

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE FOR VOLUNTEER INVOLVING ORGANISATIONS



7. Saying 'thank you'

For many local voluntary and community groups, volunteers are their lifeblood, and in some cases organisations simply wouldn't be able to function without the tireless support they receive from their volunteers.

So how can these efforts be acknowledged, and what are the best ways to reward volunteers for their contributions?

This Information Sheet covers:

- Ideas for saying 'thank you' to volunteers
- "Good practice" considerations to bear in mind

Suggestions for thanking a volunteer when they leave

Saying 'thank you' is easy, especially if you get into the habit of saying it at the end of every session that the volunteer attends. By thanking volunteers individually, you're acknowledging their contribution and recognising that they are making a difference, not just to your organisation, but to your clients as well.

Some organisations arrange special events to celebrate their volunteers' achievements. These can include meals, social events, and even award ceremonies. Volunteers can be presented with a certificate, and some organisations like to give each volunteer a lapel pin/ badge or a t-shirt that has the organisation's name on. Such items can then be worn in the course of volunteering, and can be especially effective when worn by volunteers who are in a public-facing role, such as raising awareness or fundraising.

Volunteers' Week (1st-7th June)

This is an annual national campaign which can be used both as part of your recruitment drive and to celebrate your volunteers' achievements. The Volunteers' Week website sells merchandise with the Volunteers' Week logo on it, and has included items such as baseball caps, coffee mugs and certificates. The Volunteers' Week logo is also available for free, so you can use it in various ways depending on how you are planning to celebrate the Week.

www.volunteersweek.org.uk

Other special occasions

However, Volunteers' Week isn't the only time to say 'thank you'. Depending on the nature of your organisation, you may choose to link your event with a special day. For instance, groups who specifically recruit volunteers who are parents may choose to send a 'thank you' card on Mother's or Father's Day.

Organisations that are linked to health conditions may choose to tie in a special event with their own themed week or special day. Calendars such as Count Me In and Interfaith provide details of national days and weeks, as well as public and religious holidays. If your organisation aims to integrate immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers into the local community, you may decide to arrange an event to coincide with one of their festivals. Some organisations choose to send 'thank you' cards on the volunteer's birthday, or on Valentine's Day.

Events

Some organisations thank their volunteers by arranging special events that may be specifically for volunteers, or may include staff. Such activities can include meals, lunches, coffee mornings, fun days, champagne receptions, sporting activities such as bowling or skittles, or maybe a visit to the organisation's head office, so that volunteers can get a sense of how they fit in to the overall structure of the organisation. Funding for such events should be included in the budget for the volunteer programme. After all, volunteers give their time for free, and the least an organisation can do is to recognise this by demonstrating how much their volunteers are appreciated.

Other ideas

If you're planning to hold an event to celebrate your volunteers, you could write a letter to your local newspaper, or invite a journalist along to report on the occasion. Some people like to have their photograph in the local newspaper because it means that they have been recognised for their volunteering efforts. They can also show the article to friends and family, and keep it as a souvenir. However, some volunteers may not like such publicity, so it is always best to check first if they're happy to be included in any media coverage, or have their photograph taken.

For many volunteers, the most important part of volunteering is working alongside a client group. If a client or service user compliments a particular volunteer, then you could include these comments in a 'thank you' card to the volunteer. Alternatively, you could design a 'Thank you' noticeboard, where clients or service users can show their appreciation by adding comments about volunteers.

Volunteers can sometimes be such a source of inspiration to clients and service users that they in turn may decide to 'give something back' to the organisation, possibly by becoming volunteers themselves. If your volunteers inspire members of your client group, acknowledge this and let the volunteer

know how they've helped change someone's life in some way. For some volunteers, this is the biggest reward of all.

Good practice

Whilst some organisations may choose to thank their volunteers by buying them gifts, it is good practice to avoid giving anything that sets a precedent for expectation on the part of the volunteer. If a gift is regarded as a 'perk' (something that the volunteer gains in exchange for volunteering), this may contribute to the creation of a contract with the volunteers, giving them employment status with the associated rights. Also, it is important not to give gifts that the volunteer can benefit from financially such as money, vouchers, tokens and gifts of appreciable value, as this can affect benefit claims, and may be taxable. If presenting volunteers with gifts, you could give small items such as flowers or chocolates, or even home-made ones. Giving a packet of seeds is a small gift, but the benefits can be long-lasting, as the volunteer can nurture the seeds and watch them grow into flowers. Handmade bookmarks make both a small and personal gift, and can even be made by the client group that the volunteers are working with.

In cases where you may wish to recognise an individual's longstanding contribution to your organisation, it may be appropriate to give a more significant gift, such as a commemorative paperweight. This may also be the case when volunteers leave or 'retire' from volunteering with your organisation. As this would be a one-off event, there would be no reason for the volunteer to expect such a reward on a regular basis, so the issue of setting a precedent would not apply.

Presenting certificates, 'thank you' cards and group photographs to volunteers is also a good idea, as there is no financial value attached to them, yet they recognise the achievements of the volunteer. Certificates can be given to all your volunteers, or can be awarded to those who have made outstanding contributions. However, if you choose this option, you need to make sure that other volunteers don't feel left out. If you present awards or certificates to commemorate your volunteers' achievements, keep it fair and ensure that at the very least everyone receives acknowledgement, even if you just say 'thank you'.

When volunteers leave

It's a good idea to have a written policy on how to say 'thank you' to volunteers when they leave your organisation, to ensure that all volunteers are treated fairly and equally. This will be especially helpful for other members of staff if a volunteer leaves whilst you are away for any reason. For instance, you may decide to give the volunteer a 'thank you' card that other members of the organisation can sign, and/or a small commemorative gift. You could give each volunteer a similar gift, or something that would appeal to their personal tastes. Whatever you decide to do, it's worth setting a cap on the amount that

you will spend on the gift. You could also present the volunteer with a certificate to acknowledge their volunteering contribution. Some people may regard this as a souvenir of the time they've spent with your organisation, whilst others may find a certificate a useful way of demonstrating the skills that they've learnt and developed when applying for other volunteering roles, or even paid work.

In conclusion

Providing support and supervision, relevant training and offering extra responsibility show that your organisation is committed to its volunteers, and these tasks usually form part of a volunteer management strategy that takes place all year round. Whilst celebrating volunteers' achievements may take a bit more planning, it is well worth putting in the time and effort to do this because the rewards can be substantial. Volunteers need to feel valued and respected, and showing your appreciation with a small event or gesture can really boost a volunteer's morale, self-confidence and sense of self-worth. It can also help staff and volunteers to 'bond'. In addition, such events and gestures will also help maintain volunteer loyalty and increase retention levels, which in turn benefits the organisation and the people it is there to serve; its clients.

This information sheet is based on advice and guidance on good practice provided by Volunteering England.

For more information on managing volunteers, please visit
The Good Practice Bank at www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice

Or please contact Volunteering England Information Service
Email: Information@volunteeringengland.org
Freephone Information Line: 0800 028 3304 (M-F 10.30-12.30 & 14.00-16.00)

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