

# VAN BRIEFING

**BRIEFING FROM THE  
VOLUNTARY ARTS NETWORK**

## Increasing and maintaining your membership

*How to make new friends  
and keep your old ones*

**Every organisation** needs new members in order to thrive. New members bring with them new ideas, fresh enthusiasm and often new subscriptions. Whether you are looking for people to work on committees, perform in plays and concerts, help with sets and make up or write your newsletter the basic principles are the same. One of the most important things to remember is that volunteering in the arts is still volunteering - and there is a lot we can learn from research done by the wider voluntary sector. In most cases people who give up their time to work in the arts will not use the term volunteer. They may use a title like "I am secretary of" or talk about the role they take within productions saying things like "I directed" or "I played". For the sake of this briefing volunteering in the arts and membership of voluntary arts organisations are largely synonymous and can be defined as: "accomplishing or assisting with the management, running or creation of the programme or activities of a cultural organisation without payment and for the benefit of others." This roughly translates as taking part in arts activities for pleasure not payment. Volunteering in the arts provides opportunities for intellectual and physical stimulation which are affordable and

local, it develops skills far beyond those specific to any art form, raises confidence and increases people's social circle. As you know it is also great fun.

### Why do people join your group?

People join arts groups on a voluntary basis for a wide range of reasons but these can be broadly split between altruism and self interest. Nationally one in every two people volunteers, men and women volunteer about equally and 17% of volunteers work for organisations whose area of interest is hobbies, recreation or the arts. Research by the Arts Council of England showed that 67% of arts establishments used volunteers in some way.

A survey carried out in 1991 by the Volunteer Centre UK asked volunteers why they became involved in organisations. Their motivations were:

<b>Reason for Volunteering</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Connected to own needs and interests . . .</b>	<b>.39</b>
<b>Connected to needs and interests of family or friends . . . . .</b>	<b>.43</b>
<b>Connected with paid work . . . . .</b>	<b>.11</b>
<b>To meet a need in the community . . . . .</b>	<b>.26</b>
<b>To improve things/help people . . . . .</b>	<b>.39</b>
<b>To meet people/make friends . . . . .</b>	<b>.25</b>
<b>Someone asked them to help . . . . .</b>	<b>.51</b>
<b>Offered to help . . . . .</b>	<b>.49</b>
<b>Started the group . . . . .</b>	<b>.5</b>
<b>Had time to spare . . . . .</b>	<b>.28</b>
<b>Felt they were "good at it" . . . . .</b>	<b>.18</b>
<b>A chance to learn new skills . . . . .</b>	<b>.11</b>

There are some obvious differences between these motivations, largely for work in the health and community sectors, and those of volunteers in the arts. The prime motivation for joining a dramatic society or choir is most likely to be an interest in drama or choral music. Research by Friends of the Earth into the motivation of volunteers at their Rainforest Festival reported that the decision to volunteer for an arts organisation stemmed from deep rooted aesthetic and social values and a basic love for and commitment to the arts and all they represent. However, there are other important considerations, many of them social. Think about the reasons you first joined your group and ask others what their first motivations were. You might be surprised how many people who are now part of the group's core of most active members first joined because of links with friends or the desire to meet new people.

*The Comedia report Use or Ornament: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, published last year, took a close look at the effects of participation in the arts on individuals and this too gives an insight into the results of volunteering in the arts. The people questioned by the researchers had been involved with community arts projects, local festivals and music making. An amazing 91% said they had made new friends, 84% felt more confident about what they could do, 86% wanted to become involved in other projects and 73% said they felt happier since they had been involved in their various projects and organisations. In short then, the benefits of volunteering in the arts, in whatever capacity, are not just to the organisation involved. People who join your group will make new friends, improve their confidence, learn new skills and feel more positive and involved in where they live and work. If you had to write a Government budget to pay for these kind of community services it would cost millions - and in the voluntary arts we are already doing it for free or for a nominal subscription cost.

## How do you get new members to join your group?

Once you know why people get involved in the first place it is easier to encourage new members to sign up. Before you start looking for new members you need to identify your target group. Who do you think would want to be members of your organisation and how do you get in touch with them? If you were looking for members for a drama group one of the best places to target people might be at your own productions. People who have attended performances already have an interest and understanding of your work and may know people who are already involved. You could also put leaflets in theatres or arts centres inviting people to an open evening or event.

Word of mouth is by far the best way of attracting new members and it is also free. By getting your existing members to tell their friends, neighbours and relatives about the group you can boost your membership considerably.

Also, think about equal opportunities when you are recruiting new members. You may not consciously be excluding anyone but if your building is not accessible disabled people are not likely to feel welcome and if you only put up posters in a white, middle class area you are likely to recruit white, middle class people. Try putting leaflets into community centres and shops in other parts of town and make it clear on your publicity that everyone is welcome. Think about the age range within your group and how you can target young people or older people. Perhaps a separate youth section could be set up or someone could talk at youth clubs or in schools about your work. If you need to recruit more older people you could again try community centres. People who are already members of your group will have detailed local knowledge - use this and ask them for ideas.

Once you have got people interested or let them know that you are looking for new members you need to tell them what membership of the group involves. This is a marketing task and if you treat it as such you are more likely to end up with a group of people who both understand the organisation and have an idea of how they could become involved in it. Think it through in terms of the following process.

- **Let people know that you want members.**
- **Tell them exactly what is involved, are there meetings to attend, where and how often will these take place, what they could be asked to do, how flexible that is. Deal with any questions that may arise out of this honestly - it is no good lying to people and if they find they are being asked to do more than they are prepared to they will usually just leave. It is far easier to agree a verbal contract with someone at the start so that you both have an idea of what is on offer and what is required.**
- **Sell people the benefits of volunteering and membership. What services do you offer to members in terms of merchandise, educational events, social events and publications. If you produce a newsletter, is this attractive, well written and saying what you want people to hear about your organisation. We have already seen that people have a self interest in volunteering. If you can offer “goodies” in terms of training, social events, support, expenses to make sure no-one feels they are left out of pocket they will feel more willing to come forward.**
- **One of the best ways to sell the benefits of membership is to organise a social event so that new volunteers can meet and talk to more established members of the group. They might not believe the bare statistics of the Comedia report but they will if someone says to them:**

**“I feel so much more confident since I started doing the sets from the drama group, I have lots of new friends and the skills I have picked up along the way have even helped me with doing presentations at work. I look forward to Wednesday night and seeing everyone again. And you should see our house now, the things I have learnt about using colour and fabrics have revolutionised the way I decorate. My husband and the kids laugh occasionally and when we did pantomime they said I turned the living room into Aladdin’s cave but really they love it. It gives me a real sense of pride to see my work on stage - and think about how much I enjoyed getting it there.”**

## **Once you have got new members, how do you keep them?**

The best way of keeping volunteers is to make sure they feel valued and involved in the organisation. It seems obvious, but one important thing to remember is that everyone who joins your organisation brings with them a whole range of experiences and talents, and their own personal needs and desires. People volunteer in different ways and just as a new person within a company would be shown the ropes, a new member needs to be made to feel welcome and important.

The members within your organisation can be broadly divided into four types:

### **Committee members**

(Those who serve on boards of management)

### **Organising members**

(Those who coordinate the work)

### **Service members**

(Unpaid workers who contribute to the day to day running of the organisation)

### **Process members**

(Those who direct, shape and lead artistic work such as directors, choreographers, conductors and producers)

Each of these different groups of members has different needs, for example sitting in on a committee meeting for the first time may be less daunting if other committee members have first been in touch socially or talked through an agenda. In the case of committee members a one to one or small group introductory session might be best. In the case of service members an introductory meeting for all new members might prove more useful.

Another way of showing volunteers that their work is valued is via training. Some roles taken by members such as Secretary or Treasurer involve complex tasks and are organisationally vital. Training courses run specifically for the voluntary arts or wider voluntary sector can help ensure the volunteer understand the legal and organisational responsibilities involved but also give the volunteer a feeling that the organisation is investing in them as an individual.

It is also vital to create a supportive environment. Someone who feels they are doing a difficult and important task in isolation, and has some doubt about whether they are doing the job well, is likely to leave. You cannot imagine being asked to do a paid job without being told who you were responsible to, where to go for support and exactly what your job involved yet many volunteers are put in exactly that position. Volunteers have a right to regular and constructive feedback, appropriate training and a brief but clear job description. Once these basic rights have been established the volunteer has a position from which to speak and the organisation knows what it can expect.

Perhaps the most important right volunteers have is the right to say "no" without feeling guilty. Voluntary work is just that - voluntary. As we saw at the start people volunteer, at the most basic, to make the world a better place and their own lives better within it. Once volunteering becomes too large a burden volunteers need to be able to say NO, to know who to say no to and not to be made to feel guilty about it.

### How do you get members to renew subscriptions?

- **Consult people - the kind of evaluation process described in the briefing sheet which accompanies this one will give you an idea of whether people are happy with the services you provide.**
- **Talk to lapsed members about why they did not renew subscriptions and use the information to improve your services.**
- **Think about how you keep in touch with your members. Do you contact people by phone or letter? Do you have a**

**newsletter? Do people meet face to face at conferences and events? The more personal the contact the more valued and involved people will feel and the more likely they are to renew subscriptions.**

#### ● **USE YOUR DATABASE**

**Most organisations have a database of members. If you do not already have one then unless your organisation is very small and you know everyone personally you probably should! It does not need to be anything too complicated - just a store of names, addresses, day and evening phone numbers, membership numbers and when renewals are due. The database can be used to produce mailing labels and merge letters and record contacts with members.**

### Further information

On the broad benefits of participation in the arts:

***Use or Ornament: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts***  
**Francois Matarasso, Comedia 1997**

For information on volunteering in general, supporting and managing volunteers:

**The National Centre for Volunteering**  
**183 Eversholt Street**  
**London NW1 1BU**

For guidance on how to manage volunteers:

***Essential Volunteer Management***  
**Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, Directory of Social Change, 1997**



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