Reining in the Bulls with Michael Marx
Interview with Vojtech Sedlak of Stand.earth
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Name: Vojtech Sedlak
Current Title: Director, Digital Innovation & Analytics
Current Organization: Stand.earth

00:04 Michael Marx:
Thank you for agreeing to this interview about the digital track of corporate campaigns. I know you're with Stand.earth. Do you want to give me just a sense of your role at Stand and then, I've got a number of questions for you.

00:21 Vojtěch Sedlák:
That sounds great. Thanks, Michael. Happy to be here. So I work as a digital director at Stand.earth, formerly known as Forest Ethics. Forest Ethics and Stand have been around for up to now, I think 30 years. But it was only in the last couple of years that Stand has really embraced digital campaigning as part of its work. And my role is to lead the team that kind of executes the digital components of our campaigns. It's one of the tools in the Stand toolkit in addition to research and corporate engagement, and communications and other aspects. Naturally it's been an increasingly important piece of the campaigning puzzle. So I lead a team of campaigners. We have a data analyst. We have web developers who help us create kind of cutting-edge online tools to engage people on market campaigns.

01:09 MM:
Great. I remember Forest Ethics in the early days since I was there, but it sounds like the strategies of Forest Ethics have really evolved to include much more online. Can you give me a sense of how online strategies and tactics have really evolved over the last, I'm thinking 20 years, but whatever is the range of years that you're able to talk about? I'm just curious how things have evolved.

01:41 VS:
There's been so much change that has happened in the last 20 years and Forest Ethics has kind of gone through -- and I'll keep saying Stand because Forest Ethics is obviously no more -- but yes, Stand has kind of evolved alongside those trends. And so, I would say the biggest milestones from the last 20 years that have really impacted how Stand does campaigning has been the rise of social media, the rise of mobile devices, things that really democratize the access to information and made it a lot easier for people to participate in digital discourse, to participate in having conversations online, to be able to share content, post content, voice their ideas and opinions. Be able to find like-minded individuals. I would say when that shift

happened, and we're talking here about 2008 and after that, there was about, I would say six to seven years after that, it was probably like 2008 when the iPhone came around and when Facebook really took off to about maybe 2014, 2015, those were I would say the original days of online activism when everything was new. It was a new frontier where everything that was done was done for the first time. And oftentimes to remarkable and unexpected success.

02:59 VS:
Where small groups with tiny budgets, with minimal staff were able to influence public discourse on large issues. I happened to, at the time, work at an organization here in Canada, based on the west coast of Canada; it was a group of two people and myself, who was a volunteer at the time. They took on this issue of internet pricing in Canada, and they took on the internet regulator which is a federal agency. And they mobilized within two months, about half a million people using an online petition. This was actually late 2010. And it was just remarkable to see how easy it was to mobilize, and how easy it was to engage people. And so in those days, we saw the rise of organizations like Change.Org and Sum of Us -- which is now called Ekō, and other organizations.

03:56 VS:
It's kind of what is now sort of a standard model of digital campaigning where people can take actions on petitions, subscribe to an email list for an organization and then kind of keep engaging on issues. But this is now a long time ago, and what's happened since then, I would say the biggest change is that that the model which was tried and true for many years and has achieved amazing outcomes, has kind of lost its, I would say, shine. And, organizations are now, especially in the market campaign world where you're targeting corporations, they have become a lot more immune to some of the kind of standard tactics, and are able to withstand some of that pressure that perhaps 10 years ago, if there was a big brouhaha about their company on say, Twitter or X, now called X, or Facebook, that would've been a tangible threat to their corporate identity or their public image, I would say it's less so now.

04:52 VS:
And so the biggest change that I think company organizations have had to tackle in the last couple of years is to figure out what's next. How do we move beyond these kinds of tried and true tactics around online activism of those early days, those early 2010's and how do we move beyond that here at Stand? What that means is that we have been doing a lot of experimentation trying to exist in the ever-changing world of social media platforms where we're obviously at the mercy of algorithms and changes in ownership. As I mentioned, Twitter X is a good example of that where we don't have a lot of control over the platforms that we use to distribute information and where we hope to organize people on campaigns. It sometimes is very frustrating to be working in a space where the landscape shifts so quickly. But it also puts emphasis on other innovative new ways of engaging people. And sometimes, some of those ways of engaging people are not necessarily new. Email continues to be a really key pillar for, I think a lot of organizations but there's new channels. There's texting. A lot of video has become a big way of communicating issues. And so, to sum up, my long answer to your question, a lot has changed, and a lot of it has had to do with things that are usually outside of the control of

the organizations that are working in the space. And a lot of the changes are simply adaptation, adaptation to changes in the social media landscape, adaptation to the emergence of new tools, new ways of communicating, new ways of storytelling, and that will continue. And so it's an honor for me to be on the front lines of some of those changes and to try to help Stand figure out what that looks like.

06:45 MM:
It seems like when I look at all the different tracks that can be part of a corporate campaign, the field track, the shareholder track, the legislative track, for example, the most dynamic and changing seems to be the digital track, the online track. And I know that can be broken into kind of two big categories. One is the paid and one is the unpaid. And you were just alluding to some of the unpaid, but also talking about how video's becoming more popular, which often ends up being paid. I'd like to just go back to the unpaid options. What are some of the key unpaid options? And I'd like to talk about those for a few minutes.

07:39 VS:
So, if we were to come back to the standard distribution model of media where we look at owned, earned, and paid, the owned and earned are the ones that would obviously fall into the carrier of unpaid. And that's where there's been a lot of movement. And so right now when we talk about an unpaid digital channel, we're usually talking about an owned channel. So having like an email list that one is responsible for, that one grows and tries to maintain because then one can reach out to those people without being at mercy of a curated algorithm, a news feed algorithm or something like that. So those old channels, owned channels, are I would say the foundation of any organization that works in the market campaigning space. The key pieces of that owned bucket of digital channels would be email, channels like X-Link, which have obviously recently become more emergent as people embrace that mode of communication more, organic social media presence still would fall into that category, but it's less and less important in my experience as the wave platforms have evolved is that it's become more of a pay to play. And so we can talk about the social debt platforms and the value they bring to the movement, underpaid channels, and the unpaid, it really is just about existing on those platforms, posting regularly, showing up where it's relevant, but it's really increasingly harder and harder to achieve meaningful kind of impact on social media without having to dip into the wallet. And so, as an old channel that's not as relevant. Obviously there are earned channels as well and that's where we get into, historically earned would've been media mentioned. So getting mentioned in newspapers, but in the digital realm, the earned landscape also can include things like influencers, building relationships with people who then reference Stand or reference your campaigns without you necessarily having full ownership over that communication. And so that earned bucket has been increasing and changing a lot lately too. We can come back to influencers perhaps later on, because that's an interesting topic, I think, to talk about given how, what role video plays nowadays and the emergence of platforms like TikTok that are solely based on this kind of video influencer model. But those are, I would say, some of the kind of foundational pieces of the unpaid digital channels. And, the nature of these channels is such that they're built over time. You can't just, on a drop of a dime, build out an unpaid channel and be able to be expecting to reach a lot of people. Stand, for example, has

built its email and texting and social media list for the last couple of years. It's about six, seven years to get us to now having more than 1 million members on our list that we can email, having these strong followings on across various platforms that we try to prioritize. So it's really a labor of like a long term investment that one has to make to build out these unpaid channels to be able to have an impact in the market campaigning that we want to do.

11:07 MM:
I was going to ask you what are some of the requirements? And obviously one of the requirements is a real dedication to building out your digital activist membership and feeding it and keeping it alive. And one of the things that we've talked about, one of the traditional approaches that may be kind of losing some of its effectiveness or its bite with corporations is petition signatures, for example. I'm just curious about what's the percentage there? How many do you have to send out, for example, to get a critical mass of petition signatures to at least get the attention of a company and, petition signatures, as we think of escalation, might be a lower level first salvo, shot over the bow. So kind of two questions: How many do you have to send out to get a critical mass? And what is a critical mass, that is not going to send the wrong message?

12:15 VS:
That's a great question, and I would, I think at the top level, it kind of depends on the target. Who is it that you're trying to target? If we are talking specific about corporate engagement, if, say we take on a company like Google or Apple, and we try to talk to them about their emissions and supply chains, something like that, to move a company like that, the amount of attention that a petition would need to get would be hundreds of thousands of signatures for it to really gain momentum and for it to emerge from what is now a very saturated field of petitions and that kind of level of digital organizing. But then you may have smaller companies. For example, one of the campaigns that Stand runs focuses on the fashion company, Lululemon, that's based out of Vancouver. And, you know, we have had this kind of open letter petition that targets yoga influencers which is a very key target demographic for Lululemon. And having a couple hundred of yoga influencers sign onto that petition has an outsized impact on the company. And so there's considerations to be kind of entertained there around who is the target and what's the audience signing the petition. If we're talking about kind of broad public petitions, I would say, at least a hundred thousand is kind of what we want to get to achieve to be actually able to get on the radar of big company. Sometimes it's smaller, but what it comes down to is not necessarily even the number of signatures, but how that petition is used.

13:49 VS:
So in my kind of experience of how petitions have evolved over the last, especially 10 years, is that there's kind of a dual purpose. On one hand, petitions are the low bar entry for people to engage on a campaign, to learn about an issue, to get fired up, to be interested in, in advancing a cost, to be able to take action. There is a parallel track of actually achieving the impact of the campaign, but oftentimes a petition doesn't really play as big a role in that. Oftentimes petitions are a way to start building relationships with people who down the road in the

campaign, are the ones who are going to pick up the phone and call the specific target, who are going to be the ones who are able to write a letter to their editor in a new local newspaper. The ones who will end up potentially even showing up at a rally, which are tactics that are way more impactful in terms of the second track of achieving the outcome of the campaign. And so, petitions on their own will rarely move a target. Petitions are a great way to build relationships with people so that you can bring them on the journey of the campaign arc, that helps them get to the more higher bar engagement which will be more impactful.

14:59 MM:
You mentioned that, and I'm aware of this, that the petitions are the lower bar on that ladder of engagement. Can you give me an example of how you might step it up that ladder, for example, digitally in a campaign, starting with petitions?

15:18 VS:
Most of the campaigns that we've run at Stand follow this kind of pattern of the ladder of engagement. The parameters may differ, but usually there is that starting petition because it forces one to communicate the issue that we're trying to advocate for in the simplest possible way, in a way that engages the most people. And so it's always a valuable exercise to put together a simple petition that allows people to engage on a given issue. Because Stand already has an existing following, it has its own email list that we can get that petition on people's radar with minimal investment. We send the people to our list, we email to our list or a couple and are able to get up to 50,000 signatures very quickly just through our own channels that we already have.

16:08 VS:
Historically, this would've been the place where we'd be able to then reach new audiences as well. Because, by the virtue of people taking actions through a petition, they would be encouraged to share, and that sharing would organically reach new audiences and bring them in. And many organizations have been built around this model and they were the two-tenths organizations like some of us that have really been able to grow and reach millions and millions of people based on this model. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case.

16:38 VS:
Sharing on social media platforms, organic sharing, the reach of that has dramatically decreased. So at this initial stage of the petition, it is hard to reach new audiences. And that's where one has to tap into the paid channels, and we can come back to those. But we start with the petition. Usually the next step, in that kind of engagement journey would be a more targeted tool, a way for people to actually get more familiar with the target that actually has the power to affect the change that the campaign is seeking. For example, in the Lululemon campaign, we would set up an email to target tool where people can send a letter to a specific person who works at Lululemon, say in the sustainability department or the CEO, urging them to follow through on the changes that we want to see implemented. That email to target, we'll see if we have, say, a thousand petition signatures, just for the sake of the math here, we'll probably see about 600 people end up taking this email to target action. So we ought to see a

bit of a drop off as we progress on this engagement journey, but that's okay. We don't expect everyone who signs a petition to do a more high bar action. That said, we always look for opportunities on that low bar level to keep people engaged on the campaign, even if they are not ready to take that higher step of sending a letter or doing other things. If we continue along that engagement journey after the petition, after these more targeted email actions, we get into the territory of the more kind of tactics that are perhaps more intrusive to the target, and therefore they're more impactful. So things like a call tool, where people are encouraged to use one of our call tools where they get patched through to a target and actually get a chance to talk to someone and explain their stance.

18:27 VS:
We have tools that allow people to submit say, videos, testimonials, that we then get into a video that we then run as ads targeting the targets that we're trying to aim at. There are tools like writing letter to the editor. There are various tools that make it easier to engage. We have even things like click to fax if we're trying to engage a government agency that still uses fax, for example. There's these kind of more higher bar tools that really are meant to put that additional impression.

19:06 VS:
What we usually see, if we go along this engagement journey, is that the petition alone doesn't usually solicit that much engagement from a company unless there is also a parallel communication happening, or there's some other kind of track of engagement. But when we get to the email to target, when people actually start to get inundated with emails, when they start to notice that these are actually shifting, that's where we usually start to see some movement. And when we then escalate to the kind of third step of actually calling people, having them see ads on this where people are calling, urging them to take action, that's where we often see the movement. And so to illustrate perhaps this in a quick example, one of our campaigns has been targeting European banks that are investing in the extraction of oil in the Amazon. We had a bunch of research that came out of Stand highlighting which banks fund Amazon Oil extraction, to what degree, we put together a list. And we started with a petition and wrote a very kind of compelling story to engage our list on a simple petition calling on the banks to divest. That alone put it on the radar. And because there already was a piece of research that got some media attention, we knew that this was already on the bank's radar and the public engagement was really meant to ramp up that pressure. So we started with the petition, and then we moved up to that email-to-target tool where we actually send emails to each bank, and we had thousands and thousands of people come and actually take the time to write a letter, send it to the respective banks. And that's when we started to see banks actually come out with claims, or come out with commitments to withdraw funding from Amazon oil extraction.

20:38 VS:
And once we had that, then we used that as a momentum to put pressure on the other banks that have yet to do that. So it ended up, I believe all of them -- don't quote me on that, but a lot

of them, a lot of the banks have now made commitments to that effect. So we have seen that come to fruition.

20:58 MM:
I want to backtrack just a moment, because one of the ways you talked about expanding the reach is through influencers. How do you target influencers and reach them?

21:12 VS:
It's a difficult thing. I will say there is no one right way to do it. So because influencers are a fairly new development and the kind of social media landscape, there are now tools that have emerged, platforms that actually make it easier to reach influencers, to figure out what influencers support at what costs, and to be able to get connected. Because that's half of the challenge is being able to connect, find who the influencers are, find the ones that are, you know, mission aligned and who have the sufficient following who reach the audiences that you want to reach.

21:44 VS:
And so there is this kind of initial groundwork that needs to be done when you're running a market campaign, you're trying to influence specific audiences. You have to kind of think about, well, who are the influencers who are influencing their audience? And, that obviously will differ between campaigns. But to come back to that example of say, the Lululemon campaign, we knew that yoga influencers would have an outsized impact because that's one of the direct demographics. And so, we've done some research around identifying what are existing networks of influencers. We did the research of tracking and building a little database that we were then able to go and actually approach people and start asking for their support. And then, once you know who the influencers are that you want to reach, as I mentioned, there are platforms that you can use to reach people and to facilitate, oftentimes what is an exchange of funds because influencers are influencing for money, and that's their business model.

22:47 VS:
Many people make their living like that. And so, there are platforms that make it easier to exchange, to do that kind of pay for fee service of promoting our campaigns. And those platforms are really expensive. To actually scale this kind of influence marketing, it's not currently very friendly to nonprofits. It's more kind of geared towards big corporations and big budgets. So the pathway that we usually end up going through is less through these kind of 'as they think' platforms, but more through building personal relationships.

23:19 VS:
And oftentimes it starts with highlighting someone's post on our own social media channels and reaching out to them personally and asking them to promote maybe one piece of content that is well aligned with their beliefs. And oftentimes it just takes time to build those relationships and to maintain them over time and to think of the right opportunities to build that relationship, that take that next step.

23:44 VS:
All of that means that it's a lot of work and the returns on that can be variable. It has to be very kind of deliberate and strategic choice when influencer marketing makes sense, and when it makes sense to try to find someone who can elevate and reach new audiences. Sometimes then that's the kind of fickle side of the influencer landscape is that sometimes you don't even need to do anything, and a big shot is going to amplify your content. And we saw this play out dramatically in our old growth campaign, which focuses on old growth logging in BC, when Mark Ruffalo, AKA "the Hulk," took a personal interest in that campaign, and did a huge amount of amplification including recording videos. And he has now done it for a couple different campaigns. And, if you follow Mark Ruffalo on online, he's fierce advocate for a lot of environmental issues.

24:39 VS:
That had a huge impact on our ability to engage and for the reach of that campaign. And now there has been more intentionality put into building relationships with people of that influence. But it started very small and very unexpectedly. And so, the influence marketing landscape is still emerging, still evolving. One thing I just want to add here, as I mentioned it, it is very much geared towards kind of corporate engagement and corporate brand kind of advertising and we've all seen influencers reviewing products or mentioning products in their videos as part of their marketing strategy or their business model. But as we are seeing more influencers kind of take on issue advertising and to actually get involved with causes and to try to be more active on that front and obviously their business model has to evolve alongside that. And so one of the things that we're trying to think about is how to create, say for example, like a climate pledge where we invite influencers to refuse to take money from fossil fuel companies and instead, amplify that pledge as a way of kind of getting our causes out there, specifically obviously protection of climate, without us having to spend the hundreds of thousands of dollars that potentially, we would have had to have that kind of reach. And so finding new ways of reaching influencers, of creating pathways of engagement is something that we're thinking about. And I think we're early on that frontier as alongside many other organizations who are trying to do the same.

26:25 MM:
Good. And it sounds like that even with influencers, we've somewhat segued into the paid side, since as you know, influencers -- this is how they make their living. So let's segue there, but before we do, I want to make sure that I get to one other one. It may also have that same kind of paid factor. Many times I know to go out and build your database or for a smaller NGO to reach a lot more people, they'll go to an Avaaz or they'll go to "SumofUs", or they'll go to Cause Action. How do we refer to them? Are they like a network, digital NGOs? What are they called? And who are the major ones out there right now?

27:18 VS:
Yeah, that's a real interesting question because, actually I used to work at SumOfUs myself and got to witness this kind of model of online activism in practice. And it is very much, I would say that the main players in the landscape now would be SumOfUs, now known as Ekō. Avaaz.

Change.Org is an interesting platform that is a bit of a hybrid model, but it still plays a very important role in building online momentum and activism. Daily Kos plays a very important role specifically in the US. There are sometimes kind of regional or country-based organizations that play an outsized role, but they're usually in the international setting. If we're looking at the US specifically, these I think would be the main players. To be quite honest, I'm not sure what the proper name would be to describe that organization because they are distinct entities in so far as they have their own themes, their own staff, their budgets, their campaign priorities. So they work in somewhat of an isolation, and yet they have an outsized impact on the movement because they also work with partners. They engage in cross kind of, you know, they build networks of support and many organizations do. So, even at Stand, we built networks around campaign issues to have a bigger impact.

28:41 VS:
I think the way that, for example, Avaaz has done things has been a little bit specific insofar as they would actually take an issue and, in a way co-opt it, but not so without the sometimes negative connotations, and we don't have to get into that, but they would imply their kind of huge fire hose that they would have access to in terms of their giant following to be able to really take an issue and blow it up and to really emphasize it. And so, they are still out there, I would say their models have changed a lot how they operate. I've seen that happen with SumOfUs and they're still oftentimes small donor funded, so they are dependent on fundraising and they have to kind of look after themselves as well as the broader movement. And so, the example of the Change.Org is one that's a little bit of an outlier, but has a very important role and their model has perhaps changed the most. They used to be a lot more open to sort of that network building role and increasingly they have kind of shifted into being more of an issue agnostic platform even, which makes it a lot less palatable to some progressive spaces. But it still has a very, very huge impact on the discourse around on activism and a lot of the tactics, a lot of the ways of engaging people that Change has piloted have now been co-opted by other organizations or into other movements. And so, it's very important we keep an eye on these players. Finally, the Daily Kos one that you mentioned, they play a very interesting convening role in the US landscape, where they kind of create and host a lot of low bar petitions that then they invite other organizations to collaborate on. And, I would say the main advantage of that, or the main function of that is to build the power of the movement because in these moments, in these kind of petitions or in these actions that are collaborative, there is less sharing.

30:50 VS:
So, there is kind of cross pollination of the action takers among the organizations which is one way for organizations to grow, to build more of an audience and to then potentially have an outsized impact. There is also, in the US context, there's another new player on the block called Civic Shout, which is a new platform that has emerged as kind of building on this kind of power building model for the whole movement, not necessarily on the impact for each campaign, but on the power building, where it's all about making it easier for people to take low bar online actions, so aka petitions, but do so in a platform that makes it very easy to then reach new audiences. And it's had a quite a significant impact since it launched, I believe a year and a half

ago. And so when it comes to network building and building out power with other groups, those are some of the players that one should definitely keep in mind.

31:48 MM:
And the one that you just mentioned, could you say that name again?

31:51 VS:
Civic Shout.

31:52 MM:
Okay. Great. You mentioned that they have to fund themselves. But if you were to go to SumOfUs, for example, and ask them to be involved and they were to be persuaded, would they raise money and would there be some kind of a quid pro quo or would they get to keep a certain percentage of the money or would they not even do that? It would just be petitions.

32:22 VS:
This is where we get into somewhat of the kind of underground layer of the kind of progressive online activism space where data ownership and fundraising are kind of inevitable parts of the landscape. And so in an organization like SumOfUs, and I've now been out of there for a couple of years, so practice may have changed, but SumOfUs would often take on a whole variety of issues and be able to put pressure on and run a petition and engage people on a specific issue.

32:55 VS:
And oftentimes this was done in collaboration with other groups but it was immediately followed by testing of the kind of fundraising messaging and needing to make sure that every month there is a successful fundraiser that goes out. I used to work as a data scientist at the organization, and so I was at the receiving end of a lot of these experiments trying to figure out what's the optimal messaging. And, so we moved from like trying to have an impact with the campaign to also trying to make sure that this organization was sustainable and had sufficient funding. And so there is kind of duality in how most organizations operate in this space, where obviously we all have our eyes on the prize of the impact that we want to have in the world, but when it comes to building relations with people and having own channels like large email lists, there is also this kind of flip side of having to fundraise and build sustainable organizations. And so that would definitely be always part of the landscape. Sometimes there would be some funds shared with the actual organization that, SumOfUs say, is collaborating with. But oftentimes, it would be a fraction of what is being raised.

34:05 VS:
Even at Stand, we have a lot of small donations coming through, having our large following. We've been trying to be very intentional about sharing some of those funds with, say, indigenous partners on issues where we are putting the indigenous partners, you know, front and center where we're trying to amplify their messaging and to support their causes. So for example, on the old growth campaign that I mentioned earlier, that received a lot of attention thanks to Mark Ruffalo and others who've amplified it, we've been intentional about giving

some of the money that we raised through that campaign to frontline partners on the ground. But it's all very ad hoc. It's oftentime the unseen layer of this kind of organizing landscape.

34:52 MM:
Okay. Well, now that we're into that paid category, could you give us an overview of that? I mean, what are the options in that paid category? And, maybe, they too might be escalated options in terms of the ladder of engagement.

35:16 VS:
Yes, paid is a big, big part of the work and anyone who is in the digital campaigning landscape at this point has to think about paid advertising and paid channels as a way of reaching audiences and building power. So if we do look at that kind of layer of engagement again and think about some of the entry points, when we look at the petition level at that lowest bar to entry, that's where paid advertising plays a huge role because it's the primary way of reaching new audiences. So whatever audiences an organization already has in order to reach new ones, and especially if you have a specifically targeted audience that you're trying to reach, for example, in our climate finance campaign targeting RBC (Royal Bank of Canada), which is a bank in Canada, we have an interest in targeting specific demographics that we know that the bank is also interested in targeting. They may not be on our list yet, but to reach them, we have to actually engage in advertising. And so some of the platforms that are effective in that still, although that keeps changing year to year, is Facebook or Meta, which includes Facebook and, and Instagram. YouTube is a very effective advertising platform, assuming you have a good video creative. If you do, then YouTube can be very, very effective way of reaching your audiences. We have dabbled with platforms like Reddit, TikTok, we've done some advertising on Twitter to lesser success. Most of the social networks have a paid program. And so that's where there is a lot of importance in investing. Also, things like search engine advertising, so putting up simple Google search ads or Bing search ads where you're trying to basically get to the people who are looking for specific information, you want to make sure that you get your campaign on their radar.

36:59 VS:
A huge bunch of paid advertising goes into this kind of power building at the ground level, when we get into the more kind of impact-oriented advertising, there is some really interesting tactics that have been emerging and are getting piloted by many organizations around how advertising can be used to put pressure on targets. Some of the examples of that are focusing on platforms like LinkedIn that are really tailored to kind of corporate engagement, where you have the option of targeting specific employees of a specific company even based on things like seniority, location. And obviously this is the function of advertising and why it's an effective means of engaging audiences because you do have the ability to specify the targeting. This obviously opens up the whole big data question and ethics and privacy.

37:47 VS:
And that's something that each organization has to navigate and set lines of assent around what is and isn't okay. But it is very effective when it comes to target engagement. Running, say

a paid campaign on LinkedIn that targets employees of a certain company, we've seen a lot of success with that. Beyond that, some of the more kind of advanced and most impactful tactic that we've done is using something called programmatic advertising, where we actually work with a bidding platform to put ads basically everywhere on the internet. But because of the possible reach, it's quite costly unless you are very specific about the audience that you target. And oftentimes that audience definition can focus on people who live within a block radius of a specific address and so that's where we've used it a great success by, for example, targeting headquarters of a company.

38:44 VS:
And it's the kind of situation where if the employee is in that building and they check their phone and Google something, or go to any website, read an article, they'll see our ads and they will only see it because they're in that location, and then go to another website and they also see our ads, and it creates this kind of pervasiveness feeling that they're bombarded by our messaging when in fact they're only being bombarded because they are in a given location and no one else is seeing it. And so that can have an outsized impact, and we've seen some real interesting impact that that has had on campaigns, and we're still playing around with that.

39:21 VS:
It's a kind of a newish frontier but there are different options, different layers, and also depends on how well an organization is set up in terms of its own data infrastructure, how you evaluate the results of ad campaigns. But that gets into a lot of the nuance and details that can get complicated.

39:42 MM:
You know, I remember that with Uber and Lyft and trying to get them to commit to be fully carbon emission free by 2030, all electric vehicles or non-emitting vehicles. We did geofence their headquarters, the group geofenced their headquarters. It was pretty expensive to do that, but it was extremely effective. It actually generated meetings and negotiation meetings right out of the blocks with the CEOs of the companies. Can you speak a little bit to, at least in 2023 dollars, what kind of expenses are we talking about here?

40:22 VS:
We have a partner agency that we work on this, and their kind of guidance is always, we need to start at least at $10,000 to really to have at least some impact. But it's oftentimes a drop in the bucket. I would say $20,000 would be the lowest, lowest bar. It also depends on the parameters of the campaign, but we are talking tens of thousands of dollars. Whereas on other platforms like LinkedIn, we usually spend hundreds of dollars and feel like we have quite a significant reach in terms of getting to our targets. And the programmatic advertising is running up against things like ad blockers and potentially, somewhat of a limited reach as well. So there is like a calculation that has to be done around the trade off and whether the investment, because it's significant for an organization, even of Stand size or even other organizations to invest $20,000 in a programmatic campaign -- that's a lot of money, but if thought out well, and if really strategically implemented, it can have a big impact, as you mentioned.

41:24 MM:
Okay, let's pick up from there. So if you produce something that's attractive it generates more views, more clicks, click throughs, et cetera, in your experience, what does it take, what kind of video ads tend to be the most effective at getting people to view and click through?

41:46 VS:
I think it all comes down to the emotional appeal of the video and the ability to really, in the first five to 10 seconds, even perhaps less, to really connect emotionally with the viewer. In environmental campaigning, we oftentimes can leverage, you know, imagery of large fauna and old growth forests and things that immediately create kind of a stunning imagery that can create the very kind of vivid response and an emotional connection that combined with captivating music, perhaps some intriguing hook in those few initial seconds of a video are really the key. And what we see at times when you look at analytics on various video platforms is that most people see perhaps the first five to 10 seconds, and then we see a drop off where out of the hundred thousand who have engaged with the video, perhaps only 1% have made it to the very end of it. So it's really about those first few seconds and there is a very kind of animalistic, I think, emphasis on that emotional connection and really thinking through, not getting caught up on the data, on the logic of an argument on an appeal to some ethical considerations. It really is about the emotions. And that's as far as we've got in terms of finding a formula. Sometimes we have a video that we think checks all the boxes and it simply doesn't track and people don't respond to it.

43:17 VS:
Sometimes we have videos that we just test for the sake of testing, and they do well. There is, I think, an interesting aspect around the emotional landscape is obviously whether it's about positive or negative emotions and something that we are trying to figure out is how to find that balance between, for example, using imagery related to climate disasters, which is a very negative reinforcing imagery. If you see a flood or wildfire or a house falling into a river, or one of those images that we've all seen over the summer, how to use that in a way that doesn't leave people in more despair, but that empowers them to feel like there's hope and that they then can take action. Pardon me. So it's a fine balance. It's a fine balance and it can be hard to find but some of the testing that we are doing, we are trying to bring in some of that more realistic imagery of what climate change looks like. Not to just bring the images of whales and beautiful old growth trees and polar bears because that's more the positive images, positive emotion side.

44:26 VS:
But it is a tricky territory to figure out. We have seen some interesting examples even from other organizations, videos that are really resonating. People power is another interesting, I think, emotion that oftentimes counters that kind of despair, the climate kind of depression that we see emerge, especially in the environmental movement where in face of all the climate disasters, it can feel hard to imagine change, but that people power and highlighting that, you know, last week all the footage that came out of the climate marches and climate week in New

York City, we'll see that in videos for the next couple of months because I think most will be trying to capitalize on that.

45:05 MM:
Okay. I want to do the same thing we did with the petitions. Is there a critical mass of views, clickthroughs that you're looking for, that a company, when they see those numbers or you see those numbers, you go, that ads paying for itself.

45:25 VS:
There's two ways that we can evaluate ads. One is very kind of internally focused and the metrics that we look at are things like cost per acquisition and return on investment. So if we spend a thousand dollars on an ad across on any platform, we look very closely at, if we get people to take actions as a result of reviewing that ad, how much do we pay to acquire that action? And so usually our best performing actions, we get to somewhere around a dollar, a dollar 50, for someone to take an action who is new to our community. And, if an ad is not meeting that bar, we oftentimes will not continue with that ad because we can optimize better, similar to return on investment where we actually, obviously people have the opportunity to make a donation to the campaign and to Stand as an organization. And for most kind of petitions there is like a fundraising engagement pathway. If we see that the ads are actually paying for themselves or that the return on investment is high, that is also an internal factor in deciding whether to continue with an ad campaign. When we are talking about that power building stage at that low bar petition level, we don't expect there to be large impact on the target, but we want to build the power. And so building it in a way that's cost effective is the primary criteria. When it comes to, say, engaging with targets directly on platforms like LinkedIn or even the programmatic advertising, some of the metrics that we look at, it kind of depends on the advertising platform, but we look at the percentage of how much of the video, for example, was viewed. So a video that we've put out that we want employees of a certain company to view, if we can see that they watched 50% of the video that would be considered, say, a success if we frontloaded all the key messages into the first 50%, and that's what we'll be trying to optimize the campaign for. And that would be considered success, and then we would perhaps bump up the budget. When it comes to spending on ad campaigns, we have some control, but oftentimes the platforms are the ones in control of how much they spend, how do they spend the money. It's a bit of a black box on each platform and we try to kind of work within that. But I would say it's hard to put a benchmark around what that impact then looks like. It has to be kind of specific to the objectives of each campaign and each platform that you're advertising on.

47:50 MM:
Okay. Good. I want to pull up to that thousand foot level and start to wrap it up. So you've got unpaid, you've got paid, there's an escalation of these, it's happening over time. Are companies using big data, for example, to get a sense out there of, is a campaign building? How many people are engaged? How many influencers have been captured or participated in the campaign? I would imagine if they do that, that influences how quickly they might respond, but it might also influence how you approach the campaign.

48:35 VS:
Yeah, that's a great question. Really highlights the different, the kind of evolving world, the digital organizing place in campaigning and how it moves the target. There were days, we're talking maybe six, seven years ago when tweeting at a company and mentioning a company in a tweet would have an impact and the company would notice and actually come to the table ready to talk because they didn't want to get their laundry out into the public eye. Those days actually, sadly, have passed. Very few companies are now threatened by that level of engagement. And most certainly, yes, to your question, every company out there has a robust department that monitors all of the public discourse online.

49:20 VS:
They're very careful to know who the players are. There are social listening tools that allow them to see what level of conversations are happening across social media platforms that mention their brand name, that reputation management is a budding industry, and there are a lot of tools that make it very easy to invest into that. So when we work within that landscape as an organization, what it requires us to do is to really approach the campaigning from multiple fronts and to not really put our eggs in one basket.

49:50 VS:
Digital campaigning on its own -- it's an incredibly helpful tool, but just hoping that a petition and one tool, and some ads are going to win a campaign is not really realistic in this day and age, and it requires an organization to really think about how does direct corporate engagement fit in and how does research and media engagement fit in and influence public communication and discourse. It really requires us to think beyond that kind of streamlined way of digital engagement, to put a pressure on a company. And, there's a lot of creativity. There's a lot of exciting kind of new frontiers to be reached there. Digital will always play a role, whatever tactic we employ out there, we're past the days where we are somewhat still structured like this at Stand, but this is not about having like an isolated digital team that does its own thing, and then the rest of the organization does the campaigning. Digital is the underlying layer, it's the foundation of many organizations. It's a resource that every organization has to invest into in order to be able to not just do the digital engagement of running petitions and tools, but every organization needs to have a solid infrastructure around data processing, around understanding data.

51:05 VS:
Because one of these big data tools that other companies leverage, we have access to them too, and we can leverage them too for our own benefit. We are building demographic profiles using census data in the same way that a political campaign can do. So to target specific voters, we have the power to actually employ a lot of these tools for good and for the interest of our campaigns. And that oftentimes doesn't mean necessarily relate to the petitions and the email to target tools. It actually influences the whole campaign strategy and how we think about the research that we produce and how do we communicate with media. It all comes down to kind

of some of this foundational data and digital backbone of an organization. But we do have to think on multiple fronts to have the biggest impact we can.

51:55 MM:
I'm glad you made that point, and I think we're going to end it there. One of the things I didn't realize until more recent years is that the digital track actually ends up being the integrative track with the field track. It's connected with the legislative track, shareholder track -- that the digital track is kind of the glue, the unifying kind of component that kind of brings it all together which is so important. Any last thoughts? Questions, conclusions, things I haven't asked, because this has been extremely informative.

52:40 VS:
I would just reiterate what I mentioned earlier is that there can be a somewhat of an apathy or despair around the usefulness of digital engagement in campaigning and rightfully so. We have seen, the rise of discourses in the online spaces that are harmful to the causes that we work on and that are threatening at times our very existence. And so in face of that, it can be hard to believe that an investment in digital can make a difference. But following up on that point you just made, that's exactly why it is still the foundational way because it is not just about the petitions. Solid digital infrastructure and investment into digital tools plays into all of these different areas of organizing and campaigning, and is an essential part of the landscape at the moment.

53:30 MM:
Perfect ending. Vojtèch Sedlák, Stand.Earth -- thank you very much for your time. This has been very informative. Much appreciated.

53:42 VS:
Thanks, Michael. It was an honor.

53:43 MM:
Take care.