



TCG

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

CENTERPIECE FOCUS ON: VOLUNTEERS

....

A CLOSER LOOK AT VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

BY CAROL BAKER

As director of volunteer & audience relations for Actors Theatre of Louisville, I am challenged every day to be the *best* in all my various roles, which include (but are not limited to) facilitator, project developer, teacher/trainer, organizer, director, friend and confidant, nurturer, disciplinarian, promoter, peacemaker and advocate. Most theatre volunteer coordinators, after all, have other jobs as well, acting as public relations/marketing director, development director, house manager, special events coordinator, etc. My situation is no different.

Even with all of these responsibilities, I continue to feel that I have the best job at Actors Theatre. Because I interact daily with the staff, the public and with our volunteers, I am constantly reminded of what makes working in a theatre so special, what keeps staff and volunteers committed, and what attracts new people to want to become a part of our work. As a volunteer coordinator, one of my jobs is to relay the theatre's vision to over 1,000 volunteers. They pass it on to their friends, and those friends tell *their* friends. In this way, as we involve others in the theatre's work, we also build advocates, who in turn can bring on board the audiences, donors, volunteers and even artists of the future. I get vast satisfaction watching a volunteer talk to someone about the theatre — particularly when a volunteer tour guide brings a group of students through our facility or when I observe a volunteer usher acting as a buddy to a new volunteer. Such moments remind me of what the hard work is all about — telling the story!

Sometimes, though, we need to stop and take a look at the volunteer program to see if it is effectively serving our theatre's needs, and in turn, whether our theatres are serving the needs of volunteers. Nothing is stagnant in live theatre — if it becomes stagnant, why do it? It is the same thing with a volunteer program. One of the many challenges we volunteer coordinators tackle is how to design our programs to be both effective and “fresh” to avoid burnout and how to engage the entire staff in creating an environment where the volunteers are thought of as equal partners. The importance of volunteers cannot be overstated. According to the 1998 *TCG Fiscal Survey*, the average number of volunteers in theatres of all budget sizes exceeds paid staff by 15% with an even higher percentage in the mid- to large size theatres. It's quite a challenge to ensure that these volunteers are considered an integral part of your theatre and utilized to their fullest extent.

The following article, *Eight Smart Tips for Successful Volunteer Involvement* by Susan Ellis, is a great resource for all volunteer programs. She presents a concise checklist for creating a successful volunteer program and addresses the idea of incorporating volunteers into the infrastructure of your organization. Check and see if your program is on track. If it is, congratulations! If not, it's never too late to reassess and restructure. Volunteers are only as valuable as you make them.

Carol Baker is the Director of Volunteer and Audience Relations, Actors Theatre of Louisville.
Copyright © 1999 by Theatre Communications Group, Inc. All articles reproduced by permission of the authors. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher or author. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 355 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017, telephone (212) 697-5230, fax (212) 983-4847. Ben Cameron, Executive Director; Joan Channick, Deputy Director; Christopher Shuff, Director of Management Programs.

EIGHT SMART TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

BY SUSAN J. ELLIS

When an organization decides to begin a volunteer effort, the most common mistake is to rush into recruiting the first volunteers. This is based on the belief that it will be hard to attract volunteers and so the important thing is to actually have some in hand and then figure out how best to utilize them. In fact, the opposite is true. Only when an organization is clear on what it needs volunteers to do, and has a plan for how volunteers will be supported, does it make sense to go public with a recruitment plea.

The following eight tips are a few of the fundamental principles critical to the successful involvement of volunteers in any type of organization, with some important tips on what might be special in a theatre setting.

Tip #1: Know WHY you want volunteers in the first place.

Be careful that you are not seeking volunteers simply because you do not have enough money. If lack of funds is the major reason for wanting volunteers, you will always view them as a poor alternative to the paid staff you really want. Instead, focus on the unique things that volunteers can offer that are different from what employees contribute: credibility with the public because they do not personally profit from the funds raised; expanded spheres of influence; diversity of experiences and skills; the luxury to focus on one project while the paid staff must divide their time among all the work to be done; and, most especially, outreach to new potential audiences.

Tip #2: Develop the broadest VISION of volunteer involvement.

Working with volunteers is true community-resource development. The process of reaching out to a wide range of people will have the ripple effect of making friends for your theatre — not only the people who actually contribute their time, but also those who learn about your performances, your need for donations of cash and goods, and your work in general. Don't limit your outreach to those with a proven interest in the arts or in drama. Prospective volunteers can represent enormous diversity in demographic profile, occupation and talents — if you genuinely welcome such contributions.

Tip #3: Never assume people know how to work with volunteers (even if they are volunteers themselves).

Very few people receive formal training in how to work with volunteers, certainly not in academic course programs. And it is important to realize that being a volunteer does not automatically make someone into a great leader of other volunteers! It takes knowledge and skill to be a good volunteer supervisor. Diagnose and deal with possible staff resistance to volunteers and provide training in the best ways to support volunteers.

Be aware of the fact that resistance to volunteers has a special history in the arts community. All too often in the past, actors and other performing artists were approached by organizations to volunteer their talents, usually for fundraising events. To establish the valid point that such artists need to be paid to earn a living, some people grew to resent the concept of volunteerism. In some ways, the theatre community's response to the AIDS crisis has broadened their understanding of volunteerism, but it is important to stress that you are seeking volunteers with skills beyond the theatre world.

Tip #4: Create the infrastructure to support volunteer involvement.

Consider what resources you will budget/allocate to support volunteers: money, staff time, space and supplies. Volunteers are definitely not "free" labor, even if the amount of funds needed are less than if you were hiring employees.

If your theatre has designated a coordinator of volunteers, that's a great start. But if many people share the work of recruiting and supervising volunteers, you still need a clear leader or "point person" to coordinate the work, maintain records, etc. Answer questions such as: Who will interview, screen, and place candidates? What criteria will you use for these important decisions? Who will orient and train volunteers — and what do they need to be taught in order to do the work? Who will prepare and supervise volunteer work? (Sometimes this is as simple — and difficult — as making sure that there is always someone available to answer questions.) Who will evaluate the effectiveness of volunteer work and who will thank volunteers for their time and effort? Be clear on your policies and procedures BEFORE you start recruiting!

Tip #5: It is as important to understand why some people do NOT volunteer as to understand why others do.

Recruiters commonly consider the motivations that attract people to volunteering. Once you know why prospects might want to volunteer in your organization, you will be able to speak to their needs and wishes as well as about the needs of your theatre. There are many reasons, ranging from a desire to socialize, to the hope of learning new skills, to the urge to explore a career, or even a chance to soak in the creative excitement of an opening night.

But it is also critical to diagnose what might STOP someone from volunteering and analyze whether these feelings stem from fears and misunderstanding or from legitimate concerns about the work. As much as possible, anticipate negative reactions and adapt your volunteer job descriptions and recruitment messages accordingly. For example, are some assignments boring? If so, could they be done by a volunteer while observing something interesting such as a rehearsal? Are some people afraid to come to the theatre at night? Maybe you can set up a volunteer buddy system.

Tip #6: Most people do not say no to the invitation to volunteer — they never feel asked.

Do not confuse publicity about your program with direct recruitment of individuals to become volunteers. It's usually a mistake to assume everyone knows about you or about your desire to involve volunteers. Even your closest constituencies, such as subscribers, may be unaware of how they can help you.

Also, don't have mental conversations instead of getting out there and talking directly to the people that you want to attract most. If you talk yourself out of contacting key individuals because you think they're too busy or wouldn't want to help, you will, indeed, never recruit them! The only way you can have a fighting chance is to ASK people to volunteer!

Tip #7: Be sure you are truly welcoming to newcomers.

Do a mental walk-through of what a new volunteer might experience in joining your organization. What is the process and the tone? For example, does your voice mail system easily direct potential recruits to the right extension? How intimidating is the guard at the stage door? Is there actual room for a volunteer to work in the office? Where are volunteers expected to keep their belongings while ushering? It's the little things that make all the difference in whether or not your organization makes volunteers feel welcome.

Assign someone to orient newcomers, especially to greet him or her on their first day. This is a great way to flatter experienced volunteers, by the way. Make a checklist of what a stranger would want to know, including details like how to use the telephone system, where to get coffee, etc.

The best way to demonstrate that a new volunteer is valued is to put him or her to work as soon as possible! After all, that's what they came to do.

Tip #8: Recognition is much more than a thank you.

We all know that we need to recognize volunteers, but recognition and appreciation are two different things. Yes, we need to find all sorts of ways to say thank you, both formally (such as an annual party) and continuously (such as brief notes whenever someone does something special). It's also important to celebrate benchmarks of achievement during a long project, not just end products. Be aware of potential low points in enthusiasm and design "pick me ups."

True recognition, however, stems from the root of cognition — showing that you know and understand each volunteer's contribution. This is demonstrated by giving public credit for work accomplished, inviting volunteers to staff meetings relevant to their assignment, and actually using an idea offered by a volunteer!

Following these tips will head you in the right direction for developing a volunteer in a meaningful and successful way. If you are a novice to the field of volunteer management, make an effort to connect with your colleagues in the field, beyond the specific setting of theatres. A good way to start is to visit Websites such as the one Energize offers to leaders of volunteer programs: www.energizeinc.com. From there you can browse an Online Bookstore with more than 70 different volunteerism titles, read many practical tips posted by site visitors, and link to other websites. Make sure that you register with your community's Volunteer Center, if you have one, and test out a meeting of your local DOVIA (directors of volunteers in agencies). You can track these down on the Energize website, too. Good luck!

Susan J. Ellis is President of Energize, Inc., a Philadelphia-based international consulting, training and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. Since 1977, the company has assisted a wide range of clients throughout North America and Europe, including many cultural arts organizations. For more in-depth information about volunteer program development and management, call for your free copy of the "Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog" at 1-800-395-9800 or visit the Energize Website at <http://www.energizeinc.com>.

RESOURCE LIST

Books:

Ellis, Susan J. *Volunteer Recruitment Book*. Philadelphia: Energize Inc., 1994

Ellis, Susan J., John Paul Dalsimer, and Jeffery D. Kahn. *From The Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*. Philadelphia: Energize Associates, 1986

Graff, Linda L. *By Definition: Policies for Volunteer Programs: A Manual for Executive Directors, Board Members, and Managers of Volunteers*. Volunteer Ontario Publications, 1996

Kuyper, John, Ellen Hirzy and Kathleen Huftalen. *Volunteer Program Administration: A Handbook for Museums and other Cultural Institutions*. New York: American Association for Museum Volunteers, 1993

Lee, Jarene Frances and Julia M. Catagnus. *Supervising Volunteers: An Action Guide for Making Your Job Easier*. Philadelphia: Energize, Inc., 1999

"Pass It On" *Volunteer Recruitment Manual: Outreach to African-American, Latino/a and other Diverse Populations*. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, 1994

Organizations:

Association for Volunteer Administrations (AVA)

P.O. Box 32092

Richmond, VA 23294

Ava@freedomnet.com

www.avaintl.org

International membership organization for people who are involved in leading volunteer efforts. They publish the *Journal of Volunteer Administration*. There are local chapters across the country.

National Center for Non-Profit Boards

200 L Street, NW, Suite 510

Washington, DC 20036-4907

(202) 452-6262

NCNB@NCNB.org

Publishes books and information on board development.

The Points of Light Foundation

1400 I Street, NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20505-2208

www.pointsoflight.org

Publishes *Leadership* magazine.

CAVORT (Conference About Volunteers of Regional Theatres)

Next conference will be held in San Diego, April 2000, hosted by the Old Globe Theatre and the Globe Guilders. For information, please contact the Old Globe Theatre at (619) 231-1941 or Wendy Ledford, CAVORT Chair, at (619) 484-0688 or at LEDrwta@aol.com.

Note: A few volunteer coordinators at the 1996 CAVORT Conference in Cleveland exchanged email addresses to develop a support line. If you would like to receive an email list of other volunteer coordinators, please email either BakerCUB@aol.com (Carol Baker, Actors Theatre) or PKranz@centerstage.org (Pebble Kranz, Center Stage). Feel free to throw out questions to the whole group.