

Agency for Change Podcast: Susan Graf, Alpine Bank

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Susan Graf: 0:01

Everything you do makes a difference.

Announcer: 0:06

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers 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: 0:30

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Susan Graf, Vice President, Regional Business Development of Alpine Bank, a Colorado-based community bank with a heart for positive impact. We're diving into Susan's journey, Alpine Bank's mission, and discovering how they're shaping the future of banking while staying true to their roots and making banking a force for good. Susan, I am eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you and Alpine Bank are making. Welcome to the podcast.

Susan Graf: 1:16

Thank you, Lyn, I'm happy to be here.

Lyn Wineman: 1:19

I'm so glad to talk to you and just to start out with, since we have listeners from across the country and a few international, can you start by telling us more about Alpine Bank for people who may not be in the Colorado area?

Susan Graf: 1:35

Oh, I'd love to. Alpine Bank is an employee-owned, independent Colorado Community Bank. So we've been around since 1973, which makes us 50 years old.

Lyn Wineman: 1:52

Wow.

Susan Graf: 1:54

We have 40 branches throughout Colorado, so pretty well spread out across the territory, but just in Colorado, and we have about 900 employees at this point, so it's definitely grown over that time.

Lyn Wineman: 2:11

That is a big organization. Now tell me, did you have a party for the 50th birthday?

Susan Graf: 2:18

Absolutely. Multiple parties.

Lyn Wineman: 2:19

Multiple parties. Of course you did. That's fantastic. So, Susan, you and I met at an event for Certified B Corp, so I know that Alpine Bank is really focused on being a force for good. But could you talk to us more about that and tell us how you weave that into your day-to-day business practices?

Susan Graf: 2:49

Yeah, absolutely. Our shorthand tagline is to give a damn. And so that represents our mission, which, more formally, is that we want to make sure that our customers, employees, stakeholders and community achieve their dreams. So it's a focus on customers first, and then on our community, which can mean being good stewards of the land in the communities that we serve. We have a very strong environmental leadership program which is certified and audited every year. We're an EPA green partner. We get 100% of our electricity from renewable sources, so a big piece of that is just being good stewards of the land and the resources in our community. And then the third part of that would be that we give back to our communities. So every one of our branches has a budget that they can locally make decisions on what organizations and efforts they should support to make their communities inclusive and healthy for everyone.

Lyn Wineman: 4:08

I love everything you just said, but I want to wind it back up a little bit to the very first part. Being in marketing and branding, we always talk about having messaging that's positively disruptive and the tagline we give a damn might be at the top of that list of any tagline I've ever heard. So congratulations on that. That is certainly memorable. So you've talked about giving back and I know I've seen on your website and I think I've even heard from you talk about banking for impact. I mean, what does that mean to you when you hear or say the phrase banking for impact?

Susan Graf: 4:49

Yeah, I can see where that might not make sense to people who don't think banks are different from each other. But when you have a checking or a savings account, your money is not sitting in the vault waiting for you to come back and get it.

Lyn Wineman: 5:04

Wait, it's not. You don't have my little stack of money somewhere in that vault.

Susan Graf: 5:12

It's out there working wherever your bank fees fit, and whereas a lot of people have thought about divesting their retirement funds, for example, people don't think about transactional banking the same way. And if you are banking with a really large bank, they make money by investing your funds in the stock market in industries that you might not be crazy about, and the vast majority of their deposits are invested somewhere outside of your community, whereas with a community bank or a credit union, the vast majority of those are invested back in the community: mortgages for your friends and family, owner-occupied real estate in the community, and a very small portion that has to be reserved for safety purposes is usually in municipal bonds, so you're keeping that money in the community. Community banks and credit unions, by definition, are banking for impact, and people just don't recognize that there is that difference.

Lyn Wineman: 6:28

That is such an interesting point. At KidGlov, we love both community banks and credit unions for that reason. But I think in recent years there's been a lot of focus put on where are my retirement funds being invested you know where is my 401k going, but maybe less thought about what's happening with that money that you have put into the bank or the credit union, and I love that you are shining a light on that. So we talked a minute about you being your bank being 50 years old and how you've celebrated over that time, you've done so many good things. I'm curious how does Alpine Bank nurture a sense of community among both staff and customers? Because your staff is really that, that frontline connection with your customers, with your customers.

Susan Graf: 7:25

Yeah, we have the advantage of being able to invest back in our communities and we get a lot of that input from our employees and from our customers. And we do that a couple of different ways. One is that we have a loyalty debit card program.

Susan Graf: 7:43

So, every customer who has a debit card gets to choose if they'd like an environment card, an education card, community art, and every time they use their debit card we put 10 cents because we give a dime. We put Alpine Bank money into a pool for that purpose and then each community gets to decide where that money goes, so that money goes back to nonprofits in the community for that purpose.

Lyn Wineman: 8:19

That's amazing.

Susan Graf: 8:21

So that involves our customers in giving back to the community, and we even took that a step farther last year. On our 50th birthday, we gave every employee \$500 and asked them to give that to a

nonprofit in their community and we had the employees go out with giant checks and several of them got together and chose the same organization so that the check would be larger and we just had a lot of fun with that interacting with our community and it got our employees really engaged.

Lyn Wineman: 9:03

I bet they loved that and you take. Did you say 900 employees? Yes, 900 employees times \$500 a piece that in itself is a huge impact.

Susan Graf: 9:17

Yeah, in addition to what we normally do.

Lyn Wineman: 9:20

Wow.

Susan Graf: 9:21

That was a very fun program. Last year.

Lyn Wineman: 9:28

That's amazing. I can only imagine how much fun it was, how much energy there was around it, but then also the ripples of impact, the number of people and projects that were impacted by that. That's really amazing. So, Susan, I heard an interesting fact recently and I can't remember the exact percentage, but if you look back through the history of movies and books and entertainment, More often than not people who are in business are characterized in a non-positive light in a lot of entertainment right, and sometimes banks become part of that as well. I think there's a lot of maybe misunderstanding about all of the good work that banks do for their communities and I wonder are there any common misunderstandings that people might have about Alpine Bank and, if so, how do you address them?

Susan Graf: 10:31

Yeah, I think if we're talking about Alpine specifically, people may assume that we're smaller than we are because we have such a local community focus, but in reality we have \$6.6 billion in assets and quite a large and diverse loan portfolio. So I agree with you as an industry, people definitely don't think of banks as good guys. I think a lot of that is well deserved. I think sometimes that banks do exert power in ways that are not necessarily good and healthy for our communities and for people who are sometimes left out of the industry sometimes left out of the industry.

Susan Graf: 11:26

But I think, and people assume, that bigger is better, bigger is too big to fail, bigger is safer and more secure and a community bank the size of Alpine has the exact same compliance requirements. We have the exact same levels of insurance for our customers. We have the best online technology for both online banking and mobile banking, because we're able to outsource that to a company that provides

that for many community banks. So we have purchasing power, cooperative purchasing power by working together to provide those same level of services and technology and security for our customers.

Susan Graf: 12:11

People shouldn't be afraid of smaller banks. It's always good to do your homework, but it is also good to recognize that you can get a lot of the same benefits with the bank who actually knows you by name. If you need a loan restructured or you've overdrawn your account, or you need a PPP loan to actually know the name of your banker and have their direct phone number is a huge advantage.

Susan Graf: 12:44

So I think making a distinction between large banks and small banks is an important distinction to make and to not be afraid of smaller, more personal services.

Lyn Wineman: 12:56

That's fantastic. I think you hit on. That's the key there to have your smaller or smallest customers feel as though they matter, feel as though you give a damn which you said it first but yet to have the breadth and the resources so you can have the technology and and have the wherewithal to do some of the bigger things. That's such a really great balance to strike. So I want to shift just a little bit, because we talked a little bit about the big giveaway you did for the 50th anniversary and getting the employees involved. But I know that was on top of your normal efforts to give back to communities and I wondered if you would share a few more examples of how Alpine Bank gives back to the communities it serves.

Susan Graf: 13:52

Yeah, absolutely. I talked about the loyalty debit card program, which is certainly one big way to give back to the community. I also mentioned that we have a budget for each and every branch that they can give back to the community and that those local employees get to choose where that money goes. And in fact, we're the in the top five most philanthropic organizations in the state of Colorado the top five most philanthropic organizations in the state of Colorado.

Susan Graf: 14:25

Second, if you look at just Colorado owned or native Colorado companies and we're the smallest of those, so we give the largest percentage of our revenues back to our Colorado community, and I'll give you a couple of specific examples because that's where it's more fun.

Susan Graf: 14:44

So our employees this year are tasked with volunteering 24 hours in 2024. And those are paid work hours. We have a lot of fun with that. We highlight people's volunteer work on our website so that they can talk about where they're volunteering and why they're passionate about those organizations. And we have some goals set up at the end of the year for people. If everybody in the branch gets their 24 hours volunteered. For example, in the branch I work out of, they get to wear jeans every Friday.

Susan Graf: 15:36

If we get that in by the end of September and there'll be some recognition and rewards at the end of the year. So we have a volunteer 24 and 24 program going on to get our employees involved and that is definitely in line with our approach to giving back to the community. We don't want to be the organization that just writes a check blindly and then forgets about an organization.

Susan Graf: 16:02

We really like to have holistic relationships, multi-year relationships. So I'll give you an example of one that we support here in the Boulder branch, one of the 50 nonprofits that we support out of the Boulder Branch. It's an organization called Growing Gardens and they are an organic urban farm and they provide food to food insecure families in the community and they raise the funds to do that by having a community supported agriculture program, a CSA program, that people in the community can subscribe to and get their vegetables and fruit from all summer long and they have a community plant sale. So those things allow them to have the financial strength to give the food away to folks who can't afford to pay for it. So organic vegetables, a lot of education programs. They have a youth program called Cultiva where they focus on leadership and work skills for people in marginalized communities. So we as an organization not only support them financially but we have employees who work as greeters and testers at the community plant sale, we go out and pull a massive amount of weeds.

Susan Graf: 17:40

And we promote them on social media and do radio spots to promote their events, and we have someone on their board of directors a bilingual person on their board of directors. So that's an example of how we really engage with a community organization, beyond just the check writing.

Lyn Wineman: 18:04

That's so great. You know, it still feels like, even though we're, you know, post-covid, it feels like our great nonprofits are still in great need of volunteers. I mean, they still definitely need the money, but you know, you talk about time, talent and treasure. What I love about a volunteer program and 24 hours times times 900 employees that's a lot of volunteer hours too. But when you volunteer for an organization, you get to know about them and their mission at a deeper level. You get to see people who are being served and it it your connection becomes much more real and much more emotional and I I commend you for that, that level of effort.

Susan Graf: 18:56

I think that's fantastic yeah, our employees can definitely speak about the organizations that the bank supports with very personal experience and great knowledge, so that makes it rewarding.

Lyn Wineman: 19:10

That's fantastic, and since we're only audio, people can't see you smiling, but I can see you beaming about these programs, as you talk about them, and I feel the passion you have for them as well. So I'm

curious. You're doing so many great things at Alpine Bank. What's on the horizon? Are there exciting initiatives and areas that you're focusing on?

Susan Graf: 19:34

Yes, my area of focus this year and beyond is particularly in the area of inclusion. So banking has not traditionally been a field that people have always been drawn to.

Susan Graf: 19:51

As you said, they don't always have the best reputation and we want our workforce to represent the communities that we live in and represent the communities that we live in. So we have developed an apprenticeship program and I actually got the idea for this from a build leadership summit the last year from another B Corp who was doing this in their industry, and I looked into it and the banking industry did not have an active apprenticeship program.

Lyn Wineman: 20:22

Oh, wow.

Susan Graf: 20:23

I worked with some workforce development folks and we've developed one now that we will have paid supplemental training for candidates that come from more diverse communities so that we can diversify our pool of applicants and have a more welcoming environment when people come into the bank, and that will also carry through, we \nd opening a new branch in an area in Denver later this year and the entire branch will be bilingual. And the third part of that is that we are supporting several financial literacy programs.

Lyn Wineman: 21:35

Oh yeah.

Susan Graf: 21:37

And so we are partnering with nonprofits who are already in schools and they are teaching kids, especially kids that come from families that don't have a high degree of knowledge and experience with banking and financial tools, how do you open an account, how do you manage your money, how do you responsibly handle credit cards. We are supporting those organizations financially. We also have bilingual staff that are going out and helping to teach those courses and help mentor those students and really hopefully create a whole generation of more sophisticated financial consumers who can participate fully in our economy and hopefully equalize things just a little bit.

Lyn Wineman: 22:33

Absolutely.

Susan Graf: 22:35

If you don't change finance, you can't finance change.

Lyn Wineman: 22:39

Wow, that's another good one. You've got a good marketing and messaging team behind you, Susan. I love all of those things that you're saying. One thing, too, that I've learned let's see, KidGlov became part of the B Corp world in 2021. When you go to a B Corp event, like the ones you and I met at in Denver, one thing you learn is that if a certified B Corp has a good idea, they're often very open to sharing that idea in order to spread the impact, versus just holding onto it tightly and secretly and doing that, doing it themselves, and so anybody out there who's thinking about becoming a B Corp or maybe you're a B Corp but you haven't tapped into the community. It really is kind of a magical alliance of people that are very passionate about, you know, moving the needle and making the world a better place. Yeah, fantastic.

Susan Graf: 23:43

I agree that I have felt and seen that for myself over the years where the companies are, even if they're competitors, they just want to move the needle on these important societal issues and lifestyle choices and they're incredibly collaborative and willing to share information, resources, contacts, and I adore being part of that community.

Lyn Wineman: 24:17

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I do have one more banking related question for you, Susan, because you are so focused on taking care of people and building relationships and building community yet banking is one of those industries that we've seen a lot of modern technology come into right. Like you know, you use all the electronic services. You make your deposits on your phone. How do you still lean into modern technology but also build relationships at Alpine Bank?

Susan Graf: 24:53

Oh, that's such a good point and so important because we do have to be incredibly compliant with taking good care of people's money, so we have to make sure we have the best safety and security. So we outsource that to companies that do it for much, much larger banks, so that we have the best technology, protecting our customers with all the kind of security that you expect in the banking industry, and the same thing with service and being able to have the most sophisticated online and mobile banking. Everybody wants to do banking from their phones, yes, so we need to make sure and we do have access to those services. We also subscribe to a service that can sweep customers' money out of Alpine Bank and into other depositories, so you can have an account with Alpine Bank with millions of dollars in it and we make sure that you get the FDIC coverage of \$250,000 by putting those deposits into multiple banks that the customer approved.

Susan Graf: 26:15

But we streamline it. You just have one account and we take care of all of that, sweeping the money into fully insured FDIC accounts behind the scenes for them. So we have that advantage. But the flip side is that you, if you have a problem, if you want to talk to someone, we actually have a branch that you can walk into, where you will be greeted by name and you will be able to hopefully speak with someone who can solve your problem or who will find the person who will solve your problem for you.

Susan Graf: 26:54

Because everyone needs that. As I mentioned, PPP was a particularly important time for people to know who their banker was

Susan Graf: 27:08

But today, fraud is a really good reason for that. You want to make sure that somebody is not going to initiate a wire transfer on your account or trick a banker into a transfer on your account or present a fraudulent check. The advantage is if that banker, that person, knows you. They know what your habits are, they know whether or not this is a typical transaction for you and they will double check to make sure that it is in fact a legitimate transfer. And the same thing with elder abuse which is happening.

Lyn Wineman: 27:49

Yeah.

Susan Graf: 27:50

Someone comes into a bank to withdraw a large amount of money because their child is in jail in a foreign country. Have you talked to the parents to confirm that this is, in fact, true? How do you know that this is your child? That's the grandchild that's calling. So that's where that personalized service becomes really important. Ironically, it's because technology has become so ubiquitous that people can do things. They can mimic your emails, they can spoof your phone number, they can come up with very sophisticated ways to trick people. And that's where that personal service really comes into play in protecting you and educating you.

Lyn Wineman: 28:41

Yeah, very good, very good. So the technology makes life easier, makes more convenient, but the people still form those relationships and provide you the safety net. I like that combination. So, Susan, for people who have been listening and want to know more about Alpine Bank, maybe they're in the Colorado area and they want to tap into your services, or maybe they're somewhere else and they just want to learn from you or learn about you, how can they find out more about Alpine Bank?

Susan Graf: 29:13

Thank you. Yes, alpinebank.com is our website. You can click on the community tab to find out about our environmental leadership program, about our loyalty debit card program, our giving back to the community, and feel free to appropriate whatever ideas you can put into practice in your own business. If you have suggestions for us, we'd be totally open to that as well. So we would love if people got to

know us a little bit better through our website and if they're curious about the financial standing of the company. Specifically, there's a company called Bauer Financial that rates banks, and they have been so kind as to give us a five-star rating.

Susan Graf: 30:04

And on their website you can read about their report about our financial condition and our safety and security.

Lyn Wineman: 30:15

That's fantastic. That's fantastic. So, Susan, as we got started today, before we started to record, I mentioned to you that this will be Agency for Change, episode 194. And one thing we've asked all of our guests is to share their own words of wisdom to inspire our listeners. Can you give us a Susan Graf original quote?

Susan Graf: 30:45

Well, congratulations, 194th episode, I don't know that this is anything earth shattering, but I would say everything you do makes a difference. So if you think about where you shop, what you're buying, how you travel, who you spend time with, every single thing you do has the potential to make a difference.

Lyn Wineman: 31:12

I love that, Susan. Everything you do makes a difference. Fantastic, which leads me right into our last question. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you'd like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Susan Graf: 31:32

That I and Alpine Bank are in service to our community. That's the reason that we do what we do.

Lyn Wineman: 31:41

I love it. I love it. True words from someone and an organization that gives a damn. I just can't help saying that again because I love it so much. Susan, I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more community banks like Alpine Bank. Thank you for taking time to talk with us on the Agency for Change today.

Susan Graf: 32:05

Thank you for the opportunity. It was a pleasure.

Announcer: 32:10

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.

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