

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION

Achieve Big Volunteer Celebrations On a Small Budget

By Kerry Nenn

You want to make your volunteers feel appreciated, but you don't want to break the budget. "Think outside the box," recommends Joe Landmichl, education and community volunteer manager for the Alzheimer's Association (Illinois chapter; Rockford, IL), "and feel free to think small. Too many managers worry their volunteers will be upset if the 'thank-you' isn't pricy. But just doing something is going to make a big impact, and you might be surprised what volunteers appreciate and enjoy."

For example, many volunteers are looking for opportunities to forge new relationships, so create a social event for them. Host a potluck game night, where you provide the drinks. Landmichl suggests, "Break volunteers into teams and play Scattergories. They love it."

Landmichl says you don't even need a budget for the drinks. "If you approach Walmart or Sam's with a request that you want to show appreciation for your volunteers, who accomplished X (name a specific achievement, like educating 150 students in the area), they are likely to give you \$25 to \$100 to cover your drinks or snacks."

Volunteers also love to have something with the organization's name on it. "This is a win-win, because the volunteers feel appreciated, and they're marketing for you," notes Landmichl. Consider awarding milestone pins for years of service or hours. T-shirts with your logo are another possibility. "We had success with simple name badges," reports Landmichl. "We gave volunteers professional-style badges with inserts that can be switched out, and then gave volunteers the opportunity to purchase special-occasion inserts. They liked the name tags, thought it was fun to change out their inserts for holidays, and they paid \$5 for each insert, which helped cover the initial cost."

Another affordable way to offer recognition throughout the year is to send out digital birthday and anniversary cards. Ask a volunteer to come in once a week to schedule the cards to go out that week via email. Or, design, print, and mail custom

cards with, "Produced by the volunteer office of ...," printed on the back. "This is also a great way to rejuvenate inactive volunteers," notes Landmichl. "Maybe they haven't been active for six months, but they get a birthday card and it prompts them to call and see how they can get involved again."

Volunteers also love outings or trips. They'll even pay for the trip, if you will simply act as their travel agent and plan everything. Consider getting discounted admission somewhere for a group, then arrange a bus road trip to that destination. Choose something volunteers wouldn't normally drive themselves to, or offer a survey to find out where they would like to go. You could also contact a local forest preserve, tell them you'd like to do something for your volunteers and ask if there is a day you can come out and get a tour. "Forest preserves always say 'yes,'" Landmichl says, "and it doesn't cost anything. The outing offers that desirable social aspect and says 'thank you.'"

Offering inside knowledge or a behind-the-scenes opportunity is also a big hit with volunteers. Offer a quarterly lecture series where your marketing team or CEO talks about strategic plans for your organization and how volunteers can help execute it. Schedule a Zoom call or a program at a library, and include Q&A. "Most volunteers don't get to talk to the CEO, so these events empower them and give them a voice."

Landmichl points out one key aspect to any of these efforts: VP or CEO participation. "Get your higher-ups to take part," he explains. "Ask them to join in the potluck game night. Or host an ice cream social where the VPs serve the ice cream to volunteers. This kind of involvement lets volunteers know the organization cares. It makes a big impact, without a lot of effort or cost." ♦

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TRAINING ESSENTIALS

Get Volunteers to Sign Off on Your Training Manual

Do you have a volunteer manual that volunteers are expected to thoroughly review before starting their service to your organization?

Provide them with a document that they are expected to

sign and date indicating they have complied with your instructions:

"I have read and understand the contents of the training manual, which includes the following" ♦