same time when a volunteer arrives for a major meeting, give each volunteer a print out of his or her contact info, and ask the volunteer to look over the information, update or confirm any information on the paper, sign it and turn the paper back in. Make sure no volunteer leaves without turning their paper back in.
- Require volunteers to review their most basic contact info (email and phone number) and confirm it is up-to-date *every* time they sign in to a private area on your web site, or create a system so that volunteers are prompted to do this twice a year when they sign in to such a system; they cannot proceed to the next screen until they confirm the info. You can also create a system so that volunteers cannot proceed within a private online area without being prompted to update their information about the number of hours they have contributed in a month.
- Require volunteers to sign in at least twice a year to a private online database to confirm their contact info, hours contributed to date, etc., and create a computer program that will let you know who hasn't signed in to confirm or update their info. Volunteers who don't sign in do not receive new assignments or updates, or are blocked from your online group for your volunteers until they update or confirm their info.
- Thank volunteers via your online discussion group, print materials and meetings for keeping their information up-to-date, remind others to do so, and review the consequences of their not doing so for the organization, your clients, the volunteers themselves, etc.
- Recognize volunteers who have contributed a certain number of hours or done something worth the notice of all other volunteers. This often reminds other volunteers to ensure their information regarding their service is up-to-date.

- When you get an email returned as undeliverable, call or text the volunteer to let him or her know the email address doesn't work. This could be a task done by another volunteer regularly once or twice a month.
- If your organization is super savvy and everyone has the latest and greatest smart phone - and even better, the same ones - there is probably an app that you could use that would automatically sign volunteers in and out at an onsite activity or event, allowing you to know who was there and for how long. However, remember that even if all your volunteers are super tech-savvy, many WON'T have this function on their smart phones, and you will need an offline way for them to sign in and out. Also, people are much less likely to fill out an online form before they leave a site - paper is still powerful!

One of the reasons I love creating [an online discussion group for volunteers](#) is that, when I use it to create a group for volunteers I'm working with, I require the volunteers to keep their information up-to-date themselves. If someone writes me and says, "I've changed my email; here's the new address" I can write them back and say, "Please update your subscription information on our online group; here's how..." Eventually, volunteers learn that they are in control of their own information, and don't have to wait for me to update their email address. In addition, I can see whose email addresses are not working and target those volunteers at our next onsite meeting, or with a phone call.

I strongly discourage you from trying to input all updates about volunteers yourself, if at all possible. If you are in charge of changing contact information for volunteers (rather than the volunteers themselves, via an input screen on a computer), make sure you change data within 48 hours after receiving the updated information.

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