

A Volunteer Communications Strategy: 13 Steps to Driving Recruitment, Engagement and Leadership (Case Study)

When it comes to recruiting and motivating volunteers to ever higher and more effective levels of engagement, no organization has its work more cut out for it than New York Cares.

As New York City's leading volunteer organization, [New York Cares](#) runs volunteer programs for 1,000 New York City nonprofits, city agencies and public schools, enabling more than 50,000 volunteers annually to contribute their time, expertise and energy to a wide array of organizations that address critical social needs citywide.

In order to ensure that its massive and complex operation runs smoothly, the staff at New York Cares has spent considerable time developing and refining their volunteer recruitment strategies, whose lynchpin, not surprisingly, is communication.

I've spent some time talking with the folks at New York Cares recently, and as you'll see below, their strategies can be put to work to boost your organization's volunteer recruitment, engagement and retention rates, no matter the size of your organization.

The Challenge

In the recent past, New York Cares realized it faced three challenges that limited its ability to grow the base of volunteers serving its nonprofit partners.

1) They needed to raise "activation rates" of attendees who came to learn about New York Cares volunteer opportunities. Only 45% were immediately signing up for an assignment after their informational orientation.

2) They needed to increase the levels of volunteer engagement. The great thing about New York Cares is that it's a one-stop shop for want-to-be volunteers to

learn about opportunities to help a broad range of nonprofits, and register for a project that has a commitment level of as little as just a few hours.

But New York Cares needed and wanted volunteers to come back again and again for more of the meaningful volunteer assignments they offered. “We needed to increase the average number of projects volunteers completed in order to grow the services we provide to nonprofit partners,” says Colleen Farrell, senior director of marketing and communications at New York Cares.

Farrell notes that New York Cares also needs a volunteer team leader for every project they start.

3) They needed to create new leaders. “We wanted and needed a higher percent of our volunteer base to step into leadership roles. Taking a leadership role is the ultimate form of engagement and is critical to our expansion,” says Farrell.

What follows is a group of key principles for volunteer communication strategies I’ve gleaned from my observations of New York Cares’ work. I want to thank executive director, Gary Bagley, as well as Colleen Farrell, for volunteering their time and insights on how they’ve achieved their success. Where credit is due for brilliant insights and ideas, it is theirs alone; for anything less, I take responsibility.

The 13 Principles Driving New York Cares’ Volunteer Communication Strategy

1) Understand that all volunteers aren’t the same. Every group of volunteers incorporates various segments, each with distinct wants, needs and interests.

2) Get to know each segment well—very, very well. And keep in touch on an ongoing basis.

3) Use targeted interactive communications. They’re the best way to move volunteers from one level of engagement to the next.

New York Cares segmented its audiences and developed communications plans for each. “We focused in on volunteers, segmenting them by commitment level, and developed a new framework for our engagement with them over the course of their involvement: the *Volunteer Engagement Scale (VES)*,” says Farrell.

The *VES* enables New York Cares to pinpoint the best way to motivate volunteer movement from episodic to more engaged participation. This targeted, personalized approach is now the cornerstone of all volunteer communications.

Volunteer Engagement Scale (VES)

Level 1: Shoppers

Level 2: Episodic Contributor

Level 3: Short-term Contributor

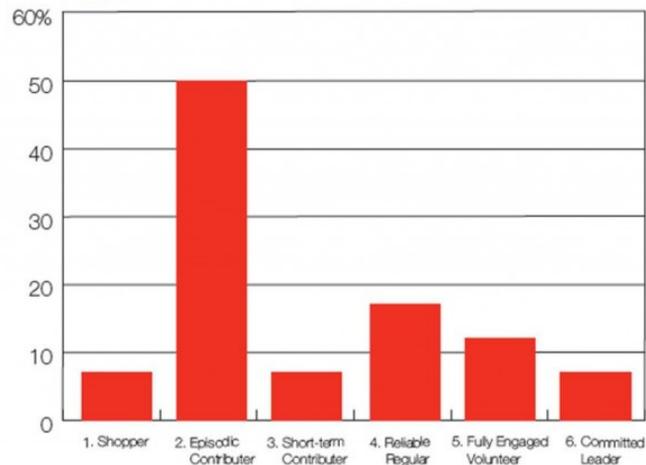
Level 4: Reliable Regular

Level 5: Fully Engaged Volunteer

Level 6: Committed Leader

Distribution of New York Cares Volunteers on the VES

Figure 3



4) Plan communication activities for each segment based on what you

know. Planning enables you to focus on what's important in the long term, rather than be distracted by what just hit your inbox.

5) Speak directly to the “wants” of each segment.

6) Roll out more frequent, targeted communications to build engagement and motivate volunteers to act.

New York Cares developed its [Volunteer Lifecycle communications program](#)—aligned with the *VES*—to provide key information at each stage and encourage deeper relevant engagement, such as more frequent volunteering. The plan specifies how to communicate to recruit volunteers and cultivate them from their first experiences to long-term engagement. For example, only volunteers who have demonstrated a significant commitment to New York Cares are engaged with leadership development messaging.

[The plan](#) also defines triggers for outreach including thank you emails, calls to volunteer leaders and special letters and awards for volunteers who reach key milestones in their volunteer lifecycle.

Stage 1:	Stage 2:	Stage 3:	Stage 4:	Stage 5:	Stage 6:
Recruiting Volunteers	Training/ Activating	Motivating & Retaining	Recruiting Team Leaders	Onsite Project Experience	Building Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word of mouth (30%) • Online: (50%) • Corporate converts (10%) • Annual Event converts (5%) • Other (5%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation Experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Materials • Presentation • Speakers • Program Guide • E-mail & mail communications • Web site and online • Education about New York Cares' model to support individual giving goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savvy email and online communications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hot projects • Recognition after 1st and 5th projects • Engage in online communities • Inspiring collaterals: Program Guide • Communicate individual and macro impact • Great onsite experiences • Great experiences with Team Leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact after 3 projects • Targeted emails • Leadership messaging in regular volunteer communications • Messaging about the need • Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible timing • Annual Conference • Dedicated VR staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How time spent: organized, efficient, fun • Community & Relationship building via teams • Getting them involved further: Team Leaders as ambassadors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition: National, local and New York Cares awards, online profiles, inclusion in PR • Targeted communications: by segment or project type • Community & Relationship building via same teams • Education about New York Cares' model to support individual giving goals

Here are some of the ingredients that make this plan work:

- Online communications are the backbone of New York Cares' outreach, a focus that enables it to manage and deliver targeted communications at a moderate cost.
- Messaging focuses on volunteer impact and outcomes (vs. outputs, such as number of meals served, volunteer hours etc.).
- Increased use of storytelling, imagery and more emotional language does more to engage New York Cares volunteers.

Chart—[***Volunteer Lifecycle Communications Program***](#)

7) Make the ask—Converting interest in volunteering, just as in fundraising, swings on it.

8) Focus on your volunteer orientation program to ensure you're maximizing your communication activities in this critical engagement activity.

New York Cares took a three-pronged approach to increase its "activation rate."

Bagley and team:

- Revamped the orientation process from start to finish. One striking change was that orientation leaders aimed to have most participants signed up for a project before they left the room.
- Streamlined communications with volunteers.

- Ensured that communications were clear and consistent, and that follow-up support was in place.

9) Put the 80-20 rule to work for your volunteer program.

New York Cares focuses on the 20% of volunteers who are most highly engaged to motivate them to become even more involved, and leverages them to more effectively engage less-connected volunteers.

10) Train colleagues, volunteer leadership and board members as messengers to expand the reach of your volunteer communications.

New York Cares increased the number of staff members focused on volunteer leadership development and training. The staff also strengthened its relationships with current team leaders via increased communication, and with prospective team leaders through personal and direct asks. For example, the staff is focusing now on getting team leaders more involved by inviting them to serve as organizational ambassadors.

11) Remember that your audience's perspective, wants, needs and interests change over time.

12) Establish an active volunteer feedback loop. It's the only way to know what's relevant, what's working and what's not, and how to do it better.

13) Track outreach—responses to specific emails, changes in messaging or channels—to supplement the feedback loop. Your findings will highlight what is effective so you can do more of it.

Here's how New York Cares' tracks its communications impact on increasing engagement and retention:

- Its in-house technology infrastructure enables New York Cares to track and measure volunteer engagement in real time. Farrell aligns communications metrics with the *VES* and tweaks continually.

It's unlikely your organization has this kind of resource in-house, but online communications platforms, from e-newsletters to Facebook, provide insight into what is working for your review.

- This real-time tracking “enables New York Cares to make real-time adjustments to both communications and program delivery,” says Farrell. “For example, we added more orientations and projects to the schedule last year to accommodate the influx of new people wanting to volunteer.

Tracking is supplemented by New York Cares’ volunteer feedback loop. The staff keeps in close touch with its volunteers’ satisfaction level and wants via monthly online polling, periodic surveys and focus groups. In addition, its volunteer advisory council provides input on an ongoing basis.

Your Turn—Just Do It!

These 13 steps are making a huge difference for New York Cares. Any or all of them will do the same for your organization.

Don’t be put off by New York Cares’ size and sophistication. You can put these strategies (or some of them) to work for your organization, no matter its size. Select one or two steps to start with, and add more over time. Now get to work!

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