



The Role of Volunteers in Fundraising

Volunteers can be a key to fundraising success. They are not just unpaid help. They set the tone and expectations of a fundraising campaign in ways that professionals cannot. However, though unpaid, volunteers are not costless. They require a commitment from the top of the organization. They require significant organizational time, effort and resources in order to be effective.

Volunteer fundraisers help with access and signaling. They know people you do not. They have access to people you may not. People who do not trust you, may trust them and be persuaded by them. A volunteer's involvement in a fundraising campaign signals something about the value of your organization, and talking about their involvement will have ripple effects in the community: www.afpnet.org/ResourceCenter/ArticleDetail.cfm?ItemNumber=22464.

Most fundraising volunteers also donate their own money to the campaign (not just their time and talent). Their donations signal to their peers (as well as the more affluent) what is an appropriate gift – in a more immediate and cognizable way than anything that a professional fundraiser can say. Even though a small percentage of donors generate most of the donations, the level of giving of the rest of the donors – including the visible volunteers – can set expectations for the more substantial givers.

“People give to people, not causes.” So says one consultant, when stressing the power of a personal solicitation by a volunteer fundraiser – especially in the context of maximizing leadership gifts, in capital campaigns. Some recommend that a volunteer seek gifts at his or her own level of giving. (Matching asker and prospect is key.) *Some suggest that the best solicitation is from a personal friend.* For many of the largest gifts, a wealthy volunteer fundraiser can make an effective “ask” of a friend that a professional simply cannot: <http://www.cdsfunds.com/category/volunteers>.

Volunteers are often people who have benefitted from the organization. Their involvement is itself a testimonial. What they say as part of a donation request is likely to be more compelling and emotionally resonant (even if less polished) than a professional's pitch.

Managing volunteer fundraisers. Give volunteers clear expectations. Build a tight interconnected network. Don't overwhelm volunteers, rather give them focused tasks. Train and equip them well. This is as important as training your fundraising professionals. Keep the volunteers' eyes on campaign goals. Keep volunteers above the details that staff can do better – your volunteer fundraisers should focus on securing financial pledges and commitments of time from others. Make them look good. And of course thank them. For a much expanded discussion of these issues, see www.cdsfunds.com/leading_leaders_effective_volunteer_management.html. See also a study on best management practices for retention of volunteers: www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411005_volunteermanagement.pdf by the Urban Institute, as well as http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the_new_volunteer_workforce.

Much like paid staff, volunteers need to be offered milestones, check-ups, and sometimes even pep talks. Time is always of the essence, and unlike money, time is a precious *non-renewable* resource. A premium volunteer especially needs to be managed. Often, they are sought by multiple institutions to be a lead volunteer. If this volunteer is spread thin, staff needs to be strategic about its requests. Determine who on staff has a knack for working with volunteers.

Commitment from the top. The leaders of your organization must be involved in your fundraising campaign – from the President of a University or Chair of a Board of Directors on down – even if in different capacities than the rank and file. Otherwise, if their actions and words demonstrate that they view this as someone else's responsibility it sends several disastrous messages to staff, volunteers, and prospective donors: their efforts aren't that important, they aren't that important, and their donations aren't that important. See <http://www.raise-funds.com/1999/how-to-recruit-your-volunteer-fund-raising-team/>.

Everyone knows the importance of valuing volunteers and thanking them – even if most don't do it. Because almost no one likes to ask others for money, one of the few ways for leadership to acknowledge the value of volunteer fundraisers is to be among those participating in the asking.

Volunteers can be the difference between good and great fundraising campaigns. Certainly paid staff bring discipline, vital structure, and daily effort to raising money. But volunteers, working with strong staff, can bring sparkle and immeasurable momentum to any fundraising effort. Volunteers are the people who *get to, want to, and choose to* give their time, talent, and, in the best cases, their treasure too.