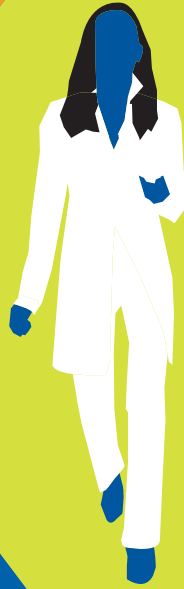


BY JESSICA SCHLIMME



# TOP TEN

# TIPS

# FOR FESTIVAL AND EVENT VOLUNTEER MANAGERS

The 89th National Cherry Festival's eight day celebration took place on July 4th, 2015. This was my 5th year as the Festival's Volunteer Manager. Each year it is easier for me to grasp and know what to expect based on my personal experience of being caught in the heat of battle, planning and implementing ways that we can make things work on the fly. In 2014, it took over 2,100 volunteers to help put on the Festival – giving a total of 20,000 hours to make it a success. The amount of help needed each year keeps growing as we add on additional events to our ever growing 8 day schedule.

Attracting volunteers is a relatively easy thing to do - with so many options from a variety of events to leadership positions, there is an opportunity for something to fit anyone's schedule based on the time and effort they are willing to put in. Retaining volunteers to come back year after year has been a challenge, we don't have a high turnover rate but we do lose a handful or so. I have worked with some fabulous volunteers, but lost some excellent ones as well. Sometimes we learn things the hard way.... My efforts in writing this article for you is in hopes that this will help you and your event succeed in the 3 R's of Volunteer Management: Recruitment, Retention and Recognition!

Based on my own experience, and from listening to the wisdom of my colleagues, I have compiled a list of my top ten tips for Volunteer Management. This will help you avoid some of the problems of managing your team of volunteers no matter the size.

### **1. Interview Them, Take Notes & Do Your Research**

Giving the volunteer an opportunity to explain their strengths and talents will give you a better understanding of what would be a good fit for their volunteer position. Once you have placed the volunteer in their position, follow up with them to make sure that it is indeed the right fit, especially in a leadership role. Leadership

roles tend to be more high stress and responsibility. Volunteers keep doing what they are happy doing, and if they aren't happy with their role or feel like they are not being utilized to their full potential, there is a good chance they won't be around for your next Festival or Event. If the volunteer is going to be around children or involved with money handling, you may want to run a background check on them to make sure you are covered on your end. All non-profit groups have free access to the ICHAT Michigan State Database, with the ability to run free background checks on all of your volunteers.

### **2. Make Them Feel Welcome**

Volunteering at your Festival or Event should be an enjoyable experience for the volunteer. This is something that they are passionate about and are willing to give up time out of their busy schedule to help with this event. Greet them when they arrive, SMILE and thank them. Show your appreciation that they showed up to help. The more your volunteer feels comfortable and welcome, the more likely they will be around to help at your next event. If you can, hold an event specific training prior to your Festival or Event. By providing this training, your volunteers will feel comfortable and confident to know what needs to be done at their volunteer assignment. Any information

you can get in their hands prior to your event will better the volunteer experience, and in turn the guest experience having a trained and ready volunteer assisting them at your event. It is important that volunteers know what to wear, what to bring, where to park, who to check in with, etc. This type of information can be created and distributed in your volunteer manual or via email prior to the event. Having information accessible to the volunteer prior to their first shift will make them better prepared and will cut down on any day of event confusion.

### **3. Have a Back-up Plan**

As a volunteer manager for the event, plan for "no-shows." Although the volunteer signed up or said that they will be there, emergencies happen and you are left to find someone to fill their spot, on scene - last minute. Be ready for an unexpected gap by having alternate volunteers who can fill in when necessary. What happens in a perfect world when all the volunteers show up for their event shifts? Think about other duties ahead of time that they could do in case this happens. Some ideas: Organizing volunteer t-shirts and nametags, beautification of the event space (picking up trash, clearing tables, etc.), or helping write thank you notes to send out post-event. As long as you have not wasted the volunteers time by having them sit around with nothing to do, you have achieved a win-win situation for your Festival gaps!

### **4. Monitor and Evaluate Groups**

Just because a volunteer group signs up for the same shift year after year, does not mean they do not need interaction or direction. Thank them, shake their hands, and let them know they are appreciated. Don't take them for granted. Check with the volunteer or team on a regular basis, and ask the group leaders for feedback post volunteer shift or after the event. You may find out something you really needed to know, which allows you to make changes accordingly- making their volunteer experience better each year!

### **5. Emergency Preparedness**

While no one wants to think about emergencies, they do happen. It might be a simple skinned knee that requires a

Don't over-use your volunteers by giving them too many shifts, hours or positions. Watch for signs that a volunteer has over-committed, to avoid burn-out. Talk to them and see if they would like to be on-call or a backup for some shifts. Try to be flexible and find a schedule that works for each individual volunteer.

Band-Aid or it might be something more serious like a thunderstorm. No matter the emergency, a plan should always be in place. Most organizations have emergency plans and or evacuation procedures but they are broad and long. An Emergency Action Plan (EAP) gets the word out to the most important group of the volunteers. A volunteer needs clear communication about who, what and when and a simple clear action plan that can give them that information. EAPs can be tailored to any event and can be changed as often as needed. They are detailed with a contact list for the event, which includes Event Staff, Fire Department, EMS, Police and the Community Emergency Manager. An EAP can also have a list of procedures for the event such as, lost child procedures, event evacuation procedures, event cancellation information and event layouts showing the location of first aid equipment and fire extinguishers. Every volunteer should have a copy of the Festival's EAP in their volunteer handbook.

### 6. Overtaxing Your Help

Don't over-use your volunteers by giving them too many shifts, hours or positions. Watch for signs that a volunteer has over-committed, to avoid burn-out. Talk to them and see if they would like to be on-call or a backup for some shifts. Try to be flexible and find a schedule that works for each individual volunteer. If they still feel obligated to help, put them in a position that is not so fast paced. Be sure to take note of this in their volunteer profile. Knowing this about a volunteer ahead of time can help you plan accordingly. It is possible that you might have to remind them that signing up to help everyday might be too much for them since

it caused an issue at the last event. Having well-rested and engaged volunteers is key to the success of your event!

### 7. Always Look for Ways to Improve

There are many volunteer management blogs, books and free resource websites that you can access to share ideas and learn about the new and upcoming trends in volunteerism. Another way to get great ideas and see how your volunteer program compares to other events out there is to volunteer yourself! How were you treated? Did you feel welcome? How was their training? Were you thanked? Sometimes having a first-hand experience, good or bad, gives you the ideas and feedback to better your organization's volunteer program. Sometimes you may find that you are doing things pretty well compared to other organizations and events.

### 8. The Power of "Thank You"

The best way to keep your volunteers is to frequently acknowledge their help and contributions to your event or organization. The importance of a verbal thank you cannot be overstated. Did you know that April is National Volunteer Month? Show your appreciation of their volunteerism! Formal types of recognition such as awards or certificates are an easy and affordable way for you to demonstrate your gratitude. Get in the habit of also sending post event thank you cards or emails. Host volunteer appreciation events if you can. A great way to recognize and thank your entire volunteer base is to hold a post- event thank you party strictly for the volunteers. This gives them ownership in your event and the excitement

to know that there will be a party after to celebrate their hard work and dedication.

### 9. YOUR Brand Ambassadors

Volunteers like to be a part of an organization that is known for their great work. Get them organization-identified nametags, certificates, shirts or jackets. If your organization or event has limited funds, ask a local business to sponsor these shirts or nametags to help cover the cost and in return, include their logo on the volunteer merchandise so the community can see their support and partnership of your Festival or event. Publish photos of volunteers at work on your website or social media page with shout outs (make sure to request their permission prior to posting their picture.) Publish a roster list of all volunteers that helped out at your Festival or event in your event program or post-event in your local newspaper. People like to see their names and get recognition for being a part of a successful event.

### 10. Get Feedback

Survey your volunteers. Hear what they have to say. You can't be everywhere at the same time so it is nice to have someone provide the feedback that was right in the middle of the action. Asking a variety of questions pertaining not only to their volunteer involvement but also include questions about the overall Festival and Event. Ask them for their feedback on how you could have improved their volunteer experience. Surveys can be sent out post Festival via free survey platforms such as Survey Monkey or Survey Gizmo. This will give you the information you need in order to see what changes need to be made for your next Festival or Event. Make sure you implement this into your post-event plans as this is an important thing to do after every event.

And remember.... No volunteers = No Festivals!

**Jessica Schlimme** is the Volunteer and Corporate Membership Manager for the National Cherry Festival. Have questions about Volunteer Management? Need some advice or ideas for your program? Feel free to contact Jessica at [jessica@cherryfestival.org](mailto:jessica@cherryfestival.org).