Volunteer Management Best Practices Part Three Communications Chaos

By Florence May

Is Anyone Listening?

Email. Smartphones. Snail mail. Facebook. Home phone. Twitter. FAX. Text. Volunteer registration management system.

How are you communicating with your volunteers? Are your communication messages and methods effective? How are your volunteers receiving and sending information? Are you listening to your volunteers?

Five years ago event volunteer communications were largely informative. Messages came from the event organizer to the volunteer. Today the communication lines are more fluid and instantaneous.

1. Volunteer Awareness

Five years ago: Here is our event.

Today: Here is our event and this is why we are important to you.

One thing has not changed. Volunteers still share their volunteer experiences with friends, families and colleagues. Volunteers communicate their excitement (or disappointment) about events and organizations by word of mouth. But now word of mouth is rarely in person.

Wired. The new word of mouth is viral, replicating your marketing message time and time again and in ways that might surprise you. The majority of volunteers will e-mail links for event websites, online volunteer registration sites, post their volunteer photos and event photo sites (like flikr) or related web-based event news articles from local media. They are also likely to share event facebook pages.

Wireless. The most technologically sophisticated volunteers do all of this on their smartphones.

The majority of volunteer opportunities to attract and register volunteers happen electronically. Are you prepared to communicate with them?

2. Volunteer Engagement

Five years ago: This is how you can help.

Today: This is how your skills, interests and social commitment are important to making this event successful.

Volunteers want to make use of their practical skills and talents. Volunteer managers must communicate during the engagement stage that the volunteer's time will be valued, productive and impactful.

Engagement still happens in person but again it is even more likely to occur on one of the many online activities.

Be honest about what you can deliver. If the jobs are physically challenging. Say so. If you need an "in charge" personality for parking. Say so. If volunteers will work in demanding, heavily trafficked areas. Say so.

Don't sugar coat your needs, requirements or benefits when you communicate in person or online. Your existing volunteers will confirm through social media whether your claims are authentic. Make those confirmations positive!

3. Volunteer Registration

Five years ago: We will tell you what job, time and where to work.

Today: Here are your volunteer options. Consider your interests and availability. Select your own jobs and shifts.

You want volunteers who are committed to the organization and specifically to their volunteer job. Recognize that their time is valuable. Give vol-

unteers access to 24/7 online registration tools. Let them choose from jobs that are clearly defined in terms of responsibilities and requirements.

Online volunteer registration tools should be integrated with your website and your event/volunteer social media tools. Create seamless opportunities during the registration process for your volunteers to become part of your event online and onsite.

Does online registration preclude mail in or faxed in paper applications? No. Nearly all registration systems have the capacity for administrators to hand-enter volunteer registrations. But the percentage of volunteer managers who have the patience for the added time of hand entering registration information and the budget of printing and mailing are decreasing rapidly.

4.Event Communications

Five years ago: Updates and last minute changes onsite.

Today: Updates and last minute changes are communicated through volunteer management systems in conjunction with e-mail, text, automated phone messages and social media communications tools.

Volunteers expect to be "in the know" by the minute. They hate to feel their time is wasted if a volunteer shift is no longer needed or a volunteer parking lot has been moved to a new location.

Managers can now instantly communicate additional volunteer needs or emergency directions

Many volunteers receive updates and last minute communications by their computers and smart phones. They will help spread the word to those who are less "connected".

5.Volunteer Appreciation

Five years ago: Thank you. We will call you next year.

Today: Thank you. Here is how your participation impacts our event. Here is the impact we, collectively, made on our community, our cause, our world.

The online world provides many more inexpensive and immediate opportunities to thank volunteers collectively. The Executive Director can send a collective e-mail the week after the event with a recap of major achievements and a big thank you to the volunteers. The volunteer manager and team leaders can send an immediate text of appreciation to key volunteers or post a Facebook message of gratitude on the personal pages of volunteer team leaders.

Team leaders in turn may send timely follow-up messages using online registration tools for their specific volunteer groups.

6.Ongoing Volunteer Communications

Five years ago: Evaluation.

Today: Online survey with opportunity to make recommendations. Continuous updates. Shared photos online. Opportunities to collaborate, coordinate, and complain online.

We want our volunteers to complain online?

If you do not provide your volunteers with opportunities to give you feedback, it is likely that you will find out about your event problems in the public domain.

Facebook and Twitter provide forums for the volunteer manager to communicate news, changes and appreciation. But social media tools work both ways. They also provide volunteers and the public the mechanism to communicate their compliments and complaints instantly ... to the world.

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Taking Control

Please take a few minutes to consider the communication elements of your volunteer program using the following informal ratings. Make notes in each topic 1-6 below and then rate your program.

✓ Check the items that are running smoothly. These should be no-to-low risk items.

? Put a question mark beside the items that need some improvement and may have moderate negative impact.

? Put an X next to the items that need immediate attention due to high cost or negative impact.

? Put two exclamation marks by the items that need extensive work or may be putting your volunteer program in jeopardy.

❏ Volunteer Awareness. Notes:

❏ Volunteer Engagement. Notes:

❏ Volunteer Registration. Notes:

❏ Event Communications. Notes:

❏ Volunteer Appreciation. Notes:

❏ Ongoing Volunteer Communications. Notes: