



Volunteer Fair Preparation Guide

This volunteer fair preparation guide is designed to help you make your volunteer fair experience a positive and productive one for your agency. It is filled with tips gleaned from web experts as well as local coordinators of volunteers and Volunteer Victoria staff and volunteers.

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Before the Fair

Identify your goals for the fair

Be specific about the things you want to accomplish as a result of your participation in the fair. Do you want to increase visibility for your agency, gain exposure to a new or 'tried and true' market of volunteers, or are you desperate to recruit a certain number of volunteers by fair's end? Also, don't forget the value of networking! We have been told by past participants that making connections with other agencies at volunteer fairs is just as important and valuable as the number of volunteers recruited there. Spend some time thinking about why you want to participate in the fair and what you hope to achieve by being there.



Define measurements of success

Determine a way to measure the success of your goals, both in the short term and longer term. Remember to be realistic and that success is not always tangible nor are the results always immediate – i.e. that you have signed up 20 new volunteers by fair's end! It is important to remember that by taking part, and raising community awareness of your organization and its volunteer opportunities, you help to keep your organization in the public's mind. It is not uncommon that volunteers approach an organization weeks/months after the fact to learn more about how they can be involved. One Coordinator we know applies a gardening analogy to attending volunteer fairs. She 'sows seeds' at the fairs and hopes that some of those seeds will sprout into volunteers for her organization. When talking later with those potential volunteers, she asks how they learned about her organization – this helps her measure her recruitment successes.

Also consider defining such targets as the number of inquiries made about your organization at the fair, and the number of colleagues you wish to connect with.

Design an open, inviting booth

Design a booth that is interesting, inviting and uncluttered. Your logo and agency name should be large enough to catch people's attention and be read from a distance. Signage should be professional in appearance and not hand-lettered. Appealing booths are colourful, but not overwhelmingly so. You can include one or two media articles (laminated is best), but keep in mind that most people won't spend a lot of time at your booth reading all the fine print. Larger-print signs (with 3-5 bullet points) and photos are better. Try to give people a snapshot – with pictures and signage – of what your agency and volunteers do. Ask someone from outside your agency to take a quick look at your booth in advance of the fair to give you their unbiased opinion of the effectiveness of your information and display. Also consider whether your booth should be two-sided, which will depend on the location of your booth at the particular fair you're attending. There may also be booth height

and width restrictions to meet depending upon the regulations at the particular fair venue you're attending. Your organizer will notify you if this is applicable.

Advertise your fair participation

Fair organizers will be advertising the fair to a wide audience through multiple channels. Do what you can to promote your participation to your current circle of contacts as well. Post it in your newsletter, on your website or social media sites, and/or use tag lines in your email signature or on literature such as "See us at the upcoming Volunteer Fair at (location) on (date)." You can also create a link to fair details here as well. If you have not posted it on your website, you can link to Volunteer Victoria's website events page for the details at http://www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca/news_events.html. Also, consider emailing or calling potential volunteers that have recently been in touch with you to let them know about the fair and that you will be there. Volunteer Victoria will also send you a professionally-designed flyer for each fair that you can customize with your top three volunteer opportunities in order to send out to your own contacts – make use of it! Some potential volunteers may find it easier to connect with your agency in person; you can even set up times with people to interview them right at the fair (if you have someone else that can watch the booth while you're doing so). If possible, on the day of the event leave an outgoing voicemail message telling people you are at the volunteer fair and encourage them to visit with you there.

Prepare all necessary supplies

Do pre-planning several months before the fair. Will you have enough brochures to give away at the fair? Think about the audience that will be coming and target your information to them. Should you order more giveaways or plan to bring treats such as wrapped candies to your booth? Have appealing items that will draw people to your booth or consider holding a draw for a prize. It's also a good idea to create handouts that describe your volunteer opportunities to distribute. Don't forget to include your contact information, website and other pertinent details or include your business card. If you don't have enough business cards in your stockpile, ensure that you order more in advance of the fair. If you don't have business cards at all, it might be a good idea to print make-your-own business cards using a kit from an office supply store.

Design or arrange multimedia

If you think a video or PowerPoint presentation is a good tool for promoting your volunteer opportunities or agency services, consider arranging a multimedia presentation as part of your booth display. A short, engaging presentation is a way to 'tell' the story of your agency and 'sell' your volunteer opportunities. Just keep in mind that low (or no) sound is preferable, so as not to bother your fellow agencies or fair participants. If you plan to use a video presentation, don't forget to let your fair organizers know that you need access to power (or the Internet, if applicable) in advance of the fair.



Identify who will staff the booth

Not every Coordinator of Volunteers can leave his/her desk for a day to staff their agency booth at a volunteer fair. Sometimes these are great opportunities for volunteers to help out instead (or alongside). But who is the 'right' person to ask to staff a volunteer fair booth? Choose people that have pleasant attitudes and engaging personalities. You've heard the expression, "You only get one chance to make a first impression." Friendly people who can talk knowledgeably about your agency and your volunteer positions are ideal. Having courteous, helpful people who are good listeners at your volunteer fair booth can make the difference between a potential volunteer passing you by, or stopping to find out more about your agency. Pick people that can stand for long periods of time, and consider asking volunteers that will match the demographic of the target volunteer audience (for example, use your 20-something volunteers at a university campus volunteer fair). Remember that just because a volunteer or staff member has been around the longest doesn't mean that they will be the most appropriate person to staff your booth; go for effectiveness, not seniority.

Train booth staff

Think back to your goals that you want to achieve at the volunteer fair. Discuss your goals and how to measure the success of your fair with your helpers. Do you want them to track how many people they spoke to in the day? Perhaps you'd rather know how many people took your brochures (be sure to count the number you sent and came home with), or how many volunteer candidates from your database showed up. You also need to communicate your expectations around behaviour at the booth, and how to engage prospective volunteers. Good customer service isn't always obvious to everyone, so be clear about your expectations. Can volunteers use their cell phones while at the booth? Should they stop talking to each other (when staffing in pairs) when an interested attendee stops by? Think about how body language can be interpreted; for example, a person standing with their arms crossed over their chest is not very inviting. Communicate expectations about proper ways to greet and interact with attendees and use your training time to consider whether you've picked the right people for the position.

Set up a booth schedule

Taking into consideration fair set-up and take-down times, devise a participation schedule for your staff and volunteers who will be at your agency's booth. Communicate timings clearly to everyone involved, and make sure people know if they are expected to bring, or take home, the display from the fair. Make sure to schedule enough coverage so that your helpers can take breaks throughout the fair; pairs of people often work quite well to make the time go by quickly at a slower fair and handle the onslaught at a busy one!



Plan your comfort items

Used to sitting at a desk all day? Standing for long periods at a fair is a different matter. Plan to wear comfortable shoes and perhaps even bring along a chair cushion if you think

your backside might get sore sitting on those metal folding chairs that are usually provided. You also might want to consider bringing some water to keep yourself hydrated throughout the day, if liquids won't be provided to you at the fair. Check in with your fair organizer about what food and beverages will be offered (if any) to exhibitors, and augment yourself or your volunteer booth staffers with additional snacks to keep everyone happy if you can. Remember, volunteers usually love food!

During the Fair

Network with other agencies

If one of your goals is to connect with other agencies at the fair, be sure to alternate staffing your booth so one of you can walk around and visit with the other agencies present. Keep in mind community collaborations, taking advantage of the 'captive' audience of agencies, and discuss possible ways of working together. Or, connect with your fellow Coordinators of Volunteers and swap stories of best practices and challenges!

Connect with Volunteer Victoria

When did you attend an orientation at Volunteer Victoria to learn about our services? The volunteer fair is a great time to connect with Volunteer Victoria staff and volunteers. Learn how Volunteer Victoria can promote your agency in the community and help you do what you do: manage your volunteer program.

Complete the evaluation form

Love the volunteer fairs and wish that Volunteer Victoria would organize more? Or have an idea about how we could do them even better? Make sure you fill out the fair evaluation form and return it to Volunteer Victoria. Ensure that your voice will be heard. Believe us, we do read all your feedback after each fair and we make changes where we can. We arrange these fairs for **you**, and we want to make sure they're working for you.

Staff the booth at all times

We know it's tempting to leave your booth empty if you: a) haven't arranged enough volunteers to staff it, or b) need to go have a lunch or washroom break, but a more effective display booth is a staffed display booth. To a potential volunteer, visiting your empty booth is the same as visiting your agency's website: there's no one to talk to immediately if you have more questions. And they could have visited your website from home. Having two booth attendants is ideal so you can spell each other off for washroom and lunch breaks (and networking with other agencies!). If you do happen to be there alone and need to skip away for a pit stop, try to make it as quick as possible and consider bringing a "Back in 5 Minutes" sign that you could just prop up at your booth. Or ask one of the booths beside you to 'cover' you. They can let a visitor know that you'll be back very soon, and to return to

your booth in a few minutes. Murphy's Law says that an interested volunteer will drop by the minute you've left your booth unattended.

After the Fair

Follow up with potential volunteers

At the volunteer fair you will have engaged with people visiting your booth. You will have provided them with information about your agency, handed out your card or other contact information to them and encouraged them to think about volunteering at your organization. If they follow up with you after the fair, you'll know they've given your organization some real thought. Wait no longer than a week after the fair to follow up and provide them with more information. We hear so many times from volunteers that: "I tried to volunteer with that agency, but I never heard back." Don't let this happen to you! Strike while the iron is hot and call or email those potential volunteers as soon as you can after the fair with an actionable next step. Of course, some volunteers may not follow up with you after signing up with ten different agencies at the fair and receiving your follow up email, but that's their choice. Never let the reason why someone didn't volunteer with your agency be that you didn't have a chance to connect with them after the fair. This is your second chance to make a good impression!



Analyze lessons learned

Analyze the lessons you learned from attending the fair, and evaluate whether you were pleased with the fair's result. Did you meet your expectations and goals? Why or why not? Or is it too soon to tell? If your goals weren't met, ask yourself if you had control over this situation. If you did, what changes are needed to improve your participation for the next time? If the fair was a successful event and met your goals, make a record of what worked so that you can duplicate it next time. Don't forget to debrief with all your booth helpers to gather their opinions, especially if you yourself didn't actually attend the fair. And finally, remember to share your suggestions and findings with Volunteer Victoria organizers (as applicable) to help us to make the fairs a continued success.