

Youth appeal

What volunteer groups
need to know about reaching
out to young people



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Most of us who work in Quebec's non-profit sector are passionate about community service.

Our groups are mostly run by small teams of staff and devoted volunteers working diligently to make a difference in people's lives. Indeed, the wide range of services and activities we offer seems especially impressive when you consider the small number of staff and volunteers who are actively engaged in this work.

No matter how satisfying a job in the community sector may be, most people eventually think about retirement. Others will be attracted by employment or volunteer opportunities elsewhere. Sometimes the scope of activities in a non-profit will simply grow to the point where more staff and volunteers are needed. Healthy groups always look to their future needs in order to carry their mission forward.

However, persuading younger generations to take up that mission requires effort and care. Navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by digital media must be part of your approach. Equally important are the messages you send. This guide offers information and advice that can help groups become more effective at engaging with the next generation of community leaders

ENGAGEMENT, DEFINED

To engage with youth means educating younger people about the work of your organization, getting them to care about the work you do, and encouraging their participation in whatever ways advance your mission. This could ultimately mean creating a position for a young staff member, recruiting younger volunteers, or even form-

ing a youth council. Before you start crafting a communications strategy, it will help if you focus on the situation in your community, by answering the following questions:

- Why is engaging with younger people important to your group?
- How do you imagine that your organization is currently perceived by youth?
- What do you hope to accomplish by reaching out to younger community members?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH

Young people won't necessarily find out about your activities and services just because you have an online presence. However, because today's youth spend so much time on the internet, it's hard to imagine an effective messaging strategy aimed at younger community members without a digital component. Consider the findings of a recent study of social media use among 18-24 year olds, prepared by Pew Internet:

- 94 per cent use YouTube
- 78 per cent use Snapchat, with 82 per cent of these users visiting the platform daily
- 71 per cent use Instagram, with 81 per cent of these users visiting the platform daily
- 45 per cent are Twitter users

Contrary to popular wisdom, young people are quite willing, as a whole, to donate their time as volunteers. Consider these facts:

- Young Canadians are more likely to volunteer their time than older community members – except that they tend to donate fewer hours (Statistics Canada).
- Young Canadians are most likely to volunteer for education and research institutions.
- Quebec has the lowest rate of volunteering across all age groups.

Why do youth volunteer? Here's what the research shows:

- Seven per cent of youth volunteers are doing so through mandatory high school programs.
- Because their friends or peers are volunteering and encouraged them to do so (54 per cent of 15-19 year-olds, and 47 per cent of 20-24 year-olds).



- To improve their job opportunities (65 per cent of 15-19 year-old volunteers agreed compared to 44 per cent of 20-24 year-olds and 13 per cent of those 25 and older)
- To explore their own strengths (65 per cent of 15-19 year-old volunteers agreed compared to 62 per cent of 20-24 year olds and 45 per cent of those 25 and older).

What about all those young people who don't volunteer?

Here are some reasons that turn up on surveys:

- Teens and young adults are more likely than older Canadians to say nobody asked them to help, or they just don't know how to get involved (almost half of young non-volunteers!).
- They are most likely to say it is hard to find meaningful volunteer opportunities.
- They don't have time and can't make a long-term commitment (just like everyone else).
- Teens were about three times more likely than young adults to say they had a bad experience in the past (13 per cent of those aged 15-19 versus five per cent of those aged 20-24).

Keep in mind that youth are very sensitive to perceived age discrimination (feeling talked down to, being reminded of how little experience they have, hearing generalizations about their generation, etc). They also tend to be highly motivated by issues that concern social justice. They are flexible and can adapt to change more easily. They are also tech-literate and are more likely to find volunteer opportunities through the internet and social media.

Young people have a lot to offer. They are passionate, can be great fundraisers for a cause they believe in, and can be a welcome breath of fresh air for your organization.



STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Once your organization has committed to the challenge of engaging young people, you'll need to develop campaign messages that are sincere and to the point. Be prepared to explain why you need their involvement and be specific about what it is you expect them to do. Showcase your cause and the impact they can have. If younger people already work or volunteer for you, ask them to share their stories.

You'll need to activate traditional and digital methods of communication. Use your website and social-media platforms, as well as posters in schools and community centres. Get in touch with your local school board and high school/college/university career and guidance personnel and ask them to reach out to their students. Is there some place where you can meet and talk to them in person?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Once you have your new volunteers, how do you keep them? Volunteer retention can be tricky, so remember to show young people your appreciation. Think about creating a program in your organization that helps them earn certification. Ask them about what they'd like to learn while serving in your organization; give them assignments that develop their skills; and provide them with employment references. If you are engaged in their success, they will keep coming back.

Young people's longing for meaningful work and a sense of belonging is as keen as it ever was among older generations. Treating youth with respect and giving them responsibility will make them feel like they are part of your team.

Offer your young colleagues constructive feedback and ask for the same in return.

References

Centre for Community Organizations (COCO), Social Media Workbook.
<https://coco-net.org/social-media-workbook-community-organizations-nonprofits/>

For more information visit:

Imagine Canada: <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/>

Idealware: <https://www.idealware.org/>

Nonprofit Marketing Guide.Com: <https://www.nonprofitmarketing-guide.com/blog/>

Other Publications

Titles below are included in the *Communication Matters* series:

1. Networking for Change: A practical guide for non-profits using social media
2. Pick your platforms: Four of the world's most popular networking sites, at a glance
3. Less is more: A guide to content style and strategy in the age of online marketing
4. Youth appeal: What volunteer groups need to know about reaching out to young people
5. First impressions: Tips and design principles for crafting eye-catching messages

The Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN) also produces the following educational resources:

Cemetery Heritage in Quebec: A Handbook

Why and how to care properly for early burial grounds.

Oral History Guide

Offers tips on preparing for, setting up and conducting interviews.

Heritage Field Guide Series: Security for Heritage vols. 1-10
Series of bilingual guides highlights best practices to ensure the security of heritage resources.

Organized Planning and Emergency Response Assistant (OPERA): Your Guide to Emergency Planning (CD)
An interactive tool for storing and retrieving emergency contact information, procedures for managing a variety of threats, a resources guide and an extensive reading list devoted to emergency management.

Heritage Field Guide Series: Volunteering Matters vols. 1-8
Series of bilingual guides highlights topics that will help and interest those working in non-profit organizations that depend upon volunteers.

Volunteering Matters: Guide to Volunteer Recruitment
A step-by-step guide to help your organization develop its ability to recruit volunteers.

InHerit Handbook: Inspiring Heritage Renewal and Identity Together
How to create great learning projects for schools and communities

The Identity of English-speaking Quebec in 100 Objects
A DVD portrait of Quebec's Anglophone communities in all their diversity

Quebec Heritage News
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