

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH



Bottom Line: Direct contact with volunteers results in more participation.

Bottom Line Findings:

- Talking to volunteers directly via text, phone, or face to face are all more effective for recruitment than just sending them emails.
- It's important to remind volunteers of their shifts to ensure higher attendance.
- Volunteer training is crucial for the best voter outreach programs (e.g., phonebanking).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Active recruitment works better than email recruitment.

- A 2018 study by SDAN and Dr. Katherine Haenschen found that recruiting volunteers to attend an event via text message, phone call, or a combination of the two increased RSVP rate and more than doubled attendance rate for the event compared to volunteers who just received email invitations to the event.¹

Reminding volunteers about events helps reduce flake rate and increase attendance.

- Industry sources² have found that sending volunteers reminders via phone calls or text messages decreases flake rate (the % of people who RSVP to attend but don't show up) to events. Researchers suggested text messages for younger voters and phone calls for older voters.
- A 2018 study by SDAN and Dr. Katherine Haenschen found that confirming that volunteers plan to attend events they have RSVP'd to attend, via text message, phone call, or a combination of the two, decreased flake rate to events compared to just sending email reminders to RSVPs.¹

Multiple reminders aren't necessarily better.

- A 2020 test by SDAN found that an additional text message reminder to people who had RSVP'd to an event and already received an email reminder did not meaningfully increase attendance to the event.³

Volunteers should be intrinsically motivated.

- Research on intrinsic motivation (motivation driven by internal rewards like a feeling of accomplishment) demonstrates that people often become less motivated to do something when they are offered some kind of external incentive.⁴ This appears to be true in social, developmental, and organizational psychology research, especially when rewards are contingent on performance.^{4,5,6}
 - This also proved to be true in one industry study when offering a sticker in exchange for making calls decreased the number of callers and calling volunteers and asking them to make calls increased the number of callers.
 - Some industry research suggests that emphasizing the social enjoyment of volunteering can be intrinsically motivating.



Training is key - because quality is key.

- Nickerson and colleagues found that well trained callers mobilize voters 2.5-4.5% more than poorly trained callers.⁷ This means that it's especially important to make sure that volunteers feel comfortable making calls, talking about the candidates or issues the calls are about, and that they feel able to go "off-script" to have genuine conversations with voters.

Team community is important.

- In a [2019 volunteer survey](#)⁸, SDAN found that the team aspect and the social closeness among Sister District Project teams and affiliates was especially important to volunteers and predicted increased involvement in the organization.
- Several industry studies have found that making volunteers feel appreciated, useful, and part of a larger mission encourages more participation.
- Industry sources regularly find that people who are recruited by friends are more likely to actually volunteer than people who are recruited by campaign staffers.
- Empowering volunteers to express their thoughts through the use of high-quality volunteer meetings may be effective in increasing volunteer engagement.⁹

Areas for future exploration:

- Gamification/friendly competition in the context of national volunteer bases
 - While intrinsic motivation is important, many organizers report positive results from the use of friendly competitions or "gamifying" volunteer activities like fundraising. Gamification involves making an activity more "game-like" to further engage folks in the activity. Examples are things like using leaderboards and earning badges for accomplishments.
- Ladder of engagement
 - Little is known about the best practices around moving volunteers "up the ladder of engagement" to, for instance, turn an email subscriber into a first time volunteer event attendee or a textbank attendee into a phonebanker. Our initial exploration was not fruitful and more work is needed.¹⁰



References:

1. <https://sisterdistrict.com/research/personal-contact-works-better-than-just-email>
2. Industry source (SDAN has access to various research reports by progressive organizations that we are not allowed to disseminate or cite but are sharing broad strokes of here).
3. <https://sisterdistrict.com/b/research/text-message-reminders-work/>
4. Deci, E. L. (1971). Effects of externally mediated rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 18(1), 105.
5. Deci, E. L. (1976). The hidden costs of rewards. *Organizational Dynamics*, 4(3), 61-72.
6. Anderson, R., Manoogian, S. T., & Reznick, J. S. (1976). The undermining and enhancing of intrinsic motivation in preschool children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34(5), 915.
7. Nickerson, D. W. (2007). Quality is job one: Professional and volunteer voter mobilization calls. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(2), 269-282. (<https://sites.temple.edu/nickerson/files/2017/07/Quality.Nickerson.2007.pdf>)
8. <https://sisterdistrict.com/research/social-investment-in-team>
9. Allen, J. A., & Prange, K. (2021). Another meeting just might do it!: Enhancing volunteer engagement using effective meetings. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 45(1), 49-65.
10. <https://sisterdistrict.com/b/research/the-ladder-of-engagement/>