

# What Volunteers Want

## Focus Group Provides Important Insights and Observations

A recent movie depicts the leading man gaining the fantastic ability to read women's thoughts as a result of an accident in his own home, allowing him to "hear" what women are thinking. Wouldn't it be great to know what people are thinking?

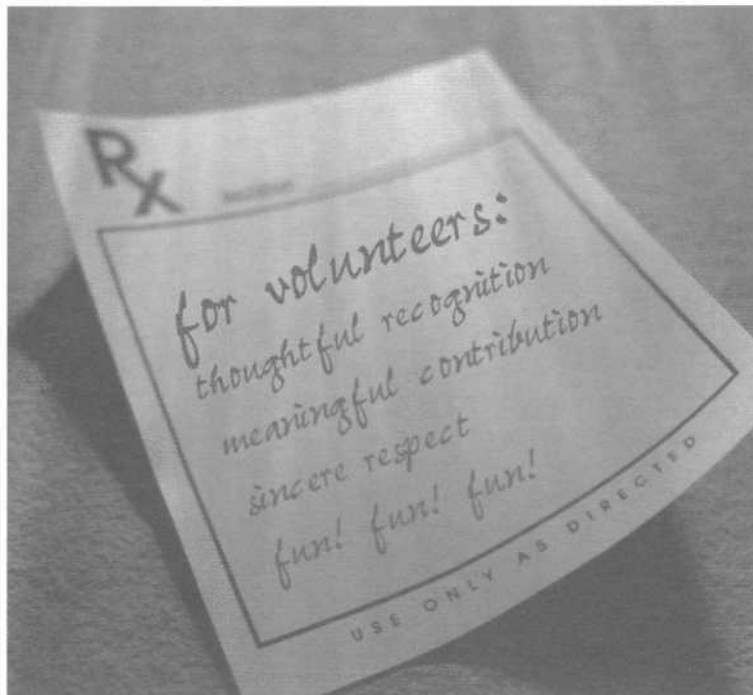
Such understanding must inevitably lead to better communication and stronger relationships in this fast-paced modern society in which people have complicated, conflicting thoughts and feelings.

Healthcare volunteerism is as complicated as other aspects of modern society. A multitude of internal and external pressures add to the usual challenges of donating time, energy, thought and money to charity.

A focus group was conducted with hospital volunteers, a director of volunteer services (DVS), the chairman of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer (CEO) of a traditional hospital.

Participants included a past State Auxiliary Leader (SAL), a SAL-elect, a gift shop committee chairman, and the chairman of the information desk committee. The thoughts and feelings that emerged may be rather typical of healthcare volunteers and volunteers in general. The broad themes are:

1. *To contribute to the larger good.* Volunteers want to contribute to a cause that is bigger than themselves.
2. *To be recognized for their contributions.* Appreciation needs to be informal and formal. It needs to be frequent, regular, specific and suited to both the individual and the group. The traditional annual awards banquet may not be adequate.
3. *To recognize that the contributions of the volunteer should not compromise the altruism of the volunteer.* Volunteers do so out of a desire to contribute. But the contribution they make is so significant that it demands recognition—sometimes public, sometimes private, sometimes both. The delicate handling of this balance is perhaps the key to success for the CEO and DVS. The precise technique of when and how to offer appreciation is impossible to impart by formula. A good



leader learns from many sources of information when and how to affirm hard-working volunteers.

4. *To feel respected by staff, especially management.* Volunteers frequently work side-by-side with paid staff. They do not want to be "looked down on." When paid staff do not fully understand or appreciate the importance of volunteer programs, the volunteer understandably may be offended. Upper level management support may not filter down to the staff who have the most daily contact with volunteers.
5. *To be assigned meaningful tasks.* It is frustrating for a volunteer to show up for work and have to look for things to do, and it is a waste of valuable resources for an organization to underutilize volunteer time. It takes planning and coordination to provide tasks that keep the volunteer busy and feeling useful. That is why the role of the DVS is so essential.
6. *To receive training for the volunteer job at hand.* Volunteer jobs are as challenging as paid jobs. It is essential that the volunteer know what is expected and how to deliver it. This requires an orientation and ongoing feedback and training. Training adds to a volunteer's sense

of satisfaction by increasing confidence and competence.

7. *To be supported during the performance of duties.* Volunteer activities require systems support such as computers, equipment and space. The organization's leadership should have mechanisms in place to determine if adequate support is in place and to obtain resources as needed.
8. *To have good communication with upper level management and particularly with the CEO.* It is important for the CEO to know what the volunteer organization is doing and for volunteers to know the overall directions of the larger organization. Frequent face-to-face communication at volunteer board and membership meetings offers a formal setting in which to share information. Also, it helps for the CEO to communicate informally with volunteers when making rounds.
9. *To have volunteer activities publicized.* Publicity is listed separately from other support measures because it fulfills a number of roles. Publicity is a form of recognition and it is also a form of marketing. For example, publicity helps to achieve the success of particular activities, i.e. a fundraiser or social event, while it improves the success of the volunteer organization through indirect benefits such as recruiting new members.
10. *To receive certain perquisites.* Volunteers appreciate occasional perks. A free flu shot or a meal in the cafeteria can be a powerful gesture.

11. *To have more help.* The common battle cry for years at volunteer committee meetings has been, "We need more help!" An unfortunate burden is placed on dedicated volunteers who accept the commitment to do a good job, but cannot take on the responsibility for more hours than committed.

12. *To have fun.* Volunteers have a choice about the use of their time. Good camaraderie with other volunteers and paid staff and a sense of the contribution made to the organization's mission help to sustain the volunteer. As one elderly volunteer once exclaimed, "We're just a bunch of girls who want to have a good time!"

Volunteers offer an important dimension to healthcare institutions that cannot be duplicated by even the most caring paid staff. This article is written with gratitude and appreciation for the countless volunteers who have offered their time, energy and talents for the good of others.

Volunteerism in general is threatened by decreasing numbers — the decline of pink smocked hospital auxiliaries is particularly noticeable. To retain and recruit volunteers, CEOs, volunteer services directors and other volunteer leaders must understand what volunteers want. Since the ability to read minds remains a fantasy, it is important to ask, "What do volunteers want?" ■

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## September Launch for [www.todaysvolunteer.org](http://www.todaysvolunteer.org)

Premiering in September: the most exciting website for healthcare volunteers. . . ours!

The new site features communities for ASDVS members, Volunteer Leaders, Volunteer Managers (non-ASDVS members), Gift Shop Managers, and features a recruitment section for New Volunteers. The site provides the high quality information you have come to expect, and supports *anyone interested in healthcare volunteerism*. Our goal is to be the premier source of information for healthcare volunteers in America.

The new site contains many of our favorite features from the present ASDVS site with a new look and feel. For example, the bulletin board where members network will have a new name: *On-line Forum*.

Many sections are accessible to all site visitors. Sections such as the popular *News You Can Use* and the on-line version of *Partners In Community Health* are accessible to anyone for a few months to encourage people to sign-up. We will closely monitor this site to learn what our visitors find of greatest interest and value.

*Marketplace* offers ASDVS and AHA products and services. It also links to business partners for access to recognition products, gift shop merchandise and sponsors and trade show exhibitors.

Sections such as *News and Events* provides information about meetings and conferences across the country. You are able to easily announce your related meeting/event and send it to us for quick posting. This will help attract more people to your

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