



A GEM

NO  
SHOW

PROBLEM  
VOLUNTEER

FEELS  
LIKE PART  
OF THE  
GROUP

HAD  
FUN

HAD  
OWNERSHIP

A GOOD  
MATCH

# Volunteer Managers Share **TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES**

By Joelle Baugher



After 4 years as the 500 Festival Volunteer Manager, I felt like an expert in managing large groups of volunteers and confident that my experience would be valued by the clients of TRS – The Registration System, my new employer.

My first job assignment for TRS was to interview nine volunteer managers from a variety of festivals, sports commissions and hospitals to gather tips, techniques and lessons learned related to common challenges.

I wondered what gems of wisdom these interviews would deliver but quickly discovered a wealth of lessons learned from this experienced and talented group which included:

- David Blank, Volunteer Manager, San Antonio Sports
- Eric Corning, Vice President, Seafair
- Jackie Johnson, Director of Volunteers, Team Ortho Foundation
- Jason Means, Events Manager, Chick-fil-A Bowl
- Yolanda Michaux, Coordinator - Membership & Volunteer Services, Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Tom Norton, Events Manager, Gator Bowl Association
- Tammy Parent, Director of Volunteer Services, Cisco Ottawa Bluesfest
- Adam Scott, Community Affairs Liaison, St. Vincent Health
- Tricia Siegwald, Director of Event Production and Volunteers, Kentucky Derby Festival

## Recruiting

**Make New Friends.** There is no doubt that recruiting can be difficult. We have to constantly look for new angles and connections to recruit volunteers who have the skills and dedication our organization is seeking. Eric (Seafair) and Tricia (Kentucky Derby Festival) both work with corporate sponsors to extend volunteer opportunities to their employees. Tricia says, "It is a good way to build their partnership, as both parties benefit."

Corporations often have internal communications sites specifically geared to official volunteer opportunities. They may look for options to "own" a specific shift or area, such as the information booths, water stations or food booths.

Eric suggests working with your event sponsorship team to help find the right contacts and build effective volunteer options for corporations in your area. This approach can also help introduce new businesses to partnerships with your organization.

**Build a Team.** David (San Antonio Sports), Tom (Gator Bowl Association) and Jason (Chick-fil-A Bowl) understand that one of the best sources for new volunteers is the network of existing volunteers. They each seek approaches to ensure their volunteers have a great experience. Obviously they want the volunteers to treat event guests well and make the event run smoothly. But we invest in volunteers so they will become part of the event team, so they will return

the next year and as a by-product, so they will encourage friends, families and colleagues to join them.

David works all year to make his volunteers feel like they are "part of the group" and get their commitment to the event and organization, but also on a more personal level, "they don't want to let me down, so in turn I won't let them down."

**Make it Fun.** Jackie (Team Ortho Foundation) uses a fun incentive program to help recruit volunteers, "we offer 1000 'bones' for each hour they volunteer. The bones can be redeemed for race entries and some of our race gear. It gives the volunteers a choice of rewards and the incentive fits with our Ortho brand!" But, she warns, that "it is important to be clear with incentives so everyone consistently gets the same options – I have, in a panic, offered additional incentives to try to get last minute volunteers and then had a hard time managing those incentives." Now when she creates a new incentive plan, she makes sure she is fair and consistent to all of her volunteers.

**Make it Easy.** During year-round recruiting efforts, Adam (St. Vincent Health), "constantly includes reminders about volunteer opportunities within our various communication tools." Adam also tries to make accessing the St. Vincent online registration site and registering for volunteer jobs a simple task, "our hope is that every associate who signs up to volunteer has a good experience on the



[registration] site and will then recommend the site to their colleagues."

**Good Match?** One piece of advice from Eric (Seafair), "understand who your volunteers are and make [the volunteer opportunity] a good match." For example Eric partners with military groups for some of the Seafair set-up, because the soldiers are willing to, "be up at 5 or 6 am and move equipment and then wait a few hours only to move [everything] again." Carefully consider the skills, unusual demands or personal traits required for the volunteer job before you start filling positions. The goal is to recruit volunteers with a long-term relationship in mind.

## Communication

**Am I getting through?** When I asked the group of expert volunteer managers about communication, it was with the assumption that they, like most volunteer managers, use email to communicate with their volunteers. This theory proved to be true, but our experts also emphasized that effective communication is a lot more than just sending out emails.

**Too much? Too little? Clear? Confusing?** The most often quoted rule is: Communicate often! But if you aren't getting the responses from your volunteers you want, look at what you are writing and ask yourself if it is effective. Communicating more often might be counter-productive if you are not clearly articulating your message. You have to step back and look at the bigger picture.

Jason (Chick-fil-A Bowl) has strict email communication rules. Only he and his intern are sending volunteer emails to en-

sure "clear and concise" communications. They also establish a limit of sending "no more than two emails a week" during the busy time. They want to make sure not to overload their volunteers with emails, because they are concerned [the volunteers] will stop reading the emails and therefore miss important information.

Eric is also regimented when it comes to Seafair email communication, "we send out a single email at set intervals prior to the event: 4 weeks, 2 weeks, 1 week and finally a few days before." He suggests having all your emails written prior to the season, so all you have to do is tweak last minute changes, copy, paste and hit send. This proactive effort will save you the time of correcting careless mistakes made while you are exhausted and make your time more productive during your busy festival or event season.

**Be in the Know.** Tom comments that when Gator Bowl volunteers get regular update messages they are likely to feel a greater connection to the organization, "they feel like the organization really cares for them. The [volunteers] like to know everything and want to feel a part of something, like they belong and you can do this with [consistent] communications."

Several of our experts commented on the importance of giving their volunteers an emotional connection to the events. In San Antonio, David likes to send emails about [a broad array of] event specifics, so "they know what I know." This also helps volunteers feel a part of the group and increases their level of ownership. The more ownership the volunteers feel, the greater the likelihood that they are showing up

for their shifts, working hard and growing their commitment to you and your events. As Tom stated previously, this relationship starts with good communication.

**Stay in Touch.** When you have a large gap between events consider alternative communication mechanisms. Jackie has launched a Team Ortho volunteer newsletter that comes out on a monthly basis, "it is a great way to educate and keep volunteers informed between events." The newsletter helps the volunteers stay up-to-date with your organization when you don't have any events happening. The idea is to keep the contact fresh, remind volunteers that you are thinking about them and value the ongoing relationship.

**Those Who Don't Read.** Of course, some volunteers will not read regardless of how well your communications are drafted or displayed, a lesson I learned the hard way. As Adam (St. Vincent Health) states, "no matter how clearly you post information for volunteers on TRS and in emails, [some] of them will certainly not read it or will miss it. This just comes with the territory of volunteer management. It's just something you need to recognize and be aware of as a volunteer coordinator." He prepares for this type of challenge by recruiting a few extra volunteers for each shift in case there are no shows.

While some volunteers don't read or skim and don't follow instructions, it is still important to clearly communicate information to your volunteers, so they know what to expect. The majority will read and follow the directions. Well, most of the directions!

## Problem Volunteers

**Understand the Whole Story.** There is always one in the group! There are problem volunteers within nearly all events and organizations. Our experts shared advice on how to handle rough situations with finesse and confidence.

The most important thing is to try to address the situation right away before it gets any worse. Yolanda (Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau) says, "If I'm onsite with the problem volunteer, I pull them aside to discuss the problem or complaint. I also ask for their point of view or opinion." Jason (Chick-fil-A Bowl) learned that it's always best to get all the facts, "Do some information gathering first by talking with everyone involved in order to make the best judgment."

**Protect Your Organization.** David (San Antonio Sports) agrees that it's important to hear all sides and get everyone's perception. Then pull the person aside to chat with them, "some [volunteers] are oblivious to what they are doing!" So once you bring the concerns to their attention

and talk to them, they adjust. If the bad behavior still continues, end their shift and ask them to leave. In reference to bad behavior, Tom (Gator Bowl Association) says, "no matter how desperate you are for volunteers, you still don't want that volunteer and we would rather the volunteer position be vacant than have that volunteer." Don't allow your organization's reputation to be damaged by a bad apple.

## No Shows

**What Happened?** When volunteers don't show up, the first step is to communicate with the absentee volunteer, "let them know that you know they didn't show up," says Tom from the Gator Bowl Association. Once the situation is clarified, Tom removes the missing volunteers from the game day ticket list and does not send them an invite to their volunteer appreciation party.

Adam (St. Vincent Health) also communicates with the volunteer who did not show up, "we send a polite e-mail, tailored to that individual to a) give them an opportunity to explain why they did not show up, b) stress the importance of volunteers coming through for us and c) remind them that we closely track and monitor volunteers tardiness and attendance for all of our events." Adam offers the absentee volunteer a chance to redeem him or herself, but if they continue to be unreliable, he will not allow them to volunteer in the future.

If you experience a high level of no shows, take the time to consider how the volunteers who did not show up were recruited. Were they all from the same company? Or were they all people who showed up on your e-mail status report as having not read or opened any e-mails? Were you clear about the directions and check-in location? Did you change their job or shift? Was it perhaps a poor volunteer match?

**Recognize People Who Show Up.** Adam says, "It's important to be proactive and always recognize and thank the volunteers who do come through for you. The positive reinforcement will help you build a more loyal and dependable group of volunteers." Those who worked in particularly difficult environments, inclement weather or undesirable early morning shifts should receive special kudos. It often takes several years of hard work to build a committed, reliable team of volunteers, but it's definitely worth it and it will reward you in the long run.

## Gems

**Hindsight is always 20/20.** It would be great to take everything you know now, turn back the time and use that knowledge! Well, we can't turn back time, but our experts can offer you some lessons learned. Whether you are new to the volunteer management field or a seasoned

veteran, these gems of advice will offer insight into your volunteer programs.

**Know The Players.** When Yolanda (Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau) took over managing volunteers several years ago, she had no idea what to expect, "it was a new position within our company, so I had to go with the flow. I had to make the best of it. What I've learned along the way is that you have to be a 'people person' to deal with and manage volunteers, especially when you have over 8,000 to deal with!" She highly recommends learning the capabilities of your volunteers, especially your volunteer captains, "it's nice to know who to touch base with when a volunteer assignment comes up at the last minute."

**No Knee Jerk Reactions.** Jason (Chick-fil-A Bowl) warns to limit changes during your first year. He suggests spending time learning and listening, especially to those longtime volunteers. You can make necessary changes your second year, "learn and get to know your volunteers. Gain their respect so when you do have to make a tough decision or change, you have their buy-in." Jason strives to provide good customer service to make them feel appreciated and important. Chick-fil-A Bowl volunteers are required to pay for their uniforms but this is not a detriment to volunteer return each year. Volunteers quickly fill online registration year after year, "we try to provide a lot of value to them if they volunteer – this includes having raffles for great prizes and honoring their years of service."

**It is Never Too Early.** Eric (Seafair) says that you can never start too early, "you have to spend time getting your ducks in a row, designing and executing a plan. Take the time to properly develop your volunteer job descriptions and expectations. Think about who you need and how you can get them [involved in your event]." He believes that this extra work up front contributes to how quickly the Seafair volunteer positions reach their maximum number needed. Eric also advises to keep communicating with the volunteers who signed up early, "they might not hear from you for months, so they will forget and may in turn become a no show. Send them a message to keep them engaged, even if it's just – we'll be sending out more info in a few weeks – type of message." This kind of continuous communication will help volunteers stay involved and will help decrease no shows.

**Stay Dynamic.** Tammy (Cisco Ottawa Bluesfest) warns that, "You can never get too comfortable. Your program has to be as dynamic as the people that donate their time to your organization. You have to stay on top of the constant changes that affect your program. You have to constantly review your program, right down to the perks or privileges you offer to them to keep attracting the right

people, or to keep the experienced people coming back." It is important to review year after year and adjust to attract the energized, committed volunteers on which you are dependent for success.

**Volunteer Management is EVERYONE'S Job.** Jackie (Team Ortho Foundation) states that, "just because you are in charge of recruiting volunteers doesn't mean that the rest of the event staff is off the hook when it comes to managing and preparing for the volunteers. Other members of your team should know how to work with volunteers as well." It is a team effort, because the volunteer manager can't be in several places at once, especially during event time. She also believes it's important to have the best interest of your volunteers in mind, "put yourself in their shoes and think about how you would like to be treated. The event will run a lot better in the end."

**Get Dirty.** David (San Antonio Sports) has similar beliefs, "don't ask someone to do something you wouldn't do yourself. The volunteers won't respect you if you can't get down in the trenches with them and get dirty." He finds that managing volunteers can be very humbling, "you meet all kinds of people, but you don't know where they come from unless you get to know them."

## In Closing

**Take A Step Back.** My final advice is: Take a step back from the continuous motion of the event world to ensure that you, the volunteer manager, get grounded with a well-thought out plan, clear communications, uniform policies, and time to build an energized team of volunteers. The importance of strong relationships with your volunteer corps is important to the event operations but in turn it will increase your passion for your work as it has for our team of experts and as it did for me. Thank you to the 500 Festival Volunteers for four great years and so many friendships!

**Joelle M. Baugher** is the Account Manager at TRS – The Registration System. Before coming to TRS, Joelle was responsible for the 500 Festival's entire volunteer effort as the Volunteer Manager managing over 7,000 volunteers across nearly 50 events and programs. Baugher then moved to Program Manager where she continued to be in charge of the award winning Volunteer Program; in addition to the 500 Festival and Indianapolis 500® Education Program. Joelle can be reached at: 1.317.644.6980 or [jbaugher@theregistrationsystem.com](mailto:jbaugher@theregistrationsystem.com). For more information on TRS, go to: [www.theregistrationsystem.com](http://www.theregistrationsystem.com).