Essential Information For Downtown Revitalization November 15, 2008

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

In recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers, imagine downtown as winery

By Jeffrey Sadler

Three things give downtowns the most trouble with regard to volunteers: No clear work plan, little educational outreach, and generational disconnect.

Basically, many downtown organizations have a hard time recruiting volunteers because no one knows what they do. There is no clear mission set for them, and most recruitment begins with, "Can you come to our meeting next Wednesday?"

Moreover, those who are involved in downtown have trouble stepping outside of their comfort zone to look for new stakeholders. The same people from the chamber, Lions, Rotary, and planning commission are asked to do the downtown work, too. Downtowns need to look to incorporate more minorities, churches, youth, and neighbors in their projects.

Open the recruitment channels, and leave no stone unturned

As far as recruiting volunteers goes, I say leave no stone unturned. Ask every stakeholder to become involved; bankers, neighboring residents, business owners, you name it. Too often overlooked places for task- or project-specific volunteers are churches and high schools.

Attracting volunteers is much easier when the prospects know who you are, what your mission is, and what is expected of them. Therefore, it is important to have a detailed, task-oriented work plan that is shared often. Also, giving all stakeholders a say in the development of the work plan helps attract volunteers. People will support what they are invested in.

Training should be an ongoing task that basically follows as a matter of course from running an open organization. Most people are naturally curious. It is the organization's job to let people know that there is more to learn and facilitate that learning.

Think of it as developing wine enthusiasts. At first they just like wine. Then they learn about the different varietals, and then how factors like soil composition, aging, and weather affect the flavor. The learning resources are often readily available, but people have to use them.

The best way to keep volunteers coming back is to make it fun. Wine has its own intrinsic reward, but downtowns can offer many varieties of fun events to say thank you to the volunteers.

Downtowns must adapt to changing nature of volunteerism

The prevailing theory about modern volunteerism is that volunteers are more task-oriented and less 'loyal' to an organization or cause. There must be rewards for the volunteers. The easiest reward a volunteer coordinator can offer is success. This success comes from clearly identifying the task, the purpose, and the goal, and also providing the necessary tools for success.

Nothing will drive a volunteer away more quickly than vague instructions or ongoing, nebulous projects. Keep the work simple and goal-oriented.

Let downtown's loyalists lead, but don't overwhelm them

Managers of downtown organizations dependent on volunteers may be vexed by how to compensate for the shift from fewer and fewer all-of-the-timers, to mostly some-of-the-time volunteer work-

This article was reprinted from the November 15, 2008 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange.*
Interested readers may subscribe to the twice-monthly newsletter by visiting http://www.downtowndevelopment.com or phoning (973) 265-2300.
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ers. How can they still get good work, the sharing of know-how from one volunteer to the next, and consistent staffing levels?

Well, there is still a cadre of loyalists in every downtown. The key is to identify them and let them know how important they are to revitalization efforts without overwhelming them. Use their consistency to direct and inform the part-timers.

Be sensitive to how people change through their life stages

Old, young, and middle-aged people can all make fine volunteers, but people obviously have different responsibilities and reasons for volunteering through their stages in life.

For youth (high school-age to 25 years old), it has to be fun. The best way to make it fun is to involve groups of peers. It is also important for these groups to be able to find their own way, i.e., give them lots of guidance, but allow them to figure it out on their own. Make sure that direction is conversational rather than dictatorial. Ask questions like, "Do you think it would work if we …"

Once people move into the family stage of life, it is difficult to compete with all of the school, church, and recreational activities. That is why it is good to ask the umbrella organizations for assistance. Again, churches are natural partners for most downtowns. Time is the key commodity here, so make sure that the tasks the volunteers are completing are very directed and have distinct deliverables. Make sure they know what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and how to do it. Make sure that any needed tools or supplies are ready before you ask them to begin.

For older people or retirees, it is important that work has a purpose. For many retirees, the ideas of being connected and helping the community are paramount. Encourage them to help lead, develop, and mentor the other volunteers. Ask them about their experience, skills and interests. Be sure to actually listen to what they say and appreciate them.

Stay ahead of challenges to volunteerism

Educate the public about what you do. Tell them the big picture. Invite them to join you. Ask for their opinion. Ask them for their help. Thank them.

Never let a volunteer leave a project or task without being assigned a new one. If they can't do the first one you suggest, have a back-up ready. If they can't do that one, they either did not have a good experience or they really don't have time.

Make sure you thank them in person and follow it up with an email, a letter, or a phone call. The rewards of being needed and wanted are important to those who volunteer. Make sure they know just how important they are to you.

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