RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Maximizing Recruitment Marketing for Volunteer Fire and EMS Departments

Marketing can attract a prospective volunteer, but timely and persistent follow-up determines what happens next. Learn how to connect campaigns, people and process.

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IN SHORT

A complete guide to volunteer fire and EMS recruitment marketing, candidate follow-up, prospect tracking, station visits, onboarding and retention.

Volunteer fire and EMS departments face a recruitment challenge that is different from filling a traditional job opening. They are asking people to make a substantial commitment of time, training and responsibility while balancing work, family and everything else in their lives.

Successful recruitment marketing must do more than generate awareness. It must explain the opportunity clearly, capture interest, support personal follow-up and guide prospects through a process that may take weeks or months.

Marketing can get someone to notice the department. It cannot, by itself, turn that person into a member. The outcome is usually decided by what happens after the inquiry.

Start With the Department's Real Staffing Needs

Define the roles and coverage gaps before launching a campaign. The department may need interior firefighters, EMTs, drivers, administrative members, support personnel, junior members or people available during specific hours.

Avoid presenting every opportunity as the same role. Someone who cannot become an interior firefighter may be an excellent EMT, driver, fundraiser, public educator or administrative member.

Develop Clear Prospect Profiles

Identify the groups most likely to match each need. Potential audiences may include:

- High school and college students
- Young professionals
- Parents and established community members
- Military veterans
- Healthcare workers
- Retired residents
- People seeking career experience
- New residents looking for community connections

Each audience has different motivations and concerns. Recruitment messages should reflect those differences.

Build a Recruitment-Focused Website Experience

Do not rely on the department's general homepage to convert prospects. Create a dedicated recruitment section that explains:

- Available roles
- Eligibility requirements
- Training provided
- Expected time commitment

- Benefits and incentives
- The application and onboarding process
- Answers to common questions
- Stories from current members
- A simple way to express interest

Use plain language. Prospects may not understand department terminology, certification names or operational expectations.

Use a Short Interest Form

Many potential volunteers are not ready to complete a formal membership application during their first website visit.

Offer a short form that captures name, contact information, role of interest, availability and preferred contact method. Use the full application later, after the department has answered questions and confirmed basic eligibility.

Record the campaign or source that generated each lead.

Create an Immediate Follow-Up Process

Send an automatic confirmation that explains what happens next. Personal follow-up should occur quickly, ideally from a named recruitment contact or department member.

Use a shared tracking system so prospects are not trapped in one person's email account. Record contact attempts, questions, event attendance, application progress and the next assigned action.

Follow Up With Purpose and Persistence

Volunteer departments often lose good candidates because they are too passive after the first contact. A prospect submits a form, receives one email and then hears nothing unless they take the initiative again.

The department should be timely and persistent, even aggressive when appropriate, without making the candidate feel pressured or harassed. That balance comes from making every contact useful.

A practical follow-up sequence might include:

1. Immediate confirmation with the name of the person who will respond
2. Personal phone call, text or email within one business day
3. Invitation to visit the station or attend a recruitment event
4. Reminder before the scheduled visit
5. Follow-up within a day after the visit
6. Help completing the application and gathering required information
7. Regular status updates while screening or approval is underway

If the prospect does not respond, vary the communication method. Some people ignore email but answer a text. Others are more comfortable with a phone call. Ask for the preferred method and time during the initial inquiry.

Do not interpret one missed call as a lack of interest. People considering volunteer service are often balancing work, school, family and other responsibilities. Follow up several times over a reasonable period, while making it easy for the person to say they are no longer interested.

Give Every Prospect a Named Contact

Candidates should know who is responsible for helping them. A general recruitment inbox may capture the inquiry, but the relationship should quickly become personal.

Assign a recruiter, officer, mentor or member to each qualified prospect. That person should answer questions, explain the process and ensure the next step occurs. The candidate should never have to guess whom to contact or repeat the same story to several people.

Use Follow-Up to Showcase the Department

Every follow-up is an opportunity to show what membership actually looks like.

Invite prospects to training, community events and appropriate station activities. Share short videos or photos that illustrate the agency's call types, equipment, specialty services and training opportunities. Explain the variety of incidents the department handles and the skills members can develop.

Exciting fire and EMS incidents can attract attention, but they should not become the entire recruitment message. Protect patient and victim privacy and avoid treating someone else's emergency as entertainment.

Most importantly, showcase the people. Introduce prospects to newer members, experienced officers, operational personnel and support members. Let them hear why people joined, how they balance the commitment and what the department means to them.

A candidate may be impressed by the apparatus or call volume. They usually decide whether to stay because of the people.

Track Follow-Up Performance

Measure more than lead volume. Recruitment leaders should be able to answer:

- **Q** How quickly did the department respond?
- **Q** How many contact attempts were made?
- **Q** Did the prospect schedule and attend a visit?
- **Q** Who owns the next action?
- **Q** How long has the candidate been waiting?
- **Q** At which step did the person disengage?

Set internal expectations for response time and unresolved leads. A weekly pipeline review can prevent strong candidates from being forgotten.

Follow-up data can also reveal operational problems. If many prospects disappear after a station visit, the issue may be the experience they had. If candidates leave during background checks or approvals, the department may need clearer expectations and more frequent status updates.

Tell Real Member Stories

Feature members with different ages, backgrounds, roles and reasons for joining. Short videos and first-person stories can address questions that formal recruitment language cannot.

Useful story themes include:

- Why I joined
- How I balance volunteering with work and family
- What training was really like
- What surprised me
- How the department helped my career
- Why non-operational members matter

Do not make every story sound the same. The range of experiences is part of the appeal.

Build a Repeatable Campaign Calendar

Recruitment should operate throughout the year, not only when staffing reaches a crisis.

Plan recurring campaigns around school calendars, community events, graduation, seasonal department activity and scheduled recruitment nights. Reuse strong themes while refreshing the people, images and calls to action.

Coordinate website content, social media, email, local media, signage, community partners and member referrals.

Use Paid Advertising Carefully

Targeted social and search advertising can extend reach, but traffic alone does not create members. Begin with a clear audience, geographic area, landing page and conversion goal.

Test several messages and images. Compare cost per qualified lead, not only clicks or impressions. Stop spending on campaigns that attract attention but do not generate realistic prospects.

Strengthen Community Partnerships

Build relationships with schools, colleges, employers, healthcare organizations, civic groups, veterans' organizations and community associations.

Provide partners with a simple description of the opportunity, current needs, contact information and shareable recruitment material. One trusted community partner can produce stronger prospects than a broad advertising campaign.

Hold Events Designed for Prospects

A general open house may attract families without creating serious recruitment conversations. Offer events specifically for interested prospects.

Include a realistic overview of membership, station and apparatus tours, equipment demonstrations, conversations with newer members and a clearly explained next step.

Capture every attendee's information and follow up afterward.

Connect Recruitment With Onboarding

Recruitment marketing makes a promise about the department. Onboarding must fulfill it.

New members should receive a clear schedule, required paperwork, policies, assigned mentor, training milestones, issued equipment and regular communication. Long silences or disorganized first weeks cause preventable losses.

Track where candidates withdraw and ask why. Recruitment and retention data should influence both marketing and internal improvements.

Measure the Full Funnel

Useful metrics include:

- Visitors to recruitment pages
- Interest-form completion rate
- Lead source
- Response time
- Qualified prospects
- Event attendance
- Applications started and completed
- Acceptance rate
- Time from inquiry to membership
- Six-month and twelve-month retention
- Cost per accepted and retained member

Review the numbers regularly. A campaign that produces many inquiries but few retained members may be targeting the wrong audience or setting inaccurate expectations.

Frequently asked questions

How quickly should a volunteer department follow up with a recruitment lead?

Send an immediate confirmation and make personal contact within one business day whenever possible. Fast follow-up demonstrates that the department values the candidate and has an organized process.

How many times should a recruiter contact an unresponsive prospect?

One missed call or unanswered email should not end the process. Make several useful attempts over a reasonable period and vary the method between phone, text and email. Each message should offer information or a clear next step, while making it easy for the person to decline further contact.

What should a volunteer fire or EMS recruitment page include?

Explain available roles, requirements, training, time commitments, benefits, the application process and what happens after someone expresses interest. Include real member stories and one simple action a prospect can take from a phone.

Should recruitment marketing focus on emergency incidents?

Incident and training content can help explain the mission, but it should protect privacy and avoid using tragedy as entertainment. Lead with the members, culture, mentorship and sense of purpose that determine whether a candidate will belong and stay.

Which volunteer recruitment metrics matter most?

Track qualified leads, response time, contact attempts, station visits, completed applications, acceptance, time to membership and retention after six and twelve months. Clicks and impressions are useful only when they contribute to qualified and retained members.

Create a Recruitment System, Not a Campaign

Volunteer recruitment improves when marketing, follow-up, application management and onboarding operate as one connected process.

Marketing opens the door. Timely, personal and persistent follow-up is what invites someone through it.

The goal is not simply to collect more names. It is to find people who understand the commitment, connect them with the department and give them a clear path toward becoming successful long-term members.

For a broader collection of tactics, read Kick-Ass Public Safety Recruitment Strategies. For a focused look at using members and culture in recruitment, read Your People Are Your Best Recruitment Strategy.

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Dave Iannone

FOUNDER & CHIEF PRODUCT OFFICER, FIRST ARRIVING

He co-founded Firehouse.com and now leads First Arriving, a public safety SaaS company. A fire service veteran and former journalist, he writes on technology, marketing, recruitment and leadership in and around public safety.

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