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Tips for Recruiting and Managing Older Volunteers

By Leah Kerkman

VOLUNTEERISM

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Until a year ago, the Arizona Theatre Company, in Phoenix, had only one volunteer opportunity for people in their 50s or older: They could man the gift cart in the theater's lobby. Now, the theater offers a wide array of opportunities for older volunteers, such as serving as mentors to young actors during play rehearsals and filling in for an absent receptionist.

The theater's director of development, Marcia Halstead, who oversees its volunteers, says that she saw an untapped resource simply waiting to be developed. So she asked the charity's helpers for their input. "Once we called the volunteers together, they were quick to say that they could do any number of things," says Ms. Halstead. "In fact, one of our senior volunteers has taken it upon himself to create a speaker's bureau for us." The first volunteer-organized fund-raising event, spearheaded by the older volunteers, is slotted for the spring, a fashion show highlighting some of the theater's costumes.

Phoenix is a major retirement destination -- in some neighborhoods residents age 55 and older make up more than 60 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Census. And Ms. Halstead has noticed people in their late 50s and early 60s volunteering more. "We are getting younger and younger retired volunteers, who have had full professional lives and who are really bringing an amazing amount of professional expertise to us," she says. "We have some fabulously accomplished seniors when it comes to computers. We have seniors who have run their own businesses, who do profit-loss analyses for us on our projects. We have seniors with experience in buying, who help us select things for the gift shop."

Older volunteers have long played an important role in serving charities, and that role is growing. In January, President Bush called on Americans to donate 4,000 hours to community service over their lifetimes. In response, Senior Corps, a division of the national community-service program AmeriCorps, saw a 131-percent increase in visitors to its Web site in less than two months, evidence that retired people are interested in donating their time. When they do volunteer, they devote more hours than do younger supporters: While the U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics says that the median time donated annually by all Americans who volunteer is 52 hours, volunteers who are 65 or older spend a median of 96 hours (meaning that half give more time and half less). Some charities are working to capitalize on this pool of people who are willing, ready, and able to volunteer.

Older volunteers face no more limitations in serving charities than do other supporters, says the Arizona Theatre Company's Ms. Halstead. "In fact, less limitations because we find them really willing to explore and to add skills to their repertoires," she says. "So even if they haven't done something before, seniors are willing to give it a go."

'A New Stage of Life'

The first wave of America's 78 million baby boomers are just beginning to hit their 60s, and soon will be at prime retirement age. People in this age group are increasingly vital and able, differing greatly from previous generations of older volunteers. "It used to be when you thought of seniors, you thought of little, white-haired people who didn't want to stand up for long periods of time," says Ms. Halstead. "I think that the idea of senior volunteers has changed a lot from what it used to be."

Marc Freedman, president of Civic Ventures, a nonprofit group in San Francisco that seeks to engage older Americans in civic service, has been studying the changing face of senior-citizen volunteerism for more than 17 years. He has found that retired volunteers, because they are living and staying healthier longer, are looking for more active roles at nonprofit organizations.

"We're essentially creating a new stage of life between midlife and true old age," Mr. Freedman asserts. "In the 19th century, we created childhood, and in the 20th century, we invented adolescence. Now there's this period where people work for 30 years in midlife and that part of their career has run its course, and they're ready for something different, but they're not going to be frail or infirm."

As a result of this phenomenon, organizations looking to recruit retirees must make their volunteer opportunities stand out from those traditionally offered to the elderly, he says. "Much of what goes under the banner of 'senior volunteerism' now was really designed more to keep older people active and busy and it didn't pay much attention to what they could actually

contribute," he says. "This new generation of people are not going to be enticed by opportunities just to stay busy. We're going to have to provide work that captures people's imaginations and really uses their skills."

Bob Brittain, a 62-year-old retired urban planner who volunteers at the Arizona Theatre Company, does many of the same things for the theater that he did during his working life. "I'm a computer geek, so I love database entry," says Mr. Brittain, who retired six years ago. Among his tasks during his career, he says, was putting together mailings, so even what he calls the "drudge work" of charity volunteerism feels familiar and enjoyable to him.

Volunteer managers need to be attuned to volunteers' motivations. "In some cases, there may be the assumption that you need to treat volunteers like your grandmother," says Claudia Meiling, executive director of a branch of the Senior Corps-sponsored Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, in Tulsa, Okla., a national program that matches older volunteers with charities throughout the country. "And maybe that's not why they are there." According to a survey of its participants that Ms. Meiling's organization conducted this year, "the desire to feel valued and useful" and "the desire to feel vital and physically active" were the two most commonly cited reasons for volunteering.

As with volunteers of any age, though, motivations can vary from individual to individual. Mr. Brittain says that when selecting volunteer opportunities, he looks for organizations that are dedicated to their missions, and puts a high premium on meeting new people. "It's something that gives me satisfaction," he says, "and a return on my investment of time." Ms. Meiling echoes the notion that people have many different reasons for volunteering, but she adds, "Our seniors, more than any other age group, seem to love working with people and to enjoy being in positions of some authority."

Recruiting Retirees

Because today's retired volunteers don't readily identify themselves as senior citizens, many of the traditional techniques used for recruiting people in other age groups work just as well for recruiting the retirees, though the appeal for volunteers may need to be tweaked to emphasize why older people would find the situation attractive.

Ms. Meiling suggests touting the flexibility and challenges of an organization's volunteer opportunities to attract would-be volunteers. "The key is recruiting these seniors with a variety of opportunities that can appeal to them, just like any other age group," she says. "Go to the senior centers, the churches, the retirement organizations, or the fraternal organizations such as the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs."

Once contact has been made with potential volunteers, the best way to get their attention is to recruit a current volunteer to sing the charity's praises, says Paul Arfin, president of Intergenerational Strategies, a Long Island, N.Y., nonprofit organization aimed at promoting youth and the elderly in community service.

Mr. Arfin says that when recruiting mentors for a program through Intergenerational Strategies, he has succeeded by showing videos to prospective volunteers and bringing in current mentors to talk to them. "Most of the new mentors have come in that way," he says, rather than through advertising in newspapers or other news media.

Brenda Evans, volunteer coordinator at Habitat for Humanity of Durham, N.C., agrees that the personal touch is the most effective in recruiting new volunteers of any age to a nonprofit organization. "There is no one better than a satisfied volunteer to make the best spokesperson for an organization," Ms. Evans says. Mr. Brittain says personal recruiting has been a constant in his charity work: In all cases, whether volunteering for the Sierra Club, the local YMCA, or the theater, he signed up because he had heard of the programs through friends.

Ms. Evans also recommends contacting local chapters of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program and homes for the elderly. "There are so many venues," she says. "We think that seniors may just sit around all day, but they don't. You get them the same way you market toward other volunteers."

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, administered by Senior Corps and operating 766 local branches nationwide, acts as a clearinghouse to match volunteers with nonprofit organizations. Several other national organizations also match older volunteers with suitable nonprofit organizations, such as Experience Corps, which currently operates in 12 cities, and the Executive Service Corps, a nonprofit organization that matches retired business professionals with charities in 27 states.

According to Ms. Meiling, the only requirement to be considered for the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program is that a group seeking help must be registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a charity. "We want to build relationships with those volunteer managers," she says. "They send requests to us and we try to match them up with the individuals who come through our system wanting to do some meaningful volunteer work."

For nonprofit groups that are too small to employ a manager of volunteers, Mr. Arfin suggests relegating some recruitment duties to board members. Charities, he says, "can do a better job by bringing in people with public relations and marketing experience on their boards, and ask them to take on that role in their organization."

The Internet can also aid recruitment. Ms. Meiling encourages nonprofit groups to maintain Web sites because older people make up the fastest-growing population online, a statistic confirmed by a 2001 AOL survey. "When designing their Web site, they should have a special appeal to retirees," says Ms. Meiling, "because seniors are, more and more, going to the Web to access information." Directly asking for retired volunteers, and acknowledging their commitment, experience, and willingness to serve, are key elements to include on a Web site, she says.

Encouraging Commitment

Like recruiting older volunteers, managing them doesn't differ greatly from overseeing other age groups, say those who supervise charity helpers. But there are some ways to make a retired volunteer's experience more rewarding.

The new breed of volunteers seeks a worklike atmosphere, Mr. Freedman says. "This is a group who, men and women alike, have worked unprecedented hours in midlife. Their whole lives are defined by work," he says. "If we can portray volunteerism and service as a way to get much of what they liked about work without some of the things they didn't like, then we're much more likely to entice them." He stresses that flexible schedules, combined with seriousness and a sense of purpose, are components that newly retired volunteers seek.

Mr. Brittain enjoys being able to volunteer as much or as little as he wants. In midlife, he says, he worked as long as 14 hours a day and didn't have time for volunteering. When tutoring a young actor last year, he put in about three hours a day for five days a week -- but sometimes, he takes a week or more off. "I'm pretty much satisfied with where I'm at," he says, "because I can travel, too."

To mirror the world of paid employment, Ms. Evans prepares formal job descriptions for volunteer slots and asks candidates to fill out application forms. "I don't like the word 'volunteer,'" she says. "The work they do is equally as important as the work of a paid staff member."

Managing Limitations

Although older volunteers have many similarities to their younger colleagues, they may also bring with them physical or other limitations that need to be accommodated. "People just need to be candid with the volunteer coordinator about what they can do and what they can't," Ms. Halstead says. "Make it safe, make it comfortable for the volunteers to say 'I have a limitation' without feeling like they can't volunteer or that they're going to be a drag on the project."

She suggests asking the volunteers what they would like to do, rather than assigning them a task that they may not feel comfortable with. "I say something along the lines of, 'You know, this job involves a lot of standing. Is that something you think you would like? I know my feet are always tired at the end of the day, so personally I would want a job that involved a chair, '" says Ms. Halstead. "I like this approach because it seems respectful and friendly to me, and I am letting them know that I have similar limitations."

Another way to keep volunteers is to give them proper training, Mr. Arfin says. "All too often, the volunteers, after some brief orientation, are left on their own," he says. "Organizations need to build in an ongoing process of communication and supervision; otherwise, they may be disappointed and may never come back."

Proper training and follow-up supervision will help to ease retired volunteers back into the world of work, whether it is paid or not, echoes Ms. Meiling. Senior volunteers, she says, "want clear guidelines of what the expectations are." Sometimes, she says, they just need some how-to help: For instance, she says, for those who have been out of the workplace for some time, new office technology can seem daunting. "This age group is used to feeling experienced in what they do," Ms. Meiling says. "They want to have a sense of accomplishment and self-worth without embarrassment."

But once the training is done, and the expectations are set, Ms. Halstead praises her older volunteers for their reliability. "When they make a commitment, it's a commitment, and you can set your clock by our seniors," she laughs. "That's a mind-set I would like to see spread among the entire volunteer organization."

Does your organization depend on older volunteers? How did you find them, and what do you think volunteer managers need to know about working with older volunteers? Share your thoughts in the Volunteerism online forum.