

Giving Growth Podcast - Doug Krehbel of ASPCA, hosted by Greg Sobiech (full transcript)

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Doug Krehbel

The bridge between younger and older donors is important, but I think what we really need to pay more attention to is that the landscape has changed so much. It's not simply enough anymore to show photos of animals in peril. Donors of all ages have access to information they didn't have 20, 15, even 10 years ago.

You have to tell better stories, and you have to do it with a clarity of purpose that you may not have had to do years ago. So it's constant self-analysis is how you get from one step to the next.

Greg Sobiech

My guest this week is Doug Krehbel, Senior Director of Data Strategy and Operations at ASPCA. The ASPCA is one of the most recognized names in animal welfare, but behind the brand is a complex challenge that many nonprofits face today. How do you stay relevant to loyal, long-term donors while also meeting the expectations of a younger, more impact-conscious generation?

Doug is right at the center of this shift. He's helping ASPCA move beyond traditional messaging and into a new era of personalized engagement where data drives strategy, transparency builds trust, and program outcomes speak louder than cute animal photos. Doug, welcome to Giving Growth.

Doug Krehbel

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Good to see you this morning.

Greg Sobiech

I thought that one interesting place to start would be to talk about a formative experience on your nonprofit journey. You decide how far back you want to go. I'm always interested to understand what happened in the past that influences where we are today.

Doug Krehbel

Sure. Thanks. My technical journey is pretty common.

I started out as a software developer back in the 90s in languages that now only exist in museums. You know, worked on that for a long time. And, you know, it's a funny shift technically that I remember during those days, people cared about applications and not data necessarily.

It was more about what the application did than what the data was behind it. So that was really interesting. And I started getting more interested in the data.

And at the same time, I kind of made that career shift. I decided that I wanted my personal goals, the things that I was spending my time on, volunteering and other causes, I wanted that to be my career. And so I was lucky enough to make that shift about 18, 20 years ago.

So I've been in a variety of roles in politics, in labor unions, the environmental space, and now in the animal welfare space. I think something formative really was for me, for data folks, especially in the nonprofit space and fundraisers, you tend to get closeted a bit in the numbers. You tend to get closeted in the analysis.

And you kind of forget about what the impact of the programs you're helping to serve actually do. I was fortunate enough to, with Greenpeace, for example, the environmental group, to take part in direct actions, to volunteer there, to be out in the field when I could. Same with the ASPCA.

I just returned from volunteering at one of our shelters out in Ohio. That was just an eye-opening experience. And I have to say, we think that we do a lot of work, and we do.

But compared to what folks are doing via the money that we raise and via the efforts that we do, there's really no comparison. So I think formative for me is really trying to take part in the end goal as well and not just looking at the numbers.

Greg Sobiech

The fact that you are willing to go out and, if I may say so, get your hands dirty with the mission, I find that very unusual.

Doug Krehbel

It's not always an opportunity that nonprofits can give to staff because everybody's so busy. Everybody really is working too hard with too little budget. But that would be my encouragement for all nonprofits, big and small, is that if you have the chance to go send somebody on a deployment, if you have a chance for people to volunteer with groups, please do it because everybody I've talked to at the organizations I've been with, they come back from those things feeling energized.

They come back feeling like they're connected a lot more, like you said, getting your hands dirty with it.

Greg Sobiech

I think there is also another benefit. What I am trying to push is this idea of getting into the head of the donor. I call it entering the conversation in their mind.

And I wonder if your unique perspective around being closer to the mission is what makes you a little bit open-minded to think beyond your role and to look at the bigger picture.

Doug Krehbel

Maybe, but I don't think it's that uncommon in this space. I mean, the folks that we hire for our teams, they come in with obviously a lot of data experience, let's say CRM experience, Salesforce and whatnot. But they also come in with a real passion, and they've done interesting things, maybe not data related.

We've hired for our team folks that have volunteered for the local shelters or done something completely non-animal related. So I definitely think there's an appetite there, and it helps motivate people. But like I said, I think the barrier to entry is simply that staff are just too busy.

It's very hard to say, I need to take a week away so I can't work on this finance report that everybody is clamoring for. I can't work on this analytics that everybody needs to work on a marketing strategy. But I think you have to carve out that space at some point, and I think that's an organizational decision.

And I've been fortunate enough to be with a couple orgs that really make that happen and take the effort to it.

Greg Sobiech

That really resonates. I used to be at Bath & Body Works 20 years ago as a director of digital in Columbus, Ohio. And I was there for two years.

I don't remember one day where I was allowed to go to a physical store and actually interact with the customer. Now, I want to talk about this topic of bridging the generational divide. I wonder if longtime ASPCA donors who may have been giving for decades are a bit different than younger donors who may be asking tougher questions about transparency and impact.

When you think about ASPCA's engagement strategy, how do you balance the needs of those more mature versus younger audiences?

Doug Krehbel

It's challenging, but not insurmountable. But I think I want to clarify one thing, that I think that the bridge between younger and older donors is important, but I think what we really need to pay more attention to in combination with that is simply that the landscape has changed so much. Donors of all ages have access to information they didn't have 20, 15, even 10 years ago.

They have levels of access that let them ask questions on different levels. Time was you sent in a donation by check. You were lucky if you got a calendar back.

You got maybe a newsletter back. You maybe saw news pieces about what the organization was doing. But you didn't have this constant daily stream of input from not only that organization you supported, but all the others in the same space.

So donors are asking tougher questions. You're exactly right. And I think in the main it might be younger donors, but I think more experienced donors are able now to say, I've been giving to your organization for 20 years.

I'm noticing this. I'm noticing a shift in your communications. I'm noticing a shift in what you're advertising as your priorities.

And to remember, this seems obvious, but younger donors turn into older donors, right? And their priorities change. And so the 20-year-old that we sign up today as a sustainer, we want to keep them until they're in their 60s, and we want to be able to remind them why they support.

They have a lot more choices today. The advent of digital fundraising has made the barriers to entry for small and large nonprofits a lot shorter, right? Whereas they don't have to cook up a mail program or a Canvas program to be viable.

So of all levels, they want to know what the impact is that they're making, and they will quickly shift if they don't feel like they're getting kind of true answers, right? And so we talked a little bit in the pre-interview about stories. How do you keep people engaged?

And I think you had said something like, you know, it's not simply enough anymore to show photos of animals in peril or the effects of climate change or demonstrators, you know, being locked up, you know, and their rights taken away. I think that helps, but I think you have to be telling stories about exactly what the org is doing to combat all of this, right? And I think that that's what we're moving to.

So again, to me, it's less of a generational gap than it is merely that people of all ages have more access than they ever had before. You have to tell better stories, and you have to do it with a clarity of purpose that you may not have had to do years ago.

Greg Sobiech

Looking at people in their 20s and 30s, sometimes it's very easy to have judgment. In my case, in the 90s, it was play hard, work hard. I see younger people right now not play us hard, but they play differently, and they have a different attitude towards work hard.

It's very easy to judge and look at it from my perspective, which is sort of the way I asked the question. It was a bit judgmental. And I think what you're saying, which I really like, is that the external environment, I remember back a couple of crashes ago when Alan Greenspan said, it's these exogenous factors.

And maybe the environment around us has changed. And it isn't about younger versus older. It isn't about these very traditional demographic characteristics.

It's about the environment in which we donate and in which we operate has changed. And our engagement strategy has to reflect changes in the environment.

Doug Krehbel

While still recognizing that there are some generational assumptions that still do hold true. I mean, older donors prefer direct mail. Younger donors would like to be able to give via Apple Pay and other means like that.

But it's a lot more fluid, as you're alluding to, than we think it is. Take this example, and I think this is an unfair assumption, but you always hear, oh, people, young people today, gen, whatever you want to call it, they just expect things to be handed to them, right? They don't want to work hard.

They just want to be thanked for everything. And when you do studies, I was at a conference about six months ago where somebody did a wonderful A-B test where they did differences of acknowledgments between older and younger donors. I don't remember all the details.

I'll fumble it if I try to. But what they were expecting was that younger donors expected premiums more. They expected to be thanked more.

And that wasn't the case. It had really no effect on retention. People just want to be thanked for what they're giving, and they want to know why they're giving, right?

It's rare that there's the person who just basically says, well, I'm just going to give to a bunch of different charities. I don't really care which ones they are. I'm sure they'll do good with something.

And like I was saying, I think now you have more of a responsibility to proactively send that message out, not just to your sustainers, but to your one-time donors, especially your major donors, folks like that, to kind of keep reminding them of why they're giving. But they don't expect something for nothing. They're very savvy, I think, the younger donor generation.

And they recognize how much choice they have, and I think that's a good thing.

Greg Sobiech

Back to choice and storytelling, there's always a beginning and there's always a now, and we're always going somewhere. There's always a story. There's always a chronology.

And in the pre-interview we spoke about, and you already mentioned this, that showing pictures of cute animals isn't enough. And I think that was sort of something we both spoke about, and obviously ASPCA's mission is about the animals and animal welfare. What do you find to be the most effective stories or types of content that work when it comes to engaging all donors?

Because to your point, maybe it isn't about younger versus older. It's almost an escape hatch. It's almost easy to say older versus donor.

It feels like a bit of a cop-out. What are stories or content that people want to actually consume?

Doug Krehbel

That's a really good question, and I'm not going to put myself forth as a messaging expert. We have tons of good folks who are crafting these communications. But in my experience, engaging supporters, that skill is the same skill set that you want to use to engage your next-door neighbor in conversation.

The emotional pull is necessary, but I think you've also got to back that up with saying, this is a story that shows supporters, both donors and just advocates for the organization, this is something that shows what a direct impact that we have. It can be something like a cruelty case where we help prosecute and rescue dogs from a dog fighting ring. It can be our program to train shelter vets.

It can be a whole bunch of things, but I think any story you tell has to be through the lens of, at the end of the story, be proud of what you gave to the ASPCA, or become a giver so that you can help us tell more stories like that. That seems really simplistic, right? Now, how do you do it?

But again, I think if you want to engage folks, you want to do it in a way that respects the fact that you don't know who you're talking to. You can't tell a story that you know is going to appeal to a 60- to 70-year-old dog owner, right? You don't know who's listening.

You want to just tell honest stories. Let me tell you an interesting anecdote. So at the ASPCA a while back, we were curious about whether we could appeal to people who would be identified as cat people versus people who would be identified as dog people.

So a survey was sent out and had a bunch of questions on it, and one of them was, are you a – not this simply, but a ways to get to are you more interested in cats or are you more interested in dogs? And we took that data back, and they did an A-B test. The cat people, they sent a direct mail piece that had obviously a cat on it.

The dog people, they sent a dog piece, same with the digital. Got the results back, absolutely no effect. So I think the lesson from that is people might think of themselves as cat people or dog people.

They might think of themselves as interested in issue A versus issue B, but they don't necessarily want to be told that by the nonprofit, right? So they want to be able to choose what they're interested in. I know somebody who had no idea that the ASPCA does equine rescue, right?

There's horrible stories about people on farms and horse farms that simply have no other choice but to walk away, and that's just the nature of the economic times we live in and so forth. They had no idea, and then they started getting interested and looking at our website and so forth. So again, I think the story should be, how do we demonstrate our impact, right?

How do we demonstrate the fact that we are working on these issues, and we have a broad swath across the animal welfare space? And also assuming that folks are going to be interested in something, like you said, because they are male, female, non-cisgendered, et cetera, age, geographics. These are all segments that folks love to work on in the fundraising space, and it's important because if you find that there's a certain type of donor you can appeal to in that way, it's great.

But I think the stories have to stay grounded in simply what the impact of the organization is.

Greg Sobiech

I remember when I started back in 99, we called it direct marketing, because digital was still very nascent. And I kind of got lucky. I started at a firm, at Digitas, back then it was called Bronner Schlossberg Humphrey in Boston, and I was able to absorb lessons from direct mail, but to the lens of digital.

Segmentation is so important to direct marketing, but even back then we spoke about one-to-one marketing. That was a bit of a joke in my mind over the last 25 years, because we didn't do one-to-one marketing. We did marketing at cluster, segment, or list level.

It was never one-to-one. I was actually researching the other day how much Netflix spends per year on its recommendation engine. We all see a different login screen.

Nobody actually knows. The estimate I read, it's about 300 to 500 million dollars a year. Just on that one piece of software, I'm sure they spend X billion per year on the total data infrastructure and technical infrastructure.

They must. Now, I'm bringing this up because this topic of personalization is important. I love your example because, again, maybe we are more complex than, like I am definitely a dog person.

I don't like cats, but I'm also more complex than that. I don't want cats to be harmed either. There's levels to the story.

I will pet a cat, and I feel terrible if I see any animal that's hurt. There's complexity to all of us, and I think that's what you're pointing at. What is your take on personalization at scale?

Do you agree that we need to lean into personalization? What have you learned to be a way, or what's your current philosophy on what it actually means to do personalization?

Doug Krehbel

I love this topic because it's more and more prevalent in the fundraising space. Segments are getting more and more defined. Segments are getting smaller, and what you always hear from marketing folks is that we need more data.

If only we knew more about our supporters, if only we knew more about our targets, we could really personalize to them. We could customize our messaging and so forth. I don't think that's necessarily true, and I say that for a couple of reasons.

One is that you reach a kind of diminishing return, and, again, I think you need to meet supporters where they are. You have to meet them with the information they've given you. People love to reach out to third-party data sources, things like Voter File and so forth, and do things like age append and matching and so forth, so they can just find out that one data piece, that if we know that Mr. Robinson is 55 years old, then we can customize his mail piece. That's fine, and it's noble to want to raise more money that way, but it leads you down a very strange ecosystem, right? So I think it's a troublesome notion to say that we can personalize too far, but I do think it's possible. But I think you need to know a couple of things first and keep that in mind when you do it.

First of all, donors are constantly shifting, right? I mentioned the cat-dog kind of survey that we did to try and glean information from that. Somebody might be a dog person when we asked them six months ago, and now they're a cat person because their significant other brought home a cat.

We don't know. I think the most important thing we can do when we're looking at personalization is see how our message is resonating, right? And that comes from things like response to certain campaigns and asking donors and asking supporters and reaching out, saying, what do you think of the ASPCA?

Are you aware that we do all these things? But when you try to get to when you're choosing the perfect donor segment, it becomes really slippery, and I don't think that all this reliance on so-called predictive data is necessarily being used in the right way. We know these four data points about Doug Krehbel.

We know where he buys his clothes. We know how tall he is. We know his age.

We know who he works for. We can therefore predict that he will likely give to X, Y, and Z, or he'll give to us if we do this certain appeal. And it's so problematic.

I like the example of when I had been working with a voter file years ago and just kind of looking through some sample aggregate data, and I told my partner what I had discovered in there, which is that the voter file assumes that she has 2.3 children because that's what's predicted, and she was very surprised because there were none running around at the time, right? So I think that the models that do these things are so imperfect that if you try to rely on them too much, you're going to fall into bad patterns. And the donor universe is constantly shifting, right?

It's like an old cartoon I saw where somebody made fun of a map that they had built a map of caribou habitats across the American Northwest, right? These are where the caribou are. And the person looks at it and says, well, that map is no good.

The caribou could be anywhere by now. They walk around. They're ambulatory, right?

So it's that kind of fallacy of the fact if we can pinpoint things too well, then we're going to have the best data possible. There's a fantastic book that I have to pitch. It's by two authors named Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein.

It's called Data Feminism. Anyone in the data space, anyone in the nonprofit space should take a look at, anyone anywhere actually should take a look at this book because it talks about a lot of these tropes that we've gotten used to, right? The myth of big data.

If we have enough data, then we can spend enough time and we'll find the perfect answers. And that's not necessarily true. And their argument is that that sort of notion comes from the fact that data has largely been a male-driven profession for decades, right?

The masculine approach to data is to assemble as many terabytes as we can. And that's kind of a fallacy. And I think folks in the nonprofit space recognize that now.

We're already seeing limitations of AI, which can only go so far, even though AI has all the data. You can give AI all the data in the world and it may not make the right conclusions. I'm kind of rambling here a little bit, but what it brings me back to is I think personalization is good if you're listening to what donors are telling you about how they want to be contacted, about what stories they might be interested in.

I think it gets problematic when you start assuming that people want to hear what you want to tell them because you assume they want to hear it, right? And then again, it just goes back to telling good stories. If you're having a conversation with somebody like we are, if we meet out in the street, it's the same skillset.

Listen to what they're talking about. If you want to come back with a story, come back with one that you think is going to be interesting to them, not because you're trying to impress them, but it's how to make a good, engaging conversation. And I think it might be as simple as that without having to get into the weeds of looking at third-party data sources and getting so wrapped up in small segments.

Greg Sobiech

In my experience, charities already have a good analog for what Netflix is doing. Giving officers. A good giving officer has ex-people in her or his Rolodex that they are talking to on a regular basis.

That giving officer in her head or his head has an algorithm running already around Greg likes annual care and recovery, and this is from your website, and Doug cares about the puppy industry. These are some of the examples of work that ASPCA stands for. And if I know that I'm into one part or I'm connected to one part of the mission and you're connected to a different part of the mission, because I'm a human being and I track your first and last address and I can see your donation history and I have a handful of people like that in my Rolodex, I am basically that algorithm that Netflix developed.

It just isn't at scale. And we would love to deliver as marketers that level of experience that I am getting as a mid or major donor to mass donors. I do think that's what we want as an objective.

We want to replicate that one-to-one experience across maybe many donors and because they're on TikTok, Instagram, on YouTube, in other places. And what you're saying, I believe is foundational. It's very easy to screw it up.

And I love how you are bringing to the surface the fact that it's super, super hard.

Doug Krehbel

It really is. And the major donor portfolio person, that's a wonderful analogy because they can spend that time and attention. The only thing I would push back on that a little bit is that I think a really strong major giving officer not only finds out what's going to appeal to an individual donor, but also cares about what journey that donor wants to take.

You entered the ASPCA through an appeal that had to do with a horrific puppy mill, like you gave the example. And we love having you as a supporter of the organization. Where is your journey from there?

We don't necessarily, we want you to give more. We want you to keep giving. But what other things can we engage you in?

Did you know that the ASPCA does specific training in shelter medicine, for instance, once these puppies get out of where they were? We have specific techniques that we teach about how best to serve animals in shelters. It's a whole different ballgame than serving animals one-to-one, as might seem obvious.

I think you can get there with non-major donors as well if you look at what they want their journey to be. You can track how somebody came to the organization. Did they fill out a form?

Did they respond to a mail piece? Did they respond to a direct response television ad? And you can track their journey and where they want to go next.

So that, to me, is the personalization. You can't say, well, you gave \$25 on a digital form. We are now going to flood your inbox because you're a digital giver.

You are a one-time giver, but we want to make you a sustainer, right? So we are treating all people that come in that way the same way. But then when you start to find out that, hey, you sent them a mail piece and they didn't reply with a donation, but they sent back a survey you sent.

And I think large organizations, because it is so complex, don't do a good enough job in tracing the supporter journey wherever it goes, right, and always assuming that it's going to be linear. So if you don't assume that it's a linear journey and you let people kind of find their way through, they'll get to the place that they want to go to, which is hopefully the place that you want them to go to. And you're telling good stories and you're engaging them about impact.

So that, to me, is a real potential for personalization at scale if you're really honestly tracking what they want to tell you and how they want to enter the conversation with the organization.

Greg Sobiech

I want to stay on this topic for a little bit longer. I want to share an image that I have on my desk. And because we're remote, it's a perfect time to do it.

Doug Krehbel

I like that.

Greg Sobiech

And for those who are listening, it says small, consistent steps, massive change, and it's a bunch of steps leading up a staircase. I have learned to accept that this is how life works. I am not wired for small, consistent steps.

I like to skip over steps. That sometimes works, and it often doesn't work, actually. When I go to gym, I have to do the reps every day.

That is an example of small, consistent steps. And then six months later, I see change, but not tomorrow and not next week. And I would love to hear your perspective on this because what I often see is charities, and all of us get overwhelmed.

If I needed to lose 20 pounds right now, that's overwhelming. But if I need to go to the gym tomorrow, I can handle that. What is one way that you've seen, or maybe it's something that you're doing today, where you know where you want to go, and there is a bigger vision we want to pursue when they run personalization.

And to your point, it's hairy. It's complicated. But what are some ways to just get started, to take a small step on this journey, to create some mental models around who are my clusters or micro-audiences of donors, and what are the types of, let's call it, micro-affinities or micro-messages that I need to tie them to?

And to your point, it isn't just one. Maybe it's many. What are some ways to get started, to start to figure this out?

Doug Krehbel

I think one way is not to skip the step that a lot of organizations naturally skip sometime, which is something like A-B testing, right? If you have a direct mail piece that's a new message or some new approach. A lot of orgs don't want to A-B test for a couple of reasons.

One is that if the A or the B doesn't perform as well, you're leaving money on the table. It's like, oh, if we'd have only sent them A, we'd have had this many more donors. The cost of testing is a lot lower than the cost of not testing, right?

So that's a small step. I don't care what scale you're on. If you're a small theater company sending out 200 flyers for a show, why not try a different message?

Why not try featuring a different, one of the productions on one versus the other? For very little cost, you could find out a lot about what people respond to, right? So I think that that's one thing.

But to do that, what you need to have is a very stable data architecture, right? And this is where I kind of downplayed the use of data a couple minutes ago, which sounds strange coming from me. But this sort of thing, the incremental movement upwards is where a strong data system and strong data professionals really show its value, right?

Change over time in small increments. How are my campaigns performing? We all do this in this space.

We know how our campaigns did. We know what the ROI was. We know what the cost to acquire was.

If we're savvy enough, we can follow retention based on campaigns, three, six, 12-month retention. But are we categorizing it in the right way? These campaigns are not just standalone.

They should be part of a larger messaging service, and they are for the most part. But I think organizations sometimes want to pivot so quickly to say, we just sent out a piece about, I'll take whatever. We just sent out a piece about refugees in X, and boy, that did not do well.

We had best pivot to whatever other awful humanitarian crisis is happening in the world without asking themselves why. Why didn't it work out? There's so many different reasons it could or couldn't have.

And that's where your data structure comes in handy to look at all those data points and say, well, hold on. This is still a story worth telling. Maybe we didn't tell it the right way.

Maybe we didn't send it to the right people, that sort of thing, right? So it's constant self-analysis is how you get from one step to the next. That's a big part.

And just being honest with yourselves, right? I've seen, and not been personally involved with, but I've seen a couple organizations that seem to want to pivot so quickly that folks are wondering, and they're literally saying, well, I got this direct mail piece that says A, but then I got this email that seems to say that the organization's mission is B. Which is it?

That sort of thing. So incremental change is so powerful, as your graph illustrates, but it doesn't have to mean that every time you don't go up a step that you have to somehow totally retrench. Look at what the data's telling you.

Look at what your campaign response and campaign members are telling you. And just move accordingly, right? And don't be afraid to reevaluate, but don't think that you have to do it so much because you're not making that major jump in engagement.

Greg Sobiech

And there is pressure on charities, especially given cost-expense ratios or financial constraints. There is this idea that I always have to get it right. And what I do hear from many fundraising leaders is that they're sick of it.

They're sick of the fact that they're expected to experiment and be innovative, and yet they're not giving slack when something doesn't work out. And we can't have it both ways. I don't know a CFO that expects a high rate of return from a very safe investment.

High rate of return comes with a high rate of risk.

Doug Krehbel

Definitely.

Greg Sobiech

And I love scientific testing, right? Scientific method, rather. I love scientific method because it's about hypotheses, and you either validate or invalidate that hypothesis.

It isn't success-failure. It's validation or invalidation. And I think what you're saying is that if I showed a cat to cat people, because I think they're cat people, and a dog to dog people, because I think they're dog people, and I failed to get a lift, did I fail or did I simply learn that maybe I need to think about it differently?

Doug Krehbel

Absolutely. I don't know if you're a fan of old movies, but there's constant old movies where you see some mad scientist in a lab or, you know, somebody working on something, and you see somebody in a lab coat, and they throw up their hands, and they say, the experiment was a failure. The experiment wasn't a failure.

It just didn't get the results you expected, but it got you information, unless it was a poorly designed experiment. And that's what goes back to the notion of constant testing, constant kind of A-B testing, constant message testing, things like that. But you're exactly right, right?

Like the cat-dog survey, you know, just because it didn't increase our fundraising to a measurable degree doesn't mean it was a failure. It just tells us to kind of look in other places to where we can do our personalization. You know, that's a personalization that we tried that was pretty simple.

And who knows? We may try, you know, if we tried it a year from now, maybe there's something in the nature of people, maybe the economic situation, that will make them have that affinity and make them respond better to one or the other. We just don't know.

You know, we can only know by constantly experimenting.

Greg Sobiech

There is something valuable that's hidden within the process of thinking about hypotheses themselves. Just that process of sitting down inside and maybe it's someone from data, someone from technology, someone from marketing, communications. As long as we agree that we need to be relevant, thus reflect what the donor is thinking about because they're thinking something.

But if we agree that there is something that they resonate with because of something that happened to them in the past, if we can hit the nail on the head in terms of messaging, something good may happen. And if we agree that that's true, then it's all going to be a wonderful learning experience. And that's kind of what I'm taking away from this.

What are you taking away? What would you recommend that fundraising professionals or anyone that works for a charity think about in the context of personalization and what we have chatted about so far?

Doug Krehbel

Well, I think it goes back to something we talked about previously, which is how do we most effectively, honestly, and impactfully communicate the impact that we're having? That is such a huge challenge, especially for larger nonprofits, right? How do we tell people, and we see kind of simpler examples all the time, and I see this a lot in advertising.

If you give \$20 today, you'll feed four shelter dogs for a month. And that's fine, right? That kind of specific message does resonate with a lot of people and it's shown to be very effective.

The whole just 36 cents a day sort of thing. I think there's a much larger kind of impact statement that nonprofits can make that really will both get to the personalization of the message, but also to really reassure people that what they're doing is really helping. They are not putting their money into something where they don't really know.

They sort of know that, you know, hey, I feel really good about giving to this university every month. It makes me feel good. I think the savvier donors are going to ask themselves, well, why do I give to X and not to Y, right?

Why am I giving to this university and not this one? And why am I giving to this animal welfare organization and not this one? Because there are so many good ones in this space, large and small.

So I think, again, the challenge for larger nonprofits, of which we're one, is how do you really communicate impact in a way that will resonate? And it's something that until recently I really haven't seen as a focus of a large organization. In terms of, we know that we have our hands in all these different issues, and we know the people that we serve, and we can put our hands on these individual actions that we do, but how do we make a person know about the sheer scope of what we really do and combine that with individualizing the stories, right?

It's such a tricky needle to thread, but I do think it's possible. But I think it really comes down to you can't communicate impact until you measure impact. How do you kind of objectively and forcefully measure the impact your organization is having?

That's, again, where the power of data comes in, but it's also the power of asking that question honestly. Like, how do we measure the impact we have on this community versus this community? And so it's a really fascinating kind of emphasis that I would love to see more in this space.

Greg Sobiech

There's a reason why the Edelman Trust Barometer talks about trust in organizations, trust in government going down, and I think that this decline in trust in organizations is driven partially by the fact that donors care less about the organization itself, and they really care more about causes. My interpretation is that if we forget that who we are as an organization carries less weight than the specific parts of our mission and, thus, specific elements of the mission that drive specific impact, that's where we get in trouble. It's a bit arrogant of us as an industry to forget that impact matters.

Doug Krehbel

Absolutely. And, you know, the impact that you have should tie in with your mission. Absolutely.

And I think people... You should be able to articulate fairly clearly and fairly easily what your mission is. But I think you could also find a way to succinctly and honestly have an impact statement for the past however time period that people are curious about, right?

This is our mission. The impact statement is what tells people, are they fulfilling their mission, you know, and how exactly are they doing it? You know, I think of the ASPCA as animal welfare.

I know that they do some other things. That's their mission. Their impact is so much greater.

And I'm not just talking about us. I think this could apply to any nonprofit. But when people look at the impact and if they're able to look at it in a manageable way, not having to look through statistics of last year we saved 6,000 shelter pets and we also did this and this, how do we synthesize that into a single impact statement that says this not only quantifies, but it relates back to the mission to say this is who we are.

You know, the mission statement is this is who we are. The impact statement is this is what we did.

Greg Sobiech

Is there a specific program that you remember that ASPCA executed that from your perspective helped donors have a better understanding of where their money actually is going?

Doug Krehbel

There's two answers to that. What we've been doing in the past in my estimation and what we've done very well is to communicate the impact of specific stories very well, right, across

the whole range of the 20 or so programs that we have. I think we're very good messengers in that regard.

So if you are someone who will respond to a message about a cruelty case or about a wildlife rescue or a crisis rescue or something like that, I think we're very good at communicating that impact directly because we tell good stories. We show the impact. We do have the statistics to say, you know, the California wildfires impacted this many shelters and this many animals and this is how many we brought to different shelters and rehomed, et cetera.

I think we're good at that. The effort that we're undertaking right now through a team at ASPCA is how do we combine those impacts? This is going to sound simplistic and I don't mean it this way, but what it boils down to largely is how do we communicate to a donor the impact of training veterinarians how to do spay and neuter more safely versus something completely different.

We have our shelter medicine program or, you know, the adoption programs that we do. These are disparate efforts, but they all speak to the same mission. So if we're able to kind of pull those together into a single data source and be able to say the impact of your donation, you choose what you want it to be, but here's how you know that we're reaching the most animals possible.

We're reaching the most professionals possible. So that's the effort that we're undergoing right now is how to measure impact across programs. And I think, I know that we'll pull it off.

We've got a wonderful team that's doing it. And I think it could be a really valuable lesson as well, especially for larger groups that have different programs that may not be able to, you may not be able to compare apples to apples. I'm not sure that we're going to be able to do it in that simple a way, but I think it's going to be able to really help us synthesize what's happening across the organization.

Greg Sobiech

I want to shift gears to another element that connects data and mesh messaging and impact, and that's audiences. The old paradigm is structuring messaging around channels. When I think back to my early days in late nineties, that was often email, and then we added search, and then we added display, video, social.

You can place ads programmatically on podcasts. As much as we want to move away from a channel-centric way of spending media dollars, it is still very channel-centric. And we talk about multi-channel.

I remember years ago hearing about omni-channel, another fancy word that I think we invented. It's hard to get it right. What have you seen charities get right or wrong when it comes to having, let's call it a multi-channel strategy with messaging and messaging around storytelling and messaging around impact threaded throughout?

Doug Krehbel

I love this discussion about channel marketing and especially about multi-channel marketing. I think somewhere in a cave, somewhere alongside the Holy Grail, whenever you

find it, like Indiana Jones, there's going to be a grail and the perfect multi-channel marketing strategy. It doesn't exist.

But you can't get away from channels necessarily. It's just not practical. You can't say we're going to be channel-agnostic and we're just going to spend in whatever direction we want to go because the difference in ROI, the difference in upfront cost, the availability, which we all learned when canvassing suddenly stopped being an option in 2020.

So it's a really interesting kind of way to look at it in terms of multi-channel. I think we're all multi-channel fundraisers now. I mean, with the exception of very small groups, right?

You've got to be in the digital space. You've got to do maybe person-to-person, maybe texting peer-to-peer, whatever else you have to do. Even if you're not doing every channel available to you, you have to look at it from a multi-channel point of view.

And channels can disappear, right? Channels can appear and disappear, so you have to be open to that. I just referred to COVID.

At Greenpeace, you know, we were known for our canvassing program, and then within the space of two weeks, we had to stop. So I think it speaks to keeping multi-channel in mind without thinking that it's a panacea for everything. We were able to pivot.

We were able to shift and put a lot more effort toward our digital program, which took a lot of pain because it wasn't quite as mature as I think we hoped it would be at that time. But I think the key to keep in mind is that we care about the channel a lot more than the donor does. Again, the donor only cares about channels when they feel like they're being pummeled through multiple channels, right, where they're getting text messages, they're getting direct mail, they're getting digital, they're getting phone calls even, if that.

That's when they care about it. But I think the pitfalls that also make donors care about channels in a bad way is when, for example, the messaging is inconsistent, right? And I have this happen all the time, right?

And we've probably done it. I'm sure ASPA's done it. Everybody's done it.

Where you get a mail piece that says, we are focusing on National Shelter Adoption Month right now, and that's where we're putting all of our efforts, and this is why you should give. And then I get an email saying, well, there's this awful thing that happened somewhere else, right? Multi-channel doesn't mean multi-message.

It can't. There has to be some consistency around it. And we talked about personalization.

I don't think you necessarily need to personalize via one channel than the other, but marketing experts will probably disagree, and they will probably say, no, you need to have a different comms program for mail versus something else. And I think another danger is, too, are you looking at the channels where people are expecting you to be? I think that's something very interesting, and again, I think it goes back to constantly examining your results, constantly looking at how your campaigns are doing, who are they resonating with, and just listening.

We can't assume anymore that if somebody gives by direct mail, they're going to keep giving that way. They may pivot, and they may surprise us and say, yeah, you know what? I filled out this form.

I know I'm a monthly sustainer, but I saw this appeal, and something made me click on it and give a one-time donation. And you'd be amazed at how many organizations probably aren't able to track that. They're not able to see that person A is also person A, right?

So that speaks to a good data infrastructure. So from a long way around, right, I think the key to multichannel, again, is having a good data infrastructure. It's not being afraid to ask questions of yourselves.

It's not being afraid to say, you know what? We're not equipped to be asking for donations in this way, right? We want to concentrate on what's doing well and not get bogged down in thinking that we have to be omnichannel, like you said.

I even forget what omnichannel means anymore. I think it's—I'm not quite sure, but I do remember the term pretty well.

Greg Sobiech

I think it's dangerous when we apply a tactic a bit mindlessly to different contexts. If I have a smaller budget, I think multichannel can be exactly the wrong thing to do because I'm spreading myself thin. Maybe I should just be focusing on non-branded search.

Why non-branded? Because it's pretty incremental. Branded is probably something that would have happened anyway.

And maybe multichannel, for me, simply means focusing on non-branded search. On the other hand, if I'm investing \$20 million a year in digital and \$20 million in direct mail, maybe I do need to be in every channel, but I need to test into those channels. And I also can't jump in because it's very easy to just waste money, to burn money while moving too fast.

So for me, multichannel is about the context around the size of my budget and moving at the right speed so that I don't waste money. I don't lose credibility. I build trust around results.

Doug Krehbel

Yeah, and I think also that one of the traps you can fall into with multichannel is thinking too much only about acquisition, right? Right. How did this mail program get us new sustainers and new one-time donors versus this new paid lead gen that we had, that we did digital?

That's important because you need to see the upfront results and you need to see whether you're having an impact on acquisition, but you've got to track that further. And this is another data point that's completely improved in the 10, 12 years that I've been working in this space, is that people are now starting to look at first touch and second touch and where that person ends up 18 months, two years, three years down the road. Maybe your acquisition via direct mail of a particular campaign was not that great, but suddenly you find out that a higher percentage of those folks are now in the major giving portfolio or in planned giving or that sort of thing, right?

You have to be patient. Like you said, if you have the resources to do multi-channel, it doesn't mean you necessarily should, but I think it's something to try as long as you're asking questions along the way. ASPCA is known probably by most folks for our direct response television ads, the Sarah McLachlan ad, the other ones that just pull at the heartstrings because they're heartbreaking stories.

They're good stories and they're worth telling, but surprisingly, DRTV, it's not a major part of our strategy. It's a part of it. It's definitely valuable, but people probably assume that that's where we raise 80% of our money, and that's not true.

So that's kind of a good thing about multi-channel marketing. That gives us an edge in terms of we're telling effective stories through that medium, but we can also do it through other ways, and people will look back and think, oh, yeah, I did see that ad. I didn't call when I saw that on TV, but now I have this mail piece that is consistent with the mission.

It's telling me what impact ASPCA will have on what I saw on TV. Now here's where I enter and give. So again, it has to be thoughtful, going back to your point earlier about small steps.

You know, you shouldn't take the plunge into a new channel and expect in six months it's going to be, you're going to change your forecast, unless something kind of remarkable happens, but I think it takes patience and it takes self-examination from an org.

Greg Sobiech

ASPCA, I think, is experiencing this, and many of our charities have a similar challenge where we don't compete against each other, and yet some or many elements of our mission overlap, and we may be going after the same donor. There is also something happening with data providers, such as Yland, doing a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy because we are kind of going after the same donor pool, it feels like to me, with a very similar message. And maybe to your earlier point, the impact is different and maybe it's actually quite similar.

I don't know. But what is ASPCA doing to not be perceived as just a local, humane society, which I wonder if it sometimes suffers from? How do you work with your team to communicate your unique value proposition your unique impact to donors who may not see the difference?

Doug Krehbel

Yeah, I've told people that I've met since we moved to Baltimore that I work for the ASPCA, and they say, Oh, me too. I volunteer for the SPCA, meaning the Maryland SPCA in Baltimore or anywhere else. And, you know, I do the same thing that I think the ASPCA does, but could probably do a better job of, is to educate and say like, Well, we're not affiliated with them.

We don't have any ownership of them. We have no control. They don't report to us.

But we cooperate with local shelters much more than you would possibly know in terms of providing guidance, in terms of providing training. I think that confusion is always going to be there, and I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. I think the ASPCA would love it if all of our donors, while giving to us, also gave to their local shelters, their local rescues and things like that.

And we encourage that. You know, it's not a zero-sum game. We are competing for dollars in the animal welfare space.

But I think us communicating our impact, and if all the other similar-sized and smaller, larger-sized organizations do the same, we can draw attention to the issue, right? And I think you alluded to this earlier. It's the issue, not the organization.

It's the impact, not the name on the nameplate or on the mail piece, right? So I think that's one thing. I think, again, measuring impact.

What is our impact on local rescue organizations? We know it pretty directly when a crisis comes up, like the North Carolina hurricane, for instance, where we had our volunteers on the ground within a day helping the shelters that couldn't stay open anymore, helping move animals, using our expertise. Same with the wildfires.

That's pretty easy to measure. But how are we measuring when a local shelter comes to us, which they do, to say, we need some help on best practices for training, for being able to move animals safely, for shelter medicine, that sort of thing? So it's a challenge.

But again, I don't think it's a matter of competition within the space. I think it's more of, let's all get messaging about what we particularly do, but in the context of why this subject matters, right? We want to make somebody who is typically given to educational organizations give to us as well, right?

That's the win, is to make everybody want to feel more impactful about what they're doing and to make that known, maybe not just with their dollars, but with their support, right? With petition support, you know, with things like that. So again, for us, I think the confusion a little bit about local versus national, I think there's a bit of, you know, we've, and this has been public, you know, we've received criticism that we don't do enough for local shelters, for instance.

Like how much of the money you give to ASPCA goes to local shelters? That depends on how you look at it, right? Do we write checks to shelters?

No, but we help in so many other ways, but we have to go back and be able to measure that impact and say, okay, here's an answer to your question about what impact we have on your particular community. So an ongoing challenge and one that we keep working on, especially with the program I mentioned earlier about measuring impact, but we'll get closer to that messaging and that communication.

Greg Sobiech

Here's my final question, and this stems from my bold belief that life can be about regrets, and yet I can't stop thinking sometimes about, had I known 20 years ago or 30 years ago what I know today, how differently would I have lived my life? And I know it's such a pointless exercise and I don't dwell on it, but it is something I occasionally think about. And I wonder if you went back to the beginning of your career or a moment in your career, you knew then what you know today.

Maybe it's about personalization, maybe it's about data, maybe it's about storytelling, it's about impact, whatever resonates with you the most. What do you wish that you had known sooner?

Doug Krehbel

The first thing I'll say is I wish I'd have known that being in this space, the nonprofit space, was as rewarding as it has been. So one of my big regrets is that I entered this space 15, 18 years ago, as opposed to, I don't want to date myself, but 35 years ago, right? There's always been that fear of like, well, I'd love to go work for a nonprofit, I'd love to be in the data space, but boy, it doesn't pay as much, it's tougher, it's more demanding, things like that.

Anyone listening that's having that sort of doubt, jump in. We need, on whatever side of the aisle, whatever sort of cause that you believe in, we need more people to be coming to the nonprofit space. I've seen so much amazing talent on the teams that I've been with.

We just need more. And so I will say that that is one of the regrets, that I did not enter this space sooner. The other one is less of a regret, but it's more something that I wish I'd been advocating for more early on, which is a higher regard for kind of data governance, right?

And we haven't talked about that too much as yet, but in the nonprofit space, there is such pressure, again, to not leave money on the table. How can we know more about our donors? Where can we find out more about them?

To me, there's a very fine line between that and kind of an invasion of privacy, right? There's famous examples of when companies have gone too far in terms of trying to personalize. There was an advertisement that Target sent to a young teenage girl because they'd have information about her buying history that indicated that she might be expecting a child.

And there was incredibly bad fallout from that. And that's a really extreme example. I'm a drum beater on data governance and respect for data much more now than I ever was when I started out.

And that's one thing I wish I'd have been more pressing on beforehand, because you do see some pretty questionable things that happen in any space, but even in the nonprofit space, thinking that it's buoyed by good intentions, right? You know, hey, if we only knew this much about a donor, we could get them to give more money. They'll feel better about themselves.

It's a win-win. So that's one thing I think, and again, maybe I'm using that as a lesson that I want to push, is that don't forget the fact that we have to meet supporters where they are and only where they are, right? They'll tell us what they want us to know about them.

They'll tell us what they care about. And use that as kind of a governing principle a lot more than I think certainly is done in the private sector, but even more than I think we could be doing more in the nonprofit space to respect that.

Greg Sobiech

Well, thank you for today's meeting. I honestly wish that this was a three-hour format. I really mean it, because there are so many things I wanted to ask you about that maybe we can do in person over lunch or dinner one of these days this summer.

Happy to. I would love that.

Doug Krehbel

Happy to.

Greg Sobiech

Sure. And this was Doug Krehbel, Senior Director, Data Strategy and Operations, ASPCA.

Doug, thank you for your time.

Doug Krehbel

My pleasure, Greg. Great talking to you. 🎵