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This Aint Prom - 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 Alicia Baraga. Alicia is the owner of Ripple Event Marketing, and we are a perfect pair because she creates online courses for small nonprofits, teaching them how to plan successful fundraising events. I love online courses and creating good things for small nonprofits.

Thanks so much for being here, Alicia.

[Speaker 2]

Hi, Jess. Thanks for having me.

[Speaker 1]

I wanted to have you on the podcast because I get a lot of questions about throwing events. You know, I'm sort of like outsource counsel and got a master's in nonprofit management. Sometimes people think I'm an event coordinator and I'm not.

So, I thought you'd be a great guest to chat about those things with me and before we dive in, I have to know, in your experience working so long in nonprofit events, what's the most unique event you've ever worked on?

[Speaker 2]

I have a couple. What I think makes these two events unique is the venue that was chosen. So, the first one was for a nonprofit where we hosted the event at CHS Field in St. Paul. And it was really fun. It was a family-friendly event. It was a bags tournament, but it was also family friendly.

So, we had activities for kids. And so, we had the boards and the bags competition on the field at CHS Field, which was really cool. And then at the time, this was a new thing, and it was called Knockerball.

And it's these giant clear soccer balls that you get inside of. And you can roll yourself around. You can have others roll you around and you bounce into each other.

And it was super fun. That's awesome. It was a great event.

We had some therapy dogs out there. This organization was for male caregivers of family members that were going through either cancer or some type of ailment. And so it was just a fun blend of things to do.

And then the second one was for a school foundation. And we hosted a dueling piano event at an airport hangar in the North Metro.

It was really cool. Just a unique venue and a unique type of event. You know, not your typical gala.

[Speaker 1]

Right. I got to know a bags event. What is that?

[Speaker 2]

Cornhole.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, bean bag toss. Yes. I feel like that may be a very Midwest-specific game. I don't know. We'll find out. Listen to comments. She'll tell us. Cornhole. Do you call bean bag toss cornhole or is that just Minnesotans? All right.

[Speaker 2]

Anyway. I'd love to know that as well.

[Speaker 1]

I know, right? It's normal to us. Moving on. Let's get to the first question.

Are you ready?

[Speaker 2]

I am ready.

[Speaker 1]

All right.

Next year, we're celebrating a 25th anniversary of our work. And we're looking for an innovative and creative event to put on. We don't have any ongoing events as a rule.

And individual donations aren't a huge part of our business model. The outcomes we want for this event are to recognize stakeholders, funders, and partners in our work, to expand awareness around our new five-year strategic plan, and celebrate our achievements. We really don't want to do a formal gala or a stuffy dinner.

What are some other ideas that are a little more outside the box?

[Speaker 2]

This is a really great question. And I get this quite a bit. So, my first comment on this, and you're going to hear me say this a lot, is that the key to any successful event, no matter what it is, is to start with your target audience in mind.

And then build your event around that audience. So, you talked about your stakeholders, and funders, and partners. So, what commonalities do they have both demographically and psychographically?

What are the age ranges? Is it mostly what's the ratio of male to female? Or if you're not using gender pronouns, what does that look like?

Do they come from a certain geographic area? Do they work in certain industries? Collecting all of that demographic info.

And then psychographically, is your audience more inclined to want to attend an event where they're sitting and watching a program? Or is it maybe something that's more interactive or participatory? So really hone in on what your target audience is, what they're all about, and then create this event around them.

And then as far as that unique and creative part of it, I get this all the time as well. And all nonprofits want something unique and creative. So, it's imperative that you know your audience, because what might be creative to one audience could potentially be a little bit bizarre out there to another audience.

[Speaker 1]

Right? I feel like everybody wants a creative fundraiser until you come up with a really creative idea. And then they're like pooping all over it because it's like too outside the box. And then you end up with a golf tournament.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. Oh my gosh, we're speaking the same language. That's so true.

Yeah, if I have another golf tournament, I'm gonna scream.

[Speaker 1]

No offense, clients who are listening that do golf tournaments. I love you, but also...

[Speaker 2]

And it's great for a particular audience, but it's not for everybody. So, you just have to keep that in mind. So, what I want to say about the creativity piece is that creativity doesn't happen in a vacuum.

It needs constraints. And so, your target audience is a constraint. Your budget is a constraint.

Maybe the geographic location is a constraint. So, once you kind of hone in on those pieces, it's easier to come up with something creative because you have something specific in mind, an audience specific in mind and all these other factors. So, your mission is a constraint.

I always tell nonprofits to don't just have an event or a theme for the sake of having a theme or a type of event for the sake of having a type of event. The same from people. Exactly.

And so, tie it to your mission. Tie it to what you do, your cause. And then the other piece of this question is they have a really great start on some of their outcomes, but I would say get more specific.

[Speaker 1]

How are you going to measure the success of this event? There's not much measurement in this question. That was the first thing that jumped out to me.

I can hear Ginger Sisko, my professor at Hamlin, being like, you can't measure awareness. Exactly.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. So, what does that look like? And also, because I don't know your budget on this, but I will give some ideas for how to introduce some creativity.

So, like we talked about, having a unique venue is one way. Tying your event to your cause or your mission, that's automatically going to make you a little bit unique unless there's 800,000 other organizations that do what you do. And even then, you can still find something unique about what you do for your event.

And then different forms of entertainment too. What does that look like? But again, it all goes back to your target audience and making sure that you are creating an event that they're going to want too.

Even if this is a one-off, but especially if it's an annual event, you want to create something they're going to want to come back to year after year.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, that's the other piece in this question is sort of like, well, why don't you have any ongoing events? That was a weird thing for me. I'm like, really?

And they don't do much with individual gifts. I'm like, what is this mythical, magical doesn't have any events or a significant amount of donors? It doesn't need to fundraise.

Yeah, I mean, you know, and if this event goes off as a success, I mean, it's something you can build off of then potentially, right?

[Speaker 2]

Exactly.

[Speaker 1]

All right. Well, good luck to them and best on the next 25 years, right? Yeah, absolutely.

All right. Next up, I'm organizing an event for a nonprofit I'm involved with. It's a concert and a beanbag toss tournament.

Hey, I have about a month to approach potential event sponsors. I was thinking of offering them a booth or a table at the event and t-shirts with sponsor logos. Any suggestions on how to approach local businesses for sponsorships?

This one is a little weird.

[Speaker 2]

Well, my first thought when I heard this was, yikes, a month that doesn't give you much time.

[Speaker 1]

Right? Wow. You should have started this.

How many months ago? Yeah, six months. Okay.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. Note to you. I mean, relationships are about, I mean, sponsorships are about building relationships.

And so, you know, it's hard to build a relationship in a month. So, what you're likely going to get for this is not what I would call a sponsorship. Because a sponsorship is a business relationship.

It's not philanthropic. They are doing it because they want a certain outcome. They have, it's usually from a marketing budget, not a giving budget, a philanthropic budget.

And so, you need time to build this relationship. And once again, it all goes back to your target audience. Because you're going to be able to find sponsors that have the same target audience, that align with who's coming to your event.

And that's the key. So, most nonprofits, they are going to come up with this package, with this tiered list of opportunities. Like for \$5,000, you get this, this and this.

And for 2,500, you know, it's, it lists gets shorter and shorter with the lower the dollar amount. What I recommend is a different approach. And it's approaching your sponsors individually and seeing what they're hoping to get out of the sponsorship and matching that, making it match up and trying to figure out a dollar amount that works for both of you.

Sponsorship should be win-win situations. It shouldn't be where you feel like you're going through all kinds of work for one sponsor that's giving you \$1,000. But it also shouldn't be, hey, we'll slap a logo on this.

Please give us \$5,000.

[Speaker 1]

Well, and there's the assumption that we already know what our sponsors want. And we have predetermined this menu of benefits. And we've predetermined how much money that is worth to you to advertise basically at our event.

There's a lot wrong with that. There's this whole idea that came up at this sort of unconference that I went to a long time ago about sending people a blank invoice. And this was in a lawyer context, but that's kind of the same, the similar idea here is like, you don't, we don't need to assume that we know what the value is that they're placing on this.

Why not have a conversation with them about what is important to you? What is valuable to you? And it's funny how I'm sure that's part of like major donor work.

The folks that are in fundraising that are cultivating relationships with major donors. I'm sure that's part of it. But why do we lose sight of that when it's corporate sponsors?

Yes, it's going to be an expense on their marketing thing and not philanthropic. They're not necessarily a donor in the same way. And there are legal things around that that people need to be aware of and what you're doing with how you talk about them at the event and call your lawyer for more advice on that.

But the idea that we can just pre-plan this menu and go, this is what we're going to do. We're going to put a little logo on the beverage cart at our annual conference and call that \$3,000. It's like, don't assume.

You may find a company is really into your mission and wants to sponsor at a very high level. And you wouldn't know that unless you asked, right? Unless you have the conversation.

So, I think the whole presumption that we already know what the options should be is a flawed model in fundraising.

[Speaker 2]

I agree. And it's, you are likely leaving money on the table by having these two packages. Let's say you have one at your top tier is 5,000.

Your next one is 2,500. Maybe there is somebody that would come in at 3,500 because you're meeting all of their needs as from marketing and philanthropic and all of that. So why leave that on the table if you can work something out with that sponsor?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, or they'd like to give you a multi-year commitment, but you don't offer that. So, you miss 100% of the shots you don't take, right? Yeah.

Exactly.

[Speaker 2]

Okay. Anything left to say about this one? No, again, know your audience so you can find those sponsors for your events.

[Speaker 1]

And start early. And start earlier. Okay.

So, question three, here we go. Hello, I'm looking for some advice or knowledge for the nonprofit I work at. They are looking to put on a fundraising event like a gala golf tournament or something of that nature.

My manager is hoping to hire a consultant or event planner to help, but I have a sneaking suspicion the ED won't want to dedicate any financial resources to hiring someone. So, I'm trying to do some research about events since I've never thrown one before. What do I need to know?

Are there any resources you can point me towards? Oh, I feel like this is a classic situation.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, how long is this? Do we have an hour? Right?

We need to dive in a little deeper. So, my first thought right off the bat is start with the type of event you're going to host. Again, it goes back to your audience and building an event around that audience.

Far too often it's, we're gonna host this gala or we're gonna host this golf tournament. And then they're scrambling to get people to attend. You're making more work for yourself doing it that way versus building an event around a certain audience.

The key to a successful event knowing your target audience, having your goals. So, making sure those all align and then putting together a really great team of volunteers to carry this out. Because most small nonprofits have less than 10 staff members and that's not really enough to carry out a successful fundraising event.

And from that team, you need a good combination of strategic thinkers and worker bees. If you have too many of one, you're either gonna have a really great idea for an event that never gets done or you're gonna have a lot of people working on event with no strategic vision. Again, tie your event to your mission, resources.

Oh, I guess I'll step back and say I wouldn't necessarily discount, you know, you said that the ED won't wanna spend money on this. First, you gotta figure out where you need the help the most. Cause you don't necessarily need somebody to produce this event for you.

You may need just help in a certain area. And so, you know, someone like me, me or someone like me can help you through that. And so, it might not be this big outlaid money that you think it is.

So, figure out where you need the help the most. And then, you know, I, of course, shameless plug here, I would love to be a resource for you. Yeah, I'm like, do you have online courses on this kind of stuff?

I do. Well, so I'm creating more of them, but my current, I have one course out right now and it's called Event Brand Bootcamp. And it's all about creating a compelling and unique brand name for your event.

Cause you know, that's the start of it, right? You've got to entice people to want to sign up and register and attend your event. And so, it starts with a great brand name.

And so, this course is meant to be completed in five days or less, self-driven, you know, self-guided course. And it's \$27. So, it's a really low investment.

And through the course, I walk you through figuring out who your target audience is and setting those goals. So, it's kind of that first big step in planning an event.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, not to turn this into a commercial for you, but it's like, you know, I can imagine there are a lot of small nonprofits that are in this kind of a situation where not everybody has the resources to hire an event planner. And you do, you have to like, spend money to make money, right? Like a lot of groups, they need to figure out how to do fundraising and they're doing it.

I mean, I work with a lot of startups, so I know they're doing it on sort of a wing and a prayer and like Googling and asking their friends and figuring it out. So absolutely, look for those kinds of resources.

[Speaker 2]

And that's the other thing I was going to say, was, you know, you can't look at it as just an expense. You know, you have to figure out what value that person brings to your, that consultant brings to your organization. I've worked with clients where I worked with them three, four, five years.

And after that time, they're like, you know what, we've got it from here. You got to set up with the right processes that we need and the templates and all that stuff where we can take it from here. And they're doing it.

They're hosting their own events.

[Speaker 1]

Which is really what you want, right? Like on a certain level, when I help somebody with a certain kind of project, it's like, look, I'm like helping you fly. Go, go.

I have accomplished my mission.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, yeah. I don't want to be their producer for 10 years. You know what?

I want them to be able to do this on their own.

[Speaker 1]

Right. Well, it just gets boring for you. I'm sure too.

You're like, okay, go do it. So here are some, I think we've covered some really good highlights here. And I want to make sure I kind of hit some of these takeaways.

And the one that I stand out to me the most is this idea of like putting constraints on yourself. And I love that idea because Paul, who's my like BFF and was recently on the pod, is a musician. And he always talks about, you know, having limitations with the equipment that you're using force you to be creative.

So, like having unlimited tracks to record hurts you, whereas having eight tracks forces you to make choices. And so, I love that idea of putting constraints on yourself and it limits you in a way that encourages your creativity. And so, then you have to make choices, like tie things to your mission.

Think about who's going to be there. You know, think about, well, we only have these three options for the event to be there. Now that we know we have these three location choices, what does that mean for us?

Right. I love that constraints equal creativity piece. And then I think one that I don't want to miss is y'all need to be starting early and not be like, oh, we have to do our fundraising event 30 days from now.

Let's get started. Start earlier. You know, I know it's hard.

It's really hard when you're... That was so Minnesotan. It's hard.

Oh, yeah. It's difficult to start early when you're just, you know, tyranny of the urgent. You're trying to deliver the mission, but really the earlier you can start, the better off you're going to be.

And then I think third is sort of this theme of like, don't assume. We do a lot of assuming in the nonprofit sector. We assume what donors think.

We assume what our sponsors want to give to us. We assume our ED won't fund this. Don't assume.

Ask questions. Curious. Find out what is real.

Don't just fill in the blank that, oh, I have to do more with less because my ED is going to say no. You know, talk to the ED. Have a conversation.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. Well, and I think, you know, on the line of assumption is that we think, oh, if I, like, let's say we're talking about the sponsorship and those tiered packages. We think, oh, it's going to be less work if we just create this package and send it out and hopefully people do it.

Well, it actually ends up being more work than getting specific and getting, asking those questions and talking to people. So again, I guess that's another assumption is that it's going to be more work when it's actually not.

[Speaker 1]

And that it's transactional and that it's a transaction that you're entering into and that it's not a relationship, right? We're assuming we're not going to have a relationship with that sponsor. Right.

So those are such great takeaways. Thank you so much for being here today. I think that was just absolutely valuable.

If listeners want to connect with you and learn more about what you do, where can they find you?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, so I would say go to my website. It's RippleEventMKTG.com. So, Ripple, like a ripple in the water and then event and then MKTG, which is short for marketing.

So RippleEventMKTG.com.

[Speaker 1]

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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.

Let's connect!

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