



Eight Deadly Sins of Recruiting Campaign Volunteers

Background

Volunteers are the “lifeblood” of any campaign-local, state, or national. However, **candidates and volunteer managers need to understand how we approach and work with volunteers determines whether they return for future campaign events or activities.** Every campaign manager is facing the need to stop doing business as usual and re-think their approach to all aspects of volunteer management - recruiting, rewarding and retaining volunteers.

The overall goal is to create a positive experience from the volunteer’s perspective. Considering there are so many family, leisure, social, and political activities going on these days, we need to remember they have other choices with how to spend their time.

To provide a framework to your strategies or thinking, here are eight deadly sins related to recruiting and/or managing volunteers. Avoid these mistakes and you are on your way to a successful volunteer effort.

Sin # 1: *Expect announcements to get volunteers all by themselves.*

Here is a list of frequently used, inadequate, methods:

- just make an announcement (via email, texts, Facebook, or Twitter)
- just announce the need for volunteers in your newsletter
- just give a 60-second plug at your monthly meeting
- just do a special mailing touting the need for volunteers

Let's be honest most of these results are disappointing because you didn't get enough people (and you might get the wrong people). A key word is the word “expect” announcements (in all forms) of marketing to be an effective recruitment strategy. These announcements can't be a substitute for recruiting. Marketing is not the same as recruiting. We are not saying, don't make announcements, it's saying don't expect only announcements to yield volunteers. So, what will work?

Volunteer managers need to realize that most people **don't want** to volunteer. Instead, they want to be asked. Phone calls can work. Person to person requests are better. Higher rates occur when people know and trust the caller (recruiter).

We need to change our perception of the word volunteer. We can't see the word “volunteer” as a verb. Let's make a change-make volunteer a noun. Quit asking for people to volunteer. **Ask for help on a specific task and with a specific time commitment.** (See Sin # 3)

Sin # 2: *Only recruit volunteers who make long-term commitments.*

Many volunteer leaders start with the assumption that they want somebody to make a long-term commitment (4-5 weeks or a large number of hours). This just does not match the current situation. This worked 20 years ago. The approach doesn't work in 2019.

The new volunteer is much more interested in helping with short-term (or limited time), time specific (with start and end times), projects (See Sin # 3). If the recruiter's pitch sounds like a big commitment, they will likely get a "No." Bad practice: Can you help volunteer on our campaign?

If feasible, try to first understand what an individual's passions or self-interest is before "the ask."

Sin # 3: *Make a generic ask for volunteering.*

This sin is making a generic, unclear, request for their time and talent. Make your ask to a volunteer in a specific manner. An effective recruitment script will have the recruiter weave the following into the first two minutes of a conversation: benefits of volunteering, the date (or options of dates), how much time (# of hours) is needed, and the role/activity. Make sure they understand some training or orientation is available. The new volunteer may say "no" because they feel they don't have the skills. New volunteers want to be successful the first time and not look foolish.

Remember shorter volunteer experiences can open the door to longer commitments. Shorter experiences expose volunteers to your campaign's leadership. Always use one of your organization's most effective leaders to lead your new volunteers so they have the opportunity to catch the "vision" and "spirit" of the campaign.

Sin # 4: *Treat professionals with careers like lackeys in your campaign.*

The new breed of volunteers is sophisticated. The recruitment of a 21st century volunteer needs a fresh perspective. Dry, stale, approaches from 20 years ago assumed volunteers can only do clerical or busy work. When you call, they assume the only thing they can do is low level task.

Remember this may not be attractive to many people. Notice how this applies to two generations who we want to be successful volunteers. The two generations are the retiring Baby Boomers and the Gen X/Y people. Retired Baby Boomers worked in professional level jobs and Gen X/Y people are currently working in professional positions. These two groups have something in common. They have technical, leadership, artistic, management, and educational skills at a professional level. In the past, volunteer managers mistakenly believed the only thing volunteers could do are jobs that paid staff did not want to do.

The new breed of volunteer likes to be recruited for an experience. They want to feel that they can have some input into the campaign and "made an impact" by using their expertise. Committing this sin may kill the passion of many Baby Boomers and Gen X/Y professionals.

There are times you want to recruit people to do some of the busy work. But we must understand this approach can be a "black hole." It explains why some volunteers are "one and done."

Sin # 5: *Hire people (or select volunteers) to lead/run our volunteer activities in political campaigns who know nothing about effective volunteer management. (Beware of people who say they have done it before but make deadly sins in your campaign)*

Sin number seven is a little bit different because it's a sin committed by the organization, not by the individual. Many organizations that need volunteer managers make the mistake of hiring somebody (or selecting another volunteer) who is very good at what the organization does rather than leading volunteers. Select people who have demonstrated success in recruiting and managing volunteers. This relates to skills in communication, group motivation skills and relationship-building. When selecting individuals to lead volunteers, ask them these questions:

- A. What are the characteristics of a successful volunteer experience?
- B. What skills or competencies are needed by a successful volunteer leader?
- C. What are the components of a "successful" ask?

- D. What are three deadly sins when recruiting or managing volunteer?
- E. How did you problem solve a prior “bad” volunteer experience?

Avoid volunteer leaders who can’t effectively answer the above questions. Just because they led volunteers in the past doesn’t mean they have the required competencies. An ineffective volunteer leader is a major problem to the campaign. Poor “word of mouth” testimonials spread fast.

Sin # 6: *Go It Alone*

One of the sins of volunteer recruitment is to have only one person conduct the recruitment. Instead, you need to do this as a team. A group of recruiters are needed-leaders and staff. The key is to have an effective network and individuals with the following characteristics:

- a passion for your campaign or cause
- already volunteering for you
- a clear communicator
- a person trained in a volunteer recruitment script

Consider the concept of partnering with other organizations (who have similar values) on side projects beyond your specific campaign. Prior projects build trust and relationships. Some groups use the word partnering instead of networking. Partnering allows you to build a network of contacts/connections and simultaneously builds trust. It may take multiple contacts through these types of activities before you ask them to volunteer for a campaign. When people know you by name, they are more likely to pick up the telephone or call back. More connections in a community, before a political campaign, increases your probability to recruit volunteers. Most political campaigns start volunteer recruitment too late and ignore this concept. Result? They “lose out” on many volunteers.

Sin # 7: *When the volunteer says no, assume that no means never.*

One of the things we experience is that people say no to our request. We need to realize over time the situation of the volunteer may change. Their interest may also change. Keep a log of volunteer requests. We can’t count on the fact that people are always going to be busy. A smart recruiter will review notes made two, three, and four months ago. Recycle back to these individuals and make the recruitment ask again. The contact two months later can be a friendly contact that’s shows interest in the person. This is not a “hard sell” type of contact.

Sin # 8: *Oh, By The Way*

This sin is related to asking individuals more than what was expected. Example: You have a volunteer activity on Saturday. They agreed to the Saturday activity. And then at the end of the Saturday experience, you ask them, “**oh by the way,**” we have a meeting on Tuesday night, and you would really be good, we need you to come. They come on Tuesday night and then at the end of the meeting, you go, “**oh by the way,**” we need somebody to meet on Thursday night. Etc.

This is a turnoff to new (and many) volunteers. They did not expect this type of situation. Many people hesitate to say no. They will reluctantly agree to do something even though their heart is not in it because they hate to turn you down. Overall, this is detrimental to the campaign. People may do this for two or three occasions. However, this volunteer may feel negative about the experience and won’t support you over a longer period of time.

Sources: Adapted from the following books and multiple political campaigns:

- A. Engaging the Head, Heart, and Hands of a Volunteer, Barry Altland
- B. The New Breed : Understanding and Equipping the 21st century Volunteer, Jonathan McKee, Thomas W McKee
- C. Wellstone Action; <https://www.wellstone.org>.