



When volunteer groups come knocking, baby boomers ask: 'What's in it for me?'

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In the '60s, baby boomers wanted to change the world. Now they only want to change it on their own terms.

An 18-month Ottawa pilot project that looked at new ways to engage baby boomer volunteers uncovered a number of trends in the hard-to-engage boomer demographic.

Among the trends: "virtual volunteering," which connects the volunteer to the person they mentor via web cam and "volunteer speed dating," which gives potential recruits the chance to meet with several agencies in the time it takes to drink a cup of high-end coffee.

Boomer volunteers are a notoriously slippery fish to catch.

While baby boomers make up almost a third of the Canadian population -- older boomers are in their 60s and heading towards retirement and therefore in their prime volunteering years -- they have been reluctant to sign up.

And when they do, they want to know what's in it for them, said Dan Dubeau, community programs co-ordinator at the Catholic Immigration Centre, which got a provincial grant to explore new ways to nab boomer volunteers.

"Boomers want choice. They want to make their own destiny," he said. "And, for the most part, they don't want to get stuck licking stamps."

Older boomers are more likely than previous generations to work part-time or into their retirement years. They have aging parents and boomerang children to look after, he said. They're not volunteering out of a sense of obligation, but because they like socializing.

"Baby boomers are saying: 'This is what we have and this is what we want out of it. Take it or leave it'," said Mr. Dubeau, who, at 32, considers boomers to be his mentors.

Mr. Dubeau's project included two focus groups and a survey of the members of Ottawa Lifelong Learning, a group of volunteers over age 55, as well as a review of studies from all over the world and some experiments in the Ottawa volunteer community.

One of the ideas the project tried was volunteer speed dating. Held at a downtown café, the networking event gave potential recruits an opportunity to mingle with officials from agencies for a "power hour." Event organizers rang a bell every few minutes, allowing the participants to have a short chat with representatives from one agency, then move on to the next without feeling obligated.

In a similar event, potential recruits were offered a cup of speciality coffee and a chance to meet with six agencies. Surprisingly, the effort attracted more recruits in the 30-something age group and not as many in the target 50-plus demographic.

"This cohort was tough. We threw the net out to see what we pulled in," said Mr. Dubeau.

Heather Badenoch, community relations officer with Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa, said it is easier for her agency to attract 20-something volunteers than boomers. The agency, which matched people with disabilities to volunteer advocates, currently has 230 matches and 220 people on its waiting list.

Ms. Badenoch regularly runs recruitment campaigns aimed at specific demographics. When she needs male volunteers, for example, she will request a public service announcement on the Bear, a radio rock station with predominately male listeners

She is currently working on a Facebook advertising campaign to target potential recruits in this geographic area. But that strategy is unlikely to attract boomers, who aren't much interested in Facebook, she said.

"They have a wealth of knowledge. They have a lot to share. But they're hard to attract," she said.

Chris White, artistic director of the Ottawa Folk Festival, said the 15-year-old festival depends on its 450 volunteers, who perform tasks ranging from feeding 700 people a day and washing the recyclable plates to setting up the stage. About half of the volunteers are boomers, and about 60 per cent return from one year to the next. Mr. White would like to improve this figure -- some festivals have a 90-per-cent volunteer return rate and a festival in Winnipeg even has a waiting list for those who want to be "apprentice volunteers."

To attract and retain volunteers, Mr. White's group works at making them feel appreciated. Last year, a chef prepared a menu for the volunteers, who also get free T-shirts and an opportunity to see the performers up close.

"Part of our mandate is to give volunteers a really good experience," he said. "They're helping us. But I hope we're helping them."

Using the ideas generated in the pilot project, the Catholic Immigration Centre beefed up its volunteer base from 200 workers to 220.

"It didn't skyrocket" Mr. Dubeau concedes.

His report is to be released at a press conference this afternoon at Hooley's Pub on Elgin Street. The event, coincidentally, will also be a networking opportunity aimed at attracting boomer volunteers.

Mr. Dubeau notes that agencies are going to have to change their ways and spend money to attract boomer volunteers.

"It's going to take a lot of effort and a lot of change," he said. "It's not a matter of expecting them to adapt to us."

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## MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE VOLUNTEER STUDY

The study of baby boomer volunteers included two focus groups and a survey of the members of Ottawa Lifelong Learning, a group of 55-plus volunteers, as well as a review of studies from all over the world and some experiments in the Ottawa volunteer community.

Among the major trends the study found:

- "Volutrael" is a working vacation, often overseas, that lets the volunteer experience another culture while using his or her skills to improve the lives of people in need.
- "Virtual volunteering" allows volunteers to offer their skills without even leaving home. Ottawa's PACE 2000, for example, connects volunteer tutors of new immigrants to their matches with web-based video conferencing.
- Boomers want to be matched to a volunteer job that suits their talents and they want the matching to be done efficiently. A British organization recently released a tool kit for "volunteer speed dating" events.
- "Chunking" allows a volunteer to contribute a set amount of time to a project. Boomer volunteers like it because it sets limits on their commitment.
- For a boomer, the biggest inducement to volunteering is being asked by someone they know.
- One of the best places to recruit boomers is at work. Boomers think of volunteerism as a transition out of work.
- Boomers expect clear roles and expectations and want a "memorandum of understanding" that outlines their role. They would also like someone to help guide their "career" as a volunteer.
- Boomer volunteers want immediate feedback. They appreciate it when celebrities and politicians come to volunteer appreciation events. They also don't object to getting attention in the mainstream media for their efforts.

- Agencies that want to attract boomers should call them "seasoned professionals" not "retirees."
- Boomers want rewards -- good meals are considered a plus -- and opportunities to attend outside conferences and training. They also want to be informed when paid work that might suit them becomes available.
- Agencies that want boomers need to "brand" themselves with logos, messages and tag lines that communicate the agency's identity.

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