

How to Create a Community Relations Program

A comprehensive, ongoing community relations program can help your Friends group achieve greater visibility, recruit more volunteers, increase donations of both money and “in-kind” goods and establish valuable partnerships with businesses and other service organizations in your region.

The best way to plan a community relations program is to explore ways in which your Friends group can establish *mutually beneficial* relationship with businesses, service groups, schools, houses of worship in the communities closest to your state park or forest.

What’s in it for your Friends group and your park or forest?

While a community relations program requires a serious commitment of time, planning and effort, your Friends group will reap significant benefits in return, such as:

- Increased community awareness and appreciation for the natural beauty, recreational activities, and value of your regional state park or forest and of the value your Friends group provides to enhance these benefits.
- Recruit candidates for longer-term volunteering in more substantive activities or additional members for your Friends group
- Cultivation of donors
- More hands to improve your favorite park or forest and promote community stewardship of public lands.

What’s in it for them?

Remember, to be successful your community service activities must be **mutually beneficial** to both your Friends group and to the partner organization with which you are working.

Service organizations are always looking for opportunities to be a good community citizen and are especially interested in supporting programs that improve their neighbors’ quality of life. They are highly motivated to partner with nonprofit organizations.

Houses of worship in your community can be a good source for volunteers. “Faith-based” environmentalism began in 1993 with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which was founded to “weave the mission of care for God’s creation across all areas of organized religion.” Earth Ministry, an association of 90 churches around Seattle, organizes hikes, book parties, and volunteer support for local agricultural projects, helping to educate thousands of people along the way. For some houses of worship, such as the Religious Society of Friends--“Quakers” and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship stewardship of the Earth an integral teaching.

Businesses owners are often receptive to forge partnerships with community groups because it demonstrates that the business cares about its social and civic responsibility, which generates overall goodwill. Numerous studies have shown that taking an active interest in the well being of its community provides businesses with long-term benefits such as community support, customer loyalty, and improved employee morale.

Schools and youth service groups want students to learn the values of volunteerism, which, in turn teaches them personal responsibility, social and teamwork skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. Students also take pride in seeing the tangible benefits of their efforts. Moreover, studies show that students who volunteer are more engaged in their communities and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Sometimes a volunteer job inspires a student to pursue a related career. Many high schools confer a special recognition to graduating seniors who have documented a minimum number of volunteer hours.

Here are some ideas to consider for building community relationships:

- Create a speakers bureau of Friends group members who can introduce your organization and its mission to business and service groups.
- Have Friends ask for donations of materials and supplies from local businesses they regularly patronize prior to a special event.
- Host a community education event. (e.g. a bird watch, an invasive species show and tell, a walk, paddle or bike with a naturalist, etc.)
- Take part in civic activities. (e.g. Staff a Friends of your park or forest booth at the community grange fair or town carnival. You could sell native landscape plants, pass out informational cards and ask visitors to sign up for an upcoming event or activity.)
- Organize a youth activity. (e.g. a merit badge fulfillment for Scouts coupled with related volunteer work)
- Participate in local government. (e.g. attend your local government park and rec committee meetings or, even better, volunteer to serve on such a committee.)

Capture Information and use it

You should capture key information of all adult volunteers (and youth volunteers, as appropriate)—full names, phone numbers, email addresses—for future contact.

After an event, e-mail these volunteers to thank them and let them know what a difference their volunteer effort made.

In your next paragraph invite them to sign up for the PPF email newsletter, like your Friends group's and PPF's Facebook Pages (provide a link in your e-mail, share photos they may have taken, point them to the photos your Friends group took during the event and finally invite them to a future volunteering activity.

Photos

Have all participants sign a photo release regarding use of their photos. If children under the age of 18 are photographed, a parent must sign the photo release. Take plenty of shots that capture the day's action, and encourage participants to share the photos they take with you as well after the event. Use these photos on your web site, your Facebook Page, the PPF Facebook Page, Flickr account, etc.

Remember to send two or three high-resolution (300 dpi minimum) photos of the event to the community editor at your local newspapers. Tape a caption on the back that describes what the people in the photograph are doing and where. Be sure to identify them, from right to left by first and last names.

Working with Boy and Girl Scout Troops

- Contact the Girl Scout or Boy Scout council office http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scouting_in_Pennsylvania that serves your area to tell them your idea, set up a meeting with them and plan how to pull it off.
- Borrow a current copy of a Boy Scout and Girl Scout handbooks and pick one or more of the outdoor badges to plan a merit badge workshop for Scout troops in your park or forest's region.
- Design activities that could be done within two-three hours, by setting up "stations," each lead by a volunteer, where various requirements can be fulfilled.
- Recruit troop leaders who are interested in the event and help you put it together.
- Decide who will be in charge of each activity station. Schedule volunteers for the event
- Friends who are interested in leading any youth activities and events must go through the criminal background check and any other screening that may be required by the youth organization.
- Gather all materials prior to the event (ask Scout troops in your area what they may have available already or try to get them donated; do not ask Scouts to pay for supply costs.)
- Ask local grocers to donate some healthy snacks and beverages for the Scouts. Be sure to acknowledge the donation with signage and a thank you certificate with a picture afterwards. The owner or store manager will likely post this in a spot visible to patrons.
- Obtain and follow all safety policies of the Boy or Girl Scouts, including those regarding taking and posting photos of children.
- After your Friends group has established a relationship with Scout troops in your area, regularly invite them to participate in volunteer activities.
- When you have a larger project that needs to be completed, let Scout troop leaders know in case it might be appropriate for a Boy Scout Eagle Project or a Girl Scout Silver or Gold Service Project. Keep in mind that these projects require the Scout to assume a leadership and planning role, which requires significant autonomy. You can serve as an advisor, and volunteer on the work crew, but the Boy or Girl Scout must be the project leader.

How to Engage a Small Business

One of the most effective ways to engage local business near your state park or forest is to help them understand how the parks help their business. State parks attract visitors who spend money with local businesses near the park. In addition, there are several opportunities for small businesses to increase their favorability with the local community by partnering with the Pennsylvania State Parks and Forest Foundation and your Friends Group.

Ideas for small business engagement:

- Ask storefronts to put up signs about park events and activities.
- Ask local coffee shops to donate boxes or cambros (5 gallons) of coffee for meetings and volunteer events (Peet's Coffee does this and requires at least one month's notice).
- Ask supermarkets to donate gift certificates or bulk food for special events.
- Ask restaurants and salons to donate gift certificates that can be used for a silent auction. You can also ask restaurants to offer a nonprofit discount if you host your special event there.
- Ask delis to donate sandwiches for volunteer events.
- Ask businesses to have their customers "check-in" to the state park on Facebook, Yelp, or Foursquare to unlock local business coupons and rewards (these would need to be negotiated with the local business).

Process for reaching out to local businesses:

- Identify how to recognize the small business for their contribution (e.g. if Peet's donates coffee, make little signs in front of the coffee that say "Generously donated by Peet's Coffee & Tea").
- Call the small business to find out the name of the owner or general manager and ask when a good time to speak with that person is (e.g. for restaurant owners, 3pm in the afternoon is usually a slow time).
- Ideally, have someone who patronizes the business make contact – business owners are much more likely to give back to causes their customers care about.
- Put your request in writing on your **letterhead, address it to the person in charge, and mention the recognition opportunity. Be sure to mention that your group is part of the Pennsylvania Parks & Forests Foundation.**
- **Visit the business at the time of day that was suggested when you called. Ask to speak to the owner or general manager to make the ask. Leave the letter to that person behind.**
- **Depending on how the visit goes, follow-up as suggested or in a few days.**
- **Provide the recognition that you offered the business. Go the extra mile and email them a picture of it!**
- **Send a thank-you letter or hand-written note.**

Service Organizations to Approach for Partnership Opportunities

Adult Community Service Organizations

Kiwanis International

Website: www.kiwanis.org

"Kiwanis is a global organization of volunteers dedicated to changing the world, one child and one community at a time."

Lions Clubs International

Their mission is "to empower volunteers to serve their communities, meet humanitarian needs, encourage peace and promote international understanding... Here's a link to a Lions Club that sponsored a fishing event for mentally challenged children in a state park:

http://www.lionsclubs.org/EN/our-impact/lions-in-action/lions-in-action-archives/community_and_environment_projects/fishing-derby.php

Rotary International

Website: www.rotary.org

Rotary Club's motto is "Service above self." The organization brings together business and professional leaders to provide humanitarian services, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. There are 34,282 clubs and over 1.2 million members worldwide.

Youth Service Organizations

Girl Scouts of America

Website: www.girlscouts.org

Girl Scouts describes itself as "the world's preeminent organization dedicated solely to girls." Its goal is to empower girls and to help teach values through activities including camping, community service, learning first aid, and earning badges by acquiring other practical skills.

Approach the Girl Scout Council closest to your park or forest.

Boy Scouts of America

Website: www.scouting.org

Boy Scouts is one of the largest youth organizations in the United States, with 2.7 million youth members and over 1 million adult volunteers. The BSA goal is to train youth in responsible citizenship, character development, and self-reliance through participation in a wide range of outdoor activities, educational programs, and, at older age levels, career-oriented programs in partnership with community organizations.

Approach the Boy Scout Council closest to your park or forest.

Campfire USA

The youth service organization's tagline is "Light the fire within." Camp Fire camps provide opportunities for children and youth to be outside to learn, explore, and play together, while developing a lifelong appreciation and respect for the outdoors environment.

Website: www.campfireusa.org

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Website: <http://www.bbbs.org/>

The organization pairs adult mentors with youth who need mentors. Regional chapters seek low-cost venues and activities where adult mentors and youth can do something interesting that will promote bonding and shared learning.

Boys and Girls Clubs

<http://www.bgca.org>

Their stated mission is to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. The organization's primary concern is to provide a safe place for school students to go.

You also might want to have members approach their own house of worship.

Also consider approaching your local outdoor recreation groups who organize members around hiking, fishing, mountain biking, hunting, birding, etc. Many of these clubs organize environmental stewardship events. Since members have a vested interest in maintaining the quality of public lands, they may be motivated to help with advocacy.

Sample Solicitation Letter

Date

Business Owner or Manager Name

Title

Business Name

Address

City, State Zip

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name,

I am writing to you today with an exciting opportunity for you to help support [name of your state park/forest]. [Describe request – what you are looking for and what it will be used for].

Friends of [name of your state park/forest] exists to protect and preserve our park through needs assessment, enhancement projects, public relations and education. We are people who highly value the [name of your park] for its scenic beauty, wildlife and outdoor family fun. A nonprofit, all-volunteer organization, we work to preserve and enhance the park. In cooperation with the park staff we identify areas of need and meet those needs through our volunteer action and financial support. Friends Groups like ours are part of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation, a registered charitable organization.

[Describe in more detail what the event/activity the donation you are requesting is for (date, location, who benefits, how they benefit).]

As a business [owner/manager], we understand that you are looking for ways to attract and retain customers. By supporting Friends of [name of your state park/forest], your business will be recognized in our community. [Insert how you will recognize the business for their contribution].

Thank you for considering our request. I will follow-up with you next week to see if you will be able to provide support. In the meantime, please feel free to contact me at [email] or [number] with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Your Name