

The Power of Thank You

By Donna Ann Harris, CMSM | From *Main Street Story of the Week* | July 24, 2014 |



Thank you! These are two incredibly powerful words that every Main Street leader must communicate well, and with gusto, every day, to the countless volunteers, board members, committee chairs, politicians, and the host of others that help us make our downtowns great.

We show appreciation to volunteers for a variety of reasons: for a job well done, after a difficult meeting, before starting a challenging or (ahem!) thankless project or after a particularly thoughtful comment or gesture. Saying thank you is what powers successful local Main Street efforts.

Thanks from Everyone

So, who should be thanking people in your revitalization program? EVERYONE! Showing gratitude is not just the job of the Executive Director. Saying thank you, and meaning it, should extend throughout the organization. Main Street thrives when all of its volunteers including Board members and committee chairs are skilled and enthusiastic at giving timely and heartfelt appreciation.

Committee chairs and event chairs are probably “ground zero” for basic thank you tasks, as they work directly with volunteers throughout the year. Some volunteers spend inordinate amounts of time on your organization, and those folks are more precious than gold. Thank them frequently. A good place to start for thank you ideas is the legendary list of [“139 Ways to Say “Thank-You” and Recognize Volunteers.”](#)

Three Times, Three Ways

When I first started working in Main Street, Sheri Stuart, who was then a Program Associate for the National Main Street Center, told me that volunteers should be “thanked three times three ways—in person, in writing and in front of their peers.” This simple adage has stuck with me for more than fifteen years. It really makes perfect sense. Thanking

volunteers multiple times, in multiple ways is designed to make sure that at least one of the thanks resonates with the volunteer, and to acknowledge their valuable contribution to your organization.

If we take Sheri's advice and put it into practice, volunteers should be alternately praised and thanked throughout their service to Main Street, and not just at the end of an event or after a year of service at your annual recognition event (you do that don't you?). Publishing the name of every Main Street volunteer in your annual report each year also makes good sense. Some volunteers thrive on thanks and recognition, others just want a quiet word of heartfelt appreciation. It is rare for a volunteer to be over thanked in Main Street.

Giving praise and recognition comes easily to some, and needs to be practiced by others. But the need for "Thank You!" never goes away. Sometimes an otherwise excellent volunteer manager falls short on thanking their charges. If that is the case, others need to step in. Not everyone is good at thanking or praising, so we must identify board and committee members that excel at this.

Whom to Thank

Volunteers — The annual volunteer picnic or cocktail party is critical to honor everyone who plays a part in your downtown work. We are fortunate that the Main Street movement has always collected volunteer hours as a means to show the impact of citizen involvement in our revitalization efforts. Some towns give awards (either funny or serious) for particular achievements during the year, designed to celebrate the grace, tenacity, or brute force necessary to make downtown projects happen. Energize Inc. an international training and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism, has a great list of ideas for volunteer recognition, see them [here](#).

Board members — Board thanks and recognition happens mostly when a board member fulfills their board term(s) and is moving on. Unfortunately, these recognition events often occur at the annual meeting, and this is a shame because it is often a condensed "good bye, thank you!" Current board members should be celebrated at every annual meeting to highlight their accomplishments throughout the year. [Main Street Lawrenceville](#) in New Jersey acknowledges the high caliber of their board members on their website, which is available all of the time.

Investors in your local program — It is my belief that everyone who donates to your organization should get a written thank you note, no matter the size of the gift. The [IRS Publication 1771](#) explains when an "acknowledgement" is required. For gifts of \$75.00 and above, see how you should be thanking these people on page 6.

Donors — Those who give you larger sums, say over \$250 yearly, need to be thanked differently. These real and abiding friends, need a heartfelt letter that acknowledges their gift and tells them how their funds will be used. Acknowledging all of your donors in your annual report or once a year in your e-newsletter is also great recognition. According to the IRS, the donor is responsible for obtaining a written acknowledgment from a charity for any single contribution of \$250 or more, before the donor can claim a charitable contribution on his/her federal income tax return. See pages 2-3 in [IRS Publication 1771](#) to make sure you use the correct language in the letters you send to thank these supporters that give larger sums.

The Executive Director — So much of what the executive director does is give credit and praise to others. They make sure that board members and elected officials are appropriately appreciated for supporting the organization. Yet, we cannot forget that managers/executive directors are the biggest Main Street volunteer of all. Every week, they give more hours to the organization than any other volunteer. They sometimes put in five, 10 or even 20 hours (!) beyond their regular paid schedule to make the local Main Street program thrive.

Main Street Staff — Sometimes, staff does not get appropriate thanks from their boss, the board president or from other Board members. In my work with the Main Street movement, I have seen first-hand that lack of appreciation is one of the five most common reasons why managers leave their jobs. Lack of appreciation can be subtle or profound,

and can cut to the quick. Being overlooked and underappreciated when other public thanking is being done by board members, is hard to take.

Board members should be sensitive to this matter, and not take the attitude that “well she gets paid, that’s her thanks for a job well done.” Employee appreciation is part of being a good employer. Lack of appreciation can tempt an otherwise high quality manager to seriously consider another position. Board members and especially the board president must maintain an open dialogue with the Executive Director to understand how important thanks and appreciation are to a successful partnership.

Thank you! It never stops in Main Street. So make an extra effort this week, and every week, to show appreciation to the legions of volunteers and staff that help you make your downtown great.

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