

SHIFTING VOLUNTEER TRENDS

By Florence May with Ben Reno-Weber

At a recent volunteer management conference, I noticed a common theme in every session: The volunteer world is shifting.

Several speakers were discussing a shift in the perceived role of volunteers. According to Rick Lynch, principal consultant at Lynch Associates, the volunteer management era “grew up” when many people volunteered as an alternative to professional work, whereas today’s volunteers do so as an alternative to other leisure activities.

In addition, we shared observations that more people are choosing to volunteer in a team or group. The volunteer groups, numbering in the 10s and 100s, come from schools, clubs, associations, or even just a group of friends or family who would like to spend time together at a volunteer activity. And this is just part of the group trend.

In this age of corporate social respon-

sibility, the groups are often employees from a local, national or even international companies. Often these groups wish to spend their leisure time helping their community. Popular group volunteer activities include solving social problems; improving the quality of life and developing sustainable environmental projects.

While studying these dramatic changes in community service and volunteer trends, I recently had the pleasure of talking with social entrepreneur Ben Reno-Weber, co-founder of MobileServe. MobileServe provides tools for organizations to measure their organization’s social impact by tracking employee volunteer activity.

FLORENCE: *Ben, you are working in an exciting field with a wide variety of organizations. Corporations, Schools, Non-Profits, Community entities and*

so many others are actively engaging in social responsibility. Why are these organizations interested in matching their employees with volunteer opportunities? What has changed?

BEN: I think there are three forces at play here. The first is an underlying part of the human condition that has not changed: people want to be of service to others. They want to be a part of something larger than themselves. What has changed is that many institutions which previously filled that need have deteriorated. Everything from faith communities, Rotaries, Bowling Leagues, the Elks, and the PTA have seen declining memberships over the last decade. So the second force? People are looking for companies to fill that gap. And the final force is the increasing dominance of the Millennials in the workplace and the

marketplace. Millennials are now more than 50% of the workforce, and they want to work for and purchase from organizations that align with their values. They want to see how their efforts have impact, not just cut a check and trust that it will help.

So, what used to be a nice to have is now a need to have: organizations who want top talent or want loyal customers need to demonstrate how their companies contribute to their communities. Volunteering is a great way to do that.

FLORENCE: *At TRS we work with a wide variety of event volunteer managers -- championships, endurance sports, festivals, arts and educational programs -- they want to connect with large groups. What advice would you give to them? (Should they pay greater attention to community impact and links to social cause? Or other items?)*

BEN: My best advice: build connections over time. There can be transactional component, which is fine: "volunteer at this event to get free admissions or to fundraise for your group."

But if you want a longer-term relationship, if you want volunteers to be ambassadors, if you want people connected not just to your event but to your organization, you need to offer more than just a one-time per year engagement. The highest retention and engagement we see is with groups who offer multiple on-ramps and significant autonomy to their volunteers.

Here's an example: WeDay puts on concerts and inspirational events that fill stadiums all over the world. To even have a chance to get a ticket to attend, you have to do (and report) one domestically focused service project and one internationally focused service project. They also recognize their participants who go above and beyond with leaderboards and social-media shout-outs. It's not complicated, but it does require investment either in people or technology.

FLORENCE: *At TRS, we see this generational shift in volunteer trends is creating new challenges and new opportunities for event volunteer managers. Not just recruiting but retaining volunteers. There seems to be an outdated view of volunteers as "unpaid labor" must change to a cultivated relationship with professionals who bring skills, collaboration and professional advice. Have I got this right?*

BEN: The best book on this I've ever read is Daniel Pink's Drive. He lays out what motivates people in almost any setting, not just volunteering. He says people crave

Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose, to which I would add Community. What does that mean for people engaging volunteers?

Autonomy means giving people a task or set of tasks to accomplish and let them reason through how to do it. You can give them best practices, history of approaches, inspect, and approve, but let them own it. For Mastery, they also want to feel they are getting better. Returning volunteers might want to be "supervisors" or get first crack at different assignments. People who have invested in pre-work (ie. doing volunteer work at a pre-event or as part of something else) might get preferred assignments or increased responsibility.

To help people feel purpose, spend some time reminding people the "Why?" of what they are doing. Handing out water is about hydration, but it's also about encouraging people to be the best they can be, picking them up when they are down, and getting them into the right headspace to finish.

And community is about connecting them to one another and to the organization. They want to know who else is with them and why they are here. I'm not just working this information booth, Alexis, Callie, Chris and I are making people feel welcome here.

FLORENCE: *Event volunteer managers are eager to cultivate relationships that will evolve into recurring volunteer activity. Are the organizations focused on factors that volunteer managers need to consider?*

BEN: This is the biggest area of opportunity we see. People are hungry to belong, but afraid of being trapped. They increasingly don't want to belong to an organization, but are happy to be affiliated with a cause. They want their volunteer experience to be aligned with their values, connected to their skills, to be meaningful, and to help them connect. I recognize that's a tall order for a volunteer manager who just needs warm bodies to get the job done.

But it's also not as daunting as it sounds. A lot of that work can be automated, or can be done at the same time as the logistics, with a little bit of forethought. The same volunteer hungry for increased responsibility can be put in charge of volunteer culture in their little part of the event. Pre-event volunteering is a great way to select who is really motivated and capable. Keeping records of those who have been there before gives you a great chance to give shout-outs and support leaders.

Of course, I'm biased in all of this. I ran a nonprofit that grew from hosting

10 events to 20+ events per year and depended on volunteers for all of them. I ended up leaving because I felt like I didn't have the tools I needed to do that engagement well, and neither did my peers, so we went out and built them.

Ultimately, we need people to be engaged in their communities. Volunteering is not just about getting the work done, it's about building connections that bind us together as a community and a society. At this moment, our country needs as much that as we can get.

Give Meaning

Thank you, Ben for your insightful observations. At TRS, we sense that for many volunteer managers the changes to the volunteer recruiting, training, activity and retention cycle feel dramatic. And clearly the national research and your observations reinforce the realities of this millennial shift.

We collectively see the desire for stronger participation when there are shared values. The motivation among younger (but also many older) volunteers to 'own the movement' or 'make an impact' which gives meaning to their time.

Our volunteers are asking: What's the point? What's in this for my personal goals? The job of event directors and volunteer managers is to create consequential connections.

I, **Florence May**, love volunteers. Maybe it is the 15 years spent managing events with Visit Indy, Simply Hospitality and the United States Grand Prix (F1). Or maybe it is the 16 years delivering online volunteer management systems for many of the largest and most complex events in North America.

Over the past few years my company, TRS – The Registration System, has provided volunteer management systems for the 500 Festival, the Kentucky Derby Festival, the Republican National Convention, the Democratic National Convention, Celebrate Fairfax, the Gilroy Garlic Festival, the US Mayors Conference, the Azalea Festival, USA Special Olympics National Games and hundreds of smaller events. In the process of supporting events, I study and discuss the trends that make certain events successful while others struggle.