SPARKS Episode 21

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Welcome to the 21st episode of Sparks! My name is Deirdre Brennan. I am the Executive Director of RAILS, Reaching Across Illinois Library System and we started this podcast to provoke discussion and conversation about issues and trends that are affecting libraries today. My guest today is Kim Caviness. She is the Executive Vice President and Chief Content Officer at Imagination, which is a content marketing strategy firm with offices in Chicago and Washington DC. Welcome Kim!

KIM CAVINESS: Thank you so much.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thanks for joining us. The reason that I wanted to bring Kim to our listeners is because libraries do a lot of content marketing so we have a lot in common with the work that Imagination does and we can also learn a lot from the work that Imagination does. So, I thought maybe today we would start with just a description and a conversation about what Imagination does and what the difference is between marketing and content marketing.

KIM CAVINESS: I love your question of what libraries and content marketing have in common because actually, it's a lot. Marketing has always been around, advertising has always been around, and content marketing is a field of marketing that came up maybe 30-40 years ago. Most people will probably think about it when you think about those flight magazines in airlines. They were the first example that was created by a business using the best-in-class examples of journalism, content, and storytelling to drive more business. But the stuff has to be good-that is how it is different from PR, not that PR is not good but PR is about promoting something and it's very obvious from the voice. In content marketing, we try to use the best practices in fantastic content. What this has to do with libraries is that just in the way that librarians are the ones that connect that perfect person to the perfect reading experience that’s going to change their lives and invest them more into spending more time with the library; that's what we try to do in content marketing. It's all about audience. What are the goals that you want them to do from a business perspective? Then we line them up to what your target audience member needs and we use beautiful words and beautiful experiences having to do with design or sound or whatever format to get them to do that.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So, its very audience focused, right? It's about telling stories that will resonate with the audience, as opposed to just trying to sell them a new tube of toothpaste with a different logo on it or something like that.

KIM CAVINESS: That's exactly right. It's the opposite of being a painter or a writer in a garret writing your beautiful book, which is what you want to say. It’s about what your audience needs to say. So, using your toothpaste example: say a toothpaste brand, Colgate, came to us and said I want to create an entire website about the history of teeth and paintings. We would then create that and tell a story around it and get you all interested in beautiful things about teeth you didn't even know and that would be brought to you by Colgate. So, it's that masterpiece theater brought to you by example.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Great, so can you tell us a little bit about how Imagination helps customers talk to their audiences? Maybe give us some interesting and relevant examples of some campaigns that you've done.

KIM CAVINESS: Sure thing and then of course we can talk about the one we’re doing for libraries.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yes, definitely.

KIM CAVINESS: Imagination has been around for about 25 years and was started at a time when content was first starting to be used to drive business. In the ensuing twenty-four years, we've grown to about a hundred and five people and two offices. What we do is meet with businesses and usually associations or financial services, retail, and B2B. We talk about what their business goals, challenges, and opportunities are and then we create a custom plan for each one of them with what types of content can you put where to reach your exact audience. So, wherever their audiences are, we spend a lot of time using all the best practices of design thinking. We will really think through where their audience is and pinpoint what they wish they had more of. We try to solve that because at its best, great storytelling and content are identity. When we can connect the identity of our end user to what the business can give them and it's really valuable, moving, and emotionally engaging, it opens up their hearts, minds, and wallets. It can create the kind of action that you want there to be. Some of our really moving campaigns that we’ve done that have great results are, for example, we work with a local company called Don Foods. They provide pre-made materials for bakeries and so we made a really great magazine called Batter Up for them.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That’s great!

KIM CAVINESS: And why print? Well, print is so relevant when people are so busy. We do mostly digital work but we love print too. In the case of these artisanal bakers, you're in the kitchen, you get this great magazine with tons of ideas about managing your business and ways to save money and it comes from Don, you're going to feel loyalty to Don. We’ve seen that it really does create a wonderful environment for considering products and services from somebody you admire because they're giving you value. So that's how we love to connect it up. Our programs are typically Omni-channel. We’ll think where are they? Take this baker: where are they when they're not working? Where are they when they are working? What time do they get there and what are the best ways to reach them? Podcast might make great sense for them because they're on their feet in their kitchen and their hands are full of batter. So we like to think about things like that, to that specificity.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Very interesting. I was going to ask you about tools that you use. Naturally, being a librarian I did some research about this a little bit. One of the articles I read was talking about managing the way you use different channels and tools. Can you talk a little bit about how you figure out which channel? I mean that was great what you just said about Batter Up and listening to things but are there other examples like that? Because libraries are good at marketing but we always need to be better because there's so much that libraries do. I mean we kind of are all things to all people. We try to be and we feel like we should be. Of course, I think that that is probably not what you would say the best kind of way to do marketing is (to talk about everything).

KIM CAVINESS: There is strategic marketing and then there's osmosis and we can't rely on osmosis as just being everywhere to reach them and also there's limited resources on the Creator's part, the librarians’ part. There's only so many ways you can get your message out. So what we do is very carefully look at our client or partner and they have specific problems. They're not reaching X amount of audience and this audience tends to be *this* type of people, they look for *this* this is there need, this is there pin point, this is where they're frustrated. This is how they can benefit from your brand and once we went we hook into that and think very hard about who are these people, where are they, what keeps them up at night, what would make them so happy and feel so connected to you? The best content branch are things that you put in your own little identity circle. Like I am a person who reads the New Yorker. That defines me. So, we want to get to that little inside circle of identity and that's when we really can convert them over to our thinking. Let's think about our audience: is this the kind of audience that is on Pinterest anyway when they're in the mindset to think about you? Then let's do something on Pinterest that will be really connected to it that's brought to you by this. Or let's collect the best books that people like this love and pin it to maybe the favorite color that is connected to these books or meals that they would make for the characters in these books. Think about what is that content storytelling ethos that you can wrap around and is going to make them think. So it's all about the audience and where they are. We love to think Omni-channel but then you have to sign a goal for each of these channels and what you want it to do that you can measurably prove that they're doing because time and money are not infinite. So we really do think about what channels will get the most bang for time and for buck and how we can then put that to work for your brand. We try to limit ourselves to the most effective of the channels and also how are they going to talk to each other along the continuum of your end-users life? One might drive to the other. The print will tell you to go to Pinterest, the Pinterest would say these come from ideas that we’re going to explore in longer form in a magazine and by the way, we talk to these same people on the podcast.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I'm very happy that print seems to be an important tool and I know that you have a magazine as well. So can you talk a little bit about that, about how you use print specifically?

KIM CAVINESS: I'd love to, I love print so much. In the mid 2000’s everybody said print is dead and everybody rushed to get rid of their print magazine. We have a lot of association clients in D.C. and some of them said, “Great, I'm just going to save this money from the printer and postage and go online” and they all saw a decrease in membership. The fact is, print is so powerful now and there's a reason why these brands like Red Bull and Airbnb; they’re all making magazines. It is because the coming up next audiences (the Millennials and the next gens and even the Gen Z 1000) are all really connecting to the fact that we're so immersed in this online world and on our phones and we love it but we hate it. We’re so mixed up about it and it is always tugging at us. There’s something so amazing about getting a magazine and it's offline and you can sink into it. Magazines bring certain opportunities at storytelling that you can never get on digital. And I love digital but you cannot have a spread feature with a gorgeous big piece of art in a magazine and what that can do to make you feel about a beautiful photo of your favorite books in the favorite authors and it's a great spread and great story will make you rush to the library quicker than that a newsletter that tells you that you have five events. You need both of them because one will inspire you on the weekend but you forgot about it by Monday then you get the newsletter on Monday and you go. That's what we try to do, create a layered content experience where everything is always reminding you because that's how our focus is now. We just need constant pings to get us to do things.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: As I said, that's so reassuring to a lifelong print person but it'll be interesting to see how that affects libraries who have also given up a lot of their magazine print subscriptions, etcetera. So, I see a future podcast!

KIM CAVINESS: I’m all in for print. We’re also doing books. A lot of our clients are asking for commemorative books. One of my clients is Project management Institute PMI. They're making a 50th Anniversary Book, commemorating their highlights. In the past we did one for McDonald's as well, they're amazing highlights in a coffee table book. So books are back as well.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Let's talk a little bit more about libraries, I know you love libraries. I'm wondering what advice comes to mind for libraries in trying to deal with this all things to all people. How to prioritize and also, of course, evaluation which is so important and so difficult in libraries because people don't necessarily interact with the staff. Sometimes they don't even come in and they could be heavy users of the library, so any advice that you can offer?
KIM CAVINESS: It’s all about focus and priorities. As Libraries sit down to think about what are the biggest opportunities and audience given where they are in the community that they're in with the kinds of audiences of all ages that they can get in. What are their priorities, what do they think they have the biggest differentiator of value to tell a story about that will get them in there and then to create a clear campaign with campaign goals that they can put out a certain kind of a story. Then once you make your priority about okay, we really want to get, for example, young parents who need to bring in kids right after school. That would be great gateway to get those families in, of course, libraries are no stranger to this, they're planning all kinds of fun activities for that group but how are you going to reach them in a way that cuts through the clutter? Do you host some kind of forum on the online parents group of that community, Who's going to host it and do you have books that you crowdsource, the best books that you read and put on your Pinterest board and then put it out to those groups? It really is thinking about what do you have the time and the energy and the story to tell and then putting a little campaign around that and then assigning someone to it because content has to come out regularly in order to connect. If people come to us and say they want to make a magazine once a year, we say no. It's a waste of your money; it won't work well and you want to get the most bang for your buck. We've been working together on a pro bono film that were so happy to be proud of and Gail Borden in Elgin is the library we worked with. They have such a fantastic marketing program. It's so smart and they have focus, events, you can tell they know their audience. Their audience is extremely family centric, given where they are and their lot of families that literally live within walking distance of them. You can tell it's a through line that runs through all their programs and they are very targeted as to what their message is. Whatever your message and your value prop is will inform your voice. So is your voice very gentle and soothing because you want to bring in parents in at all different levels? Are you more spiky and funny and wry, like the New York Public Library because that’s they're audience in the city? Know who you are, know you're kind of brand voice and then put out an organized, orchestrated series of marketing campaigns, programs, and formats that reflect that which you have the means and the time to create in a regular sequence because that's what creates connection. That's what reflects identity. Then set goals against each one. We're working on a project together you and us on for Gail Borden we're trying to see do we increase visits year-over-year measuring this January to last January. That'll help us see if we're actually making a dent.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Well as long as you brought it up, let's talk about our project, our campaign. As a lot of our Illinois library listeners know, we have a serious problem where we have almost a million people that do not have access to public library service. This really affects children the most because you have children in schools within the same classroom, living across the street or next door to another child who does have access to public library. We decided to see what we could do about this with Imagination’s help. We worked with them and came up with a fantastic short film about kids using the library to make their dreams come true. We're going to be pushing it out to libraries in a variety of ways because we think that it not only tells a great story about unserved residence but just about libraries in general.

KIM CAVINESS: When you came to me with this challenge and fun idea of how can we use content marketing to connect with the unserved or tell their story and change the way that libraries might be funded to make them accessible, I was so inspired to do that and to bring imagination in to help as your partner. I was that girl growing up who the librarian was my secret friend and I would always pop in there during elementary school and she'd always have a couple of books picked out for me. She would save them for me and she knew my taste and I love reading so much. So the fact that some kids don't have that, I was all in to look to make a difference. So we got together, Deirdre you got over your team and I brought over strategists and the video team. We thought of video because it seemed like a very visceral and easily accessible way to connect to the library and it seemed like to use a visual format would be powerful when there's already so much writing around it. Let's make a video because that's very connectable and we knew we had many audiences. We wanted to reach people in Springfield to make the case for funding but we also wanted to reach the end user and this really connected to this unserved and what we thought is before we can tell this more complex, unserved political story, we had to reinforce the value of why libraries matter and why they remain relevant today. Many people might think, why do we have to take money away from this other city service to fund a library when there's the internet and people can find information anywhere and by the way, I go to my Starbucks to read. We wanted to reinforce why libraries matter and we came to the simple conclusion that it is librarians who make libraries matter. They're Google for you. They can customize that search for you and if everything is audience first in today's world, we live in this user-focus society, librarians are the ones that make a personal connection to you, the specific person interested in topics A through Z so they can make recommendations based on your likes. We came up with this concept about a little boy who goes into a library bored and somehow a book magically falls at his feet and it opened up a world of possibly that plays out through his life and at the end of the day the camera turns around and you see that actually the book that fell at his feet was pushed by a librarian.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right, the librarian magic

KIM CAVENESS: It’s like in everyone’s secret corner there’s a librarian. Then the camera spins around and you can see that there's all these librarians, like in a Harry Potter book, peeping over and just popping books out of the stacks at different kids’ feet. Google might be amazing but it's all impersonal, it's an algorithm and there's a personal connection to your library, so we made a movie about that. We're going to experiment and see, does it really connect? The call to action is we worked in partnership with Gail Borden and we had a very specific event that they're going to be driving to so we can measure if it works. Right now we're experimenting; we're doing an AB test with two different messages, we’re going to put out to a specific targeted audience in Elgin, around the Gail Borden Library. Some are unserved we know some and some are served. We’re going to do it in English and Spanish. We're going to measure which message resonates the best and which one gets more feet into the library. We’re excited to see how that works. Later, we'll take it to a broader message but it's sort of stage one: the relevance of the library. Then once we get that under our belt, we will be able to make future messaging around why fund the unserved and how it's a basic American right to information and to letting your dreams be fed with the right information that’s relevant and personal to them. So it’s very exciting to see how this works and we're putting all the best resources of content marketing on behalf of libraries and their endurance and the value that they add to the American dream.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It has been a great project and is still ongoing. As I look back as you were describing it I realize we went through so many of the steps that you described in figuring out like who the audience should be, what the channel or tools should be, whether it should be funny or serious. Very instructive in terms of how to do content marketing and I think we'll see that it’s going to be very successful. I really look forward to being able to help all a lot of our libraries with it. We're really grateful to all of you here are doing this for us. We’ll need to be talking to our listeners again about this at some point because I'm sure that there's going to be a great story to tell about the success.

KIM CAVINESS: Well, thank you. It would be our pleasure and the talented team at Imagination, the Director Sean R., it was his personal story so the personal does connect to the universal. Its out there and if it does well we’d love to make it available to every library in Illinois and we can customize it. Very important in content marketing is the call to action, what is a specific CTA at the end of the video that's going to drive to whatever is measurable. We can create customized calls to action for every library in Illinois that wants it.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Super

KIM CAVINESS: I just did want to say, as I was thinking about it, I think libraries are the content marketing of the world in that people did go to the library to customize their own search into what they needed so that librarians is still there and that is the primary connection and so it makes so much sense to me to take the tools and best practices of content marketing and put them on behalf of libraries. Advertising has changed fundamentally since the last ten, fifteen years. We used to love to look at ads because they were part of the magazine experience in a way and as we get more digital banners don't work in the same way that print ads did. DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Fascinating

KIM CAVINESS: There’s something called banner blindness; your eye just knows to ignore that thing in the right corner. You're not going to look at it and we know that and that's why all these Brands like BuzzFeed and Forbes, they're all using what they call native advertising, which is basically smart content just like the other content they would get but it's brought to you by somebody. So that backed up into what content marketing always was and always will be but libraries have a leg up on anybody else because they already have the fantastic content. They already have the stories people want. They just need to surface them in the right targeted way, using the right, smart distribution that they can measure to see what works and doesn't. It's a natural fit.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right and I think that libraries can learn so much from you and your colleagues and about just from reading about it. I do think of that embracing content marketing is something that libraries really have to do. Especially because we are pulled in so many different directions more and more as we have you know learned over the last couple of years. I thank you very much for talking with me today and I hope that maybe we'll do a part two or a follow up sometime soon and thanks for all your help with the project. I can't wait to see what happens.

KIM CAVINESS: Us too, it's a pleasure and we can definitely come back if you want and really look at the numbers and get into what worked with didn't. We learn from it so that everybody can learn.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That would be awesome, thanks!

KIM CAVINESS: Thank you!

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much for listening to Sparks today. Sparks is produced by the Reaching Across Illinois Library System. If you would like to learn more about the show or share your feedback on the topics discussed, please visit railslibraries.info/sparks.