

The Volunteer Dating Game ASSOCIATIONS NOW, May 2010

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Six tips for getting your relationship with volunteers started off on the right foot.

Sometimes nothing beats curling up on the couch and watching a classic romantic comedy. Like the one where the man pushes the damsel in distress out of the way of a moving car and they fall in love at first sight? Or the one where they just happen to meet at the top of the Empire State Building? Meeting that special someone is a piece of cake, right?

Let's get real, people. It isn't easy to find your perfect match, and the same goes for recruiting volunteers. Just like a first date, you want your relationship with your volunteer to get off on the right foot and last well into the future.

Here are six ways you can appropriately ask, engage, and hold onto your volunteers. Chances are that if you are a good "first date," your association will benefit by recruiting and retaining members dedicated to helping further its mission.

1. Don't play the "he said, she said" game: Be direct and personal. Ask potential volunteers to share their time and energy personally and directly. Clear invitations are the most effective method of asking potential volunteers to get involved, with the least chance of getting turned down.

2. "You want how many kids?": Know their motivations. From the get go, find out what motivates your volunteers and what they want to get out of the experience in order to meet their expectations and yours, expand on their talents, and keep them engaged. Knowing their long-term goals will enable your association to carve out a detailed volunteer path for them to progressively get more involved in activities that will enhance your business.

3. Casual dinner at 7 p.m. sharp: Provide detailed expectations. Give your volunteers clear guidelines so that they know what your association needs and wants, and you know what your volunteers need and want; it's a two-way street. Also take into account volunteer demographics, the type of volunteer opportunity, and the audience's current level of familiarity and engagement with association.

4. "Did you just Facebook message me for my phone number?": Don't be passive. You want what potential volunteers have to offer, so make your message loud and clear. Show you're interested in them and reinforce this message however you can, via the web, social media, in-person events, and recruitment incentives for current members. (Important note: An approach this aggressive may not be recommended in the real-life dating game.)

5. Always hold the door open: Be responsive. Ensure that you have trained the necessary staff to be friendly, responsive, and always follow through with your volunteers. The easier it is for your volunteers to get what they need from your organization, the more satisfied they will be, and the more likely they will be to come back for a second date.

6. Flowers are always nice: Recognize appropriately. Determine the most appropriate way to highlight your volunteers' accomplishments and recognize how their work affects your association's

larger mission. It could be as simple as a thank-you note or as grand as a standing ovation onsite at a conference; if you know their motivation, you will know how to reward them.

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