Creating the Volunteer Experience

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Ask Starbucks executive about the company's recipes for success, and they will tell you unequivocally that it's the people, or “partners,” as Starbucks calls its employees. They will tell you that Starbucks doesn’t just sell coffee, it sells an experience. And that experience, they will say, is completely dependent upon the attitudes and abilities of the partners on the front line who greet and serve more than 30 million customers globally every week. (Weber, 2005)

Two words jumped out at me as I read this report on the hiring practices of Starbucks – “partners” and “experience.” I am intrigued by the concept of creating a “volunteer experience” and I love the idea of referring to volunteers as partners.

Does it create a different impression if we call volunteers partners, consultants, or team members? Starbucks has a Vice President of Partner Resources (not Human Resources). What would happen if Manager of Volunteers became Manager (Vice President) of Partner Resources? What does this say about the people we are bringing into the organization? Frequently, in my experience, volunteers are nice additions to the organization but seldom seen as integral to the mission, values and vision. How can we promote the value of volunteering in recruitment materials if there is no stated internal value for the contributions (or partnership) of volunteers? Inviting volunteers to “make a difference” rings hollow unless the board, leadership and paid staff value the relationship as well as contributions of volunteers. The words we use to label that relationship can be very important.

The 2004 report Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement, by the Harvard School of Public Health – MetLife Foundation Initiative, points out that much of our current language, including the term “volunteer” may be obsolete when trying to attract Baby Boomers. Other researchers have also suggested the need to find new titles for volunteer positions if we hope to entice Boomers into our organizations (Wilson, Steele, Thompson, D’heron, 2002). Why not call them partners? It suggests a more active, equal relationship, and reflects the values of respect and inclusion in decision-making that are consistently identified as critical for overall volunteer satisfaction and retention “We are treated as part of a team.” (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, Tang, 2005).
Starbucks looks for employees with core skills, but they also look for people who are passionate team players. Starbucks believes in not only attracting the best people, but they also have practices and values that keep them once they are hired. The company incorporates its values (including providing a great work environment and treating each other with respect and dignity) on its Web site, its recruiting and promotional material and on the back of employee business cards as a way to attract the best candidates.

They are telling people right upfront, ‘This is what we stand for here.’ People want to work for companies with articulated values. They gravitate toward those companies because they really know what they are getting into. (Weber, 2005)

In a highly fluid job market, Starbucks has a strong retention rate because they value and create a respectful and positive work environment. They provide good orientation and training, good compensation and full benefits to even part time employees

We’re not giving these benefits to our employees because we’re a successful company. We’re successful because we’re giving to our people. We believe it is a fundamental way to run our business. . . . The company’s most important investment is its partner base. And that investment is returned in stability. (Weber, 2005)

Research on volunteerism continues to show that younger volunteers are attracted to the mission and values of nonprofit organizations, rather than the jobs and tasks. They want to be recognized as full and equal partners. Good partners help to create the Starbucks “experience.” Can we create a volunteer experience by recruiting passionate team members – partners—to work side by side with paid staff?

Starbucks is not unique in their desire to create a customer experience. Wal-Mart has a similar philosophy. Perhaps the best-known creator of the total experience is the Disney Corporation who markets Disneyland and Disney World as “the happiest place on earth.” If you have ever been to one of the Disney theme parks, you have been immersed in the “experience.” Every employee in the park personally promotes the experience. During my last visit to Disneyland a maintenance man sat down next to me while I was resting and talked with me about my experience of the day. Every sales clerk asked, “How has your experience been today.” There were people taking exit polls as we left the park. I really felt they were concerned with my personal experience. How often do we ask our volunteer about their daily experience of being a volunteer with the organization?
I cannot help but wonder how we can better create a “volunteer experience” within our organizations? What would this feel like? I envision an environment where paid employees and volunteer partners consistently reflect mission and values to one another and to the client/consumer. It would be a pleasant, supportive, empowering, growing environment where everyone was encouraged to reach his or her full potential. Employees would be asking for volunteer opinions and ideas, and volunteers would have a deeper understanding of their role, value and impact on the mission of the organization. Volunteers would want to come back, excel, do more, because they felt valued, informed, necessary and equal. If we consider the total experience, and not just the work assignments we are creating for volunteers, would we do thing differently, and would it attract more volunteers from a highly competitive volunteer marketplace?

I think there is much we can learn about good volunteer management practices from the corporate world. Businesses have adopted recruitment practices, incentives and good management structures so they can attract and retain good employees. In a competitive volunteer marketplace Manager of Volunteers (Partner Resources) must constantly reevaluate current practices to stay on the cutting edge. There are great examples out there of nonprofits that are creating partnerships and promoting the volunteer experience. Following is an excerpt from the Free Geek website, www.freegeek.org

Whether you want to volunteer here to learn new skills, perform community service, get credit for school or just support the cause(s), we have room for you! Forget all that equipment we handle, our volunteers are our greatest assets.

For those good at striking out on their own, there are a bazillion other things you can do here. We have one volunteer who comes in regularly to make sure our lights are still working (thanks, Robert!). Others may want to concern themselves with construction projects (yep, we have some currently going on!) or making sure our testing systems work consistently. Sometimes we have work parties; you can ask the staff if there’s one coming up. There are lots of options for volunteering here; hopefully you can find one that suits you.

FREE GEEK is a community. This is one of the big rewards people get for working here. You can meet all kinds of interesting people here. You can take part in decisions at FREE GEEK from the most basic to the most wide reaching and abstract.
Like Starbucks, Free Geek recognizes the importance of the volunteers (partners) as a core value. They give examples, and they personalize them. You get a sense of the diversity of opportunities they offer without reading a laundry list of jobs. Then there is the “work party.” What a great way to invite potential volunteers to stop by and experience the organization without making a long-term commitment. Finally, they talk about the experience of community and they let everyone know they will be a partner in the decision making process. In three paragraphs this group advertises values, opportunities, organizational culture and “volunteer experience.”

Free Geek is an example of the new entrepreneurial volunteers I have written about previously.

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