Volunteer Engagement Plan: Critical Analysis

Abstract

Volunteers play an imperative part at the BFX festival; an international animation and visual effects festival that is in its eight-year. With over 21 million people volunteering in the UK and the increase in young people volunteering (Carmichael, 2016) it is important to increase the engagement and retention of these volunteers. This report aims to provide some insight in how to implement and improve BFX volunteer engagement strategy and aims to maximize the engagement of volunteers; through improving their skills, knowledge, and experiences during BFX Festival to assist with the objectives of the overall festival, showing a timeline of activities and volunteer journey. Discussing how to implement strategies and the risk of them including what environment they operate it. The report ends with recommendations for BFX on how they can continue to increase volunteer engagement in the future.

Introduction

This engagement plan is a formal strategy for BFX Festival: Bournemouth University (BFX) to increase the engagement of a key stakeholder. Volunteers engagement will be the focus in this report as this stakeholder was defined as an important and significant stakeholder that are an integral part of BFX festival both in the past as well as future as the festival increases in attendees according to Tracey Rickett who gave us a talk during my BU course lecture on 18 October 2019.

The aim of this report is to evaluate BFX's current engagement strategy to then be able to make proposals for improvements to the BFX volunteer engagement practice and policies; pre -during and after the festival. Mapping the volunteer engagement journey pre-during and after the festival clearly mapping key milestones. Taking into consideration BFX requirements for volunteers including workload and skills necessary. The report will discuss the implementations of the plan including concepts such as social media co-creation, creating personal shift patterns and engagement surveys that are appropriate for BFX volunteers. All in relation to the operating environment including the BFX finances, lack of funding and external economic factors. Taking into consideration the risks of the implantation plan and how the engagement objectives are met.

This volunteer engagement plan should then be viewed as part of BFX's overall strategic planning process which needs to be budgeted, tracked and supported, following a set of SMART objectives. Concluding with recommendations to what else BFX can do to ensure that volunteer engagement is encouraged and increased.

Engagement Strategy

BFX Festival: Bournemouth University

BFX is the UK’s largest visual effect, computer games and animation festival that has become

established as an international festival that inspires a unique mix of technical and creative practices (BFX, 2019). BFX is an annual festival that is in its eighth-year see appendix A for the five W's. BFX is recognised as one of the world's premier animation festivals, attracting collaborators from around the world (BOMO, 2019). The festival includes a range of speakers (Walt Disney, Pixar, and EA Criterion), masterclasses, exhibitions, screenings from studios around the world sharing their experiences (BFX, 2019). The final day of the festival is dedicated to recruitment so that the attendees can network with industry professionals. Over the past seven years, the festival has rapidly grown which is displayed in appendix B which shows an increase in attendees, speakers, and masterclasses.

Current BFX Engagement Strategy

To create and implement a new volunteer engagement plan it is important to understand the current volunteer engagement plan ensuring that all past engagement practices aren't overlooked. BFX festivals' current volunteer engagement strategy takes on a top-down approach meaning the organizations achieve their specific objectives through the people in authority roles making the decisions rather than by the stakeholders that are affected by the decisions (Kim and Arnold, 1996).

Pre- Event:

- Recruits/ starts engagement with potential volunteers early in the planning process. To ensure an appropriate number of volunteers are recruited and training can take place pre-event.
- Communicate to volunteers through email to notify volunteers of training dates and schedules. Tracey Rickett who gave a talk during my BU course lecture on 18 October 2019 suggests that being open and honest from the beginning helped ensure they had a dedicated and motivated group of volunteers as they were aware from the beginning of the hard work that was required from them.

During- Event:

- Throughout the festival day itself, BFX ensures that each volunteer has been delegated to a certain job role and is introduced to their point of contact. This delegation aspect is important as there is a new team of volunteers each day.

Post-Event:

- Invite volunteers to an awards ceremony
- Send out emails thanking volunteers for all their hard work across the festival.

Volunteer Engagement

A volunteer is someone who freely spends time, unpaid doing something that aims to benefits someone or an organization (Stephenson, 2020). Volunteer engagement has been rarely examined although the feelings of engagement among volunteers are a mental state that is just as desirable as it is in paid workers (Vecina, 2012). "Volunteer Engagement is a strategy that builds organizational capacity through employee and volunteer collaboration and the

development of high -impact, meaningful volunteer opportunities that create greater influence and outcome for the organization" (JFFixler Group, 2012). Alfes (2015) defined volunteer engagement as a unique, positive, motivational construct with engaged volunteers being fulfilled, invested and energized by their tasks and feelings towards their volunteer work.

BFX Volunteers

Most commonly known as the BFX Geeks, the volunteers of BFX play an "integral role to BFX" suggested Tracey Rickett who gave a talk during my BU course lecture on 18 October 2019. To ensure BFX achieve the overall objective volunteers are recruited to be:

- Motivated
- Hard-working
- Adaptable
- Responsible

The volunteers take part in an extensive list of activities that are vital to the operations of the festival activities include:

- Looking after the delegates, speakers, and catering
- Managing the ticketing process

Most volunteers that apply and volunteer for BFX:

- Event Management Students
- Industry Professionals
- Students/ graduates from the Computer Animation, Games and Visual Effects faculty
- Students/ graduates from the Film, TV, Media and Music Production faculty

A large proportion of graduates as volunteering gives them free access to the festival and recruitment day that as graduates are no longer entitled to these tickets. As many of the volunteers are ages between 18-25 it is important to utilise online platforms where volunteers can communicate as a primary reason for people to volunteer is through the meaningful connections and relationships that can be developed (Phillips, 2018).

Aims

To maximize the engagement of volunteers; through improving their skills, knowledge and experiences during the BFX Festival to assist with the objectives of the overall festival.

Strategy

Figure 1: Strategy (Author, 2020)

Objectives

Figure 2: Objective (Author, 2020)

Risks

Low-Risk Implementations:

- Low Financial Impact
- High return on investment (ROI)
- Low external threats to the organisation
- Little time/ effort to implement
- No specialist knowledge required

High-Risk Implementations:

- High Financial Impact
- Low ROI
- High external threats to the organisation
- Take a lot of time/ effort to implement
- Requires specialist knowledge

Pre–Event Implementations:

Low risk:

- BFX team send personalised emails/phone calls to re-connect to previous BFX volunteers in April 2020 to inquire if they would like to volunteer again in 2020 in a leadership role. Recognising their previous work at the festival as this encourages retention and high levels of performance (Walk et al 2017). Leadership roles should be offered as people that frequently volunteer for the same brand want to take their commitment a step further and take on leadership roles and responsibilities (Gibson, 2007). Describing them as BFX Ultra Geeks (BUG). As per Baum et al (2009), the volunteer life cycle describes that promotion increases volunteer retention. Also, allow volunteers to become super fans and micro-influencers.

Figure 3: Volunteer Life Cycle for pre-during and after the event (Baum et al, 2009)

- Create a BFX Geeks official Facebook/ Twitter page in April 2020 that will be managed/ moderated by BUG. Social media platforms enable volunteers to communicate with one another, get instant updates on the event and create a sense community. This can create a competitive advantage for BFX as volunteers move up the engagement ladder to become advocates of the brand becoming more engaged and loyal to the brand due to feel included in the organisation (Zook and Smith, 2016). However, it is important to set out some clear rules for use and retain the right to delete any comments that you deem unacceptable (WCVA, 2017).

High risk:

- Understanding volunteer motivation is key to underpinning the recruitment process (Baum et al, 2009) as it is a powerful, personal and emotional process and is important to ensure each individual feels connected to the team and objectives of BFX. Students

in higher education are the most likely group to volunteers as well as their time spent volunteering (see appendix C/D). However, the recruitment process is difficult due to the number of volunteers required as student volunteers are only able to work 15 hours per week during term time according to Tracey Rickett who gave a talk during my BU course lecture on 18 October 2019. Volunteers are important to BFX as they have a lack of funding from sponsors outside of Bournemouth University.

- Volunteers select their shift preferences in September 2002 through an online platform. Ensuring as little drop out in volunteers' numbers before/ on the day as volunteers who are dissatisfied with their schedules are likely to refuse to work (Gordan and Erkut, 2014). People are more likely to volunteers with organisations that have a degree of flexibility in choosing how often and in what way they want to contribute (Baum et al, 2009). Volunteers are an integral part of BFX and with minimum wage rising from £5.90 - £6.15 for 18-20-year olds and set to keep rising it is imperative to have motivated volunteers that are retained year on year. Which is becoming even more relevant as the Independent Sector (2018) found that the value of volunteers if £25.43 per hour.
- Formalised training program implemented. Supporting volunteers through the training process is vital as volunteers go through a delicate process of adapting when volunteering in a new environment (Johnson, 2017). Good orientation to organisations and training makes for a happy and enthusiastic volunteer (Fritz, 2019). The communication of this training is also important volunteers are there because they want to help the organisation not because they are being forced therefore be careful in the selection of tone of voice when training and giving volunteers instructions. (WCVA, 2017) FOUND important that volunteers need to receive information at least three times including when you confirm the role, a week before the event and when volunteers arrive at the event.

During–Event Implementations:

Low Risk:

- Cynics can be transformed into passionate and engaged volunteers through gamification (Scott, 2012). As gamification leads to higher participation and encourages the development of volunteer's competences (Muller et al, 2015). Gamification can be employed simply during the event by introducing designing games that entail badges and leader boards that public during the performance of volunteers. However, only top scorers should be listed publicly as displaying low-performance volunteers can cause counter-productivity (Giving Force, 2018). This can be completed by volunteers by login into an online platform that tracks their performance including attending training, engaging in social media on the BFX Geeks platform as well as official BFX platform, writing feedback forms about the speakers and masterclasses they are attending or volunteering at. During the awards ceremony, the top-performing volunteers will get a special mention and win an award as well as winning prizes such as personal one to ones with speakers and prizes relevant to animation and design.

High Risk:

- Keep social media updated throughout the event as 60% of people check their social media at least once a day, therefore, an integral part of engaging with on the go

volunteer (Volunteer Hub, 2019). Therefore, introducing volunteers that are specialised in managers and co-creating the content for social media during the event creating a strong brand community and effective collaboration between the BFX and volunteers creating brand enthusiasts who are committed to providing content to benefit the brand and show their skills (Cove et al, 2015).

Post- Event Implementations:

Low Risk:

- Send out formal thank you emails/ phone calls 1 week after the event has finished showing gratitude and appreciation to all volunteers. Investor Group (2013) fond that 80% of volunteers want to be recognized for how their work has made a difference to the organization. Every volunteer wants recognition for their work which also increases retention of volunteers as per figure 3 (Baum et al, 2009).
- Engagement survey to be sent to all volunteers 12 hours after the event. One of the simplest ways to gauge volunteer's engagement or lack of it is important, asking various questions about their experiences pre-during and after BFX using qualitative and quantitative questions (McCarthy, 2019).

For a full timeline of activities pre-during and after BFX see appendix E.

For a view of a volunteer during see appendix F.

Record, Assess, Adjust and Respond

It is necessary to do a post-event evaluation (Stackpoole, 2016) through recording, assessing, adjusting and responding to all implementations to ensure the aims and objectives of this engagement plan are met.

There are two ways data can be collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. It is important to understand how many volunteers felt engaged as well as why these volunteers felt engaged. A combination of both types of data analysis helps address evaluation questions (Public Engagement, 2017).

To know how effective the volunteer engagement implementations where and how to understand and improve these in the future it would be effective to carry out:

- A dedicated online survey to all volunteers
- Conducting interviews with a range of specialised volunteers and volunteer leader
- Extracting online social media data on how much interaction they have had on their social media pages that are public/ attendee facing to assess the specialised media and marketing volunteers.
- Asking attendees specific questions in online surveys about volunteers' performance and engagement at the event

These methods will collect feedback to learn about the needs and expectations of the volunteers and to help create future strategies (DeFranzo, 2012). Appendix G demonstrates

examples of questions that can be utilised to see if objectives are met.

Once the results have been analysed, it should be clear how effective the engagement implementation process has been, and which aspects require improvement. The response rate from volunteers should be relatively high as surveys that are distributed internally have a high response rate rather than external audiences (Fryrear, 2015).

Conclusion

This engagement plan aims to maximize the engagement of volunteers; through improving their skills, knowledge and experiences during the BFX Festival to assist with the objectives of the overall festival. The report discusses the BFX current engagement plan to develop new strategies to increase volunteer engagement after looking into the stakeholder in future detail and how significant volunteers are for BFX. Discussing implementations that can be put into practice pre-during and after BFX through implementing practices of co-creation through specialized volunteers in social media marketing, developing engagement survey post-event and the use of gamification methods to recognition volunteer's performance throughout the festival. Suggesting that an inclusive approach needs to be used when designing, implementing, monitoring, recording, assessing and recommend interventions. Ensuring the future success of volunteer programs, organizations must be able to attract, engage, and retain volunteers (Harp et al, 2017). This engagement plan is not intended to be rigid and can be flexible with the approaches discussed being interchangeable and fluid. It is hoped that this engagement plan will promote volunteer engagement and the understanding of how and why volunteers are engaged and the retention of this engagement. This volunteer engagement plan should then be viewed as part of BFX overall strategic

Recommendations

There is numerous recommendation that can be made to ensure that volunteers can continue to be engaged through the below recommendations (more details in appendix F):

- Hiring an engagement officer which can increase the engagement of volunteers as well as other important stakeholders for BFX. This can be key to high levels of engagement as they are responsible for the success of the communication and are a point of contact between BFX and the volunteers (Exchange, 2017).
- Create a volunteer focus group for a range of volunteer's two-week post-event which can be implemented by the engagement officer to see whether volunteers were satisfied and felt engaged.
- To create a creative recruitment day that stands out in the industry marketing place. Crall et al (2017) suggest that multiple marketing strategies can drive applications as well as driving attendees to the platform.
- It is important to ensure that volunteers can continue to communicate with one another after the festival, therefore, a recommendation would be to set up regular volunteer networking meetings as Watson (2013) suggest that volunteers want to feel more socially connected to one another.