

DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 145

THE PATH TO PARTICIPATION: FIVE SHIFTS TO INSPIRING ACTION

Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. After nearly three years of hosting this podcast, the things that show up over and over again when I ask guests about the meaning of participation are becoming more clear each week.

You may have noticed I'm doing more solo shows lately. I've learned so much about what participation means for you and your organizations that I've decided it is time to start analyzing what it all means.

I'm calling today's episode an "Insight Session." I'll be doing these throughout the year to begin to share with you the bigger picture ideas that are coming out of the long-form research project that is this podcast.

It's clear that participation can mean different things to different organizations — what everyone has in common in the need to inspire people to take the important actions you need for your organization to thrive.

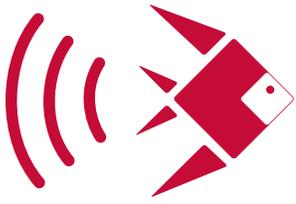
Today I am going to talk about five shifts you need to make on the path to participation. These are integral to helping you attract the right people and get them more deeply involved:

SHIFT #1. CREATE A CONNECTION.

Didn't pay your cell phone bill? Don't expect your phone to ring! The same thing applies when you're trying to attract people to your cause. If there's no connection, your audience can't answer.

To get that line hot, it helps to start with a little self-reflection ...





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First, identify the URGENT and IMPORTANT need your organization tackles.

Do you address childhood hunger — or the fact that three-year-old Jane will have nothing to eat today?

Do you work to protect the environment — or are you trying to stop deforestation in your county or there will be no owls left in two years?

Do you help low-income students get a great education — or are you helping Jack learn to read before he loses interest in school like his brother who already dropped out?

Get the picture? It's about vividly positioning the outcome of your work so your audience can literally envision the outcome. The biggest mistake you can make is talking about your organization and focusing on HOW you do the work. People don't care. They invest in outcomes that are meaningful to them.

Next, think about what makes you uniquely able to deliver the solution.

Do you have firsthand knowledge of the situation in a particular geographic area? Experience with a certain sub-species of bird? Are you the only organization that offers 24-hour services in your sector?

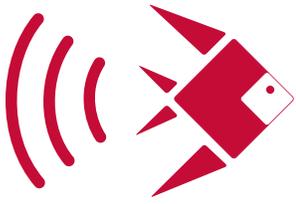
Look for parameters can you put around your work that make you the one-and-only.

Remember — don't get caught up explaining how you are the best — this is a qualifier, not a quantifier. Focus on WHY you are the best.

Once you're clear on what urgent important needs you're uniquely positioned to solve — things you're proud your organization does better than any other — you're ready to create a connection using messages, images and experiences that move your readers.

But to do that, you need to ...





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SHIFT #2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

If you're afraid of dogs and allergic to cats, are you going to feel a strong inclination to support your local animal shelter? No matter what the messaging, the shelter's time and money would be better spent wooing animal lovers.

It's time to stop doing everything for everyone. Save your energy and effort for where it's likely to pay dividends, and then laser-focus on what will help you connect with those people you want to reach.

One of my favorite acronyms is FOCUS — Follow One Course Until Success. And trust me, as an entrepreneur with a million ideas, I struggle with this every day. Perhaps that is why I talk about it so much.

The critical first step is to create a profile of your “perfect” person. And be specific. Don't just stop at demographics like name and age. Get into her hopes and dreams.

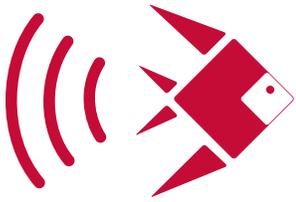
Then imagine you're speaking directly to this perfect person every time you write a letter, choose a website photo or post to social media. Let that image guide you.

You'll find this approach shapes which of your projects you talk about, what details you include, who you profile, even what channels you use.

One of the best ways to learn about your audience is asking them. Surveys are a great tool for that, but many people worry about exhausting their audience by over-asking. So how can you turn a survey into an inviting way to participate?

One of our favorite tactics is the one-question survey. It turns something that feels like it's for your benefit into a fun, shared experience like a quiz or a game. Like everything else, to make it work it has to be about something your community is excited to share, not about evaluating how great you are.





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If you pose one question every month, at the end of a year you'll have 12 new insights into your audience — and a tool for turning engagement into participation.

We like Google Forms for simple feedback surveys. It's free and easy to set up. You can find it in Google Drive by clicking on the nine-block icon on the top right when you are logged into Google. You could also use poll technology like <https://www.polleverywhere.com/> to give the instant gratification of seeing results (and how your answers compare to others.)

SHIFT #3. FACILITATE THEIR DREAMS.

When your supporters donate money, give of their time, or otherwise advance your organization's mission, it's not really about you. They're pursuing their dreams for the world they want to see. Your job is to make it a reality.

Everything you say and do should reflect this reality by putting your audience at the center of the action.

You can check to see whether your messaging is all about your supporters by watching your pronouns. Take some copy from your website, your newsletter, or your last fundraising letter, and highlight every time you use "we/us/our," and flip it to "you/your."

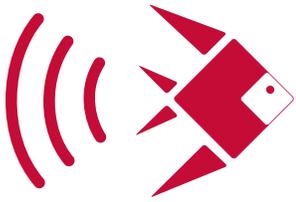
For example ...

Organization-centered: Dear audience, We did this. We changed this. We need donations to ...

Becomes audience-centered: Dear audience, You made this happen. When you volunteered, you changed this. Your gift is critical because ...

See how YOU'VE made YOUR audience central to YOUR story?





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SHIFT #4. FOCUS THEIR ACTION.

So far you've connected with and engaged your target audience. But if they don't actually DO anything — share with a friend, make a donation, sign up to volunteer — they're not participating in bringing your mission to life.

Your audience moves from engagement to participation when you help them take ACTION.

We live in a world overloaded with information, decisions and distractions. To overcome these barriers to participation, your audience needs you to focus their attention.

So stop serving your audience an overwhelming buffet of action options. Instead, offer your supporters a chef-selected entrée you know your perfect person will find appealing.

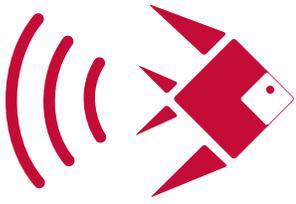
Your gut (or your board) may push you to ask your community to tutor, sponsor a child, provide snacks during the school year or call their senators, all in one letter sent to everyone. Too many choices usually lead to no choice. Pick the one action that is most valuable to you right now and most moving to your intended audience. Focus on really driving the message home with a stirring story your perfect person will readily react to.

In [Episode 133](#) my guest, Jeff Miles, director of development of the Keystone Opportunity Center, said: “The key is not always to market the biggest effort you are doing but what you are doing that most connects with your audience.”

SHIFT #5. REPEAT.

You might not get someone to participate through your first round of efforts. And even if you do, don't expect an encore performance without ongoing outreach on your part.





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As Sarah Gilman, director of the National Resource Center on Lupus (and my guest on our next episode) aptly put it, “For motivation to progress to action, repetition is required.”

Here are some of our favorite ongoing strategies:

DATE YOUR AUDIENCE

Most people don’t get married on their first date (unless you happened to be in Vegas). Relationships usually progress through increasing levels of commitment before a couple says “I do.”

Take a similar approach to your relationship with your audience by inviting them to participate in stages.

One of our favorite ways to do this is through an email welcome series. When someone first signs up for your newsletter or takes some initial action, you can invite them more completely into your fold through a series of automated specialized emails that cater to their interests and invite future actions based on previous activity.

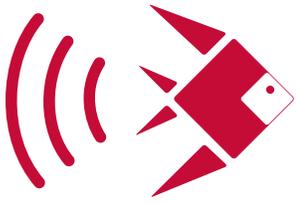
WORK YOUR THANK YOU PAGES

Once someone’s made a donation or filled out a form on your website, don’t forget to customize your thank you page to create a deeper connection. This is an opportunity to suggest a second action, whether that means sending them to your social sites, sharing a video, highlighting special content for them or giving them something special.

People are never more invested than when they have just said yes. That is the pivotal moment between diving in deeper and feeling buyers remorse. Guide their experience by reassuring them that volunteering will be fun, or their donation will help kids like Michael. It doesn’t matter if you said it already, repeat it, repeat it, repeat it.

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Repetition works on your brain to make you pay attention. Oprah is famous for this. Go find a video of her and listen for when she is trying to make a point. She pauses and says the exact same phrase, and pauses again. It adds weight and importance like underlining a piece of text.

CREATIVITY VS. CONSISTENCY

As a creative director and designer by training, I love new. There is so much need to bring nonprofit messaging and design up to a level that reflects the quality of your work that I hesitate to tell you to slow down.

But the important thing to note is that change should be done to move you forward. When things are not working, it can just as easily be because you have changed too much as changed too little. Looking current and competent is part of building trust and support for your work. But once you get there, don't be too quick to change just because you are bored. Chances are when you are sick of something your audience is just starting to recognize it and associate it with you.

On the flip side, you can get so used to "the way you do things" that you are resistant to change. I call this "playing not to lose." It shows up all the time in fundraising and can cost you the opportunity to score big wins.

Make sure you are using repetition to cement your value and not as a crutch.

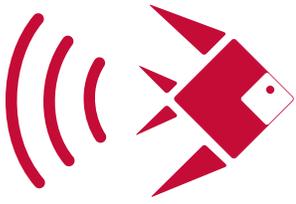
TO HELP, WORK ON CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF EXPERIMENTATION

Use your data to look for inspiration and identify what's working.

Was one campaign particularly successful? Experiment to see if you can identify the secret ingredient and incorporate it into future efforts.

Split your email list and see if you get better results sending out your appeal on different days of the week, or a different subject line. Try big experiments on





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small segments like the Drexel Fund Team talked about in [Episode 143](#).

The possibilities are endless. But you won't know what works for your organization and your perfect person unless you try out new strategies.

FEED THE CONNECTION

All this talk of repetition takes us back to the beginning — you've got to pay your audience dues so you don't get cut off!

Continuing to ask, ask, ask will only disillusion your participants, no matter how "perfect" they are.

When you remember to focus on delighting and amazing your audience, they'll be more likely to take action the next time you ask them to participate.

If you have some insight on participation you'd like to share, please contact me at beth@iriscreative.com. Everything we are learning together comes from the stories you are sharing week after week. Thank you for listening, and I'll see you next time.



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