Are your volunteers on message?

Nonprofits are notorious for having difficulty with communications. Many times, it has to do with lack of funds (and thus, insufficient support). What many nonprofits tend to have in spades, however, is volunteers. Volunteers are great for nonprofit organizations. They can staff an event, or help serve lunch, or provide input, or, maybe most important, help spread the word about the nonprofit.

And yet, some nonprofits don't seem to appreciate the role that volunteers play in communications. Let me give you two examples.

A chaotic, disorganized volunteer experience

Around Christmas, I volunteered to do some gift-wrapping with a DC-based nonprofit. The sign-up form indicated I was to work from 10 am to 3 pm. I arrived at 10 am, only to find a bit of chaos. The volunteer director told me to go one place, where I was promptly told to go back to where I started. The volunteer manager had limited ability to organize, and ended up wasting a lot of time. Two other volunteers were grousing along with me on how disorganized the event was. We didn't start wrapping (in a very chaotic and inefficient manner—also lacking tape, wrapping paper, etc.) until about 11 am. One full hour was wasted. No water or snacks were offered. No guidance as to how long we were expected to stay. When I left around 12:30 pm, no one even noticed or thanked me. In fact, I never got a thank you at all. I will not be volunteering with this organization ever again.

There are two different issues at play here. One is the negative impact of disorganization on people who volunteer. People (like me) who have a bad experience volunteering won't

volunteer with your organization again, and worse, will tell others of their bad experience. The second issue is that volunteer leaders are not being given the tools to make sure they provide both a message and a positive experience, quite possibly because the volunteering role is not valued.

Volunteers who don't have the right (or any) information

Just this week, someone in my network invited me to attend a business networking event run by a large nonprofit. The invitation said the price of the event itself was $75, but attendees were required to donate a minimum of $500 to the nonprofit during the calendar year. I pointed out that the real cost of attending this event would be $575 to the person who invited me. He called and emailed me to tell me that the $500 was "only if I wanted to donate" and that the event fee was "totally separate." However, the invitation clearly stated that the annual contribution was required.

Volunteers need to know the facts…all of them. But more importantly, they need to know the reason for the information they are sharing. The nonprofit above SHOULD have informed my contact about the requirements for the event, but moreover, should have told him WHY this event has a minimum contribution, why it is necessary, what the contribution is for (what are the impacts etc.).

Imagine if this guy had come back to me and said this instead: Yes, you are right. You will be required to donate $500 during the year, which by the way, you can give in several installments, not all at once. That money will be used to fund our X initiative, which helps X number of people. Also, you will be assured of meeting some awesome business leaders at the event, and we will be having other events during the year.

I suspect that this volunteer was only told to recruit people to come to the event. He didn't get any additional information or a script or any other tools that would help him

not only recruit attendees, but spread the message about the work the nonprofit is doing and will do with additional funds.

Volunteers can help with a nonprofit's tasks. And volunteers help communicate the nonprofit's message. Are your volunteers on message?