



THE PUBLIC FACE OF YOUR FACILITY



Training Frontline Staff *and* Volunteers

BY ALINA TUGEND

When Amy Miller, director of public programs for the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, Calif., was hired for her post five years ago from the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., she started moving the recruitment and training of volunteers in a new direction.

“We wanted to inspire guests to take action rather than having them come and learn everything they wanted to know about fish or animals,” she said. “The idea is not just to lead by example and not just to tell the visitors the same old information but to offer tips on how guests can change their own lives.”

That is the trend for most aquariums and zoos these days – trying to convey, in an appropriate way, not just what an institution has but what it hopes to get guests to do and to convey that mission with zeal and knowledge.

And that message needs to come from everyone from the parking lot attendant to the ticket-seller to the volunteer who points out where the rainforest exhibit is, says Leah Van der Mei, director of guest operations at the Academy, which includes the Morrison Planetarium, the Kimball Natural History Museum and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited Steinhart Aquarium. The staff and volunteers are “the face of the museum. The chances are higher that our staff will engage with the public more than a scientist or researcher.”



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For instance, the guy who ushers people in the planetarium, she said, and receives a quick question from a guest about black holes should be able to answer it. And if he can't, he needs to find someone who can.

But is that happening? Sometimes. And sometimes not.

Some facilities are able to commit to training every employee who might possibly interact with a guest; however, "many times these people are seasonal employees," said Nette Pletcher, AZA director of conservation education. So, intensely training each staff member can be "a huge investment with very little payoff."

With the volunteer interpreters, a goal is to ensure that they can "translate complex scientific ideas into something the public cares about, not just recite facts about the panda," said Pletcher. "The point is to get across the concept of global environmental stewardship," she adds. "What can a child living in Houston or San Francisco or Kansas City do to contribute to wildlife conservation?"

There is a line between teaching and lobbying. Miller said they don't advocate, for example, that guests write their congressional representatives about particular bills under consideration. On the other hand, when discussing, say, ocean acidification, besides explaining its harmful effects and that it is caused by an increase in carbon dioxide, an educator can offer the tip that washing in cold water can help – because 90 percent of the energy used to wash your clothes is to heat the water.

But it's not always easy. "We're at a juncture," said Chance Sanford, the vice president of education at the Houston Zoo in Houston, Texas. "We're trying to focus more outwardly on conservation but haven't developed a cohesive training program."

The Zoo's main conservation initiative focuses on six themes: use recycled paper; recycle cell phones; reduce use of plastics; eat sustainable seafood; plant gardens that are friendly to pollinators such as bees; and

become aware of the problems of using unsustainably-harvested palm oil. Information is provided on how using – or not using – specific products harm animals and their habitat, what the Zoo is doing about it and what you, as an individual, can also do to help.

The Zoo employs approximately 400 volunteers and more than 350 staff, who receive some general training and then more focused training depending on the areas where they work. All staff and volunteers are also invited to "Lunch and Learn."

"We're constantly communicating, but it's a struggle, particularly with the volunteers, where it's hard to get everyone in one place," said Sanford.

The Zoo is considering offering more online training, sending out articles on a regular basis and other ways to help people connect with the message. What really needs to be done, Sanford said, "is to create a culture of learning – a community of learning and connecting with the message."

Those who oversee conservation education, volunteers and the frontline staff at zoos and aquariums agree that uniting all volunteers and workers be-

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hind a message not only makes a better customer experience but enhances volunteer and employee motivation. People feel more like they are part of a team, which even impacts retention rates.

Lace Garland, who is the manager of volunteer programs and internships at the New England Aquarium in Boston, Mass., said ideally every “first-touch” interaction with a guest – whether it is the person who takes the ticket and stamps the hand or the volunteer guide – reflects the Aquarium’s mission to “Protect the Blue Planet.”

The Aquarium has approximately 250 staff members and 1,000 volunteers and interns; it accepts only about ten to 15 percent of those who apply. Volunteers are required to work a ten-hour day once a week for at least 26 weeks. Interns work more over a shorter period of time. The Aquarium offers brown bag lecture series during which internationally-renowned conservationists and researchers speak a

few times per month and all staff and volunteers are invited.

About a year ago, in order to include volunteers that the Aquarium could not accommodate in its regular program, it began the “Live Blue Science Corps” that responds to one-off needs, such as beach-cleanups, Garland said. “These volunteers act as ambassadors and take our mission outside Aquarium walls.”

Some 350 people have joined the Corps to date; they attend an eight-part workshop series that gives them an in-depth insight to the Aquarium’s mission and history, volunteerism in the U.S., civic and community engagement and leadership.

At the California Academy of Sciences, the process of getting staff and volunteers who are zealous about its message, “Explore, Explain and Sustain,” begins at recruitment. “I might interview 40 or 50 volunteers for about 25 available spots,” Miller said. The

Academy has a total of 450 docents, 700 total volunteers and 650 staff members. Before the six weeks practicing on the floor they have between 15 and 20 onsite training hours plus self-study at home. But the learning continues with more training in specialized areas.

“We just finished a training session on how to be a volunteer in a rainforest [exhibit],” Miller adds. In return, first-year volunteers must agree to serve three 3.5-hour shifts per month for the first year of volunteer service. After they have been there for a year, they can go down to two.

Of course, as Miller and Van der Mei acknowledge, San Francisco is an especially easy place to find people eager to volunteer or work at a facility like the Academy.

In fact, the Academy receives approximately 100 applicants for every one “guest-facing staff” position offered. It recruits about four or five times a year, bringing in approximately 30



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applicants at a time. Those applicants then spend the entire day being interviewed, doing team-building exercises and being observed interacting on the floor with guests.

"It's for us to see how comfortable they are with people," Van der Mei said. "A lot of young people know how to interview, but you get them on the public floor with guests and it's night and day."

And the reality is, although having volunteer and staff members on board with the facility's message is wonderful, "you need to also look at what you need in a facility," Sanford said. "It would be great if you only recruited passion, but you also need someone who does data entry. I think instead of recruiting people who are passionate about conservation, you need to look for people who are open-minded and ready to learn."

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