



# Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

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Series Set I Number 15

December 1998

## Set I Strategies for Societies

### Volunteers: Finding Them & Keeping Them

by Karen Clifford

# Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

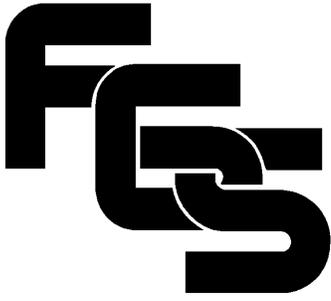
This paper describes the many volunteers in your organization; how to identify them and keep their interest is the challenge.

Ideas include: identifying projects and activities that need volunteers; determining the level of interest within your group for that project; identifying contributors (project leaders, typists, mentors, trainers); analyzing your resources available for the project; getting started; volunteer recruitment; the long haul and finally, rewarding the volunteers.

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## Set I. Strategies for Societies Volunteers: Finding Them & Keeping Them by Karen Clifford

### INTRODUCTION

Genealogy societies, ethnic organizations, and family or single-name associations exist to meet the unique needs of their members. The services they provide, although similar in nature, are often customized to these needs. But one thing these groups share is that, as nonprofit societies, they require volunteers to accomplish their many goals.

Consider your own organization. Do you fall within any of these situations?

- ▶ There is much genealogical interest but you have little room and equipment or facilities to work with, and never enough volunteers to get the work done.
- ▶ There is great expertise in genealogy in your group, much interest, but little or no organization.
- ▶ There is great interest, little expertise, but good organization.
- ▶ There is much interest, several volunteers with little experience, room and facilities are available, and organization is complete.

Each of these situations could use some help but all of them need volunteers in one area or

another. In one case volunteers may be needed to direct what few resources are available. I like to think of them as “facility cops.” If you only have one computer and everyone wants to use it, you need a strong volunteer to police the activities and keep the masses under control.

If some members have great expertise in genealogy, they could quickly burn out if they must do everything a society requires. If you need volunteers with greater genealogy expertise, a training program may be the solution. Let’s look at each of these options and see what other societies have done.

### DETERMINE A SPECIFIC GOAL

First of all, specifically determine the projects or leadership positions you are interested in or for which you need volunteers. Focus on one project or position at a time. Enlist the help of others as indicated below.

### DETERMINE LEVEL OF INTEREST

The level of interest toward starting a particular project, expanding a genealogy society, moving to a new locality, setting up a training program, finding a new leader, or whatever your society

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goal might be, could be determined by doing the following:

Discuss your ideas in a small informal meeting between like-minded individuals.

- ▶ While holding a regularly scheduled meeting at another event, take an oral survey.
- ▶ Personally contact other interested individuals.
- ▶ Conduct a written survey of associated organizations.
- ▶ Hold a question and answer session at another event.

Once you have identified the level of interest, identify specific potential contributors.

### IDENTIFY THE CONTRIBUTORS

• **Board members, leaders, committee heads.** Members of your board, past or present leaders, and committee heads can often provide the names of other potential volunteers or those who could train or mentor them. Past volunteers are an excellent reserve pool. They may be waiting to be asked to serve again.

• **Writers, promoters, editors.** Those who have a talent for promoting your ideas to potential volunteers are the writers, promoters, and editors in your society. Try to identify those individuals who could market the needs of your society well. They must fully understand your goals and objectives because they will present your case to the general public in an attempt to attract new volunteers from the community at large.

• **Educators, teachers, mentors, trainers.** Those who naturally make good trainers and mentors for new volunteers are those who have had some teaching experience. Nearly every genealogist has an area of interest and some knowledge a beginner would not have. The idea is to help potential trainers discover their own strengths

and the skills to teach others what they know. Many of these people will not be needed to teach genealogy, but they may be needed to teach a genealogy computer program, how to use a computer in general, how to use the Internet, how to run a cash register if your society has one, how to access library materials, etc. These positive, supportive, people-loving individuals are perfect to train your volunteers.

### ANALYZE YOUR RESOURCES

Once you have a list of people to consider, look at their individual needs. Professional people volunteer because they enjoy the association with like-minded individuals, and they will learn something they want to know while they share their knowledge with others.

Artistic volunteers like to share their artistic talents. Use them in your publicity functions, to help with flyers, and to organize your materials in attractive ways.

Use your honest, trustworthy volunteers to handle the financial responsibilities of your organization.

Many individuals who are in constant leadership positions may enjoy an opportunity to work solely on a project at their own pace IF they know what is expected of them and when.

### GETTING STARTED

The most important aspect is *enthusiasm*. It is like jam. It gets all over everyone. Next is solid, dependable leadership to develop a common philosophy. If your goals are defined with clearly written job descriptions for the volunteers, people will be more likely to volunteer. Why? Because they will know the extent of their volunteer service.

Teach the correct principle of *delegation*. Delegation is not passing the buck. Delegation is giving someone the opportunity to learn

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something new, to become involved in something worthwhile, to meet new friends along the way, to experience a sense of accomplishment, and to work side-by-side with you in an interesting project.

Finally, and most important, express appreciation over and over again. Volunteers receive no financial incentive to keep going. What they do receive is recognition from their peers, support in a common vocation, mostly enjoyable associations, and appreciation for their service. The more that sincere appreciation is extended to volunteers, the more they will want to continue their service.

Now let's consider some specifics such as recruitment, advanced training for the "long haul," and other rewards along the way.

### RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS

- **Advertising.** Your society newsletter is a wonderful place to advertise a need for volunteers to work on a specific project. The more specific the need, the more specific the newsletter ad should be.

Also, focus on the benefits. Why would someone want to be involved in extracting all the names out of this collection, for example? Will they learn a new computer program? Is there a potluck dinner planned for the end of the project? Does everyone who contributes get a copy of the product free or at a greatly reduced price? Or will the focus be on the enjoyment of working on a significant project?

- **One-on-one commitments.** We all know individuals to whom you cannot say no. They have an ability to get us involved in everything. Use individuals like that to enlist volunteer helpers. Have the person contact a certain number of people on a one-on-one basis.

### THE LONG HAUL

- **More enthusiasm.** Projects or commitments requiring several years are considered "long haul." Leadership must constantly be providing continued enthusiasm and support to its volunteers. That support can be in the way of recognition, better facilities, easier or faster processes, and many other things. Mostly it involves appreciation.

- **Avoid burn out.** Rather than overwork the volunteers you already have, ask them to find others to share the responsibilities. This will require constant recruiting and constant training. Knowing this in advance means that lessons prepared for training should be saved to use again at a future date. It might also suggest that some lessons could be improved, shortened, lengthened, etc. Ask current volunteers for their input. Did they feel they received sufficient training? Could any of them mentor another? Have you found another potential teacher in the group?

### REWARDING VOLUNTEERS

- **Seminars.** If your society is already putting on a genealogy seminar, let your volunteers attend at a greatly reduced price. They feel special this way and the increased training in the seminar might encourage them to become a leader in the future.

- **Training.** Advanced training and opportunities for the diligent volunteer are a form of reward. It says, "we trust what you are doing and we think you are capable of doing more." Either provide them with more training or ask them to help train others.

- **Awards.** Awards can be provided along the way for diligent volunteers. They might be presented at local monthly meetings with extra attention given at local seminar luncheons. Don't forget that the Federation of Genealogical Societies has some very special awards for those

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who have contributed in a significant way to the promotion of genealogical activities in your society. This is a way to recognize a volunteer nationally for work they have done locally.

One local society put up a spotlight of the month on a bulletin board in their society. Users of the facility could nominate anyone to be recognized for their volunteer service. A box was placed in the society research area to collect nominations. Volunteers tended to go the extra mile hoping to receive recognition for their special efforts. Leaders also watched for noteworthy contributions made by volunteers so they could nominate someone.

Another society puts on a potluck luncheon for their volunteers and presents a lovely program on behalf of these special people.

Another society, which was conducting a long term military indexing project, gave everyone on their volunteer team a military rank which historically existed at the time of the military records they were indexing. Military units were also set up to match the project. Individuals and units competed with each other to receive higher ranks and promotions by accomplishing greater and greater goals in their assigned projects. People were promoted from corporals to generals

in the several years they worked on the projects. So many people volunteered for the project that entire "armies" were organized. In order to keep communication going between the various units, a newsletter was instituted where everyone could see the promotions of other volunteers. This encouraged greater competition and more work being done in a faster manner.

When this society's leader came to report at the board meeting about his volunteers, he practically burst his buttons expressing his pride for his "troops." He understood the value of training, communication, and appreciation. He had set specific goals and clearly defined job descriptions. He knew that the project he was undertaking was for the "long haul," and he planned accordingly.

### CONCLUSION

Nonprofit organizations need volunteers to complete projects and provide member services. Attracting and keeping these important contributors is possible when a society identifies, recruits, trains, motivates, and rewards them. Generate enthusiasm to avoid the burnout caused by "long haul" projects, and these volunteers will help your society prosper.

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