10 Tips for Effective Museum Volunteer Websites

Just a decade ago, few would have predicted the technically sophisticated, multipurpose, visually polished museum websites of today. Museums of all sizes have captured the medium’s potential to engage the public. Volunteers—prospective and current—are an important segment of the virtual audience. As the online face of volunteering, the volunteer section of a museum website is essential to marketing and recruitment. As a practical communication tool, it makes interacting with volunteers more efficient.

A web design or redesign process requires communication, collaboration, and advocacy of the volunteer program’s needs. The volunteer program manager—or a designated staff member or volunteer—should be involved early in discussions and planning, contribute content for the volunteer section, and work with the webmaster and editor to refine the content so it meets your recruitment and information needs while aligning with the museum’s brand image and budget requirements.

Volunteer program websites generate interest in volunteering, but with the right content, they also help create a pool of well-informed applicants. At a minimum, there should be four subsections:

1. About the Volunteer Program
   (an inviting overview of the impact, roles, and benefits)
2. Opportunities
   (a list of currently available jobs, with descriptions and basic requirements)
3. Benefits of Volunteering
   (tangible and intangible rewards and recognition)
4. How to Apply
   (with links to online or downloadable application forms)

Ideally, but not always, each subsection has its own page, accessed by clicking on a menu of options. The introductory page—called the “landing page”—is critical because it must quickly capture web users’ interest.

Be prepared to discuss goals, audiences, and desired features with the website developer or project manager. You may be asked to complete a worksheet outlining your needs and expectations.

Use these 10 tips to guide your thinking, express your online requirements, and draft content:

1. Take the user’s perspective.
   Think about what prospective volunteers need to know. Ask current volunteers what would make the website most useful to them. List everything the volunteer program staff (even if that’s just you) needs from a website—better job descriptions? an efficient online application process?

2. Make it action-oriented.
   Web marketers say a website needs a “call to action”: a combination of design elements and content that conveys a purpose and compels a user to take a specific action. You may want people to click deeper into the site, contact you for more information, or apply for a position that interests them.

3. Keep content short, inviting, and easy to read.
   Web readers skim what they see on the screen, so make the key points stand out. Choose brief, manageable “chunks” over longer paragraphs. Consider creating a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section to communicate basic details.

continued on page 5
It is easy to become absorbed in the day-to-day tasks and challenges of a museum volunteer program. But those of us who manage these programs or serve as volunteers or docents do not need to feel isolated. Some years ago, a group of colleagues in Philadelphia museums and other cultural institutions decided to meet periodically to share ideas, challenges, and success stories. Cultural Volunteer Managers of Greater Philadelphia has no officers or meeting minutes. The meeting rotates from place to place, always attracting a different mix of people. Other cities have similar networks, but only a few bring together managers from cultural institutions.

Though our members are all in the same metropolitan region, we and our institutions are quite diverse. One quality we share is a sense of humor—required of museum volunteer program managers. No matter what we put on an agenda, our meetings end up covering a wide range of topics: How are volunteer hours tracked? What software do you use for recordkeeping or e-newsletters? What kind of a budget does your volunteer program have? Are volunteers permitted or encouraged to have their own budget? What’s the difference between a docent and a volunteer? What awards do you give volunteers, and do you base them on years of service, or hours, or something else? Do the powers-that-be at your institution expect the number of volunteers to triple in the coming year? Are your volunteers invited to the staff holiday party? What do you do when a volunteer does ____ ? (Some horrifying and humorous tales have been shared on this topic!)

The answers are always interesting and usually very helpful. At the very least, we all gain an idea of how volunteer programs operate in other places. We are not alone in the challenges we face in building and sustaining a volunteer program, and we find that our colleagues have brilliant ideas to share. Those newer to the field definitely benefit from the experience of those who have already made lots of mistakes, and those who have been at the same institution for a long time benefit from seeing that things can be done differently elsewhere.

While meeting with colleagues informally face-to-face allows you to delve into a few topics you would not want recorded on an email exchange, there is another way volunteer program managers and volunteers can connect around common issues. The AAMV listserv magnifies the opportunity to collect ideas and call on colleagues to help solve problems. Like the agenda topics for my local group, the topics on the listserv are constantly shifting, and even when repeated, new responses shed a different light. If you could use some advice or support in addressing a problem, or if you have a brilliant idea or success story to share, I encourage you to use the AAMV listserv to connect with your colleagues nationwide. Not sure how to get on? Please feel free to contact our listserv manager, Linda Apple (LApple@mfa.org). The more participants we have, the better our conversation will be. And isn’t networking the reason there is an AAMV?

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**AAMV Newsletter**

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This newsletter is a quarterly publication of the American Association for Museum Volunteers, the nonprofit membership and service organization dedicated to the millions of volunteers in all categories of museums in the United States and to professionalism in museum volunteer program management. AAMV welcomes submissions of manuscripts for publication. Queries should be made to the President. Information about AAMV’s other services is available at [www.AAMV.org](http://www.AAMV.org).
Nominate Your Volunteer of the Year

AAMV’s annual Volunteer of the Year Award, inaugurated in 2010, recognizes the key role volunteers play in museums and cultural institutions and showcases outstanding achievement in volunteer service. This national honor offers the opportunity to nominate a deserving volunteer from your museum. (See the last newsletter for a profile of Tede Johnson, last year’s recipient.)

The nomination deadline for the 2011 award, to be presented in May at the American Association of Museums annual meeting in Houston, is March 1, 2011. Nominating criteria and forms are available on the AAMV website, http://aamv.org/aamv2010.html. For more information, contact Karen Kennedy Fink, AAMV mid-Atlantic regional director, kfink@constitutioncenter.org.

Member Spotlight

Whether they’re volunteer program managers or volunteers, AAMV members represent the full spectrum of museums. From the large urban natural history museum to the small local children’s museum, their experiences and challenges can be remarkably similar. In this newsletter feature, we’ll introduce you to some of your colleagues in other museums.

New AAMV member Paula Rampe has been manager of volunteer programs at the Asian Art Museum (http://www.asianart.org) in San Francisco since 1999. She is also an experienced museum volunteer. Her museum was transformed in 2003 when it moved to an expanded facility, an adaptive reuse of the former San Francisco Public Library. Its square footage increased by a dramatic 75 percent. AAMV board member Deirdre Araujo of the Exploratorium asked Paula to reflect on the experience.

When I began at the museum, we had 140 volunteers who provided support in the Museum Store and at the Information Desk. My first task was to recruit, place, and train an additional 300 volunteers in less than four months for the opening of a major special exhibition. It was a challenge, but we rose to the occasion.

Since then, the changes and challenges have been major. We closed our Golden Gate Park location and had an 18-month hiatus until the new building was completed. But still we had to hang on to our volunteers in anticipation of the opening, and we had to recruit more volunteers. Over the years we have had fairly significant changes in the areas that use volunteer support.

Our current volunteer base is about 425, and it is widely diverse. They come from eight of the nine Bay Area counties and range in age from teens to people in their 80s. Fifty-seven percent have Asian surnames. Volunteers provide support in our Museum Store (working collaboratively with staff) and for Visitor Services (they are responsible for the coat check and information desk). I’m proud to say that the areas staffed solely with volunteers consistently receive the highest visitor satisfaction ratings on annual surveys.

We also have about 150 active docents. Our office provides administrative and stewardship support: scheduling, compiling and analyzing tour statistics, keeping docents connected with the museum’s operations on a day-to-day basis.

As in any museum, there are opportunities and challenges. The Asian Art Museum is involved in a branding exercise that will have a major impact on our volunteers and docents, as they are the face of the museum to our visitors. We’d also like to improve staff-volunteer relations, which make it difficult, at times, to provide the amount of volunteer support we’d like. As a new AAMV member, I look forward to having this community of colleagues who can share perspectives on the work that we all care deeply about.
Q: We’re rethinking our interview process for new volunteers. Instead of interviewing every candidate using the same list of questions, we’d like to include senior volunteers in the process. How does this work in other museums?

A: • A team of two volunteers conducts the interview. The volunteer program manager and two more volunteers who escort the candidate to and from the interview also provide evaluations. All five people sit around a table to review each applicant.

• Instead of standardized questions, the docent application becomes a springboard to find out more about the candidate, his or her interest in art, comfort level in working with people of all ages, ability to give the time required for training and touring, and so on. Dialogue is a good way to gauge someone’s enthusiasm, personality, and willingness to learn.
4. **Show volunteers at work.** Strong, positive images can be just as effective as words to show the varied and interesting roles volunteers play.

5. **Use simple navigation.** For one-click access, locate a “Volunteer” button in the top-tier navigation bar. Most museums make volunteer information a subsection of “About Us,” “Support,” or “Get Involved,” and it’s not clear where to look.

6. **Make contact information easy to find.** Staff names, phone numbers, and email addresses make your volunteer program accessible.

7. **Build a volunteers-only section.** Share your volunteer handbook, phone and email lists, and other elements of your volunteer information system. You can post news updates, training materials, and a calendar of events. If time permits, consider starting a volunteers’ blog. Some museums offer scheduling through an online portal such as VicNet.

8. **Publish your newsletter online.** An e-newsletter means convenient access, lower cost, and environmentally sound practices. Maintain an online archive of back issues for easy reference. If you feel that you can’t eliminate your print newsletter now, plan to move in that direction.

9. **Keep content fresh and current.** Ease and frequency of updating is a major consideration. Often the museum webmaster is responsible, but more museums are using content management systems that make it easy for departments to make their own updates.

10. **Recognize volunteers’ contributions.** A website can be an excellent year-round recognition tool when you include volunteer profiles and information about award winners.

For ideas, look at these examples of volunteer program websites:

- **Children’s Museum of Indianapolis**
  [http://www.childrensmuseum.org/volunteer](http://www.childrensmuseum.org/volunteer)
  Prospective volunteers find clear, step-by-step instructions for applying, while active volunteers can log in to Volunteer Central for scheduling and information. A recognition section lists volunteers who have reached service milestones. A redesigned museum website will launch in 2011, with expanded possibilities for the volunteer section.

- **Detroit Institute of Arts**
  Profiles of award-winning volunteers on this inviting, easy-to-use site

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**One-Click Volunteering**

The Houston Museum of Natural Science’s lively volunteer web presence ([http://www.hmns.org/get_involved/volunteer.asp](http://www.hmns.org/get_involved/volunteer.asp)) combines the best of both worlds: an integrated section of the museum website for marketing and recruitment and a password-protected section for current volunteers. Unlike many museums, HMNS gives “Volunteer” its own button on the homepage navigation bar. Lynn Wisda, director of volunteers, explains the details:

**What are the main functions of your website?**
We use it for marketing and information purposes. If you are interested in volunteering, you can find out about opportunities, benefits, and requirements. Our tagline is “Donate Your Body to Science.” You can also register online or call us for more information. If you’re already a museum volunteer (and have completed 12 hours of training), you may register for access to the *Digital Diplodocus* website, which includes a Docent Library, newsletter, and calendar.

**Who developed The Digital Diplodocus?**
The friend of a volunteer was paid to design our original website, and a volunteer committee decided on the content. The diplodocus dinosaur is our volunteer mascot. Eventually the site was moved to museum servers, and the head of our IT department did some modifications under the guidance of the webmaster, who is a volunteer.

**What materials are included?**
The Docent Library contains education materials that you can access and print on your home computer. They explain the content of permanent exhibit halls and traveling exhibits, and they’re researched and written by volunteers. Our bimonthly newsletter, *The Dashing Diplodocus*, is available in both print and online versions.

**Who updates the volunteer website?**
The Web Secretary and a couple of volunteers keep the content up to date. We don’t have to wait for the museum to do it for us. But it’s always a challenge to keep things current.

**How have volunteers responded?**
Our volunteers truly are an extraordinary group. I would say 70 percent have registered on the website, and the materials are very well used.
An AARP survey on volunteering, giving, and civic engagement activities conducted in 2009 examines how the extent and nature of volunteering has changed since the last study in 1997. Museums may feel the impact of two key findings:

- While the rate of traditional volunteering through or for an organization has held steady, the amount of time volunteers spend in service has declined as volunteering becomes more episodic. Volunteers report spending an average of 6 to 10 hours per month in service—a decline of 5 to 9 hours per month since AARP’s 2003 Time and Money Study.

- Age continues to be highly correlated with volunteering. Generation X (currently ages 29 to 44) has the highest rates of volunteering, while the Greatest Generation (age 81 and older) has the lowest rates.


Is Facebook in your future? A recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that social media are gaining in popularity among older adults. Social networking use among Internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled—from 22 percent to 42 percent—over the past year. While use of sites like Facebook and LinkedIn has grown dramatically across all age groups, older users have been especially enthusiastic about embracing new networking tools. Although email continues to be the primary way that older users maintain contact with friends, families, and colleagues, many users now rely on social network platforms to help manage their daily communications, sharing links, photos, videos, news, and status updates with a growing network of contacts.

For more about the report, Older Adults and Social Media, go to http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media.aspx. Do you use social media like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn for marketing or information sharing in your museum volunteer program? Share your comments on the AAMV listserv.

This AAMV publication stimulates creative thinking about finding, training, supervising, and supporting volunteers in a changing environment. Purchase your copy for $29.95 at www.authorhouse.com, or visit the AAMV website at www.AAMV.org for more information and a link to order the book.


Transforming Museum Volunteering by Ellen Hirzy for the American Association for Museum Volunteers

The clear and concise content on this well-designed site explains volunteer opportunities for individuals and groups, benefits, and application steps. A description of staff roles (under “How to Apply”) shows that the museum invests in ensuring a positive volunteer experience.

Older Adults and Social Media

Volunteer from page 5

Volunteer from page 5
The AAMV Board welcomed two new at-large members in May 2010. Carly Shaw is the volunteer manager at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, overseeing the volunteer program with its 280 volunteers as well as the intern and group tour programs. She organizes training and enrichment programs for volunteers and recruits, and places and trains 15 to 20 interns each year. Carly also markets and schedules docent-led tours of the museum. Linda Wells is a volunteer and volunteer leader at the Detroit Institute of Arts. She organizes interpretive and educational programs for visitors. She has also served on the board of an international horticultural society and has skills and experience as an editor, writer, and speaker.

Western Regional Director Deirdre Araujo introduced the new state liaison from Oregon. Jeanelle Hernandez is the education/outreach department intern at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon and a former education docent at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History. She will complete a master of arts degree in arts administration and museum studies this year.

Every AAMV Board member is ready and willing to answer members’ questions and hear your ideas about how this organization can serve both volunteer program managers and volunteers in the museum world. Please use the regional representatives as your first point of contact. They would love to get to know you better.
What Is AAMV?

There are more than one million volunteers and volunteer program managers in all categories of museums in the United States. Founded in 1979, the American Association for Museum Volunteers (AAMV) is America’s only national association dedicated to the paid and unpaid museum staff who work together. AAMV is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

Who are AAMV members?

We are volunteers, docents, and paid museum staff who bring a wealth of experience and ideas in promoting volunteerism in museums and in starting or improving museum volunteer programs. We welcome members from zoos and aquariums, botanical gardens, historic houses, and other cultural organizations with an educational mission.

What does AAMV do?

- Promotes professional standards of volunteerism
- Provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and information
- Offers opportunities for continuing education through panel discussions and workshops at local, regional, and national conferences
- Encourages volunteers and volunteer program managers to become familiar with projects and programs both locally and nationally
- Informs and supports museums and volunteerism in advocacy for legislation at the local and national levels
- Accomplishes these goals in cooperation with museum directors, staff, and boards of trustees

Membership benefits

- Participation in a vibrant members-only listserv
- Quarterly newsletter
- Access to information to create and sustain a museum volunteer program
- Opportunities to take part in workshops and presentations at state, regional, and national meetings
- Access to state and regional representatives as well as a nationwide network of volunteer management professionals and experienced volunteers
- Advance notice of AAMV publications, such as Transforming Museum Volunteering, plus workshops, presentations, and meetings

Become an AAMV Member Today!

Name ___________________________ Institutional Affiliation ___________________________ Date ____________

Mailing Address ___________________________

Phone ___________________________ Fax ___________________________ E-mail ___________________________

Volunteer ☐  Staff ☐  Title (if staff) ___________________________ Department ___________________________

Check here if you would like to be added to the listserv ☐

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

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<tr>
<td>Volunteer Group*</td>
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Send membership applications to:  AAMV, P. O. Box 9494, Washington, DC 20016