Valuing Volunteers: Volunteer Recognition
Wednesday, April 8, 2015

1. 2013 Volunteer Recognition Study
   a. Research Objectives
      i. To learn about best practices in volunteer recognition and determine the key drivers that lead to volunteer retention
      ii. To raise awareness around the importance of recognizing volunteers' efforts
      iii. To explore the changing volunteer landscape in Canada and its implications for volunteer engagement
   b. Methodology
      i. Two online surveys were launched in May 2013, designed for volunteers and non-profit organizations in Canada. In total there were 379 responses to the surveys
      ii. The survey designed for volunteers sought to explore preferences around volunteer recognition, and identify links between the volunteers' motivation and their preferred recognition practices
      iii. The organizational survey was targeted to non-profit organizations and it sought to determine how organizations were thanking volunteers, barriers to volunteer recognition and best practices
      iv. 14 key informant interviews were conducted by Volunteer Canada, providing in-depth feedback on volunteer recognition practices, challenges and experiences
   c. Key Findings
      i. Top two ways volunteers want to be recognized
         1. 80% stated that they would like to be recognized or thanked by the organization they volunteer for by hearing about how their work has made a difference.
         2. Close to 70% stated they would like to be recognized by being thanked in person on an ongoing, informal basis.
      ii. Least preferred ways volunteers want to be recognized
         1. Volunteers indicated that their least preferred forms of recognition include banquets, formal gatherings, and public acknowledgment in newspapers, radio or television.
         2. Interestingly, these methods are common methods for many organizations, with 60% citing banquets and formal gatherings, and 50% using public acknowledgement as their recognition strategies.
      iii. Perceived barriers to volunteer recognition

1. Over 80% of organizations indicated that the most common barrier they encounter around volunteer recognition is that they do not have enough money in the budget to do what they want to do.
2. Yet 80% of volunteers would like to be recognized by hearing the impact of their contributions.

    iv. Expanding the concept of volunteer recognition
1. Volunteers and organizations alike have identified a need to redefine perceptions of volunteer recognition – away from a once a year banquet and towards a holistic, year round practice that acknowledges volunteers for their individual contributions of supporting the communities around them.
2. Organizations can expand the concept of volunteer recognition by taking time to learn about volunteers' motivations and preferences. This can be achieved by building in questionnaires to accompany the documentation organizations are already requesting for screening and administration. This information can be referenced for ongoing recognition throughout the year.
3. Recognition practices can be expanded by learning about the kind of skills volunteers' would like to apply or develop and by ensuring that this is being fulfilled in their volunteer roles. Organizations can create an event that embeds training or networking opportunities with celebrations around volunteer recognition.

2. Volunteer Engagement
   a. Motivation

      i. The number one motivation for volunteering is to "contribute to my community," while the second most common motivation is having the opportunity to gain or apply skills and knowledge to a volunteer task.
     ii. Organizations can recognize volunteers' efforts by communicating and highlighting the impact that they are having on their communities. They can take time to learn about their volunteers' skills, knowledge and motivations and find ways to foster or develop them. Creating more skills- based volunteering opportunities can be one way to achieve this.

   b. Recruitment
      i. Almost 60% of respondents indicated that they were recruited by directly contacting an organization they were interested in about opportunities. They were proactive in their search to volunteer, and specific in their selection of an organization.
     ii. Research highlighted that for organizations seeking to reach older adults, they may find more success promoting their organization through newspaper/radio ads.
    iii. Consistent with previous research (Vézina, M., et. al. (2012) Volunteering in Canada. Canadian Social Trends. Statistics Canada.), parent involvement was cited as being influential to youth engagement, whether in setting an example through their own volunteering, or with helping to seek out opportunities.

   c. Volunteer Activities

    i.   Volunteers indicated a preference to work directly with people who benefit from their volunteering. Additionally, many cited a desire to apply professional or technological skills, or serve on boards and committees.

    ii.   Volunteers indicated that they are less interested in manual labour, crafts, cooking or fundraising. Interestingly, data from the 2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating highlighted fundraising as the most common activity volunteers are engaged in (45%).

    iii.   Volunteers indicated that more breaks, reimbursement of expenses and access to organizations' events are not important factors in how organizations could more effectively engage them.

    iv.   Volunteers prefer greater flexibility in scheduling, more feedback on the impact of their work and more opportunities to use their skills, abilities or talents in their volunteer roles.

d.   Volunteer Recognition

    i.   The desire to be thanked personally on an informal basis, versus formal recognition through banquets or events, is something that also tends to increase with age. Younger people expressed a higher preference for more concrete expressions of recognition – certificates, letters of reference, small gifts and nomination for awards.

    ii.   All age groups highlighted a desire to partake in an informal group outing as a way to be recognized, highlighting the social appeal to volunteering, especially for young people. Picnics, potlucks and small get-togethers were highlighted as being a very meaningful way to recognize volunteers- something that is not costly, but that brings people together in an informal way.

    iii.   The types of recognition volunteers are NOT interested in include public forms of recognition, newspaper columns or radio ads and costly forms of recognition such as banquets, formal gatherings and small gifts. People highlighted issues they have with money being spent on thank you gifts, when they'd prefer to see it contributed directly to the organizations mission. Some people voiced a preference for recognition events to be integrated into the volunteer's time commitment to the organization, as opposed to during their weekend or evening.

e.   Perceived Barriers to Volunteer Recognition

    i.   Over 80% of organizations indicated that the most common barrier they encounter around volunteer recognition is that they do not have enough money in the budget to do what they want to do. This significant percentage highlights the prevalence of this concern amongst organizations across Canada. The good news is that the two types of recognition that volunteers appreciate most are not dependent on organizations' budget. Volunteers want to be thanked informally and hear about the impact of their work. Shedding light on these findings will be an important step in breaking down these perceived barriers.

    ii.   Over 50% of organizations indicated that they do not have enough time to design and run a recognition program.

Understanding how volunteers wish to be recognized may enable organizations to rethink the way a recognition program could operate, and highlight the fact that it does not need to be a burden on budget or time.

    iii. Interestingly, over 40% of organizations indicated that a lack of interest from volunteers is a barrier to their implementation of a volunteer recognition program. It is worth considering whether the perceived lack is a result of volunteers not wanting to be recognized at all, or that they simply do not wish to be recognized in the ways the organization sees fit.

3. How Organizations Are Currently Recognizing Volunteers
   a. Recognition Practices/Preferences
      i. The most common way organizations are recognizing volunteers is by thanking them in person on an ongoing, informal basis. Great news! This is also the most popular way volunteers would like to be recognized.
      ii. Over 60% are holding banquets and formal gatherings, while less than 20% of volunteers like to be recognized in this way.
   b. Communicating Impact
      i. 80% of volunteers would like to be recognized by hearing the impact of their contributions, and less than 60% of organizations are currently doing this. This highlights an opportunity for organizations to focus heavily on communicating impact to volunteers.
   c. Public Recognition
      i. Close to 50% of organizations are recognizing volunteers using public methods – placing thank you ads, speaking or writing about their volunteers in the media, nominating volunteers for awards- but less than 20% of volunteers want to be recognized in this manner.
      ii. Part of the reason described by organizations for publically recognizing volunteers, is that it also serves to market the work they are doing regionally or nationally. Recognizing volunteers this way creates an opportunity to share stories with the public about the organization itself and the role volunteers play in achieving its mission.
      iii. 40% of organizations stated that they believe they are not doing enough to recognize volunteers. 20% of volunteers believe the organization they volunteer for is not doing enough. This highlights an opportunity for organizations to reflect upon their current recognition strategy and determine if any changes could be made.

4. Best Practices
      i. Recognition is not just a once a year event, it should be year round. Organizations need to move beyond the perception that volunteer recognition equates to volunteer events.
      ii. Organizations can learn about volunteers' motivations and preferences by building in questionnaires to accompany the documentation organizations are already requesting for screening and administration. This information can be

very useful for ongoing recognition throughout the year.

iii. Organizations can recognize volunteers by learning about their motivations and by ensuring that volunteers are meeting their desires to use or develop skills.

iv. Volunteer recognition is a continuum that requires a variety of initiatives. It's important to try to offer different forms of recognition (formal and informal), customized for different individuals.

v. Organizations can find meaningful ways to recognize volunteers. They can create an event that embeds training or networking opportunities with celebrations around volunteer recognition.

vi. It is important to build strong relationships between staff and volunteers. The staff and board members should be aware of volunteers' contributions to the organization.

vii. Making volunteers feel welcome is an important form of recognition. Whether it is putting a volunteers' role on their name tag as opposed to simply "volunteer," soliciting feedback on how their role could be improved or offering training, there are many opportunities for organizations to create a warm and welcoming space.

http://volunteer.ca/content/2013-volunteer-recognition-study