

# RAISING MORE MONEY

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR YOUR MISSION™

## *The New Volunteer*

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## THE NEW VOLUNTEER

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One of the clearest vestiges of the old reality in most nonprofit organizations is the volunteer program. It was designed with the best of intentions for the volunteers of yesterday and was a perfect fit for their needs back then.

I remember going to special classes about how to set up and run a volunteer program—how to design the job descriptions, clarify expectations and time limits for the assignment, have a sign-in book with a friendly greeter, a place for the volunteers to chat, have coffee, and have their social needs fulfilled. By all means, the program needed to be supervised by a volunteer coordinator who knew how to take care of these invaluable people who were giving their time. There were volunteer recognition programs to be put in place, including events and certificates. It was a tight little system designed for the ideal volunteer of the old reality: a woman or retired person who had plenty of extra time on their hands.

One of the main taboos of this system was asking these loyal volunteers to give money. That was a giant “no-no.” After all, they were already giving their time and talent. It would be rude to ask them for money. Furthermore, in the old reality, the majority of volunteers were women, who, according to the stereotype, didn’t have control over the purse strings anyway. Other than board members, volunteers were never expected to be donors.

Fast forward to the new reality. Think of the places you and your family volunteer right now: chairing that committee at your religious organization, serving on a committee at your kids’ school, helping out for the elections at the local neighborhood association, tutoring at the literacy program.

Notice you have quite a little list. You are not alone. In America, 56% of adults volunteer. This is an increase of nearly 14% in two years. Add to that all the elementary school and youth volunteer programs. Volunteering is no longer just for the wealthy or retired. Today, the majority of us volunteer. It has become part of our culture.

Now look at how much time you give to each of those places you volunteer. It adds up quickly. Three hours a month, six hours a week? I find it remarkable that, in the midst of people’s extraordinarily busy lives, giving time—the most precious commodity today—is becoming even more popular. It says a great deal about the sense of meaning and purpose volunteer experiences provide. It also says a great deal about the deeper, more lasting connections people are seeking. More and more of us are turning to volunteer “work” to round out our lives.

Now, go back through your list and rate each of your volunteer experiences in terms of how satisfying it was for you. Tell the truth. The fishing field trip with the inner-city kids might get a ten. Some of the other committee assignments, the ones where you spend much of your time listening to others drone on, may rate only a five.

Think about what could be done to make you a happier volunteer. What annoys you most

about each volunteer project or assignment? How could they fix it to make it work better for you? How could they customize it?

In the old reality, the organization called the shots. They said: “We need tutors three days a week; we need volunteers to deliver meals at 11 a.m.” The organization’s needs drove the program. That worked pretty well when the primary sources of volunteers were affluent women and retired senior citizens.

In the new reality, “volunteer” takes on a whole new meaning. The edges of “volunteer” blur with the edges of “donor.” In the new reality, the organizations that thrive will be those that treat volunteers as lifelong major donors. And they will treat donors as volunteers.

## **VOLUNTEER = DONOR**

The new reality calls for a greatly expanded definition of what it means to be a volunteer for a nonprofit organization. In the new reality, the words “donor” and “volunteer” will be interchangeable. The definition of volunteering will shift from being organization-centered to being volunteer-centered. Rather than recruiting volunteers for pre-set slots, organizations will be asking this new, loosely-defined breed of volunteers how they would like to become involved.

Nothing will look quite the same. “Volunteering” will begin to resemble a series of unrelated projects, dictated by the donor’s interest and schedule. From the organization’s perspective, it will look like isolated, almost random intersections where donors tell you what they want to do and then do it.

From the donor’s perspective, it will feel like a satisfying relationship with you. In their world, when they are at a social gathering and people ask them what they have been doing lately, their “little project” with your organization will figure prominently in their conversation. That is because it will work well for them. Their “volunteer work” will have been customized to their schedule, their interest, and their unique situation.

Let me give you an example. Several years ago, while working full-time and raising two young kids, my husband and I realized we wanted to do more to teach our kids about giving back. At the time, I had been working with organizations that served the homeless. I had found the intractable problem of family homelessness to be very compelling.

I called a local transitional housing program and asked if there would be a way for my family to volunteer. Was there a way we could contribute appropriately to these families? I knew there were confidentiality issues. Yet I was sure there was something they needed that we could provide.

The creative executive director on the other end of the phone saw the opportunity immediately. She knew I was well-meaning, fairly well-connected, and busy. What I was asking for did not fit any neatly-prescribed job description, yet she knew better than to turn down a good resource who could become a long-term supporter.

I asked if perhaps we could put on a party for the residents and families, something

appropriate to the season. We were too late. The holiday party was already spoken for.

“How about a birthday party?” I mused. “Most of the kids probably never get a real birthday party—clown and balloons and all.”

“Well, how would that work?” she asked with an open mind. “We wouldn’t want to exclude any of the kids or families.”

What we cooked up was a party for all the kids with birthdays in November. Everyone in the shelter was invited. Early one Saturday morning, my husband, two kids, and I, loaded with bags of food, streamers, and balloons, took on decorating the room, setting up the party, greeting everyone, serving the food, and introducing the clown. We all had the time of our lives.

Our son, then six years old, was in charge of serving second helpings of ice cream. He walked around the room with a half-dripping carton, quietly stopping at each place and offering more. For him, the most memorable moment was when he ran out of ice cream while serving “thirds” to a little boy about his own age. He came running up to me to ask what to do. “Mom, he wants more and I’m all out. What should I do?”

I handed him a new carton of ice cream and said, “Give him all he wants.” I remember watching as the little boy’s mother, sitting right beside him, glowed as her son finally became satiated with ice cream! My kids learned more in those few hours than any other classroom could have taught them. Plus, we had an extraordinary experience as a family.

Of course, by the time we had cleaned up the place and were out of there, my husband and I had made the list of eleven other families we were certain would agree to host the birthday party of the month at this shelter. We got their commitments, put the calendar together, and presented the plan to the executive director. How could she refuse? As it happens, one of the other mothers was involved in the Junior League. By the end of the year, the entire project had been adopted as an ongoing Junior League project and it continues to thrive today.

Now, let’s dissect the process a bit. First, I spoke to the executive director—someone who was highly entrepreneurial, with natural street-smarts, and with whom I had enough of a past relationship that she knew I was serious.

If instead, I had talked to the volunteer coordinator, assuming she was an old-reality volunteer coordinator, I most likely would have been met with the familiar response, “I’m sorry, we can’t let volunteers host parties. It violates the confidentiality of our residents. The jobs we have for volunteers are: playground attendant, dinner server, tutor, etc.” There is nothing wrong with any of those jobs. They just weren’t what we had in mind.

Just as with donors, today’s volunteers need to call the shots. They need to be able to tell you what they want to do, for as much time as they want to do it.

Here is a statistic to consider: *Giving and Volunteering in America* reports that 84% of all the households that contributed to charities in 1998 had at least one volunteer in that household.

Furthermore, the dollar amount of contributions from those households was two-and-a-half times higher than that of non-volunteer households.

So think again. If you have volunteers who are not giving to your organization, the odds are they are giving somewhere else, perhaps to several other organizations. In the new reality, money clearly follows involvement. Where else would people rather give than to the organizations with which they feel most connected? If you are not giving your volunteers an opportunity to contribute, most likely you have still got one foot stuck in the old reality.

Let's look at your trepidation. It is certainly true that some of the "guild ladies" and other hard working, hands-on volunteers might be thoroughly insulted that you would have the nerve to ask them for money. On the other hand, in my experience, if you take the time to ask your volunteers how they would feel about giving money, the majority will tell you they have been wondering what took you so long to ask. The majority will tell you they would be delighted to give.

After all, they are most likely among the three-quarters of Americans who are giving money somewhere. They are giving you their time and their emotional commitment—two gifts which, in today's world, may be more valuable than money. Yet your organization is holding back on asking them for money for fear of offending them.

## **RETHINKING YOUR DEFINITION OF VOLUNTEER**

Here is another example. A friend, age fifty, recently retired after selling his business for an eight-figure sum and began looking to get involved with a nonprofit.

"I want to be involved with kids but I don't want to tutor or be a mentor," he tells me. "I wouldn't want a kid to get that dependent on me having to show up at a set time every week. I have another idea. From time to time, I'd like to take kids on outings, out to games, out to dinner, to see special shows.

"I'd keep doing it faithfully. I'd set it up with the organization every time. I just wouldn't want to be confined to every Thursday night. I even know which organization I'd like to do this for." It was a religious youth organization he had never been involved with before. "But I can't just go in there and offer to do that," he reasoned. "They'd think I was crazy."

What new-reality organization would be silly enough to pass up this man? No question he will put his money where he puts his time. Yet the odds are that organization—the one he already feels connected to—does not have a job description on the shelf that quite fits this man's desired "job." Let's hope he hooks up with a creative volunteer coordinator or senior staff person.

In the new reality, volunteer programs will be operated hand-in-hand with fundraising programs. They will be in the same offices, or right next door. The donor/volunteer will have a contact person—a "Donor Services Representative"—the nonprofit equivalent of your personal shopper and customer services representative rolled into one. That person will help customize your volunteer experience and interface with the people inside the organization to be sure your kooky idea for a project will work for them.

Everyone interfacing with you, as the volunteer, will treat you as a respected member of the family with the potential to become a major donor. No wild idea will be summarily discarded for lack of a job description.

## **IN-KIND STARTER GIFTS**

Another way new-reality volunteers/donors present themselves to organizations is as donors of in-kind goods. These are tangible items as opposed to cash. Like those who volunteer their time, in-kind donors are testing the waters to see how they will be treated. It allows them to stay in the driver's seat as they are checking you out.

Make it easier for them by developing Wish Lists. Wish Lists are essential in the new reality. They tell the donors what you need. They should include everything from used curtains to computer laboratories, from pots and pans to endowed scholarships. Make sure these are things you really do need. Include no price tags. Circulate the Wish Lists everywhere. Post them on your Web site. Print them in your newsletter. Enclose them in your holiday mailing. People who are interested in your organization will read them.

Make it easy for in-kind donors to give. Offer to pick up those computers or books. Invite them out to see the sad state of your current computers. If someone happened to show a Wish List to my retired friend looking to hook up with a youth program, he would surely be forthcoming. "Oh," he might say, "New sports gear? I could help with that. Oh, used, high-quality women's business suits? My wife could contribute those."

With each in-kind contribution, he is making more of a connection with you. He is watching to see what happens after you get the sports gear. What kind of thank you does he get? His Donor Services Representative would know kids and sports were his hot buttons and, for sure, she would invite him out to see some of the equipment put to use. She would know to treat it as one more piece of bonding in the lifelong relationship.

That sports equipment will wear out. Perhaps he would like to fund it again next year. Maybe he has a buddy in the sports equipment business. His Donor Services Representative would know that, for him, this one in-kind donation means much more than it might appear to mean. He is carving out his own customized path into the inner sanctum of the organization.

In the old reality, we were on a fishing expedition for just the size and shape of volunteers we needed. When it came to volunteer programs, the organization called the shots. In the new reality, the volunteer/donor is the boss. Our job is to listen and keep listening to hear their preferences. Our job is to engage them in the creative process of tailoring a project to their interests. We know they are building a relationship with us. We know they are a wonderful investment.

## **CUSTOMIZATION TAKES TIME**

By now, you may be thinking you can't afford this new-reality approach to individual donors/volunteers. You may be concerned it will require more time and one-on-one attention than your current part-time volunteer coordinator can provide.

Consider this. I once worked as the sole development person in a super fast-paced start-up program that desperately needed to raise money. I did this fifteen hours a day, six or seven days a week for a couple of years. We were creating and building a new-reality fundraising program for an exceptional organization. Each time I had to drop everything to take that long, slow call from a volunteer with a good idea, I would kick myself. I knew it meant I would be adding precisely that much extra time to the end of my day.

One day, one of those volunteers with a crazy idea asked if he could come observe the development office in action. He thought he had an idea about how to make our fundraising effort more efficient. “Sure,” I thought cynically, “this is just what I need—to be living under the microscope of some business guy who’s sure my office could be run more like a business.”

He wouldn’t take no for an answer. He hung around for nearly a week. At the end of the week, he presented me his “findings.” “You are incredibly efficient,” he said. “Between talking on the phone and inputting every detail into the computer, it’s a wonder you do all you do. In fact, I can see that the only thing limiting you is hours in the day. If there were more people like you here doing more of the same, we’d be raising many times more money.”

“What a surprise,” I thought. “A no-brainer.” Little did I know what this unique volunteer had in mind. He and I both knew I would be leaving that organization after we had set up our fundraising system. He could see the huge head of steam we were building up in the form of happy donors. As I was leaving, he went to the board and offered to personally fund three additional positions in the development office, each for three years.

Talk about designing your own way of participating! Now, how would you categorize that wonderful man—as a volunteer, a donor, an advocate? In the new reality, these lines will completely blur. Call them friends, advocates, board members, call them what you will. Just know that they will be defining the game. If you are lucky enough to capture their attention and can comfortably follow their interests, staying closely at their side, these “volunteers” will become lifelong supporters.