

# Spokesperson Secrets to Build Your Brand: Meridith Maskara and Patrick Riccards

Spokesperson Secrets to Build Your Brand celebrates the inaugural SPOKEies® Award winners. You'll learn how to incorporate current events within your communications campaign and how to find different voices for key audiences.

Featuring: Meridith Maskara, CEO of Girl Scouts of Greater New York and SPOKEies® Award Winner in the Non-profit Youth Category and Patrick Riccards, Chief Communications Officer at the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation and SPOKEies® Award Winner in the Non-Profit Education Category.

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## FULL TRANSCRIPT

**DOUG:** Welcome to Spokesperson Secrets to Build Your Brand. I'm Doug Simon. Let's meet our next panel featuring two SPOKEies® award winners in the Non-profit Categories. Seated next to me Meredith Maskara, CEO of the Girl Scouts of Greater New York. She's a SPOKEies® award winner in the Nonprofit Youth Category and what's your top tip?

**MERIDITH:** My top tip would be, to be authentic. I think that Luke had mentioned that in a previous one but it's so important and I think in all the media platforms today it's very easy to detect when someone is not authentic or true to themselves or true to their mission and true to the brand. So for me it's—it's really making sure that that everything that we're delivering and everything that we're talking about and doing just really comes with the with the authenticity that serves our mission.

**DOUG:** Great and before we get to Patrick. Do you want to give a shout out to the Girl Scouts who may be watching The Girl Scouts Facebook at Girl Scout NYC, I would think you would?

**MERIDITH:** Absolutely. Because we serve 30,000 girls in New York City. And the best part of my job and being able to speak about them, is that they have the best stories to talk about and they are actually our best spokespeople in the world to talk about what we do. But yes a big shout out to all my Girl Scouts who are watching and are the leaders and volunteers who support them.

**DOUG:** And I don't want to throw shade on any of my other panelists because they've all been awesome but I'd say you know, now that I've been hosting an event on the Girl Scouts Facebook Live page in New York City there's really no other place for me to go in my career. OK. We'll get full control of this. So we've got Patrick Riccards also he's done some really awesome work as Communications Officer at the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation. That's why he's a SPOKEies® award winner in the Nonprofit Education Category. Why don't you share your top tip as well?

**PATRICK:** I think my tip is the same advice that my wife gives me regularly, on what makes a successful marriage, and you have to be positive and flexible. I think it is the organizations that are Unicorn's out there that determine whether one is successful or not based on whether they

followed the communications strategy with Fidelity? They are not there. I mean each one of us as we look at this we go to great lengths and we create strategies and plans and everything else. But if we're not willing to adapt if we're not able to be flexible for and able to change the messaging based on what's happening in real life add or subtract audiences change tactics. You're never going to reach the goals that you're trying to achieve.

**DOUG:** And that's a great point. Meredith maybe you can jump in. What are some ways maybe where you've had to be flexible because a lot of times it's trial and unfortunately error, because they don't just say trial, it's trial and error. So the key is to be able to learn quickly and make adjustments during that process. What are some of the ways you try and do that?

**MERIDITH:** One of the things, I mean just recently I would say in this past year a lot of things have changed in the environment for girls and for volunteers and for women in general. So we've had to be very reactionary to that also being very conscientious that we're an all-inclusive organization and we represent every girl in this city. So finding that balance of how to to really respect the organization and our membership and everything that they have. But being flexible enough to react to everything that's going on in society right now and giving you know, we serve girls and girls are really out there on social media. They are the ones that you know, we don't pay influencers. We have girls who are on their phones who are natural influencers doing that for us. So we have to give them the proper tools also and to give them the training in how to be their own spokespeople on social media and all platforms. And that's that's a very responsive. And like I said that that flexibility is really key. But we've been we've been in a lot of flexible moments right now where we have to react but also having a very solid strategy of our mission and our brand that we have to drive

forward at all times.

**DOUG:** And Patrick I should also give you credit because now I'm streaming on the Eduflack Twitter feed as well. So it's just you know ice-cream on top of the cake we're just living the dream right now. But I think it might be good for you to sort of take a step back and maybe share a little bit about the mission of your organization and what they're involved with.

**PATRICK:** Sure. So the Woodrow Wilson Foundation has been around now for more than seven decades and it's focus all along has been how do we prepare tomorrow's leaders for the challenges they're going to face? The last decade that focus has been how do we prepare teachers and school leaders? I think that becomes its own challenge. There are some tremendous education communications professionals across this country. I mean all-many of them. And but education is one of those topics that since most of us were educated most of us went to school we all have opinions on that. And so the challenge always is you know if you're looking at how do you transform the way we're going to prepare teachers for the classrooms of tomorrow, how do you do that in a way that's respectful of the teachers of today? How do you do that in a way that inspires those who might not otherwise choose teaching to go into teaching? You know it's one of those tremendous challenges that organizations like ours were created to serve.

**DOUG:** And when you talk about change, there's always a built-in resistance to change. And it's so important to be flexible as you mentioned just how do you navigate that path and especially Meredith you have a position where you've got the New York group but you're also working with national, there are multiple constituencies down on so many different levels, from the girls themselves. The people who were in charge of the different groups the National Organization etc.

**MEREDITH:** Right. We've been very strategic in defining those voices so really being very specific as to with our with our plans that we are having girl voice and also engaging girls you know again they're our best spokespeople. Right. So giving them the outlet and the validation that they are young spokeswomen and can go out and do that on their own and do that through our network. And also you know we have a voice for, we have 8,000 volunteers who deliver our program. So that's a completely different voice. Those are those are young men and moms, dads, community members who volunteer and serve them. So their needs are different and also the way they receive all of this is very different. And then of course we have a donor a voice you know we're a nonprofit. So how are we how are we engaging donors. It goes back to content content content content. You have amazing stories to tell. So relying on that content and using it as a resource to gather content from from all of our constituents.

**PATRICK:** I think what you should mention is just so essential. I mean we're an operating foundation. People think with the name foundation you're sitting on buckets of money we're not, we have to raise every dollar that we spend. And I think what you see is people have a misplaced believe in what it means to be a nonprofit organization, and what it means what not for profit means and what it means for the organization and how they communicate. And I think any successful organization The Girl Scouts being one of them recognizes you can't simply inform. It's not about one way communication where you push it out. Everything we do is judged based on our clients. It's based on our customers it's based on donors it's based on alumni. All of the different audiences that we have to deal with. Everything has to go through those filters. You have to make sure it's not just about informing them. But ultimately, I think for both of our organizations about driving people to take action.

**DOUG:** So what are some maybe pitfalls to avoid. If you want to

share some advice to the folks who are tuning in and watching.

**MEREDITH:** I would say getting comfortable like avoid getting comfortable keeping yourself you know, try as being ahead of it and taking some risks to see what that engagement. You constantly have to be testing the waters and pushing that a little bit but once you commit you have to be relentless. I think that that's the biggest fear is when people are going to commit to this kind of level of PR, now communication is expected instantly and ad nauseum. So you have to be relentless so once you commit your in.

**DOUG:** Patrick you've jumped out early, especially in the online space. How does digital and online and social help and how does that complicate things?

**PATRICK:** Well I think it's funny. I had a conversation earlier this week with a for-profit company that was asking in the education space about digital and social media. And her big question was "Well we've been doing Twitter now for a couple of months. It hasn't directly resulted in sales yet so we must not be needing to do it. Moving forward.". It's understanding I mean this is both a sprint but this is a marathon. You're trying to get things done. You're trying to figure out how to move it forward. And I think you know these all become real challenges. I think you know when we look at this and you see one of the reasons why you see those organizations that have taken on digital, have taken on social media, and done in a meaningful way is because they've recognized communications isn't a commodity it's not something you simply add on at the end of an engagement saying Okay we've done all this wonderful programmatic work. Now go ahead and just tell people about it. The successful organizations particularly the not-for-profit space whether you are the largest university in the country or the smallest city based non-profit they recognize that communications is part of the effort from day one. It's part of the strategy the planning, the program.

**DOUG:** And that's a great point because there's the talk that used to be when I was earlier in my career can PR get closer to the C-Suite and have more influence. Now if all of it is engaging together you know that works and makes everything more powerful. We do have a question that's come in, it ask how nonprofits spokespeople can be as effective without as many financial resources? One of the great tips you gave is it's got to be integrated into the whole program from the very beginning, it's not let's do this in a way. We've got this problem let's throw a bucket of money about it. Add it to get it out there.

**MERIDITH:** And I think one of the best internal resources for that is you know if you don't have a budget line specifically for it right now, you'd you have a staff where you have five people whether you have 50 people who are all most likely connected in some way on their own personal social media. And you know in order to do some staff development. What does it mean for you as an employee. What are your expectations to be part of that social media movement and how can you continue and tell your story and and be part of the voice and face of the organization?

**PATRICK:** And I think it's multi-purposing that material. I think you look at it you know we are a relatively small organization. We don't have buckets of money we don't other than salary and benefits. We don't have a communications budget to really speak of. And what that means is, it means when you do something you have to use it in a multitude of ways. I mean we already know from the science that for an idea to take hold someone needs to hear six or eight times in different ways. The same goes for your material so you go, you create. You know we heard earlier today you create that one minute video. Well how do you cut that up so you are using it on Instagram, using it on YouTube? You're figuring out how to post it on Twitter you have it on your Web site you able to link to it from your blog. How do you cut slice and dice and

do things in a way that you're using the same material in a number of ways that people are beginning to see the value that it's not a onetime shot? Right.

**DOUG:** No that's so critical and so far been some great value in tips. Any final thoughts that you have for the audience? If you could go back even in your own career and say oh I wish I started doing this earlier what might it be?

**PATRICK:** So I think for me it really was two things: one you know I seemed to live my life now on Twitter and other social media. When Twitter first came along I was a blogger and I thought Twitter was the silliest idea in the world. The thought that I was going to be able to take a 600 word thought in a blog post and put it into 140 characters that were meaningful. I resisted, until I had individuals "Can you help us with Twitter?" so I got to actually figure out how to do this myself. And so I think that forced it, I think for me you know, it was one of those I was fortunate in that I decided early on, or it was decided for me that I would be a jack of all trades. I didn't specialize in one part of the communications operation as needs came up I took them on. So I think that's been both a blessing and a curse. But I think you know that because the communications field changes so much. I mean you can't tell other than from the beard. I'm old enough to remember that I started working on Capitol Hill before we were emailing press releases. I was literally typing them out and faxing them someplace. I'd have to read it over the phone.

**DOUG:** I just want to go on record as saying I think your jacket balance is out, any beard effect- there might be.

**PATRICK:** I mean you look at this. I mean I've seen organizations have to all of a sudden build websites when there were never websites. You had to get on blogs you've had to move into social media. We're now moving you know live video all of these other pieces that you can't predict. And so it shows you, how do you build those other skills how do you

build the strategic skills, the writing skills, the thinking skills, so that you can adapt professionally.

**DOUG:** I think that's such a great point especially for the younger people who may be tuning into this broadcast to grow their careers. You almost need to be both a generalist and a specifically focused person. So, you're creating expertise in multiple specific channels which is really important. I've got we've got two of our winners and Meredith jump in.

**MERIDITH:** I'm going to just be very, very simple. And in fact we have one of our Girl Scout Laws is to be responsible for what I say and do and that is when I'm talking with young women, when I'm talking with my own daughters specifically in this you know, being your own spokesperson. Everything that you say can be on record. Right. And that's you have to be responsible for everything that you say and do and sometimes it's that simple.

**DOUG:** Yeah, it's interesting we're all our own spokespeople now with social media on that. So the young minds definitely have the authenticity part but there might be areas where that kind of youthful authenticity is not helpful.

**MERIDITH:** And as an organization we really have a responsibility now. We have to move at their speed. So, if that's the world that they're living in, we have to give them the tools to be that to be that responsible spokesperson for themselves and to make sure that they're not hurting their image and their brand of who they are as an individual as they move on their leadership journey.

**DOUG:** To those points some of the poll results that we got earlier: Half the audience was involved with having their own influencers trying to be connected to other influencers as well as opposed to just only a quarter we're relying on those third-party experts to drive the message. So that is positive and also sort of holds dear the information of what the

SPOKEies® are all about. So for you guys, have you felt the SPOKEies® have been sort of a valuable piece for your own recognition of the work that you're doing?

**MERIDITH:** Absolutely I think that I think that we all get in our bubbles, and I know a nonprofit specifically we get in our bubbles and we and we work in our track and it's hard for us to measure outside of our organizations, our reach or our success are is our conversation stretching and reaching. And for me it was very validating to know that the work and the efforts and the money and the resources that we put into this have been validated and recognized and show us that we can get that return and we can continue to tell our story that we need. So thank you very much.

**DOUG:** And it's a really important piece that the people who are bringing trust and authenticity to the table, and I think it's wonderful and I'll get to you in a moment Patrick that is happening in the non-profit sector. But there's also a lot of truthful authentic work going on in the corporate space which is often overlooked as well with people sort of getting this good guy, bad guy kind of paradigm that really just isn't a fit anymore because there are good and bad actors in every space within it. So let's start recognizing the good ones including Patrick. Tell us about your SPOKEies®.

**PATRICK:** I think I think this is incredibly important particularly in the nonprofit sector but in corporate as well I think it's one of those things, that the SPOKEies recognizes the very best that goes into being an effective communicator and being an effective spokesperson. And I think for those who are not living this day in day out. My colleague here was actually editing an op-ed on a blog on the iPhone as we were getting ready. But if you're not part of that world what you see is you think that what we do for a living is the job that you see on TV. The publicists that you see who's going to the hot parties, and you can getting things on page six here in New York. That's not what most of us do. And I think awards

like this the SPOKEies® helps people understand the impact that we're having the contributions we make to the organization beyond a clip in a way that is meaningful and important.

**MERIDITH:** When Patrick is on page six he is wearing orange.

**DOUG:** With that but you guys have been awesome we're getting ready to move it to the panel. I would have to say that this is probably one of the hottest parties going on around except for perhaps the Frankenstein food, and the catering that's in the kitchen. But nothing is perfect.