

## Youth Volunteer Recruitment

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### The search for youth

“Youth involvement” is a common catch phrase heard everywhere these days. It can mean a variety of things but almost always pertains to youth voting or contributing to their communities –usually in a service capacity.

You’ve heard that youth are an untapped market - they are ready and willing to help in the nonprofit sector and are just waiting for the chance to do so! You’ve done an audit of your agency and have determined you are indeed “youth friendly”. So, what now? How do you let young people know what opportunities await them at your agency? How do you reach youth – and when you find them, what will your message say?

### Finding youth

Naturally, high schools and post-secondary institutions come to mind – and for good reason! Many high school programs require or encourage students to perform a certain number of community service hours. Some are only 5 hours per year while others are much more demanding, such as the International Baccalaureate program which can require 100 hours by graduation. In post-secondary institutes, community service learning is a trend that continues to grow in popularity – requiring students to volunteer for at least 30 hours. Don’t forget that some faculties require prospective students to volunteer up to 100 hours before even applying to the program! So, focusing your efforts on these educational institutes is an excellent way to reach youth.

In addition to schools, think of other places where the youth gather in your community. How about movie theatres? Malls? Dance studios? Community leagues? Small businesses such as restaurants or retail stores? Is there a recreation center or sports arena where young people spend time? Places where youth are with their parents offer an extra bonus – don’t underestimate a parent’s role in encouraging their child to volunteer!

## Media and the net

Other effective ways to reach young people is through the media and the computer! Regular publications like local newspapers may not be as effective as trendier weekly papers like the kinds found in coffee houses. Of course, most young people access computers on a regular basis – in fact a recent study called *Young Canadians in a Wired World* states that “94% of young people say they go online from home (compared to 79% in 2001) and 64% of grade 10 and 11 students use the Net to explore their own interests, learn about the world and do school work”<sup>1</sup>.

So, take advantage of that knowledge and access any websites that allow you to advertise your volunteer opportunities – ones aimed specifically at youth are best and many exist – just do a search for one specific to your area.

## Websites aimed at youth:

<http://www.tigweb.org/>

<http://www.pitchin.org/>

<http://www.teenresearch.com/>

<http://www.apathyisboring.com/>

<http://youthcentral.com/>

## Speaking to youth

Now that you’ve found all the young people, it’s important to know what you’re going to say to them! With any kind of volunteer recruitment, it’s imperative to list the benefits of volunteering –but it’s even more so with this audience. Be sure to really highlight what’s “in it for them”. For a lot of young people, volunteering is a new concept. Today’s youth are busy with school, sports, clubs, lessons, part time work, friends and family and so they may wonder why they would choose to spend their time working for free? Point out that helping others can also mean helping themselves (excellent resume experience, contacts in the field, better

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<sup>1</sup> Young Canadians in a Wired World 2005. [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

chance at scholarships, potential summer or future employment, etc.) and in the process, they may have fun and gain that amazing feeling one gets from really making a difference.

## Marketing to youth

How you communicate to youth is very important. If it's been awhile since you've been a young person yourself, the first thing you should do is to take a peek inside the world of young people today. You can do this by listening to a radio station that plays today's music (hint: if you recognize the songs *and* they are done by the *original* artist's – that's not the stations that today's youth listen to!), watch Much Music, visit the many websites designed by and for youth, buy a funky magazine aimed at youth and look at the tone of the language used, look at the colours featured and the mood of the advertisements. Notice the bold text and graphics. See how the writing styles are often casual and conversational and how humour and shock are often used. If you've been using those single colours, photocopied, tri-fold brochures without graphics, it will be easy to see why these simply can't compete with what you've been seeing in advertisements aimed at youth! But don't be discouraged. Use their tactics to make your own marketing strategies more effective. Often, large retail companies pay big bucks to various research firms to find out what speaks to youth – what's "fresh". Why not take advantage of what they've learned? Remember, you are competing with the media and today's youth are media savvy.

## Presenting yourself to youth

A word of caution though, while your goal is to glimpse into the world of youth, don't try to become a youth yourself. In other words, unless you are in fact a young person yourself – don't try to act like one. Nothing is more transparent than someone trying to speak to youth by being funky, cool, hip, fresh, def, phat and a whole bunch of other words that I can really only guess at their meaning but do know that they sound absolutely ridiculous coming from someone over 18! Be genuine. Be yourself – especially in presentations. Treating the event like a business meeting won't work but don't pretend that you are their peers either. Like any other age group, youth can see pretense and will resent your attempt to manipulate them. Keep it casual, keep it conversational – avoid using business jargon – use layman's terms and whenever possible, use humour. If you are stiff, formal and cold, then volunteering at your agency isn't going to look like a barrel of laughs! However, don't downplay the importance of the volunteer work. Be honest and upfront about everything – especially commitment, reliability and what their

involvement means to the agency and the community. If it's really hard or serious work, don't promote it as a party – that will benefit no one. Also, if possible, ask a youth who volunteers at your agency or has had positive volunteer experiences to present with you. Hearing this information from their peers will carry more weight.

### **Worth the effort**

Youth can be energetic, positive and enthusiastic to have in your agency. They can look at things from a perspective that others may not see. They may have special considerations that are different from other age groups but if your agency wants to be inclusive, diverse and fair – then it's worth the effort to include youth. The key to speaking to youth successfully is honesty and respect. Isn't this true for virtually all age groups?

### **Acknowledgement**

This article was written by Amanda Sokol; 2006

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