

VAN Briefing

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Reward!



the experience corps
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VAN / EXPERIENCE CORPS

This briefing looks at developing positive relationships with volunteers in the cultural sector and ways to reward their participation. It is the third of four briefings on volunteering to celebrate Volunteer's Week 2002.

Unlike most information on rewarding volunteers, we will look at reward issues from the perspective of cultural volunteers and those involved in managing voluntary cultural organisations.

For most organisations, cultural volunteers can be easily translated as 'members', for example, members of a choir, orchestra, quilting group, drama group, etc. and those managing, on a voluntary basis, these activities. In this briefing we will use the term volunteer to mean cultural volunteer, member and participant as well as voluntary board member or managers supporting arts and crafts activity.

Getting to know your volunteers

Everyone likes to feel appreciated. In the cultural sector much of the reward volunteers experience is the 'feel good factor' from taking part. However, as organisations looking to maintain levels of participation through membership and attendance at events, we cannot rely on the 'feel good factor' alone as a reward. We need to be more proactive. By building 'reward action' into the business of running an organisation we are more likely to acknowledge volunteers, making them feel good about what they are doing or what they have achieved. Thus, getting to know your volunteers, what motivates them and what they get out of the experience of participating in your art or craft form is at the heart of understanding how to reward, build loyalty and increase participation.

What motivates volunteers to take part?

There are as many motivations for participation in the arts and crafts as there are people taking part.

Some motivations include:

- to learn something new;
- to practice an existing skill;
- to realise a long held ambition or dream;
- to find friends with similar interests;
- to be recognised in the community;
- to give something back;
- to teach others;
- to keep an interest in a specialist field alive;
- to find out what is going on in an art or craft area;
- to create, produce or perform something of value.

You may never know why someone has volunteered with you, but being aware of possible motivations gives you scope to design new activities, events or publications. You may have some flops working this way, but you may also have success with things you'd never really thought important before. For example, for volunteers involved with music, the motivation for many experienced players may be to share what they have learnt with others. Addressing this motivation through, say, running a seminar or series of articles on 'teaching you how to teach' would relate directly to this underlying motivation and add value to the volunteer's relationship with you. This is also relevant when understanding the volunteer lifecycle eg. how people join, develop, pass on skills, stay, etc.



Levels of competence

Volunteers may join your organisation at different stages in the development of their skills, from 'complete beginners' to 'experts'. Depending where they are in this lifecycle, they will want different things. Beginners need information and support to get them going, experienced volunteers may want to be encouraged to try something new, whereas experts will be looking for ways to express their expertise and gain recognition. Enabling volunteers to feel good at what they do and giving them ways to improve their skills, will strengthen your relationship.

Consider:

- producing different membership packs for different levels of experience;
- producing a handbook with essential information for beginners;
- designing a mentoring scheme to link beginners with experts;
- producing fact sheets or running seminars on new techniques for your more experienced members;
- offering master-classes with well-known artists for your expert members or your young hopefuls;
- designing an awards scheme for members of different abilities;
- recognising improvement, exams passed, and other major milestones for you volunteers in your publications or website.

Warning: one of the quickest ways to lose a new recruit is to put them into a situation where they feel incompetent, unskilled or unintelligent. No one wants to feel stupid, so make sure the material you send or activities you involve a new volunteer in are appropriate to their level of experience.

National organisations and local groups

If you are working at the national level you may never develop personal relationships with your volunteers, even if you meet them occasionally at conferences, meetings or other events. This makes relationship building more challenging because you will have to visualise as accurately as possible who

your volunteers are. You will need to make your database as information rich as you can, to make it possible to learn and record as much about your volunteers as you can. (*however, be aware of data protection issues. See VAN Briefing 46 Data Protection Act 1998*).

At the local level this is far from true. Relationships with volunteers may well be one-on-one and you may meet on a regular basis. You will know more about your volunteers than you may want to, from their shoe size (if you are a dance group) to their more annoying habits (like always turning up five minutes late to rehearsals). However, from this overload of information you still need to find out what makes your individual volunteers tick: what do they want from you? What motivates them and how can you address this?

Ideas for better volunteer relations

What does a volunteer want?

When your volunteer joined, they were 'buying into' your group or organisation. Have you given them what they wanted?

Why not talk to volunteers who have been members for some time, and to new volunteers three or six months after they've joined. Ask them if they are getting what they expected from your organisation. You can do this on the phone, by letter or with a questionnaire. Ask them why they joined and what they want to gain from volunteering. If you produce a magazine, newsletter or website, ask them if it is useful and what you could do to improve it. Don't forget to thank them and make sure you record the information. If you can't use it immediately, keep it on file for future reference.

How do you keep in touch?

Do you record first names in your database and gender? Addressing your letter to 'Mary' rather than 'Mrs Scott' is much friendlier! Look for



opportunities to personalise correspondence and communication with members. Mail merge can easily insert first names after the 'dear' in a letter, and throughout a document (but bear in mind just how annoying some of those junk mail letters that use your name over and over again can be!).

Finding opportunities to communicate with your volunteers strengthens your relationship. Rather than simply sending reminders for membership renewals, why not look for other, positive ways of staying in touch? Birth dates not only give you important data on the age structure of your volunteer base, but they also give you the chance to send birthday cards! If you can enclose an invitation to an event, even better! You could also send cards at Christmas or a card for your volunteer's notable achievements, such as performing a solo, passing an exam or being accepted in an important exhibition.

Social contact is important for us all. For national organisations without local groups, volunteers may never get to know each other. You may be aware that you have two volunteers in the same street, and twenty others in the same town, but until you give them an opportunity to meet, they may be none the wiser! If you have volunteers within striking distance of each other, why not find a way of introducing them? Be creative about the socialising opportunities you offer.

Do your volunteers have special privileges?

What can you do for your volunteers that will make them feel special? Special areas on your website, special newsletters, invitations to previews, opening nights and other special occasions all build rapport. Offer discounts not only for goods and services related to their art or craft, but also for fun things too, like holidays, clothes, concerts and outings. If you have analysed your database you should have some idea of the kinds of things they would like. Matching your database and teaming up with a company whose customers are similar kinds of people is a great

starting point for negotiating discounts and offers in return for advertising.

Give your volunteers good information

Look for ways to improve your information services. If you produce a magazine, journal or newsletter, take time to check with your readers that it is useful, entertaining and relevant to them. Take the time to write relevant articles, or ask experts to write them for you. You can often reproduce articles if you credit the author and publication, and obtain necessary permissions, so if you find something of relevance to your readers, reproduce it.

Warning: producing poor quality information, filling your publications and websites with information that is not relevant, useful, current or readable will have an adverse effect on your volunteers. If information is your main benefit for volunteers, make sure it is of consistently good quality. If you can't produce it in house, consider commissioning someone else to do it.

Invest in fun

Laughter, good times and memorable occasions have a place in everyone's lives. Can your organisation create a memorable occasion for your volunteers? Think of fundraising, milestones, anniversaries, charity days (eg. red nose day/children in need), volunteer achievements – whatever, as a good reason to have a good time. You don't have to promise to do it again next year, but if you have fun your volunteers may come back asking for more!

Warning: many organisations get caught in the trap of 'annual dinner syndrome'. If you have an annual event that's lost its appeal, it may be doing more damage to volunteer morale than good. Volunteers do not want to 'do their duty' when that means enduring an evening or day that has no fun in it for them. If this is true for you, it may be time to take a fresh look at your volunteer base and redesign your events list.



Create real rewards

Milestones

Recognising significant milestones for your volunteers is important. Do they have opportunities to test their skills, perhaps in exams, or by completing significant pieces of work? Do you hold exhibitions and award prizes? If not, start thinking about how you can give real recognition to your volunteer's efforts. There are many more possibilities than certificates and trophies. What about personal letters from the Chair or Chief Executive? Or a small gift of specific importance, like a set of strings or reeds for a musician or something else appropriate to your art or craft form. There are many possibilities, not just the obvious ones, and the more creative and personal your rewards are, the more they will be appreciated by your volunteers.

Volunteer's week

Every year in the UK during the first week in June, the massive contribution volunteers make in all areas of society and culture is celebrated and recognised. Events are usually organised through local and regional volunteer bureaux, and regional and national voluntary action organisations. They will tell you what they have planned for volunteer's week and what the theme is for the year. By taking part in the celebrations you are letting your volunteers know they are part of something much bigger than their art and craft form and that their time is as valued by society as the time of those volunteers in the more widely recognised service sector.

Resources

There is little written specifically for volunteers in the cultural sector. Instead you may find it useful to look at the way 'friends' schemes are run, for example, Friends of the Royal Academy. These organisations are primarily fundraising organisations, bringing in significant amounts of revenue for their parent organisations. They offer membership benefits, give them information on events and activities and are usually excellent exemplars of how to create good relationships with members. Many of their ideas can be scaled down and used by voluntary cultural organisations, but even if their ideas can't always be translated, their way of working is worth learning from.

www.volunteering.org.uk

National Centre for Volunteering. Up to the minute information on all aspects of volunteering, including plenty of good information on volunteering good practice.

www.ivr.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research. Lots of information, including research reports to download.

www.volunteersweek.org.uk

Everything you need to know about volunteers week, what's happening, where and how you can take part. Includes a useful section on ideas, with files to download on recruitment issues amongst others.

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The Voluntary Arts Network, PO Box 200, Cardiff CF5 1YH

T: 029 20 395 395 F: 029 20 397 397 E: info@voluntaryarts.org W: www.voluntaryarts.org

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