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There Definitely Won't be Bears - Transcript

[Speaker 1]

Welcome to Charity Therapy, a podcast from Birken Law about building better nonprofits. I'm your host, Jess Birken. Hello and welcome to this episode of Charity Therapy.

Today I am joined by Simon Scriver from Fundraising Everywhere and Everywhere. Simon does all the things. He's a fundraising pro, a coach, a teacher, speaker, so much more.

Thanks for joining me, Simon.

[Speaker 2]

Thank you for having me, Jess. And that was a lovely, punchy introduction. I like it.

[Speaker 1]

I got to keep it light here. What's with the Fundraising Everywhere and Everywhere plus?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, so we kind of accidentally started two companies. We were trying to start Fundraising Everywhere, which was like an online training community. And, you know, we do virtual conferences and just lots of fundraising stuff.

And then we realized that there wasn't really a good platform for us to run all this stuff on. So, we built one and called it Everywhere Plus, which is either very clever or very confusing, depending on how you put it. Yeah, so now we have like these two companies.

One is a virtual event platform, and we help charities put on their virtual events, whatever those are. And then one is Fundraising Everywhere, which is just supporting our virtual fundraising friends around the world who can't afford to travel to conferences or can't afford the tickets or, you know, who wants to stay in touch even when they're not travelling to things.

[Speaker 1]

I am super excited for you to be here because not only are you fundraising knowledgeable, but also the virtual events thing. And so many of my clients and people I know in the nonprofit space have converted to virtual events during the last two years, some with more success than others. And I think just in my own experience of attending virtual events, I think they tend to suck.

So, tell me what do you think is the secret to like making a virtual event a success?

[Speaker 2]

A lot of it seems to be like, you know, really taking it seriously. So, I see virtual events where people are like, oh, we'll just do it on Zoom. We'll just kind of rock up.

We'll just, you know, get someone to speak to the camera for an hour or two. And they call that a virtual event. And then it's like, yeah, it wasn't very engaging, and it wasn't very interesting.

And I think a big part of it is you have to kind of take it seriously. You know, it's not just like a tack-on. It's not just an add-on.

It's something that, you know, the more thought and effort you put into your speakers, the more thought and effort you put into your preparation, the more thought you put into the appearance and the experience for attendees, then the better it is and the more engaging it is. And I think that's a huge part of it. The way we take real life events seriously and really, you know, craft them beautifully and then they succeed.

It's the same with virtual events, I think. And I think that's missing at the moment. Some people still see virtual as like a cheap knockoff or like, you know, or something they had to do during COVID.

Whereas we see it as like a really exciting opportunity that you can have speakers from everywhere. You can take a camera into the middle of a project and show your donors that as opposed to, you know, when you couldn't actually show them, you can bring them into that, and you can have some really cool engagement tools online that you can't have in the real world. So, they're different and I love real life events, but there's some really beautiful things you can do with virtual events.

So, it's about seeing the possibilities, I think.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I hope y'all were listening to some of those nuggets of wisdom that were embedded in there because what you are describing, Simon, are inherently things that are interesting and don't suck. So, I love it. With that, let's get into our Q&A.

Are you ready?

[Speaker 2]

I'm ready.

[Speaker 1]

All right. We're a small organization that provides support for people with a rare autoimmune disorder. We were doing in-person events before the pandemic, but one surprise during the past few years is that we actually have better attendance at our virtual events.

Seems obvious in retrospect. These are immune-compromised people, even when there's not a worldwide pandemic. But we need to upgrade our system.

We've just been using our regular Zoom account. How do we throw a virtual event that's professional and effective? Now that we're going to reduce the number of in-person events, we actually have a budget to invest in what we need.

[Speaker 2]

I find this really interesting that it's like all of us or so many organizations in the sector just suddenly realized, oh, virtual events, we should be doing them because we work with so many vulnerable people. There's so many issues around accessibility. Our sector should be more accessible.

And yet this is like a real surprise for so many of us when we were forced to do it in COVID that actually, yeah, more people do attend, and you can reach people who are outside of it. And some of our clients have raised more in their virtual events than they ever raised in their

physical events simply because they've got more people in. So, my answer to this question would be genuinely get advice.

So, you don't have to get advice from me, but talk to an expert because there are experts out there who do virtual events every day, every week, and have done this stuff. And so, in the same way that you wouldn't set up a physical event without any experience, you wouldn't embark on a direct mail campaign without any experience. I mean, you might, but you shouldn't.

Or you need to put the time aside to really educate yourself and learn from it. So, I think it's the same thing. It's like, for some reason, we do have this thinking, like I said before, that virtual events are just like this cheap, quick afterthought, but they're not.

It's a medium. It's a craft. And so, it's like you either put the time and the budget into one of your team or some of your team learning this stuff.

And there's plenty of online courses. And we run some free training around how to do better virtual events at Everywhere Plus. But do bring in someone, bring in a consultant, or we're seeing more charities who are actually hiring staff to focus on this virtual stuff, because it's not going to shrink.

It's only going to grow, and it's only going to develop. And so, I think with that extra budget, it's like get some expertise, learn, develop, and then it becomes easy to maintain it and grow from that. But if you're starting from scratch and really, you've just been using Zoom, there is a whole beautiful virtual world out there.

It's like start talking to people, start networking. We run networking sessions for charity virtual event organizers, so very, very niche. But like any other medium, it's like taking it seriously again.

And actually, it takes time and or money. And so, it's making the commitment to do that, I think.

[Speaker 1]

I love the recommendation to get advice from somebody who specializes in virtual events, because I have nothing to back this up. Just my gut feeling says that there are a lot of in-person event planners that now claim to be able to do virtual events. And those are probably the events that most closely mirror, oh, here's a bunch of conference rooms, and here's the vendor hall, and we just replicated that in a virtual space.

And we called it good. I just think there's a lot more you can do. And I think it's wise to look for people who really are focused on making kick-ass virtual events.

And I also think there is a certain habit that we have in the nonprofit sector of looking at other nonprofits that maybe are bigger, older, or something, and seeing, oh, this is what worked for the United Way, or this is what worked for Big Org No. 7. And therefore, that's obviously what we should do, because they're big, and we want to grow to have millions of dollars like them.

And that is not the right approach. Because like the questioner here is like, hey, who's the community we're actually serving? Not just copying the gala format of the biggest organization in your town and thinking that that equals you raising more money, right?

[Speaker 2]

100%. And what's interesting is just because the bigger organization is doing it, I'd argue it doesn't mean it's even working for them.

[Speaker 1]

Well, and I just want to close this one out by saying shout out to y'all for setting a budget for virtual events. I feel like it's just, yes, good job. This is not just an afterthought.

You're actually approaching it thoughtfully and putting some money behind it. I love that. So, kudos to them.

[Speaker 2]

And the bravery of reducing in-person events, because I know the amount of organizations I've worked with over the years who keep doing a physical event because they've always done it, and it's like they're losing money every year on it. It's like, but our board loves it. And it's like, cut it out if it's not working.

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

I tell you, that is the main thing that nonprofits and law firms have in common is risk aversion.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

For real. All right, let's move on to question two. I'm on the board of a nonprofit that's growing rapidly.

We're in the middle of a hiring phase, getting more staff so we can get the board out of the day-to-day operations. Yay, good job. I would really like for us to hire a fundraising specialist.

Only thing, our president is convinced that we don't need one because everyone is a fundraiser. She's convinced that our new ED and program people can do the fundraising in whatever spare time they get, plus the money the board raises. How can I convince her that fundraising is its own specialty, and it will benefit the organization to hire someone with that expertise?

[Speaker 2]

Madam President, you are wrong.

[Speaker 1]

Just play this episode.

[Speaker 2]

Tear down this wall. Yeah. Yeah.

Oh, God, this is like the professional fundraiser's bane of our existence is this idea that it's like, anyone can do fundraising and just do it in your part time and just like not taking it serious when it's a profession. And like the previous question, the more seriously you take it, the more effective it is. But I think this phrase, everyone is a fundraiser.

I think that's like a key phrase which has been, I was going to say soiled. Maybe that's the wrong word.

[Speaker 1]

Soiled. Let's use it.

[Speaker 2]

Tainted. Yeah, it's been soiled. Okay, thank you.

It's been soiled. And I think it's like, it's not that everyone is a fundraiser. I think the phrase should be everyone has a role in fundraising.

You know, so whether that's your board members thanking people or sharing their personal story of how they got involved or making introductions or supporting you as a fundraiser, even, you know, they all have a role in fundraising, but it doesn't mean that they should be asking. And I think if you, you know, if you go in expecting everyone in your organization and everyone on your board to ask, you're in for trouble because A, it's they're not very good at it and B, it starts to piss them off and they start to leave the board and they start to whatever. So, I think it's like your fundraiser is a fundraiser and everyone else's kind of feeds into it and supports them.

But I think, you know, to the question of how you convince your ED on how to agree with that and how to take it seriously. In my experience, you can't convince your ED yourself, your board and your ED. They won't listen to us.

Yeah, internally. And I think actually what I found works best is to bring someone in from the outside. So, bring in like a consultant or someone from another charity who's done this successfully, you know, who's grown their fundraising successfully and get them in front of the board and the ED for 10 minutes to like answer questions and talk through it.

And then they seem to take it seriously. And I I've had like as a consultant, I've had lots of bits of work where literally someone has just paid me to go in and tell the board exactly what they've been saying for five years. And then it's like, oh, yeah, that is a good idea.

Let's do that.

[Speaker 1]

That is a God's honest truth. When you work inside a nonprofit, especially and you bring in the person, the outsider that they finally listen to. And you're like, I have been saying this same thing.

Damn it. It's so true, though.

[Speaker 2]

Hundred percent. And fundraisers are really generous with their time. So, I like bringing in like fundraisers from other charities who are maybe a couple of years ahead a year, you know, who've done this thing where they've invested in staff properly and getting them in and just sharing their experience.

And I've done it for other charities and charities have done it for me. And it actually does really work. It's like getting that outside.

It's frustrating, but people are more likely to listen to someone who they deem as an expert. Like I just I just think it's like because the hierarchy of an organization, it's like they naturally look down on you a little bit and they naturally second guess it or challenge you. They feel that's their role.

Whereas when you bring an outsider in, it's like just gives them a bit of authority. So that would probably be my big advice is like is stop trying to convince them because it's hard and actually wangle your way into getting someone into and prepping them exactly what to say when they stand in front of your ED or your board. That seems to help.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I love that. And I kind of love embedded in there like the idea that good ideas can come from program staff.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

Get off your pedestal thinking that if it's not your idea, it must not be a good idea. Check your ego at the door, please. I just do want to give this group a shout out for actually going through that struggle, the growth struggle and getting the board out of the day to day.

That's a really tough time as well. Just from an org theory and development perspective to try and like separate yourself from like we've been rolling up our sleeves and doing everything to I can see how that is. That's hard to do.

You're growing really fast and they're hiring all this staff. And there can be a little bit of like anxiety around that, whether it's like anxiety, like can we actually sustain all these employees or you're taking away my work? People get really bent up about that.

So, who knows? Maybe the president is one of the top fundraisers at the organization. And there could be also something going on psychologically where she doesn't want to give up her agency in that role because it is fun, and she knows that part.

So, I would also kind of like have some conversations with the president around if that's the case, if they are a top fundraiser.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, you're so right, because I mean, you can't build a sustainable fundraising program on that. You know, you can't build this on people doing it when they have time and when they feel like it and when it suits them. You know, to build like steady growth, you need a fundraiser.

I mean, if you compared it to like the private sector, it's like you'd never think a company could just have, oh, your marketing department. No, we'll all do marketing just in our spare time. It's like, no, you need a marketing person, or you need a salesperson.

Right. But again, kudos to this person because it's like you're on the board and you truly understand this need to invest in fundraising. And so, shout out to this person.

[Speaker 1]

All right, here we go. Last question. Working in development, I feel like my staff, and I always run into this idea that we're doing the, quote, unsavory work in the nonprofit sector.

Some other folks in our organization assume that we're doing shady things to get the big money, and I can tell it affects the morale of my team. How do I combat this and make sure people know that we have strict ethical standards? Oh, I love this question.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I like the use of the word shady. Not that they're doing anything shady, but it just, you know, the possibilities of doing shady stuff is very interesting. I think that's a movie waiting to be happened.

So yeah, I think this is a common challenge for fundraisers, isn't it? It's like the rest of the organization looks down on fundraising a bit. You know, most people in charities, they kind of see fundraising as a necessary evil or something to be a bit embarrassed about or something, you know, they have to do but don't really want to do.

It's one of the reasons that I don't, you know, I left my last in-house charity job, and I don't think I'd ever work in-house in a charity again. I just don't have the mental strength for it anymore to, like, deal with this internal conflict. Conflict is a bit strong, but you need to convince internally that that fundraising is good.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, and have the pressure from the top to raise more, right?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. I mean, you're getting it from every angle, aren't you, as a fundraiser, which for me, you can't tell someone that you're ethical and you can't tell someone that you're not shady. And my old business partner used to put it like this.

He used to say, like, if I said to you, Jess, let's go camping, you know, next time you're in Scotland or you've come to Ireland, we'll go camping. There definitely won't be bears. It definitely won't be raining.

I definitely won't murder you. Nothing, nothing terrible definitely won't happen. When you say that, it's like, it seems even more shady.

You know, you're like the lady doth protest too much.

[Speaker 1]

Clearly you are going to murder me and there will be a bear to witness this event.

[Speaker 2]

I mean, not definitely, but it's like, it's probably a coin toss. So, it's like a 50, 50. So instead what you have to do is like not tell them but show them.

And so, for me, it's like this idea of internal marketing and part of a fundraiser's role is to market fundraising within the organization. So, it's like to sell fundraising within the organization. And the way you do things like that is by sharing donor feedback.

So, if a donor says something really lovely or a donor sends in a donation with a lovely comment, you send that to all your staff and you say, look what just came in for a donor. And you kind of dress it up. Like I wanted you to see how everyone supports you, but it actually says that they love the fundraising team or, you know, you show when you have a big win.

I remember in an organization I work with, one time we got, we got like free advertising on Facebook because I met someone who worked in Facebook, and they gave us like a grand's worth of advertising or something. And when I told all the staff, they were like, oh my God, Facebook, they've, you know, they felt like Facebook had noticed us. And suddenly it was like, wow, fundraising is opening this door to Facebook.

And so I think that's a lot of what it is, is you have to, you have to like think of your co-workers and your board and your, you know, everyone within the organization, you have to think of them as an, as an audience, as a segment of, of your audience. And you have to consider what your stewardship is for them. Like what are your newsletter updates to them?

What is your, you know, what events do you bring them into? That's going to get them excited. And it's not about like just asking them for stuff.

It's not just making them go to your stupid Harry Potter quiz or going to, you know, shaking a bucket in the rain. It's like showing them the success and the wins and the passion. And then it begins to get contagious.

And I remember the last in-house job I did this, you know, I, I'm, this was part of my mission was internal marketing. And by the time I left, it was a small organization, but by the time I left half of the staff had set up monthly direct debits donations. So they were, they had become my donors, not from me directly asking them, but just showing them that this is what people did.

And this, and people got something out of it when they became monthly donors. Like it was a good feeling and good stuff was happening. And, and, and they started to come on board and they, you know, they never really, they never saw themselves like that before, but suddenly they were like buying into the organization in the way that outsiders would, because we, we positioned it slightly different.

We'd marketed it. So, it's really interesting. It's what I hate dealing with it directly, but I love working with fundraisers to try and like win over their team and the people around them.

I find that really interesting.

[Speaker 1]

I love your description of the employee giving, because that may be the one time that I want to like clap and be like, yay for employee giving. Because usually I'm just like, boo, they're forcing you, you know, cause that's how it's, it's done a lot of times. So, I love that there's something in this question that reminds me of high school.

There's like a social factor that goes on where the people that are in fundraising, like, where does this come from? That, that the other staff think fundraising is bad. And I'm like, it's almost like, it's like the group of popular kids.

And if the popular kids are friendly and like everybody knows the prom queen and the football guy and whatever, and they're like, yeah, I'm popular and I'm really nice to everybody. Then it's like, everybody just likes them. But if they're kind of like mean, you know, it's like a Lindsay Lohan, like mean girls where, oh, maybe like people have been rude to me.

And so now I'm a little cold and standoffish and I just focus all of my love and attention on the major donors. Now it becomes clicky. And I just feel like there's some social psychology thing that you have to, like, you just nailed it with that.

That's an internal audience. And like, yes, don't let it turn into some high school drama where you set up this cultural dynamic where everybody shits on the fundraisers. So, we're just mean to everybody.

And then that just sets the dynamic for, you know.

[Speaker 2]

Get the fundraisers, stuff them in his locker. Yeah, I was totally bullied as a fundraiser. Fundraising is like, you know, people don't like it because it's not why they got involved with the charity.

It's not why they work there. You know, they kind of don't understand why they why we should be asking for money, why we have to ask for money. And I get that.

And I think it's like we have to as fundraisers, we have to empathize with these non-fundraisers. You've got to, like, get them caught up in it. So, you know, passion is contagious.

And if you love fundraising and you're doing good fundraising and you're getting them involved in the right things and talking to them in the right way, they get behind it. But it takes work. And it's something that you have to, you have to, like, carve out time for it.

You have to say, I'm going to put like two hours a week into internal marketing. I'm going to, you know, I'm going to make sure I send out an email every week as an almost like a newsletter for people. Like, this is the great stuff that happened in fundraising, and this is what we achieved.

And I think we have to take it, take that approach to it.

[Speaker 1]

And for this questioner, this department director, I also feel like I would kind of take a look beyond your own department and see if the leadership at the organization is also recognizing the great work that is happening at the program staff level. Because I feel like a lot of times fundraising staff get a lot of accolades for like, oh, great job getting that big gift or like that big grant. And maybe we're not really, you know, recognizing the people who are in the trenches doing the program work in the field or whatever.

And it's like, again, I just think that high school thing is like, look outside your department and help the organization celebrate all of their outcomes on the program staff side too, you know. So being able to be a part of that could be good.

[Speaker 2]

It's just about being mindful. You know, we have to really ground ourselves and come back to that, that it's like, look, this is a united front. We're trying to achieve the same thing.

We might see it in a different way, but we have to work together on this, both program side and fundraising side. But it is, it's part of your fundraising job. And if you think it's just going to happen, it's not.

You've got to like; this is part of your role is to like carve out time to manage the people around you inside there. And it's actually quite a fun part of the job once you start to see it as part of your job. I like it.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. That's why you're good at what you do. All right.

So, here's some like nuggets that have jotted down and tell me if you think I've missed any, Simon, but here's what I've got. First of all, please take your virtual events seriously. They are not just like an add-on, right?

Make it interesting. Be thoughtful. Consider the viewer.

Secondly, good things cost money. Good events, good fundraising, set a budget plan to spend money on these things. It's worth it, right?

That is the old adage. You got to spend money to make money. Third, everyone is not a fundraiser, but everyone has a role in fundraising.

And then finally, remember that you as an organization have an internal audience and that you need to market your fundraising efforts to them internally, not through, you know, put you in a headlock and try and make you give part of your paycheck to us, but by showing the wins and the passion that donors have for the mission. Simon, if people want to connect with you online, where can they find you?

[Speaker 2]

I am at fundraisingeverywhere.com. Fundraisingeverywhere.com is the fundraising community. So you'll see me at a lot of events virtually there.

We'd love to have you join us. We have lots of free events if anyone wants to pop in. I'm on Twitter as toastfundraiser, @toastfundraiser.

So, if I'm not on there, just wait a week and then I'll be back. That's usually how it works. And then of course, you can find me on LinkedIn, search for Simon Sriver.

And I'm always happy to connect with my American and international friends. I'm always happy to chat fundraising.

[Speaker 1]

Yes, because it's fun. Folks, if you enjoyed this episode, do me a huge favor, share it with a friend. You know you know someone who needs to hear Simon.

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About the Author



Hi, I'm Jess Birken.

I'm the owner of Birken Law Office, I help nonprofits solve problems so they can quit worrying and get back to what matters most – The Mission. I'm not like most attorneys, I actually have an outgoing personality, and – like you – I like to think outside the box. Most of my clients are passionate and have an entrepreneurial spirit. I'm like that too. My goal is to help you crush it. Getting bogged down in the minutia sucks the joy out of the important stuff. My clients want to do the work – not the paperwork.

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