

Oh, By the Way!

The Four Words that Volunteers Hate to Hear

Thomas W. McKee

Lauren was recruited to work as a helper for her daughters' girl's club. As a parent she felt obligated and really wanted to help.

"What can I do? I would be happy to be a helper," were her responses. She was eager and felt that she would be happy to bake cookies, drive, stuff envelopes, attend activities and anything else, as long as it was behind the scenes stuff. That is Lauren. The leaders said, "Great. We are excited to have Sabrina and Savanna in our club, and we would love to have you volunteer to help." Lauren went to the first meeting and said, "What do you want me to do?" The leader handed her a huge manual and said, "**Oh, by the way**, we ask all volunteer leaders to read this." Lauren took it home and started to read it when the phone rang. The leader said, "**Oh, by the way**, we are giving a test on the manual. We want all our leaders to know the philosophy and what we expect from our volunteers." Lauren said, "I'm happy to read the manual" --she was being polite, "but I'm more the behind the scenes type of person. Can I be a helper?" The leader then said, "Well, we really want the parents to be leaders. **Oh, by the way**, we are having an eight-hour training session next Saturday and want all our leaders to attend."

Lauren is conscientious and wanted to be a support. After all, her girls were taking part, and she felt that she should help. Lauren had a big decision to make, and it was troubling her. Should she quit, feeling guilty that she had not kept her commitment, or should she continue, hating every minute of it and feeling duped by the continuous "**Oh, by the ways!**"

Classic **Oh, By the Ways**:

- Oh, by the way, all volunteers need to be fingerprinted.
- Oh, by the way, all volunteers pay dues to the national organization. Dues are \$150 a year.
- Oh, by the way, each year each board member calls 10 donors to ask for end of the year contributions.
- Oh, by the way, all volunteers attend our annual planning retreat.
- Oh, by the way, all volunteers spend at least 12 hours just before the 4th of July working in the fireworks booth.

The classic come back for the volunteer is, "Oh, by the way, I quit! You deceived me."

Who is wrong here?

What is wrong with this picture? The problem is not Lauren. The problem is not even with the demands—there's nothing wrong with asking volunteers to be fingerprinted or with asking volunteers to attend our annual planning retreat. The problem is the volunteer organization that follows the "Oh, by the way" recruiting method.

But wait a minute. I thought that an important recruiting principle was not overwhelming the volunteer at first. Many volunteer recruiters find that if they ease the volunteer into the job, they have better results. If they told the volunteer how many hours, some of the unpleasant tasks, and the level of commitment they expect, they wouldn't get anyone. After all, when people begin to volunteer, they begin to get excited about the organization and want to do more.

So the reasoning goes—but that reasoning is wrong.

The "Oh, by the way" approach has never been a successful strategy for managing volunteers, but it is especially ineffective for the 21st Century volunteer. Today's volunteers are too savvy.

FOUR RULES OF ALL CARDS ON THE TABLE:

The 21st century volunteer wants you to be up front and follow these four rules:

Develop a list of volunteer positions: Develop a form with a statement asking for volunteers and a checklist of what you need. Be sure to add an "other" to your list in which people can volunteer their unique talents.

Be flexible: The 21st century volunteer is eager to volunteer—according to their schedule, not yours. You might need someone who needs to be committed every week. But do you need them so much that you're willing to turn down someone who can be only committed once a month? No. Be flexible. This doesn't mean bi-passing training or the vital application process either. But you might be able to have two levels of volunteers. Those who work hands-on. If it is a youth organization, these workers need screening and training. Then at a second level there are those who might just want to bake cookies. Do they really need an eight-hour training?

Develop position charters for each position: A position charter outlines the position, the roles and responsibilities and commitment expected. See a sample of the volunteer position charter at <http://www.volunteerpowers.com/resources/charter.asp>

Interview each potential volunteer individually: You can clarify your expectations and their concerns when you interview each volunteer and go over the position charter.

When I was in graduate school, our oldest son was in first grade. My wife Susie was working full-time as a high school English teacher while I was taking a full load of courses. We got a note from our son Thom's teacher asking for mothers to volunteer as room-mothers. Susie and I discussed it. Looking at the schedule we knew she could not be available at the times they needed help, but I could. So I filled out the form by crossing out the words "room mother" and wrote in "room father." I got a call from Thom's teacher saying that they would love to have me help. However, at the first meeting the women were talking about how they would make cookies and arrange for holiday goodies for the school. I kept thinking, "This is not what I signed up for." I felt out of place, even though the women were gracious and tried to find a place for me.

When I got home, I called Thom's teacher and told her I would love to volunteer to help in the classroom, attend field trips, and perhaps even bring my guitar to the class and lead the group in a singing and story time—that is something I could do. The teacher quickly changed the program and classified me as the room father. I had a great year volunteering for the first grade because the school was willing to let me work according to my interest and our busy schedule.

Thomas W. McKee is a leading volunteer management speaker, trainer and consultant. Tom is a co-author with his son Jonathan of the book, *The New Breed, how to recruit and manage the 21st Century Volunteers who want to do it their way*. You can reach him at (916) 987-0359 or e-mail Tom@VolunteerPower.com Other articles and free resources are available at www.volunteerpowers.com. ©2003 VolunteerPower.com