



HIDDEN help

Volunteers are the greatest resource many charities have at their disposal, but too few are capitalising enough on this growing force. **Nicola Davis**, managing director of N² Consulting, implores charities to do more

It isn't as if the need doesn't exist. The global recession has left everyone feeling the pinch, donations are slowing and already limited funding is stretched to capacity. Conversely, however, volunteering is a growing market. More and more people from a variety of backgrounds, skills and generations are being turned on to the benefits of giving their time and skills for free.

The problem up to now is that many charities haven't truly understood the value of what the volunteering opportunity means in terms of hard cash and resources to their

business. Sure, they appreciate their army of volunteers and know they would struggle to deliver important services without them, but they need to go beyond that – and view volunteers as a critical resource that will enable them to survive and prosper.

A new approach

Next, they need to take an 'account management' approach. This means asking: 'What do we need our volunteers to do to sustain and grow the organisation?' 'How many willing people are out there and how do we reach them?' 'What are their skill sets?' 'What do they want from the experience?' This should be swiftly followed by a plan to manage the process

of recruiting the right people and retaining them, giving each person such a fulfilling variety of roles that they never want to leave.

Sounds radical? It's a sophisticated way of managing people, but that should be no surprise – after all, we're dealing with people who are not staff or motivated by money, but are joining us for more complex, mature reasons involving goodwill and free will.

Designing and implementing a new way of working will demand some big cultural and management changes for many charities, and will be a rapid learning curve. It's a tough proposition, but delay and you could decrease your chances of survival in the tough current climate.



sure your objectives are tangible and specific, and measure success through key performance indicators.

UNDERSTAND THE OPPORTUNITY Build a volunteer target-and-cost model that shows the different groups of volunteers out there, the numbers available, and in what way they can contribute to the charity – either via extending services, improving internal operations or helping with campaigns or events. Translate the opportunity into hard facts and figures, including how much you need to invest in your infrastructure and resources to realise the potential. And be realistic – if there is only a £50K opportunity in volunteering, don't invest £500K in changing your infrastructure.

CONVERT OPPORTUNITY INTO RESOURCES There is no point in having a fantastic idea for your 'new' volunteering approach, without the internal processes, support and customer services to enable it to happen. Make sure you have excellent recruitment processes and resources in place and aim for a 100 per cent conversion rate (for suitable candidates). That means that when a volunteer approaches your organisation you can find them a great opportunity that benefits the organisation, inspires the volunteer and stops them taking their time to another organisation. The most important point though is to ensure that volunteering has a place at the 'top table' and that accountability for delivery and success sits firmly at director/ chief executive level.

ONCE YOU HAVE THE VOLUNTEERS, KEEP THEM Aim to get your retention rate as high as possible – recruiting new volunteers is far more costly than keeping existing ones. Develop best practice management and support processes to manage these people, also bear in mind that volunteers will have different needs, so carefully consider each group's different and evolving requirements and devise a tailored 'career path' for each to ensure they get a satisfying mix of experiences that ensure they stay with you.

IMPLEMENT A PLANNING AND REVIEW PROCESS In the early days, your core team will be in proud possession of their shiny new volunteering strategy. Don't then park it and leave it! Your volunteering strategy should be a living, breathing document that is reviewed at least once a year to ensure trends in volunteering and society

are translated back into opportunities for the organisation. Volunteering is a fluid market and your strategy needs to remain flexible. Reviewing it regularly also helps to refocus people and keeps volunteering firmly on the management agenda.

DEVELOP CORPORATE PARTNERSHIPS Volunteering is a fantastic opportunity for the corporate and not-for-profit sectors to work together beneficially. Charities can benefit from employee volunteering schemes and corporate funding, while the corporate sector can benefit from experiencing a completely different working environment, leading to increased motivation, enhanced skills and cultural diversity. Understand the opportunities out there, make a plan for how you might create partnerships with like-minded businesses and build this into your overall strategy.

DEVELOP A VOLUNTEERING BRAND Developing an inspiring, innovative and relevant volunteering brand is critical to differentiating your organisation in the marketplace and creating the high level of buy-in required from your employees and

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supporters. Tune in to the market to understand what volunteers really want and develop a 'brand within your brand' that will help you lead the way in the field. Use the brand to help change the existing perceptions people may have about you and to attract new groups of volunteers. Develop a marketing strategy. Segment the market to understand the different types of volunteers and their requirements, and target specific segments with tailored promotional campaigns.

A successful volunteering brand will create sparkle and enthusiasm around the entire organisation. ■

Tips for success

At N² we have helped many of our clients start from scratch in this area and only months later they are seeing real results. To get you started, I offer my eight top tips that will act as critical success factors:

REDEFINE 'VOLUNTEERING' Encourage and incentivise people to think innovatively about the new volunteering landscape, and talk to people across the organisation (including existing volunteers and supporters) to understand the external perception of your organisation – why do volunteers join you/stay/leave? How do they perceive your charity?

DEVELOP A VOLUNTEERING STRATEGY Volunteering is normally managed in a 'soft' way, with an emphasis on how people are treated and managed at a tactical, rather than strategic, level. Start afresh with a robust strategy that has buy-in at board level that directly contributes to your wider organisational aims. Make

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For information on N² Consulting, visit www.n2-consulting.com or email the author at nik@n2-consulting.com. UK Workforce Hub has advice on managing volunteers at www.ukworkforcehub.org.uk