

MYSTERY VOLUNTEERS

A Pilot Project from Community Volunteer Connections

Have you ever wondered what it's like for someone to contact your organization and offer to volunteer? Community Volunteer Connections decided to find out, and so the Mystery Volunteers Pilot Project was born.

Mystery Volunteer Program: What We Do

Mystery Volunteers contact organizations with Volunteer Programs in any way that organization invites contact on their website. If your website offers a Twitter or Facebook link, the Mystery Volunteer makes contacts via those methods. Depending on the organization a Mystery Volunteer may:

- ✓ Tweet a Twitter account
- ✓ Send a Direct Message to a Facebook page
- ✓ Call a general telephone line
- ✓ Call a direct Volunteer Services telephone line
- ✓ Send an email to a general email
- ✓ Send an email to a direct Volunteer Services email
- ✓ Fill out an application available online or by email

Mystery Volunteer Program: Why We Do It

As a volunteer centre, we wanted to understand the “decision points” of potential volunteers: the parts of the experience that make someone want to volunteer and the parts that make someone less enthusiastic.

For participating Managers of Volunteers, we wanted to provide:

- honest feedback about what a potential volunteer experiences when they approach your organization to volunteer.
- the ability to monitor the parts of the organization you may not have control over as a Manager of Volunteers (e.g. general phone, email).
- concrete information to take to those who make decisions about social media, office administration, and website administration.

The Pilot Round: How We Did It

Our Volunteers

Community Volunteer Connections recruited 10 volunteers, a mix of community volunteers and SFU business students. Our volunteers had some previous experience volunteering and limited or no experience managing volunteers. We trained our volunteers in observational skills, note-

taking, and confidentiality to ensure that the performance of individual organizations was handled with respect and discretion.

Our Organizations

Eight organizations responded to our invitation to participate in the Mystery Volunteers Project. We secured permission from both the Manager of Volunteers and Executive Director (or designate) of each organization. Both the Manager of Volunteers and the Executive Director knew a Mystery Volunteer would be making contact, but did not know when.

We had a range of organizations participate in the pilot project, including one hospital, two mental health service agencies, one crisis agency, one seniors care facility, one immigrant serving society, and one hospice.

Making Contact

We assigned eight volunteers one organization each and gave each volunteer a list of ways to contact their organization. Mystery Volunteers contacted their organizations in mid-July. Each volunteer had two weeks to complete their assignment; the first week to make contact and the second week to give organizations time to respond. After the two-week period, Mystery Volunteers filled out an online survey giving the results of their contacts. If we received responses from organizations after the two-week test period we did not include them in our reports.

The Results: What We Found Out

Overall 6 of 8 Mystery Volunteers would have volunteered for their organization. We asked our volunteers to list the “decision points” when they decided whether they would want to volunteer with their organization or not. The answers we received shed a lot of light on what volunteers want when they reach out to offer their time.

DECISION POINTS TO VOLUNTEER

- “She used an exclamation point in the email – that showed enthusiasm.”
- “She used my name in the email – showed a personal touch.”
- “I liked that she answered my specific questions; I knew every position available and what to do next to apply – no wasting my time.”
- “I liked having application form attached – no wasting my time.”
- “The video testimonials from volunteers/clients on the website inspired me. They showed the good work they do.”
- “Having a thorough “volunteer section” on website made me feel they really cared about investing in their volunteers.”
- “The fast response time via twitter, facebook, email, phone.”
- “The email auto-reply told me when the person would be back and I received a return email on the day they returned.”

Personalization, enthusiasm, and efficiency were highly prized by our Mystery Volunteers.

DECISION POINTS NOT TO VOLUNTEER

- “The email replies didn’t answer all my questions about what positions were available and how to apply for them. I didn’t want to have to email back again.”
- “Front desk staff didn’t know anything about volunteering or where to transfer my call.”
- “I contacted the organization through the BC office, but no one responded to my twitter, facebook, or phone call to send me to the local office.”

PERFORMANCE BY CONTACT METHOD

We asked Mystery Volunteers to track how long an organization took to respond to them and to rate the response on:

- How the response made them feel about volunteering for the organization (1=less excited; 3=no change; 5=more excited)
- Whether the response gave them the information they needed to volunteer (1=not at all; 5=everything I needed)

Response Times

The contact method with the best performance was direct email. All organizations with a dedicated volunteer program email returned emails within 2 days. Other forms of contact showed great variation. Table 1 outlines response times for all contact methods.

Table 1: Response Times by Contact Method

Contact Method	#contacted	#responded	Fastest response	Slowest response
Twitter	4	1	9 days	>2 weeks
Facebook	6	4	<1 day	2 days

General Phone*	8	6	0 days	>2 weeks
<i>Answered</i>	4	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Voice Mail</i>	3	2	2 days	>2 weeks
General Email	4	1	<1 day	>2 weeks

*One general line was busy; volunteer could not get through.

Direct Phone	3	2	0 days	>2 weeks
<i>Answered</i>	1	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Voice Mail</i>	2	1	<1 day	>2 weeks
Direct Email	6	6	<1 day	2 days

Impact of Responses

Response time had an impact on how volunteers rated their interest in volunteering at an organization, but that impact was not universal.

Twitter

4 contacted; 1 responded; response took 9 days

- Our volunteers reported disappointment in the lack of a timely response over Twitter, but it did not impact on their interest in volunteering at the organizations.
- One volunteer pointed out that if he had received a quick reply on Twitter, he would have questioned how staff was choosing to spend their time.

Facebook

6 contacted; 4 responded; 3 responses within the day; 1 within 2 days

- Volunteers were much more likely to lose interest in volunteering if their Facebook message was ignored than if a tweet was ignored. Both volunteers who did not receive a reply said their interest in volunteering decreased.
- Volunteers liked replies that were personalized and gave links to detailed information about volunteer positions increased their interest in volunteering. Volunteers gave low marks for impersonal referrals to the organization's volunteer page (e.g. "Please visit [weblink](#) for current Volunteer Openings").

General Email

4 contacted; 1 response within day

- Volunteers perceived organizations that didn't reply to general emails as disorganized, and were less excited about volunteering with them.
- The one volunteer who received a reply from the general email liked having a high level of detail about volunteer positions and the process of volunteering,

General Phone

8 contacted; 4 answers; 3 voice mail; 1 busy; 2 vmails returned within 2 days

- Whether or not a live person answered the phone was less important to volunteers than being clear that they were talking to the right person.
- In one case a volunteer reported "the phone was answered by an automatic telephone system which offered to connect me to 'Volunteer Services' by pressing 2. It was really nice to hear that a dedicated option was appointed to volunteer services rather than being transferred by a person. It would save a lot of time of the potential volunteer and of the organization."
- Volunteers preferred being connected to the Manager of Volunteers directly, by a live person or a phone message tree.
- In one case the person answering the general line did not know who was responsible for volunteers, which led to confusion and a sense that volunteers were not important to the organization. In that volunteer's word: "He did refer me to his 'boss' who knew a lot more about the volunteer positions, but she was very rushed, and I could barely keep a conversation alive. It was very much like I asked the general questions and she answered them and that was it. She didn't seem like she wanted to carry on the conversation, instead she kept saying to email her and she will email me back an

interview date and a volunteer form to fill out. I felt a bit ... rushed, like I had to ask everything and then contact her through email.”

Volunteer Program Email

6 contacted; 6 responded within 2 days

- Volunteers perceived Managers of Volunteers as friendly and knowledgeable in their email replies.
- Although a timely response was important, one volunteer loved that he received an auto-reply from the Manager of Volunteers stating when she would be back in the office. He was impressed when he received a reply on the day of her return.
- In almost all cases the email replies made volunteers feel more excited about volunteering.
- In one case the volunteer felt less excited about volunteering, because only volunteer job titles were provided without descriptions, and the volunteer realized she would have to email back to get the details she needed to decide if the volunteer positions were a fit.

Volunteer Program Phone Line

3 contacted; 1 answered; 2 voice mail; 1 vmail returned within day

- As with the general line, volunteers were fine with leaving a message as long as their message was returned promptly.
- Volunteers perceived the Managers of Volunteers they spoke to as very friendly and very knowledgeable.
- They liked that the Managers asked questions about their interests and goals before making suggestions about what volunteer positions would fit.

Application Forms

Seven organizations had online or emailed application forms.

- Applications made volunteers feel more like volunteering when they could view the position descriptions with the application.
- Applications made volunteers feel less like volunteering when they had to print and fill them in by hand.

Suggestions for Improvement from Mystery Volunteers

We learned a lot about what volunteers like and don't like when they approach organizations to volunteer. We've pulled what we've learned together to offer some low cost, time efficient suggestions to create positive first impressions with potential volunteers.

Social Media

1. Consider whether a Twitter or Facebook account provides added benefits for your organization. If your organization does use Twitter or Facebook, ensure you have a webpage for your Volunteer Program with detailed information about your volunteer opportunities. If you are using social media, volunteers will expect you to have a strong website to match.

Website

2. Include detailed volunteer positions on your website and explain your volunteer selection and screening procedures. The Volunteer Program webpages our volunteers liked best included testimonials from volunteers and pictures or videos of volunteers in action.

Email

3. If you are a part-time Manager of Volunteers, use auto-replies to let potential volunteers know when you will be able to respond to their reply. Dedicate the first hour when you get back to responding to inquiries. Build a template you can use to reply to any volunteer inquiry, but remember to add the person's name to the top of your response.

Phone

4. Make sure there is an easy transfer from the general line to the Volunteer Program line. Include the direct line or extension for Volunteer Inquiries in the organization's general voice mail. Ensure front desk staff are aware of the appropriate contact person for the Volunteer Program. Include an FAQ for front desk staff if you have multiple volunteer positions managed by multiple staff, so they can direct the volunteer to the appropriate person.

Parent Organizations

5. If your organization is a branch of a BC or national organization, ensure your parent organization is able to refer local volunteers to you.'

Critical Information for Potential Volunteers:

6. Ensure potential volunteers have a clear idea of what volunteer positions are available in your organization after their first contact. This information can be provided on your website or in your email reply.
7. Discuss with potential volunteers by email or phone what they are looking for in a volunteer position and be prepared to refer volunteers to other opportunities that would be a better fit. Highlight volunteer opportunities that will provide a benefit to your organization. You may have a fundraising arm that needs volunteers whose schedules don't fit your positions. Your clients may be connected to other services that need volunteers. When you encourage potential volunteers to get involved in activities that benefit your organization or clients, they feel like you still value the contribution they can make to your organization.
8. In every contact, include clear directions of what comes next and how long it will be until the next step happens. Is there an orientation session? When? Is the interview the next step? How will you set that up? Do you need the volunteer to get a criminal record review before the interview? An checklist of next steps will help your potential volunteer know what comes next.

References:

9. If you are asking for contacts from previous volunteer positions Ask for one or the other; or accept previous volunteering as references. Ask for permission to contact references. Do

you contact references prior to interview or do people have to pass an interview before you contact references?

Application Forms

10. Make sure your application form includes details about the potential volunteer opportunities and outlines the next steps after the application is completed.
11. Create emailed or downloaded application forms as “fillable” pdfs so that applicants can type responses directly into the application form. PDF Escape (www.pdfescape.com) is a free online resource to create fillable pdfs.

Criminal Record Checks:

12. If you require a Criminal Record Check, mention this in your application form. Do not ask whether an individual has a criminal record; this can leave you open to a human rights complaint if you do not follow through on the application. You can inform a potential volunteer of the requirement to get a Criminal Record Check without asking if they have a Criminal Record using a question like this:

*“Volunteers work with a vulnerable population so as part of our screening process we require you to complete a Criminal Record Check. If you have an incident on your Criminal Record we consider the nature of the incident and how long ago the incident occurred to make a decision about your eligibility to volunteer with us. Are you willing to have a Criminal Record Check completed?”
Yes / No*

Get your Own Mystery Volunteer

Now that you have seen what a Mystery Volunteer can tell you, you probably want to have a Mystery Volunteer contact your organization. You are in luck: Community Volunteer Connections is signing up organizations to the Mystery Volunteer program now.

How do I sign up to get a Mystery Volunteer?

- Contact Community Volunteer Connections at cvcinfo@volunteerconnections.net and ask for a Mystery Volunteer.
- We will send you a Mystery Volunteer Request form to get basic information about your organization.
- We will ask for both the Managers of Volunteers and the Executive Director or designate to sign a permission form to allow our Mystery Volunteer to contact your organization. You’ll know we’re coming, you just won’t know when.

Your Mystery Volunteer feedback is strictly confidential. If you have any questions, please contact Stacy Ashton at 604-529-5118.