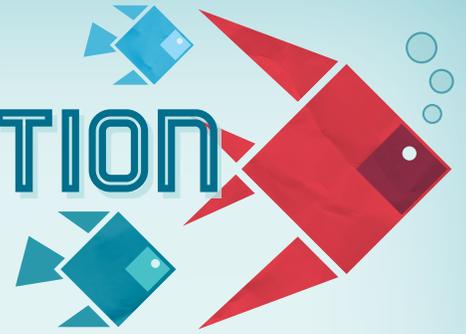


DRIVING PARTICIPATION

with Beth Brodovsky



SESSION 069

BECOME THE PLACE YOUR COMMUNITY WANTS TO BE WITH AMY SAMPLE WARD

Beth: Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. I am here today with Amy Sample Ward. Amy, as many of you must know, is the CEO of NTEN, the nonprofit technology network. Thank you so much for joining me today, Amy.

Amy: Thanks, Beth! I'm excited to get to talk to you.

Beth: I have been to your conference and I can't even tell you how many people that I run into that tell me "If you have one batch of money, one thing that you can do this year, the NTC conference is the one to go to." So you've done such amazing things with the organization and are such a resource for all of us. I just so appreciate the work that you and your organization do.

Amy: Thank you so much! That is incredible to hear. I really appreciate it.

Beth: It's just fun on top of it.

Amy: We try and keep it fun.

Beth: Right, exactly. The geek games, you're not really going to see that everywhere.

Amy: It's true. I mean this last year, Segway races, I don't think a lot of conferences offer that.

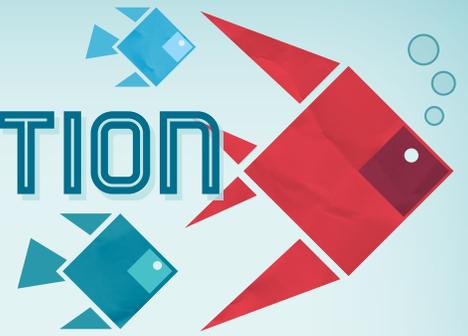
Beth: Is that what you had? Oh my gosh! That's so funny! I am definitely going to be out there in San Jose and for everyone that's listening, when's the conference? It's in March, right? What's the date of the conference?

Amy: March 23-25 in San Jose.

Beth: It's going to be beautiful. That's nothing like a California sky in March.

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Amy: Exactly. I think for a lot of us, wherever else in the US where we're coming from, it will feel nice to go to California.

Beth: You're such an interesting person to talk to because you are at the cross section of two of the worlds of people that I talk to. You are the CEO of an association, which is a membership organization.

Amy: Not an association.

Beth: Exactly, not an association, but you're a member-driven membership organization, and you also, the people that you work with that you serve that are in your community are nonprofits. We kind of work with both types of things and talk to those people. How did you end up standing there at this crossroads working with these people?

Amy: Well, I'm sure that there is much more interesting psychological answers to that question, but really I've only ever worked in the nonprofit sector. I don't have a kind of transformational story of "I started out doing this one job in this big corporation and I saw the light and I went to the nonprofit sector." I've always worked in the nonprofit sector and I've also always worked in that intersection of how you manage community engagement, how you manage actual change, creating change locally or globally through technology and how do we bring that together organizationally? How do we support the communities using technology? I think for me, like from my experience, it makes a lot of sense to work and NTEN where that's what we talk about all day because that's also the position, whether that was my title and the organization knew that's what I needed to do for my job or it was not really called out. Years ago where we were thinking about it in those terms, it's always been the meat of my work.

Beth: It's so interesting. One of the things my dad always says is when he was growing up job titles were doctor, lawyer, teacher, nurse. One word and then in my generation as I was growing up we got two words. Graphic designer or physical therapist, and now we're living in this world of really interesting and deep and complex things that often come with a complex job title. When you were coming up through school and education, how did you know that this was a job, that this thing that you're interested in was something you could do? How did you find it?

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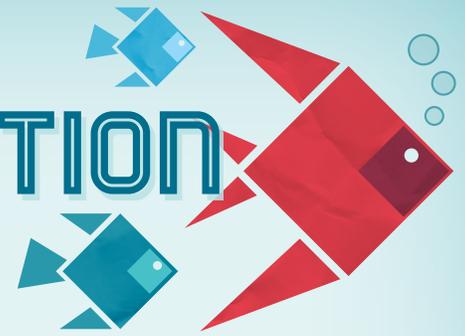
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Amy: I didn't know that it was. I just did the work that I thought I knew how to do. So let me explain. I recognize that doesn't really mean anything. So my first kind of real job, not just a summer job or something, was with an organization out in Indiana where I went to college and it was an organization that's not nonprofit that served a three county area, including the city where I went to school and lived, and it provided legal services, safe shelter, social services for victims of domestic violence and their children. I was there on the communications team and that meant creating the communications and marketing materials to launch the annual campaign and communicating with volunteers and all those different pieces that you can imagine for an organization like that are actually external because a lot of the communication with clients is not public and in doing that, again like I just did the work that I thought I should be doing. Oh, we should communicate about this to our supporters? Well, volunteers physically arrive on site. Why should I email them if they come on site? I'm going to make a nice newsletter that they can take with them and for people who we never see, those are the people I'm going to email with very different content and I didn't really think anything of that. I just thought "My job is to have successful communication, so I'm going to do what I can," and then when I transitioned out, I graduated from college and wanted to move back to Oregon and I'm kind of transitioning all of my work to someone new and they said "What do you mean, volunteers get a different newsletter. Why? How did you come up with different things to say? Why is it printed? How do I do this?" and that's when I really realized that there's a whole world of how to be effective in this work that people who aren't thinking about technology aren't even considering as a part of how to do their job day to day, let alone how to create a larger strategy to engage their communities. I mean I have the same, so communications there was only part of my job. The other part was managing a teen outreach program. So at that time it meant, Facebook had just launched a couple months in to like that first group of schools and that was a great place to organize these college-aged volunteers who were going to go do these presentations and middle or high schools and again, when I left they said "What do you mean, there's a thing called Facebook that is where people are volunteers?" Like how is that a thing. What is that sentence. I don't understand. And so after that I really focused on making sure both in my own day to day and strategic work alike, but also all of my colleagues understood that there were technologies that could make our work faster or easier or sometimes not easier, but actually able to give us more information in the end. That led me through all different organizations, but always working at that technology to

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work for us kind of place.

Beth: Now you're so lucky that you seemed to have found this perfect home that brings all of those interests and those thing together.

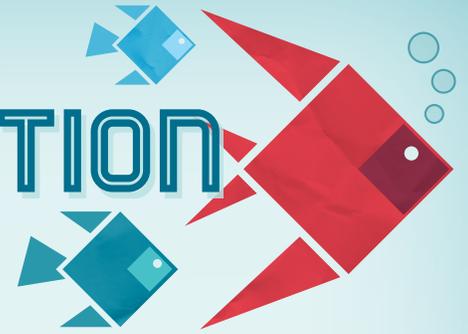
Amy: Yeah, I think I have a pretty typical story for the NTEN community. I was an NTEN member and felt like "Oh, there's this community of people that don't think I'm crazy when I say actually we should be able to segment our list in that way," or "Our website actually should be able to do this." It feels like, I mean, I love my job. I love working at NTEN but I also, I have had so much value and benefit over the years just by being in the NTEN community regardless of where I worked because it's such a sharing open community of people that know even if every community member doesn't know kind of the technical workings of everything, what people do know is that technology should be working for us. It should be helping us make real change and I think that focus on knowing that we should have a tool that helps us do this is kind of what helps drive the technology forward and if everyone thought "Well I've got everything I need, don't need anything else," we wouldn't really be creating these new tools or improving the ones we have.

Beth: Right, and it's so important that something like this exists because the technology is always changing and growing. In the work that you're doing and you're at the forefront of technology for organizations that are not always characterized by being at the forefront of technology, you're also a membership organization that does not define themselves as an association. One of the things that I see and I hear from the actual associations and consultants that work with associations is that they're all struggling with membership and struggling with involvement and from what I've seen with you guys, you're not. I mean, maybe you think you are, but you're doing amazing things. You've got this real vibe going and people are active and talking and showing up at stuff in ways that other membership organizations that are wrapped around a job title or an area of professional proficiency are struggling with. I'd love to know, I'm sure everyone would love to know how the heck are you guys doing it? What do you think is creating that magic and what do you think is making people want so much to engage with and participate with the work that you're doing?

Amy: I mean thank you for the pretty implied compliment. I appreciate that.

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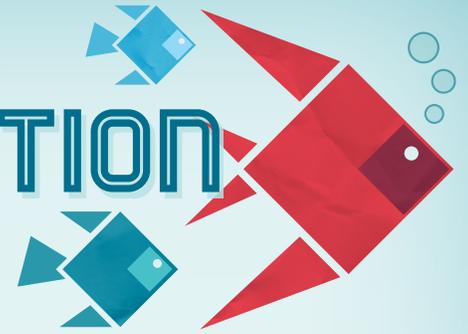


Beth: Absolutely. It's more than implied.

Amy: Yeah, I think NTEN, we are a 501c3 nonprofit organization and we take that very seriously. Our mission is very broad, that all nonprofits will use technology to effectively meet their mission, all nonprofits. The idea that we would then say "Well, we're going to be an association," that would then mean to calculate our impact to try to measure if we're meeting our mission. It would be "Well, we don't have every nonprofit in the world as a paid member, so I guess we're not meeting our mission," and it's unrealistic to think that an association model would be able to reach the kind of mission that we have and so for us being a c3 is important, we do have membership and it works kind of in two ways. One, of course, is just the math. You know that's earned revenue, but it's not a huge amount. I mean we try to keep membership fees as low as we possibly can because we don't want that to be a barrier to someone in an organization that's really small and doesn't have a ton of financial capacity to pay for memberships to stop them from participating, but the other part of membership is that it does serve as an indicator for us that people get what we're saying, that we are creating value. We see a bunch of people join and never renew or people stop joining. That tells us that we're doing something wrong and we need to change what we do, so for us, it's a really easy indicator to look to that we're doing good. I think what's different too for us because everything is accessible, it might mean that if you're a member your registration to the NTC for example is discounted or to a webinar or something like that, but so much of the content and the community programs that we run do not require membership. They are all publicly available and I think it helps us keep a focus on the community instead of feeling like, OK, all that matters is that we're getting this membership revenue or the exact number of registrants for the conference, etc., if we can keep a focus on creating the very best value in this community and supporting community members having the opportunities that they want, being able to meet other professionals that have the same job as them and they are the only one in their organization so they really want to find someone that they can talk to or helping connect community members to the people who create that database that they use so they feel like they can really shape the future priorities of development, whatever that is, that's where we want to spend out time, not feeling like we're just tied to watching that membership revenue come in.

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Beth: I feel like you really do live that and it really does show. It's like the complete opposite of some models. I know for me, I've done many programs both from free webinars to going to the conference and there's not like a punitive difference in the cost for a member versus a nonmember, so when you go to participate and engage in the content, I know I've always felt that this is so great and so much of it is given away and so much of it is terrific. When I decided to join as a member it was more like I wanted to give you guys a gift back for all that I've gotten out of it versus feeling like membership was a gateway in order for me to get anything of value at all.

Amy: Totally! That is what we hear all the time and it's very common for people to join as an organization and not pay online, but print out their invoice and mail it in.

Beth: Wow! People do that? To a technology organization? I would be embarrassed!

Amy: Membership or even a webinar or a conference registration invoice paid in the mail. We get multiple a day. At peak times of the year we're getting 100 checks in the mail a day. People like the invoice process just the small little tip. People will do that and we'll open it up and they will have paid for their membership and then added a donation on top because they felt just exactly like what you're saying that their membership of course was kind of a functional thing. We want to have the membership, etc., and make sure our staff are logging into resources, but also it's too low. We feel that we get more value than this so we want to give you more than what you're asking for a membership and we love of course we love donations, but we love the idea that people feel that there is enough value that they want to set their own price that's higher on it.

Beth: I think it's so interesting that strategically as an organization because it's not the thing that's keeping your lights on, that you're using that as a barometer for how well you're doing in meeting people's needs.

Amy: What we've found too, we have an annual community survey. We have lots of surveys, but we have one specifically that is looking at people that have a paid membership for the past year and people who don't and what programs or pieces of content, what did they do during the year and how did they feel about it and how could we improve it and a lot of times, there are multiple kind of programs where the content area is in the top five for paid members

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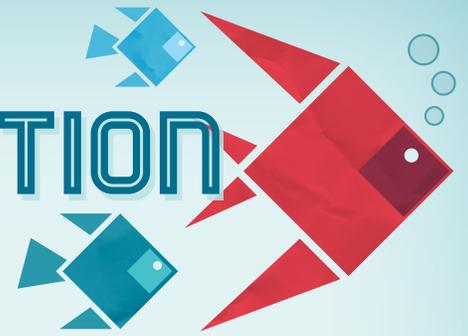
that are not members only so people are saying the thing I get the most value out of as an NTEN member is “x,” but it’s something that’s not exclusive to members. It’s something that they don’t even get a discount on, but they still associate it with their membership and what that’s helped us do in seeing where people are saying this is a huge value to me as a member, but it has nothing to do with being a member, those are opportunities in our opinion to say how do we reflect members in this piece of content or in this program so they feel like even though it wasn’t restricted to members only to access, they still see that it is member driven. They see themselves or they see someone they know being highlighted in that content or program, etc., instead of I think I’m more of a business approach like “Oh people find value in this? Let’s monetize this. Let’s make this a paid for piece of content.” Instead say “Great, let’s make sure you love it even more because the more you do feel like you have consistent value in the community, the more you really will renew,” or you will register. So instead of trying like to tackle revenue, tackle retention by value.

Beth: Right, and that’s a perfect lead-in to the main thing we want to talk about today is something people really struggle with. How do you know what’s appropriate for your community and you obviously use the survey a lot as one of the things that you do and one of the things that I hear from people all the time is “Well, I can’t ask my members or community this because we just surveyed them three years ago.” Can you speak a little bit about the ways that you very directly reach out and the frequency and how people respond to that?

Amy: Sure. I think one reminder to share is that if humans have anything, it’s opinions, and if they would like to do anything, it’s share those opinions with others. So remember that you are providing a gift, you’re providing an avenue for your members’ opinions to be shared, but what’s important is that you are listening to those opinions. I think you could survey people every single day or once every ten years, but if they see that what you tell them has no impact, they don’t care anymore. It’s not about the frequency as much as it is that you’re going to take action because of what you heard and that’s something that we try and make very clear so when, for example, at the end of the conference we have two types of surveys. One is on every single session so if you attended, Beth you’re a speaker and if I go to your session, you’re going to get the evaluations specific to your session, which is valuable as a speaker.

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Beth: Super valuable as a speaker.

Amy: We also do that for the conference overall so the things that wouldn't be a session, did you like lunch? Was the dessert okay? Did you like the reception? All of those other pieces.

Beth: And the number one thing, is the room too cold?

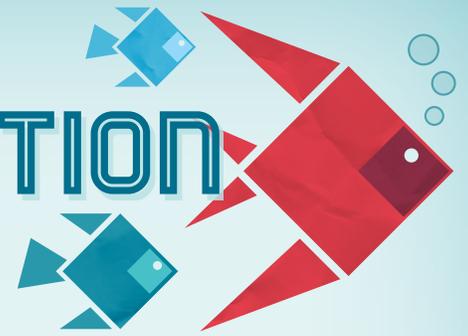
Amy: Oh my gosh! People, you all know, you cannot control a convention center's heating and cooling instantaneously. Whatever! So all of those kind of extra pieces and it informs a lot of what we do, but that could be super secretive. People could fill out a survey and have no idea that it means anything so when we announce the next year's conference, our registration opens. We have blog posts leading up to the conference where we say "Get ready. This year at the conference, we're going to do this new thing during lunch," and we're doing it because last year's survey said," and this is what we heard in those quotes and make people feel like "Whoa, what I said has directly changed the shape of this conference that I liked and now I really love. I am guiding this." It doesn't matter that we get five or thousands of survey responses, but that we can make explicit "We are listening to you and we have taken action because of what you said." I think that's what buys people in to NTEN surveys.

Beth: That's really key. I think not just you're using the content, but you're telling people that you're using what they said because even if somebody didn't respond to that survey themselves, when they see that you're responding based on input, it definitely colors their opinion and makes them think about who you are as an organization and what you're willing to do for your members, but it also makes people think 'well maybe next year, I will respond because clearly it does make a difference'.

Amy: Exactly and I think, so for this year's NTC, so back in March, we had just over 2,000 attendees and I think we had about 65 percent or more of attendees complete the survey for the conference. That's not counting how many people filled out the survey about the session that they went to because I don't think it's just because somehow we are really good at designing surveys. I mean it's just a survey. What I think it is is they know we really will use what they say to make the conference better every year. Nothing is set in stone. Nothing is sacred and perfect and can't be changed if that's what the community wants.

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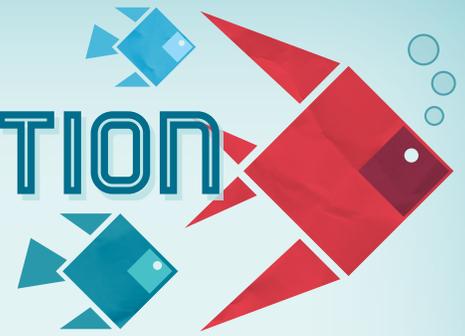


Beth: Right and I think that is really, really key for them to see that and experience it, it makes such a huge difference and people do then start to want to participate and they probably want to see what you're going to change. What is it they say? The thing is not the thing. It's like of course the content and feedback that you get back in the survey is valuable, but it's almost as much valuable that you're doing it and demonstrating it and doing it and demonstrating it and people get to see who you are as an organization through your actions, not just through, I mean everybody sends a survey. We've all seen that a thousand times, but what makes it different is the visible impact of that. So that's a really active way to go out and ask people what they want and get them to tell you and get them to give feedback. Are there other ways, more passive ways or different ways that you are able to interpret what people want when they're not so willing to tell you?

Amy: Yeah, I think that kind of more passive input is something that at NTEN we care a lot about and talk about all the time and think about and I think from working with organizations of all different sizes and kinds, it's not because NTEN is a certain size that we have a certain sophistication about it. I think I've seen a completely volunteer organization that doesn't have an operating budget all the way up to international massive organizations that do this well and do this poor and that is recognizing that your system should be set up in a way that of course meet the kind of transaction or interaction needs of your users or community members or whatever, but also that then give you the information to know what's going on. I think there are a lot of times that people are like we need people to register for a conference so we're going to use this event system that lets them get their tickets and we need to message people so we're going to use this other system that messages people and even if you have different systems, aggregating that data in a certain or a central database can tell you so much more. I mean it's very interesting to know if you have 50 percent of your conference that is new versus 20 percent of your conference that's new, but if all that you're looking at, well we have this many registrations, you know so little to start planning from that and I think places just to make it more clear I think a lot of organizations have a sign up on their website where you can sign up to join the newsletter or updates or whatever and it's one thing. We just want your email and we will send you the one thing we create, but other than tell you much so instead having in your database some fields that are private just internally, you know that specific user can't see them, but say how they came to you. Are these ten people all folks

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people who said they all wanted to sign up at your off line events? You should have a field where you're tracking that so later you could say "Gosh, everybody that comes to our events and they use that sign in sheet and say I want to sign up," and we put them in the database, they never register for another event. Something's going on there versus "Well, we just have a bunch of people, and sometimes people register." You don't see how did those people originally come to you and maybe they're not getting what they want back.

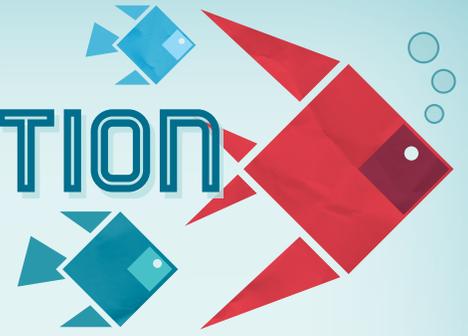
Beth: Yeah, absolutely. It's important to pay attention to which measures you should just notice and take note of and which measures you should actually act on.

Amy: Right, exactly. Even letting, so that's kind of an example of an internal, like a hidden data point where you're tracking where people came from, but also providing your community members with ways that they can tell you things, again not in the form of a survey or something like that, but when they sign up and instead of just saying "Here's my email. I want the newsletter," to be able to say "I don't want the newsletter, but I do want action alerts," or "I do want to know when there's an event." I don't care about actions or what you consider to be news, but I really love events and I love meeting people and that's what I'm on your email list for. So instead of saying "Great, here's this one field. Go ahead and give us your email," let people say what content they want from you and then if you start to see, you don't have to totally track it incredibly, intensely every day, but if you start to notice over time no one is actually signing up for the newsletter option, they're only signing up for event announcements or something, that should tell you either your newsletter isn't right or the idea of a newsletter isn't appealing to the kind of people who are interested in your work so maybe this is an opportunity to rethink the content you send via email.

Beth: Absolutely. That reminds me a lot, I had Shannon Doolittle who focuses on storytelling nonprofits and a lot on member retention in the fundraising world on last year and she was phenomenal and she was saying a lot. She was saying she had a couple of tricks that help people figure out how many people are you retaining and that retention rate is so much more important than the total because if really you're looking at a 25 percent retention rate, you're actually looking at a 75 percent walk away rate.

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Amy: Right! I think what, it's this issue that happens all the time in nonprofits. We get fixated on the metrics and the goals being the same thing. The idea that a goal would be how many subscribers we have, that's silly to me because your goal should be the value, the action that you're driving. You might measure that by how many subscribers you have or whatever, but the metric is not the goal a) and b) no one is giving out awards for having the largest list. You don't just magically get an award because you kept 1,000 email addresses on your list for ten years that are dead email addresses. You don't get an award for that. You're actually paying for people

Beth: I was going to say you're paying for people. It's a very expensive award. We did that with a client that had, they're a four-person nonprofit that had a 46,000 name email address and we were getting ready to do a print, direct mail fundraising campaign. It was a nightmare and the first thing I had them do is go in and look and see how many people gave in the last three years and that got the list down to 4,600. It literally cut the list down to 10 percent of the total list and they were terrified, but we ended up mailing just to the 4,600 people and they increased the amount of money that they earned by 20 percent because we were able to write an email, we were able to write the direct mail to the people that actually cared and did something as opposed to trying to make everyone on the list happy.

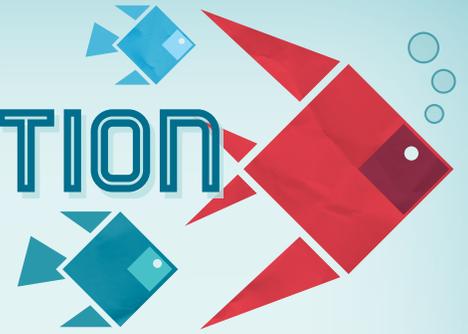
Amy: Right, exactly. You know so much more about those people when you're not thinking "How do I frame this to 46,000 people?" but if you know it's 4,600 and you can even specifically say, like segment that further and say you do three mailers, people who gave in the last year, the last two years, the last three and be able to say "We know you gave three years ago, Beth." Oh my gosh! I totally did give three years ago. They got me. Make it so much more real, versus "Hey it's us, the organization that always mails you and asks for money, but doesn't know who you are."

Beth: Exactly, and you're thinking I'm not that interested and people run around chasing everyone and everything and then it doesn't work out so well.

Amy: Yeah, especially when you're paying for it, especially when it's direct mail and I mean email is very cheap. Maybe you're paying a penny an email or something.

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Beth: But it still costs money to have names on the list.

Amy: But it's 46,000 versus 4,600.

Beth: Exactly, and then you're constantly and there's also that opportunity cost so while technically those email names may not cost that much even on that email list, if you're writing your mailed letter in a way that's living in the belief that you're eventually going to scoop those people up and get them to do what you want them to do, clearly this organization showed it was costing them money just to do that.

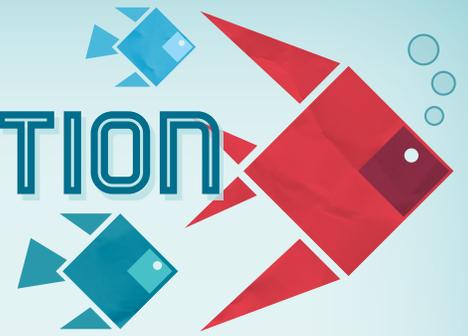
Amy: Exactly, and I think that's something we try to do as often as possible is reference how or why someone is getting a communication. You're getting this message because you registered and attended last year's conference and we had such a great time with you and we want to make sure you register next year, versus we know you've never been to the NTC before, but we want to make sure you know about it. Here's what the conference is like, here's what you can get out of it instead of a message kind of blindly to everyone on the NTEN list. Oh, registration is open. BTDubS, go ahead and click through. Who wants that email?

Beth: Right, it's kind of like the difference between you pick up the phone and somebody is like "Hi, my name is Bob," and instantly you're like the alert, the warning sign goes on and then the next thing Bob says is "I know your mother and she suggested that I call." It's like the whole conversation changes. All of a sudden the guards go down, the doors open and you're like "Bob, what do you have to say?" and you listen in a different way as if you were still on that high alert of how can I say no and get off the phone as fast as possible. It's funny that now we're in email and social. The feelings are the same. The technology is just different.

Amy: Exactly, but I think there's functional things that are different. You know, writing a tweet versus an email versus a printed letter, but the larger best practices of being as personal as you can without being creepy and making the action clear and streamlined and easy to take for the reader, it doesn't matter if it's a 140 character tweet or a three-page direct mail letter. If you aren't doing those things, it will not be successful in any medium and that's kind of the core of engaging a community, whether they're paid level membership community or it's people that all live in the same neighborhood. What a community wants is to know that they

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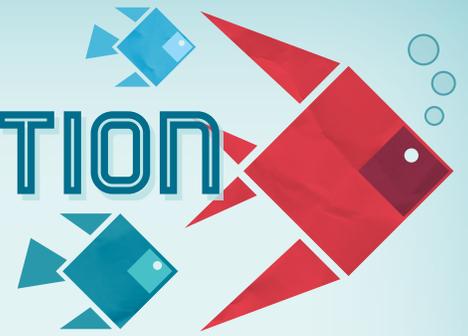


are taking the action you wanted them to take. No community members like to receive an email that says "Please donate to us, but also can you share the campaign and if you click here you can invite five friends." What is of most value? Should I invite five friends to share this? I don't understand what to do and I think when it comes to knowing your community, again whether it's your physical neighborhood or kind of a larger community online or a paid, you know behind a paid wall private association specific community. What I think a lot of organizers or organizations forget is that those people that are on the list, those people that opted in and said "Here's my email," have said "I get it. I know what you do. I'm buying in. I totally support the mission," and then we waste all of these communications being super generic in trying to resell people on what we do. They know what we do. That is why they signed up for all of our alerts. Give them something to do towards this mission and that will make people feel so much more interested in opening your email or reading your letter because they know this is the organization where I'm an active part of making this change I care about versus here's an organization that emails me once a quarter with a strange confounding message about five things to do.

Beth: I think a lot of that comes from organizational fear, which really stems from not being willing to focus on who you really want and who you really are and going out and looking for those people and getting the perfect people into your organization so that when you put that message back out there, they hear it and they want it and you don't feel the need to sort of say a little bit to everything and capture everybody's interest all in one place. I saw this one example that I actually use in a talk that I do on the value of design and how design both creates an impression and also the purpose of design is to guide you to the information that you need, and this organization had a hideous, hideous website that they redesigned and it was beautiful and open and white and it had lovely photography and as a graphic designer myself, it was visually a designer's dream, and you click off of the beautiful white home page and go to the donation page, which starts out lovely and then four screens of scrolling later, they have asked you to give money, to be a member, to volunteer, to do like a whole bunch of other things and I'm scrolling down and it's like "If you don't like this, then you can do this," and "How about this?" It was like the traveling salesman showed up at your door and it's like the Ginsu knife of donation pages and at the very bottom of the donation were two huge black buttons that were identical to each other, one on top of the other and the top one

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said “Donate Now” and the very last thing on the bottom of the page that looked exactly like the “Donate Now” button was “Friend us on Facebook” or “Become a fan on Facebook.” So at the end of this long page where I’ve given you 20 different things that you wanted to do, all the way at the end, I’m not exhausted, but I made it to the end and it’s like “donate” or “become a fan on Facebook” or whatever, they’re equal to us. It doesn’t matter.

Amy: Exactly. We don’t need your \$50 if you’re going to give us a like.

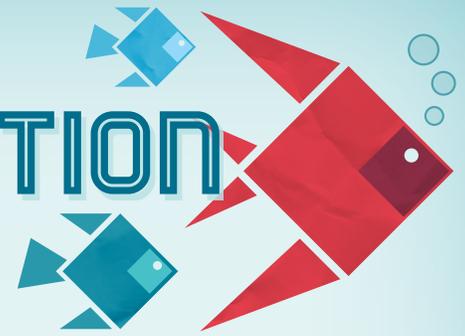
Beth: Exactly. But that’s so common because we’ve all been trained to be like let’s give people options. Let’s give them everything as opposed to just guiding people.

Amy: Yeah, exactly. I think that’s what’s missing. You’re losing the real experience by trying to give people so many options, even in a restaurant I say I want to have the soup and then I want to have a salad course and then I want to have a main meal and then I want to have dessert. The restaurant doesn’t bring it all to you at once because then you would just sit there with your fork and feel like “Oh my gosh, I’m going to eat so much food right now.” Instead, they say “Here’s your soup. Are you all done with your soup? Here’s your salad.” It’s the same kind of experience we want as a community member, the user side of that relationship, but again the organization feels like “Oh my gosh, don’t worry. We have so much food here you can have anything on the menu you want. We can bring it all to the table right now,” versus “Great, what we really want is for you to donate. Thank you for donating. Now what we would love is for you to share about how you’re excited that you donated on Facebook. Thanks for doing that. Now here’s an email that says why don’t you invite another friend to join us in this membership pledge,” or whatever it is. You’ve got to pace it out the same way you would a meal or a party or any other kind of piece of life.

Beth: Absolutely. I’ll also put a link in the show notes to a great book on this concept. I went to a really terrific AMA presentation and heard the author speak. The book is called “The Paradox of Choice,” by Barry Schwartz, and if people haven’t read it, it’s a really great and interesting book about how when given too many different things to choose from, people get paralyzed and can’t make any decision, and if you’ve ever gone shopping with my mother, you would absolutely have experienced this. I think this guy must have gone shopping with

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my mother. People always want to say I want to give them so many choices and what usually ends up happening is people just end up closing the browser window because they can't deal with it right now. It's not even a time thing, like I don't have time to read it all. It's more than when equal things are given to your brain to input, you can't figure out what to do. I talk a lot about when you go to Vegas. It's probably like the boring brick building with the carved wooden sign that you're going to notice because in Vegas, even the McDonalds is like lit up in neon letters and when every single thing is using that same style, that same language to communicate who they are, all of Vegas just turns into this one equal blur and I would bet the guy that does the opposite is the one you notice.

Amy: Right. If everything is flashy and everything is act now, then nothing is act now.

Beth: Right. It's like what we'll say in a donation letter or in anything because when people come to our firm they say "I want this to be red and all caps and bold and italic and underlined," or they'll do any combination of those things throughout something and there's so many little pieces to look at that it starts to break down the concept of dominance, sub-dominance, subordinate that gets people to be able to level things in their own heads and make decisions. So one of the interesting things that I want to talk about with you before we finish up is the interesting way that you engage with your community, not all just your members, but your whole community through building the content for your conference because one of the many, many wonderful things that you do that you're known for is the large NTC conference that you do once a year and you've just completed the voting process that you have for having people put in session ideas and then put them up there for your community to evaluate and weigh in on. I speak at a lot of conferences and I've been to a lot of conferences. Your process is pretty unique. Can you talk a little about what you do, why you do it that way and how it's defined to really be customized for your particular member?

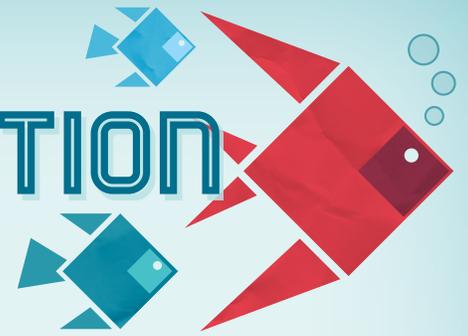
Amy: Sure. I think, so the NTC just to make sure we're not using jargon, is Nonprofit Technology Conference.

Beth: Thank you. That is important.

Amy: That is the conference we put on each spring. That's the one we mentioned earlier that

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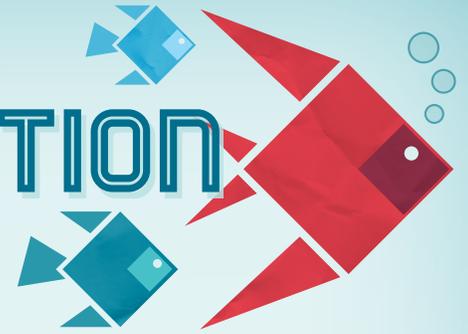
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will be in San Jose and the process for the content, I can talk to the logistical process, but I also want to share a couple pieces up front about kind of why we have these conferences. So first, the 12 NTEN staff are not the attendees of the conference. I mean, we are there putting the conference on, but if we tried to create the conference agenda, the 12 of us, it would be the things the 12 of us are interested in, but this is a conference with 2,000+ attendees. The idea that the 12 of us somehow would be able to capture all of the ideas and interests of 2,000 people is super overwhelming, but also really unrealistic and at the end of the day, we're only putting the conference on because the community wants to have a convenient place to learn and a place to connect so we want them to create what they want in that experience. We've committed to doing the leg work of getting the venue and setting it up and ordering the food and making sure the schedule works, but we want the community to know that they're coming to learn about what they want to learn about or hear from the people they want to hear from and that requires the community be deeply involved in the process. So we have a submission conference session submission period where anyone, it doesn't matter if you're a member or not, can submit session ideas and what's important to us is that people can both submit a session that they want to present. So maybe I put in there I have a session idea about community engagement, and I'm going to co-present with Beth and we're going to talk about all these great strategies, but also I can put in there a topic that I want to learn about, a topic I know I need to sit in that session and have somebody that knows more than me teach me about this topic because it's going on in my organization and I don't know about, maybe your organization is doing a website design and you really want to hear from somebody who has already gone through that process. So we allow both I want to present and I want to attend a session like this. So folks all across the community submit sessions and to support that of course we promote it. If you're on the email list and we put it on the blog, but we also ask partner organizations to let their communities know. I think it's important to have the session submissions coming in from people who aren't long time NTEN community members where maybe they're bring a fresh perspective or they're bringing something that a lot of members don't normally talk about or experience so we reach out to other organizations to promote it and then we also put on a webinar while submissions are open for people who have never presented at a conference, let alone submitted a session concept to walk them through what makes a good submission, that it's totally safe and OK if people support them and everything will be fine and just answer questions for people

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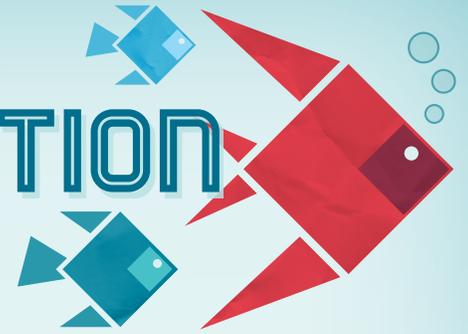


who never come to the conference, like I said never presented anywhere so that again it's not just the usual suspects. It's not just people who always get to present that feel like they can be part of the process. Once all the sessions are submitted and that deadline comes, we then open all those sessions up for community voting and voting is an up or down, yes, more points to this one or no, I don't want this one on the agenda and almost exclusively those down votes are from people going through all the sessions and voting and finding this idea has been in here three times. This is the one of the three I think is strongest and the other two on the same topic I don't think should be the one. So it's not necessarily like a big boo, it's more trying to filter similar concepts, but also people can comment. So we see people commenting "Hey, I really like this session. I was going to submit one on the same topic. Could I be your co-presenter?" so people are also engaging in that way. We don't, on principle, we don't allow sessions to have one speaker because sure the NTC has 2,000 attendees, but the NTEN community is about 70,000 people so the idea that there could be a topic that there's only one voice out of 70,000 not counting like the rest of the world to speak on that topic is unrealistic and we don't want to reinforce that only this person has a perspective, so we require that there is a minimum of two presenters. That does not mean all of the sessions are a panel and you just sit up there and answer questions, but it means two or three people are actually collaborating on those slides and saying "I'm going to cover this section," and "I'm going to maybe lead a discussion," and "I want to bring in this case study," so they're coming together with different organizations, different backgrounds, different ideas and sometimes they disagree on the strategy that they're talking about, which is really great and we get really positive evaluations on those sessions because attendees were able to hear two totally different perspectives, opposing views and get to figure out kind of where they fall on that strategy. So anyway, then everybody can vote and again that's community wide. You don't have to be a member to vote and then there's a steering committee each year for the conference, different people each year and then the steering committee gets to vote on all of those sessions and then staff also get to vote on those sessions so that all of those different three waves of scores get compiled and that's how we select the agenda, the sessions that end up on the agenda.

Beth: Interesting. It's so funny. I've never really heard the whole process before, but it's very different than other people's and one of the things I think is interesting about it is it is a very

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collaborative and community-based thing, which is very mission-focused from you, but it's also very technological. What I really responded to and why I initially reached out to you was how you're taking the two sides of where you demonstrate value for your audience and putting them together so that the whole experience of building this conference feels very true to who you are and who the members are.

Amy: We'll get comments from organizations that have a conference or kind of an event as some sort of the programming that they deliver and they have you know kind of a fear or anxiety around using a model because they say, I guess the NTEN can be used just as really small and safe and you know it's a good group of people and people aren't putting like bad sessions in. Oh, there's tons of bad sessions. That's why they don't get voted on, but also it's actually I think in that other model where you think "I just need to make sure we've decided all the sessions because we know what's best on this topic," and then folks come and say "Gosh, I really don't like this session. This session doesn't meet my needs at all." If that happens at the NTC, it's really easy to respond with "Great, a number of community members voted for this session. If it's not working for you, make sure you participate next year in picking the agenda that really does work for you."

Beth: That's beautiful. That's right. I mean, really, you can say "We will address this as facilitators," but it probably also helps you not take things personally.

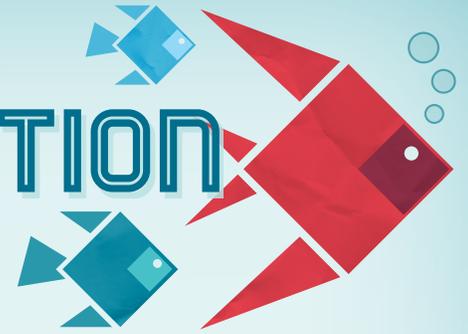
Amy: Totally! I mean we're all staff are voting just like community members and steering committee and we're all trying to figure out what's the best kind of collection of topics. That doesn't mean every session is going to appeal to everyone. At the NTC because it's a large enough conference, we have about 17 concurrent sessions each breakout block.

Beth: I know, it kills me!

Amy: There's plenty of choice. You don't like the one session you're in, go to one of the other 16 and if you don't like that either, we reserved space in the agenda throughout the conference that once you get onsite if there's still something not on the agenda you want to talk about, you can sign up for one of those free spaces and say "I don't like any of these 17 sessions. I propose that in the extra room, I'm going to put on this conversation and people

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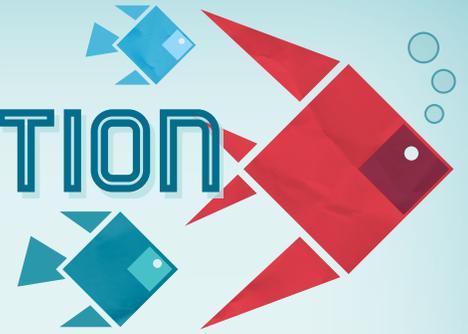
that want to talk to me can come do so,” so that again if you don’t like what’s here, we’re here to make sure you can make that happen, but we’re not going to pretend to know that ahead of time.

Beth: And you can just tell in the way people respond to the conference, I mean it’s so democratic. It’s really like a conference of the people and by the people and you know, but it’s more structured and organized than an unconference. That’s a long way to fly to go to an unconference and have it be a complete crap shoot of moods or is there going to be anything there that I’m going to want, but there’s a lot of sessions, but also you know it gets you out of what happens at a lot of other conferences with other organizations that I’ve been to. It starts to feel pretty clear over the years who their friends are and it’s like no shocker that she got on the agenda to speak, or jeez, I spent all this money to come back to this conference, and it’s just like the same people. I’ve heard from them before. If people really want to hear from the same people year after year, they tell you and they show up. If they don’t or they’re not getting any value out of it, they probably end up moving on. It’s fascinating. So I wanted a chance to bring some of these things that you’re doing out to the nonprofit community because many nonprofits run conferences, run programs, do lots of educational sessions and some of the ways that you’ve done it have really blended the member community with your organization and made them feel less separate and really created something that people clearly love and support and come back to year after year. I wanted to share that with everyone. Thank you so much for talking a little bit about why you do what you do as opposed to how you do what you do because they love they they love the tactic. I love to know the nuts and bolts tactics. Can you tell us is there a specific technology or things that you use to help make this happen?

Amy: Yeah, I guess the caveat or the reminder is that the best computer that we have is still the human brain so yes there are tools and technologies that we use to facilitate that process, but it requires humans all throughout the process. We don’t just like tell the robots to go make the agenda so we use a tool called idea scale and that’s the tool that we use for people to submit their sessions and for the community and then for the votes, but beyond that, we have to export that data and then we’re still manually saying “Here are all the sessions that are accepted. How do we organize them so the five data sessions aren’t all on the same

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slot," or whatever, that the agenda is balanced. That's all still manual and with us kind of understanding what sessions are on what topic, but Idea Scale manages the submissions and the voting and then we use a tool called Sched, like schedule, but just the first part of it to host, I guess is the right word, the actual agenda in the end. In Sched, we can load in, OK, here are the 17 concurrent sessions for this time block and here are the next time block, etc., and then can just embed that inside the conference site so people can poke around and sort and search for sessions on certain topics and all that kind of stuff.

Beth: So basically you're saying that technology has not allowed you to avoid having meetings?

Amy: Exactly.

Beth: Excellent. This was so wonderful and I really, really appreciate you taking the time to share your knowledge and your experience with both me and the nonprofit community. Thank you so much for joining me. Where can people get in touch with you if they have questions?

Amy: Sure, and thank you also for talking about all of this and being such a great champion for NTEN's work and our community. I'm so flattered by everything that you shared on the call. To get in touch with me or with NTEN, you can go to NTEN.org so N-T-E-N.org and that's where you can find links to either of our conferences or to the community groups, all those places where you can engage. You can send me an email. Everybody is listed on the staff page, but just Amy, A-m-y @NTEN.org or you can connect with me on Twitter. If you want to do that, my handle on Twitter is AmyRSWard and I can connect with you wherever.

Beth: Absolutely, and I know you are also a frequent guest on a podcast from one of our former guests, Tony Martinetti, so you can also hear Amy talk about social media and all kinds of interesting technology content there. Thanks so much again for joining me. It was a pleasure.

Amy: Thank you.