

## Agency For Change Podcast : **Amy Dickerson**, Managing Director of The Lancaster Event Center

### **Announcer:**

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

Hello, fellow changemakers. This is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov, and welcome to another episode of Agency for Change podcast. Today, we're talking with Amy Dickerson, managing director of Lancaster Event Center. We're going to discuss how fairgrounds and event centers make an economic impact, the importance of staying connected to our agricultural roots and the experience of leading through a global pandemic. Amy, thank you for joining me today.

### **Amy Dickerson:**

Hello, everybody.

### **Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, we have people listening from across the country. Could you start by giving us an overview of what happens at Lancaster Event Center?

### **Amy Dickerson:**

This is a national-level fairgrounds actually based in Lancaster County and the capital of Nebraska here in Lincoln. We've got 160 acres including 9.2 acres of buildings, or 400,000 square feet, across about seven buildings, big open multi-use buildings. And we've got a couple of major seasons, so you can kind of picture what we do here. We were built as a home for the Lancaster County Super Fair, which has grown to be the biggest county fair in Nebraska. That's 10 days in late summer.

### **Amy Dickerson:**

Spring to fall we run probably around 125, mainly equine, but some livestock, shows. We've got one going on right now, as we speak. It's going to end up being our biggest one of the year, 570 stalls. People are here from coast to coast, coming to enjoy Nebraska and Lincoln and enjoying our fairgrounds here.

### **Amy Dickerson:**

During the winter, in fact we're getting ready for that right now, we're talking about trade shows and indoor people shows like circuses and tractor pulls and other motor sports, but trade shows are big. We have the second largest farm show, to give you an idea, and the second largest indoor tractor pull inside of our buildings during the winter here in Nebraska. Those are super popular things to do, affordable family fun.

### **Amy Dickerson:**

If you have a passion, you can pretty much do it out here at the fairgrounds. We're opening up a grandstand outside and a new expanded arena and a national event campground. We're starting to attract really big high school rodeos and big RV rallies. And we also, just on the side, because that's not enough to do, we do full-service catering. We have the biggest banquet hall in town and do lots of receptions and business meetings. You name it, it happens at Lancaster Event Center.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow, that's a lot. I know I was driving by just yesterday and noticed that your campground was full of RVs and campers, so I knew something big was going on. That's good to know that you had another big equine show happening.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Now, I know you have all different kinds of events, but your mission statement speaks to showcasing the agricultural nature of Lancaster County. Why is that important in today's world, Amy?

**Amy Dickerson:**

The organization that owns and operates, and actually came up with the vision and built the Lancaster Event Center 20 years ago, is the Lancaster County Ag Society. This is a group of nine volunteers, a publicly elected board. Originally, back 150 years ago in the very first years in Nebraska, it was all about, okay, well, we're promoting agriculture. Let's get together at the end of the summer, celebrate the harvest, celebrate what's going on in the community, keep the youth involved, give them a chance to learn about agriculture and compete. It might've been about growing vegetables, sewing, or a lot of livestock and horses. These are really life skills at that point, a good majority of our population were involved in agriculture personally. So that's the genesis of it, 150 years ago.

**Amy Dickerson:**

Fast forward to now, and last I checked we all still pretty much like to eat three times a day, but there's just a lot fewer of us involved in that today. And so you could argue that the Ag Society is even more relevant today to share with all of us, Where's our food coming from? For the youth out there, providing them opportunities to dig into those things and see if that's an interest area of theirs. Even if not, it gives good leadership and teamwork and discipline to work on projects all year, culminating at the County Fair. We do other things here, other youth sports and science fairs and that kind of thing. Youth is really near and dear to our heart, whatever they end up being passionate about.

**Amy Dickerson:**

I was just talking to our mayor today about that, about how we could really help...she's very passionate about climate change and sustainability, and I think that's very related to agriculture and how we can all be doing things better there. We can showcase that to our public as they come out for the fair and year-round. It's a fun organization to work for as a nonprofit, definitely to continue to be relevant in today's world.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. I have such fond memories of going to my grandparents' houses, both sets my grandparents were farmers, and helping to feed the cattle and ride in the tractor and the combine, and those things. And I think as the generations of my family go on, the kids are farther removed from that.

And sometimes at the County Fair and some of the things you do at the Lancaster Event Center might be the only connection to those roots. I think it's great that we still have and preserve that.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, this is a big number. I have seen a study by a third party from the University of Nebraska Bureau of Business Research that says that Lancaster Event Center has a \$40 million economic impact on the region. That's huge. Can you tell us a little bit more about how that comes about?

**Amy Dickerson:**

I'll tell you what, that was actually measured back in 2017, and we've been growing since then because we've been relaunching as a team here. In fact, before the pandemic, this year we were set to grow another 40% with two national/international events that were coming up. We were estimating our impact was actually going to be closer to 60, even up to \$70 million this year.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Amy Dickerson:**

As I look at my core team of about 20 people, that means each one of them is bringing \$3 million of spending from visitors outside the county to our county. And supporting as many as 750 jobs and \$2 million of local taxes coming in from people like I described before, coming from all over the country and the region. All at the same time, while we by the way, support 200 community events here, very local, often free or affordable.

**Amy Dickerson:**

We play those two hats there, but that economic spending is something we're very proud of, to do it outside of fair time. That's a big part of our mission, to bring that to the area, and we're proud of it. It takes a lot of work and we're not subsidized to do it, which we're very painfully aware of right now during the pandemic.

**Amy Dickerson:**

It's interesting, it varies when the university did the study. They were here over a year, went to a variety of our different events like I described to you before, we have such a wide variety. And they found there were three basic types of folks that were spending money. If you came just to be a spectator or a shopper, like at that tractor pull, the circus, a trade show, you were spending on average about a hundred dollars. If you were coming from outside of the county for one of those, between what you spend on the grounds and then maybe when you filled up your gas tank or went shopping or to the zoo or that kind of thing, it was a hundred dollars if you were a spectator or a shopper.

**Amy Dickerson:**

If you were a competitor at one of those horse and equine shows I described, it's about \$150 a day. They probably stay on average four or five days a lot of times, so hotel rooms, campsites, that kind of thing start to play in and then shopping and that kind of thing. And all the way up to, we have that second biggest farm show coming up and those exhibitors, a lot of them are corporate people from large

companies and they have expense accounts so they're staying in a nice hotel downtown and doing a nice dinner every night. And they're spending closer to over \$200 a day.

**Amy Dickerson:**

And so that all adds up and all that's really from our biggest, about, 100 shows. The other 200, I described as community events. There's no incremental economic impact that is measured from them, including that huge County Fair I talked about, because those economists are pretty tough when they do those economic impact studies. He said, "No, if they hadn't come there to the Super Fair, they might've gone downtown and had a dinner, so it's not incremental dollars to the county. That's just the incremental dollars from people coming outside of the county. It's pretty fun to measure that and see that.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's pretty amazing. Now, you talk about all of these people coming to Lancaster County, Lincoln, Nebraska, right in the middle of the country. Lincoln maybe doesn't have this national reputation as a vacation spot. What does it take to attract these big events here?

**Amy Dickerson:**

Actually, it's way easier to attract these national events than it is to attract your average family out there thinking about, where am I going to go on vacation this year?

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow.

**Amy Dickerson:**

You hit on what is, kind of, our secret, number one marketing message - that we're in the center. That's very exciting to a national group when they're trying to maximize their attendance from all areas of the country. Nebraska and Lincoln have just wonderful characteristics to visit. It's near major transportation, interstates and airports. It's safe, it's friendly. There's lots of things to do. We're on the top of a lot of lists, of national lists. Lincoln's really starting to come into its own as a place to visit.

**Amy Dickerson:**

Like I was describing to somebody the other day, to our hoteliers. I think when we get these 2,000 RVs coming in for an RV rally, it's a great sampling of Lincoln for them. Or when all these 1,700 high schoolers come for the National High School Finals Rodeo next year. Those families coming in and getting on our university and college campuses while they're here, what a great way to get them to consider to be a student here or a future citizen. Or those RV'ers talking to the rest of their family and saying, "Hey, you know you ought to go to Lincoln or Nebraska to visit. We saw this, we saw that." That's exciting.

**Lyn Wineman:**

That's fantastic. Having talked with you in the past, I know that you spend as much time promoting Lincoln and Nebraska as you do promoting the Event Center itself. And, as you think about it, these RVs, the horse shows, the livestock folks, even a lot of the trade show people that are bringing in equipment

and so forth, they need to drive here, and being centrally located I could see where that would be a huge, huge benefit.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, here's a big question. I mean, 2020 is an interesting year. And when I say interesting, that's probably the most positive way I can put it, right? I know you were on track to have a record year. While you potentially could have had 40% growth with several events and the 150th anniversary of the Super Fair. Then on March 13th as a result of the global pandemic, you were forced to completely shut down. I'd just like to hear a little bit from you on how that impacted the Event Center and also you personally as a leader?

**Amy Dickerson:**

We ended up being shut for three and a half months. And we prepare for a lot of things here. We have an emergency plan with like 30, 40 situations in it, and the one that wasn't in there was a pandemic. You go through the classic stages whenever there's a big change in your life. The first one, it was just absolute shock, for me and the team. All of us, all of us in the whole country were going through that. But the team very quickly pivoted, and we figured out, "Okay, this is how we're going to operate and keep everybody safe." It's just been a constant pivoting, pivoting to the point where it feels like you're spinning around in 360 degree circles.

**Amy Dickerson:**

But I was just commenting to somebody else today that we can get kind of overwhelmed because it's just constant change. I talked to a lot of people about how it feels like it's been multiple years this year because of the amount of change and how fast it's been. There's been a lot of silver linings that have come out of the pandemic too.

**Amy Dickerson:**

It's caused us to build relationships statewide that we've never had before as we've been researching how to get some support to make sure that we can keep our core team and be ready to open up this fairgrounds to keep having the impact that it's been having as quickly as possible. It's caused us to rethink a lot of our operations. We now have the capability to work remotely, which we didn't have before for our office team. We've figured out how to do drive-in events, whether it's a movie or a broadcast concert. We opened up with Garth Brooks, a broadcast concert, of all things, after three and a half months. And food truck rodeos outside.

**Amy Dickerson:**

I'm talking to my trade shows right now about unique things they can do. There are some marketing advantages. We have to do time-ticket entry now for our biggest trade shows this winter. And I was just talking to a promoter about, "Well, you can use the opportunity to ask five key questions and now you've got an email list versus taking cash at the door." There are some advantages to things.

**Amy Dickerson:**

It's been an interesting journey. I'm proud of my team. They're out there right now talking to those people who drove across the country about wearing your face coverings, keeping your distance. My team has pivoted and created a safe environment, as safe as you can be, and we become kind of known for that. We're proud of that, so that we can stay open and provide...we have blood drives out here

now, food distributions. We've had COVID testing. We're out here for the community too, and we're proud to do it, including the election coming up. We're an election site now.

**Lyn Wineman:**

I did not know that.

**Amy Dickerson:**

It's been an interesting journey and I wouldn't wish it on anybody. But I think coming out of it, we've learned a lot too.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, I really appreciate your perspective on that. I've talked to a lot of leaders about how they're dealing with the pandemic and it seems like the ones who are thriving have those two same things that you just mentioned, they're pivoting. And almost, you've got to feel a little bit like a ballet dancer, right? You've pivoted all the way around and you're starting again. And then you're also looking at this and saying, "What opportunities can come from this?" and looking forward. I think we will all be stronger coming out of it. I think that's really a great, great perspective. As the Event Center starts to reopen, what do things look like moving forward for you?

**Amy Dickerson:**

We've successfully opened up with our horse shows. Those have been going great, actually bigger than ever now in the fall, because we had a lot of shows rescheduled from spring and summer. We just got approval for how we're going to operate with our trade shows. I mentioned the time tickets and the face coverings and spacing things out indoors, like more grab-and-go food, less lines, that kind of thing. And I'm really hopeful that those pop-up retail stores will, for those that are able to come out, will be good for everybody. A good opportunity to have something to do. The mayor just said to me that, "You guys are providing a service in terms of mental health, providing some safe things for people to do."

**Amy Dickerson:**

Going forward, we're hoping, when it starts to get warmer again, then we really start to shine because with that 160 acres and our buildings with the huge garage doors, we can really do a lot of things very safely. Like that big high school rodeo, the Super Fair, the horse shows again. And I bet we'll still be doing drive-in things until everybody's got that vaccine.

**Amy Dickerson:**

We're just moving forward. We're planning on being open. We're planning with all the best health experts, with my team making the changes and working with our customers and getting the word out to our guests that they can feel safe coming. For those that don't have a personal health issue, if they want to come out, we're going to provide as safe an environment as we can. That's how we're keeping going during the pandemic here.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Fantastic. All of that space you have out there, all of those acres have got to be really helpful, both inside and outdoors, as we all work our way through this. Amy, you've been through a lot, a lot in your

career, and a lot in the last even six to eight months. What advice do you have for leaders who face adversity?

**Amy Dickerson:**

Never lose hope and trust your team. Something that I've really learned is of more value, just in the last couple of months, is the power of gratitude. For those of you that are Gallup StrengthsFinder people, my number one is maximizer, and so my first thing that I usually talk to people about is how we can do it just a little bit better. A lot of my people, not understanding that strength, take that as, "Oh, she doesn't like what I did." But actually, it's just my strength that I'm always trying to improve things. I can always see, "Ah, I can just be a little bit... and then it'll be perfect."

**Amy Dickerson:**

But I'm learning that with all the stress and change that people are dealing with this year, it's really, really important to start with gratitude, start with recognition of what they're already doing. And especially because I've also had to go and ask some really important people for some support, but everybody loves that recognition and that gratitude. Starting there, it helps build those relationships with your team, with other partners and community leaders. And so again, a silver lining from COVID. I'm sure that's something that my team would have wished I learned five years ago, but COVID has actually really cemented that.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, I might've mentioned this to you before. I'm kind of coming to the belief that maybe 2020, in a very difficult way, has been the year we all needed, to kind of bring us back to the basics. I love that advice, "Never lose hope. Trust your team." Boy, we have to trust our teams and then the power of gratitude, all great things. I also have witnessed your maximizer strengths in action, and I do believe always looking for that slight edge is also good advice.

**Lyn Wineman:**

You know I have a background in marketing. I know you have a background in marketing. This is my only marketing question I ask on the podcast, but what advice do you have for others to help them get the word out about what they're doing?

**Amy Dickerson:**

Well, I tell you, we just couldn't survive without our social media and all the different electronic forms, our website, our emails, all that. We have very tight marketing dollars and we have relied more and more on that. I just think the sky's the limit there. I think we're still just scratching the surface of what we can do there and how we can engage.

**Amy Dickerson:**

I think the challenge is there's a lot of noise out there across all the different media channels. When you look at how many cable channels and radio and social and the number of messages we all see, just in our houses and our daily lives, "How do you really break through and be really authentic and create a relationship with your customers?"

**Amy Dickerson:**

And social media has some dark sides. It's really easy for people to just jump right in without information and post negative comments. And as a marketer, we were used to having more control in the past, and you have to let some of that just ride. Some of it, you can't take it, because they'll notice that's not authentic. Is it appropriate to sit there and argue with somebody on social media? No, probably not. But it's a great way to connect...being marketers that had to figure that out. We used to pay tens of thousands of dollars to get basic marketing research and now that's another thing that is really powerful about social media. You can get a pulse, and you have to take for granted that not everybody's out there, that it's not a scientific sample, but at least it gives you a pulse and a way to have a conversation.

**Amy Dickerson:**

And it even becomes customer service. We get so many people that don't bother to pick up the phone and they just ask us a question there. It requires a lot of time, and some folks on your team that are really talented at being authentic like that, talking about what's going on that changes all the time. We don't keep up with it, but it's an interesting tool that I think, again, we're just scratching the surface on.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Right. Every post is like a mini focus group. And as far as you mentioned about being authentic, I've witnessed the advice you gave in the previous question, I've witnessed that happening in your social media. I've seen your posts be hopeful and positive. I've seen you highlight your team members. I've seen you express gratitude to the community and others. I think that's kind of neat to see your advice coming forward in your social media as well.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amy, for people who would really like to learn more about what's happening at Lancaster Event Center and support the Event Center in some way, how can they find out more?

**Amy Dickerson:**

It's really easy. Again, start with our website, [lancastereventcenter.org](http://lancastereventcenter.org), and you can see what's going on with the year-round Event Center operations, with the 300 events there. And we're always looking for new staff and advertising partners, volunteers to help with some of the bigger shows, some great marketing opportunities there too.

**Amy Dickerson:**

You can hit the orange button at the top right and go over to the Super Fair which is a whole 'nother parallel site that's up all year. And there's some neat opportunities to support the youth and what they're doing and great, very engaging marketing opportunities there.

**Amy Dickerson:**

And then the other biggie that we have, because we're helping co-host it, is the National High School Finals Rodeo. That's really unique, it's the world's biggest rodeo coming to town next year, next July. And what a neat opportunity to have. We're going to pop up a town, Lyn. We're going to have about 8,000 people here next year living on our grounds and more visitors coming in to see the rodeo and to enjoy the shopping and the eating.

**Amy Dickerson:**

And all of those, it's all on our website. And my email and phone number out there, and you can just reach out to me. There's a lot of different ways, whether you want to sell something out of here, be an advertiser, be a sponsor, a donor, because we are nonprofit, or volunteer. Maybe you have a group in your company that you'd like to do a certain number of hours and give back. That's huge to us as a nonprofit.

**Amy Dickerson:**

And for those groups out there that need support, with a lot of nonprofits listening to this. If they need somewhere, a big space to do what they need to do. If they need to run a fundraiser or a training or have a meeting, or that kind of thing, we've had more and more nonprofits reach out. In fact, we just announced a program where nonprofits, locally in the county, can come out and get their first \$2,000 free for what they do out here each year.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Wow, that's amazing.

**Amy Dickerson:**

I'll throw that out there for those nonprofit executives that are listening.

**Lyn Wineman:**

All right. Did everybody hear that? That's an amazing program, Amy. I was talking a few weeks ago with Scott Young, the director of the Lincoln Food Bank, who's also on the podcast. And he was mentioning how the Event Center has been so helpful as they do the expanded drive-through food distribution throughout the pandemic. He was very appreciative of you and your staff and the space that you have as well.

**Amy Dickerson:**

Yep, 375 cars an hour this week, so every week.

**Lyn Wineman:**

Amazing. Amazing. Amazing. Amy, you have been through a lot this year and your story of leadership through adversity, it inspires me and I know it will inspire others. And I really thank you for your time today.

**Amy Dickerson:**

You bet, Lyn. It was good to talk with everybody.

**Announcer:**

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