

# PTA Volunteer Recruitment Step by Step



Leslie Block, Matsunaga/Langview PTA

**T**he start of a new school year mixes excitement with trepidation for parents and students alike. It also signals the beginning of a new PTA year—a year characterized by hopes for increased parental involvement, new projects, and successful fundraisers.

For those hopes to be realized, PTAs need to recruit new volunteers and motivate existing volunteers to stay active and productive. The big question is “How?” First, it is important to remember that virtually every study that examines volunteer involvement stresses that people volunteer because they are asked. *Because they are asked!!* It sounds so simple, but asking can be harder than it seems. Here are a few pointers to help you make your “ask” an effective one.

## Be prepared

PTA leaders should be knowledgeable about the initiatives their unit has planned for the coming year and what specific jobs will need to be done to carry out those initiatives. When and where

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does the work need to be done? Who is available to answer questions from volunteers? Is this a task that involves coming to the school, or can working at home be just as effective? How much time will be involved? Likewise, does the potential volunteer need to have certain skills, or access to certain equipment, such as home computers and printers? The more you know about the work that you are asking someone to perform, the more likely it is that the person being asked will be able to evaluate the request and give you an honest answer.

## Choose the right person to do the asking

If you are seeking a parent to take on a particularly large task, you will want to consider who knows this person well enough to generate a positive response to the request. Consider involving the principal of your school when asking for a major commitment, or find a friend or colleague who can fully explain the task, as well as the expected benefits.

## Thank for asking!

Eileen Spagnola, a PTA member who has served in a variety of roles for the Forest Ridge PTA, Oak Forest, Illinois, agrees that the main reason she joined PTA was "being asked."

"I was never a sit-at-home type of person, so right after I had children, I did as much as possible with them. I have two girls, and we did the zoo, parks, museums, anything I could find to keep us busy and learning something, even if it was learning how to get to the next adventure.

"Once my oldest started school and my youngest was in preschool, I really needed something to fill my time. I found out the school needed someone to help a few days a week in the computer lab, so I started volunteering.

"One day, I walked into school and the building secretary said, 'Hey, just the person I was looking for. Could you help PTA with something? Will you be our building representative for their Reflections program?' She gave me the name and number of the PTA person who was currently the Reflections chair, and after we talked, I took the plunge. I was lucky enough to have devoted and organized volunteers to learn from in my first few years.

"Because of PTA, I have learned so very much about how our public schools work and the best way to help and be an advocate for our children and our schools.

"So really, just being asked was the nicest thing anyone could have done for me!"

### Personalize the message

We've all had the terrible recruitment calls in which someone on the other end of the phone says "It's your turn" or "I've asked everyone else, and no one would do it." No matter how much you may feel like saying one of those things, don't! Think about the person to whom you will be talking and frame your message to their particular circumstances. Each of us is special, and each of us deserves to be noticed for what makes us special.

### Put yourself in your volunteers' shoes

Volunteers may have special needs or problems committing their time for a variety of reasons. You need to keep in mind what your volunteer needs to say "yes" to you. If you are asking months in advance for help running an event, keep in mind that volunteers' schedules change, emergencies come up, and memories are faulty. You will need to confirm their participation closer to the event date. Likewise, grandparents, disabled adults, and low-income parents may have trouble getting to the event; if so, transportation should be offered.

### Be enthusiastic

While this point should go without saying, it is very important to be enthusiastic when you invite someone to volunteer. Who wants to say "yes" to volunteering when the asker makes the task sound like sheer drudgery?

Be rested, positive, and upbeat when you make a recruitment call—yes, I said "call." E-mail is wonderful, but it does have its limitations. Some e-mails get lost in transit, and others are misplaced in very full in-boxes. If you do e-mail a request, follow up with a phone call or a face-to-face visit. If the job is important enough to get done, then it's important enough to justify both a written and a verbal request.

### Be realistic

As you consider the various jobs that need to be done, be attentive to the size and scope of work that you ask others (and yourself) to perform. While some volunteers may be eager to take on a lot of assignments, your PTA runs the risk of work not being completed. It is far better to carve out realistic assignments and include more volunteers than to rely on only a few people. Such arrangements help avoid volunteer burnout and offer more parents a chance to become involved.

### Be courteous

Everyone gets tired and everyone has a bad day, but it is not appropriate to share your bad mood with the people your PTA counts on the most—your volunteers. Likewise, when you're calling volunteers to ask for their help, ensure that you haven't phoned at a bad time. You probably can find people at home during the dinner hour, but calling at dinnertime can be an imposition on volunteers' time with their families. When you call, determine if they are willing and able to talk. If not, arrange a mutually agreeable time to discuss your request.

### Close the deal

When you call or meet with someone and pose a service opportunity, don't conclude the conversation without the final ask: "Now that you understand the assignment, would you be willing to take it on?" Without this final component of a conversation, it is easy to walk away from a discussion thinking that someone has said "yes" when, in fact, they are still thinking about it, or even worse, not aware that you were hoping they would volunteer for the task. If you find out the person is not yet ready to commit, set a date and time when you can get back in touch.

### Determine what "no" means

In spite of your best efforts, not everyone will be available to volunteer when you need them. Their refusal doesn't always mean

## Free Online Tools for PTA Volunteer Management

If you want to:	Use this Web site:
organize a class party	evite, mypunchbowl
quickly assemble a roster	CircleUp
sell tickets for events	eventbrite
choose an ideal meeting time	Doodle.ch/main.html
sign up and remind volunteers	VolunteerSpot
coordinate group communication	Yahoogroups Googlegroups

they don't want to volunteer at all. For some people, "no" is a temporary situation; they may be available "next month" or "after the soccer season." One way to determine if "no" is a short-term situation is to ask if you can call back next semester, or in a month or

two. If each ask still generates a "no," you may need to take this person off your prospects list. You don't need to waste your time if this person never plans to volunteer.

### Follow up quickly

As soon as a prospective volunteer has agreed to take on a task, you need to get back in touch with project manuals, guidelines, or other necessary information. If you don't have materials or information to forward, then be sure you follow up to offer assistance or suggestions as needed.

The work PTAs do is vital to the health of our schools and the education of our children. For a PTA to become and remain healthy, its leadership must find ways to engage members and nonmembers alike in working to improve the educational environment for students. By recruiting volunteers, helping them succeed, and continuing to motivate their efforts, PTA leaders can ensure their units remain effective and active voices for children, families, and education. **OC**

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