



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 112

ADAPTING YOUR MESSAGE TO YOUR AUDIENCE

WITH GREG KOCH

BETH: Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I am here on site in Miami with Greg Koch. He is the director of education and volunteer services at Zoo Miami. Greg, thank you so much for joining me today.

GREG: Thank you for having me.

BETH: I am excited because this is actually the second time I've had Zoo Miami on this show. I had the CEO Bill Moore on very early on in my first year of recording and he was nice enough to introduce me to you when we started to do some series around volunteering and education, and I thought that my trip down to Miami was a perfect time to meet you and talk to you a little about the work that you're doing that's really focusing some of the expertise of the organization and integrating it into what you're doing here at the zoo.

GREG: Yeah, I'm happy to have that conversation.

BETH: So to start with, I always like to ask people how they ended up wandering into this world. Zoo work is such an interesting and different thing, but some people I'm sure say, "I want to work at a zoo." Was that you? How did you start?

GREG: Yes and no. It's a little cliché. I always loved animals. I was always that kid just fascinated by all the different types of animals. I loved going to pet stores and that kind of thing and actually in high school, one of my first jobs was working in an aquarium shop, and I got really involved and interested in marine aquariums and reef aquariums and sort of this idea of keeping relatively delicate organisms in a glass box and how do you successfully do that. The more that I was learning and reading, I just became fascinated with water and water chemistry and how you clean water and how do you use other living organisms



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

and bacteria to really drive this eco system and really connecting all of these dots. So I transitioned in college. My undergrad degree was in biology, became then really interested in wetlands and ecosystems and learning how are these coastal ecosystems helping to clean water that's then flowing offshore and then going to these natural reef systems. When I graduated from undergraduate degree, I was connected with a professor down here in Miami, Dan Shoulders, who was doing Everglades research involving coastal systems. So I came down here and started pursuing a PhD, and that was connected with the Florida Coastal Everglades Long Term Ecological Research Program, which is funded through the National Science Foundation, and I had a really great time with that group. They're still on going and still involved with them. I was able to gather this real deep understanding and passion for Everglade science, and then when I graduated with my PhD, I was looking at opportunities, and something that was also very important to me was how to, how do you communicate these sometimes complicated or nuanced scientific topics to the general public and how do you involve them into the fold and how do you bring them full circle back around and use sort of flagship species or charismatic species, such as a Florida panther or a black bear or a lion or a tiger and how to use them to communicate these bigger issues about eco systems and about sustainability and conservation.

BETH: I love that! That's so interesting especially because we've done a lot in health care and in other sort of scientific organizations and that's always that thing. You've got subject matter and you have deep expertise filled with long complicated words and incredible fascination in stuff that's so specific, but often isn't very accessible to the public, so how do you take that thing that you love and make it something that's publicly accessible, and not every subject matter expert is interested in doing that, but it does make it hard to make other people love the things that you love especially in the way that you would do it at a zoo where you're really trying to be accessible to all kinds of levels who have varying interest in it. So the specialties that you have in the Everglades, was that something the zoo was already interested in working in or did you kind of bring that in?



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

GREG: Yeah, one of the things that really attracted me to Zoo Miami when I was graduating and looking for work, they were in the process of launching or developing a new exhibit, a new wing of the zoo that was all focused on the Everglades and Florida wildlife. That's called Florida Mission Everglades. So I took a look at that and I was like, "That's really neat. I didn't know that Zoo Miami was doing that," and I wanted to know more about that, and when I came on board, I sort of joined that sort of core team that was developing that exhibit. We're under construction now for that exhibit. It will launch later this year, later in 2016, but that just really fascinated me. Often times when you think about zoos, it's OK we have this collection of animals all over the world. There's not any particular focus on what the zoo is trying to accomplish, but this is great. Zoo Miami can be this really great resource for, it could be a community science center. It can be a resource for biology and learning about wildlife conservation and I thought, "Here's a really great opportunity to focus down and narrow in on a topic."

BETH: I think it's really smart what the zoo is doing in that they didn't just pick some random like we want to get known for our bear exhibit, that you actually are picking a subject which is local that really ties into the environmental movement culture sustainability and the whole, in the botanical world, the local species type concept. So you chose something that literally you guys can uniquely do and if any one else tried to say, "We want to be the experts in the Everglades," they'd have to chase you, which from a branding perspective, that's the way to go. You want to go after the thing that you really can be a demonstrable expert in.

GREG: Yeah, there's a tremendous number of experts statewide, even nationwide. Lots of really talented folks who are studying the Everglades who have their own pieces of that pie. I think here at the zoo we can be that public touch point, that lobby if you will for the public to know more about what are the scientists doing and what are the politicians doing and how can I help? How do the Everglades impact me? It's not just some swamp here in my backyard. It's actually this really diverse mix of marshes and mangrove swamps and cypress swamps and it's



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

providing my drinking water for half of the state's population.

BETH: Right and I feel like as a zoo, zoos sort of hit that middle space between a nonprofit and a hospitality type attraction, which is a weird space to sometimes be, but it lets you sit on that little hump in the middle between the academic side of things and the public and be a conduit to spreading and distributing information in a way that a lot of other organizations, maybe the truly scientific or departments in colleges would struggle to do. It's a service that you're really providing both the academic side and the community, which is so interesting. So that brings me to the idea of participation because you've got so many communities. You've got your volunteers. You've got your donors. You've got the scientists and you've got the public. At the zoo, when you bring in a mission like this, when you bring in something that kind of translates publicly into an exhibit, what kind of participation is the zoo looking for? What does that word mean in this type of work?

GREG: Yeah, I think for me, participation takes on three meanings. One is in our zoo member base. So you can have normal visitors who are incredibly important, but then you have that little bit more engaged visitor, which is your annual member, someone who is going to come frequently to the zoo throughout the year who is going to be more involved in the programs that are occurring, the special events that are occurring. I think the second way that I would define participation is in our volunteer base. So folks who are willing to give up their time and come work at the zoo, help us to interpret topics for the general public's health, in the kitchen preparing diets and helping in all these different areas of the zoo to really help us be successful because we need that help just like anybody else. Then the third, last but not least, the way I've defined participation is through our donors because while we do sort of have that attraction mantle, we do need that sort of financial assistance especially for special projects like Mission Everglades. In order to do these new cutting edge things that we want to do, we do need our support from our community.



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

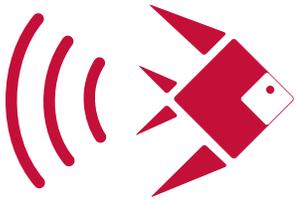
WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

BETH: I know it's always a struggle for organizations that sell something that are nonprofits to sometimes get that message out, that the ticket cost doesn't cover the vast amount of things that you do at an organization. Theaters have this problem, museums, botanical gardens. Even to the point of colleges and universities and hospital systems. You know, these are all types of nonprofits that sell a service and then still have to communicate to the public that we want more from you, and it can be really hard. So when it comes to this participation and bringing this Everglades project, this focal point for the organization and bringing it to fruition and then having it really be immersed deeply throughout the different areas of the organization, how are you approaching that project?

GREG: Yeah, so a couple of ways. So in preparation for Mission Everglades going live later this year, we have a targeted group of high school volunteers called the Conservation Teen Scientists, a really popular program. They've been undergoing a lot of training, field trips to Everglades National Park, they've been doing a lot of interpretation here within the park already. They're getting training from National Park staff, really getting ready that when the exhibit goes live we can hit the ground running. We have these really outgoing teen volunteers who are ready to talk to the public and share all of their passion and their knowledge.

BETH: So what are you doing? What kind of things are you doing to get them ready to do this?

GREG: Yeah, so we're taking them into Everglades National Park, they're getting to see sort of the wet season and dry season dynamics. They get to participate in some cool science opportunities with looking at native butterflies, native plants and trying to understand really how our seasonal sort of water flow and our seasonal water cycle here in the Everglades, how is that really governing all of the other processes that we see in the Everglades and with Mission Everglades, inside the exhibit, our story there is really all focused on the story of water. It's all about the seasonal delivery and how that infiltrates below ground and becomes our drinking water. As one of the largest sub-tropical wetlands in the country, I think



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

it is the largest sub-tropical in the country, being a wetland, water is just central to that entire ecosystem and all the animals that are involved there. So I think really getting the kids out there to see the system function throughout the year is completely central to

BETH: And how are they reacting to this experience?

GREG: Oh, it's fantastic! I think for a lot of them, they had never been to Everglades National Park before in their lives.

BETH: But it's students from all over the region?

GREG: Yeah, it's mostly Miami-Dade County. We get a few from Broward County as well, but it's mostly Miami-Dade County and high school students, but it's interesting when I talk with my colleagues at Everglades National Park, they tend to not have a lot of local residents visiting the park. It's mostly international tourists whereas at the zoo, we seem to have the opposite demographic. We get a lot of local community members visiting the zoo regularly and we have fewer international tourists.

BETH: Interesting. So is that collaboration between you helping you both?

GREG: Oh absolutely! We actually just recently were able to sign a memorandum of understanding, sort of linking our organizations together, paving the way really for a broader collaborative effort.

BETH: That's so interesting and that's one of the themes that's been coming out of the podcast as I've been doing it is this idea of collaboration and how organizations that normally would have considered themselves solo entities and maybe thought that they were competing maybe as attractions that when you start to collaborate and work together, you realize you want the inside of the orange and they want the peel and that if you work together, there's enough orange to go around for everyone.



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

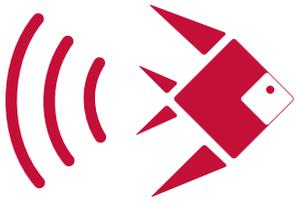
WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

GREG: Exactly.

BETH: It's so interesting.

GREG: Yeah, I think collaboration is incredibly important. I think it's going to be increasingly more important for all organizations going into the future. Fortunately when I was in graduate school and my advisor Dan, really instilled in me this appreciation for collaborating, whether it's with other scientists or other organizations. Really be inclusive, reaching out your hands and asking other people for their advice or their help. How can we fit in other organizations. It doesn't just stop with the Everglades National Park. We also have been talking with folks at Everglades Foundation, which is sort of a nonprofit that's more focused on Everglades restoration and sort of the politics, funding involved there in those projects, but they have a strong educational mission as well. They want the public to know and appreciate how incredibly the Everglades is as a resource. So there's lots of synergy there. I have a good relationship with the staff there. We've also been talking about how do we involve a lot of other local museum and cultural attractions that are all involved with, in some piece they're interested in communicating about the Everglades and how do we all align ourselves so that we're communicating the same messages and we can really be that much more effective, whether it's the Frost Science Museum, whether it's Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden or Zoo Miami or Palm Beach Zoo or any of these things.

BETH: How are you seeing, with an entire region, this goes beyond now the zoo is gonna have an exhibit and taking this one in theory little idea, but not really little, but basically having the region, all the different people have a passion of this Everglade area and you said that the one organization focuses on advocacy and you're probably thinking, "Awesome, this is great." Now you don't have to own advocacy because there's somebody there that's doing it and they think education is important and you guys are actually executing it so that you're not just kind of stepping on each other. I mean it's really a smart way to do it and it will be interesting to see what happens in both education and in tourism



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

throughout the entire region based on the fact that it's all of you together saying that this is important. So my next question and I know this isn't your area of expertise, when you have these different organizations that are all working on the same thing, how does the whole issue of fighting for dollars and donor stuff come in? Does that become a problem?

GREG: Yeah, you know that's a really good question and that hasn't come up yet, but I can certainly see the potential for that, especially if you start thinking about just local private donors. You can imagine that any given private donor might have interest in donating to one of these organizations so there's a potential there that we are all fighting for that one person. What I think is the direction that we would need to go though is if we work together collaboratively, that opens the door to first of all, there could be new donors sort of on a national stage who have maybe some deeper pockets, but are looking for that broader participation.

BETH: Yeah, someone who never would have given to a small organization that when you're trying to make a statement and change something in the world, somebody that has maybe deeper pockets or broader interests, that's a really good point.

GREG: Beyond that, I think it also opens the door for significant grant dollars if you get away from just looking at it as an individual donor or private donor or you then go to government funding agencies. Well, hey now this could be a really great proposal for the National Science Foundation or the Department of Education where you have this region wide coalition of organizations that are all focused on one idea and I think that then becomes very tangible and very fundable.

BETH: It sounds like it's this circle where you have this idea and then you find out that other people are interested in this same idea and in starting to work together, you are all starting to think bigger and when you think bigger, you're funded bigger and in doing that, you're able to have the impact that each of you



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

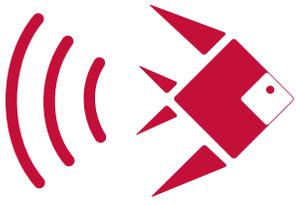
WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

wanted to have on your own and couldn't. I mean, it's interesting when you look at that and it all comes from being willing to look outside your walls and play with others, which I don't think is the easiest thing to do naturally.

GREG: No it's not and that's why I'm constantly grateful and I think it goes back to my advisor that you just always stress the importance of being collaborative and in our lab, graduate students in our lab, you're just always looking to work together. It wasn't just sit at your computer, look at your data, work in a silo and try to publish your research. It was more let's work as a team and who can we pull in from other departments in chemistry and physics or hydrology and how can we think about these ideas and just think bigger, think bigger.

BETH: It brings in this idea that we talk about in branding a lot, that it's your message and your visuals. That isn't the brand. It's all of that tied to the experience and of course in a zoo, people think the experience is just the visitor's experience, but really an experience is delivered by every single person that is involved with the organization, from the volunteers to the staff to the visitor facing people and a lot of making what an organization wants to happen actually happen, it comes down to making sure that you have the right people involved that think the way you're thinking. You know if you're hiring more people to work in an organization that believe that you're stronger together, then you're gonna actually have so much of a better chance to actually make that happen than somebody that has a scarcity mindset that says we can't share our data. I don't want to give somebody a tour of our labs because then they'll see what we're doing and they might steal it and it's interesting to hear you talk about how you see that the success is coming from that openness.

GREG: Yeah, just avoiding that protection is almost, let's put up our walls and say this is mine and you can't have it or this is what I do and I don't want you interfering with that. Just breaking down those walls and just sharing with people I think ultimately is going to benefit everybody involved.



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

BETH: So I just have to ask the marketing question. So you're collecting all of this data, you're involved with all of these students, you're having these students work on different projects. Where are you guys on the scale of taking all of this interesting, valuable, fascinating information and using it, flipping it around and pushing it out to the public so that you can use it to show people what you're doing and attract both more visitors and potentially more donors to support the work?

GREG: Yeah, so I will fully admit I think we don't do as good of a job at that as we should. I think our teen scientists when they're out there talking to the public, they do a tremendous job of communicating what they know, but to go one level deeper and say, "OK, let's really assess our visitors, is that an effective way to communicate to the visitors?" Are they really getting the concepts that we're teaching them? What are they learning? Are there better ways to teach the interpreters who have been teaching the public. So really going under the hood and looking at how that's all put together and is that being effective? I think historically we haven't done a very good job of that. Also something simple we started a citizen science program and we're collecting data. This coming, in two weekends, we'll have a fishing derby here at the zoo that's focused on native species versus invasive species and we collect data on that, but what do we do with that? It makes me think going down the line we should really start to make those resources available to everybody and OK, then the zoo has years of fish data that they're pulling out. Here's butterfly data or ...

BETH: How can you use that for like you have one of your audiences, K-12 education, how can you put data from those resources together in a public way so the kids can use it in a science report.

GREG: Exactly, and that can be something as simple as create a section of our website that is just downloadable data so a teacher can say, "Hey, let's go to the zoo's website and pull in some data. Let's do a report," or if you want to teach Excel or I want to teach you guys how to graph something out or let's talk about



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

regressions only if it's a senior class or something. You know, here's data that we can be providing to fuel those types of projects and I don't think it also doesn't stop with just the zoo. Right? There's researchers that I'm affiliated with, Florida National University, have decades of long term data that we've been collecting in Everglades National Park and to connect people with those resources as well to show teachers here is a data source as well that if you want to see what water flow has been like at this one particular part of Everglades National Park over the last 20 years you can do that and you can have your students go and look at that and hey, wow, look at this. How the years change and plot that versus precipitation or hurricanes or something.

BETH: It is challenging and you're lucky that you're at this point where you've got all this information. A lot of organizations have the opposite problem, that they've been doing great work, but the data isn't always there to do that, but some of those organizations are doing a great job with sharing their story and with all of the digital means right now, the website that you have, social media and things, it will be interesting to see with this new focus that you're doing how you're gonna translate that into different media that people can possible use to educate themselves, learn and be attracted to work that you're doing and the experience that you're creating.

GREG: I think it's a really good point. There's other organizations out there that do a really good job at this, and I would certainly love to hear from those folks and how they're being successful in a similar fashion. We certainly don't have all the answers. Even though we're a big zoo with a million or so people coming through the door every year, I think we still have a lot of the same challenges that a small organization would have.

BETH: I see that time and time again, which is why I actually do the podcast the way that I do it, that we have big organizations on and small organizations on because I really feel we can all learn from each other and it's amazing that people thing that because you're large you have all the resources in the world to do



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

everything that you want. It's never the case. I never use the word "affordable" in any of the work that I do, because it's a completely relative term and there may be somebody at another organization that has time that you guys don't have or has some expertise in something to have figured one thing out and I'm hoping that we can all learn from each other and so this has been terrific. If somebody wanted to do some of the things that you've been doing, that wanted to kind of build this expertise around things that brings a lot of people's skills and ideas together so that they can create this kind of submersion project like you're doing, do you have any advice that you could give somebody?

GREG: Yeah, gosh, I would say if you're tackling a project like this, make sure that you sort of define what is your central message, your central theme on the project, but then realize that all the folks who are going to be involved in that project are gonna have a slightly different take on it, so you're gonna have to allow yourself enough around that central theme to accommodate a lot of different view points or different approaches and give people the flexibility to approach that in their own way.

BETH: I think that that is so key because it's so common when people, the marketing people get involved, that we want to say, "Do it our way. Stay on message and we're gonna do message training to make sure that you say what we want you to say," and then people hate us and they get frustrated because they feel really boxed in, and in my experience, when you give people too thin of a line, they're gonna go rogue and you're gonna see it when you're standing in the back of the room and somebody is standing up front doing a presentation and the marketing person's jaw drops because they're horrified. If you are too restrictive, people are just gonna go around you and do whatever they want so this idea of, I always call it "putting the cattle chutes in wide enough" or telling somebody that you can ride your bicycle between the fire hydrant and the driveway. If you don't give them enough leeway and say, "Here's some flexibility within that," for you because people want to be creative. They want to add their own personality to it, especially if they're volunteers, if they're gonna be engaged



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

and do it, they want to do what they want to do. While you can't have people just doing whatever, sometimes when somebody brings their own twist or their own spin on it, it brings something special that you may not have thought of.

GREG: Yeah, something unexpected and I think even just the case in point when we're thinking about how we're gonna communicate some of these messages in Mission Everglades or whatever we talked about, some of those messages on the signage, we even struggle internally while how maybe scientific do we phrase some of those things versus trying to make them very accessible or using words that a random visitor would be able to understand, because sometimes you want to try to teach somebody something new, but at the same time that concept can be really hard to communicate in a very small space so we struggle with that, too, and I think making sure that the central message is there and clear, but then allowing other folks who are involved in your sort of coalition to take on maybe even a more scientific route or I'm going to go into an elementary school and try to teach kids about Everglades and the hydrology and things like that, and all the approaches are gonna be very different, but as long as you're going the same direction.

BETH: You guys are really lucky because you have a great focus group of high school kids that probably have absolutely no issue with telling you when you're dead wrong.

GREG: Yeah, they just give you a blank stare.

BETH: Right, and one of the best ways to do it is to make sure that you're listening to them and listening to the language that they use and then re-purposing some of that because they're gonna speak in a way that they like to be communicated to, and I feel like a lot of times the organizations that are subject matter experts or have a lot of expertise and skill and intelligence in an area, it's so easy to really want to communicate this and want people to understand every nuance the way a scientist understands the nuance and then people can't



DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

process that information. They just can't even absorb it and it's always shocking to realize that the general public generally consumes information at a sixth grade level, which is shocking to a lot of people, and then most of us tend to write at an 11th grade level and one of the tests I always tell people to do is go find out what your most popular web page is, and copy that, put it into word and then check and see what grade level it's at, and then you can see how well you've been communicating and connecting with people that are there, but I think you've got these great assets. You've got your visitors you can talk to. You've got your scientists and you've got that great group of teenagers in the middle that will absolutely tell you when you've totally missed the mark. So thank you so much. This was so interesting.

GREG: Sure, it was my pleasure.

BETH: I always learn a lot when I talk to people and it's such a pleasure and it's such an opportunity to be able to do this on site in this great environment of the zoo. Thanks so much for joining me and for sharing your knowledge with me and our whole nonprofit community.

GREG: Thanks for having me.

BETH: I appreciate it.