

Tip Your Volunteer Recruitment into Success

Susan J. Ellis

Malcolm Gladwell shared many intriguing observations about selling products and disseminating ideas in his popular book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000, Little, Brown). Although the book was much discussed in business circles, the information is highly applicable to nonprofit situations, including to increasing the success of volunteer recruitment techniques.

Take the Gladwell's "Stickiness Factor" as a good example. Gladwell recounts the attempt of a Yale University professor to encourage students to get a free tetanus shot as part of an experiment on fear. He produced booklets in several versions that described the seriousness of tetanus in ever-increasing vividness. Questionnaires showed that the information campaign worked; regardless of the amount of fear instilled, the majority of the students were educated about the dangers of tetanus. But only 3% actually went to the infirmary to get their shot. They were not translating their knowledge into action. Finally, the professor included a map of the campus circling the exact location of the health center and listing the hours that the shots would be available-and that "tipped" 28% of the students into getting vaccinated. Since undoubtedly many students had no real need of the map to find the infirmary, Gladwell concludes:

...what the tetanus invitation needed in order to tip was not an avalanche of new or additional information. What it needed was a subtle but significant change in presentation. The students needed to know how to fit the tetanus stuff into their lives...once the advice became practical and personal, it became memorable.

How might a volunteer recruiter put an understanding of the Stickiness Factor to work?

First, don't assume everyone knows what you might consider basic information about your organization, even who you are or what you do. This is as true for people who already have some contact with you as for those who are clearly newcomers. Organizations change all the time, as do the needs of clients and service projects. So it's quite possible for someone to be generally informed about your agency and yet be in the dark about recent developments.

You can apply this principle of "don't assume" to the way you recruit volunteers in some very practical ways:

- Beware of acronyms. Always translate any alphabet soup labels applied to projects.
- Explain anything that has a special name, especially if it's not descriptive. So rather than saying, "Join our Rainbow Project," the message will communicate more if it's worded: "Help children in our Rainbow Project to discover the world of books."

- Consider possible misconceptions people might have about your organization, either because of outdated information or by inferring something from your name. For example, someone considering volunteering for a children's museum might understandably assume that volunteers interact there with children. But if the available volunteer assignments are behind the scenes or focused on supporting parents, an applicant who wants to work with children will be disappointed. So describe the volunteer work correctly.

Second, make sure your recruitment message means something to the prospective volunteer personally, or it won't stick. Stop concentrating on explaining the gravity of your clients' needs or the significance of your services. All this does is evoke guilt in people who simply cannot respond to every good cause. Besides, most nonprofits are worthy of support - so what makes *your* organization memorable?

The way to increase the response rate to your volunteer recruitment message is to develop a connection with personal interests, concerns, or hopes. Here are a few ideas:

- Most nonprofit causes are overwhelming in scope and some individuals understandably feel that they lack adequate skills to be of help. You can make a real impression simply by clearly stating: "Training is provided and volunteers receive ongoing support."
- So many people feel time-deprived and can't imagine fitting volunteering into their schedules. Some simple phrases added to your recruitment pitch can make a difference in response: "We offer a variety of volunteer assignments requiring different amounts of time and we can be flexible in scheduling your hours" or "Even three hours every other week can have an impact" or "We'll work together to find the right schedule for you."
- Given the number of single and divorced adults today, it is reasonable to assume that a percentage of your prospective volunteers are seeking social outlets. They want to meet interesting new people while doing good. Use photos of volunteers of different ages, men and women, and other diversity - and show volunteers interacting, rather than just individual head shots. If it works in your setting, note that you have designated some shifts for "singles only."
- Consider whether people might fear something about your organization: personal safety in your neighborhood, viewing conditions that are disturbing, or other concerns. Address these by preempting them. In a matter-of-fact way, note that volunteers are on a buddy system at night or provide a map showing the proximity of parking. Again, positive photographs can allay fears and attract prospects, as can audio clips of actual client voices. The content of what they say (perhaps explaining how much they enjoy being with volunteers) is not as important as the tone (gee, this person isn't scary at all).

Can you be more "sticky"?

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for Sep 2012.