

CANADIAN FUNDRAISER

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IDEAS WE'VE NOTED -

Treat volunteers right and they'll keep coming

How might the recession affect volunteering? Volunteerism expert **Susan J. Ellis** says it seems reasonable to expect greater need for human services and less funding to meet them. Conditions such as homelessness and hunger, mental health problems and crime may well increase. And volunteers pay for their volunteering expenses from their discretionary funds, not their grocery money. These two challenges seem to suggest that just as the demand for volunteer services increases, the availability of volunteers will decline.

But after years of affirming volunteers and their work around the world Ellis remains optimistic. In her view, there is always a silver lining, and many of the common assumptions simply will not hold up.

Assumption #1: In hard times, people can't afford to volunteer

As the economy falters, says Ellis, human need will be more obvious. It will be very clear that donations of cash and time make a huge difference. Volunteering makes sense to people who feel they cannot give money but can give time, she affirms. Corporations too may substitute skills for money. If they give fewer grants, they may look to employee volunteering as an alternative or supplement to the agencies that they have funded in the past.

Ellis counsels development officers to recognize this pattern and make sure that an invitation to donate volunteer time is always extended along with a plea for a cash contribution. The organization that allows supporters to blend time and money, she says, may come through the recession with more volunteers and ultimately bigger donors.

Assumption #2: When people suffer financially, they have self-centered priorities and are less likely to think about the needs of others

There is no doubt that people must put their own survival needs first. A creative organization will seize the opportunity to turn that trait to its advantage through finding ways to barter. Think of what your organization might have a prospective volunteer might value – the use of your meeting room, for example, in return for contributing professional skills to your board.

Better yet, see if you can organize mutual exchange among clients themselves. Instead of recruiting an outside volunteer to help clients in need, she urges, look at what they can do for each other.

Assumption #3: Financial worries cause mental depression, fear of the future, and other difficult emotions that cause people to withdraw

Natural disasters and other immediate crises generate spontaneous volunteers. People who respond to an emergency by rolling up their sleeves and joining others to do something are overcoming the feeling of helplessness that a disaster evokes. Volunteering with your charity can achieve the same end. Rather than ignoring the depressing news stories, try recruiting new volunteers by using the crisis, Ellis advises. “Concerned about the future? Think what seniors on a fixed income today must feel. What better time to brighten their day with a friendly visit?”

You can turn unemployment into an advantage, both for your organization and for potential volunteers. People looking for new jobs may have unscheduled time on their hands, and may welcome the chance to build new skills. So recruit unemployed people with a targeted approach. “We want your talents! As you seek new work, spend part of those long days with us. Keep your resume current and help others at the same time.”

Assumption #4: Anything that isn't a human service is of low importance in a recession

Both bread and roses are important, Ellis proclaims. She encourages cultural, recreational and environmental organizations to continue their outreach and get over their feelings that it is unseemly to divert people from more pressing needs. “It is precisely at such times,” she says, “that groups and institutions offering beauty, relaxation, and other spiritual nourishment have an opportunity to demonstrate their worth.”

You'd better be doing it right already

There is one big obstacle, Ellis notes, to making the most of this silver lining. Organizations that have not welcomed volunteers nor invested in them in good times are less likely to be successful during a recession than those with a solid track record of volunteer recruitment, management and motivation. And don't even think about laying off your manager of volunteer resources to save money just when you're going to need more volunteers.

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