Suggestions for Extension Professionals When Engaging with Volunteers Virtually

Volunteers play a crucial role in delivering Extension programming. Extension professionals primarily partner with these valuable volunteers in person. However, with travel and social distancing restrictions established to slow the spread of novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), Extension professionals need to engage with important Extension volunteers differently. How can Extension professionals continue to partner with volunteers during this time? Below are some tips to consider.

Communicate regularly with volunteers

Volunteers depend on regular communication. But, with information changing rapidly during the COVID-19 event, this can be challenging. Here are some considerations for maintaining effective communication:

- Prepare a webpage that gives updates pertinent to cancelations, virtual meeting schedules, and project planning updates for their respective Extension program(s). Volunteers can visit one location for regular updates and links to helpful information for their local program.
- Share an encouraging or informational video message with volunteers via YouTube, Facebook live, Twitter, Instagram, or some other social media tool.
- Use email groups, newsletters, and social media outlets to provide written updates or important information for volunteers.
- Make phone calls or send text updates to volunteers who may not have reliable internet access.

Encourage volunteers to continue to meet virtually

Providing support for volunteers to remain engaged with Extension professionals and fellow volunteers is vital. 

- Zoom, WebEx, Google Hang-outs, Skype and other platforms can provide free or paid online packages that are available to volunteers to host online meetings and continue planning future projects.
- Meet by phone when internet connection is not available. Many Extension offices or cell phone plans have conference call features that can be used for this purpose. Virtual meeting tools such as WebEx can have phone-in features enabled as well.
- Incorporate the current recommended privacy measures for the online platform to ensure the safety of the online meeting participants.
- DropBox, Google Docs, Basecamp, or other online file sharing tools can be utilized for sharing information in one location for volunteers to access.
- Some online tools have virtual “break-out” room features that allow larger groups to divide into smaller groups for further discussion.
- Consider offering a “practice meeting” for volunteers to test the virtual meeting platform. Visit this site for information about other free online meeting tools: [https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/online-tools-for-workshops/](https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/online-tools-for-workshops/)

Tips for hosting a successful virtual meeting

Both in-person and virtual meetings require planning to be successful. Here are a few suggestions:

- Be clear about the meeting purpose.
- Prepare an agenda for the meeting. Use the screen share feature to share the agenda for attendees to view during the meeting.
Recognize volunteers for their accomplishments

Recognizing volunteers for their accomplishments and service is even more important during this uncertain time.

- Send handwritten thank you notes.
- Include a photo from a successful project and thank the volunteers involved by name in a social media post.
- Share “volunteer spotlights” in the organization newsletter to recognize successful volunteers.

Celebrate National Volunteer Week, April 19-25, 2020. Visit the website for more information:
https://www.pointsoflight.org/nvw/
- Visit the webpage for National Volunteer Week for Indiana 4-H:
  https://extension.purdue.edu/4h/Pages/volunteerWeek.aspx

Additional Resources

- COVID-19 Resources for Purdue Extension Master Gardener County Coordinators:
  https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/master-gardener/virtual-meeting-resources-for-purdue-extension-master-gardener-programs/
- Volunteer activity ideas for Purdue Extension Master Gardeners while at Home:
  https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/master-gardener/volunteerideas-at-home/
- Web-based trainings for Purdue Extension Master Gardeners earn education hours:
  https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/master-gardener/continuededhours/
- Indiana 4-H “At-Home Activities for Kids” webpage includes a number of activities for children and youth, as well as 4-H Volunteers and Staff: https://extension.purdue.edu/4h/Pages/4HHomeActivities.aspx. (This page is updated frequently as new resources become available.)

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