Middle-Aged Adults and Their Approaches to Volunteering

Giving Back: Attitudes and Behaviors Across the Lifespan

When it comes to giving back to the community, Americans ages 35 to 64 share some similarities with the age groups adjacent to them (those 35 to 49 with the 18 to 34 year olds and those 50 to 64 with the 65 and older), although these similarities tend to vary in degree across age groups. Standing out from their similarly aged neighbors, the younger adults (ages 35 to 49) within this middle-aged group are well-positioned for volunteer recruiting, but the older half of this group (ages 50 to 64) presents recruiting challenges.

Those ages 35 to 49 are more motivated to give back when they perceive a reciprocal benefit to their careers.

Those under age 50 more often rank achieving success in their top three life priorities than do those over age 50. Perhaps these life priorities as well as their higher tendency for participating in the workforce motivate adults under age 50 to seek volunteer opportunities that allow them to learn new skills that they can use to get ahead in the workplace. They are more motivated to volunteer when it gives them the chance to develop leadership skills, gain confidence, improve job opportunities, and build professional networks.
Those ages 35 to 49 believe in conscious consumerism and look for alternative ways of giving back to the community.

For Americans under age 50, actions speak louder than words. Adults ages 35 to 49, like their younger counterparts, are more likely to believe that conscious changes to their lifestyle and the products they purchase, as well as small actions, can have as much impact as traditional volunteering. And, while all adults prefer local causes to global ones (55%), when asked to rank the two, those under age 50 show a markedly higher preference for global causes.

Adults ages 35 to 49 hold the most promise for near-term volunteerism, while those ages 50 to 64 show the least potential.

Although adults ages 65 and older are the most frequent volunteers and the ones that give the most time each month, those ages 35 to 49 are the most likely to say that they will volunteer formally in the next year. Among those who have volunteered with an organization in the past year, the 35 to 49 age group is also most likely to have approached that organization proactively themselves. Nearly half (43%) of adults ages 35 to 49 have children in their homes, so they may have more opportunities to volunteer with schools and other children’s activities. These opportunities involving their children may explain their intention to volunteer in the future and their proactive method of arranging it.
Conversely, adults ages 50 to 64 are the least likely to volunteer in the next year. A majority of these folks reported that they did not formally volunteer within the last year, and 31% said that they are unlikely to do so next year. This group's apparent lack of interest in volunteering runs counter to their belief in the efficacy of volunteering and their goal of good health. People ages 50 to 64 are the most likely to feel that society would suffer without volunteers. And more than a quarter of these people (28%) feel that society will be worse off in 2019 than 2018 (vs. 35–49: 17%). Perhaps this pessimism explains their lower tendency to volunteer. Volunteering also correlates with certain health benefits, such as lower blood pressure and decreased mortality rates. Their decision not to volunteer could have health effects that undermine their goal of lifelong health.1

Implications

Organizations recruiting volunteers to meet their current as well as their long-term needs should engage prospects ages 35 to 49. To engage this age group, recruiters must consider their career focus, how they participate in their children’s lives, and their commitment to being socially responsible consumers. If a volunteer base of ages 50 and over is sought, perhaps a focus on the health benefits of volunteering may aid in recruitment.

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