

## Maximizing Volunteer Input in Association Publishing

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Volunteers are the lifeblood of any association. Their commitment to and efforts on behalf of the association make it possible to not only establish a mission that responds to members' needs but also implement programs and services that fulfill those objectives."

—Wayne E Leroy, CAE, *Professional Practices in Association Management*

Nonprofits have one critical advantage over their commercial competitors in developing new products. That critical advantage is the immediate and free access to a wealth of information and knowledge about content, potential authors, editors, and markets. Volunteer members are perhaps one of the single most valuable assets you will work with in your association career. How can you maximize the effectiveness of volunteer input into your association publishing program?

In order to learn how to maximize volunteer effectiveness, let's first examine the four aspects of working with volunteers: relationships, respect, expectations, and politics.

### FOUR ASPECTS OF WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

*Relationships:* It's about getting along and feeling comfortable with those volunteers working with your publishing program. You don't have to like them as close friends, but you need to work on a positive relationship with all volunteers. In most instances, unlike someone you hired, you didn't pick your volunteers and they didn't pick you. So make it work as it is in the best interests of your career.

*Respect:* Respect is a two-way street, so respect your volunteers and they will respect you. This obviously is a part of a positive relationship. Stop the volunteer bashing, it's a morale crusher and it negatively colors the relationship. In my first association job, at a managerial level, all I heard was that volunteers were a bunch of fools and jerks. Think Aretha Franklin, "R-E-S-P-E-C-T." Obviously, that sort of lack of staff respect for volunteers was a negative drag on that publishing program.

*Expectations:* Seems pretty obvious that expectations are important. But many times expectations are not considered up-front and articulated. Find out what your volunteers expect of you and let them know what you expect of them. Reach out to your volunteers and make known what you want to accomplish in this relationship.

*Politics:* This might be the most critical element of succeeding in your association career. Positive politics is at the heart of your one-on-one relationship with volunteers. Some feel the term "politics" is a negative term. It isn't. Politics, simply, is a way of getting things done when you work with people. It's about getting people to trust you, not by being a phony, but by showing a genuine interest in the people around you. Politics is also about understanding people and using that understanding to predict behavior.

### UNDERSTAND POWER

Power is the ability to influence people, behavior and events. And it often has nothing to do with position, title or formal authority. As Hedrick Smith observes in his book, *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." Remember those intangible ingredients of power when interacting with volunteers.

Go back and reread Smith's quote. As you reflect on how Smith describes power, I think you will find that you possess more power than you think regardless of your position in the organization. Therefore, when

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dealing with volunteers keep in mind what power you have to favorably influence the relationship.

## DEVELOP JOB DESCRIPTIONS FOR VOLUNTEER POSITIONS

The relationship between staff and volunteers is strengthened if each party knows exactly what is expected of the other. As a staff member, you have a job description and so should your volunteer counterpart. Spelling out the responsibilities in a job description is not only helpful to the new volunteer but also allows for a smooth transition during and after the inevitable turnover in any volunteer position.

## EDUCATE VOLUNTEERS ABOUT PUBLISHING

With the volunteer's job description in hand, have a heart-to-heart discussion that establishes your professional credentials and outlines the needs of the program. Emphasize the importance of everyone meeting deadlines; volunteers generally underestimate the time needed to accomplish publishing tasks.

For example, if you work with a volunteer journal editor, walk through the requirements for getting each issue to the managing editor or the printer on schedule; discuss the recommended number of articles that should always be in development to maintain the journal's publishing schedule. For volunteers working with a book program, talk about the expected turnaround time for manuscript reviews and the type of information reviewers should provide.

## REVIEW THE GOVERNING DOCUMENTS

Your association's organizational documents can prove useful if you find yourself embroiled in a political disagreement. Knowledge is power and those who know the rules have an advantage when politics intensify.

Your association's by-laws, for instance, may address who the publisher is; the selection process for and duties of editors, referees, and committee chairs; and the volunteer editor's scope of authority, tenure, and compensation. This is important information because you know

the boundaries of your decision-making authority and the degree of organizational clout you possess.

## TRIPLE BENEFIT

There are three significant benefits for you in maximizing the effectiveness of the volunteer relationships. First, you get access to a subject matter expert in your publishing specialty. Second, the volunteer is a customer of your association's products and services. So you get insight from someone who brings the customer perspective and will make time to talk to you. Finally, a volunteer is someone who will keep you focused on the mission of the organization. It is easy for staff members to forget the association's mission. This can be a mistake as, after all, the mission is why the association exists.

## SUMMARY

Volunteer participation and contributions will make a difference in the success of your organization's publishing program. As a staff member, it is your responsibility to create positive relationships with your volunteers. If you make the effort, it will be win-win for all involved.

## About John B. McHugh

John B. "Jack" McHugh is a 40 year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy.

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McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, are co-authoring a series of papers on Networking Techniques. Jack McHugh is also the manager of theLinkedIn™ group, Association and Nonprofit Publishing.

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