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25 Tips for Optimizing
Online Communication with Volunteers

Drowning in a sea of online messages and cell phone texts? So are your volunteers.

And it's only getting worse. Online communication is no longer limited to your e-mail in-box. Group conversations may need your response on Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media sites. Maybe you exchange notes on an online shared workspace. Personal communication is becoming so…personal! Some volunteers may prefer texting, other still like e-mail, while a whole host of them just say "Facebook me."

Messages come to us on several different devices. Some volunteers will most often communicate by smart phone, which strips out formatting and other visuals you painstakingly included. Despite the trend to micro messaging, most organization work still requires the longer format of an e-mail or online post.

So how can you keep up? More important, how can you make sure your messages are getting through to volunteers and eliciting the action you need?

Here are 25 tips to help you cope.

General Issues

1. Most of the time we appreciate how much better e-mail messages are than postal mail or faxes, but they do have a big downside: they are sent constantly (often to many more recipients than necessary) and **senders expect an immediate reply**. You do not have to respond *instantly*, but many feel that cyber-etiquette requires some sort of reply within *72 hours*. Even if it's "thanks for your e-mail and I promise to give you an answer by _____." Be aware that volunteers who cannot get reasonably prompt answers to e-mails will feel neglected and unappreciated.

2. Of, course, the issue of not getting fast answers back *from* volunteers is another story! Do not get angry at silence. **Train everyone** how to work with you via e-mail. Many of the tips here will help. Recognize that most people are overwhelmed by the amount of electronic messages they receive and make your communications ones they will *want* to open. Make sure they know exactly *how to respond*.

3. The **telephone** still works! One way to show volunteers that you are serious about having two-way e-mail exchanges is to prove it. Re-send e-mails that did not elicit a response the first time. Introduce the second try with: "Just wanted to be sure this reached you because we really need your answer by _____." And if that doesn't work, pick up the phone and call.

4. Keep **updating everyone's e-mail addresses**! These change often and you cannot assume an incorrectly addressed message will bounce back to let you know it didn't get through. It's not enough to ask once for an e-mail address on the volunteer's application form. At least annually, make sure you verify that the address on file is still the right one.

5. Let volunteers know **your preferred way of receiving e-mail**. If that means you want it sent to your organizational e-mail address rather than via Facebook, say so. If someone mistakenly sends you a message via a social media platform, make sure your response comes from your preferred e-mail address, with a note saying that you prefer to be contacted this way.

6. **Check your junk/spam e-mail regularly** to be sure you do not miss messages from volunteers with unrecognized e-mail addresses. Then set your junk/spam filter to allow messages from those sites. Request, in turn, that volunteers allow messages from you to reach them.

7. Consider designating **one or more e-mail addresses** for categories of messages you receive often. Your direct e-mail address may be *yourname@hometownagency.org*. It might be useful to set up a specific e-mail address for things like contacts from new applicants (*volnew@hometownagency.org)* or receiving monthly electronic reports from volunteers (*volreport@hometownagency.org*). There are a few reasons this might be sensible:

   - It creates a permanent address for ongoing communication, rather than tying it to your name.
   - You can choose to send everything into your single mailbox anyway, or you can segregate the messages and tend to them at different times.
   - You could redirect one or more such addresses to anyone helping you to respond to things like applications or reports (see the next tip!).

8. **Recruit "Cyber Deputy" volunteers** to help you deal with things like e-mailed volunteer reports, basic requests for information, and monitoring online forums or RSS feeds to which you subscribe. Cyber deputies can also coach you in understanding and using social media, particularly if you recruit volunteers of different ages who are familiar with and active on the site(s) most popular in their circle of friends and colleagues.

9. **Don't drown volunteers in e-mail**. Rather than sending messages as soon as you think of something you want to say, take the time to choose the appropriate recipients and type of communiqué. There are at least three categories of e-mails to consider: individual exchanges with one volunteer at a time; blast e-mails that go to every volunteer; and e-mails sent collectively to selected volunteers working together on a committee or project. Note that many volunteers will be on all three of these lists, so it's easy to overwhelm them. That's why subject bars are so critical (see the tips about those, starting with #14 below).

10. Blast e-mails can be regular communiqués sent at set intervals, such as an **e-newsletter** that always arrives the first week of the month. This can be as long as you want or need it to be because everyone expects it to contain a variety of news and announcements. Some hints:

    - Design it nicely and keep the look consistent so it's recognizable. Don't make it look like just another e-mail. There are commercial programs such as Constant Contact or Mail Chimp that give you templates in which to drop your text and make it look great. Recruit a volunteer who is skilled in graphics and knows this type of software to help you.
    - Put an index to the issue at the top so people can click to whatever sections they most want to read.
    - Consider organizing the e-newsletter by FYI and Need Your Action so that readers can prioritize what to attend to first if they are in a rush.
    - Use photos and other visually interesting elements.
    - Include links to more detail on every subject.
    - Some people cannot read messages sent in HTML and will only see things as text. You might be able to make a PDF file of the e-newsletter and send it as an attachment to a transmittal e-mail. Or you can post the entire e-newsletter online and simply give a link to it.

11. Blast e-mails also work as **alerts** or **calls to action**, sent only when you need to notify people of something requiring an immediate response. Again, you should have a consistent "look" to this sort of message that sets it apart from other e-mails, but the key is to use it only occasionally. It works best when people trust you to alert them only for something truly important.

12. For individual and small group communication, it's much better to **send several shorter e-mails** – each on a specific subject – than to combine lots of points into one long message. Your goal is to allow recipients to deal with the content of each e-mail and file it away. Not to mention how much easier it will make your life if return messages are clearly about a specific topic.

13. As a substitute for working via e-mail, consider organizing **an online discussion group**, such as Google Groups (http://groups.google.com/), for specific initiatives or committees. While there may be many posts to get work done, setting the "digest" option consolidates the exchanges each day and may alleviate the feeling of an inundated email box.

14. **Train everyone** to pay attention to the subject bar (both in receiving and sending messages) and make sure it communicates what each e-mail contains. This is your *most important tool* to ensure successful e-mail control.

15. If there is something critical in the message, include the word **"important" or "urgent"** in the subject line, but do so sparingly. If every e-mail message from you says urgent, recipients will not take your messages seriously. Don't cry wolf!

16. First, decide on **an acronym** for your organization and use it consistently as the first item in every subject bar. This will allow volunteers to identify any e-mail from you event when rapidly scanning a very full e-mail box, plus it becomes easy to group e-mails from you. So, "Hometown Agency Volunteer Project" might become "HAVP." Or it might be more useful for you to consistently refer to a special committee or activity in the subject bar. E-mails regarding the "Strategic Planning Team" would therefore always start with "SPT."

17. Then, follow the acronym with something that alerts volunteers about the **contents of the e-mail**. Single words such as "hello" or "information" communicate nothing. Help volunteers distinguish important messages needing action from FYI information. Some examples:

    HAVP INFO: <subject><date>

    SPT: Agenda for Wednesday's meeting

    HAVP: RESPONSE NEEDED A.S.A.P.!
       (*Again, be sure it is* really *urgent!*)

    SPT: Please read attached report from Executive Director

18. Agree together to **use certain terms consistently** in subject bars. In other words, decide that you will always say "Treasurer's Report" and not later use "Financials" or "Cash Flow" to refer to the same document you send every month. This helps everyone to recognize and save e-mails in similarly-named folders.

19. When several people are responding to the same information or working together to reach a decision, help them to **track the sequence of responses** in the subject bar. Whether or not you predetermine the order in which people will respond, it works like this:

    - First person (A) sends a message requiring a response to 3 different people (B, C and D). This first e-mail's subject bar is:

      HAVP: Need your ideas for conference speakers

    - B responds, adding his/her name to the end of the subject bar:

      HAVP: Need your ideas for conference speakers – RESPONSE, B

- If C and D respond at the same time, everyone will see 4 messages in their inbox, the original plus the 3 responses clearly showing whether it came from B, C or D. It's possible to follow a set sequence in responding by allowing B to answer first, followed by C and then D. Each appends his or her name or initials to the subject bar, and possibly a date, too. There will still be 4 messages in total, but the progression will be very clear. The final subject bar for D's last reply will look like this:

  HAVP: Need your ideas for conference speakers – RESPONSE, B; C; D

You can see how this leads to other variations of people responding to each other's thoughts, but always showing where the response fits in the sequence.

20. If more exchange is needed, **identify the "round"** so people can keep track. Continuing the example above, A, who initiated the chain of e-mails, can modify the subject heading of his/her second e-mail like this:

    HAVP: Ideas for conference speakers, Round 2

And the process continues through as many rounds as needed.

21. *Change the subject bar* when the contents of the e-mail no longer refers to what was in the heading 3 weeks ago! It's common for people in an ongoing cyber conversation to just keep hitting "reply" without noticing that the subject bar of the message still says "Christmas party planning" even though it is now April.

Other Hints

22. The sort of small group discussion by e-mail just described is really a temporary online discussion form or "listserv." Teach people to **use the "Reply All" option** so that committees can communicate together easily.

23. Conversely, teach people **when NOT to use "Reply All."** There are no hard and fast rules on this, but sometimes it's helpful to say something in your message such as, "I am sending this to the whole team as a heads up, but after this Alicia and Michael can exchange e-mails without copying the rest of us."

24. If an e-mail includes **a deadline or a request** for something specific, put this information at the *beginning* of the message to be sure it is seen. Then go on to explain it. If you bury deadlines at the end of your messages, don't be surprised if they get missed.

25. Everyone appreciates **humor.** You'll be amazed at how many more people will open your messages if they know you often include a funny quote, cartoon, or interesting photograph (these are available all over the Web at no or low cost). You can even lead into it with a line such as "Here's your well-earned smile for today." Then it becomes a subtle way to recognize hard-working volunteers, too.