



## **"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"**

### **Maximizing Volunteer Input in Association Publishing**

**By**

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Nonprofit associations enjoy a priceless advantage over their commercial competitors in developing and promoting new products: direct and free access to well-grounded new-content ideas, plus uniquely qualified authors, reviewers, and editors—each ready, willing, and able to help the association prosper in product formats and markets old and new. Volunteer members rank high among the most valuable assets to any association career.

How can you maximize the value of volunteer knowledge and experience for your association publishing program? By mastering the following four essential aspects of working with volunteers:

- ***Relationships:*** It's about finding the best in each volunteer—whether elected officer or rank-and-file member—many (maybe most) of whom can bring big benefits to your publishing program. After all, nearly every member joined your organization to find a community and to help the group succeed. So make it abundantly clear that you value every member's potential for enriching your program. Finding subtle but clear-cut ways to send that message builds organizational health and publishing success—not to mention your own career.
- ***Respect:*** As the late Aretha Franklin spelled out so explicitly, "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" is key to any productive and happy human relationship. Too often, association executives—perhaps over-estimating their own abilities—fall into the counter-productive habit of belittling volunteers and their abilities. This is both unfair and unwise. Instead, try to convey in every exchange that—precisely *because* member knowledge and insight are different from your own—both are enormously helpful in developing content that moves the organization forward.
- ***Expectations:*** Keep everything open and above-board: Find out what your volunteers expect of you, and let them know what you expect in return. Reach out and work hard to make clear what you want to accomplish in the relationship.
- ***Politics:*** This might be the most critical element of success in your association career. Too many of us regard "politics" as a negative term. Not at all: In a business context, politics is simply the art and science of managing human relationships in pursuit of a

worthwhile objective. To an enormous extent, it's about getting people to trust you--not by being a phony, but by showing a genuine, open-minded interest in others. It's also about understanding people—and using that understanding to anticipate (and, ideally, guide) behavior.

## **Understand Power**

Power is the ability to influence people, behavior and events. It often has little to do with position, title, or formal authority. As journalist and author Hedrick Smith observes in *The Power Game*, “Information and knowledge are power. Visibility is power. Personal energy is power; so is self-confidence. Showmanship is power. Likability is power. Access to the inner sanctum is power. Obstruction and delay are power. Winning is power. Sometimes, the illusion of power is power.” Reflect on those diverse aspects of power when interacting with volunteers. You're likely to find that you possess more power than you might think--regardless of your actual position in the organization. When dealing with volunteers, therefore, keep in mind what “hidden” power you have to shape and direct the relationship.

## **Review Governing Documents**

Above all: Knowledge is virtually always power—so those who know the rules have the advantage when conflicts arise. Familiarity with your association's organizing documents can head off extended arguments and cut short otherwise endless circular discussions. Your association's bylaws, for instance, may address matters like the official role of the publisher; the selection process for and duties of editors, reviewers, and committee members; even a volunteer editor's scope of authority, term of office, and compensation. Getting on top of this information reinforces your decision-making authority and builds your broader organizational clout.

## **Develop Job Descriptions for Volunteer Positions**

The relationship between staff and volunteers is strengthened when each party knows exactly what is expected of the other. As a staff member, you probably have some sort of written job description. So should your volunteer counterparts—especially given the inevitable and frequent turnover in those positions. Most volunteers crave this sort of structure and make richer, more substantial contributions when roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.

## **Educate Volunteers about Your Business Structure and Processes—and about What You Bring to the Program**

This may seem like Organizational Culture 101, but it's needed: Briefly but clearly identify who does what in your operation and—to the extent possible—why (informed by broader industry practices).

Share timelines, and emphasize the importance of deadlines; volunteers generally underestimate the time needed to accomplish publishing tasks.

For example, if you work with a volunteer journal editor, review the steps in getting each issue to the managing editor or the printer on schedule; also, discuss the recommended number of

articles that must always be in development, in the “pipeline,” to maintain the journal’s publishing schedule.

A second example: For volunteers working with a book program, discuss the expected turnaround time for manuscript reviews and the qualities reviewers should look for in any given publication.

And, in the most modest way possible, don’t be afraid to toot your own horn—awards won, technology courses completed and new formats mastered, additional revenue generated, broad-scale savings achieved. Your volunteers are not publishing professionals so should not be expected to fully comprehend your successes—or missteps—without friendly yet self-interested guidance from you.

### **Triple Benefits**

There are three primary benefits that come from maximizing the effectiveness of volunteers. First, access to unrivaled subject-matter experts. Second, current market intelligence from actual customers—your members. Third, steady help in staying focused on the association’s mission—the reason, after all, why the organization exists.

### **Summary**

Volunteer involvement is key to the success of your publishing program. As a staff leader, it is your responsibility to create mutually enhancing volunteer relationships that constitute a win-win for all concerned.

### **Also of Interest <https://bit.ly/2tE3Pjf>**

- A-5, *McHugh Publishing Management Audit: The Basics and Benefits*, 2015, 4 Pages
- A-8, *Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing—Revised with co-author David Beacom*, 2018, 2 pages
- A-31, *An Interview with David Beacom On Association Publishing*, 2018, 5 pages

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