

# Saying 'thank you' to volunteers

## Summary

For many local voluntary and community groups, volunteers are their lifeblood, and in some cases organisations simply wouldn't be able to function without the tireless support they receive from their volunteers.

Volunteers need to feel valued and respected, and a small gesture can really boost a volunteer's morale, self confidence and sense of self-worth. It can also help staff and volunteers to 'bond'. Events and gestures help maintain volunteer loyalty and increase retention levels, which in turn benefits the organisation and the people it is there to serve; its clients.

So how can these efforts be acknowledged, and what are the best ways to reward volunteers for their contributions?

This Information Sheet covers:

- National initiatives
- Events
- Awards
- Other ideas
- Gifts

## **Saying 'thank you'**

Saying 'thank you' is easy, especially if you get into the habit of saying it at the end of every session that the volunteer attends. By thanking volunteers individually, you're acknowledging their contribution and recognising that they are making a difference, not just to your organisation, but to your clients and participants as well. There are also a number of other ways in which you can thank volunteers for the contribution they make to your organisation.

## **National initiatives**

National initiatives provide a focus for being able to thank people and acknowledge their contribution publicly. There are national initiatives and days which may be specific for the type of activity volunteers are involved in, whilst there are also national initiatives which focus on volunteering.

### **Volunteers' Week (1-7 June)**

This is an annual national campaign which can be used both as part of your recruitment drive and to celebrate your volunteers' achievements. The Week is a good opportunity to celebrate volunteering. Lots of organisations have celebratory events in this week and it is an excellent opportunity to get media coverage of you volunteers achievements.

### **Student Volunteering Week**

This takes place annually in the last week of February. The Week is fixture in the student volunteering movement as well as the wider voluntary and community sector. The Week is a chance to raise the national profile of student volunteers by promoting and celebrating local student groups. Around the country special events and volunteering projects are put on to reward current volunteers and recruit new ones.

### **Other special occasions**

Depending on the nature of your organisation, you may choose to link your event with a significant day. For instance, organisations who specifically recruit volunteers who are parents may choose to send a 'thank you' card on Mother's or Father's Day.

Organisations may choose to tie in a special event with their own themed week or special day. Calendars such as Year Ahead and Interfaith provide details of national days and weeks, as well as public and religious holidays. Some organisations choose to send 'thank you' cards on the volunteer's birthday, or on Valentine's Day.

## **Events**

Some organisations thank their volunteers by arranging special events that may be specifically for volunteers, or may include staff. Such activities can include meals, fun days, or maybe a visit to the organisation's head office, so that volunteers can get a

sense of how they fit in to the overall structure of the organisation. Funding for such events should be included in the budget for the volunteer programme.

If you're planning to hold an event to celebrate your volunteers, you could contact your local newspaper, invite a journalist along to report on the occasion, or get someone like the Mayor, MP or MEP to come along. However, it is always best to check first if volunteers are happy to be included in any media coverage, or have their photograph taken.

## **Awards**

Some organisations organise their own award ceremonies where volunteers can be presented with a certificates, badges or t-shirts with the organisation's name on. Such items can then be worn in the course of volunteering, and can be especially effective when worn by volunteers who are in a public-facing role, such as raising awareness or fundraising.

Nominating volunteers for external awards can also be a good way of saying 'thank you'. There are some awards organised on a national or local basis to celebrate achievements and recognise outstanding volunteers or voluntary organisations. Here is a list of some of the award schemes that volunteers could be nominated for:

**The Justice Awards** recognise exceptional achievement among staff and volunteers working in criminal justice.

<http://justiceawards.cjonline.gov.uk/>

**The Honours System** recognises people of outstanding merit, and those who have committed themselves to service to the nation.

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Honoursawardsandmedals/DG\\_067917](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Honoursawardsandmedals/DG_067917)

**The Queens Award for Voluntary Service**

[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Honoursawardsandmedals/TheQueensAwardforVoluntaryService/DG\\_180942](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/UKgovernment/Honoursawardsandmedals/TheQueensAwardforVoluntaryService/DG_180942)

**The Guardian Public Service Awards** honour the contribution that individuals make to a team that makes the critical difference between providing a good service and an outstanding one.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/publicservicesawards>

**The Guardian Charity Awards** recognises community achievements.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/charity-awards-2009>

**The Women of the Year Awards** aim to celebrate the achievements of women.

<http://www.womenoftheyear.co.uk/>

**The Young Achievers Award** recognises volunteers in arts, community, environment and sport.

<http://www.youngachievers.co.uk/>

**The League of Mercy** invites voluntary organisations to nominate individuals who have given seven or more years of 'outstanding service'.

<http://www.leagueofmercy.co.uk/>

**The Beacon Fellowship** awards six annual Prizes to individuals who have made exceptional contributions to charitable causes or to organisations that benefit the public.

<http://www.beaconfellowship.org.uk/>

## Other ideas

For many volunteers, the most important part of volunteering is working alongside a client group. If a client or service user compliments a particular volunteer, then you could include these comments in a 'thank you' card to the volunteer. Alternatively, you could design a 'thank you' noticeboard, where clients or service users can show their appreciation by adding comments about volunteers.

Volunteers can inspire clients and service users to 'give something back' to the organisation, possibly by becoming volunteers themselves. If volunteers inspire members of the client group, it is useful to acknowledge this and let the volunteer know how they've helped.

## Gifts

Some organisations may choose to thank their volunteers by buying them gifts. If presenting volunteers with gifts, consider giving small items such as flowers or chocolates. It is good practice to avoid giving anything that sets a precedent for expectation on the part of the volunteer. It is also important not to give gifts that the volunteer can benefit from financially such as money, vouchers, tokens and gifts of appreciable value, as these may be liable for taxation or could affect those claiming state benefits.

Care should be taken with gifts that may be regarded as a 'perk' (something that the volunteer gains in exchange for volunteering). This may contribute to the creation of a contract with the volunteers, giving them employment status with the associated rights. However, it is possible for organisations who offer discounts to paid staff to also offer these to their volunteers without risking creating an employment contract.

In cases where an individual's longstanding contribution to the organisation is being recognised, it may be appropriate to give a more significant gift, such as a picture or a plaque. This may also be the case when volunteers leave or 'retire' from volunteering with the organisation. As this would be a one-off event, there would be no reason for

the volunteer to expect such a reward on a regular basis, so the issue of setting a precedent would not apply.

Presenting certificates, 'thank you' cards and group photographs to volunteers is also a good idea to recognise the achievements of the volunteer. Certificates can be given to all your volunteers, or can be awarded to those who have made outstanding contributions. However, it is also important that other volunteers don't feel left out. If presenting awards or certificates to commemorate volunteers' achievements, keep it fair and ensure that at the very least everyone receives acknowledgement, even if they are just thanked.

### **Why you should say 'thank you'**

Celebrating volunteers' achievements may take a bit of planning but it is well worth putting in the time and effort to do this because the rewards can be substantial. Volunteers need to feel valued and respected, and a small gesture can really boost a volunteer's morale, self confidence and sense of self-worth. It can also help staff and volunteers to 'bond'. In addition, such events and gestures will also help maintain volunteer loyalty and increase retention levels, which in turn benefits the organisation and the people it is there to serve; its clients.

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## Further information

**Volunteers' Week:** <http://www.volunteersweek.org.uk/>

**Student Volunteering Week:** [www.volunteering.org.uk/sv](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/sv)

**Year Ahead calendar:** <http://www.yearahead.co.uk/countmein/>

**Interfaith calendar:** <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org>

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