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FROM  
VOLUNTEERS TO

# Super-Volunteers

I NEED **HELP!** DIRECTIONS? MAPS? PROGRAMS?

While the event staff is working hard behind the scenes, your festival guests will receive “help” from the mouths and hands of front line volunteers. Ironically, the public face of your event is the very group of people who spend the shortest amount of time each year with your operation.

How do you ensure that your volunteer program is properly positioned to support your event while simultaneously developing volunteers who can meet super human expectations?

The following article and questionnaire provides the opportunity for an internal assessment of your event volunteer management system. Event managers typically have solid measurements for success in publicity, sponsorship and ticket sales; however, assessing volunteer management programs may seem less tangible.

The success of a good volunteer program involves the same key elements of managing full time employees. We will explore

the importance of training, defining job responsibilities, risk controls, scheduling, communications and evaluations...all with consideration to tremendous generational differences that add a complicated dimension to volunteer management in 2015.

## 1. Proper Volunteer Training

- **Scenario:** A new event volunteer is trying to assist event participants but gives incorrect directions.
- **Scenario:** A volunteer is unclear on his duties. He would like to check with a team leader but has not been introduced to anyone who appears to be in charge.
- **Scenario:** A volunteer team leader is asked about the title event sponsor by a guest. The volunteer has no idea what service the title sponsor provides.

These situations are strong indications of poor preparation by the volunteer manager and supporting team leaders.

Good training sets the stage for volunteer confidence, competence and camara-

derie. This training should be comparable to an employee job orientation with a lot of enthusiasm. Volunteer training is time for newcomers to be instructed on job specifics and to be introduced to their team. Team leaders and veteran volunteers have the opportunity to share their experience and welcome newcomers.

Generation X and Y volunteers (Mid-40s to teens) will seek training that gives them “event insider” status and a sense of job ownership. The more mature volunteers of the Boomer and Veteran generations will look for well-organized management and clear directions.

The event staff has the opportunity to create a well-orchestrated team atmosphere with a motivational training program.

## 2. Realistic Job Descriptions

- **Scenario:** The majority of volunteers are only interested in attending the event concert at no cost. They work as little as possible and leave as soon as they’ve “earned” their tickets.

- **Scenario:** A shy, reserved volunteer is assigned to work in a busy parking lot directing traffic.
- **Scenario:** A fair skinned young volunteer is left alone at a remote entrance gate with no shade, sunscreen, break or water for four hours in the boiling sun.

The top responsibility of the volunteer manager is to recruit volunteers who are truly helpful, dependable and productive. Unfortunately, many volunteer programs operate under the short-term aim of recruiting the most volunteers possible simply to fill slots. The pursuit of sheer numbers without an emphasis on position specifics (e.g. skills, restrictions, schedules) tends to be poor use of organizational resources. Quality is key. Remember, your volunteers are people, not cattle. Not all of your volunteers will show the same ability to carry out their assigned tasks. Recruiting the right people for the right positions on the right days is critical.

The best approach is to recruit volunteers who match your organizational needs in order to form a long mutually beneficial relationship. It is critical to clearly define and communicate position requirements (e.g. technical skills, stamina/strength) and expectations (e.g. friendly, mobile, flexible, works well in high-stress situations) if you expect to recruit the appropriate people to advance your mission.

Some volunteers will be patient with "seat warmer" positions, but younger volunteers will be more interested in positions that make an impact and help people directly. Younger volunteers also are most likely to expect good use of their time and talents. Talented volunteer managers will match a volunteer's skills, interests, capabilities and availability with specific event needs for the most effective utilization of organizational resources.

### 3. Adequate Risk Controls

- **Scenario:** A volunteer shows up for duty with an infant and a small pet dog. The dog bites a child at the event.
- **Scenario:** A volunteer who is wearing sandals while moving chairs for a volunteer training, stubs her toe ripping off the toenail and part of the toe bed. She requires immediate surgery.
- **Scenario:** Pregnant volunteer is handing out brochures. She trips over a misplaced box of brochures, falls down a short flight of stairs and goes into labor.
- **Scenario:** Festival childcare provider is discovered to be a registered pedophile. Front page news that the festival did not screen its childcare providers.
- **Scenario:** Well-meaning volunteer invites event guests who can't find a hotel

to stay at his house. Event guests steal money and small electronics.

- **Scenario:** Volunteer gets badly injured during an event. The event organization has insurance but it does not cover volunteers, only staff. Volunteer sues the title sponsor of the event.
- **Scenario:** Volunteer driver is hit while driving an event car. The driver of the second car is uninsured and to make matters worse the volunteer's driver license is expired.

The scenarios, described above, are all based on real events. In every instance proper preventive measures were not taken. The volunteer was not given a dress code specifying closed toe shoes. Volunteers were not screened in advance for sensitive positions. Volunteers were told to assist guests in finding accommodations. Driver licenses were not checked during training.

Risk control is like an umbrella in the rain. The umbrella prevents you from getting wet, cold and potentially sick. Proper risk control can protect your organization, sponsors and affiliates from unnecessary liability.

Job perils, site concerns and basic security precautions are important risk elements to address starting in the registration process and on the volunteer waiver. Risk concerns should be reinforced in the volunteer handbook and training. Event managers still need to have insurance for the worst case scenario. All event volunteers are not covered by personal homeowners and motor vehicle insurance.

### 4. Volunteer Management Technology

- **Scenario:** The volunteer provides contact information online but is not able to select her own jobs or shifts. She voices frustration to friends about the wasted time making multiple calls to coordinate with the volunteer manager.
- **Scenario:** The volunteer manager spends weeks trying to manually match volunteers to jobs and shift times. Later the volunteer manager can't get reports to sort correctly and stays up all night for a week trying to resolve the challenge.
- **Scenario:** The volunteer manager does not require e-mail or cell phone contact information for all volunteers. Gas line blows up under volunteer parking garage. She is unable to communicate timely schedule changes or emergency information with event volunteers.

Most events require X and Y generation volunteers who are relatively young, energetic, mobile and technically savvy.

In our busy lives, online registration is an expectation for the X and Y gener-

ations. Online registration allows 24/7 access for the volunteer who wants to manage their own volunteer account by registering for preferred jobs and shifts.

Online volunteer registration also answers the challenge of fewer staff and tight budgets. These registration tools decrease administrative work by 50-75% allowing volunteer managers to substantially increase their productivity while also substantially reducing mail and phone costs.

### 5. Evaluation

- **Scenario:** High no show rate. Trouble recruiting new volunteers.
- **Scenario:** High no return rate. Volunteers come once and don't return the next year.

The evaluation of your volunteer program should include feedback from leaders and frontline volunteers.

Wrap up sessions should take place while the event recollections are still fresh in everyone's minds. This objective discussion should include key staff and volunteer leaders. The volunteer operations and logistics wrap up is a review of what went right, what can be improved and recommendations.

Your front line volunteers may participate in simple onsite surveys for immediate input. Anonymous electronic surveys can provide valuable feedback from your team leaders and your front line volunteers. Electronic surveys can be automatically set up to tabulate results.

### Conclusion

You have considered the fundamentals of your volunteer management program. Now, consider the number of ✓s, ?s, Xs, and !s on your checklist. Have you defined key volunteer management policies and procedures? Do you have opportunities to reduce and eliminate problem or potential risk areas? Did you identify tools for achieving continuous improvement? Are there items for corrective action? Can you highlight areas of good practice? Volunteers can be your greatest event assets. Prepare to get the best return on your volunteer investment!

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