

Agency for Change Podcast: Rob Wu, Founder & CEO, CauseVox

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- CauseVox 2023 Giving Study: <https://www.causevox.com/blog/2023-giving-study-navigating-modern-philanthropy/>

Rob Wu:

What's going to be different about you, about your fundraising, or about your work, or about your organization or your message? What is it?

Speaker 2:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of change makers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Hey, everyone. This is Lynn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change Podcast. Today's episode is especially for nonprofit marketers and fundraisers because we have the privilege of diving into this world of nonprofit fundraising and charitable giving with a true visionary in the field. Joining us is Rob Wu. He is the CEO and founder of a company called CauseVox. This is a platform that's transforming the way nonprofits approach fundraising, and he is going to drop some great knowledge for us today from a new study they've done, so you're going to want to listen all the way to the end. Rob, welcome to the podcast.

Rob Wu:

Lyn, thank you for having me.

Lyn Wineman:

I am really eager to hear your story and I'd love to have you kick things off by giving our listeners a quick rundown of what CauseVox is all about and honestly how you're making a difference for nonprofits.

Rob Wu:

Sure. CauseVox is a company I started 13-plus years ago, so it's the longest job I've ever had. Essentially we're a software company, we helped some nonprofits and we helped them unlock modern philanthropy for their fundraising. So traditional fundraising software is typically very cumbersome, very clunky, and is often the number one obstacle for nonprofits in creating a really memorable donor experience. So what we do at CauseVox is we help nonprofit fundraising professionals, marketing folks, as well as their executive directors, streamline their donor-giving process to make it easy. They use amazing software to create donation pages that increase gift size, campaign sites that are highly personalized and customizable, as well as they use our fundraising software to sell event tickets for fundraising events.

Lyn Wineman:

As a marketer that works in the nonprofit space, Rob, all of those things sound wonderful, and I have to admit, I'm not going to name names, but I've worked with my share of clunky nonprofit software, so thank you for doing that work. I want to dive deeper into CauseVox, but first I want to ask a little bit about your personal journey, and I'm really curious what led you to this point?

Rob Wu:

I don't know where to begin. I can go deep on this one, but where it started was I grew up in an immigrant family and as an immigrant, as a child of an immigrant family, you grew up in a hustle environment where people just had to serve businesses. My parents didn't have a lot of money, my dad came over when he was 40 and had \$8 and worked at Jack in the Box.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. That's an inspiring story all on its own.

Rob Wu:

Yeah. And he's told me this story, but I forgot a lot of it. But essentially the nut of it is that I grew up in an environment where starting a business and being an entrepreneur was the natural thing to do. But the thing is, I went to school, I got a corporate job, became a management consultant, and I was a horrible management consultant. I was fired from my job several times and quickly I learned that, well, I kind of need to find where my path was. So eventually I landed on wanting to be able to do good as well as to do well, and that led to me wanting to start my own thing, but help a lot of people at the same time. And also being able to be a master of your own destiny.

So that's where it started with CauseVox. One day I realized when I was a manager consultant, I was sitting in a skiff, which is a secure facility, so imagine yellow windows, shades down, security in a front, snipers on a roof, no internet. I could bring in a CD player, I could do that, but no cellphone, disconnected from the world. And just sitting there, I was like, "I really don't want to spend another minute at this place anymore." They're doing great. I was helping just improve processes, improve logistics, all that good stuff, but this is a great purpose, but it wasn't my purpose. So eventually my friend and I, Jeff, we quit our business, moved into a dinky, rat-infested, two-bedroom apartment in West Harlem in New York City.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Rob Wu:

You had to climb up four or five flights of stairs, have little mice run around, that kind of thing. And we just started building product and we built product for nonprofits where we're saying, "Well, nonprofits are doing great work, but they have a huge, huge gap in terms of how they approach digital fundraising, how they approach fundraising in general, how they connect marketing with fundraising." And we had a thesis in terms of how it should be, and we just started building products and got customers and grew the company from there. So far we've helped nonprofits raise about half a billion dollars and we're excited about the next billion dollars that we'll help them raise.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. So much packed into that story from, I'm so glad you escaped from the yellow-windowed skiff and I love that you were inspired to bring more purpose to your life and therefore benefit to the world. So that is awesome. And as I think about benefits, Rob, I know you are looking to bringing out the CauseVox giving study for 2023. A lot of us will benefit from that. Can you give us a teaser as to what trends you're uncovering and what's driving donors to open their hearts and their wallets?

Rob Wu:

Yeah. So we do a lot of white papers and thought leadership here at CauseVox, and the CauseVox giving study 2023 is our first time running it. And really it came about because I got really upset how charities are approaching fundraising and donations. A lot of things work for me is I get fed up and then I start something, I do something. I started this white paper, I wanted to run a really comprehensive, quantitative study of charitable giving. So one of the stats that really inspired us was that Giving USA saw charitable giving drop about 10 and a half percent in 2022.

Lyn Wineman:

And that is a big number that makes a difference for a lot of nonprofits when that giving drops 10% because their expenses are not dropping 10%, the need for their work is not dropping 10%. So it's a big deal.

Rob Wu:

Right. Yeah. So for me is thinking about, "Well, is this drop in 10%, is it going to be a trend downwards or is it just more of a small blip where things will just pick up the next year, increase or plateau or whatever it is?" Either way, it's the scenarios aren't that great. So what I wanted to figure out was why is there a 10% dip? And as well as what can nonprofits do to bridge the gap today in order to make sure that that 10% doesn't occur again or that 10% is reversed to 0%, 10% increase? So that's kind of where it started. I ran this quant study and it was very interesting in terms of what has developed in terms of the insights that I gathered. One of the big things is that the era of easy money is over.

Lyn Wineman:

Very sad because during the pandemic, there was some money to be had. A lot of our nonprofits saw increases.

Rob Wu:

Yeah, not only did they see increases from charitable giving because people wanted to give, people were primed to give, and digital made it really easy for folks to give, but nonprofits themselves got a lot of relief from the federal government if they're based in the US or even Canada. And then on other side, donors did see an increase in not only their assets if they were invested in equities, but also their pay too with salary income inflation, especially if they were hopping jobs. So there's a huge, huge increase in giving, increase in capacity. But then what we found was that 42% of our respondents in the study noted that financial constraints were a primary obstacle for making donations moving forward, so there's a huge percentage of them.

Lyn Wineman:

Big, yeah.

Rob Wu:

But the thing is that even though there are constraints from donors, the spirit of charitable giving is still very high. So 81% of respondents intend to sustain or increase their charitable giving activities moving forward while when you look at high earners, so those folks raise, not raising, but those folks making \$100,000 or more a year, it turns to 93%. So spirit giving is still high, but donors are more and more constrained.

Lyn Wineman:

That's an amazing stat, Rob. Anything else in your study that you can share? Any thoughts on what nonprofits might be able to do to turn the situation around?

Rob Wu:

Yeah. Well, because charitable intent is still very high, but then budgets are being constrained, I believe that there's certain things that nonprofits need to adjust when it comes to the changing donor preference that has occurred in the past few years. I think the first thing that was really interesting is that as fundraisers, and even as marketers, a lot of times we think about fundraising as the relationship is the most important thing. You have to have a relationship with your donor, whatever that means, some type of relationship where it's all about selling, you have small talk, get to know the family, get to know the person's intent, all that good stuff. I think that's very important.

And what we found is that from our study, 70% of donors want to have a personal connection with the charity, which is pretty high. It makes sense. But what's actually very interesting is that 75% actually want a branded donation experience. So they actually value having well-designed pages when it comes to donation pages and campaign sites over the relationship. And in fact, when you look at high earners, that jumps to 81%. So people making a lot of money, your mid-level major donors, they actually prefer and value a streamlined donation experience where you make it really easy for that donor to donate, where you can automate their donations. They see that actually more important than how nonprofits see what's important for donors.

So I found that really, really interesting, especially, Lyn, you've probably seen this in your work too, where brand and design is so important, and we always talk about this, but now we have actual data, faxed it back up, why we think this is important.

Lyn Wineman:

Of course, as a marketer, I love that because it's something that I've believed for years, but I think that for a lot of nonprofits, when times are tough, it's easy to convince yourself to cut corners. And sometimes those branded experiences are the corners that get cut because we feel like, "Oh, good enough is good enough and it's not going to make a difference." But I think we've all seen that it does make a difference, and your study proves that. So once again, Rob, I cannot wait for the report to come out. As a matter of fact, when and how are you planning to launch the report? How can we keep an eye out for it?

Rob Wu:

It's live online already, so if you go to causevox.com, it's on our blog, it's called kind of the Modern Donor in Philanthropy. You can go there, I can link to it, give you guys a link, and then people can download it for free. It's a 30-page white paper. Of course, it comes with a one-page summary that summarizes all of our findings.

Lyn Wineman:

Amazing. Rob, we are going to have that in the show notes on the KidGlov website, so anybody who wants to take a look at that can check out that link. Thank you for that. One of the things we also as nonprofit marketers look to often is year-end and Giving Tuesday donation campaigns. I mean, these are pivotal moments for nonprofits. Do you have any strategies or tips that you would suggest to help make the most of these critical fundraising periods?

Rob Wu:

Yeah, for sure. So Giving Tuesday or year-end tends to drive a whole ton of donations for organizations. And I think a few things that organizations can do to get ready today is to start focusing on the message and the campaign idea. A lot of times, organizations that we work with find the planning process get compressed because they have other things to work on, but then creating this really different idea for their giving for their message. And because of that, they have to try a lot harder on either sending more emails, getting really clever with fancy graphics on social media. They use tactics as a way to compensate for a great strategy.

For organizations, I think having a great strategy now, taking the time to plan is really important. I do think the other thing that's really important is to catch up with donors right now. Going back to our charitable giving study, storytelling is the number one fundraising tactic that donors resonate with. 50% of donors say, "If a organization just sends these regular updates, then I will just continue to give to them." So as simple, just regular updates, just a regular authentic story goes a really long way. So right now we're sitting in September, we had three months until year-end basically. So organizations, they still have a lot of time just to catch up on nurturing their donors, sending updates, making sure that people are in a good place, and then they can make an ask again from there.

I think another thing about is about thinking about how you can bring different, not only different payment methods such as mobile wallets into your giving page or your giving platform, but also thinking about how you can automate that. A lot of high-earner donors want automation, what they want, that streamlined experience that we just talked about. So providing a way for them to do pledge donations or recurring donations as part of their giving Tuesday or year-end fundraising would be really important.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing.

Rob Wu:

Yeah. And the last big thing that folks should be thinking about when it comes to Giving Tuesday year-end is how you can leverage your donors not only as just for financial transactions for donations, but how you can go beyond the wallet? How can you get these people to participate in your fundraising activities? Now, through our CauseVox giving study, just going back to that since this is fresh in my mind, over 70% of donors express willingness to assist in fundraising activities. 70%.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a lot.

Rob Wu:

So 70% are likely to donate when they're asked by friends and family, and 70% are also likely to donate when they have a connection with a staff member. So the best thing nonprofits can do is leverage their donors as ambassadors or volunteer fundraisers so they can participate in peer-to-peer fundraising

campaigns, or they can form a fundraising committee. This way they can extend their reach, help the nonprofits message and idea really cut through in order to drive new donors and repeat donors to their organization.

Lyn Wineman:

Rob, those suggestions are pure money in the most real way. That is great all across the board. And I want to go back to storytelling because once again, as a storyteller myself, this is an undeniably powerful tool. Do you have any insights from the study or from your work on how nonprofits can master that art of storytelling and turn it into an emotional connection to enhance the experience for donors?

Rob Wu:

Yeah, I think a lot of folks see storytelling as this amorphous thing that professionals, like people in Hollywood do, that Pixar does, that Marvel movie studios, cinematic studios does. It is something they do, but when it comes to storytelling, really donors, they're not looking for that standard of story. They want something compelling, yes. They want something emotive, yes. But what really comes down to it is just being simple with providing an update or being very transparent in terms of where the funds are being utilized. For example, gen Z, the number one thing they look for is for the nonprofits when they're fundraising to be transparent with how the funds will be utilized. So that's not some fancy graphic or fancy photo, that's actually an Excel spreadsheet. It's just a chart with saying, "Okay, these are the program line items, this is our budget, and this is how much we need, and this is how much we'll spend."

A lot of organizations when it comes to writing a fundraising appeal, they focus too much on that compelling emotional part or just the facts, and they don't really talk about, "How is my \$1,000 or \$200, \$100, how is it actually going to make a difference in this budget?"

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Rob, do you have any insights also on localized giving? How important is it to let your donor know that their money might stay in the specific geographic area that they're in?

Rob Wu:

Yeah. Oh, I don't have any hard data on that, but I think it really revolves on the donor's preference. So sometimes donors prefer to give to certain specific causes that they have a personal connection with or that they actually see visibly in their local communities. So I think it is important for some folks, but also it's not important for a lot of donors.

Lyn Wineman:

Got it, I hear you there. I want to flip back and ask you a question about yourself again, because I saw this intriguing note about you having a past experience of spending time upside down.

Rob Wu:

Yeah.

Lyn Wineman:

Can you tell us more about that?

Rob Wu:

Oh, well, I'm really into hand balancing, so handstands and cartwheels and stuff. So for me, running a company for 13-plus years is really hard to treat it as a marathon. So what that really means is figuring out a place where you can find your center or find your balance or find your whatever it is to decompress. So some people do yoga, some people meditate, some people go hike, some people go drink, and whatever it is for them to let loose. For me, it's always been about physical activity, and I picked up kind of this thing around hand balancing where I wanted to make a goal of getting a 62nd handstand just at any time I wanted to. And then it took me about 10 years to get there if I'm [inaudible 00:19:17].

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing though. That's amazing. I think you're the first person we've had on the podcast with that experience and that goal.

Rob Wu:

Yeah. So it's fun. It's fun to work at something where you can see improvement every single time you train for it, because as kind of an entrepreneur when building a business, sometimes it's very hard to see your progress. You don't really know the work you're doing is actually going to move the needle or not. It takes like a year or six months to really see that. But doing something like that helps me find my center, helps me just decompress a little bit. It actually helps me think a lot about some of the problems I'm trying to overcome too. Not only when I'm upside down, but also just thinking about random things. It helps you see the world from a different perspective, which I think a lot of fundraisers or marketers need to do as well. Kind of see things not only from their own shoes, but also seeing it from their audience or their donor's shoes.

Lyn Wineman:

I really like that. I've often heard that just simple things like brushing your teeth with a different hand or changing up your routine gets your brain firing in different ways, so I've got to imagine being upside down really makes a difference in that as well. I'm curious, did you pick that up when you were an NSA consultant? Because I think that that's also an interesting part of your background, and I'm curious how your experience in tech and security shaped the innovative approach that CauseVox brings to the world of fundraising.

Rob Wu:

Yeah, that's a good one. So my first career was as a management consultant. So I spent a lot of time at a whole bunch of alphabet soup security agencies like the NRO, NSA, TSS, the list goes on. So some projects, I helped agencies speed up their security processing, so improving the process to do that. All their projects, I did just random logistics stuff or budgetary stuff to help them improve how they count beans essentially. But for me, my experience doing that, as I alluded to before, I was a horrible management. Horrible.

Lyn Wineman:

I can't believe that. I really can't believe you would be horrible at anything just from the few conversations I've had with you

Rob Wu:

Before, I was really bad at understanding team culture, playing into politics, as well as doing work that I had no interest in doing.

Lyn Wineman:

Now, that does make a lot of sense to me. That's no fun at all.

Rob Wu:

But at the same time, I'm looking back, I'm like, well, I didn't really take advantage of all the opportunities that were really given to me. I should have tried harder. I should have really appreciated a lot of the experience that my team members had. I could have learned a lot more than being a little bit like I'm a young, arrogant management consultant. That's what I learned. I do apologize to everybody that I offended back in the day, but I think one of the things I learned is that just from working a lot in a lot of big government agencies and consulting for them is that for me at CauseVox was looking at companies that I start as well as organizations that I serve, it has certain philosophies of how I approach things, where one of them is that lean is better than bloated.

At a lot of government agencies, you just have layers, bureaucracy, siloed teams, and then people don't talk to each other and people play politics, and then your enemy is no longer either helping people or increasing revenue. Your enemy is just like your coworker, so it becomes a really frustrating and toxic environment. I think the second thing I learned in terms of philosophy is that purpose is better than boredom. So for me, I perform the best when I have a specific purpose and I tend to flourish the most when it comes to that. I do think that other people, whether they're people that I work with or clients or just partners, that's the case too. When someone has a purpose, you can bring out the best work and the best happiness from them than doing something they're not really interested in.

Lyn Wineman:

Rob, I love that. Both of those points are great. And once again, I can't imagine that you were horrible, but I can see where what you're doing now is a much, much better fit. Hey, I have one more question for our nonprofit fundraisers out there, because I think I've heard you mention the misconception of treating fundraising as separate projects. Like sometimes we look at it as our beginning of the year campaign, our event, our end-of-year campaign, our Giving Tuesday, our giving days. Can you elaborate on how CauseVox envisions a more interconnected approach using more nurturing and relationships and fostering that continuous pipeline?

Rob Wu:

Yeah, I think because of how a lot of nonprofits, fundraising shops are organized, where you have an events person just thinking about events, you have someone doing individual gifts, thinking about individual gifts. Then you have your major donor people sometimes if they're a large enough shop. Or if they're not, then it's kind of a part-time thing. So everything is very just siloed. Because of that, everything's treated as projects like, "Oh, we need to do a Giving Tuesday campaign. Let's do it. Or we need to run a gala. Okay, let's do it. Let's go find some sponsors." So because of that, everything is always a start-and-stop situation.

And if you have ever pushed something really heavy, whether it's a car or whatever else there is, starting and stopping, pushing something heavy is incredibly frustrating because you're always starting and stopping and you never reach a point of momentum where you have force and gravity and weight just helping you. So that's the case for a lot of nonprofits today where they're stuck in this start-and-stop

approach, and it is always hard, always heavy, and people get burnt out. So I always get really frustrated when good people with great ideas just call it quits because the systems crush them.

So for me, how I envision fundraising is that because things are so siloed in a lot of nonprofits, they never see that things should be interconnected. So interconnected in two ways. The first way is interconnected when it comes to fundraising, where treating, getting donors, acquiring donors for the first time, first-time donor, as lead generation. It doesn't really matter what you do, but you just need to get someone to give you a first-time gift because for example, in our study, over 52% of people expect to continue donating to a nonprofit after their first gift. They say, they think, "If I donate once, I'm going to just donate a really long time. Forever. Forever."

So getting their first gift is super important, but then treating that as a way to enter people into a pipeline where then you can nurture, steward them, give them updates, as well as bring in some screening so you can upgrade that donation amount to a higher donation amount. So treating these leads essentially as customers that you upgrade and upgrade every single year. So a lot of organizations don't see it this way where they just say, "Okay, we get donors," and then they turn off the communications, then they turn it on again like, "We need to get donors again. Oh, why do I have an 18% donor retention rate?" Or whatever the number is, the industry number is 18% for some reason, 18% retention rate as an actual number while donors expect to keep on giving 52%. So there's a huge disconnect over there, and I think my belief is that one of the disconnects is because of how fundraising operations are just so siloed.

So the second thing is that marketing should be connected to fundraising directly, but typically they sit in different departments. So your marketer just relegated to maintaining your website, posting on social media, doing a newsletter, that kind of thing. But really the best fundraisers today and moving forward are going to be great communicators because donors expect regular updates, they expect transparency, they expect different touches through different channels across the board. When we ran this study as well looking into data, donors are just across the board in terms of channels, whether it's advertising, social media, email calls, whatever. So you kind of need to have integrated communications with marketing in order to be successful.

And for us at CauseVox that's what we're building towards where we can have marketers and fundraisers in one place, in one product, so they can not only work together, but then the functions and the jobs they need to do can just occur in one place. But then on the backend, on the data side, you can build a really comprehensive view of your donors and provide them with this incredible donor experience that historically nonprofits haven't provided their donors.

Lyn Wineman:

Rob, I love that all the way from the whole idea of pushing the boulder up the hill and doping and starting, and the energy required in that. I think too, I've talked to so many fundraisers and nonprofit marketers who sometimes are afraid to make an ask, and I think even just knowing that statistic that you shared, that over 50% of donors intend to keep giving, that is the invitation to continue to make the ask as well, so that is really a fantastic stat and strategy to share with us.

Rob Wu:

Yeah, I was talking to a major donor as part of a different study and not related to the CauseVox giving study. I was doing a major donor study before this earlier this year where I talked to over 300 people, a bunch of the major donors. One major donor told me, and this really stood out, is that he said that if the nonprofit he was donating to just shows up every year, gives him some regular updates, he's going to keep on donating \$100,000 checks forever. So a lot of the part of doing something is just showing up.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, for sure. That is the start. Nothing will happen if you don't show up. So Rob, I want to ask you my favorite question next. I've asked it on every single Agency for Change Podcast, and I love the responses that we get, and a lot of people know that I'm inspired by motivational quotes, and I would love to have an original Rob Wu quote to inspire our listeners.

Rob Wu:

I think I live by this year because it's something that's really inspired me as well in terms of how I think and how I want to build the company. But for me, the quote would be, find your different. What's going to be different about you, about your fundraising or about your work or about your organization or your message? What is it? Because in our environment today, because just thinking back to nonprofits at least, donors are more constrained, so you really have to find what's different about your organization.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that so much. A lot of times being different is even more important than being better because people understand your niche. A lot of times with nonprofits, there are many other nonprofits that have a similar mission that survey, similar audience, and how are you going to get that story across so people understand what makes you different? I love that so much.

Rob Wu:

Yeah. When it comes to campaigns, like for example, with going back to Giving Tuesday and year-end fundraising, when we look at a lot of organizations using our platform kind of to some of the appeals, either they have on our campaign sites or that they send out or the appeals that I get, there's not a ton of difference. So a lot of appeals have the same structure, they look the same, some just very general and not really specific. So I think if organizations can really think about, "Well, if everybody's doing something this way, if I do something a little bit different, maybe two to three steps removed, then I'm going to stand out. And if I'm going to stand out, then I'm going to be noticed. If I'm going to be noticed, then I'm going to get donors."

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Rob, for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work, how to support you, how they could check out CauseVox, what is the best way for them to find you?

Rob Wu:

Yeah, best way is go to causevox.com, so C-A-U-S-E V as in Victor, O-X.com. Check out our website. If they navigate to our Learning Center from the top navigation, we have our blog where there's some resources. All of them are free, whether it be our CauseVox giving study white paper or our free webinars, or our free blog articles, you can check them out. And I do post occasionally on my LinkedIn as well. So [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com/in/robjwu). My handle is Rob J. Wu, I believe.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. Rob, we'll make sure that there are links to both of those in the show notes for everyone as well. So I have loved this conversation and as we wrap up this time together today, what is the most important thing, Rob, that you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you are doing?

Rob Wu:

The most important thing, I think the most important thing that I'd love folks to remember is it's about the donor experience. And then for CauseVox, we want to provide all of our nonprofits and our customers a modern way to give their donors a seamless and easy and delightful experience from first touch all the way to repeat donations. So that's what we're building, and we love to work with folks who have a similar philosophy.

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. Fantastic. Rob, I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more people that hang upside down every once in a while, and I just thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Rob Wu:

All right, Lyn, thanks so much for your time as well.

Speaker 2:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change Podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from visit kidglov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.