

Friends of the National Zoo



SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL ZOO
& CONSERVATION BIOLOGY INSTITUTE

Friends of the National Zoo
Case Study

Industry: Museums, Parks, and Zoos

Challenge: Coordinate 1,600 volunteers, including 600 with full-time schedules

Solution: VSystem One, VSystem Live

Key words: volunteer management, self scheduling, volunteer peer-to peer communication, real time reports, partner reports, emergency communication

VSystem One Simplifies Volunteer Management and Provides Valuable Reporting to Partners

Who

Friends of the National Zoo (FONZ) is the nonprofit partner of the Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI) that helps operate and raise revenue for the Zoo, and inspires people to help save species in the U.S. and around the globe. FONZ relies on 1,600 volunteers annually create an engaging experience for Zoo visitors, assist in the care of the Zoo's animals, work at events, and aid in data collection. From recruiting, hiring, and training, FONZ's volunteer force helps support nearly every function of daily life at the Zoo.

Challenge

FONZ had been using an outdated version of VolunteerWorks that no longer served their needs for volunteer management. As a contracted service provider, FONZ needed **a solution that quickly allows them to produce customized reports for their many partners** at the Smithsonian and Zoo. Program Manager Suzanne Hough also needed a system **for general and targeted communications**. Frequently, messages only need to address a limited number of volunteers, such as those who specialize in the Asia Trail, Great Apes, or Reptile Discovery Center. In addition, FONZ needed **a system that efficiently schedules 1,600 volunteers**, including 600 individuals who make a one-year commitment as full-volunteers.

Solution

VSystem One and VSystem Live by Bespoke Software were customized to take into account FONZ's mission-critical activities and business functions. Now in place, the system supports volunteer managers in:

- **scheduling**
- **data collection**
- **real-time reporting**
- **general, targeted, and emergency communications**

Results

The transition to VSystem One was fast, efficient, and accurate. "It took less than 48 hours to convert all the data and none was lost," said Hough.

"The downtime for our team was very short." The database was cut off on a Monday and VSystem was up and running by the end of the day. By the end of the second day, FONZ verified that all the data was properly populated and they could access everything that was mission critical. "Wednesday, Thursday and Friday we trained everyone were up and running!"

"Bespoke understands our business model ...[I] get the information that is valuable to me."

—Suzanne Hough, Program Manager

"We perform the HR function for Zoo volunteers," said Hough. With VSystem One in place, her team always has accurate, current records for each volunteer. "[The system shows] completed background checks, agreements to abide by volunteer policies, and of all the work volunteers have done." **VSystem One reporting makes it easy for Hough to show her partners how FONZ is fulfilling their promise to deliver volunteer services.**

“We looked at several systems and did a month-long trial with VSystem One,” said Hough. “I did my best to break it! I filled in with sample names and events and realized this is a robust program that meets our needs.”

Senior level management saw the merits of VSystem One and approved the purchase. Since then, they’ve found that the system exceeds expectations time and again.

“Bespoke understands our business model and they show us how to maximize the system utilities,” said Hough. “The team has **helped me select tools to get the information that is valuable to me – and it’s never overwhelming**. They also maximize the comfort of our volunteers. There are a lot of bells and whistles in VSystem and they dial down the training so people learn how to use the parts relevant to them.”

REAL TIME REPORTING

Some days 30,000 guests visit the Zoo. Volunteers play a critical role in the experience of those guests. On any given day, a volunteer might engage in conversation with 100 people. “Those people get a unique interaction; each one gets an experience tailored to their interest. These could be life-changing conversations,” said Hough. “A kid who talks to one of our volunteers could be grow up and become a Zoo staff member or a volunteer.”

When volunteers check out, the system prompts them to record the number of people they spoke with during their shift. **Detailed recording can be set up for specific groups.** For example, volunteers may report how many guests participated in a tug-of-war with an orangutan at the rope-pull. Hough can set up the form to record numerous details to collect real time data on Zoo activities and events.

Real-time reporting helps FONZ evaluate activities, test on the fly and make changes as needed in operations.

“**Real time reporting helps us evaluate activities, test on the fly, and make changes in how we operate,**” said Hough. This kind of responsiveness increases the value of FONZ’s services to its partners.

During the summer of 2016, FONZ volunteers played an integral part in the “Washed Ashore: Art to Save the Sea” exhibit. This larger-than-life exhibit of marine wildlife sculptures – from jellyfish to sharks – was made entirely of plastic pollution directly recovered from the oceans.

“We recruited volunteers to talk about the oceans and what people can do to save the sea,” said Hough. “We used VSystem Live to check volunteers in and out. When volunteers checked out, they used account detail to record how many people they talked with. **All summer long we were able to keep our partners up-to-date** on who was volunteering, where, and how many guests volunteers spoke with.”

From reporting that comes through VSystem Live, FONZ gets **also gets qualitative data** that shows what kind of experiences guests are having. “Volunteers use the form to share memorable interactions,” said Hough. “Recently, one reported how a guest was able to understand the role of the Zoo in the breeding of Giant Pandas and the greater success of pandas as a whole. Another reported that when a group of young adults was introduced to a Spotted Leopard, they made the connection between the behavior of that animal to a house cat.” **This kind of reporting helps FONZ respond to and improve guests’ experience at the Zoo.**

VOLUNTEER USE

Hough’s team takes full advantage of VSystem One for scheduling. A favorite feature for both managers and volunteers is **the ability for volunteers to self-schedule**. Hough especially likes the way **volunteers can send emails to their peers**. “If an Asia Trail volunteer needs to

change his shift, he can connect via the VSys with other Asia Trail volunteers.” It saves a lot of administrative time because volunteers now manage their own schedules.

Volunteers also access the system to update their emergency contact information and access the newsletter. Overall, **volunteers learn the system quickly and find it easy to use.**

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

“We have not yet put our emergency communication plan into action,” said Hough, “but it gives us great peace of mind knowing that **we can quickly alert all our volunteers in the park if we need to.**”

The Zoo takes every precaution to keep employees, volunteers and park guests safe. However, the fact is they house wild animals and must be prepared for emergencies. With VSys Live, volunteers check in and out at each shift or event they work. “We can quickly pull a report to see who is working in the park. I can send a text or email message instructing all volunteers to shelter in place and to call me to verify that they’ve received the message. **Even those who aren’t eager to adopt technology see how in the event of an emergency this system is better.**”

SERVICE SATISFACTION

“**I can’t say enough about the phenomenal quality of service from the VSys One team.** No matter who I talk to, from the training team right up through Bill [Cornett], they will get on the line, look at what I’m trying to accomplish, and jump in remotely to help me find a solution,” said Hough.

When she needs a custom solution for scheduling jobs, an interactive screen, or even an email, Hough says, “The VSys team looks at our mission-critical steps and they are responsive! They show me how to make the most of the tools in VSys. **Plus, I’m confident that when I offer feedback it is incorporated into the whole system.**”

“I can’t say enough about the phenomenal quality of service...”
–Suzanne Hough, Program Manager

About Bespoke Software and VSys One

Bespoke Software was founded in 1998 to support the Special Olympics, and has grown since to help all manner of non-profit organizations. The VSys One system is in use across the United States and in Canada, in organizations small and large. We are passionate about supporting our applications, with a knowledgeable U.S.-based support team available for you to call, and we offer training both on-site and via the web.

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