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Interview with Sarah Bunting from TomatoNation.com



Adrian Bye: Today, I'm talking with Sarah from Tomâto Nation. I guess I should say it the American way – Tomato Nation. Probably nobody of you have ever heard of Sarah. She doesn't like it when I say this but I don't think she's really very well-known. I don't think her blog has a whole lot of traffic. Her blog in fact, and which you can go have a look at, is kind of like a standard template from WordPress. It's not even really like well-designed. So she's going to be mad at me for saying all this stuff but the amazing thing that Sarah does year after year is there is a giving challenge called DonorsChoose and Sarah comes along and just destroys all of the technology guys with donations like she puts together through her little blog with not much traffic. She just blows away all of the other guys combined. I think Sarah has got a big story to tell and I'm fascinated to hear it.

Sarah, thanks for joining us.

Sarah Bunting: Thank you for having me and my tiny blog with no traffic.

Adrian Bye: Let's talk about that – a tiny blog with no traffic. You do get a lot of comments but when I look at your blog, you have an Alexa rank of about 230,000 as of right now. Now obviously, those can be distorted, inflated and all that sort of stuff but that would generally indicate a blog that has a few visitors a month. Am I wrong?

Sarah Bunting: Well, it depends on the metrics that you're using, of course. The ones that I use show that I'm getting 25,000 to 30,000 unique users a month. I don't really do anything with search engine optimization, or trying to juice my keywords or anything like that. I probably should do those things but I really don't. I launched the blog in '97 so I've been around since the internet was in shorthand.

Adrian Bye: '97? Was there even an internet back then?

Sarah Bunting: Yes, we used chalkboard and we then we just mailed it to each other.

Adrian Bye: Right, okay.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, we wound it up with a crank. Yes.

But I also was a cofounder of a much larger site called Television Without Pity, which was a television review site that got more like a million unique users a month and so if I am known at all anymore, it would probably be from that. But Tomato Nation is much more of a boutique site, I guess, niche and it's also a holdover really from 10 years ago when no one called it "blogs". It was you had a site or a journal. I was much more of a generalist and wrote about just about everything culture-related. I have an advice column. I tell stories about my cats. "Dated" is not the right word perhaps but it's a holdover from a more generalist time on the internet when websites were a little more like print media, and tried to be a little more-things-to-more-people kind of thing instead of being a little more niche and a little more marketed or target-marketed.

Adrian Bye: Just in terms of traffic, you're saying 25,000 to 30,000 visitors per month and so we're talking daily like under 1,000 visitors a day.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, if you average it out. That sounds about right. I there are spikes, you know. The weekend is quiet, and then Fridays, people come in to read the advice column because that's one where I solicit opinions from the readers so they tend to come in and sit on the site for longer.



Adrian Bye: Just by comparison, we can talk some of the specifics and the numbers, and this is what I find hilarious and impressive. Craig Newmark who runs craigslist, I don't even know what their traffic is but he measures their traffic in billions of paid views.

Sarah Bunting: Sure.

Adrian Bye: In the most recent round of DonorsChoose, Craig was able to raise \$13,850 from 13 donors and Tomato Nation with Sarah was able to raise \$374,036 from 1,132 donors.

Sarah Bunting: Yes. If you compare the numbers that Gawker Media put up and this is all of their sites, I think it's similarly a lopsided comparison.

Adrian Bye: That means Craig didn't put his DonorsChoose giving page on every page of craigslist so he didn't have the visibility. I mean you work at this obviously.

Sarah Bunting: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Do they put it up on every page of Gawker Media's site.

Sarah Bunting: I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean I think it was on all the sites in the sidebar but I think they didn't do as much to promote it. I can't speak to what Deadspin did to promote it but that's not really in there per view. I mean that's a sports site and I think it's not – I don't know – branded for what they do.

Adrian Bye: You said you work it and that's what I want to talk about. It's how you actually work about it because while this is giving, I'm of the strong opinion that this can be just applied equally to business. Now, I think there're a lot of things that we can learn in what you're doing here and apply them to business.

Fred Wilson, for example – rockstar VC blogger in New York City – his results were he raised \$38,733 from 217 donors so that means...

Sarah Bunting: Not bad.

Adrian Bye: Yes, I know. He doubled what he's done before but still one-tenth of what you've been raising. I worked out the numbers. Your average donation size per person was something like \$330 and his is \$178.

Sarah Bunting: Right. I'm not sure that number is going to be entirely accurate because I do have a few angels in the group that donate a large proportion that I had one angel who I think provided matching funds in the amount of, this year, \$27,000. I had one who...

Adrian Bye: Listen. Before we go into all the strategy on that – we'll go through that – I'm just talking like overall your average donation size.

Sarah Bunting: Right, okay.

Adrian Bye: You don't have to be embarrassed on... I mean I donated on Fred's one and I gave \$100. Now, I'm seeing like the average donation size of \$178 and then on yours, it's \$330. So okay, they're skewed up by some people giving more money but now I'm feeling like a little bit of a loser.

Sarah Bunting: Right.

Adrian Bye: So my apologies and I'll do better next year.

Sarah Bunting: I think there's no need to apologize because part of my whole sale strategy every year is to remind people that in the case of this particular charity, even \$5 will make a difference, and that I want to get everyone involved and make everyone feel like their \$5 or \$500 but even \$5 will make a difference, and that people shouldn't do that thing Americans sometimes do where it's like, "I'm not going to vote because it doesn't matter." If everyone thinks that then it doesn't. That's part of what I do. It's kind of give everyone in the readership ownership of the project...

Adrian Bye: Yes.

Sarah Bunting: ...because it's true also and make everyone feel that if we don't all do this together, it can't be done without everyone. It definitely is...

Adrian Bye: Right. Before we go down that part, can we just take a couple of steps back, and could you tell us firstly a little bit about yourself and your blog, and then about DonorsChoose and why you support it just so we can put everything into context, and then I'd really love to dig into your strategies if that's alright with you?

Sarah Bunting: Sure. I'm a writer and an editor. I went to Princeton University and graduated with a Creative Writing degree, which is exactly as useful as you might assume, and worked various, odd jobs before the internet presented a better option for me in terms of getting my work out there. It was very difficult for me to break into print so 15 years ago when I was getting started, I started up a little website and just put my thoughts down. It was a way to keep the writing muscles warm while I was, at the same time, making money by being a records clerk – very glamorous. Try not to be jealous.

Adrian Bye: Did you have to show your Princeton degree to get that job?

Sarah Bunting: I did not. I just had to type really fast. Bless the union.

After that, I sort of was building up various online presences and my pretty much day job, if you want to call it that – I worked at home but my day job – was Television Without Pity for close to 10 years. I did that with two Canadian partners and that was my main focus. It was television and pop culture, and then I was freelancing as a result of that for msnbc.com, and various other publications online and off. Then we sold that site to Bravo a couple of years ago. God bless. So that's my work history on the internet. Tomato Nation, which is my own blog, was not sold and I've continued to update that regularly for over a decade. Geez.

Adrian Bye: What's Tomato Nation about?

Sarah Bunting: Tomato Nation isn't really about any one particular thing. I sort of wanted to be a humor writer and it was something that I could do so I started out writing humorous essays once week, and then I was dared to start an advice column 10 years ago so I did it as a joke because all the other advice columns were so bad and I thought, how hard can this be, why are they always screwing up, why is Ann Landers such an idiot, and then it's actually a lot harder than it looks. But it has an advice column.

Adrian Bye: That's one of the things that I've noticed. Tomato Nation isn't really about anything, right? You're just talking. It's your personality coming across and just talking about stuff you like. Is that correct, do you think?

Sarah Bunting: Well, I prefer to think it's about everything.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Sarah Bunting: I like to put a positive spin on it but yes, there isn't a niche. There are certain things that I don't really do. I mean I don't talk about tech, really. I mean there are things it doesn't do. There is not a branded focus except that there does seem to be a lot of salty language, making fun of celebrities for driving drunk and that kind of thing.

Adrian Bye: Can you tell us the work that you did to develop your template? I mean you must have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to get your site design done.

Sarah Bunting: Yes. Well, when I first started writing the site and it was on a page on SpryNET, this is like going back. I mean the site is old. It had no design then, either. I had to hand code all the HTML and I used to call it the fastest-loading site on the internet. It was no graphics. It was nothing, you know? I think visual interest and a good design is wonderful and important but it's not why people come to Tomato Nation so I just haven't focused on it. As long as the text is relatively readable and people can find everything pretty much then...

Adrian Bye: I'd like to congratulate you because it does appear to me like you took the standard WordPress theme, the default one, and then you changed the color to red. Would that be a fair summary of your site?

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I believe I also altered the font somewhat.

Adrian Bye: Okay, good job.

Sarah Bunting: That is what we call "focusing on core business and not wasting time on other things."

Adrian Bye: No, I agree! I mean there's a guy named Eric Reeves who talks about developing startups, starting with the core stuff and not getting caught up in everything that doesn't make a difference. No question whatsoever.

Sarah Bunting: It's really just laziness on my part, I will admit. But it is also that kind of thing is not important.

Adrian Bye: If there's anything to see, you make a blog post and you've got 200 responses to it.



Sarah Bunting: Something's working. It might not be the design but apparently that's not all that's important.

Adrian Bye: Tell me then. Where is your traffic coming from? Are you like a Twitter maniac? Are you doing like hardcore SEO like you're out there competing with the Viagra guys for your traffic? Do you have millions of people on your e-mail list? Where's it all coming from?

Sarah Bunting: It's just coming from – what's the word I want – endurance, I

guess. Duration of time – I think that when I first started, I had three readers and two of them were blood relatives. Eventually, someone forwarded it, and so on and so forth, and then I did pull a lot of traffic off of the larger television site for awhile. But I think it's mostly reliability that people do know that there's going to be new content of some kind at least a couple of times a week. I do have a Twitter account. I do have a Facebook account for the site. But the site predated that, and these are things that everyone has now.

Adrian Bye: Do you think initially people found out about you from your television show and that's what gave it a boost, and then they kept coming back?

Sarah Bunting: Initially, no. Actually, I met my partners on the television site through Tomato Nation and that we were all members of this bulletin board that was devoted to TV. But I think it was just the slow accruing of people who would've had one of articles forwarded to them, and then they saw some things they liked in the archives and stuck around. I really haven't done mailing lists. I haven't done SEO. It's mostly just kind of waiting for the flight to quality, I guess, hopefully. Knock wood. I mean again the site was started in '97 so the way that you promoted yourself was much different, and then I've adopted...

Adrian Bye: You're like the internet equivalent of an Amish farmer compared to some of the guys that I talk to. I mean it's incredible. Congratulations for making it work. It's amazing.

Sarah Bunting: Thank you. It's like some people still like to use a manual typewriter, and that's kind of my emotional wavelength.

Adrian Bye: So what is it? I mean are people bookmarking your site? When you make a blog post and you have 200 comments to it, where are all those people finding out? Do they bookmark you like, “Oh, I want to go and write a response every Friday because it’s the advice column,” or is it...

Sarah Bunting: I think for some people, that’s true. Again every time I have a new entry, it does go out on the Twitter stream, it does go out on the Facebook update and then people retweet it or however it is they’re spreading it. But I think regular readers – either I’m on a bookmarks list, I’m on a reader aggregate stream, it’s just part of their daily chore or they click on it out of Twitter. I don’t know where they always come from. I think at this point, I do have regular readership and I also have different readerships for different things. There are people who only read what I write about baseball and don’t care about any of the rest of it. There are people who only read the advice column and were not aware that I even wrote anything else because they only come in through that link and they never go to the homepage.

On top of having a loyal demographic, I also have some sub-demographics, I believe. I haven’t done any sort of formal information collection about this to see what demographic...

Adrian Bye: Is the majority of your readership women?

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I would say.

Adrian Bye: Yes, because as a guy, I haven’t found a site that I could particularly get into a lot. It’s like *Sex & the City*. I know people like it but I can’t remember why.

Sarah Bunting: Oh, I was the same way with *Sex & the City*. That’s sort of what I mean. When I’m writing about baseball then there’s a big chunk of the demographic that doesn’t care because for better or worse, a lot of women don’t give a shit about baseball and a lot of men don’t, either, actually. If I’m writing about the NFL, that’d be different because everybody loves football!

Adrian Bye: Sure. Explain to me then. You publish a post. What is a post that is going to get 200 comments on it and why is that happening? What it seems to me is that because you’re strong in writing and you write in a very emotional way that you have such a strong connection with your readership that they feel like it’s all a team. Then because you all feel like you’re a team, and then you all want to sit around the coffee table and chat in the comments that therefore you’ve built effectively a community through... It’s not really a forum. It’s a fairly limited community platform but then because you’ve built that sort of community and there is that connection there that when you go and do something like DonorsChoose, you kick ass.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I think that’s true. I think that having run a much larger site which did have a community bulletin board for a very long time, and having seen kind of the best and worst of what that could generate in terms of behavior, and the sense of community, I do have some rules for commenting. I do check every comment before it goes through. I’m trying to keep the conversation a conversation and not have spam but also people in all caps being rude to each other, yelling. Salty language is fine, obviously. I use it constantly. Strong opinions are fine and disagreeing with me absolutely is fine. But I’m trying to have it be a discussion and a debate, and not just a way-out-of-whack, signal-to-noise ratio like you may see elsewhere where the comments aren’t moderated as closely.

A post that gets a lot of comments does tend to be...

I'm not going to lie. I have two cats. It's part of the spinster code and any post about cats, joking about cat behavior or I ran this one thing that pretended to be this anthropological study about the cats, and people on the internet love that. They love to tell their own stories about their cats, dogs, ferrets or whatever. That gets a lot of comments. Making a bold statement on a point of etiquette on which you know you're outdated but you feel very strongly also will get a lot of comments. Cat-key.org linked to this essay I wrote a few years ago, saying, "Look, I don't care if you don't want to do it. You're writing me a goddamn thank-you note. I'm not buying you anything else. That's how that's going to go. You can like it. You cannot like it." A lot of people really didn't like it and accused me of being a fascist, "Who are you to decide what people do with their time?", "You're not Emily Post," and "Fuck you, (bleep)!" I mean it gets a lot of traffic something like that where you take a position.

I don't write posts with the traffic in mind. I write about what I want and sometimes it strikes a chord, and people are actually in an argument in the comments right now about whether Sean Penn is a good actor. That wasn't my intent. I was just reviewing this movie and then people had strong opinions about it.

Adrian Bye: Who are your readers now? Are they people like you?

Sarah Bunting: I think sometimes yes and sometimes no. The demographic profile anecdotically would suggest that there are a lot of white ladies in their 30s who have cats but those are just the people who comment. It's hard to say. I think that there may be a large, silent majority. In my baseball posts, I love baseball. I've presented papers on baseball. I really would love to get into that more as a career option but I think that people do read those posts and forward them. But I don't think there's as much commenting on them. But that's a whole other sociology of the internet question that I'm actually not qualified to answer.

Adrian Bye: How much do you actually raise each year with your fundraising drives?

Sarah Bunting: It's been building each year. It's over the course of five years. I've had four fundraisers, and I believe my lifetime total is something close to \$580,000.

Adrian Bye: It's \$580,000 that you raised and I noticed you put Google AdSense on the site.

Sarah Bunting: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Are you able to talk about your revenues from Google AdSense?

Sarah Bunting: Oh, can you put the word "revenue" in quotes because not...

Adrian Bye: Yes, I know. Let's be real.

Sarah Bunting: Yes. They don't bother paying until you've made \$100. It covers my hosting expenses. Let's leave it at that. It gets me to break even.

Adrian Bye: Well, we don't want to break the terms of service of the Google AdSense publisher agreement because then they might...

Sarah Bunting: Yes, they are a little. I think technically I'm not even allowed to admit that I have them. I'm never supposed to mention it on the blog. Well, okay. It's like being undercover.

Adrian Bye: You may actually be making millions of dollars through those AdSense ads and not be telling us here.

Sarah Bunting: Yes.

Adrian Bye: No. I mean I think it's incredible.

Let's talk about how you do it. Actually, can you tell us a little bit about DonorsChoose and why you support that, and then maybe why you think your community supports that? I think we're getting the picture that you've built a community. People are connected. They feel connected with you. You're their leader. You've built a tribe.

Have you read the book about tribes?

Sarah Bunting: Yes.



Adrian Bye: Okay, so it seems like you've built a tribe.

Sarah Bunting: Apparently, I've built a tribe.

I heard about DonorsChoose by reading about it in The New Yorker in 2004, for those of you who are unfamiliar. It was founded by a former New York City public school teacher in response to the fact that teachers generally were underfunded. Like teachers in low-income schools didn't have enough money for basic materials at times. They were running out of paper. They all had to share one copy of the textbook or it had to be photocopied and then they're out of paper. They needed air purifiers. They needed desks. There was no money in the budget. This wasn't something that the local PTAs could provide. DonorsChoose's system is to solicit project proposals from the teacher and then the teacher posts this proposal. For example, I need 50 reams of paper for my class. It costs \$500. Then donors can donate the entire \$500 and pay for the entire project. They can donate \$50. They can donate \$5. Then you immediately see a difference on the proposal's page that you have made this donation and that it is going directly to the classroom. You're not writing a check to, for example, World Wildlife Fund and your \$500 probably goes into mailing materials asking you for even more money. It's a much more direct system. It's all on the internet. I mean of course they have a brick-and-mortar office, but it's all on the internet, and it's addressing a need directly.

Adrian Bye: One of the things that I found interesting, I talked with some of the DonorsChoose teachers and they were very clear that it's their stuff like if they moved to another school, they take it with them. It's not in the school system. It's outside. That sort of gives the teachers a little bit more control to be able to help their kids. I find that an interesting dynamic.

Sarah Bunting: Yes and I think that that's important also. At least my friends when I first got involved with the charity it's that the teachers just felt completely powerless to affect any change and on top of that, it was at a point in American politics where Bush II had made a bunch of promises about "no child left behind", and I

think then that result of that was that there was a lot more testing and a lot more fighting over social grade promotion, and not much funding and not much attention paid to how children really learn, and what they need to do that.

I am the product of, counting university, 17 years of private schooling that my parents were able to pay for in full. I had every possible advantage, and my education was made a big priority by my parents and they were able to give that to me which I'm very grateful for. But many, many people in this country don't have that and are forced to rely on the public schools to educate their kids, and the public schools would like to do that but they're not able to and certainly there are no extras: whole schools without arts programs; whole schools without certain books that we took for granted and they have to pass around one book among 40 kids. I just thought since I have been lucky in this way and since this is clearly a need that I think a small investment in something like this pays off really big down the road for the entire society, and I found it very attractive.

Getting back to the fact that Tomato Nation is not designed at all, DonorsChoose.org, their website, is functional. It doesn't look like it's from the past or anything like that. But when I first got involved with it, it was very stripped-down like the navigation was and still is pretty basic that you're only given the links that you need and it's not a lot of flash on it. It's not a lot of bells and whistles. It's trying to give you the information that you need and it's not wasting a lot of time with extras, and I found that very appealing sort of as a small business person and as a donor that I felt like there was not a lot of stat on it.

Adrian Bye: Right.

Sarah Bunting: I felt like it was run with an eye towards just 95% doing what it was designed to do which was to get resources to teachers and to public school kids, and not passing around with, "Let's have this benefit and let's do a concert."

Adrian Bye: Can we talk a little bit then about how this actually works? You do one fundraising drive per year. Is that right?

Sarah Bunting: Yes.

Adrian Bye: When do you start the drive and at what particular time? Why do you pick that time?

Sarah Bunting: I actually didn't pick that time. I have to go back a little bit. The first year that my readers and I were involved with this was around the presidential elections in 2004. Whatever everyone else's politics are, I don't judge you but Bush's reelection was a grave disappointment to me and to many of my readers who are political progressive. People were writing into the advice column actually and saying, "How do I manage the next four years when I feel like I don't belong in this country and like I don't share the values of Bush?"

Adrian Bye: How many of your readers are Bible-belt thumpers and conservative, Bush-voting, gun-carrying types of people?

Sarah Bunting: Based on the comments, none.

Adrian Bye: Okay.

Sarah Bunting: We do have some current and ex-military who sometimes have a different perspective on certain decisions but as far as the commenting goes...

Adrian Bye: That's another thing then that's an important thing to identify. You've got a very strong theme through your group. It is very much a group that identifies together.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I would say so. I mean I think that there are some people who will take an outlying position but in terms of politics, I've made it very clear through one of my more popular essays actually that I am a social progressive, fiscal conservative feminazi and I'm really not trying to hear any sexist language or I'm pro gay marriage and prochoice. Other people's beliefs are other people's beliefs but would that make certain readers uncomfortable? Yes, that's possible. I can live with it. It's not a value judgment. It is what it is.

Adrian Bye: When do you do your fundraising each year? When do you start?

Sarah Bunting: It's in October but this is why I need to back up. When I first began this drive, it was in response to feeling powerless to affect anything as progressives so I invited my readers to donate to DonorsChoose.

Adrian Bye: Oh, so this is a big part of it. The donations are actually in response to the political environment.

Sarah Bunting: Initially, they were because a big part of the readers' frustration with Bush is that he presented as this anti-intellectual politician who really had no interest in education or in keeping his promises about education, and in response to that feeling of powerlessness, frustration and why-don't-we-all-just-move-to-Canada, I said, "Listen. I just read about this organization where you can give some money directly to a public school classroom. You can make a difference and you can feel like you exist in this system." So that's how that started. After that, I believe we raised \$23,000 that time. In response to that, I was invited into the DonorsChoose offices to tell them how I had managed to do that. I didn't really have a ton of good answers for them at that time but then DonorsChoose launched what they then called the Blogger Challenge but is now called the Social Media Challenge that it would take place every October from October 1st to October 31st. It would be kind of a throw down between all these various blogs.

Adrian Bye: I mean there's status that comes along with that. The guy is like really featured. It's fascinating to see the list because there're all these small number and then along comes you.

Sarah Bunting: Yes. I don't think that I necessarily – whatever – invented this idea but it was interesting to see because for a nonprofit that was based pretty much entirely in the online space, they seemed sort of shocked that another online space could actually leverage that in a way that made a lot of sense. I mean we couldn't necessarily figure out exactly why so much money had been given. Bush is not going to be reelected every year so how am I going to do this next year? But I think that they realized at that point that if one blog can earn all this money, there're a bazillion blogs out there, and if you set it up as kind of a competition with a leader board and give it kind of a contest festival atmosphere then you can really leverage it. I think the first year they did it, I was sort of talking a lot of shit about Fred Wilson. What he's doing is great and I obviously have nothing against the guy personally but it made it more fun to be like, "Fred Wilson thinks that he can challenge our fundraising abilities and I don't think you guys should put up with that crap so how about everybody cough up another \$10 and show Fred Wilson who's boss?" Then we also killed Steven Colbert that year, and he had a TV show and mentioned his drive on the show, and still shits stomped him. So who knows? It's kind of this miraculous, weird thing.

Adrian Bye: That's actually not a theme for fundraising or potentially making money and other stuff as well. It's you've created a common enemy. You've got one through the political system with Bush, and then you've got a second one there with Fred who obviously I know as well, I've interviewed and I think he's a great guy.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I know. Fred is excellent.

Adrian Bye: You obviously like him, too.

Sarah Bunting: Yes. Well in Fred, certainly the first year, Fred e-mailed me and was like, "So, I see that you're killing us. Who the hell are you?" Then I wrote back, "Well, I'm kind of nobody."

But at this late date in my fundraising career with this group of readers in this particular organization, a lot of it is just, I would say, muscle memory. Like the readers know that this will happen every year. They save up their pennies. They take great pride in dusting the competition and so I don't have to always work that hard to sell it to them at this point because they know what it is. Last year was tough.

Adrian Bye: So your readers actually save up for this?

Sarah Bunting: I think some of them do, yes.

Adrian Bye: So it's really pretty important to them?

Sarah Bunting: Yes, it's become something of an institution in the sense that they are part of this thing that is bigger than they are. I think they feel relied upon by me, by DonorsChoose, by the other competitors.

For this year, I did offer to remove myself from the competition. I said, "I'll still raise money at another time of year but don't you think that may be this might be getting a little depressing for other participants?" But DonorsChoose felt that it was an inspiration, it was a motivation for other participants. I actually don't know how true that is. I wouldn't know how to gauge that. First of all, I'm just doing what I just do.

Adrian Bye: You set the pace. You can't pull out. There's no way you can do that. You're going to show these guys up.

Sarah Bunting: I surely don't know how I'm going to top \$350,000 next year and that's a jump out of a...

Adrian Bye: You can do it by getting \$500,000.

Sarah Bunting: We'll see. Frankly, I didn't give myself good odds this year. I just had faith that the money would come from somewhere that if I'd asked, it would appear with this kind of *Field of Dreams* faith.

Adrian Bye: Yes, doing this down home – laid back angle on it. But let's be real here. You do a lot of work. You do a lot of posts about it. Also, you have a lot of bonuses, which you give away when people donate, don't you?

Sarah Bunting: Yes.

Adrian Bye: Can you maybe explain some of that stuff, what kind of thinking and how that works?

Sarah Bunting: I sort of do the fundraiser in the framework of a contest which is actually how it started. I do a contest every year. People can win things. That's how that started. Forward me your DonorsChoose receipts and that will be your entry into the contest. I think that people do enjoy getting free stuff and people also enjoy contributing free stuff so that's a whole other angle or a whole other way that people can help with the

contest. That's kind of an excuse at this point. I feel like a lot of the readers don't care whether they win anything. They feel like they've already won. The DonorsChoose setup, and the feedback that you get from the teachers and the students, is extremely touching and rewarding for people. I feel like for some of them if I give them a copy of Civilization IV on CD-ROM or tickets to something or other, they appreciate it but it's no longer why they're participating. They're not participating to win prizes.

Adrian Bye: Is it part of a movement? Maybe you're going to be a politician from this?

Sarah Bunting: I'd like to think, no. I don't know that it's a movement necessarily. First of all, part of it is just logistically speaking during the month of October, if you're not part of the contest and following the contest then you're kind of going to feel left out of what's going on, on the blog. Part of it is that community aspect.

Adrian Bye: You've taken a blog that people follow and you've taken your community. As a leader, you've turned it into the contest. So that's the first thing. You want to pay attention to Tomato Nation and look at the...

Sarah Bunting: For the month of October, it definitely is the contest and I do have to occasionally have to apologize to readers who, for whatever reason, don't have much interest in it, and say, "More regular programming will resume on the 1st of November but until then, we have kids who are counting on us! Let's buy books!" and then occasionally put up a movie review just so that people don't go away forever and not come back.

Adrian Bye: What are they talking about in the comments during the time that you're running the promotion?

Sarah Bunting: They're mentioning specific projects that they'd like to see funded that are either from the area where they grew up, it's a subject matter that interests them or it's a former teacher of theirs sometimes. They're talking about how far ahead we are of everyone else or what proportion of the total fundraising we've done, and who is making a run at trying to catch us. They're talking about the letters that they received from the classroom and how touching those are. They're talking about just logistical things like, "I can't find a certain project. Did I donate to the right place?" They're talking to each other, I think. The best part of...

Adrian Bye: Do your readers build a relationship with each other or is it all just a one-way relationship with you?

Sarah Bunting: I think they build a relationship with each other. I call them the Tomato St. Irregulars that you see the same names over and over again, you definitely recognize them, and then there are some only occasional commenters but I think that part of it is that feeling of community both within the contest and generally on the blog that you do have some regular posters who are known to each other. I don't know if they socialize apart from me. They're welcome to.

Adrian Bye: Have you ever like had people come and meet face-to-face anywhere?

Sarah Bunting: I've done that a couple of times. I had a little baseball-watching conference, gave some stuff away and actually raised a little money for DonorsChoose doing that. I'm thinking of doing a much larger meetup. Then whenever I do my stunt, the other about this fundraiser is that I always promise to do some crazy thing while dressed as a tomato, obviously. I actually bought a tomato outfit and took it then straight off. This is how big the contest has gotten in my career life. People do come out to see me do whatever my stunt is. I did a little dance in Rockefeller Plaza one year and a bunch of people came out to watch that. This year, I

will be going to Atlantic City dressed as a tomato so I'm hoping that Philadelphia and South Jersey locals, come out, play a little blackjack and watch me befuddling casino security with my big foam outfit.

Adrian Bye: This is part of the competition so you actually make it fun as well and make it entertaining for people, "Hey, here's a way to humiliate Sarah, our noble leader, if you give more money to DonorsChoose."

Sarah Bunting: Right and you also have to signal to the readers that you believe that much in the project. One year, I shaved my head and not like down to stubble. I mean shaved it skin and promptly caught a cold right afterwards that lasted for two weeks. But as it turns out, I have a very nice, round head so that part of it actually worked out okay. But I think that in the case of my particular readership which is not necessarily wealthy people that there are a lot of graduate students, college students or people like me who sort of have enough money to get by but not a lot, especially in the last couple of years when the economy has been in the shitter, to ask them to give money to this organization on your say-so, I think that when I signal to them that this is that important to me that I will shave my head, that I will buy a \$300 vegetable outfit and prance around Washington DC – that's important to me. That's, I think, an article of faith with the readers that I take this very seriously. But I am working extremely hard behind the scenes to keep all the prizing organized, to make sure all the donations are going where they're supposed to go, to be liaison if people have questions about – whatever – the DonorsChoose backend that I know who to tell them whom to contact.

I definitely don't want them to feel like this is drudgery or that I'm complaining, but I do need them to know that I am working hard, that I am committed to this project, and that their participation is important to me, and is matched by full participation and investment of my time and energy on my side because at a time like this where the first element of discretionary spending that people kick out at an economic time like this is charitable giving. Frequently, that's the first thing to go. They can't afford to give to public radio anymore and they're fuck you Sierra Club like they have to tighten their belts. When I come in after the failure of Lehman Brothers, I'm like, "I would like you to raise \$100,000 for people you don't even know on my say-so," I think that a big part of their trust in me... I mean you're talking about is it a movement or am I an institution. I'm sort of not comfortable with the terms that big and grandiose to describe what I do because a lot of what I do is not what "I" do. It's what the readers do and it's what the charity does to be an attractive prospect. But a big part of it is making them feel that this is a public or sort of a community trust. What we do with the fundraiser is a community trust. Everyone has to tighten their belts now more than ever, etc.

Adrian Bye: So that's just another point to this. You're raising 10 times more than Fred Wilson, and the net worth of Fred Wilson's community versus yours is probably somewhat different.

Sarah Bunting: Yes, I think you're talking exponents there, probably. We do have some first-class fliers in the readership, I'm sure.

Adrian Bye: Can you tell us some of the other dynamics then? You mentioned earlier on in the call, someone that came and gave like \$27,000 in matching funds. What are some of the other things that are going on to get the numbers to be as high as they are? You're doing the matching donations. You're running around in a tomato outfit. Like what else is going on?

Sarah Bunting: As I said, I think that by this point, we started doing this in 2004 and now in 2009 I think that there is a muscle-memory aspect to it that the readers are prepared for this to happen in October. They're looking for projects that appeal to them. They're primed for it like they've been, not trained – I'm not super-comfortable with that word – but they've been prepared.

Adrian Bye: Right. So you've trained them to do it.

Sarah Bunting: Then there's another psychology's crowd aspect. It's kind of a reverse psychology thing where if I imply that, "I would really like you to reach \$70,000 by today. You probably can't do it but it would be really great and if you haven't donated yet, today would be a great day to do that." Then there is usually this small piranhas-on-a-cow type flurry of donations where they feel that I have impugned their honor, and they will then get to \$70,000 and show me what's boss.

Adrian Bye: Really? You actually put them down a little bit and they want to earn your approval.

Sarah Bunting: Yes or it's more like, "It's okay. We're all winners," and they're like, "Fuck that! We know how to do this. Out of the way, crazy lady. We got this." Then putting match points at key points in the fundraiser where experience has shown me that after, for example, the initial excitement, things tend to slow down. After the first big goal, things tend to slow down. Like once they get to \$50,000 a lot of them sort of sit back and feel like, "Okay, I've done my part," and that's where you really have to give them the guilt. I mean this year, my brother and his wife had a baby in June and my nephew is, by all objective measures, the cutest baby ever born, and I was not afraid to dress him up in little outfits including the tomato, put pictures of him on the site and say, "This is a future public school student. Do you want him to go without Hemingway in his English class, you coldhearted bastard?! Do it for the daisy!" I mean, "...shameless..." whatever works. That did work on a couple of people who said, "I thought I'd emptied my pockets but I found another \$10 for little nipper."

There're a bunch of things that I can do that do work. Some of it comes from having five years experience, knowing how this particular crowd will behave and putting incentives at the points where they're needed most, and also just having faith that they can get it done.

Adrian Bye: Do you hang out with your community in person or is it because you've just done it enough times?

Sarah Bunting: I have met various readers at various times. I'm certainly not adverse for that. It's a lot of fun for me, actually, to meet them in person especially if they're regular commenters. To put a face with the name is lots of fun. But I don't have regular meetups. It's something I'm thinking of starting in 2010 to try to make it more of an in-person community as well and see if people respond to that. The internet sometimes is its own thing and it doesn't translate. My readers are sort of sprayed all over the world. One of my larger donors this year is actually from Norway. I guess she feels US public schools are important, and I'm glad she does. But it's not necessarily a centralized or even New York-based community so much for how that would work out.

Adrian Bye: She's in Norway and she's giving to US public schools on your blog! She's been giving in Donors?

Sarah Bunting: I guess she just thinks I'm a nice girl.

Adrian Bye: Have you ever talked to her by phone?

Sarah Bunting: No, no need. E-mail. Also, the time difference is a little severe.

That's the amazing thing to me. It's the trust that some of these larger donors put in this project but at least initially it was something that they did on my say-so which is a big responsibility.

Adrian Bye: How does it work with the larger donor? Do they approach you? Do you go out and solicit them? Do you do matching? Like what's the deal for a bigger donor?

Sarah Bunting: It depends. Usually, they've approached me. I have a couple who are in my real-life circle that I've approached that I can rely on every year. But the bigger donors really approached me. In one case, "I have a trust that was left to me for charitable giving and I would like to set up a system with the contest this year where if certain projects are donated to, like certain science projects for example, then I will donate a like amount." But generally speaking, they approach me and it's often because they want certain projects from a certain part of the country or certain subject matter to be addressed, and they want to ensure that extra attention is given to that and that in my daily post, I say, "Here're five projects that we're focusing on today in Detroit," for example, "Donors to this project can receive a special prize and we will get extra money if these projects are completed." That's helpful motivationally that the donors can feel that they can control some of the money which they can and then we're given an extra boost. This extra boost creates extra boosts of their own as people are inspired by a big jump in the number to become a part of it. It's built on itself. So that's very helpful.

But I did consider doing a little road show maybe this year because I asked for just a rid-o-culous amount of money that I had no reasonable expectation would ever we raise. I was considering working my various contacts and trying to get in front of someone at the Trump Organization or writing for a grant, doing something to get actual block donations lined up ahead of time just to ensure that we didn't fall short. I didn't end up having time to do that and as I said before, there was some little voice that said, "You know, money will come," and it did. There was a man who wrote to me, offering a \$20,000 match. I didn't recognize his name. I didn't recognize his internet handle. I'm not sure how he found me but he made a very generous donation to get us up to \$300,000. Whether it's the charity or whether it's the cult of personality that I've created, I really can't say. But I'm very grateful to him, and all my donors big and small. There were people that gave \$1 a day just so they could feel that they were part of it and stretched their participation out throughout the month.

Adrian Bye: So they come in everyday and give \$1?

Sarah Bunting: Yes, yes. One donor in particular, she had it set to give \$1 a day just so that there would be that little bit of momentum that there would always be \$1 because I think she had \$30 budgeted. It was the best she could do. But she wanted to feel like she was a part of it every day and she was.

Adrian Bye: Are there any other past lists that we haven't discussed in terms of how you make this work?

Sarah Bunting: I don't think so. It is a lot of setup work on the frontend and then cleanup work on the backend. I think people that I've talked to have been a little surprised. I think they're expecting to hear that I have some like magic formula, here's how you target your mailing list or what have you. But really it's just sitting on this database for 16 hours a day, writing posts to motivate people, being funny and then being serious, and trying to hit the buttons that will get people involved and excited.

There's also the fact that I can't take full credit for any of it. It's an excellent organization that's set up in a way that makes it very easy for me to sell it. It's not obscure. You see a difference immediately. It's an excellent organization, and all I sort of had to do was stand next to it and point at it.

Adrian Bye: You're doing a little more than that.

Actually, I want to just ask in fact, have you studied traditional copywriting? By that, I mean David Ogilvy type stuff, Joe Sugarman, John Caples, Claude Hopkins – any of the traditional copywriters. Have you studied any of them?

Sarah Bunting: I really haven't studied it. I mean just sort of the same things that people read in passing references elsewhere.

Adrian Bye: You haven't actually gone out and read books on copywriting in print?

Sarah Bunting: No, because the thing is that I've had an internet presence since God was a child and it's pretty much learning from experience both generally speaking how internet readers tend to respond to things and how my specific readers tend to respond to things. I have actually studied Obama's speeches very carefully and I'm fascinated by how he's able to do certain emotional things the way he does in the writing. I like to sort of turn his speeches over, look at the back and see where the knots are. That entire process, not just traditional copywriting but just generally the narrative process and how you get certain effects, it's what I do. I'm a writer. I don't want to sound too cynical like I'm just trying to take advantage of people. That's obviously not what's happening. But there is a certain way to pitch things that it's based on experience and on understanding how the readers do tend to respond or not respond to certain things. I imagine if I read...

Adrian Bye: I'm sorry. I've got to ask you this question because we're wrapping up.

Sarah Bunting: Okay.

Adrian Bye: This is probably the question that's going to offend you but I've got to ask you. Have you ever read any Ayn Rand like *Atlas Shrugged* or any of her other books?

Sarah Bunting: I got halfway through *The Fountainhead* and then I just couldn't anymore. I just couldn't take it.

Adrian Bye: It would seem to me that if you managed to get that to work with your mental system that you would be one of the best people at selling stuff online because you've really got that drive and the understanding on how to sell stuff. I know some of your readers are going to go and listen to this interview, and then they're going to like beat me up in the comments for my site and all this stuff. But, I don't know. I really think you've got something here and I'm impressed.

Sarah Bunting: No, I see where you're going with it. I think that her writing itself, I couldn't tolerate it but there is definitely something there. The ability to strike a chord was something she could definitely do. Whatever! You can point to a lot of bestselling writers who that's true. Everyone does some things well.

Adrian Bye: Is there anything that you wish to talk about that we have not covered?

Sarah Bunting: I don't think so.

Adrian Bye: Alright.

Well, Sarah, thanks very much for taking the time.

Sarah Bunting: Thanks so much for having me.