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Appreciate Your Volunteers' Generational Differences

It's no secret that different generations have different views on volunteerism, use technology differently and can be motivated and rewarded in specific ways. While some say speaking of generations is too broad, people born in a defined time frame do tend to share the same formative years — shared historical events helped to shape their views and preferences. The challenge is that, as volunteer managers, it's common to look through the lens of our own generation and assume others are the same, says Shelly Kaiser, health educator at the Marshfield Clinic Center for Community Outreach (Marshfield, WI). But one size does not fit all.

To bring out the best in all volunteers, learn to recognize and celebrate differences and find ways to build a diverse volunteer base. Here are the five generations likely present in your volunteer list and some specific tips from Kaiser for managing them:

1. Traditionalist, those over 70 years old.

- **Communication:** They like anything on paper and prefer more formal language. (Avoid using slang and profanity.)
- **Recruitment:** Newspapers are still effective.
- **Appreciation:** Put recognition notices in newspapers and avoid flashy rewards.
- **Motivation and Management:** Clearly define roles/functions to take advantage of their experience.

2. Baby Boomers, those in their 50s and 60s.

- **Communication:** They like to be included in work groups and committees.
- **Recruitment:** Focus on skills-based roles and recruit specifically for those skills.
- **Appreciation:** Handwritten notes work well (and they value being sent to workshops or trainings).
- **Motivation and Management:** Keep your standards high and expect them to perform. (They can be a bit competitive.)

3. Generation X, those in their late 30s and 40s.

- **Communication:** They value direct communication (just the when and where), and e-mail is best.
- **Recruitment:** Offer flexibility because flexibility is very important, and they'll put family first. Many are looking to volunteer to develop their career/skills.
- **Appreciation:** Be more informal, like just dropping by to tell them you appreciate them, or randomly leaving a muffin at their workstation.
- **Motivation and Management:** Let them work independently. (They often don't want mentoring and like to solve their own problems.)

4. Millennials, those currently between 23 and 35 years old.

- **Communication:** Value instantaneous communication, like texts. (They can be a bit impatient.)
- **Recruitment:** Focus on connecting the volunteer role with their personal goals and don't be afraid of humor.
- **Appreciation:** They value involvement in decision-making and appreciate volunteer promotions. (They want the sense of moving up.)
- **Motivation and Management:** Remember they value multitasking, bonding with a team and being part of a fun and inclusive environment.

5. Generation Z, those currently 22 years old and under.

- **Communication:** Focus on tech (like social media) to communicate.
- **Recruitment:** Show how volunteering can help build expertise (and you may have more luck recruiting groups/teams than individuals).
- **Appreciation:** Food works very well — make the whole experience a social event. Also, they like to be respected as equals, so don't dwell on their age.
- **Motivation and Management:** Create a team environment and remember they are tech-savvy.

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