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Your Organization was started to Change the World

Guest was Dan Portnoy

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Transcription of the Podcast

Joe Dager: Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me, today is Dan Portnoy. He is the author of The Non-Profit Narrative: How Stories Can Save The World. He loves helping passionate people strive for the impossible and on several occasions he's seen it happen. One of the best books I've read on how to relate stories to your organization, whether you're a non-profit or for profit. Dan, before we start talking about stories and the book, tell me about the background picture on your book website and if there's a connection there.

Dan Portnoy: Well, I tend to think that it's all about that the stories are happening, and they're ever changing, right? So, it's just kind of an amalgamation of ongoing story thoughts and pieces that are going on.

Joe Dager: I thought it was a great picture. I really enjoyed it. I started looking at it and kind of got lost if I was supposed to click on anything because I'm looking at the pictures.

Dan Portnoy: Well, that's great.

Joe Dager: I'm not sure this signifies a great story or not but The Non-Profit Narrative is

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one of the few books that I own both in audio and on Kindle. I have to ask you, what inspired the book?

Dan Portnoy: Thanks for having both of them. That's pretty awesome. What inspired the book is I was actually getting let go from a client. I have been working with a client for a good while, and I really cared about what they were doing and this is my love letter to them as they kind of went off. We had been working together, and it just started from a real personal place. It was, and I just thought they were making some bad moves, so I thought I would write what essentially became kind of this manifesto that then with some coaching from some friends. Everyone was like, "You could just turn that into a book. That sounds like information that a lot of people would enjoy, not just your one client." Because, it was kind of my send off. What it became was more, hopefully, a super help for Marketing Managers and Development Directors that are tired, that are looking to get some information and get it instituted very fast, but without a whole lot of fluff.

Joe Dager: That's a great story in itself, probably some of my longest and best letters have come from the time when I'm passionate, and I just write it down. I want to say something.

Dan Portnoy: Those late nights where you're like up till 2 in the morning writing, writing, writing and you're like "I don't do this very often" and that's kind of how it started.

Joe Dager: In the startup world, the founder always has the experience, the vision and that inspiration to tell a story. You talk about the story and how to create it but what makes

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that so seemingly difficult for others that are in an organization to do that?

Dan Portnoy: They think they're supposed to be the founder. They think that when they relate the story, it doesn't have the same, oomph or that same character but the truth is if I tell you, if Scott Harrison from Charity Water tells you the story of how he got started and I tell you the story of how he got started, it's really only a little bit different, like the impact. As long as I've got my facts down, and I can share the information with the same kind of passion, it's virtually similar. There isn't somebody who's going to say, "Wow, I'm definitely going to give to Charity Water now because I've heard Scott's heart or I've heard this other guy tell about it." If they're going to donate or they were going to be involved with Charity Water, they're going to do it no matter what, as long as me, as a storyteller, as long as I'm conveying the right pieces, which is not that hard. For me, I don't think it's that hard, it's all about emotional connection. It's all about the emotion when you hear Scott's passion, when you hear him share the triumph and the heartache, as there's an emotional response and as a storyteller, if I'm telling that story, it's very important for me to make sure I tap into an emotional response because I will get you as the audience to remember the right things and to react the way I want you to. I really want to be careful there because I'm not thinking of it from a manipulative standpoint. I know that if I'm telling you a great story you're going to be happy when I want you to be happy, and you're going to be sad when I want you to be sad.

Joe Dager: It's really about sharing that passion that has to come out of you when you tell that story.

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Dan Portnoy: Oh, agreed, and I think, especially with non-profits. I think there's really no limit to the passion. Most people who are working at a non-profit are involved in the issue that they're talking about in some way. I mean, I've never gone to a homeless shelter or some sort of housing scenario where people who are working there previously were homeless or had a brother or a son or a spouse who was homeless. I mean, the impact is usually pretty great.

Joe Dager: You're so correct because most people that are attracted to a non-profit has some experience in that area that brings them there. Have you found that to be true?

Dan Portnoy: Oh, very much, very much, I mean, like I would go so far as to say it's probably 60% of the people who are at any non-profit experienced some sort of massive issue or experienced the help of a non-profit while dealing with the issue that this non-profit deals with or a close relative has and so, it's very, it's deeply personal.

Joe Dager: One of the first things you talked about in crafting a story I found really interesting. It's something that I use in the sales and marketing and for people onboarding, let's say someone in the support area or a new salesman. What we do is that initial training, we will ask them to form a paragraph about what our company does, then form a paragraph of what you do and then boiling down to each of them to say what the company does in one sentence and correct me if I'm wrong, but that's how you started with having people talk about stories. Where do you take that to building a whole story out of something like that?

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Dan Portnoy: Honestly, I think it does come from the kind of a sales background. It is all about, we live in a culture that if I give you the headline first, you're going to respect me a lot better or you're going to understand that I'm respecting you a lot more because I'm giving you the headline first and then I can tell you the story that goes with it if you're interested.

We're letting people kind of check the box by agreeing like, "Oh, okay, that sounds interesting" or "That doesn't sound interesting." The idea is don't bore your audience by telling them paragraphs upon paragraphs or a long story if you can't really get to the essence of what the organization is doing in a couple of sentences. I don't know where you're starting, like it just tells me that you don't know what's going on. Or that you're not thinking critically about it. Organization that doesn't have that figured out but more that's the first place we'd start. We'd say, "Okay, well, we haven't really thought critically about this issue, so let's think about it critically and let's get this solved in the next two days." And then, it starts to catch like wildfire. I find with an organization that once we start moving in this direction, we get some momentum and you just deal with it internally and some big things start happening internally and attitude starts changing and improving and then it just catches. It's great.

Joe Dager: We talked before the podcast about storytelling becoming a buzz word. Everybody's got to tell stories now; it's hard to even know what storytelling and what stories are. Can you frame what you mean by storytelling and what your book maybe gets a non-profit to do?

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Dan Portnoy: Well, I think that the key difference in when someone says, “Oh, we just need to get back to storytelling.” I can’t tell you how many times I hear that all day and all night, “we just got to tell our story better, we got to tell our story better” and I agree but it seems that not a lot of people know how and ‘how’ is really where it’s at, in my opinion. That’s one thing that I try to get very specific in the book of like ‘Here’s a framework for How.’ Here’s how to take a three-act story structure, overlay it to a January to December calendar and start moving. Start moving right away. Don’t wait till tomorrow. You could do it; you could get started today. I think that’s a really crucial piece when the world is buzzing with stories, stories, and stories. How many people on their social media platform put themselves down as a storyteller? My thought is more like “Did you wake up today? Well, then you’re a storyteller, of course, you are. Every part of our human DNA screams ‘I’m going to tell you a story.’” So, I don’t think that’s really getting specific. I just want to get down to ‘how’ because that matters.

Joe Dager: I think you did a great job at that. What are some of the biggest struggles you find in organizations to get them started and tell a good story?

Dan Portnoy: It’s a really good question. Some of the big things that I find is usually there’s not a, I actually just had this conversation with a graphic designer yesterday. They purchased; there’s a training that I actually have of the whole book that is a step by step.

You can walk through it. He said, “You know, one of the problems that we have is that the conversation that we have from the C-suite and the Executives to the Creators is there’s not a level playing field in terms of the vernacular that we’ll use.” So, my encouragement

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or one of the big things that I find is that it's easier for a group to kind of experience storytelling together. Like, essentially setting up the Executives to kind of run down the storytelling path, so they feel and hear and understand some of these terms better. So that, they can see like, "Oh okay, so I do have to. I have to give my Creatives some time.

I can't just fill up their schedules with meetings." I can't tell you how many times I come into a place and it's just all day is meetings, and all night is e-mail. I ask the question very often, when do we actually do the work part? That's really a big issue. It just seems to happen, so I'm a big fan of, if the Executives can carve out the time, huge pieces of time, for the Creatives to kind of sit in the story. I think of the Pixar brain trust, the guys, and I don't know if you've checked out Creativity Inc. by Ed Catmull, very, very good book. But, he talks about that the Pixar brain trust spends hours and hours and hours working out a scene and working out pieces and what's connecting and what's not. They really spend huge amounts of time on it, and I think that's a really good thing because how many times do you say, "Hey, Creative Team, we've got to come up with something."

The thing they come up with is like black and white photos and slow piano music and it's like the terrible times of blah, blah, blah. I mean that happens, and it's because that's their first idea, and it's not bad, it's just not the best one. We could do better with more time. I think the Executive Team can figure that out or can help their team a lot better that way.

Joe Dager: When we're sitting there creating stories within an organization, it isn't this guy over in the corner pounding on the keyboard in isolation that we really need to have this group session of the post-it-notes and putting in different themes and getting a very

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collaborative process in the story.

Dan Portnoy: I think, especially because if it's an organization, you want to have the ideas that you're throwing out kind of on the anvil and everybody takes a whack at it because if it stands up, it's connecting with multiple different people and multiple different demographics and that's important versus "Yeah, so this is what I came up with.

This is what we're going to do." It's like kind of in a closet, and it's not necessary, it may connect really well for the person that made it. Say it's being made by, a 37-year old woman. Well, this is going to connect really well with her maybe but it may not connect with a 54-year old man who's a large donor or somebody like that. That's where I think it's really important too and then to focus on the emotional pieces. Where's the emotion? Is it joy? Is it sadness? Is it sorrow? What emotion are we messing with? I think that's really important and so I think it's a process of post-it notes, exactly like you're saying that. You put them up on the board, and we look at it and we talk about it and that's something I do with companies to figure it out and I haven't found a better way yet.

Joe Dager: Should every story have a hero and a villain?

Dan Portnoy: Classically, yes. I think that the other thing that I really find is that the hero can be a non-profit but it also in more effective campaigns and probably in the next edition of the book it will be, but the hero is actually the audience, and that means the non-profit functions or the organization has to function as a mentor. So, thinking through that in story terms is that if you're Obi-wan, you have to shepherd Luke along. You don't know

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how everything's going to go, but you do know that there's a force, and you do know that there's space, and there's a big world and there's a Darth Vader and there's you know. You know all of these things, so you can prep your audience for the journey, and that's really important. I think beyond that, I think every organization is fighting something, and I think it's really easy when you start targeting for profit terms I think there could be something that is villainized. Yes. So, I think, and that makes the story telling process a lot easier.

Joe Dager: Oh, I just pick my competitor, "I could villainize him, can't I?"

Dan Portnoy: Sure, but I think the other big part is, especially, and this often happens in the political arena and then this is, I really like watching the political cycle go because in terms of storytelling. I can tell you right now whoever gets elected President in the next election will be the one who tells the best story. It's the way it always works. It's like they're connecting to a larger audience. It means more to them, and that's the other big thing and I think a lot of places forget that. That it's really about how it's received.

It's not about how I feel when I tell the story. That actually doesn't matter at all. It's a hundred percent about your audience and how are they receiving it and what does it feel like and does it feel good and do I feel like this organization or company has a good vision for what they're doing and do I want to back that. I think that it really works out to not just villainize your competition but what's the key issue, that's happening. I think, like this Coke campaign over the summer with the branded cans, absolutely brilliant. Absolutely brilliant but it has nothing to do with villainizing Pepsi, it has everything to do with telling you how great it is to be together and that whole campaign is about togetherness and

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interpersonal relationships, and I just think that's pretty brilliant.

Joe Dager: I think that the hero is shifting now. We are shifting the hero to the customer or the audience. You see that in the different TV shows now, the reality shows. We're shifting that hero, and I think people want to see people like themselves. I think they understand that message so much better/ If you can support that message, if you can play a supporting role to the audience or the hero that bigger message comes through to a wider audience.

Dan Portnoy: Agreed. Yeah, definitely.

Joe Dager: We talked a little bit about a hook or that as I call it a 'James Bond moment' at the beginning. Should I worry about that at the start of my story of having the right hook or should I leave the story develop and comeback and kind of rewrite the beginning?

Dan Portnoy: Well, I think it's okay, like if you're in the planning stage. I think it's okay if you don't know what that's going to be. It's okay to get started because you kind of have to start on step 1 when you're getting started. The fun thing about Bond to me is that a Bond movie starts in step 2, right? You're already in something. I think that great storytelling starts you're already in something. 'Once upon a time' is a great piece to let you know that something's going to happen next but I think 'Skyfall' was a great beginning for a Bond movie because it was the dark hallway and he walks into the light, I mean it just tells you like okay, and the guns up, so it tells you right away like "Oh, this is a job. This is a gig he's doing. This is a big deal." I think it's important, the signals at that sense

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that we take note as storytellers to say, "Okay if it's starting on step 2." A movie that begins and just starts and right out the gate and its super exciting is something that makes us want to watch the next little bit and the next little bit. In the YouTube economy, oh my goodness, you only get what, 10 seconds? I mean, think about all those ads that we click through on YouTube, you got 5 seconds in those ads, and there have been a few where I'm like "Oh, I will watch this. What is this?" But, there are most, I'm just like "I can't wait to click that ad and skip it. I can't wait to get past it." I think it's really important that you are thinking about what does the first 5 minutes of this look like? Does it look good? Does it feel right? Does it sound good? If it does, then we get another 5 seconds. And then, does the next 5 seconds? Does it look good, does it sound good? Yes.

Okay, then I get another one and that's really the beginning of the marketing funnel in my opinion, that it just starts that way and if I can get you through a full commercial or a full minute promotion, maybe I'll get your e-mail, and maybe I'll get you to follow me on social media. Maybe from the e-mail, I'll set-up some auto responders, and I'll get to tell you more about what we do and at the end of those auto responders, I'm going to ask you to become a monthly donor. Maybe you'll do that but the conversion rate on that is going to be really big because I've thought through all the different spaces where I'm going to have a touch point with you and I think a lot of times organizations/companies they kind of do that shotgun idea and they still think about like "Well, we just do a traditional news ad buy, we do a TV ad buy and we do a paper print ad buy and if we get 1%, we're doing really well." Well, I know campaigns that'll get 30% turnaround which is outrageous but when it's thought through and pushed in a digital fashion, we have a lot more data so why not use it.

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Joe Dager: Does all my stories have to connect for a non-profit or for an organization? Does it work when there's a story out in left field somewhere or do they have to connect?

Dan Portnoy: No, I don't think, I think they all have to connect in the sense that they're all from the organization which that might be the same YouTube channel, but it doesn't have to be, they don't have to like 'characters from one to the next' and maybe it's around the same idea. The example I would use is Union Rescue Mission. They have, I don't know, 60, 70 videos now that they've been doing one a month for the last 5/6 years and all of these stories are connected in the sense they're dealing with the issue of homelessness, but sometimes it'll be staffs, sometimes it'll be someone in treatment, it'll be someone on the street. It might not even be someone who's involved in the mission. It might be a donor. It might be a Toyota got involved, and there was one on them and I mean it was all over the place. I think that's really good because I think in the end; they make concentric circles and at the heart of it is an organization or company.

Joe Dager: How would you tell someone to get started and improve the storytelling? Besides buying your book, which I think is an excellent idea. What's the first couple of steps to really start telling stories for an organization?

Dan Portnoy: I think for any organization; they need to figure out who their audience is. That's the first one. If they can figure out who their audience is figure that out like demographically, we have a 65% female audience and 35% male audience. Are they 40 to 45 years old? Are they late 20s or early 30s? What's that primary and secondary audience?

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Figure that out. Then, the next thing is you've got to offer them something. So, offer them, what are we going to do and trade, I think any non-profit that says "Sign up for our e-mail address and I'm going to give you 5 steps for blah, blah, blah" that does something for the audience, like isn't around the issue of, maybe it's clean water or so, here's '5 ways to conserve water', as you go back to school or something like that. It's this downloadable pdf that is and actually has value to it, and it's a good trade-off. Give your e-mail, you get this. But, it's got to be positioned in such a way that it's actually valuable, and that's really, you know, it's like 'Well here's 5 tips on how not to be homeless' is not necessarily great news that anybody wants.

Nobody wants that so figuring out your audience, then to offer and then figuring out what's next. After you've got them, they've given you your e-mail, what going to be the next step and to think through that, what's the next piece? If you are a master storyteller, you know what the next step is, and that's really important. So, I think that's where you can start, right there.

Joe Dager: I always kind of give a rule of thumb that you never publish a step unless you already knew what the next step after that was.

Dan Portnoy: It's a good rule. That's a good rule.

Joe Dager: You're not out there scrambling and trying to figure out what to do.

Dan Portnoy: Exactly.

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Joe Dager: I have a question in your book that I have to ask, and I may say it incorrectly, so you'll have to correct me but what is the Department of Meh?

Dan Portnoy: Oh, Meh. So, you know, when people kind of shrug their shoulders and then say it, it's a very hipster term, to be just like "Meh." That's the sound that we make. The idea is that there's so much out there. There's so much out there for people to enjoy and to love and million, multi multimillions and billions of dollars spent on advertising, so if you're a non-profit, you've got to do something that's going to get better than a "Hmm, yeah, that's not bad." You've got to do something that's like "Wow, that's killer. That's absolutely killer. I love it. That really sound interesting." The problem is I think a lot of non-profits go "This makes me feel good" when they do their advertising, so when they feel good, they don't feel like then that's really the measure they're going by. 'I feel good in this so let's put it out' and not 'is this going to resonate with our audience.' They're asking the wrong question. And so, I think you've got to get past that Department of Meh.

Joe Dager: Where could someone find the book?

Dan Portnoy: Well, you can get the book on Amazon. It's also available on Audible if you'd like the audio book and you can get it as part of their, you know, in print or Kindle, and if you do the Amazon unlimited right now, you can actually get the book completely free. So, you sign up for a trial for the unlimited, and it's one of the books you can get right off the bat. Always available on social media and Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, so connect with me there.

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Joe Dager: What's the best way to contact you?

Dan Portnoy: Through the website. You can go to PortnoyMediaGroup.com and just go through the website and connect with the social media and send me an e-mail, whatever you'd like to do.

Joe Dager: I would like to thank you very much. I appreciated it and encourage people to take a look at it. Like I said earlier, I talked to you before the podcast; the brevity of the book is great. It's not a long book, but it's one that I've read several times and listened to several times in a short history already, so.

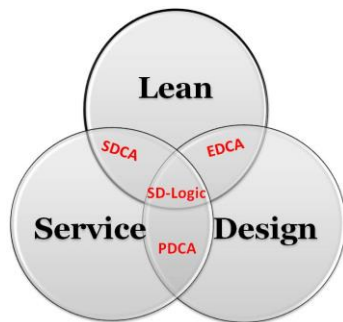
Dan Portnoy: Thanks so much for having me. Appreciate it.

Joe Dager: This podcast will be available at the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site. So, thanks everyone.

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Joe Dager is president of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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