

Should We Ask Volunteers to Give Money on Top of Time?

Susan J. Ellis

Every nonprofit organization that involves the time and talents of volunteers also seeks financial contributions from private and institutional donors. It amazes me how often fundraising staff shy away from soliciting money from volunteers out of a sense that this is “double dipping.” Despite research showing that people who volunteer are more likely to also give cash than uninvolved people, the reluctance to ask for money from volunteers keeps the development office and the volunteer resources office operating in distinctly separate spheres.

It is assumed by many that volunteers and donors are simply different. One stereotype is that volunteers don't have a lot of money. This, of course, is only understood for frontline volunteers, since those engaged in things like planning the gala dinner are conversely assumed to be wealthy enough to pay for anything requested of them. Beware all assumptions! There have simply been too many news items about the little old lady with the 16 cats who dutifully fulfils her volunteer shift quietly for 27 years, dies, and leaves \$4,000,000 to the organization. Even if this fantasy comes true only rarely, the truth is that no one really knows who has money and who does not. Or, who wants to give *your cause* money and who does not.

But let's get back to “it just doesn't feel right” to ask faithful volunteers to give money, too. The correct response is that an organization can – and probably should – offer volunteers the opportunity to donate funds, but it has to be done in a way that is clearly different from soliciting people who are not already actively working for you. The key is to start by acknowledging that the prospective donor is a volunteer. It's true “recognition” to know this important fact. Nothing is worse than a volunteer receiving the same mailing sent to everyone, as if his or her service is invisible.

Try the following sorts of appeals:

We are so appreciative of the time and talent you share with us throughout the year as a volunteer. Thank you!

Please know that your volunteer contribution is of great value in many ways. Volunteers ensure that we can spend every dollar we have on needed services and still do more. We also know that giving us your time comes with various costs/expenses to you personally. But because you are so familiar with our work, you know that it takes both participation and money to accomplish our mission.

How can we ask strangers to contribute funds and not give you the chance to decide if you want to add a check to the ways in which you already help us?

Of course, there's no obligation to give money. It's completely your choice.

Done properly, a solicitation can (and should) feel like a thank you. Possibly this request for a donation should be sent only once a year, without follow up. The point is to include volunteers, but not to guilt them into writing a check.

Other Development Options

In some ways, however, it may be too limiting simply to write a distinctive letter to volunteers as part of an annual or special campaign. Why not consider unique ways that volunteers might add to the treasury? For example:

- Keep volunteers informed about your wish list for in-kind donations. A list (kept current) on a bulletin board where volunteers can see it regularly will plant the seeds to be on the lookout for you all the time. Volunteers themselves or their circle of friends, family and colleagues may well turn up the used furniture, extra computer printer, or supply of light bulbs that you really need. Many of these things are too small to warrant a public “campaign” to find, but there will be some volunteers who rise to the challenge of ferreting out the items you want on an ongoing basis throughout the year.
- Have volunteers do small fundraisers for a pot of money they can “own” and spend as they wish, within guidelines set mutually. For example, volunteers may want a fund to buy some personal items, a graduation present, or a special book for a client. These expenses can be approved by a representative council of other volunteers.
- Instead of giving comparatively insignificant gifts at a volunteer banquet, cut the costs and do something for the organization in the name of the volunteers. Let the volunteers know how much money is involved and let them decide what they would like to purchase or do. If it’s something tangible, such as renovating a room or replanting the garden, have a plaque made that says: “Given in recognition of volunteer services contributed in 2004.” If there’s space, include everyone’s name (even if it has to be in tiny print).

The Reverse Is Important, Too

The funny thing is that we might learn to ask volunteers for money, but rarely do we approach donors with the invitation to volunteer! People who become known to us through a fundraising campaign are typecast as check writers, not doers. Why?

Recent studies have shown that regular donors can lose interest in an organization over time, but that being given the opportunity to volunteer re-commits them to the cause. Interestingly, it’s the recruitment *invitation* that matters, not if they actually volunteer or not. Asking a donor to get involved in person does several things: It implies that you see this person as more than a hand holding a pen; it offers the person the chance to see for her/himself how wisely you manage the budget; and it gives you access to more skills and talents.

There are various times at which you can discuss volunteer opportunities with donors:

- When you thank people for their financial gifts, include a message about volunteering options as information they may want for themselves or to share with family members or friends. If they care about your cause, so might others close to them.
- Keep donors informed throughout the year about volunteer opportunities, particularly ways they might be able to help at a special event, with a short-term project, or as a technical advisor (it helps if you ask donors some basic information about themselves such as profession).
- For long-time donors, make a personal appeal by letter or phone, acknowledging how much they have contributed over time and therefore you want to be sure they know you are interested in their skills as well as in their money.

Finally, avoid lost opportunities. For example, if you sell tickets to corporate donors for something like a table for eight at a special event, keep in mind that the employees who are given the chance to fill those chairs attend at no personal cost. So why not provide them with information about your organization, including current volunteer needs and an envelope for their own donation?

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