



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

## SESSION 180

### FOCUSING ON RELATIONSHIPS IN A WORLD OF TECH

WITH MARK MEHLING

**BETH:** Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I have Mark Mehling from Conservative Copy with me. Mark and I connected online after I read some things that were really interesting that he was writing. Mark, I am so glad to have you on today to talk about the work that you do and how it applies to relationships in nonprofits.

**MARK:** Thanks, Beth! I'm really pleased to be here myself.

**BETH:** You are an interesting guest to have on because you have some for-profit and some nonprofit experience. You've done a wide variety of different marketing activities in your life. It's a great way to be able to ask you in your experience, if you look at the work that you're doing now and the background that you bring to it, what does "participation" mean to you today and what has it meant over the course of your career? What do you look for when you're working with clients that really means that participation is working?

**MARK:** Well, it's a great question, and you're really defining the latest word "engagement," but the real thing is marketing is just persuasion and influence. Whether we call it marketing or outreach or some other name, the reason you picked this name, is because we've rediscovered the meaning of the word "engagement." You know if we look at our personal lives we can see that when people get engaged, that has a tremendous meaning. It's the beginning of a long-term relationship and that's what participation must be in any business, but more importantly in the nonprofit sector.

**BETH:** You know and it's interesting because I had a guest on, Adrian Segar, a couple years back, and he said something to me that was really transformational





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

in my understanding of this world and he said, “Participation is engagement in action,” and I absolutely loved that because for me, I was really struggling with this word “engagement” and how broadly it’s used and that in many times it’s often used to mean things aren’t really action-oriented, and people are engaged when they are liking. People are engaged when they’re commenting and I was concerned people were maybe losing sight of the important actions that people need to take in order for their organization to really thrive. Have you seen that? When you talk about engagement, what are the things in the work that you’ve done that you’ve seen that move people from this idea of being mentally engaged into being actually engaged in a way that they’re doing the things that organizations need to help them thrive?

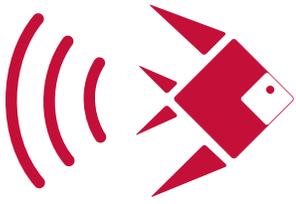
**MARK:** Well, it’s really very, very simple. In today’s technology, a lot of times we’re overlooking and it’s a relationship and if you think about it, no relationship ever works when one person is doing all the talking or one person is always doing all the asking or the only time you get contacted is when somebody wants something from you. None of those build relationships. An engagement, just like in human beings who get in engaged, involves two people communicating initially together to establish a rapport and at some point arriving to the point where they do things together and that’s really what engagement or participation is all about when we talk about our mission.

**BETH:** It’s really interesting today because we’re in this new weird world of technology coming in and impacting relationships. How do you see both the pros and the cons of today’s world and where technology is coming in and either impacting relationships for a positive or a negative result?

**MARK:** Well, I have to tell ya, most of it’s negative. It’s killing relationships in so many different ways. The standard, maybe you’ve seen the picture of the family gathered together at dinner and they’re all on their phones. What you don’t understand is they may be texting, “Pass the mashed potatoes.”

**BETH:** Right, exactly!





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**MARK:** You know, sales people are afraid to use the phone. People have 5,000 friends on social media, and yet no one cares about them. This is all caused by the technological change because most people don't realize that all it is is a change in media and capabilities. It's not a change in the basic element of communication. Forty years ago, people liked getting a long letter from friends and family, but you can't necessarily transfer that today. That's what a lot of us do in the communication in the nonprofit world.

**BETH:** I know.

**MARK:** Forty years ago you had to think about what you were gonna write or type. Otherwise you got cross outs and redoing and today, I hate to say it, but you can barf all over a page and send out some huge long snail mail email. Again, it doesn't work.

**BETH:** It is really fascinating because I was saying to my mother the other day that a hundred years from now, what's gonna be in a museum? All of the documents and pieces and things that we look at to kind of put a sense to what history was like at the time, those things aren't going to exist in the same way. On the plus side, my mother is into genealogy right now and there's archives and data points that she can't get access to because of a big fire at a certain year, the year after a census was taken. So all the records from that year's census are gone. So there's advantages to technology and its ability to collect, preserve, organize and find information, but it doesn't have that same tactile feel as it used to. Is that hurting people's ability to connect with each other?

**MARK:** I tell you what I think it comes down to. I think it comes down that the key to technology is not technology. It's the ability to pass a compelling message to an individual and that's really what we have to see and that's where most of the nonprofits make the mistakes, is they look at the technology and say, "Look at all the data we can gather," but then they're not using that data on a personal basis. They're just using it to put your first name at the beginning, the same ask message that they're sending to 2.2 million people.





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**BETH:** That's so interesting. I actually was teaching a workshop a week or so ago about audience focus and what I found interesting about it is that it was a very diverse audience and a lot of interest around race was coming up in the course of the whole program that we were working on, and when I'm teaching, writing a persona, there can be that feeling of "you're profiling our people, you're creating a profile." It can make people really nervous that you're pulling out just the data points that are going to limit a person, and it took me a little while to communicate that "No, the problem is the data points," that when all you're looking at for your audience is their race, their gender, their color, their income. That's the limiting factor. When you go beyond that to understand what keeps them up at night and you know, what are their kids' names and imagine them as a full person, even though it still creates data, it turns them into a person that you can connect with emotionally and it really does change things. So it is interesting that I've seen that too with people. When they're looking at things and technology through that limited scope, you get limited outcomes.

**MARK:** Well, you not only limit yourself. I tell you a couple of tricks. As you know I write copy. It's one of my skills. In order to do that effectively, I have to have a picture of one person in my writing. Most people do not. Most people are writing to a hundred thousand donors, 5,000 donors. No. I'm writing to an individual, one person. The technology and the data we have available allows me to change that message if it's a woman perhaps or if it's a male. If it's a younger person. If it's an older person. Those are some of the key elements that we can use when we try to segment because we don't talk the same to our spouses as we do to our teenagers and our three-year-olds. So that same difference in communication should apply when we're trying to communicate our mission to other people. Yes, we're all excited about this, it's wonderful, but they all have different views, perceptions, emotions. They see different benefits. They have different expectations and yes, you can't tailor every single communication to one person on your list, but you can certainly have an avatar that you can work against and that to me is probably the biggest advantage of technology, is it allows us to communicate one on one with a crowd.





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**BETH:** Right. What I find a lot of times in the nonprofits that I talk to is that very few of them have the capacity and that might mean budget it might mean people. Segmenting and being specific in one to one communications can be very time consuming, difficult and just sort of overwhelming to begin to deal with. When a nonprofit is in the situation where they have to use one communication that that's going out and that's going out to all their audiences, how have you brought the specificity? How do you get your clients to understand the value and still communicating with one real, not real, but imagined avatar and how that can still work even when that has to actually reach a lot of people?

**MARK:** Well, a lot of times it happens on the end and that is when people are shocked with the results.

**BETH:** Interesting.

**MARK:** The reason is because if you're a Doubting Thomas to start, it's gonna take something pretty amazing to get you to turn right around, but for most people, it starts with something small and when they start to see results there, then they say, "Let's move on. Let's try another one," because it's very, very simple generally to segment between something as simple as age. There's a significant difference just in your own conversations that you have with somebody over 60 and somebody less than 40. It's a totally different conversation driven by a number of different things. So if you start talking about Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, you know, you may not be hitting a lot of people below the age of 40 unless that was one of the famous movies they saw. The Wizard of Oz. These are all classic movies, but they were classic especially when an older audience was involved and so much the same as when you start talking to a younger clientele, they have much different experiences. I'm dating myself here, but chances are, they didn't hide under the desk as part of nuclear war training.

**BETH:** Right! I didn't do that. It's funny. I usually have the old person's perspective. It's funny. I was out with friends that have a 15-year-old daughter.





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

We were out to dinner and dinner was taking forever to come the other day and I always played this game with my kids when they were growing up you know, to kind of kill the time. It's a great thing to play with teenagers, which basically you challenge the other person to name 10 things that you don't think that they could name. Like I would challenge my engineer son to name 10 impressionist artists, thinking that I know the answer to that but he couldn't. This 15 year old challenged me to name 10 current slang phrases that teenagers today are using. I got two. I guess she was impressed that I got two, but I thought like certain things move faster than others. I mean, my kids are in their early 20s and kind of in my head they're still young people, but the difference between a 25-year-old and a 15-year-old in language? Completely different! It was just really fascinating and a good wake-up call to just remember that everything is really perspective, and so when you're dealing with that and someone says we need this communication to reach an 18-year-old and a 60-year-old, how do you convince your clients to find that perfect person that they need to hit? What's the things you've been able to say to them to allow you to even do the experiment and shoot for something so you have the opportunity to show them the results on the other end because of course results convince people, but I find a lot of times if you can't convince people to try your technique, you're never gonna get to that point.

**MARK:** I agree. I understand that entirely, but generally I'm blessed because people are contacting me because they do want solutions. I kind of start out with a heads up, but you actually used a word that is one of them that I use when I talk about you're gonna be communicating generally with words. So when you're talking to a 60-year-old and you mention it takes forever, for them, that may be an hour or two. If you're talking to a 25-year-old and say forever, that may be five minutes and when you're talking to a 15-year-old, forever is probably anything more than 30 seconds. So there are so many different language differences, things that you refer to, if I were going after a 25-year-old, I want to use some of their language. Some of what they have grown up with and used and it's the same for a 60-year-old. If I talk about the Vietnam War, for somebody who wasn't





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

even alive, it makes no difference. Or somebody who understands that. It makes a tremendous difference and each group that you're talking to has experiences like this that are so tremendously different from similar type avatars but just a different age.

**BETH:** As a writer, how do you access that because we can only be the age we are and have our own you know window on how we view the world? When I said it takes forever, you're absolutely right that I have my own perspective on what that might mean. How do you when you're going and say someone asks you and says, "Well, my avatar is an 18-year-old"? How would you go about figuring out what the world would look like from that person's perspective so you can write to it?

**MARK:** Well, the first thing is I go find a bunch of 18-year-olds and the reason is because then we can start this conversation, start to understand. The web is a wonderful place to find answers to things like name 10 phrases that only a teenager would understand, and it's not that you fill the communication with that, but there is enough to establish a trust and a belief that this is someone who knows me, who understands me. So finding a few key elements like that and I actually have to tell you it's a very expensive program when I do it on the commercial side because it lays the groundwork for 5-10 years of different advertising. It involves everything from understanding what are their wants, their needs? What are their emotions? What are their beliefs? These are all things that once you gather together once for your nonprofit, you can use that for years because somebody who has a deep-seated belief that people are not properly housed and it's unfair that we now know that if I run something that provides a type or kind of housing assistance, then now we kind of know what is going to prompt them. What's their emotional position in there? It's fairly long and involved. It's not anything I could cover in five minutes.

**BETH:** Right. We work from the same platform, that it's the same idea of really understanding who that person is and what keeps them up at night changes everything. How would today's communicator, someone working in a nonprofit





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

who is trying to build their communications, how could they grow their own skills in creating relationships with supporters?

**MARK:** Well actually, I have three things that I always mention. First one is segmenting communication and the reason is because you can tell because as a copywriter, I believe right away I can tell when something was tailor made. There are subtleties that are in there. The other is writing like we're talking to friends. I'm so used to what I call buffery and fakery, that basically it's the difference between "Beth, I really appreciate that cup of coffee. I really needed that. Thank you so much," and "It is a complete honor for us to show our appreciation for the significant contribution you provided." You can tell right away because you're laughing, and it's true, but yet if you look, I'm in the middle of a program right now where I'm making \$5-\$10 donations to 50 different nonprofits and I'm getting back all these different initial communications that are just scary.

**BETH:** Really?

**MARK:** Yes.

**BETH:** It's sad that this is still such a problem when so many nonprofit consultants are out there talking about the thank you process.

**MARK:** It's really amazing. The summary I have right now is it's a cross between an IRS letter and an ATM receipt. Literally that's what it looks like. So really it's writing like you're talking to friends and the last one is, the third point is having reasons, creating reasons to communicate other than the ask. A simple method that I use when I set up systems to increase engagement is taking that first contribution and making it a conversation. If it's an email and we're gonna do an email, we just send an email that says "Wow, thanks so much for donating. How did you pick us?"

**BETH:** Open-ended questions!





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**MARK:** Totally, or you can take another approach that says something along the lines of “Hey, thank you so much. Would you like a receipt and do you prefer email or your home address? Give us your home address if you want it sent there.”

**BETH:** Wow, that’s huge, and you get more information from them.

**MARK:** That’s right. Not only do you do that, but oh by the way, you have to have it well enough thought out and if you think about it, that can all be automated. You would never guess that this is not a person talking to you. This falls into many other areas, but the other thing, gee it’s not signed by the president. Anybody that gets a thank you note from the president, I doubt it.

**BETH:** They know that he or she is not sitting there signing them.

**MARK:** I can tell you if you start, the younger you get in the set the more they look at that and laugh and say that’s just so phony. It’s an important element, but yes, you get the extra information, but you encouraged communication. We go back to these two people getting to know each other. One of the things were, I’ll give you a funny sample later on how you can test to see how your nonprofit is doing. Those are the three points. It’s segmenting, it’s writing like we’re talking to friends and it’s creating reasons to communicate. Those are the three things I really think anybody communicating today could see big results with a nonprofit.

**BETH:** I love that, and it’s so simple and in fact on episode 98, I actually talked with Stephen Shattuck from Bloomerang, and he talked a lot about how people have thank you pages, after you’ve done your donation and then you get the thank you page, that ends up being like a stopping point as opposed to using that thank you page to say, “Thank you and.” “Thank you for your donation, and here’s a video that will talk more about us.” “Thank you for your donation, and go follow us on Facebook.” Kind of asking somebody to do something more, but within the lane of somebody would want to do. So opposed to asking them to





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

do something more for you, it's basically asking them to take another action that would benefit them. I think a lot of times that relationships get into problems because nonprofits become so self-focused and they think that the only way to grow and do better is to put themselves at the center of the conversation.

**MARK:** Obviously. Again, I have a simple, little model. Two people just met across the table, and for our sample, we're gonna use a guy and a girl that are kind of interested perhaps in each other, and now picture the conversation. The one thing I would say, I would never contradict what anybody else is having success with, but imagine them saying, "Gee, thank you so much for dinner. Here's a video."

**BETH:** Right. That's a good point!

**MARK:** For me, the answer is "Thank you so much for dinner. Do you prefer to communicate via email?"

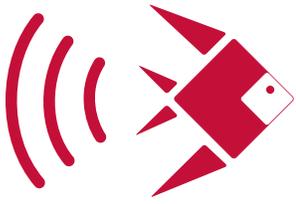
**BETH:** True, that's being human.

**MARK:** Well, that's right. This just goes back to the point we were talking about. We're friends. Communicate like friends. What I see generally are these long form thank you. Here is what we do. Here's what we're going after. Yeah, here's a video. Well, OK. Nobody asked me for anything. Nobody is interested in me. They're just interested in selling themselves. It's like those commercials where they show the two people sitting for the speed dating and the guy says, "Have I showed you this picture of my cat?"

**BETH:** Right. Exactly. Push, push, push.

**MARK:** Yeah, the real thing, the bottom line no matter what anybody says, why do people give? It's because it makes them feel good. That's what we should be doing, is making them feel good. I don't think we do it by standing there talking all about ourselves.





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

**BETH:** Right. It's funny. The most-opened email of all time had the subject line "Hey." Every time I tell people that, they're always like really shocked. It actually was from President Obama's first campaign and it's shocking, but it's not shocking to me. I can't tell you how many times I've looked through my emails and you go to click on the one, you scan through and you click on the ones that seem like they're from real people with real messages. If your phone rings, you look at the caller ID and say is this somebody that I know, and people are trying to pre-filter their attitude almost before they even begin the conversation with you.

**MARK:** See, what you're doing though is I actually created a term for that and it's called "visual dissonance."

**BETH:** OK. So talk a little bit about that.

**MARK:** OK, well let's use a simple example. One of my favorites is I live in Florida, and Thanksgiving a couple years ago, they had the police pulling over cars and then giving the drivers a turkey.

**BETH:** Really?

**MARK:** Well, if you think about that, it sounds good from a distance, but when is the last time you've been pulled over by a policeman and tell me what that did to your thinking. I didn't drink anything. Oh man, I don't remember making a mistake. Wow, what did I do wrong? Where's my wallet? What's going on?

**BETH:** It's always a negative experience.

**MARK:** Absolutely, so them handing you a turkey, it's ruined because you have what I call visual dissonance. It doesn't match everything associated with that, and we all do this every day, and you just I think gave a perfect example, and that's why I brought it up because your example is if you got an email from a nonprofit that you had recently donated to and the subject line is "Your Receipt."





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

Are you gonna spend a lot of time opening that up?

**BETH:** No! I probably wouldn't even open it up. I probably would put it in a folder.

**MARK:** Absolutely! The real thing is, you're not gonna open it up. You're certainly not gonna read it, but I bet if you did you're gonna find 30-40 lines, all kinds of things like that and the same thing happens when you get some snail mail that's signed by the CEO. Everybody knows that's not happening. When you see a header and a logo, right away you're going, "They're looking for money."

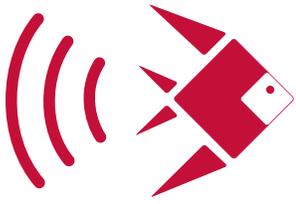
**BETH:** Interesting.

**MARK:** So this sets up a belief that allows you to pre-judge the excessive amount of information that arrives at any one time, and we do this throughout our lives. You do it right away when you pick up your snail mail and you stand over the garbage, and if it's got a window on it and there's no money due, it goes in the garbage and that's because the window envelope tells you it's either somebody selling something or it's a bill. So this visual dissonance, what it does is it says to you, "This is not something I want. I can see that," and that's what we're doing in our communications with nonprofits to our donors, is we're setting them up so they make snap judgments, and sadly it works against us.

**BETH:** So are there any places in communications in interactions with nonprofits that there is an opportunity to make big beliefs ahead in fixing this or beginning a relationship in a different way?

**MARK:** My personal preference is an on boarding system. On the commercial side, I specialize in, one of the areas I specialize in, if you go ride on an airplane, they have what is called a safety brief, but really it's an on-boarding. They want to show you how everything works, explain when the food is gonna be served, if any, what the seat belt sign means and it's to get you comfortable. To understand. If you ever go on a cruise, they do the same thing. They tell you this is where you





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

get a massage and this is what time meal hours are and all this stuff, but yet we don't seem to do that with donors. Yet we should be able to take a donor and have a series of communications, some of which I've already mentioned that establish a relationship and others that also establishes what's going on, where they can participate and talk about some of this on a regular basis so that they feel part of the organization. Not that they feel good that they gave \$10 or \$20 or \$100 or \$100,000, but that in fact they are a part of that organization and you do that with on-boarding.

**BETH:** I know I find a lot of times when you join something new, you're at this moment where you are at the most excited at that point because you've just said yes to something, and the longer you go between saying yes and the long silence, the less enthusiastic you get and so there's this moment in time when someone has just given or just joined a group or just taken any action where they are focused on you and feeling good and we don't often do the things that support that. One of our regular guests, Amanda Kaiser, was on episode 155 and she was talking about how this plays out in associations. When someone joins the association, and then they just get dumped into the standardized "Here's the next newsletter," when it happens to come out, whether that's a week later or six weeks later or a day later. You're just kind of signed into the group and whatever the next thing is that comes out with no idea of what's in it for them or how they can personally get value out of their involvement with this organization?

**MARK:** Just having any type of a personalization that actually the person, well the examples I gave earlier. If you got an email that said, "Would you like a receipt?" your instant answer is "Wow, there's somebody there, and they sent this little note to me," because it's the same kind of thing with on-boarding. You can use on-boarding the same way, and so the points that you're making are absolutely true; nonprofits generally I won't say we grab the money and run, but we're saying thank you, and then the next thing we're doing is asking or sending something generic. I'll tell you a little secret. This is a copywriter's secret now and writing sales letters, but I can tell you that for nonprofits around here, when I





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

have a simple one sentence and short sentence handwritten note at the bottom, it generally boosts response, meaning people who answer by about 50 percent. It generally doubles the amount.

**BETH:** We've seen that happen with one of our clients where they had their letters and then they had little square sticky note pads and at a board meeting, they basically handed a pad out to each of the board members and then handed them a list of people that they knew and I think each one got like 10 so it wasn't crazy, but they asked them to just write sticky notes to these people. Then they took the sticky note and put it onto the letters and hand folded them. Wow! Obviously that's a tough thing to do at scale, but when you have a group of donors that a little extra love and attention will move them from likers to lovers, it's a great investment.

**MARK:** Absolutely! That's a perfect example, and you're right. Some of it is not scalable, but the real thing is this is where segmentation comes from. You don't need that kind of attention to someone who has donated \$10 twice. On the other hand, there are people who donate large amounts of money, and geesh, they're just not getting any real substantial communication other than "Gee, would you like to give again."

**BETH:** Right. So that brings up an important question. You know, we're talking about, like I call them ... these are my beloved people, my slash marketers. The development/marketing director or the executive director/empty the trash can/do the social media. People in this world, they're busy, and they're overwhelmed, and they often have this communications aspect of their job kind of inherited on top of the thing that they thought they were gonna be doing. So how can a busy, nonprofit communicator find time and figure out ways to create space for a degree of personalization that can really make a difference? Where would you tell them to start?

**MARK:** Well, that question really has two sections. One is super busy people and





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

the answer to that is what I call super humanized automation and that means you use the automation, you use the auto responders, you use the systems that will automatically communicate, but somebody has to put the time in one time so that it's humanized because otherwise it does come across cold. I prefer the word "relationship" over "personalization" because, unfortunately, personalization has been over-utilized. People put my name because they got my name at the top of all kinds of different things and it's like, c'mon. Most people I think recognize that that doesn't do much. The key is you've got to leverage the technology by infusing it with personality from the very beginning, and I'll give you a perfect example. Remember Star Wars had the two droids? Most people fell in love with the droids, but why is that? The reason is because no matter the technologies or anything else, they had personalities.

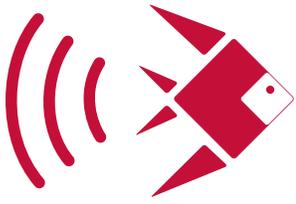
**BETH:** I think you're the first person that used a Star Wars reference on the podcast! I'm so happy right now!

**MARK:** But it's really true. If you look at those two droids, I mean if you think about it, we've got a little thing on rollers that looks like a 1940s era vacuum that makes sweeping noises, and the kids loved it! Why? Because it exuded personality and I forget. What's the other guy's name? C3PO?

**BETH:** Yes, that's right.

**MARK:** He not only had personality, but it was somewhat edgy. It was automation, and that's what with all the different things we have, we can make the donor feel good. We need to make them feel it personally and essentially part of the mission's success and we also have to give them more opportunities to be involved at any level and so you can actually do that in automated sequences that come across very personal, and that, to me, that's about the only way to do it because you're right. Everybody is doing everything, but it's kind of like if you don't fix the tires on the car, pretty soon the car doesn't go anywhere, and this is the same thing. You've got to put the stuff in place that's gonna do the most





# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

good in your fundraising, in your relationships with your donors and automate that with a real system, and then you can go back to emptying the garbage and all the other things that you're expected to do.

**BETH:** Mark, thank you so much. This was such great advice. I really appreciate the insight and that you were able to share both with me and our nonprofit community. If people have further questions for you, what's a good place for them to get in touch with you?

**MARK:** I've recently pivoted my business, and so right now, I'm just using the email. There's not a website up, but it's [Mark@ConservativeCopy.com](mailto:Mark@ConservativeCopy.com), and I'm happy. I hope they mention this podcast so I kind of get an idea of what they're talking about, and I'm more than happy to answer questions and help you.

**BETH:** Terrific! Well, thank you so much for sharing everything that you know with all of us. I appreciate you participating with me, and thanks everyone for listening. We will have connections to Mark up on the show notes page. Thanks so much, and we'll see you next time.

**MARK:** Thanks, Beth! See ya!

