### Improving donor engagement with ViewSpark

Andrew Olsen: Hey, this is Andrew Olsen, host of the Rainmaker Fundraising podcast. And I'm here with two great longtime friends: Jeff Kliewer and Kat Landa. Jeff is the CEO of ViewSpark, and Kat is Vice President at ViewSpark. And we're here at Citygate Network's national convention this week, talking with a lot of rescue mission leaders from all across the US and Canada. And Jeff, I just, before we get started, I'd love for you to give us some background. First of all, who you are, and then also share with us what is ViewSpark, and how did it come about?

Jeff Kliewer: Thanks, Andrew. Well, I'm the CEO of ViewSpark. I started ViewSpark about four years ago. I've been in the fundraising space about 25 years. Actually, I think it's now been about 30; looking back at numbers. I spent some time on the agency side, and then I went to the University of Southern California, and I was running the fundraising at the cancer center, there; the Norris, and did a couple other stops. Worked at a high school, Christian high school. And then for Joe Torre's baseball foundation. And then I got recruited back to SC, and this is what really happened for me: I was an Associate Dean, and I was running a $50 million campaign as part of the USC $6 billion campaign. And I tell you the numbers, just ... I mean, they're very large numbers. And only because we were closing very large gifts. We closed $5 million gifts. We closed annual fund gifts of $50, those types of gifts; all kinds of gifts. And yet, we had no way of engaging our donors and communicating back to them what we're doing with the money that they've given to us.

Jeff Kliewer: And so I looked at the technology in this space, and I noticed there's a bunch of crowdfunding. There's a bunch of social media-type technology. Of course, there's a bunch of companies that'll fix your website and make sure your website looks good; but no one had focused on that engagement technology, "This is what we did with the dollars you've given to us." And so at USC, we did a great job of taking money from donors. We did a great job of building buildings and creating scholarships and doing great research, but again, no one had focused on that engagement component.

Jeff Kliewer: I had a couple conversations with my dad, who spent 50 years as Executive Vice President at World Vision, running marketing and fundraising. And he says the same thing. He said, "You know, we did a great job over 50+ years of raising money and feeding kids and digging wells. But again, we didn't communicate back to the donors very well, 'This is what's happening with your giving.'" And if he were on this podcast, he would say, "We never gave donors the joy of giving." That's his phrase. And he's not on this podcast, because it would be three hours instead of 30 minutes.

Andrew Olsen: Those are your words, not mine.

Jeff Kliewer: I can say that. But he's our Chairman. He is a brilliant fundraiser. So I left USC to start ViewSpark. And early on, we raised some capital, and I kind of begged 10 clients to try it. Just, "Hey, would you just try this?" And the concept was, how can we take communication and tell donors what we're doing with their dollars? Not just asking for a gift, but to say, "This is what's happening with the money you've already given to us," and to say thank you. And so we started with 10 clients. We had a phenomenal response. Absolutely phenomenal response. And I started kind of digging in and saying, "What do we have here," and recognize that it was working really, really well. We started growing, and that's when I realized I needed some help, and I brought Kat Landa onto our team, and we've had a phenomenal run, now. We've got about 50 clients we're working with across a wide spectrum of verticals. We work with a lot of rescue missions and food banks, and some national and international clients, as well; emergency relief and kind of a good variety of that.

Andrew Olsen: Wow, 50 clients. I remember when, I think, it was three or four.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah.

Andrew Olsen: When we met at Urth Café in Pasadena, probably almost four years ago.

Jeff Kliewer: That's right.

Andrew Olsen: So that's pretty awesome growth.

Jeff Kliewer: Thank you.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, congratulations. So this is an interesting thing. This is not how most tech companies start. I know both of you very well. In fact, for our listeners, Jeff was my second boss when I got into fundraising almost 20 years ago. And Kat and I worked together for like, 10 years.

Jeff Kliewer: I give you credit for that, too, by the way.

Andrew Olsen: You should. You should. None of us, neither of you, are technologist. You're not coders. You're not programmers. You know? That's different than the way most tech companies launch, and I think it's also really critical to who you are as an organization. Talk a little bit about that.

Kat Landa: Yeah, I think it's interesting for the product itself, and its continued use with more and more clients, because we are bringing to the table what we most needed, as fundraisers. We're the gas. What couldn't I accomplish? What did I really want for my clients that we couldn't do with the existing technology? So we've been there. We've been in the seat, and we know what it's like to not be able to find a great solution or a tool to accomplish what you need to do, in terms of communication and engagement with donors. And I can't tell you how many times we sat with a client and said, "Just go outside. Just go out and grab a video of something that's happening right now. Go out to the warehouse. Go out to the program, and go talk to someone and get a quick soundbite from then, and send that out. People are going to be so excited to see something like that from you," and now we've finally ... You know, we couldn't get people to do it then.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, yeah.

Kat Landa: Because that's just too complicated. You know? How do I do that? What phone do I use? Where do I go? But now with this technology, it really does put the power of sharing that hallway conversation and that realtime moment right into someone's hands, and they think only from a perspective that starts with working with donors and fundraisers, which you didn't necessarily come up with that concept. You know?

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, yeah.

Kat Landa: And I think that's sort of how it happened, versus coming from a point of view of like, "What kind of technology could we build today, and how many people can we sell it to," you know?

Andrew Olsen: Right, yeah.

Kat Landa: So it's this different approach.

Jeff Kliewer: And we've had the ... We've surrounded ourselves with some very smart technology folks who handle that side. But yeah, it's been a lot of fun, as we've presented and shared our technology with non-profits. We actually had a group, a couple weeks ago, who applauded at the end of the presentation.

Andrew Olsen: Like physically applauded?

Kat Landa: Like physically-

Jeff Kliewer: Physically applauded.

Andrew Olsen: Pretty cool.

Jeff Kliewer: And said, "Congratulations," and we hear a lot of folks say, "Congratulations, you filled the gap. You met the need." And again, like Kat said, it just ... We've been in that seat. We've been there for years; for decades. And we know exactly what was needed, and that's why we built ViewSpark.

Andrew Olsen: Awesome. Yeah, you know I've got some clients that use the platform, and I've actually, my team, has deployed it for a couple of those clients. So we have a little bit deeper experience than probably some. And what I'm always amazed by, the technology is so simple to use. But it's also really robust. So being able to do things like segment your audience and messaging right within the platform and not having to do that in your CRM, and then feed a file in. I mean, those things make it so convenient.

Andrew Olsen: So from a technology perspective, it's really easy to use; but technology's only one piece of it. Right? You know, strategy and content are so critical. Talk a little bit about the clients that you have that are most successful. What are they doing differently in that space?

Kat Landa: I think the most important thing to remember is, with any technology or marketing strategy, is to keep it simple. Right? You know, you can easily look at a tool like this, and I've been on the phone with people who said, "Oh my gosh. Okay, this is what we've been needing. And I'm going to actually need 100 user licenses, and I'm going to put this in 23 countries tomorrow."

Jeff Kliewer: Or, "I'm going to hire someone to do ... "

Kat Landa: "I'm going to hire somebody to do ... " And that's where we go like, "Time out. Hold on a second. It's so much simpler than that. And we can get there, and we want you to get there, but we want you to be successful," so I think it's really just about ... Yeah, keeping it simple. And content wise, yeah, you know, you have to have a basic strategy, but our average user spends about seven minutes a week.

Andrew Olsen: Seven minutes a week?

Kat Landa: Seven minutes a week putting that time and thought and energy into getting something out. And really, we coach people on a couple of basic things. Get one out a week. It's basically an update, right? And it's just different than some of the other communications that you have going out. So get one out a week, and you're going to see success. So seven minutes is pretty simple. I think almost everybody can kind of do that, and we've had great conversations like with Penny, yesterday.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah.

Kat Landa: And I love her quote.

Jeff Kliewer: What was that?

Kat Landa: She was basically-

Jeff Kliewer: Oh, yeah.

Kat Landa: You know, "Gosh, if I can do this, anybody can do this." Right?

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, yeah.

Kat Landa: So you guys approve it, and then anyone could use this system. So it's really simple in terms of that.

Kat Landa: Now, I think there's so much you can add, working with your agency, or others, a really robust strategy around that; but you don't necessarily need to dive into a 12-month plan of, "What in the heck am I going to put out?"

Kat Landa: So I think the best things that happen are the more raw, the more real, the better.

Jeff Kliewer: That's really the heart of it.

Kat Landa: That is it. The raw, real content. And it's that getting leadership in front of that phone, because we're all mobile, and saying, "Hey, I'm walking into this meeting. Would you pray for us right now," or, "Can you be thinking about us at this Board meeting? We're going to make some decisions," or, "Hey, this is John. I just met in the hallway, and he's going through our program, and he's going great," and whatever that is, that very in the moment, raw, real content is what really works.

Andrew Olsen: Go ahead, Jeff.

Jeff Kliewer: And what we're hearing back from their donors is interesting, too. I mean, we, "Join up, please pray for us. We're going into a planning session," and then you get these responses from the donors saying, "Thanks for including us. We feel like-"

Andrew Olsen: Oh, that's interesting.

Jeff Kliewer: "We feel like we're a part of what's happening now." What's your phrase, Kat, of being behind the scenes, or that-

Kat Landa: It's just about being in the insider's circle.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, the insider's circle.

Kat Landa: It's, suddenly you're pulled into the mission in a way that you never were before, because you're seeing and hearing the pulse of the organization as it's rolling through its week.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, we like to say that ... You know, for the longest time, fundraising, especially for organizations like rescue ministries, has been all about extracting value from a donor. And it sounds like what you guys are really focusing on is how you push that value back to the donor.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, yeah.

Kat Landa: That's it.

Jeff Kliewer: And it's so much easier these days, because the content that people want is more of that raw and real feel, and simple. One of my favorite stories; we work with a Catholic charities organization that was responding to Hurricane Florence.

Andrew Olsen: Okay.

Jeff Kliewer: And the Executive Director had left, a small organization, and they had an administrative assistant who now had inherited ViewSpark. And Florence hits, and she says, "What do I do?" And you know, as Kat said, we kind of typically say, "Once a week, send a ViewSpark with an update, and maybe once a month, ask for a gift." Well, in an emergent situation, we've talked about ... You know, once a day.

Andrew Olsen: Sure.

Jeff Kliewer: You know, when something's going on, you kind of have permission to talk once a day. So I just said, "Once a day, walk outside, Molly, and take a picture and write a couple words, and send it out," because they were doing some food distribution in the parking lot. And the pictures were very raw. And the people were very distant in the photos, and they raised thousands of dollars. Thousands and thousands of dollars. It was simple. It was taking a picture or a video, and then it was, "354 people helped today. We're here distributing food right now." And again, that feel of, "This is what's happening right now," as opposed to the stock photo or something that happened three weeks ago that finally got processed and was able to share.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah.

Kat Landa: Not to mention that this group happened to only have 154 names on their file.

Andrew Olsen: Oh, wow.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah.

Kat Landa: So-

Jeff Kliewer: Not even donors. It was just names.

Andrew Olsen: Just names, yeah.

Kat Landa: They weren't even donors, it was people they just kind of collected on a sheet of paper. Right? So I get a lot of questions, "Oh, this sounds like a big technology, and we only have 10,000 donors, so I think it's too big for us." And I'm like, "It's not too big for you." It's really scalable. And we have many clients kind of in that just smaller range that are building their files through sharing, through something like this.

Andrew Olsen: So you mentioned sort of the emergency situations, and we know that for certain technology platforms, for things like text messaging, right? That those only really work when there's a large scale emergency, when there's free media coverage, things like that. So when we think about big things like Hurricane Katrina, right?

Kat Landa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Kliewer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrew Olsen: That's when the Red Cross was able to raise millions of dollars with SMS messaging. But it sounds like what I hear from you is that's one way that your clients are using the platform, but you have clients raising thousands of dollars regularly outside of any kind of emergency situation. This isn't just a tool you would use for that.

Jeff Kliewer: Right. It really comes down to weekly communication with your donors. And that can be too frequent for some organizations. We have some organizations where there is a figurehead or someone who is a prominent ... Who is well known. We have a church group that we work with that the head Bishop is very well known, and he does kind of a message of the week. So every Monday morning, he does a message. Kat, you know the numbers about the monthly gift conversion better than I do, for them.

Kat Landa: Yeah.

Jeff Kliewer: It's been phenomenal to see what they've been able to do.

Kat Landa: Yeah, they're actually ... They're very focused on monthly gift, and that's really what their ask is around. And through the giving flow that we've built out as part of the tool, we're focused there, as well, and getting people to convert over to monthly. And he's had upwards of 65% of the folks that he's communicating to and coming through the platform, convert over to be monthly donors.

Andrew Olsen: Wow, that's huge.

Kat Landa: Yeah.

Andrew Olsen: I mean, I know when-

Kat Landa: He's committed to it, but it's absolutely working for us.

Andrew Olsen: Sure, yeah. I know with one of our clients, they had ... We used the ViewSpark platform not just in the app environment, but also the donation page on their website, and they were seeing 11% conversion on the website without even asking for a monthly gift, which is unheard of in our space.

Jeff Kliewer: Right, right.

Andrew Olsen: So it seems like whatever you're doing in that area is working really well.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, yeah. The other piece, too, on that; we have clients ... In terms of communication methods, we have clients who have said to us, "We don't want to raise money with ViewSpark. We simply want to engage our donors," in more of a major donor environment.

Andrew Olsen: Sure.

Jeff Kliewer: And the thinking there, and ... It's, "I'm going to send you an update. Mrs. Smith, thanks for your gift. Here are people using the microscope that you help purchase for the lab." You know? That type of thing. And their thinking is, "I'll be able to do a couple of those communications and then sit down with Mrs. Smith and say, 'Mrs. Smith, would you write a check for $25,000?'" And of course, she would say, "Thanks for giving an update and showing me what, actually, my money did, instead of just going into the dark and then coming back and asking me for another gift."

Andrew Olsen: That's great. So the other thing that we see right now is acquisition's just really tough. Are any of your clients using the ViewSpark platform to acquire supporters?

Kat Landa: Yeah, actually part of the platform, of course, is the text space and world, and that has changed so significantly in the last 10 years. You know, text to give is not text to give anymore.

Andrew Olsen: Right.

Kat Landa: Right? So we're not working through phone companies with limited amounts of donor information and $10 a pop. So the texting environment has changed rapidly, and it's really coming for us. So one way that we help on that acquisition side of things is that part of the program is sort of the keyword and short code combination. So if you've ever heard anybody say, "Text HELP to 555-888, and XYZ will happen," right? So we have the ability to return a message to folks that is about giving, direct giving; and there's a giving link, there. We have the ability to change that message into a signup link, or any message, really, that you wanted. So that combination of communication is really important. If you're in a big audience or at an event, or anywhere where you're just kind of posting a group of people and having a conversation about the mission that you're on, you can offer that information, and then they're immediately added to the system.

Andrew Olsen: Okay.

Kat Landa: So you can scoop up dozens and hundreds of people at anything like that, by using that keyword-short code combination and then pulling them into the system, and then immediately after, they're in there, and you can send them one of these updates.

Andrew Olsen: Gotcha.

Kat Landa: "Hey, it was awesome to meet you last night at this event, and I just want to continue to encourage you or update you or tell you what we did today with that support that you have already given."

Andrew Olsen: So Jeff, you shared with me, at one point, a client of yours that was doing some event engagement, and had some real good success around this. Tell us about that.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, they had a ... It was a marriage organization that did a marriage retreat, and they were talking ... It was kind of a newer audience to them. They had a lot of folks attending that were not registered, or they didn't have email or communication, and they got up on stage, and they just talked about, "We got this great event where we can encourage you and inspire you, but we want to send other updates and give you more information to support you and encourage you. We put a keyword and short code out there. If you want to learn more, text," I think it was, "TMR to 555-888," and from there, they were able to start getting communication with email or text. And then about the audience, I think it was 600 people in the audience; about 300 people texted to connect.

Jeff Kliewer: And you know, I'm a fundraiser. I was there at the event, and I thought, "Oh, they'll get 10%. Maybe 5%. If it's 5%, 10%, that's really good." Literally half the audience. And they raised more money that fall than they'd ever raised before, because they had this whole new audience of folks to connect with.

Jeff Kliewer: And the point was, once a week, it was kind of the encouraging word, or the inspirational thought for marriage. And then, "Hey, we need a scholarship for our event that's coming up."

Andrew Olsen: So more, again, bringing value back to the supporters before you're asking.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah.

Andrew Olsen: Which is, sadly, sort of a-

Kat Landa: A new thing.

Andrew Olsen: ... newly rediscovered approach to fundraising.

Jeff Kliewer: Right, right.

Andrew Olsen: I hate saying that, but it's the truth.

Jeff Kliewer: Well, and part of what Kat was talking about with the event; one thing that's really nice about what we've accomplished is when you have an event specifically around raising money for a specific program or something, and you get these folks that text and connect that way, you're able to communicate back to them specifically about that event, what you can ... You know, "We want to raise money to renovate the gym." Well, you can talk to those folks that connected at the event, specifically about the gym. Don't talk to them about five other programs. Talk to them specifically about what they attended; the event they attended, and what the money was raised for.

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So I've sold enough programs to non-profit organizations to know that often, especially when it comes to technology, you sort of hit a brick wall where whoever's involved in the buying decision says things like, "Well, wait a minute. To onboard technology, we have to have our whole technology committee involved in this," and, "It's a six-month RFP process," because the investments are usually significant. Is that the conditions that would be around ViewSpark engagement? How does that work? What does that look like?

Kat Landa: No. No, but we do run into that, and get that question a lot. We were very committed to making sure that this was something that was accessible. The idea here was, again, born from our own need of wanting to use a technology like this. And the last thing that would be helpful is to make it really difficult to get on board. Right? So we know what that's like. We've all sat in front of Boards and had to convince them to make decisions about things. So we wanted it to just be something really easy, accessible, and affordable.

Kat Landa: So first of all, we're simply a monthly subscription. So that makes it pretty easy to go, "Well, let me try this out and see if it's something for us, and I don't have to make a multi-year commitment, or anything like that around implementation." There's no hardware, there's no ... You know? This is a simple signup and go kind of process. So our typical setup is pretty nominal setup fee, and then again, a very scalable monthly fee. And then we do not require a longterm contract. So most organizations, especially some of the things that are offering some other type of communication technology, you got to sign up at least a year, if not a two-year contract.

Kat Landa: We have such incredible retention with the clients that we're working with that we know you're going to love it, and so we do it month-to-month.

Andrew Olsen: Okay.

Kat Landa: So you can ... Yeah. Of course, you sign up and everything, but then if you try it for a couple months and it doesn't work for you, you can opt out.

Andrew Olsen: Wow.

Kat Landa: And just stop using it. But that's not going to happen, because you're-

Andrew Olsen: Sure. So on that topic, Q4 of 2018 was pretty terrible for a lot of non-profits. Fundraising results, other than donors giving $1,000 or more, fundraising was down. And I heard a lot of organizations, people like M+R, who do the email benchmark study every year, they came out immediately and said not only is fundraising down, but it's really down in the digital space.

Andrew Olsen: Well, when I've talked to some of your clients, they don't seem to report that same thing. Talk to me about that.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, that's been a real win for us, and actually been a lot of fun to talk about. It was a tough fall, and fundraising was down, but our clients did really well. In fact, one of our clients said that every program they did was down, but ViewSpark was up and literally saved our campaign. We saw a ten to one ROI for our clients.

Andrew Olsen: I'm sorry. Say that again. Did you say you saw a ten to one ROI?

Jeff Kliewer: Ten to one ROI, yeah.

Kat Landa: I have trouble talking about it, because I feel like people won't believe us.

Jeff Kliewer: We actually [crosstalk 00:21:53]-

Kat Landa: But I've got the data. I've got all the data.

Jeff Kliewer: Should we just say it's a seven to one ROI? Can we make it lower? You know?

Kat Landa: We started at nine, like, "Should we really tell [inaudible 00:22:01]-"

Jeff Kliewer: But you know, and I would love to say we're going to get ten to one year round. That's not the case, but industry standard in the fall would be four to one, maybe. Pretty close to somewhere around there.

Kat Landa: On a good year, yeah.

Jeff Kliewer: On a good year. And again, I just go back to ... We provide our clients with the ability to tell the donors what's happening with their dollars. We have one of our clients, a rescue mission, had a huge snowstorm come through and literally walked outside, took his phone, opened the ViewSpark app, and looked into the phone and said, "I'm standing outside. It's freezing cold. I've got my hat and my jacket on. Thanks to you, all the homeless folks are inside and they're safe, and they're warm." Didn't ask for money. Didn't do anything. It was a 30-second video. And by the way, it was very raw, because the wind was blowing and you couldn't hear his words very well, because the wind was blowing in the microphone. Raised thousands and thousands of dollars from that 30-second video. And probably, a four-minute exercise of walking outside.

Jeff Kliewer: But again, it was real. It was what was happening right now. It was timely, and it made sense. So I think that's what really created that wind for us, was [crosstalk 00:23:10]-

Andrew Olsen: Yeah, it sounds like it. That's awesome. Well, we're just about out of time, but I know that ... Or at least I believe, unless I'm mistaken, that you all have some sort of special opportunity for listeners of our podcast.

Jeff Kliewer: Oh, we have to do a special if we come on your show, Andrew.

Kat Landa: Yes. So for all of you listening to Rainmaker Fundraising podcast, we are going to do a 50% discount on your setup fee. So all you need to do is, when you speak with us and our team, just mention the podcast, and then we'll apply that automatically to your setup, and you'll be on your way.

Andrew Olsen: That's awesome. A 50% discount on your setup for ViewSpark. All you have to do is mention Rainmaker Fundraising podcast. How do they get in touch with you?

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah, they can find us ... Go to viewspark.org and from there, you can fill out a interest form.

Kat Landa: And give us a call from the number on there.

Jeff Kliewer: Yeah.

Kat Landa: Browse around, watch the demo.

Jeff Kliewer: Come find us at the conference.

Kat Landa: Yeah, come find us.

Andrew Olsen: Awesome. Thank you both for being here. Thanks for sharing. Thanks for building a great platform.

Jeff Kliewer: Thank you, appreciate it.

Kat Landa: Thank you, Andrew.

Jeff Kliewer: Thank you.

Kat Landa: Thanks.