



From the AACT Resource Library

9 Proven Volunteer Retention Strategies

Your theatre relies on volunteer support—but skilled, reliable volunteers don’t appear out of thin air. You need strategies that will attract and retain top-quality, passionate volunteers that you can count on.

Improving your volunteer retention rate relies on effective volunteer management efforts that create a positive experience and show volunteers that your theatre values their support.

In this guide, we’ll review volunteer retention from all angles, highlighting common reasons why volunteers stop engaging and strategies to keep supporters coming back. We’ll cover:

- Volunteer retention basics
- Common reasons for volunteer lapse
- Volunteer retention strategies to maintain engagement

Let’s get started by answering a couple of common questions about volunteer retention.

Volunteer retention basics

Your theatre should prioritize volunteer retention for two main reasons:

1. **Retaining volunteers is cost-effective.** Constantly acquiring and training new volunteers can drain your theatre’s time and resources. By boosting your retention rate, you can spend less time on marketing and onboarding and more time fulfilling your mission.
2. **Returning volunteers offer greater skills and knowledge.** Retained volunteers have already been through the training process and can provide more skilled support. This can help your initiatives run more smoothly and ultimately boost your return on investment (ROI).

To calculate your volunteer retention rate, first determine the date range you’re analyzing. Many theatres choose to assess volunteer retention every year. Choose specific start and end dates for the period you’re looking at.

Then, determine the number of volunteers who participated in your events last year who also volunteered this year. The calculation looks like this:

$$\text{Volunteer retention rate} = \frac{\text{\# of volunteers who participated again this year}}{\text{\# of volunteers who volunteered last year}} \times 100$$

For example, if 100 volunteers participated in your opportunities in the previous year, but only 60 of those same volunteers returned this year, your retention rate would be 60%.

Common reasons for volunteer lapse

The first step in improving your theatre's volunteer retention rate is understanding why volunteers stop participating. When you can identify and address the root causes of volunteer lapse, you can start to improve your retention rate.

Volunteers commonly lapse because they:

- **Feel burnt out:** Volunteers may feel overwhelmed if they work too many days a week, or work long hours without breaks. Prevent volunteer burnout with mindful scheduling. Be especially mindful not to overschedule volunteers who work in physically exhausting or labor-intensive roles.
- **Have busy schedules.** Changes in volunteers' work or family schedules are outside of your theatre's control, but there are steps you can take to better accommodate busy volunteers. For example, you can offer more opportunities on the weekends, or micro-opportunities that only last an hour or two.
- **Are surprised by sudden policy changes.** Surprise changes to how things are done can leave volunteers feeling out of the loop. Post your policies online so volunteers know what to expect when they sign up, and communicate any changes to current volunteers. You can even make your top volunteers a part of the decision-making process on new policies or procedures by posting online surveys requesting their input.
- **Feel like their voices aren't being heard.** Listening to volunteer feedback shows them that your theatre cares about their concerns and provides a positive experience. Consider providing an online forum for volunteers to voice concerns, ask questions, offer opinions, and give advice. Then, appoint a staff member to monitor the forum so that they can respond to questions promptly.

- ***Feel unappreciated.*** Volunteer appreciation should be incorporated into every step of the volunteer management process. Make the volunteer onboarding process a celebration by sending them a hand-written thank you card. Send [thank you notes](#) after new volunteers register and when they complete each shift.

Send surveys to volunteers who have stopped engaging with your theatre to help determine the main causes of volunteer lapse at your theatre. Then, address the issues they share with you by using the tips above and the retention strategies in the next section.

Strategies to maintain engagement

Here are some steps your nonprofit can take to proactively boost [volunteer engagement](#) and retention:

Attract motivated volunteers

Start your recruitment process on the right foot by attracting self-motivated volunteers. Use an app or website that facilitates self-registration and provides prospective volunteers with the information they need to make educated decisions about how they wish to spend their volunteer time. Include a list of roles with a detailed description, a chain of command, a list of policies and safety procedures, and contact information for your staff members.

Empower volunteers with training

Prepare your volunteers with an online or in-person orientation that covers all the information they'll need to know to fulfill their roles successfully. Offer videos or written guides that volunteers can reference after the training as needed.

Offer flexible scheduling

Allow volunteers to sign themselves up for the shifts and opportunities that work best for them. This gives volunteers greater flexibility and independence while saving your team time that may have been spent manually scheduling volunteers.

Segment volunteer communications

Segmentation is the process of grouping volunteers based on characteristics they have in common. For example, you might create segments for new volunteers, long-time volunteers or volunteers in different roles. By creating volunteer segments, you can send tailored messages to each group that are applicable to their needs and interests. For example, if you segment volunteers by role, you can send each group information about the specific supplies or tools they should bring to their next shift. This communication strategy ensures you aren't overwhelming volunteers with irrelevant information. They'll be able to focus on the information that matters most to them, and their inboxes will thank you.

Send volunteer surveys

As mentioned, asking volunteers for their input goes a long way in gaining their trust and respect. One of the most effective ways to bring volunteers into the conversation is to send out surveys asking for their feedback. Ask questions like:

- Did you feel like our onboarding process accurately prepared you for your volunteer shifts?
- Which volunteer roles do you enjoy the most?
- Do you have any suggestions for how we can improve our volunteer experience?
- Would you recommend our program to a friend?
- What is your preferred communication channel?

Compile your findings into a report and share them with volunteers to highlight the steps you plan to take to address their feedback.

Keep your events organized

Consider using a volunteer management software to keep your volunteer shifts organized. Such a system automatically sends shift confirmations and reminders and tracks volunteer attendance. You should also be able to customize the software to your scheduling needs by using multiple calendars, list views, filters, and bulk actions.

Match volunteers with roles that suit their skills and interests

Using information from your volunteer surveys and data on volunteers' past experiences, you can notify volunteers about roles that match their skills and interests. Volunteers will work more effectively when they feel comfortable and passionate about their assignments. This can boost retention and provide greater, more effective support for your mission.

Provide leadership/growth opportunities

Longtime volunteers might feel like they're ready to stretch their wings and take on new roles at your theatre. Give these experienced volunteers the opportunity to grow and take on new positions. For example, you might recruit them to lead orientation sessions or shifts.

Offer appreciation gifts

We've discussed the importance of going above and beyond to show volunteers your gratitude. One of the best ways to do so is to offer tangible volunteer rewards.

Here are a few gift ideas to say thank you to volunteers:

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|-------------|-----------------|
| • T-shirts | • Water bottles |
| • Hats | • Gift cards |
| • Mugs | • Potted plants |
| • Tote bags | |

Be sure to brand your merchandise with your theatre's logo and colors to provide extra visibility for your brand. If you plan to give out multiple gifts, take note of which items you've already given each volunteer. This prevents sending volunteers the same gift twice, showing them that your theatre cares about, and is paying attention to, each volunteer's specific situation.

Wrapping up

Ultimately, volunteer retention comes down to your theatre's ability to form genuine, long-lasting personal connections with volunteers. Volunteers participate because they support your mission, but they also want to feel like they're a part of something bigger. These engagement and appreciation efforts can facilitate a stronger sense of community and belonging.

A volunteer management system can play a major role in handling your program's logistics and planning, allowing you to stay organized and continue providing a streamlined, positive experience. Some options include (in alphabetical order) [Bloomerang](#), [Civic Champs](#), [Galaxy Digital](#), [Giveffect](#), [Mobilize](#), [SignUpGenius](#), [Volgistics](#), and [VolunteerMark](#), among others. Because changes in software providers can occur, you want to do a web search for "volunteer management system."

If you're a small theatre, it's possible that you might be able to set up your own system—at least to begin--using database software like Microsoft Access, or even simple spreadsheets. While not ideal, you'll learn what features and capabilities you need most—and can then look at which of the true volunteer management systems come closest to meeting your needs,.