



Young volunteers spread their enthusiasm to the next generation at Word of Life events throughout the year.



Word of Life Fellowship

# Energy Rush

Young volunteers breathe life into events.

BY LISA PLUMMER

When it comes to helping out at meetings and events, young volunteers can play a valuable role. Not only do they offer extra pairs of hands to accomplish a wide range of tasks without affecting the bottom line, young people also bring fresh energy that attendees are sure to notice. What's more, they have opportunities to learn new skills and the importance of work ethics, dedication and service.

Sound like a win-win? It can be, but before running to the nearest youth ministry, high school or university to recruit volunteers, keep in mind that weaving them into an event's landscape is no simple feat. Knowing the best places to find young volunteers, the right jobs to assign them, and how to train, motivate and reinforce their efforts comes with its fair share of considerations. Here are perspectives from planners who work with youth and understand how to bring out the best in them.

## WILLING AND ABLE

The Word of Life youth ministry relies heavily on volunteers from its teen membership to help run its youth camps and family conference centers, as well as assist with its 25 to 30 annual nationwide events. According to Roger Peace, WOL vice president of ministry services and operations, when motivated and inspired, young volunteers have the best work ethic and enthusiasm.

"Because we're a youth ministry and we run a youth camp, we love the idea of having youth [volunteers] because it brings a fun energy," Peace says. "We

also look at it as an investment in them. They're not nearly as set in their ways and we have an opportunity to train them in how we like things done." They also become marketers, taking to Facebook and social networks to create buzz for WOL events.

For its national events, WOL uses youth volunteers in a variety of roles based on age, maturity and prior volunteer experience within the organization.

"We've used them to run events, help with registration on-site, pass out wristbands, collect money—just about every aspect you can think of," Peace says. "With our summer camps, they're literally involved with everything. During an event, they might help with ushering, coordinating people and catering. If they have musical ability, we'll get them involved, although obviously you have to do a lot of planning in advance [for that]. Afterward, it's a lot of clean up."

Nikki Hoffpauir, program director of Student Leadership University, says when it comes to good energy and a can-do attitude, nothing surpasses the students who come from her organization. SLU, a nonprofit that hosts 30 to 40 annual faith-based youth leadership training conferences in the United States, Europe, Israel and Jordan, relies heavily on its 18- to 20-year-old volunteers.

"They can do everything from lifting boxes to being that great, welcoming face in the morning, whether behind the scenes or in front of it," Hoffpauir says. "Any task you have that you need a lot of energy for, they do that well. There isn't anything we wouldn't give our students."

But kids have different life experience, maturity and skill levels than adults, so organizers must be thoughtful about the types of tasks they assign, especially to new or younger volunteers, says Gary Hartke, director of Nazarene Youth International.

"I'd choose things that would help evaluate their effectiveness as a volunteer without putting the event in jeopardy, maybe some behind-the-scenes kinds of things," Hartke says. "For example, we have an event in July with 6,000 students, with 250 coming in early to help us put together all participants' bags and their contents. It's critical to us that it gets done, it's a simple thing to do, they're not problem solving and they're not making decisions that might impact somebody else. I would gravitate toward the things they'd be successful with and something they could walk away with feeling a sense of accomplishment."

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Some organizations don't have a large youth membership. For them, student service clubs, youth ministries and universities, especially those with hospitality or event management departments, are good places to look for helpers.

"If [youth volunteers] can come back through your organization, that's a bonus, but here in Orlando we're right next to the Rosen College of Hospitality Management, so we've got all these college students wanting experience in the business," Hoffpauir says. "We're constantly asked if we have an internship or if they can help with an event."

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—Roger Peace, *Word of Life*

Take time to establish relationships with church directors, youth pastors or leaders—individuals who will be a direct link to motivated and inspired volunteers. The best youth volunteers are the ones who are doing it for the right reasons, says Jay Abraham, director of development for the Southwest Region of Young Life, a 70-year-old youth ministry.

“You’re feeding the whole component of why a kid would [volunteer] in the first place, because his youth pastor or youth leader is asking him to join,” he says. “You’ve got to build the relationships. Otherwise, if you don’t know anybody, you’ve got to pay the kids, because T-shirts or free food won’t do it. You can’t just jump into it at the last minute and have success, or even limited success, unless you’re willing to pay for it.” Although establishing key relationships requires a time investment, ending up with good volunteers who are going to show up, do their job and be helpful is worth it.

### PREP WORK

Today’s teens and 20-somethings have grown up in a fast-paced and connected society with constant stimulation. They expect instant gratification and communication, and it’s important to keep this in mind when preparing to recruit and train them.

“This generation wants to know why they’re doing it, what’s the purpose, what greater cause they are doing it for and what the impact is going to be,” Peace says. “To work around that, we’ve found that planning is the key. The more we know about what we’re going to do before they get here, that it’s organized and we have their questions answered, the better the project goes and the more they’re content while they’re here.”

Hartke recommends engaging in clear, consistent communication with your volunteers, including conveying expectations, information about how to prepare, what to expect and how to dress. “It’s important to give them a sense of responsibility and approach them as you would anybody else,” he says. “Set the bar high and let them know their work’s important. How you interact with them matters. Coming across in a relational kind of way, leading by example and not being condescending—that will mean a lot.”

Since this generation is accustomed to using technology, communicate through tools such as email, text and Facebook. Training that involves students learning by doing rather than sitting in a classroom is also more effective.

“Before the event, we’ll have our volunteer orientation meetings where we talk about our policies, procedures, dos and don’ts, but when it comes to the actual training, we find what works best is actually putting them on the spot and having a coach or trainer alongside them,” Peace says. “It’s more hands-on and they can experience it.”

Advance preparation is especially important when working with rookie volunteers. It can prevent minor things from blowing up and ensures everyone represents the organization with professionalism. Encourage questions early on and explain that questioning a process during the event or in front of an attendee should be avoided.

Even with all the right preparation, young people still make mistakes. Besides immaturity, this might be their first time volunteering in this type of environment. “They’ve never felt the fatigue, they’ve never walked so much on concrete carrying a box, they’re dealing with stuff they’ve never dealt with before,” Hartke says. “But what we can do by giving them that opportunity is to cultivate that sense of ‘I can be used. I can make a difference. I can be involved. It matters. This is something I can do, and they need my help.’”

During the event, regularly acknowledge volunteers for good work. Let them take breaks, and create a positive, fun atmosphere. Little tokens of appreciation—T-shirts, Starbucks or post-event pizza parties—help motivate and reward their



Student volunteers on work crew at Young Life’s Lost Canyon camp in Williams, Ariz., greet arriving campers.



The 2011 PCMA Convening Leaders conference recruited 100 student volunteers from the Harrah Hotel College at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for its January event.

efforts, but the most important thing is conveying that what they're doing matters.

"We're very formal and very intentional in showing our appreciation," Peace says. "We make it known that they're part of the whole, that they're just as important as the person getting ready to stand up and speak or the guy who's running [the event]."

### **INSPIRING FUTURE CAREERS**

The Professional Convention Management Association has been using student volunteers at its annual meeting for the past decade. The association works with different volunteer groups each year, depending on the event's destination and the college programs in the area. At the 2011 PCMA Convening Leaders conference in Las Vegas in January, the association brought in 100 student volunteers from the Harrah Hotel College at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Helping further the career interests of young people has been a rewarding

experience for the association, says Kelly Peacy, PCMA senior vice president of meetings and events. "Mostly the volunteers we work with already have a deep interest in the [hospitality and events] industry and, generally, working with the PCMA staff behind the scenes seems to make them more excited about pursuing it," she says.

Students serve as greeters and session room monitors. They also perform room set-up checks and offer directions. Besides making sure students are prepared beforehand and understand the how and why of their jobs, Peacy also recommends that planners have students sign liability waivers and enforce a strict 21 and over drinking policy at any events where alcohol is served. She also stresses that it's important to make sure volunteers feel appreciated.

"Introduce them to your attendees and leadership and make them feel a part of the meeting," she says. "It will make for a memorable experience. By

sharing their experiences with other students, they are spreading the word about the events industry. [By using youth volunteers], you could be helping a student explore a fantastic career opportunity, as well as add some valuable assistance and manpower to your event."

Using young volunteers energizes a staff, gets things accomplished and saves money. It builds confidence in young people and prepares them for more responsibilities. Getting multiple generations involved in an organization is good for its health and future success. It introduces the younger generation to its mission, possibly attracting future members who want to invest long-term.

"When it works, [youth volunteers are] great for the organization," Hartke says. "It's good for the student and good for people they serve. You find their desire and eagerness to do good and make a difference is just incredible. I'm encouraged by their work, and we'd be missing it if we didn't include them." ■