

By Florence May & Kathryn May

Here I Go AGAIN!



My alarm buzzes. One eye catches the time.
5:00 a.m. Please, say it isn't so.

Closing my eyes momentarily, I wonder what exactly had possessed my brain and mouth to volunteer me, yet again, for an event that starts much too early; sucks every bit of energy from my being and devours the entire weekend. As my feet touch the cold floor, I am convinced that serial volunteer activity is the mark of a crazy person.

There must be others who share my aversion to early mornings but each year thousands of volunteers register on TRS – The Registration System – to work ticket gates, concessions, water stops, kids activities, parking lots and information booths. Many work multiple shifts on multiple days.

What motivates people to give contributions of time, talent and sometimes even treasure to event organizations? de Tocqueville (1835) proposes that “by dint of working for one’s fellow citizens, the habit and taste for serving them is at length acquired.” Is it really that simple? Citizens simply develop a habit of community volunteer service. Or are there more complex factors at play?

After comparing a number of volunteer research studies and first-hand volunteer management accounts, I have come to the conclusion that a broad combination of motivational factors contribute to the act of volunteering.

Human Motivation

The literature of Atkinson and Birch (1978) and, later in 1986, Maehr and Braskamp defined three basic sources of human motivation. These seem to fit many of the generalizations often made by volunteer managers.

Achievement. Some volunteers desire to perform at a high level and actively seek situations at which they can excel. Does your event offer challenging tasks? Are you seeking high achievers to help elevate or evolve your services and programming?

Affiliation. Other volunteers desire positive relationships. They want to help others and care about feelings. Are you recruiting these volunteers to be the public face of your event? Several studies show that older volunteers tend to fall into this category.

Power. There are also volunteers who desire to be in control and influence others. They want opportunities to direct others and to implement changes. Have you identified these people for jobs that require command and control talents such as committee chairs and team leaders?

In the professional workplace it is important to have a balance of working styles and motivations. It would be reasonable to deduce that the same equilibrium is needed for a well functioning volunteer operation. These three motiva-

tions strike me as a good starting place but relatively simplistic.

Altruistic Values

In the search for deeper levels of motivation, Clary (1998) proposed that volunteers “work” with greater purpose or more altruistic values at the core of their sustained efforts. Their service may generate from a desire for one of the following:

- Educational function in gaining new knowledge about a wide range of organizational, issue or functional topics.
- Social function involving relationships with others. This may be to fill a void – older people who have retired or lost loved ones, or younger people who have moved to a new city or seek to develop new social networks.
- Career function in providing training and contacts. This may be an opportunity to develop or improve job skills.
- Protective function of helping others. These actions may relieve individuals from feelings of guilt of having too much while others have too little.
- Enhancement function of improving self-esteem. Volunteering often provides opportunities for people to shine in public, or receive positive reinforcement that they do not find in the workplace or at home.

Our TRS account representatives regularly hear anecdotal evidence from volunteer managers that many of these altruistic attributes play an important role in continued volunteer commitment. However, the inspiration for volunteering may vary greatly depending on the stage of life and a combination of environmental influences.

All of the above may impact volunteerism but the TRS team thinks one more motivation should be added to the list. We observe this trait regularly among community event volunteers.

Community Pride

There is tremendous community pride in hosting major sports, festivals and cultural events. The events can be annual like SeaFair, 500 Festival, and Kentucky Derby Festival or one-time host opportunities like the International Choir Games and Super Bowl. There is a strong desire to connect with popular events in the community. Involvement in high profile activities offers the perception of a certain status and prestige but also in the center of the action. Volunteers for these types of events often enjoy the networking and feeling that they are "in the know".

Veteran volunteer manager, Joelle Baugher, notes, "During special events there is a "Can Do Spirit" in the community and positive media attention that volunteers may find both energizing and addictive." She adds "my job was to make volunteers understand that their role is critical to the event and the event is important to our community image."

Irrespective of the motivation, volunteer managers are important to creating an environment that keeps volunteers enthusiastic about your event. Consider your most important volunteers. Do you understand their drive to return year after year? Take a peek at the TRS TIPS sidebar to critique your volunteer program. Are you motivating your volunteers?

Here I go again. (Closing)

I arrive on site at the event. The event banners are waving in the wind. Musicians are warming up in the distance. The local weatherman is filming the set-up teams and predicting fantastic event weather. My team leader greets me warmly, "Glad to have you back. We are fully staffed but I really need your experience today. We are going to be very busy."

Why am I here? I am making a difference and I love it!

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TOP 10 BEST WAYS TO DE-MOTIVATE EVENT VOLUNTEERS

At TRS we often see event management organizations who have high no-show rates or low second year return rates. Over the past 12 years our team has documented that these results are often indicators of poor volunteer experiences and a need for fundamental change. Take stock in your motivational toolbox. Does your organization ...?

- 1 **Set unrealistic expectations** for the volunteer experience. Do volunteers think they will be near the event action, when in reality they will be in a parking lot far away? Is the volunteer job too physically challenging for some of your recruits?
- 2 **Schedule too many or too few volunteers.** Volunteers value their time. Are they bored or completely overwhelmed?
- 3 **Give volunteers jobs they don't want to do.** Do your volunteers get to pick their jobs? Or does your organization assign based on need? If you are assigning people to jobs they don't want, understand they likely will not return. You need to recruit the right people for the right jobs.
- 4 **Ignore volunteers who have negative impact.** Yes, those volunteers who get the free shirt, free parking and food but don't work or showcase anti-social or unprofessional behavior. Better consider cleaning house because those volunteers will drive away your great volunteers.
- 5 **Assign inappropriate work.** Heavy lifting, industrial clean-up, and potentially dangerous work should be hired out to specialists or community groups that regularly handle and are prepared to safely manage these jobs.
- 6 **Establish low standards.** A "good enough" mentality will discourage high achievers from volunteering with your organization.
- 7 **Communicate poorly.** Is all communication after the fact? Is there a system (e.g. e-mail, text) to communicate changes or send regular reminders about important items? Or do volunteers discover challenges on site with no preparation?
- 8 **Ignore volunteers on site.** Most volunteer managers are great at showing appreciation for your volunteer force during the event. But every Executive Director, Board Member and staff person needs to say "Thank You" during the event. Volunteers notice.
- 9 **Not train volunteers in advance.** Do you let your volunteers guess or provide bad information to your guests? Do volunteers feel like they have no preparation? No idea what is going on? Volunteers need to be trained well in advance to prevent mishaps and confusion.
- 10 **Undervalue their volunteers' experience and service.** Or do you know which volunteers "make it happen" behind the scenes? Which volunteers are the "best face" of your event? Does your organization recognize longevity, hard work and great volunteer service?