



Lifetimes
enabling people to achieve

Writing Opportunities

A Brief Guide

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Writing Opportunities for the Internet

Reading from a screen is harder than reading from a page. Research shows that most Internet users scan pages, so opportunities that are concise and logical are more likely to be read. Users find it painful to read too much text on screens, and they read about 25 percent more slowly from screens than from paper.

On the world-wide web, organisations have to grab people's attention very quickly. Instead of spending a lot of time on a single page, users tend to move between many pages and try and pick the most useful segments of each. With over 60,000 individual volunteer opportunities listed on do-it, it is really important opportunities stand out from the crowd. Voluntary and community organisations are competing for new volunteers and the most skilled and creative with their recruitment techniques are the most likely to attract the most suitable volunteers. The volunteer opportunity needs to attract people's attention instantly and then prompt them to request more information.

When writing volunteer opportunities in the form of an email announcement, for discussion group posting, inclusion on your own website or for inclusion on do-it there are a number of key points you will need to consider. By taking time to carefully develop your volunteer opportunities you will be able to maximise the potential impact of your advertisements and improve your chances of recruiting new voluntary personnel.

Opportunity Titles

The opportunity title is the first information about your opportunity potential volunteers will see. Try to avoid the use of vague, generic opportunity titles such as 'General Volunteers' which give no indication of what might actually be involved and with whom. Make sure that the title really captures what the role entails. Make the opportunity title eye catching and clear but try and keep it short. A title such as 'General Reception and Administration Support Volunteer' really needs to be shortened. The more explicit and exciting opportunity titles are (within reason), the more engaging they will sound and the more likely it will be that potential volunteers will be motivated to request more information.

Opportunity Descriptions

Remember that you are trying to sell the opportunity. You should always begin the description with the most important details, as they will be the first thing the potential volunteers will see and read. The opportunity description should be a realistic description of the actual role. If you describe the role in an exaggerated fashion you may successfully recruit new volunteers but if the work does not meet their high expectations they will soon lose interest and leave.

Take care to ensure that when writing the description you remember to include details of both the benefits volunteers will gain from undertaking the role and what specific requirements will be expected from them. Remember that people volunteer for many different reasons. Some people will be looking for work or career related experience whilst others are simply looking for an opportunity to socialise or make new friends. Whatever benefits you may be able to offer to a new volunteer they need to be openly promoted and included in the opportunity description. Potential volunteers need to be made aware of:

- What skills they will develop
- Who they be working with
- What benefit their volunteering will bring to the organisation as a whole and the wider community
- How much fun they will potentially have
- What time commitment will be required from them

The following important points should also be noted and adhered to by organisations that genuinely intend to produce high-quality, high-impact volunteer opportunities for the Internet. Organisations should:

- Make the title eye-catching but clear – you don't want people to have to guess what the opportunity is about
- Always ensure that the important information or details are at the top of the description
- Make the word count for the on-line opportunity description about half that used when writing for print.
- Keep the sentences short
- Keep the paragraphs short
- Use a clear, objective style, but don't be too formal
- Always check the opportunity descriptions for mistakes. Make sure there are no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors
- Avoid the use of Jargon wherever possible
- Don't CAPITALISE as it makes words more difficult to read
- Try to avoid including lists containing a large number of items

If it seem impossible to make the opportunity look more appealing, perhaps the role needs to be redesigned.

General Hints and Tips

Always use a relevant postcode

You must always use a postcode which is relevant to the area from which you wish to recruit volunteers. For example, If you use the postcode of a head office, which is not based, in the area in which you would like to attract volunteers they will never find them using the National Volunteering Database (do-it) which relies on postcodes as a key search criteria.

Ask someone else to check your opportunities

If possible, get a second opinion. Ask someone else to read through what you have written. Ask them if it makes sense, if there are any mistakes and if they have any suggestions for improvements.

Check your opportunities on-line

If you wish to check your volunteer opportunities and would like to see what they look like on-line why not visit the National Volunteering Database: <http://www.do-it.org.uk>

Avoid posting out-of-date information

Visitors will expect to see up-to-date opportunities. Avoid posting opportunities that are no longer available or include inaccurate or irrelevant details. Out-of-date information will frustrate users and discourage them from contacting you and will make your organisation look un-professional and disorganised.

Make sure you are ready to deal with enquiries

You must never attempt to recruit volunteers until you have an immediate next step for people who call or email to enquire about your vacancies (eg. a date for a face-to-face meeting, even if it is several weeks away). Asking for volunteers but not responding to them immediately or not having a method to immediately place them into your volunteer program is like advertising a product you don't really have. This could not only jeopardise your attempts to recruit new volunteers but could effect the reputation of your organisation and put off potential supporters. Unless your organisation can guarantee that within 48 hours of receiving email enquiries from potential volunteers it will respond this method of contact should be discounted and your email address should be removed from all advertisements. Instead, in your online announcements, direct volunteers to call by telephone. Otherwise, volunteers who don't hear from you will soon move on to other organisations and will chose to volunteer elsewhere. Make sure those who answer your agency's phone know that you are posting information to the Internet, in case there is an increase in phone calls regarding volunteer opportunities or calls about "that opportunity you posted".

Examples

Example 1

Title: Volunteer Lunchtime Assistant

Description: Volunteers are needed to help lay the table, serve lunch and wash up.

This might be better expressed as:

Title: Volunteer Lunch-club Helper

Description: Make friends over lunch. Our friendly stroke club needs volunteers to help with lunch-time duties and to socialise with members.

Notes

The opportunity has been re-written to emphasise the important and potentially attractive 'social' element of the role. The original description is very un-inspiring and would probably not motivate a viewer to request further information. This very brief description still lacks information regarding what the role will specifically involve and what commitment will be required from a potential volunteer. The description also needs to include information about the general aims of the organisation and the client group the volunteer will be supporting.

Example 2

Title: Volunteer Shop Assistant

Description: Homelessness charity works to give people a chance to help themselves. We run outreach, hostel and support services. We need volunteers to help in our charity shop.

Might be better expressed as:

Title: Volunteer Retail Assistant

Description: Are you keen to start a career in retail? Our busy shop needs an enthusiastic assistant to help sort, select and sell. Profits go to our work helping homeless people to help themselves.

Notes

The original opportunity description focuses on the general activities provided by the organisation as a whole. The description does not provide details of what tasks volunteers will be expected to undertake or the time commitment which will be required. It also fails to challenge the stereotypical image of charity shop work. The revised title and description is a vast improvement as it describes the opportunity as a potential route into a career in 'retail'. The new description also explains what the real purpose of the role is - Creating 'profits' which enable the organisation to maintain services they provide to homeless people.

Examples

Example 3

Title: Volunteer Marketing Assistant

Description: The Trust manages more than 60 reserves covering a wide range of wildlife habitats, from peat bogs to sand dunes, woodland to limestone grassland. All these habitats require management and voluntary help is vital for practical conservation tasks and surveys.

Excellent opportunity to gain work experience in public relations, fundraising and event organisation.

Notes

This lively description provides clear information about the organisation and its overall aims. The opportunity includes a good description of what benefits the volunteer will gain from the role. The role generally seems interesting and attractive. However the opportunity description is lacking specific details about what the role would entail and what time commitment is required.

Example 4

Title: Volunteer Mentor

Description: To increase the involvement of local communities as volunteers working in crime reduction and to provide access to resources which offenders may use in developing their own potential.

Tasks include: Befriending; providing support; giving advice; helping with writing letters; help with conveying forms; escorting to appointments.

Notes

This description provides good clear information about the purpose of the role and includes a thorough (if not slightly long) list of potential volunteer tasks. The opportunity could be improved by adding details of the benefits which new volunteers could expect to gain and what time commitment is required.