



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

## SESSION 162

### THE INTERSECTION OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

WITH NICK ELLINGER

**BETH:** Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I am on with Nick Ellinger. Nick is currently the VP of Marketing Strategy for Donor Voice and he's also the former VP of Strategic Outreach for MADD, which is Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Nick has a really interesting perspective on participation, both from being at the senior strategic level inside of an organization and now working with an organization that works with organization. Nick, thank you so much for joining me today.

**NICK:** Thank you for having me, Beth.

**BETH:** I found you when I was reading through the Nonprofit Pro publication, the issue from July 2017, and if people who are listening aren't familiar with Nonprofit Pro, I mean, we're lucky enough that it happens to be published right here in Philadelphia, but it's a great magazine and one really worth looking up, and as I was paging through it, I found this article about donor retention. I'm reading through the article as I read everything, with a yellow highlighter in my hand, and I found myself highlighting this idea and highlighting another idea and then highlighting a whole paragraph. Before I knew it, I had so much highlighted that I thought sounded exactly like how I talk about participation. Nick, I knew I had to get you on because even from the specific box of donor retention, you and I clearly think alike. I'm so thrilled to have you come on today to talk about some of the things I think you're best at is really understanding where this idea of development and communications intersect.

**NICK:** Well, thank you. I should say I'm a long-time listener, first-time caller. So I'm very honored to be on.





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**BETH:** It was so exciting. The funny thing is for people who are listening, when Nick and I first started planning this podcast and we talked, I called and said, “Hi, this is Beth Brodovsky,” and you said, “I know; I recognize your voice,” and it was a little surreal moment for me.

**NICK:** As for me. I’m very glad to be able to be on and contribute to the podcast that I’ve listened to for awhile now.

**BETH:** I so appreciate you doing that. Everyone else that is listening, this is also a reminder to think about the things that you’re doing and what you’ve learned about participation. I love to have listeners and people who understand our topic from any perspective. Call me up, email me, and let me know that you have an idea because it’s so great to talk to people about this. I feel like even though I’m the one hosting, this is a shared conversation and the more we can work together to bring the different aspects of participation to light, the better we’ll all learn about it. So I’m gonna start off by asking my question that I ask everyone. You have both worked for a nonprofit in a nonprofit as well as now you’re outside working to support nonprofits. In this combination of work that you’re doing, what does the word “participation” mean to you? How does it show up in a way that organizations that you support need to thrive?

**NICK:** Well, everyone brings their own type of participation to the party and really participation, from the individual’s perspective is anything that increases that engagement with the mission. So when I was at MADD, my first four years were in the public policy office, and we’d have people participating by emailing their legislators, participating in lobby days, calling their legislators. People who may not ever send a check to the organization, may not ever volunteer in a formal way to the organization contributing to that mission and also at that same time increasing their own commitment to that organization. From the organizational perspective, any type of participation that adds to that commitment is a good thing, but sometimes we have participations and experiences with nonprofits. Now putting my Donor Voice hat back on, you see those types of participations





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

that take away from commitment. Yes, a person donated, but was the experience so cumbersome that it's something that they don't want to do again? When you donated, did you get a letter back that was essentially the "Dear Occupant" letter? Are there things that we are doing that can cause people's participation with our organizations contributing to their missions the best way that they know how and ideally how we know how and get them to take steps within their own lane. They may never donate, they may never volunteer, but what can they do that helps the organization and obviously if they volunteer, donate and we're able to progress them up this ladder, that's great as well.

**BETH:** You know, it's so funny that you should say that and I love how you described that, to take steps within their own lane. Amanda Kaiser is somebody that's been on the podcast at least twice, I'm sure, and I just got her email out this morning. So she's with Kaiser Insights and she specifically does member research for associations and she put out this great email this morning exactly about that concept of what is participation? She talks about it as engagement when people are at different levels, what they would call mailbox members versus that middle level versus that super engaged person. What's the difference between you as an organization wanting to push people along to higher levels of engagement and that person saying, "I'm an engaged member at this level and I don't want to be pushed or moved to another level."

**NICK:** Well, yeah. The donor pyramid, I've written about the donor pyramid like all other pyramids being lies. You know, pyramid schemes are lies. You know, you have the people who think the pyramids were built by aliens and the donor pyramid is really no different in that respect in that the idea that someone is going to slowly and methodically move their way up from first-time donor to regular donor to monthly giver to mid-major to major to bequest as steps along that process. Donor journeys don't really look like that, and even when we try to architect them in those ways, people may lapse for a time when they come back to an organization from a donor perspective. You may never get a donation from a person and the reason that you never get a donation from that person is they're





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

volunteering, and they're saving their money so that they can give you a huge bequest upon their passing. Those are not uncommon ways of interacting with an organization. I personally, in terms of that participation, where I participate with a few different political campaigns near us, but because I've worked in the nonprofit sector and now I work with the nonprofit sector, I don't attach my name to any of those because that's my personal work, and as Donor Voice I work with all sorts of organizations. So that participation stays at the water's edge. So on those campaigns, you'll never see me on a donor roll, but knocking doors. This I can do.

**BETH:** Now this always brings up such an interesting aspect of it, that you don't always know. In the work that you've done, have you seen anything or identified anything that helps an organization identify who do we let be and let them be the checkbook member or the mailbox member? Let them get their magazine, hang out there because they're happy. Like, how do you know the difference between somebody who is at the level they're at, happy and sustaining and who is somebody who is looking for and desperate for someone to engage with them to help them figure out how do I get more involved with this organization? How do I move from just getting this magazine to somebody that comes to an event?

**NICK:** Well, and there you get right to the heart of the matter of why people participate with organizations and why they stop participating with organizations. In terms of why they start, it's part about who the organization is. It's a mission I can get behind. It's an organization I'm committed to. Then it's part who I am as a person and how that interacts with the organization. On the why people stop, it's usually because of experience, sometimes external to that some of the more common reasons for lapsing are divorce or death, which are things, one more permanent than the other, but significant changes that impact that don't have to do with the organization, but also you can have experiences without an organization just like you would with the for-profit that turn you off that you say, "You know, I've had enough of this type of communication. They're not talking to me in a way that makes sense to me." So the more that we can put





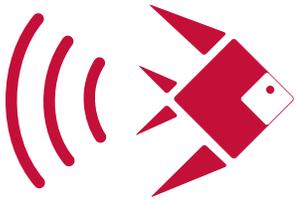
# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

on the left side of that scale, the more that we can involve them in the identity, knowing who they are, telling them we appreciate what they do, giving them opportunities to advance, but not pushing those on those. I think a good example is some work that we did with an organization in Europe. One of the things that they found is that like any other organization, they have a group of donors that are very highly committed to the organization and they have a group of donors that are not as committed to the organization coming onto their file through face to face marketing. What they found was they tested mailing zero or six additional non-ask communications that were kind of get to know you communications and normally when we think about how we would mail someone that you would say best donors, you do your analysis and your best donors get the most pieces because they're the most likely to be responsive, the low commitment folks, the people who may lapse, those are the ones we want to stay back from due to costs and things like that. What happened was exactly the opposite of that. Retention rates went down 9 percent points among highly committed donors when you sent them six additional non-ask communications and their messages were along the lines of "We're bought in. Why do you keep selling us?" For lower commitment donors, they say, "You know, I signed up with this organization, but I don't really know all that much about you. So help me understand, help me get educated," and you see from research that one of my weird sub-areas of research is ask strings and you find that once someone has given twice, you want to be sure that you begin your ask with the amount that they're used to giving. If they've given once, that's the last thing you want to do. You either want to lower your ask as a goal of getting them to stay on your file or you want to try to upgrade that ask to get them into a higher level of giving. So it's really customizing your approach to who that person is, where they are in their stream and their identity as how it relates to the organization.

**BETH:** Right. I think that it's so interesting about how you and I think and how you write is that you talk about these things, like who the identity of the person is, what their commitment to the organization is and this experiential piece and





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

how is an organization reacting to what a person is actually doing and what data shows that they might likely to want. That's always the tricky thing because I come to it from the branding perspective and it's the same thing. This experience is the thing that really is where the brand of an organization, do you demonstrate through your actions that you know this person. Not so much as do they know, like and trust you, but do you know them. One of the things that I see so much in organizations is that the development side and the communications side are often very silo-ed. They often don't work together very well. So when it comes to this idea that you talk about, this experiential thing and using that to build this commitment, how do you see that feeling? You see it as well, this sort of segmentation of development and communication not being together and how are both of them relevant as people are trying to build that brand experience?

**NICK:** Well, it's critical that those functions, they may not necessarily need to be same director in the same silo, but those functions, it's absolutely essential that those two areas are working together because the most touchpoints that you will have with a person, donor or non-donor, almost invariably are going to be through your development touchpoints. You know, if you are putting an ad out or doing press engagements or that sort of communication strategy brand building, all of that, you're still going to be swamped by the thousands, sometimes millions of pieces of mail in the mail or emails in the inbox or phone calls that a donor will especially get and so if you're trying to communicate what an organization is, it has to involve development and if you're on the flip side, as you're doing communications you also want to have a goal in mind. So many good ideas are sort of that Mickey Rooney let's put a show on in the barn because we can sort of idea, without any real goal idea of whether this will meet the goals of the organization and so you see sometimes on the branding side of things, people wanting to change the logo or the brand or the way something is messaged because they're tired of it.

**BETH:** Yeah, you're preaching. I see that all the time. I often tell people the minute you get tired of it is just the point where people outside are starting to associate





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

it with you.

**NICK:** Yes, exactly, and the curse of knowledge that that happens within organizations where you get so you're living the communications every day and you are tired of them, not tired of them. You are engaging in those ways is not anywhere near what a person is doing in terms of thinking about your organization. Your most committed donor is likely not thinking of you on a daily basis, but if you're working for a nonprofit, you're thinking of that 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14 hours a day.

**BETH:** All of them.

**NICK:** So it's a very easy trap to get into "Oh I need to change things to keep it fresh," and then it's also easy to say, "Well, I know this. Therefore, everyone should know about this," and that gets into acronym-itis, which technically means inflammation of the acronym so it's not entirely appropriate or addressing things from a person that is important within your organization, but the donor may never have heard of without any context as to who this person is or why they're communicating with me, and it's really having to step back and see it with fresh donors' eyes and constituents' eyes. That's really valuable. One of the great examples is Oxfam UK and let me preface this with they are a great organization and know their donor as well as any organization out there, but what they did is they took 20 different development messages that they were going to send out and they put them in front of the staff and had the staff rank them and then they sent them to donors and had the donors respond to them. The top three pieces that donors reacted to were among the bottom seven that the staff ranked, and the piece that the staff thought was the best was actually the second worst for donors.

**BETH:** Right. So that's huge. I would say that one of the things that we find challenging, a couple of things that we find challenging, is even when we're creating a piece like this, when we're creating a package or something like this,





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

that we then send it to the staff and maybe the board or maybe the president for approval that the participation is limited and the more I'm learning and the more we're researching on this, this idea of being open to understanding what your constituents, what the people, whether your donors or your members think of things and getting that kind of feedback almost feels like making a different kind of advisory board to approve things as opposed to just this whole like, my friend calls it inside baseball that you were talking about where you're all just breathing your own oxygen and talking about what you think is great.

**NICK:** I mean, the number-one-with-a-bullet thing that I see that falls into this category is the big check photo. So you have this thing that's very important to the organization and we're so glad that we got this gift and we want to thank the people who are behind it and then you put that into the donor newsletter and all that that communicates to the donor is that this check is very big and your check is very small.

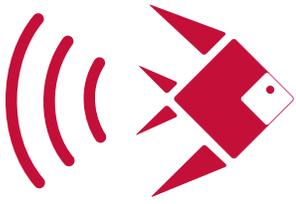
**BETH:** Interesting!

**NICK:** That's not only a neutral experience. That's an actively negative one. That's a "We got \$100,000 from this donation. Why would you bother to send us your \$20," and it really comes from that failure to see things as the donors themselves see it.

**BETH:** It's sort of the same concept of not writing letters that say, "A million people are starving," instead of saying "Michael is suffering from not having the medical care he needs to be healthy enough to go to school."

**NICK:** And there's this overwhelming desire to educate our donors and it's a noble impulse. It comes from the heart and it comes from the very best. People want people to know that this is a systemic issue that we're trying to address, but every time you put that into a communication, you are turning off donors and you are turning off donations and so you have to ask is it worth that "education"





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

if it's subtracting from the piggy bank of commitment that people have to the organization and there is less money that we have to be able to put toward our noble mission.

**BETH:** Right. So when it comes to things ... you've talked about donors and development communications. In some organizations, that's it. That's all people have and they've got to figure out communications, but in other organizations, there's members. There's prospects. There's ticket buyers. There's lots of audiences and many times there's a whole separate communications or marketing department that has not just other needs for communications, but a different perspective on the value of communications and then you've got your development department that are looking like these are the donors and how we have to communicate with them. When there's a disconnect between these two organizations and there's not this common value of communications and of the story of who the organization is, why you exist and what you're trying to do for people, we really see people struggle. So like when you were at MADD and maybe even the clients that you work with now, how did you figure out who you were as an organization to kind of work with both sides of the house, that there was sort of a common language and a common goal?

**NICK:** And so frequently we try to define that internally within the organization, any organization. We are the organization that does X, when in reality our constituents' minds, we're in a totally different line of business. There's the classic quote that trains weren't in the train business, they were in the transportation business and their failure to understand that is why trains fell out of favor for so many years. What we see with a lot of our organizations is that there are distinct identities of donors and constituents that have different views of who the organization is and you have to be able to customize that communication to each one. So we'll go in to an organization and do a study of their donors, a commitment study that says how committed are you to this organization. Then ask them about all their experiences that they have with an organization, including brand promise, problematic areas, fundraising communications, the





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

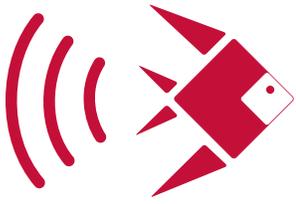
WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

whole nine yards. At the end of that, you see which of those matter and which of those don't. So for example, in now limited, my year of doing this, I have not seen social media ever come to the top or even middle of the chart of things that actually matter to donors. It's more of the blocking and tackling who you are as an organization and what type of communications, but from that, you get to see the identity or identities of your donors and there are a few examples that come straight to mind. So working with Catholic Relief Services, there really is and they will say this, a divide in their organization sometimes as to whether they are more Catholic or more Relief Services and what they found when they did their identity work is that most of their donors, not all, but most of them, were giving not solely to provide relief to those who are underprivileged, but also to express their Catholic faith and there were some mail pieces that they were sending out that they say the only time they mentioned "Catholic" was in the name of the organization and so for them, it was building back into their communications a sense of who their donors were, knowing that you were doing good and living out your Catholic faith in this way, that really engaged their donors a bit more. There was another organization. They looked at an animal organization and they looked at dog people versus cat people and you would think that other than changing pictures and copy, there's little else that you would have to do for those folks, but it turned out that they have different needs for what they wanted from that organization.

**BETH:** There really is a difference between dog people and cat people?

**NICK:** Absolutely! The dog people in this case were more focused on the shelters that they ran within the organization. The cat people more focused on adoption programs, and so there was this distinct difference, and even minor steps towards that. They, on a phone call basis, would ask, "Are you a cat person or a dog person?" and later on in the script they would say, "As a cat person, are you able to make a donation at this time?" Response rate went up 15 percent, and an average gift went up 10 pounds a year. It was a British organization. Then there was another organization that provides relief efforts and they thought





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

that's what they did, but in their donors' minds, there was a distinct number of people that said, "I wish I could be out there delivering these services myself." For them, the donors were living vicariously through the volunteers and so if given the opportunity, they likely would not go to Bolivia and provide these services, but they really wish that they could. So they felt they were a part of that team if they could give in this way. So it was, yes it was still a relief effort, but who the brand was was very different from who they thought they were, this organization thought they were going in. So to the point of development versus communications about who owns the brand, neither of them do. The brand is owned by the individual people. You see it with health charities as well. People who receive direct services from that organization are entirely different donors from people who are just getting into that organization because they believe in the mission of the organization. Someone who gives to the American Heart Association, they themselves have heart disease, care about the services being provided to those people with heart disease, the information they provide. On the flip side, someone who gives because they're a good mission, they're looking for a cure, they're looking for treatment, but they don't likely care at all about those services. So if development and communications can get together and say, "Neither of us are winning this battle. The donor, the participant, the constituent is winning this battle, and we have these one or two or three identities within our organization that we're going after," and that is king. That's when you get to true donor centricity.

**BETH:** Oh, I love it and that's exactly the kind of thing that people need to start thinking about. The challenge of it is that it's this whole idea of we're gonna craft or create this brand and people often think, like you said in the beginning, that it's about creating a logo and it really sort of sits somewhere in between we're gonna kind of choose a track and then really understand what people want from it. What we talk about all the time is that it really stems from deeply understanding your audience and knowing you can't be everything to everyone, but you also can't enforce what you're going to be and say "this is who we are" unless you're willing to say "well then, all of you people if that's not what you want, you're





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

gonna leave and that's fine" and honestly some organizations are willing to do that because that's what's important to them, but most aren't. Most want to figure out how do we serve those people and not everybody is capable of really collecting and pursuing data at that level. In the work that you're doing now, what are some of the things that you've seen to help people really understand the needs, the values, the motivations of the audiences in a way that they can narrow down and get focused so that they can deliver effective messages in a couple of buckets as opposed to one or a hundred?

**NICK:** Well, there's the Latin saying "vox populi vox Dei," "the voice of the people is the voice of God," and I would say it's "vox Dei vox ad donatorem," that "the voice of the donor is the voice of God" in this case. So many of our communications from the nonprofit side are one-sided. Read this email, respond to this mail piece, receive this phone call. Your responses are pro-scripted for you. Mail back this reply form, check this box, send in your check. So often very little is done on the feedback side of things. What are people feeling when they say that and often times it's we provide feedback for a number of organizations and I went through all of the three responses last December. Twenty thousand of them. Yes, it took awhile! At the end of that, the number one comment is keep up the good work. You're doing great work. Go out there and get them. That's great to hear, but then when you dig below that, people are making substantive comments that when you actively solicit their feedback, their thoughts, their counsel, they are making good sense and so the number one and number two comments that you will hear generally speaking are "I don't want to receive your X type of communication anymore," usually mail, and "I want to receive fewer of X communication," usually mail. Of all of the substantive comments, that's about a quarter of them. So literally a quarter of people are saying that when they're actively solicited those things and that makes us change what we're doing. Then there's small tactical things as well. There was one organization we worked with that started collecting feedback on their online site and they had a 12 percent conversion rate. They started listening to their donors and their donors would say things like, "Your confirmation email is four pages. How do I print this out for my





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

records without wasting ink and trees?” They hadn’t realized that their donors were printing that out.

**BETH:** Right, and that’s great feedback.

**NICK:** So they cut it down to one page. They made a couple other tweaks, adding PayPal to the form, things that were requested from their donors and in the span of a month, they went from 12 percent to 23 percent conversion on that page. Now if that can work at the technical level, surely it can work at the strategic level as well. When you’re listening to the voice of the donors they will tell you, “I think you’re wrong on this issue,” “I think you’re right on this issue,” “Keep up the good work,” and where I saw this recently was a place that I did not expect it. In work with the US Golf Association, there are people who are very passionate about the long putter anchoring issue.

**BETH:** Wow! OK.

**NICK:** I had to look up what that was. Of course, I could have asked my wife and she knew instantly and she’s like, “Oh I hate those long putters,” but you can learn a lot about their constituents and how much they hue to tradition, how much they want a rule book as a premium. On the flip side of it, they’re just playing with their friends on Sunday and they don’t care about the strict rules of golf. That sort of thing. Knowing where they stand on that one issue opens up whole othe]r. Are you a traditionalist? Are you a progressive in terms of golf? Do you like carts? Do you not like carts? Those are entirely different worlds that I think if I put some of those people who made comments in the same room, there would be fistfights. So it’s figuring out those identities so you can either say to your client, “These are the people that we don’t want associated with our organization,” or “We want to satisfy both of these groups. How do we customize our communications, our development efforts in a way that makes sense?” US Olympic Committee just went through a big transition where they intentionally left some of their previous supporters out at the curb, and it’s because their previous mail program was so





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

premium-based. Give us a \$20 donation and we will send you this US Olympic Committee jacket that is probably \$19 to produce and fulfill, and they said that no longer makes sense for us. We're selling this merchandise. We don't want the merchandise that's more official tainted by association with these free premiums, and we want donors for our foundation side who are giving philanthropically, and so they're going through a transition right now that isn't focused on we're going to have millions and millions of members, but rather we're gonna have the members that are the most committed to being a part of the team behind the team. We want people who believe in the Olympic values and when someone is standing up on the podium with the flag behind them and their hand over their heart, they're moved because they were a part of that person's journey.

**BETH:** I love that. I think what's really interesting in what you just said there is that it's sort of this combination of things, that the Olympic committee had to decide what they valued and what they wanted. They want to be the organization that is for the people who to be the team behind the team. So when it comes to when we're talking about branding, part of it is as an organization, you have to know what are you trying to achieve? What is your why? What are you out there looking for so you know what even to look for in an audience and in members? Then on the flip side, what you were talking about is even if you know that, the way people are going to come to that and what they want out of that and how they experience their version of a team behind the team might be different.

**NICK:** Absolutely and going back to the disease charity for example. We worked with one organization where a person who had a personal connection to the organization through the disease, they would know at point of acquisition regardless of any other factor that that person would be worth twice as much to them for their donor lifetime value as someone who had no connection to the organization. Better predictor than anything else. RFM whatever. Any demographics because that was about who they were to the organization. So once you know that, your acquisition efforts change, your communications efforts change and you're never going to take with an organization like that, you're





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

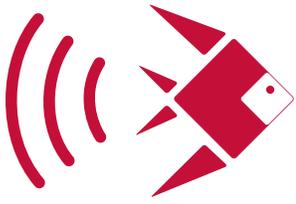
WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

absolutely going to welcome the wonderful support from people that are there “But for the grace of God go I,” and say, “I’m glad I never had this, but I want to help those that do” Those are great people, but if you have to pick one versus one, you’re going to pick that person that has been personally impacted. Similar to what we do with commitment scores, if someone is more committed to the organization versus someone who is less, whose comments are you going to listen to more closely?

**BETH:** I think that’s such an important thing to make sure that we’re letting people know because we’ve kind of in this conversation both talked about getting really focused and deeply understanding people, but then also recognizing at the end result of that, you might end up with an infinite amount of variety around what people want. Not even most organizations, you can’t do that. Even a large organization can’t be everything to everyone. I talk about genericizing the message. You know doing things that say, “We want to wrap our arms so wide and welcome everyone,” that we water down what we’re saying so that it doesn’t really have a strong impact to anyone, but even in this, once you’ve said, “Here’s the funnel we’re putting people through,” there’s still a lot of variety on the other side. I like how you talk about that. At some point though, you need to have some metrics in place so you determine of even this group of audiences how do we prioritize whose needs we address. Even if the tag line to that is “address first.”

**NICK:** Yep and you can do it at point of acquisition even. Going back to the face-to-face example. What we’ve worked with is as the canvasser processes a donation, they ask, they turn their pad around, “What was your level of satisfaction with this experience? How committed are you to this organization?” Then you know instantly what quadrant this person falls in. If they’re high commitment and they had a great experience, that’s someone that is a potential upgrade. They’re going to retain for their organization. If they are high commitment and they’re low satisfaction, that’s someone with a \$4 phone call you can save someone with a \$200-\$300 lifetime value as a monthly giver. Knowing those sorts of things, also that impacts how you set your metrics. So





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

what this organization did is if you're doing traditional face to face metrics, it's based on how many people do you bring in the door and then sometimes what is the age of those people, but because people who are older have a higher retention rate, what they did is they looked at the commitment of the donors that people were bringing in and suddenly some of the people that looked very good on the traditional metric, they were finding that those people were low commitment and had poor experiences with their canvassers. Those people might have given just to get that person to go away.

**BETH:** Interesting.

**NICK:** On the flip side, people who were passionate about the mission attracting other people who were passionate about the mission, those were the people that were put out front. Those were the people who got raises so that they trained based on those people's scripts and that organization, by reaching out to the people that were dissatisfied and focusing on the people who were persuadable, focusing on the canvassers who were bringing in good people, they increased their six-month retention rate from 60 percent to 80 percent, which doesn't sound like a lot, but you ...

**BETH:** It depends on what the numbers are.

**NICK:** You're cutting donor burn in half at that point and anyone cutting their donor burn in half is doing great business. That organization had been acquiring face-to-face donors for eight years with no increase in their donor file because they were just running on that treadmill. They were bringing them in as fast as they were going out the door. Now with this, they have a fighting chance to increase those metrics over time by plugging some of those holes.

**BETH:** That's amazing. Well I feel like what I've gotten out of our conversation today is be careful what you ask. We talked a lot about data and listening to the voice of the donors and how to work with the sides of the house of development and communications, but still all of that, the things that you're talking about





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

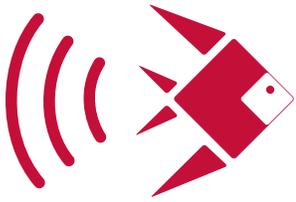
where it's important to ask people, it's important when you ask people, but the results and the actionability of what you get is really gonna depend on how you ask the question and whether it's asked in a way that gives you actionable information. You talked about things like, we call it a CTA, do this thing afterwards and people did it, but you don't know why they did it. So I'm leaving this conversation with making sure that as you're looking for ways to collect data on your audience, on what their deeper motivations are, that you're not just asking things or looking at the trail, the results of did they do this or did they do that because what they did and why they did it may be further apart than what people think.

**NICK:** Right. The traditional nonprofit view of things is people give because we ask them to give and they donated to this appeal because it was the appeal that moved their heart. It may be that they make all of their donations in November and so they donated to you in November.

**BETH:** Right, that's my parents.

**NICK:** Yeah, that transactional record is great to have and important to know if the donor is valuable in the long term, but to get to that why, you need to be asking folks how committed are you to the organization, how are you experiencing these experiences that we have for you and then running the math essentially and saying is this creating value for our donors. A great example from Catholic Relief Services is one of the things that their commitment study is. I give to live out my Catholic faith and I do it often despite the frequency of appeals that I get. So we ran a pilot program with them where we took a number of communications, mail and email, out of their stream, which is anathema to a lot of folks, but it fit with what their donors were saying and what they found is when they removed those pieces, all of the pieces surrounding them did better. They announced this as a program. People were more satisfied and they were more committed to the organization and now they're rolling out with that in the coming year. That test is now going to be their new control. It's not necessarily





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

frequency. It's getting in front of them with the right message that tells them your story, but in a way that resonates with them.

**BETH:** I think that's such great advice to leave people on because we've talked a lot about frequency and I often tell people if you were diagnosed with something, there's no amount of information that's too much for you to read. It's often not the sheer fact of frequency, but frequency with what. What's the content? What's the value that you're offering people? But getting people to remember that data is important. Good data is really what makes a difference. Data that is telling you something that isn't just asking you a yes or no or something that you can find out or figure out on your own in a different way. Often people don't respond accurately to direct questions. So I think this is so helpful. I've really appreciated this conversation and just this ongoing conversation that we're having around how do you get to know your audience? How do you give them what they need in a way to inspire them to participate and how do you work with both your development and communications departments in order to have that cohesion that lifts the whole organization? Thank you so much for joining me today to continue this. If people wanted to continue this conversation with you, learn more about what you do, learn more about what your commitment studies and what you've learned from the different experiences that you have, how can they get in touch with you?

**NICK:** Great! You can email me at [NEllinger@TheDonorVoice.com](mailto:NEllinger@TheDonorVoice.com). I'm also available on Twitter [@NickEllinger](https://twitter.com/NickEllinger). You can hit me up on LinkedIn. I try to be very available.

**BETH:** Wonderful. I will have links to all of Nick's contact information on the show notes page. Nick, thank you so much for joining me today and for sharing all of your knowledge and insight with both me and our nonprofit community. Everyone take a look out in different magazines. Nick is a prolific writer and really has some terrific insight to share. Thanks again, Nick.

**NICK:** Thank you very much for having me.

