



How to Stop Volunteers from Leaving Before They Start

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In our last article we talked about building a system for engaging volunteers. In this article we'll take a brief step alongside that system to talk about one of the most important — and most overlooked — processes in that system, particularly as it affects volunteer recruitment.

The process — quite simply — is how fast and how well an organization responds to the initial inquiry of potential volunteers, whether they are communicating via a telephone call, email, or any other method.

One of the major changes in the past 15 years has been a rapidly accelerating society, fueled mostly by the Internet, and the way it makes all activity appear to be instantaneous. You've probably experienced one of the most common — and least logical — aspects of this if you've ever sent an email to someone and then wondered five seconds later, "Why haven't they gotten back to me?" This is quite different from the leisurely days when everyone communicated by written letter and no one expected a response in anything less than a week.

This expectation of a quick response, however, is now the norm. Major companies such as Amazon promote their ability to deliver goods quickly as a major selling point. The downside of this is that customers have grown to expect the same quick response in every aspect of their interaction with an organization.

A [recent study](#) of customer complaints via social media (primarily Facebook and Twitter) found that 32 percent of complaining customers expected a response within 30 minutes and 42 percent expected a response within 60 minutes. Out of the group polled, 57 percent expected the same response time at night or over weekends as during normal business hours. Over 50 percent of customers gave only one week before they stopped doing business entirely with the company.

Fortunately, potential volunteers aren't quite this demanding. While they don't like slow response times to inquiries, they consider other aspects of the intake process before deciding whether or not the organization values them.

Here are four important elements to improve in your volunteer intake process:

1. How fast are your response times?

Potential volunteers are eager to hear back from you and can easily be disappointed or completely turned off if you don't respond quickly. A good rule of thumb is to try to respond to online inquiries within 24 hours and to return phone messages within 48 hours. If you're going

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to be out of the office, create a system that provides an interim response, even if it is only, “Thanks for your inquiry. We’ll get back to you shortly.”

2. How friendly does your organization appear?

If a potential volunteer calls your organization, what happens next? Is the person who answers the phone welcoming and knowledgeable or is he rushed and confused? Always remember that potential volunteers, like any customers, are highly sensitive to how they think they are being treated. This is especially true of minorities and cultures who have good reason to be suspicious of the real intentions of any organization. Potential volunteers operate on the theory that “if you aren’t nice to me when I first meet you, why should I believe it will get any better later?”

3. How prolonged is your intake process?

The first major examination of a volunteer intake process was done of Big Brothers/Big Sisters almost 20 years ago. It was a revelation, to say the least, and not an especially pleasant one. They learned that a lot of potential volunteers dropped out early in the intake process because — from their perspective — it was both overly long and highly unfriendly. Prospective volunteers are eager to start work. The faster we can make that happen, the less likely we are to have some drop out because of frustration or sheer boredom.

4. How understandable is your intake process?

It’s easy to forget that while you understand the process potential volunteers will go through, they are probably clueless. Most volunteers don’t think about the time required for screening or the time before a training session will be available. If you conduct an interview and want the volunteer, take the time to carefully explain all the steps you’ll need to go through to finalize the deal. Give an honest estimate of how long each step will take, erring on the side of caution. If you do have a lengthy gap between when volunteers want to begin and when you will actually have them doing something (such as attending a training program), find other ways to keep them feeling like they are part of what is going on. These could include putting them on email lists to get announcements or having them shadow a current volunteer to see what they will be doing.

All of the above will make it more likely that you’ll avoid the biggest hole that many volunteer organizations have in their retention statistics: the prospective volunteer who leaves before you’ve even had a chance to get to know them at all. 