

The Seven Deadly Sins of Recruiting Volunteers

by Thomas W. McKee

The scene: Tuesday night at our monthly membership meeting. A frantic staff member stands before the group of about 300 members and says, "If we don't get any volunteers for this program, we will assume that you aren't interested, and we'll just cancel it."

Some over-worked members feel guilty and raise their hands. Others groan and say, "The trouble with our organization is that no one wants to get involved." Others say, under their breath, "Good, it's about time we cancel some of our activities."

Sound familiar? We've all seen it happen. Well, if you are going to mess up in your volunteer program, you might as well mess up bad. By committing one of the following seven sins, you not only chase members away, but you burn them out.

Sin One: Expect Announcements to Get Volunteers

We needed people in our organization to volunteer for a short-term project. I made the announcement, wrote articles in our newsletter, had people who had been involved give a five-minute plug in several monthly meetings, and did a special mailing demonstrating the benefits for being a part of this special team.

The results were very disappointing. What was wrong? What had I done wrong? I thought that the challenge would motivate leaders to get involved.

I went to lunch with a person who was a mover and shaker and asked him, "Why didn't you volunteer for this project? I could see your name on it all the way." I'll never forget his response. Bill said, "If you wanted me, why didn't you ask? I'd be happy to work with you on this project, but I would never volunteer."

I learned an important lesson 20 years ago that I have not forgotten. Many people will never volunteer. Why aren't people volunteering? Because people want to be asked.

Sin Two: Go It Alone

One of the most effective recruiters I knew was my father. He was an Eagle Scout as a teenager. When he and Mom were first married, he was a volunteer scout leader. As I was growing up, he was always active in volunteer organizations. To meet the demands of active recruiting, Dad established a recruiting task force from the organization in which he was recruiting. His team would meet once a month with a list of vacancies. With organization directories open, they would brainstorm possible people who could fill these positions.

Partnering is another effective way to recruit volunteers. Loaves and Fishes is a successful agency in Sacramento that feeds

the homeless. They run the Mustard Seed School for the children of homeless families. This organization uses volunteers each day to take care of the meals and school. How do they get this many volunteers? They partner with local organizations—mostly churches.

Sin Three: Recruit Life-time Individuals—Not Short-term Project Teams

Mary was asked to be on the strategic planning task force for her association. She was told that the strategic planning committee would meet for a full day for training and development of strategy. She would then have six months to work on the strategic plan and then her job would be done. Mary not only said yes, but she volunteered to work with the implementation committee of the strategic planning committee—which was another two-year commitment.

Recruiting teams rather than individuals is particularly effective with younger volunteers. Many people are afraid of getting tied into a job for a lifetime and never being able to get out of it. They get burned out and then quit the organization as a way to quit their volunteer role. I accomplish three objectives when I put together a short-term project team of new volunteers with a model leader:

Objective one: Volunteers are more willing to say yes to a short-term commitment with an end-date in sight.

Objective two: Volunteers have the opportunity to catch the vision of the organization because they were working with a passionate leader.

Objective three: Leaders became mentors for future passion driven teams. We were always looking for new leadership.

Sin Four: Assume That "No" Means "Never"

Timing is everything. When we get the courage to recruit someone and then they say "no," we often feel rejection. I needed someone to be the head of our strategic planning committee and I felt that Bob was the perfect person. But when I asked him, he declined. He explained to me about a former business partner who was suing him, a teenage son who was giving him problems, and his Mercedes that was leaking oil (poor guy). He just couldn't see doing justice to the position. I asked Bob three years later and he was excited to fill the position.

Sometimes the "no" means, "not now." Sometimes it means that the prospect volunteer feels that he/she would rather do something else. When the answer is "no," I often ask if there are any positions in our organization that they would love to do, but were never asked.

Sin Five: Fall Into the BIC Trap

We often fall into the trap of following the BIC syndrome. Because we are in desperate need for a volunteer and need them quickly, we plead our case to anyone who "fogs a mirror" and at the last minute I get someone to be a "Butt In the Chair." Most times the chair is better empty than filled with the wrong person who does nothing or is high maintenance.

Sin Six: Be People Driven Rather Than Position Driven

Another variation of the "Butt In the Chair" method is just to say, "Please come and be a part of our group. We have a great time and we need your expertise." But we don't tell the prospect what we want them to do.

Joan was recruited by an after-school teen center in the inner city. She loved to do behind-the-scenes work and pictured herself scrubbing floors, painting walls and stuffing envelopes. But she was placed on the finance committee at the first meeting and was asked to go out and raise money. Although she had a passion for the cause, she was overwhelmed, disappointed and quit.

When I look at the volunteer team I think—"position." I ask, "What positions do I need to accomplish our mission?" "What do I want the team members to do?" And then I look for people who can fill those positions.

Sin Seven: Give the Position the Wrong Job Title

What's in a name? Plenty. We are calling our professional staff by the wrong name, and it is sending the wrong message to our staff, especially when we hire them. They come to the job with the wrong credentials and the wrong expectations. By the names we use for our non-profit professional staff, we are telling them that volunteer administration is not their primary job—which it really is. We are recruiting professional staff, but not professional volunteer administrators. I see this in almost every non-profit organization. For example, most environmental association professional staff are Ph.D. biologists who are passionate about the environment. They look at themselves as environmental professionals who want to get involved in restoring wetlands. But they have to spend most of their time recruiting, motivating and training volunteers to raise money for wetland restoration. Graduate schools don't train biologists to be volunteer managers. Perhaps their sub-title should be "Manager for Environmental Services Volunteers."

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