

# COMPETING FOR THE MILLENNIAL VOLUNTEER

Over the past few years we've seen major shifts in the volunteer world, including more competition for volunteers and a huge growth in the number of events held. There are a plethora of festivals, endurance events, school sports, charitable fundraisers and much more competing for the time of potential volunteers.

I've been studying The Millennial Impact Report for insight into generational trends. For many years, Baby Boomers, our growing rank of seniors, have driven our volunteer trends. We would expect that our middle age Generation X would fill the Boomers volunteer roles. But Gen X is a very small generation and there simply aren't enough people. That means volunteer managers need to focus on the younger Millennials - the largest generation in the workforce today and our next big pool of volunteers.

Many event leaders I speak to struggle to attract and retain Millennial volunteers, so I've reached out to Cara Silletto, workforce thought leader, generational speaker, and author of "Staying Power," to explore these challenges.

**Florence May:** Cara, welcome! Let's dig right in. What should volunteer managers know about different generational expectations? Can we learn something about Millennials from the workplace?

**Cara Silletto:** Absolutely! My observations about keeping Millennials as employees in the workplace apply to their volunteer roles as well. Team leaders, just like any new boss, must communicate their unwritten expectations clearly. New volunteers can't read their minds. New volunteers don't know how things "have always been done". They also may come with expectations of the volunteer experience that may be inaccurate. You likely clarify rules and expectations throughout your recruiting and training processes, but do you ask new volunteers what they expect to get out of their time volunteering with you? This is a great opportunity to make a strong early connection while clearing up any potential misunderstandings or missed expectations down the road.

**Florence May:** I often work with the leadership of events on improving their volunteer recruiting to retention cycle. Any first steps you would recommend? Are there specific questions they should be asking?

**Cara Silletto:** Start by asking how the volunteer discovered the organization/event. Ask what drew them to participate in the first place. And let the volunteer know you truly want candid answers about which items bring value to their volunteer time (networking, resume credits, community service hours, tickets to the event, etc.). The answers will help you understand what moti-

vates the volunteers. The process also encourages the volunteer to gauge the value of their volunteer time. Knowing the origin of their interest can also help you calculate their anticipated renewal rates. Is this volunteer likely to return based on initial interest? Or do we need to engage further to encourage a second volunteer experience?

**Florence May:** Change can be difficult. If events are having trouble recruiting and retaining younger volunteers, are new management strategies necessary? Do we need to consider expectations?

**Cara Silletto:** Yes, yes, yes! This question gets right at the heart of the reasons people do or don't come back. How were they treated by the managers and coordinators? What does the management-volunteer relationship look like? One of my clients was adamant that most people left because of scheduling issues, when in reality people left because they didn't like the managers. In fact, some suggested, "managers should have some experience doing the actual job first." That's great advice to anyone putting team leaders in place. Have they done the front-line work themselves before? Do they know exactly what they're asking of others who are out in the field?

**Florence May:** Great points and perfect lead in to our next question. We often see organizations struggling to find recruiting, training and scheduling strategies that work for multiple generations. How do events need to evaluate their technology and communication approaches with volunteers?

**Cara Silletto:** When there were fewer channels for communication it was easier to reach everyone in the same ways. But today, as more channels become available with new tools and apps popping up everyday, we need to remember to go where our volunteers are - of all ages.

Just because you've used email successfully for 20 years doesn't mean that will continue to work best for everyone. If you're recruiting younger volunteers, you better be sure all your web pages are mobile-optimized, info is short and sweet, and you're explain the WIIFM (What's in it for me?) aspect of volunteering in your recruiting methods. But for Baby Boomers, you had better have a simplified platform that offers instructions for completion - and they prefer it looks similar to the way it did last year.

Are you texting in addition to sending e-mail reminders? Are you offering group sign-up options? And how are you letting volunteers be heard and customize their experiences working with you?

These are all things technology can help with, but there's no silver bullet that can do it all. Organizations who will remain successful are those diversifying their approaches and using what works now and next, not just what worked five years ago!

**Florence May:** I'm glad you brought up volunteer groups because this will be our hot topic next issue! In all these points, you are talking about engaging the volunteer. This makes me think about the actual event experience which can be very passive. Are there good ways to actively engage volunteers during training and their on-site experience?

**Cara Silletto:** With the plethora of communication apps today, there's no reason for your volunteers to feel disconnected. They should know what's going on, get real-time updates throughout the event, and have ways to share questions and feedback with the organizers at all times. Note that some volunteers may not use these functions, but others will become increasingly frustrated without them. Plus, this is a great way to collect candid feedback and resolve issues quickly across all aspects of the event.

**Florence May:** You have me wondering how long should volunteer managers expect new volunteers to stay with their organizations? Is that shifting?

**Cara Silletto:** There's a major shift occurring in the event/volunteer relationship. Many people used to check the box to participate year after year because they had always done so. Now, volunteers have many more choices of where to participate and they are evaluating every single decision that impacts their schedules.

Do I want to do this again? Did I have fun last time? Was it worth my time or could I spend it elsewhere with a better return? For many, donating their time means more to them than donating their money, and they're getting picky, so you have to be more attractive than ever, and evolve with their needs.

Also, it's time to have more realistic expectations when it comes to how long you can expect to retain volunteers. People don't stay connected to any organization as long as they used to - as workers or volunteers, so be prepared for that and maximize the time you have with each person. Don't ever make folks "sit the bench" the first time they volunteer. They want to be put in the game, coach!

**Florence May:** At the end of the event, does a thank you note really mean anything? Are we looking at the right Rewards & Recognition?

**Cara Silletto:** It's critical today to appreciate any and all jobs well done - even if it's the exact job they signed up to do. Many people expect recognition and a pat on the back when they show up (thanks to those good ol' participation ribbons our parents, teachers and everyone else gave us as children) - even if you think that's ridiculous. The reality is there are lots of people who don't show up at all for things they signed up to do, so we certainly need to say "thank you" to those who do show up, and those who do a great job while they're volunteering for us. Remember, they have choices, so don't take that for granted!

And to do recognition right, find out what matters to your volunteers! Some may prefer public recognition on your social media sites while others may prefer scheduling preferences for the next event. Are you asking recruits, "When we recognize your hard work and dedication to this event, in which ways would you like to be thanked?" Give them a checklist to find out what most people want and customize rewards when possible. At my events, if I give away a gift card, I give folks a choice between three online retailers and then I email the gift card of their choice. Don't assume everyone shops or eats at the same places!

### It's a Wrap!

As we learned from Cara, for many organizations adapting strategies for millennials will be critical to the midterm success of their events. Is your leadership looking at the average age of your volunteers? Do you have strategies in place to expand your millennial base? Have you considered how these strategies will work with your older volunteers?

At TRS, we work closely with a major event venue who has a very loyal group of older volunteers. The older volunteers were very much "this is the way we've always done it" and effectively drove away all younger volunteers. So the venue managers instituted a new younger Ambassador program specifically designed to attract young adults and college students.

Guess what happened? Within one year the older volunteers wanted to participate in the younger Ambassador program! If you want to attract and retain younger volunteers, you may have to design specific initiatives that challenge the establishment.

The bottom-line? Leaders and coordinators must dive into the mindset of Millennials if we want to connect with them and extend their time working with our organizations.

Would hearing more about today's new workforce (who are or soon will be your volunteers) and ways to retain them would be helpful for your organization? Get a copy of Cara's little guide explaining "The Millennial Mindset" free at [www.crescendostrategies.com](http://www.crescendostrategies.com) or order her new book, "Staying Power: Why Your Employees Leave & How to Keep Them Longer," on Amazon.

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.

*May I Help you?*

Contact me with volunteer management related questions at [fmay@my-trs.com](mailto:fmay@my-trs.com)