

DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 140

MLK DAY: THE SECRETS OF A SUCCESSFUL MOVEMENT

Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation.

On Monday, countless people across the country observed Martin Luther King Jr. Day in service to their communities.

But that wasn't always the case.

So how did the holiday grow so rapidly into massive movement of civic engagement?

After a significant struggle, the Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday was signed into law in 1983 and first observed in 1986. Later, in 1994, Congress designated MLK Day as a national day of service appointing the Corporation for National & Community Service, a federal agency, to lead the effort.

Soon more organized initiatives began popping up across the country to help support volunteer efforts. Today the day is widely known as "a day on, not a day off."

So, what can you learn from this movement to help you effect change and inspire action within you own community?

Today I want to share some of the key elements that I think contributed to the movement's growth.

First, the date and its meaning were already on people's minds.

The MLK Day of Service movement built upon an established foundation of shared ideals, a powerful history, and a date already printed on standard calendars.





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Even before the federal holiday was established on the third Monday of January, many already celebrated Dr. King's birthday on January 15th.

There's a lot to be said about overcoming people's inertia by organizing around something that's already familiar.

Second, there's a clear connection between the holiday and the effort.

When Coretta Scott King testified before Congress to have the MLK federal holiday designated a day of humanitarian service, she quoted one of Dr. King's famous statements:

"Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve."

There is a clear and obvious link between Dr. King's legacy and encouraging people to engage in community service that breaks down barriers and builds a land where people live in peace, dignity and equality.

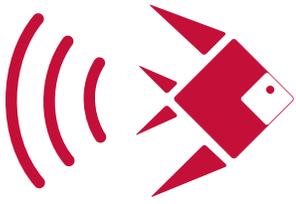
Third, people persevered.

Dedicated organizers across the country persevered year after year to grow the movement. (And before them, dedicated people persevered year after year to have the federal holiday recognized to begin with!)

Here in Philadelphia, Martin Luther King Day of Service is the nation's largest MLK Day event. It started with only 1,000 volunteers in 1996. Now, over 20 years later, that number has grown to 140,000!

This reminds me of one of my favorite books. It's called "Essentialism," by Greg McKeown, and it's about taking lots of little actions that build up over time. I know I feel sometimes like I am working really hard and things are not adding up as fast as I would like. It takes time to see success, which can be frustrating and hard to know when to stick with something and when to let it go. I heard a





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guest named Honoree Corder on John Lee Dumas's Entrepreneur on Fire podcast once say that if, after all the hard work you still want what's on the other side, you need to keep pushing for it. I think that in the long road to making something great happen, that's a pretty good yardstick.

Fourth, the movement is bigger than any one organization or person.

A lot of individuals and groups collaborated to make the MLK Day of Service a success.

While some organizations directly connect volunteers with all kinds of service opportunities, large-scale organizers like the Corporation for National & Community Service and the Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service also provide resources and tools to help other groups get their own projects off the ground and spread the word.

By working together, organizations can reach a wider audience — and benefit from each other's areas of expertise.

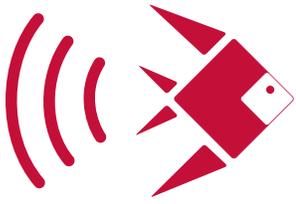
Collaboration, you may know if you are a regular listener, is a common theme here on the podcast. It is one of the top three things guests tell me are the keys to driving participation.

EXTENDING THE LESSONS

The MLK Day of Service offers a number of insights into mobilizing action and raising awareness to effect change. How can you put this idea to work by customizing it for your own community?

One obvious way would be to organize your own MLK Day of Service effort, geared toward the issue your organization addresses that make the nation a more just place.





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But can other holidays throughout the year be used to inspire action, too?

YES! Absolutely.

One successful example is the GivingTuesday movement. We've talked about GivingTuesday a lot here.

For more tips on making the most of Giving Tuesday, check out some of those episodes, especially [Session 28 - Starting a Movement and Building Momentum](#) and [Session 83 - Evolving #GivingTuesday](#)

But creating your own holiday from scratch is hard work. Kait Sheridan from GivingTuesday and I talked about that on Session 28. Remember that it's easier to gain traction around a date that's already well-established. And there should be a clear link between the holiday and your effort — like candy and cavities, the connection between National Brush Day on November 1st and Halloween the day before.

You can listen to Abigail Quesinberry's talk about about her work with the Ad Council to create National Brush Day back in [Session 17](#).

Some of my other favorites include the American Heart Association's multiple efforts in February that ride the tide of Valentine's Day, like National Wear Red Day. Another great one is by Laurel Hill, a large historic cemetery here in Philadelphia. They host the Gravediggers' Ball, which ties into Halloween to raise funds for the National Historic Landmark. I think it's brilliant because how often do you hear about a cemetery hosting a gala in the first place. It's such a twist that it really works.

(Of course, if establishing an entirely new holiday in its own right is part of your mission, don't let me stop you. Someone had to push for the creation of the MLK federal holiday to begin with!)





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Don't be discouraged if your first year starts small. Look for other organizations that might make logical partners, and keep at it. Soon your audience will begin to remember you each year as the day approaches! Consistent work over time pays off — often better than a big splash at the outset does. Just look at the numbers for participation and donation of GivingTuesday. It just grows bigger every year.

ARE VOLUNTEERS A PRIORITY FOR YOUR SUCCESS?

If so, participation needs to be a wonderful experience. In April, I'm going to be leading a free webinar with Tobi Johnson of VolunteerPro on Creative Tips and Tools for Volunteer Recognition. I'm looking for great examples I can share with our community on what makes your volunteers feel loved and appreciated. Please let me know what's working for you at beth@iriscreative.com.

You may remember Tobi. She was a guest last April talking about how to onboard volunteers the right way. If you want to get a jumpstart on improving your volunteer program, listen to Tobi on [Session 102](#) of the podcast.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We've talked a lot on this podcast about online events. If you want to learn more, I'd suggest listening to:

[Session 13 - Jamie MacDonald, Turning Online Events into a Party for Your Cause](#)

[Session 22 - Justin Ware, Manufacturing Viral Campaigns](#)

[Session 79 - A #GivingTuesday Resource Roundup from our Podcast Guests](#)

[Session 83 - Amie Simpson, Evolving #GivingTuesday](#)

[Session 100 - Karen Bantuveris, Engaging Volunteers with a Social Media Buzz Team](#)

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