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## Volunteer recognition: matching motivations to rewards

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### What is recognition?

Recognition is acknowledging the efforts of volunteers. It can take on many forms from formal galas to a simple timely thank-you. It shows appreciation for the work that volunteers do for your organization and provides volunteers with a sense of belonging and contribution. One of the best forms of recognition is to provide a solid volunteer program. This communicates to volunteers that they are an important and integral part of the organization.

### Why do people volunteer?

Volunteers come to your organization for many reasons. For as many volunteers as you have in your programs, you also have as many reasons motivating volunteers for their involvement. The Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (2000) reported that volunteers become involved in organizations because:

- 30% were asked by someone in the organization
- 16% approached the organization themselves
- 15% were a member of the organization
- 12% had a child or spouse involved in the organization
- 9% were asked by a friend or relative outside of the organization

The Canada Survey also reported the following reasons for volunteering:

- 95% of volunteers believed in the cause supported by the organization
- 81% of volunteers were involved to use their skills and experience
- 69% were motivated to volunteer because they were personally affected by the cause the organization supports
- 57% saw volunteer involvement as a way to explore their own strengths
- 30% of people became involved because of a friend's involvement indicating a social motivation
- 23% of volunteers were motivated to be involved to improve their job opportunities

Once we have people involved in our organization, it is important to keep them involved. **The key to keeping volunteers engaged in your organization is to determine what motivates them and then to recognize them based on their motivations.**

By linking motivations to recognition, you are acknowledging the reasons why volunteers are involved in your organization and placing value on that involvement in a meaningful way to the volunteer.

## Why is recognition important to your volunteer program?

Recognition is important to your volunteer program because:

**It contributes to morale.** Demonstrating concern for your volunteers, ensuring that the tasks and jobs they are assigned meet their needs, and recognizing their contribution, will only increase a volunteer's satisfaction and willingness to further participate in your organization.

**It contributes to productivity.** If volunteers are given meaningful tasks and rewarded and recognized appropriately for these, they will have a sense of belonging and a feeling of accomplishment. This in turn will result in productivity.

**It contributes to retention.** As a manager of volunteers, a lot of time, effort and energy go into recruiting volunteers into your organization. It is to your benefit to ensure that these volunteers continue on. Volunteers are more likely to stay involved with your organization if they feel appreciated for the work they do and feel connected to your organization.

## How do you make recognition meaningful to your volunteers?

Once you have determined what motivates your volunteers, your job is to find meaningful ways to appropriately recognize them. Examples of this may be:

Motivation	Recognition or Support
To contribute to a particular cause...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate how involvement is contributing to a cause</li> <li>• Sharing stories of how contributions are making a difference</li> </ul>
To utilize skills & experiences...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure proper placement of volunteer</li> <li>• Ensure the best use of volunteers skills, experiences and time are considered</li> </ul>
To socialize with others.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide recognition opportunities that have a social component.</li> <li>• Ensure volunteer is in a team setting and not working in isolation</li> </ul>
To gain new skills or improve job opportunities.....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training or skill improvement opportunities</li> <li>• Provide references</li> <li>• Job coaching or mentoring opportunities</li> </ul>

### Recognition programs that typically work are those which:

- have rewards that are based on the individual volunteers as a unique person and which addresses their individual needs or motivation
- are based on individual jobs or tasks
- are consistent in their delivery, ensuring a sense of trust that effort will receive the proper recognition
- recognize longevity and special contributions
- have rewards that can be shared by a team of volunteers or the entire organization

## What are the methods of recognition and when should they be used?

There are two types of recognition methods that should be built into your volunteer program:

**Spontaneous recognition:** Spontaneous recognition is best used to recognize a volunteer's involvement and contribution immediately and "in the moment". It does not generally require a lot of planning or coordination. What is important is to ensure that the recognition is timely, match the needs or motivations of the volunteers, and match the particular task or job.

**Organized recognition:** Organized recognition is a more formalized method of recognizing a volunteer's involvement and contribution. It is usually less timely, as it involves larger, organized events. It demonstrates that volunteer contributions are valued by the organization. When providing organized recognition, it is important to ensure that the recognition method and reward have clearly defined objectives and criteria. These should be communicated to the volunteers so they can work to achieve them. To ensure that you are using meaningful rewards, seek input from volunteers about what they value and offer recognition accordingly.

## Honor diversity

Many people enjoy public recognition, while others prefer quiet, or no, recognition. Diverse personalities, values and cultures all influence appropriate recognition. Be sure to learn more about—and to respect—others' choices.

*For volunteer recognition ideas, please consult the information found in additional resources.*

## Resources

Graff, L. (2005). *Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement*. Dundas, ON: Linda Graff and Associates Inc.

McCurley, S. & Lynch, R. (2005). *Keeping Volunteers: A Guide to Retention*. Philadelphia, PA: Fat Cat Productions.

McCurley, S. & Lynch, R. (1996). *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing All the Resources of the Community*. Downer's Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing.

Vineyard, S. (2001). *Recognizing Volunteers: The Art, the Science, and Gazillion Ideas!* Downer's Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing.

## Acknowledgement

This article was written by Cheryl Humphrey-Pratt; 2006

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