



District Governor Gary Burdette

MERL MATTERS

Are You Ready For 21st Century Volunteers?

By Jill McCrory

Did you know that volunteer service in the United States increased 6% last year? Over 63.8 million people in the U.S. did volunteer work from Sept. 2002 to Sept. 2003 according to the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics. Even more interesting is the finding that those most likely to volunteer were 35 to 44 years old.

Many service organizations are finding that they must respond differently and offer new opportunities in order to attract today's volunteers. Often, the age of the volunteer is not what makes their needs different; it is a matter of 21st century attitude. Whether 25 or 75, the needs of volunteers are changing. Lions Clubs must respond to the new volunteers as well as continue to appreciate their 20th century volunteers.

Some of the major differences between 20th century volunteers and 21st century volunteers are the following.

Tradition and Loyalty

20th century volunteers honor tradition, history and heritage. These are folks that really value our founder, the charter members, our history, and all the traditions of the club. 21st century volunteers value their freedom from tradition. These are the folks that don't want to do something just because "it's always been done that way". 20th Century volunteers are loyal and have a sense of obligation, which means they may attend meetings because they "have to" or because they should. 21st Century volunteers value integrity rather than loyalty. They do not follow a leader because the leader has a title; rather they follow because the leader does what he or she promises. The 21st Century volunteer doesn't put as much significance in titles, nametags, or hierarchy of the organization.

Meetings and Committees

Bottom line, 21st century volunteers do not like meetings. They will only attend if meetings if they have a specific purpose. It is important to them that any meeting, whether it is a dinner, committee, or board meeting have a specific agenda, a set time allocation, and is run professionally. They don't like serving on committees if the committee is more about meeting than doing. They would prefer you send them an email than meet. They WILL do the work involved; they just don't want to meet about it. This doesn't mean they don't like socializing. 21st century volunteers like informal time, but they like to include their family in that time. In comparison, 20th Century volunteers enjoy the social aspects of meetings and they are more used to not having their family there. They are more willing to be on committees, again, because it is an obligation that they value.

Structure and Membership

20th century volunteers are concerned with procedure, rules, and policy; again, perhaps because this is the traditional model of organization and committees. They also value membership in an organization. The 21st century volunteer would prefer to go outside procedures and rules and be highly creative. The results are more important to them than following the rules. They also value participation more than membership.

Technology

21st century volunteers communicate via the Internet. They like email notices, web sites, and online calendars. Many would prefer to get their newsletter electronically. Many of our 20th Century volunteers may use the Internet but don't rely on it like 21st century volunteers do.

What does this mean for today's Lions Clubs? We must be responsive to the new volunteer. That means understanding that they are not going to value all the same things that we may value. It means adjusting and changing our clubs to accommodate their values as well as ours. Here are some suggestions:

- ✍ Talk to prospective members as prospective volunteers first. Tell folks about the specific projects that Lions sponsor, the projects your club participates in, and the volunteer opportunities available.
- ✍ Spruce up your meetings. Ask new members what they are looking for in meetings and what would make them more appealing. Consider cutting back on needless meetings, or combining meetings in order to accomplish more in less time.
- ✍ Offer different ways of participating in your club. Look at alternative membership categories as well as focusing on what specific volunteer activity a new person might be most interested in. 21st century volunteers want to work on a project and then move on. Give them the flexibility they need. Let go of the idea that every Lion must participate in every meeting and every project.
- ✍ Ease up on "we've always done it that way". Encourage new ideas and new ways of doing things. Let new folks participate in those areas that have been held by the same people for years. Infuse you club with new energy.
- ✍ Communicate by email with those who prefer this. Get your club on the Web and post information, meeting minutes, and a calendar of events on your site.

The good news is that Lions Clubs have a great potential to increase volunteers and membership. We must respond to the changing face of volunteers in order to attract them into our clubs. The 21st century volunteer, no matter what their age, has different needs and desires than the volunteer of the past. If Lions Clubs respond positively to those needs, then the results should be an increase in volunteerism as well as membership and retention.