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White Paper: Engaging Volunteers Online Community IT Innovators (CITI)

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In this white paper we provide strategies on how organizations can use the Web to recruit and engage volunteers online, and how to build and nurture relationships with volunteers who serve the organization virtually.

Overview

The non-profit technology sector has grown considerably since mid-90s when organizations first started going online. Nonprofit organizations, like many other entities, took to the web to create an online presence that would engage various constituencies, including volunteers. Nonprofits have since evolved from brochure sites to now more advanced sites that take into account branding and online communications.

One of the most notable advancements in the field of nonprofit organization's websites is the ability for these organizations to virtually recruit volunteers – nationally as well as internationally – moving past geographic constraints. Other benefits include not having to set aside the time, space and expense associated with having volunteers come to a regional office. They can work anytime, anywhere from the privacy of their own homes.

The idea of virtual volunteering has grown over time with varying degrees of acceptance. Coordinating virtual volunteers takes time and energy – equal if not more that coordinating volunteers that may come to an office. And there is the disadvantage of not having the face to face time needed to develop trusted relationships. While trusted relationships can indeed be built up over time via the internet, there needs to be consistent interaction with volunteers to compensate for any difficulties that remote work environments may pose.

Growing your online volunteer base

So how can your organization develop an online environment that supports and grows your volunteer base? Here are a few suggestions.

- 1- Get organization buy-in. This is the single most powerful action you can take. Without creating the space in your organization to develop and build a volunteer program (online or off), the necessary time and money will not be sufficient to make it a success. Be sure to get the buy-in of those making the decisions in your organization as well as Board members who are dedicated to see the volunteer program advance online and off. The actual technology involved has very little to do with the success of the goal. 80% of the success of a project related to technology (including an online volunteer program) has to do with the people involved – those making the decisions and those using the technology.
- 2- Create & maintain a presence for prospective and existing volunteers online. Often volunteer pages on nonprofit websites are given the least attention by the organization. This is unfortunate since a documented statistic is that websites –

as a marketing tool – have less than 2 seconds to make an impression on a site visitor. Organizations should have in mind they are reaching two different constituencies when they go to build an online strategy around engaging volunteers – prospective volunteers and current volunteers. Be sure you have information for both.

- 3- Determine needs for in-house versus virtual volunteers. All work can not and should not be done by virtual volunteers (e.g. mailings). However, you'll probably find as you begin to list your needs, that a lot of work can be done virtually. We suggest writing a job description for each volunteer position – this gives some formality to your efforts which will pay off for both organization and the volunteer. Volunteers need to know their time is valuable so establishing a job description shows that the organization has thought out their needs and will be responsible in using the volunteer's time effectively.
- 4- Communicate – both online and off. The more an organization can communicate with its volunteer staff the more they will feel involved and part of the organization. Sending out a monthly newsletter is a great start. Think of creative content ideas like profiling a volunteer, posting new volunteer job descriptions, discuss news from the organization, profile a paid staff member who volunteers may or may not know – just so virtual volunteers can better understand who they work with. While communicating via email newsletters (we'll discuss some tools for this at the end of this article) and other online applications, an occasional phone call or meet-up (if possible) with a volunteer goes a long way.
- 5- Track your volunteers, their skills, and other important information. Most organizations with a volunteer program do this, whether by a simple Excel spreadsheet, within their Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) system or with a specialized volunteer tracking software. By tracking your volunteers you can not only maintain information like contact information, hours worked, and special skills and interests but you can also track various things that you learn about them as individuals. An organization I worked in previously took special notes on volunteers that detailed how they might be engaged or appreciated. The volunteer coordinator wrote in one entry that the volunteer loved bananas so she would have bananas in the office when that particular volunteer came to the office.
- 6- Segment and target communications. For organizations that have a large volunteer program you'll want to try and segment your contact list and target communications to that list. If you have a volunteer base with three main types of skills – technical, clerical/misc, and mailings, for example – you can target your e-communications when appropriate to those sub-groups. When at all possible send target email communications, this will increase your response rate.
- 7- Take advantage of creative new engagement tools. One of the more interesting ideas to come out of the online NPO arena of late is using your volunteers to raise money for a cause. While this concept is not new in the offline world, using an online tool where virtual volunteers can direct friends and family to online giving is. CIVIC Worldwide was founded in 2003 as a Washington-based advocacy



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organization to mitigate the harm caused to civilians in war. Recently they launched a new website taking advantage of this new [fundraising module](#) allowing users to create their own fundraising goal, their own online fundraising page and raise money online by directing potential donors to the site. The fundraising page includes a meter that shows how much money has been raised and how much money still needs to be raised.

Conclusion

While these some things to keep in mind as you move forward and create an online presence for your volunteer program, the specifics of that presence will be dedicated by your organization and your mission. The online world has opened many doors for nonprofit organizations, and reaching out to a wider audience for things like volunteer recruitment is just one of the possibilities. The effort will take time and energy but the return on investment could well exceed your expectations.

RESOURCES

I. Online Volunteer Resources

E-Volunteerism – Online Journal for Volunteerism

<http://e-volunteerism.com/index.php>

Network for Good

<http://www.networkforgood.org/>

VolunteerMatch

<http://www.volunteermatch.org/>

Idealist.org

<http://www.idealists.org/>

II. Other Resources

Tech Soup

<http://www.techsoup.org/>

NTEN – Non-profit Technology Enterprise Network

<http://www.nten.org>

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