

LEVERAGING VOLUNTEERS

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Whether you work at a small, one-person school planetarium or a major urban science center planetarium, you are probably under-staffed and under-funded. How can you be creative and develop NEW programs when all your time is spent filling out paper work and presenting the OLD programs?! One great source of labor is volunteers.

Generally speaking, volunteers can be broken down into two major categories: high school techno-nerds (this is a good thing!) and retired persons who refuse to play one more round of golf! Each of these groups has something to contribute.

"What's in it for me?"

When designing a volunteer program, one important question to ask yourself is "what's in it for this volunteer?" People volunteer for many different reasons, and a skillful volunteer director will look for those reasons and try to fulfill each volunteers need. This is not as time-consuming as it sounds. For example: In summer, we have a large cadre of high school students as volunteers. What's in it for them?

- 1) Volunteering looks good on a college application;
- 2) They are expected to behave as if this were a paid position; therefore we can provide them with a valuable reference that can 'put them ahead' of other new graduates entering the work force;
- 3) They learn first hand what is expected on the job (surprisingly, many young people don't have a clue what is desirable); and last, we told the boys that learning the constellations and other skylore was a great way to pick up girls.

The adult volunteers are a bit different. They already know how to dress for success and they don't need a college reference. Most of the ones we have encountered enjoy the social interaction, both with the staff and with other volunteers. About half of them like to wear their Volunteer Recognition Pin which lets visitors know how many hours of volunteer service each person has accumulated. (The Space Center has one volunteer with over 6,000 hours of

service! What's in it for him? He enjoys being able to be the "last man standing" during the annual recognition dinner.)

Where'd you get this guy?

Recruiting volunteers can be tricky, but there are lots of places to look. Young people are available evenings and weekends, and summers. Try the high school gifted program, science or service clubs. An unlikely source are LDS (Mormon) Missionaries. These young people, usually between ages 18-22, are sent on two-year service projects. Yes, these are the ones who wear white shirts and neckties and ride bicycles. But they are also required to do community service in their area. They travel in pairs, and are usually assigned to a district for about six months. They're smart, funny, and very interested in doing a great job. RSVP is a good place to find adult volunteers. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program recruits people and screens them for the type of work they want to do, and then refers them to the appropriate agency. RSVP will also reimburse volunteers for mileage to and from the work site.

Other good places to check: Scouts working toward their Eagle Badge; the Older American Center; Newspaper articles (just write a press release, tell them what kind of help you need, and send it to the local paper); and, of course, you can always try to snatch volunteers from the museum and redirect their efforts to the planetarium! (This method has netted some great volunteers with a diversity of hidden talents.)

Now that I've got them, what can we do with them?

With a little bit of luck and work, volunteers can do almost anything! Obviously, they can learn to present a planetarium program or school lecture. They can be greeters; those folks who will meet a school group and get them organized, collect all the gum before they go in the theater, and make sure they have a ticket.

They can help answer phones or make copies and handle other office-type duties. We even have a hospitality committee, and a Volunteer Coordinator.

Museums and planetariums will always be short of money, but volunteers can maximize even the smallest operation.

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