

[00:00:00] **Cheryl Broom:** Well, thanks so much Alex, for being here today. I'm really excited to have you on the podcast.

[00:00:04] **Alex Breitler:** Thanks for having me. Appreciate the opportunity.

[00:00:07] **Cheryl Broom:** So I, I wanna start off by having you tell us a little bit about who you are and your role at San Joaquin Delta College. But first, just to give a little bit of an introduction to our listeners. You celebrated, have just celebrated something pretty massive, and it's not commencement, but it's a passage of almost a \$600 bond measure.

So tell us about your role and who you are, but also tell us what really was at stake with this bond measure, and why your role was so important in getting it on the ballot and ultimately passed.

[00:00:42] **Alex Breitler:** You just said it was a \$600 bond measure.

[00:00:45] **Cheryl Broom:** Oh no. 600 million. \$600. That'd be like my kids' bond. Like if my child went up.

[00:00:57] **Alex Breitler:** That wouldn't buy very much.

[00:00:58] **Cheryl Broom:** I know it'd be like, what photo-, two reams of photocopy paper? Okay. I stand corrected. 600 million dollar, million dollar bond initiative. So yeah, tell us about yourself and tell us the role that you played in the initiative.

[00:01:14] **Alex Breitler:** Well, so I'm the Director of Marketing and Communications at Delta. I've been here for about seven years. I actually come from a, a journalism background. I spent around two decades as a journalist. In fact, the sort of the funny part of the story, is that one of my assignments as a community journalist here in Stockton was to cover Delta College.

And in fact, I covered the, the previous bond measure that we had 50 years ago. So I actually thought that was helpful coming into this process because I had some context sort of for, for what we'd done in the past and what worked well and what didn't work well. Those, those sorts of things. Particularly when it came to sort of, community sentiment on this subject, how folks felt about the last bond, how they felt about prospective additional bond here.

So I sort of felt having that background as a journalist was, was helpful in that way because I just sort of had some of that background information, some of that context that, that I could bring to the table.

So, you know, we always knew that we would need to go out for another bond at some point. It had been 20 years, so it had been quite a bit of time. In fact, our main campus here in Stockton has been in existence for half a century. And up until this time we had only gone out for one bond. So we really had some pretty critical infrastructure and facilities needs.

So we knew this was gonna come. And of course, as the marketing guy, I am thinking, okay, this is gonna, this is gonna involve me in a pretty big way. And I'd heard stories about, sort of how challenging this was for, from folks at other colleges. And I was approaching it honestly, with a little bit of trepidation.

'Cause I just wasn't sure what all it would entail for me and how this is, you know, a lot of this, this sort of the campaign work is, is separate from the college, right? So I'm thinking, boy, how much, how much is this, this gonna sort of add to, to my regular everyday workload? Right? So, so those were some of the, some of the concerns that I sort of had going in.

But, you know, I would say on the whole, it was a very positive experience. Actually had a lot of fun. You know, it was an opportunity for me to go out into the community and talk about this place and just knock on some doors and burn some shoe leather in our, in our neighborhoods, talking to people about the college.

And that's, that's a, for me, that's a lot of fun. Just getting out to getting out into, into neighborhoods, talking to folks about Delta College and the great work that we're doing. So, looking back, it was a stressful time. And it was a lot, but I, but I also really, really enjoyed it.

[00:03:46] **Cheryl Broom:** Now we have listeners from all over the, the nation and some states call bonds levies. And here in California we call it a bond. So before we get into like the deep dive onto how to get this thing passed, can you share just maybe a little bit about like, how a bond works, what you can use it for, what you can't use it for here in California.

'Cause I think that's a little bit different than it might be in Texas or Illinois. So what the threshold is that you have to get it past, those type of things. So.

[00:04:18] **Alex Breitler:** So the threshold is 55%. So it's not just a majority vote. You need just a little, need a little extra on top of that to get it through. And I think in terms of what it can be used for, and this is what's really essential when it comes to messaging, right, is that it's used for facilities to benefit our students, not used for administrative salaries.

I mean, that's really, really important. Because people, understandably so, are skeptical about taxes and how they're used and you know, we pay taxes and they go into this black hole and we never really know what comes outta that, right? So, I think it was really, really, really important for us to be clear with the public about what this money can be used for. And what it cannot be used for.

So we were very, we were very, very clear about no money being used for administrative salaries. And we also talked, frankly, a lot about oversight. You know, we're required by law to have a citizen's oversight committee to monitor how, how bond money is being spent.

So there's some oversight which is really important. So we talked about that as well. We talked about some of the protections that are in place to make sure, that that tax money is being spent appropriately. So I, it, it's certainly more complicated than that and, and I'm not an expert even though I've gone through this process, but that's the key thing to talk about.

It's for facilities improvements. It's not for salaries.

[00:05:35] **Cheryl Broom:** And I think that is really important because, the state of California at least doesn't give enough money for schools to be able to update their facilities. Like the money is used to pay salaries, maybe to buy equipment. But if you want to build a new nursing facility, or you wanna build a veteran's center, like you're probably gonna have to go to your community and ask them to support it through their own increase in taxes.

I mean, you're asking community members to raise taxes on themselves. To pay for the things that your college needs, so.

[00:06:11] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, and we have, you know, there are times when we've received state matching funds, for example, for bond projects. But, but you're right. I mean, this is one of the few levers that we have to pull to really raise significant money. I mean, it's, it's expensive to build anything, these days. So this is really one of the few levers we have to pull asking the community to consider investing in us.

And that's, you know, that's, that's a tough ask, and it's really sort of a, I, I sort of viewed it as really a sort of a, a, a, a, a solemn endeavor to go out and ask folks to consider taxing themselves. And which of course is why, and we'll talk about this more I'm sure, but is why we talk so much about what we can do for the community, and sort of what their, return on investment is for putting in hard earned taxpayer dollars into, into supporting us.

[00:07:00] **Cheryl Broom:** And I, I think that's a perfect segue to what I wanted to talk about next, which, and you've already mentioned, which is the importance of polling. So you've got like a long list of things. So I went through, for those of you listening, I went through bond measure twice at the college I worked at. And we failed the first time. Learned a lot. It was probably the biggest professional failure of my career.

It was like, gut wrenching. If you, for those of you that have been through a bond campaign, it is so much time and passion and energy, and you're not allowed to do it during work. Right? Because you're campaigning. So it's like the weekends and the nights. And I had, we had 6:00 AM coffee meetings and, and then we lost.

And, and Stockton's in a conservative area of California. Right? Like you're predominantly conservative, so there's a little bit more of an uphill battle. Like you really need to show conservatives who value fiscal responsibility and lower taxes.

You've gotta show them that, that they can trust you and what you're spending the money on. Right? So, and we were in, we're in a conservative area in San Diego as well.

[00:08:03] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, we're, we're sort of purple. You know, we have longstanding the agriculture community here is, is, is a significant part of our heritage, but we also have a lot of folks, sort of an influx of folks from the Bay Area, which is, we're almost an extension of the Bay Area at this point, San Francisco Bay area.

So it's an interesting sort of dynamic politically. We did, we actually flipped red at the top of the ticket this November for the first time in, in something like 20 years. And, you know, given the, the, the skepticism that conservatives tend to have about taxes, honestly, I I, I was surprised. I mean, I didn't know. If you'd told me that, that we were gonna go red at the top of the ticket, I would've thought that would've portended poorly for us.

But that's why it was so important to, to talk about things that resonate with everyone. Across, we, I don't care where you are on the political spectrum, right? It's there, we do things at this college to benefit and uplift the entire community, politics irrespective. And it was really important for us to, to drive that home.

[00:09:02] **Cheryl Broom:** And I think that's the beauty of the polling. So I'd love you to talk more about how that worked. And just before you dive into it, I, I loved, I. Like the polling to me was a marketer's dream, because our polling, and I don't know if yours is similar, but it tested like every single statement, and would like read a statement and say, now that you know that we're spending the funds on redoing the veterans center, how likely are you to support the bond?

And I know that we learned, we had a, a bond or a board member who wanted a sand volleyball court. Like this guy was gonna like die on his sand volleyball court. It polled terrible. Like, our bond consultants were like, whatever you do, do not let George mention the sand volleyball court in public. People will vote against the bond, 'cause they think it's a waste of money.

And so it really helped us with messaging. It was great. I, I loved being able to be like, George, I can't talk about the sand volleyball court, because nobody's gonna vote for the bond if I do, so.

[00:10:06] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah the poll, and the poll gave you justification for that, and that, that's really important. I viewed the poll, we did multiple polls, but I, I viewed the polling as really being our north star. And our, we had a great consultant who really, who really forced us to stay on message.

And it was all, every decision we made, really, was based on the polling. You know, the polling, not only did it give us insight on specific statements that could help us frame the language, but it also gave us a lot of info on just, you know, how many folks, I mean, how many folks are already a yes, how many folks are a no, and how many folks are undecided, and who are those folks?

Because our thinking was, what can we do to reach the undecideds? And, and try to move the needle. Just a, just a little bit on, on those folks. So the polling was essential. I really tried to just immerse myself in the polling, and again, make, like every decision we were making. Not just the bond campaign itself, which of course was completely external from the college and is, has nothing to do with college resources or, or, or college personnel, that's an external effort.

But the decisions that we were making in the marketing office about how to do our day-to-day work. Our brand awareness work, our enrollment marketing, things like that. We were always looking at that stuff through the lens of what the polling showed us with regard to the bond.

Because we thought that would help us in sort of doing some, some dual purpose work, that can, you know, obviously facilitating enrollment growth while also facilitating increased community understanding of what we do, for a, for a bond measure. So the polling, I mean, I, I, I, I lived and breathed the polling for the, for the duration of this, of this effort.

[00:11:52] **Cheryl Broom:** Was there any instance where some of the information you got from the poll helped you with enrollment marketing? Were you able to, to use any of that to help with your day-to-day work?

[00:12:04] **Alex Breidler:** Sure. Well, I mean, it helped us to identify specific programs that polled well in the community. And so one of the things we tried to do is, we looked at which of those programs had the capacity for growth. We didn't wanna just throw money at programs simply because they polled well, but this is supposed to be dual purpose marketing that we were doing, right.

So of those programs that polled well, which had the capacity for growth, and then we put money into digital ads and, and mailers promoting those programs. We actually use, we have a college app subscription. College app gives us data on around 70 to 80% of the adults in our district. And so we used that tool to build custom audiences for these campaigns that were, these are folks who had a high likelihood of enrolling, and that was the most important thing.

But secondarily, trying to work in some of what we saw in the polling in terms of which, which audiences we wanted to reach, who those undecideds were. I think some of our work we act, for example, we, we targeted homeowners. Which is not something that we might ordinarily do, right? We knew that homeowners, because they're the ones paying the taxes, were more likely to be skeptical about a bond.

So we targeted homeowners who had a high likelihood of enrolling at one point. So as a way to sort of mesh together those two goals as best we could. I don't know how effective all that ended up being. But we wanted to do, we knew there would be a massive bond campaign, again, external to college, but we wanna do whatever we could, internally with our own resources in-house to at least help facilitate support for the bond. While obviously working to increase enrollment at the same time.

[00:13:47] **Cheryl Broom:** That's great. Anytime you can use, you know, data driven decision making to help with marketing, even if you don't know the outcomes, and at least you're making informed, educated decisions. And that's really a creative way to approach it and to use this. I mean, it's a great resource, so.

[00:14:07] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, we, we felt that it was gonna be very close. And my view was even moving the needle, just a hair, on, on the undecided population could be the difference between passing and not passing. And, you know, the, the consequence, you talked about this a little bit, the, the consequence of not passing a bond after you go out into the community and talk about it and your campaign committee raises funds, the consequence of not passing a bond is that you've already put so much effort into it, you've raised money for it, and then it failed. You can't just turn around and do it again the next day.

So I think you have to be pretty confident that you can get there, again based on the polling. And, and then you've gotta just do whatever you can to move the needle, even just a little bit to get up above that 55% threshold.

We ended up passing at close to 60% across the district, which I think we were just over the moon, we were over the moon excited about that. Considering again, sort of some of the headwinds we faced, which I haven't really talked about yet. But the, but the uncertainty, what was going on with the presidential race and all that. The fact that we passed with that kind of margin to me was, was remarkable.

And I'll just put a quick plug in here to just really, really, really thank the, the, the voters in the district for, for, for seeing and recognizing what we do. You know, we view it as being, you know, a, a, a real, a real validation of the work that we do here. And I just really wanna thank folks. It's, it's never an easy ask. And we're just honored and extremely pleased that so many people see the value of Delta College, that they're willing to put this kind of investment into, into what we do.

[00:15:43] **Cheryl Broom:** Well, I wanna talk to you more about the role marketing plays, both like during work hours and what you're allowed to do, and then after, and how important it is for you as the marketing leader on your campus to have a seat at the table and a leadership seat. But first let's hear something from our sponsor.

Alright, so before we took that break, we were listening, or we were talking about just how like, you just shot over your projections, which is so cool. Like you, 55% is what you needed to pass and you went to 60%. And I know you had said earlier that you didn't know like, how successful your marketing was. But I think like, clearly it was successful, 'cause what else is gonna make somebody change their mind other than more information and better information?

So tell me a little bit about like, what are the rules around what you can do to inform the community about the bond, and what you can't do? And then also let's talk about, like what you did after hours, like not as the marketing director, but just as Alex and what your role was to help support the bond, you know, as a citizen.

[00:17:34] **Alex Breitler:** Well we looked at it, we really had two sort of mechanisms. One was the public information side of things, which is simply putting out the facts. This is what we're proposing, this is what it would cost. This, these are the sorts of things the money could be used for. That's not campaigning, that's just public information.

So certainly I as the, as the PIO, you know, we were putting out press releases every time, you know, when the board approved moving forward, and at various critical points along the way, we would put out public information without advocating for the bond. That's the key difference, right?

In fact, we did, we did do one district wide mailer, shortly after the board decided to move forward, that was a public information mailer. It was not an advocacy piece. And it simply said, this is what we're doing. Here are the facts, here's what it's gonna cost you. Full disclosure, right? That's public information. So we, we did a lot of that during business hours out of the marketing office.

'Cause that was fair game. After hours of course was, was a completely different story. So we had a, a, a, a campaign committee. And I was, I was a member of that committee. We met after hours. We, you know, you can't use your institutional email, you can't use any institutional resources whatsoever. So we were, you know, we were all using our personal email addresses to communicate the committee members, we were meeting after hours.

And what really got fun, I, I thought the, I thought the campaign stuff was a blast, as a, as a campaign volunteer. You know, we, we got to go out and do some, some door knocking, some, some canvassing. We did some text message text banking, which, which was a lot of fun and very, very interesting.

And again, just getting out, getting to go out and talk to folks in the community, I thought, I thought was a lot of fun. Just, just real, I mean, obviously we, you know, we run campaigns and we, we put out messaging externally. But rarely, I think as marketers, rarely do we sort of get outside of our bubble on campus, and actually just go out and talk face to face with people about how great our colleges are.

And it was very refreshing to have the chance to go out and, and do that. It was demanding on our time because obviously it was all after hours on our own time. Saturdays, weeknights, and there were a lot of logistical challenges. So for example, we, we put out a series of mailers through the campaign funded by campaign donations, and we need creatives for those mailers.

And it's like, okay, how do we do that? We can't, you know, I can't organize this like I would a normal photo shoot on our campus. I can't use email to reach out to faculty and gauge availability to go into classrooms or lab space. I can't do anything during work hours to facilitate any of that kind of work.

So I would take breaks during the day when I was not working, and I would go out and I would very clearly identify myself as a committee volunteer, not as an employee, and talk to folks and try to make arrangements to do, to do photo shoots. I actually took a day off to facilitate a photo shoot on my own campus, which was, which was a bit surreal.

This is the sort of thing that I do, the sort of thing that I do every day, but I had to take a day off to do it, which, which I was happy to do. But a little bit surreal. And actually we, we found out later that we couldn't use those materials because they were shot in an instructional space during class time, which was a restriction that I was not aware of at the time, so lesson learned.

So, so ultimately we, we had to use a lot of stock art for these campaign, I mean, that, and I hate doing that. I know we all hate using stock art for anything, but we sort of had to for the campaign materials. It was just too difficult to pull together something that could be done properly and legally.

[00:21:19] **Cheryl Broom:** Right, and fast. I mean, you're also working. I think one thing that we haven't touched on so much is how quickly all of this happened, right? I'm, I'm assuming what did you make a decision to go out in the fall, or in the spring and then it was on the fall ballot? So.

[00:21:36] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, the board vote I think was in July.

[00:21:38] **Cheryl Broom:** July, so summer.

[00:21:40] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, and then we were on the ballot in November. And I'll tell you the campaign stuff really, I'm sure every campaign is different, this is the only one I've been through, but the campaign in terms of churning out mailers and stuff, that really didn't accelerate until late September, early October.

So, and after that it was boom, boom, boom, go, go, go. And approvals on some of these materials. It were, I mean, it wasn't days, it was a matter of hours at times.

[00:22:08] **Cheryl Broom:** That's when the polling stuff, and, and also I wanna say that's when your expertise is so important. Because I remember doing this and having approvals with our board president, our president, our vice presidents, the foundation board. It's just like a table of all these people that wanna fight over every word, and you gotta make a decision.

And that's when the polling came in, and I think you and I had even talked about, was it clean water? There was some message that like you had to be like, hey, we don't, this is clearly something we wanna stay away from. So having that expertise is really important.

[00:22:41] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, I mean the polling, you know, we talked about how important it is to abide by the polling and, and, and be vigilant in sticking with the messaging. However, that doesn't mean that all of the messaging that comes outta the polling is appropriate for our community, right?

Like, if you don't have a problem, like maybe your college, your college doesn't have a problem with leaky roofs, right? This is a hypothetical. You don't have a problem with leaky roofs, but you put out campaign materials talking about how the bond will fix leaky roofs. The community may not pick up on that, but internally your college will. And, and it bring, that, that can raise credibility issues and can cause all sorts of problems.

So it's important to be, as important as the polling is, it's also important to be honest about what our real problems are. And just because something polls well doesn't mean that we should necessarily be talking about it.

[00:23:27] **Cheryl Broom:** Right. I know, I remember with ours. It, some of it was embarrassing too. It was like they had asked us, I had to go to the campus on a Saturday and take pictures of like, like leaky roofs and broke, like anything

broken. They're like, pretty much go find the worst things you can on campus, and take pictures of them.

And then here I am the marketing director being like, please don't put this out. Like nobody is going to enroll when they see these pictures. 'Cause our campus, we hadn't ever passed upon, ever in the history of the campus and it was 70 years old. And there was a lot of broken stuff, and I'm like, oh, this is so embarrassing.

[00:24:07] **Alex Breitler:** Well, you know, what we saw in the polling was that what really resonated with folks were the, were the deteriorating facilities. It was not the bright, shiny objects. And, and the temptation, I think for a lot of folks, I'm speaking generally here, the temptation for a lot of folks is to talk about the bright shiny objects, right?

The, the, the sparkling new buildings, the, the stuff that gets people excited. But in reality, again, the polling indicated that was not the best way to approach this. And that's where again, it became very, very important to stick with what the polling showed. And that's what we did. That's, our consultant was very good at keeping us in line on that.

And I think that's, speaking of the role of marketing. I think that's a, that's what we do, right? We, we figure out what our messaging is, and we stick to it and I think, I think one of our key roles is to convince everyone else to do the same, and try to keep everyone sort of focused on, on, again, on what the polling shows and what's gonna be the most effective.

[00:25:01] **Cheryl Broom:** For sure, yeah. I know I had to get over it. 'Cause of, because of the poll too. I mean, ours showed the same thing, I talked about the sand volleyball court. I mean, people wanted to be like, we're gonna make, be earthquake compliant. We're gonna be ADA compliant. Our campus wasn't, a lot of it wasn't ADA compliant, half the campus.

And I think if you think about your own house, if you're a homeowner, you're gonna wanna fix the things that are broken. You're, you know, if you've got a leaky faucet, nobody can get in through your front door, you're not gonna wanna spend 150 grand on a pool. like you wanna, you know, so it's the same thing.

Well, we only have a couple of, of minutes left in the conversation, but I really wanted to touch on two things. First, what you're doing now that the bond's passed, like the hard work's over, but the work's not over. So tell us a little bit

about what you're doing now. And then also if you have any advice for, especially for marketing or public information officers who've never done this before, what, what advice do you give them?

[00:26:00] **Alex Breitler:** Yeah, well, we're still in the initial phases, obviously implementing. It's, it's really just passed recently. Our, our board of trustees has identified priority projects to start focusing on. So we're, we're prepared to roll out a campaign demonstrating progress being made on those projects. That's, that's really important.

I mean, I think one of the mistakes we made maybe 20 years ago was we didn't talk enough about the great things that we were doing with that bond money at the time. So lesson learned from that. We've also just been putting out some, when we have the opportunity, putting out some general, just thank you to the community, thank you for supporting us ads.

While that recollection is still fresh in their minds about, about the bond measure, we don't want too much time to pass without expressing our gratitude to the community. So it's gonna be a lot of work over many years really to demonstrate that we are using taxpayer money appropriately and that we're benefiting students.

Again, lesson learned from the last bond where we probably weren't as effective as we could have been in that regard. So yeah, there's, in some ways, there's more work ahead of us than there is behind us, but it was very exciting to get the actual campaign outta the way.

What I would suggest, I suppose to folks who haven't been through this before is really to, to plan early. Make sure that discussions are happening, that groundwork is being laid, meetings are being held with local officials, elected officials, community leaders to sort of put in the, the groundwork. I would say anything that you can do on the marketing side to promote your CTE programs is really important. CTE polled very well, and I, I would imagine that would be the same for most colleges.

But you know, you're an older, retired property owner. You may not be planning to enroll here. You may not have family members who are. But you wanna know that there's gonna be a nurse who is trained to help you when you need medical attention, right? That's a very important, so we, so we put a lot of healthcare messaging out there during the bond. I mean, that's, everyone wants to hear that sort of reassurance.

So, laying the groundwork early on the marketing side and talking about that stuff, talking about CT-, talking about the students that we're putting directly into high paying jobs in our community.

Because I think that's something, people think of us as being transfer institutions. Talking about CTE I think is really, really important. And then I guess I would just say embrace the opportunity, be visible. This is a great opportunity to show how important marketing is for a community college, and there's not much more important than helping to secure hundreds of millions of dollars for facilities improvements that are gonna benefit students for generations to come. So make yourself visible.

Go, you know, if there's an organized campaign, go to those events, knock on those doors, talk to people. Because ultimately if the campaign is successful, this is something you can go back and you can say, I mean, obviously it's a college-wide effort, but marketing should take some credit for a successful bond campaign.

And, and that's really important in building up your own credibility and your own, political capital, I suppose, on your campus. So make yourself visible. It's a great opportunity to demonstrate your value to your board of trustees, to your, to your executive team and, and to everyone else on campus.

So don't be afraid to dive in. I think it, you know, again, I said this at the beginning, it's a lot more fun than I expected it to be. So, so, embrace it and, and have fun and dive in. It's a short term, unlike many of the things we do. The election will happen on a certain day and then it's over. This is not gonna be an ongoing thing that you're gonna have to deal with for years and years, right?

It's a short term campaign. It will end, it's hard, but it will end. Dive in and give it everything you got, because if you, if you lose by a few hundred votes, you're gonna regret things that maybe you think you should have done, right? So give it your all. Don't, don't, don't leave anything on the sideline. Do everything you can, and, and enjoy the opportunity.

[00:29:40] **Cheryl Broom:** Great. Such great advice. And Alex, thank you so much, and congratulations to you and your college. I'm excited. I'm excited to see what's to come. I, now you're gonna have to invite me up to campus at some point.

[00:29:52] **Alex Breitler:** There you go. There you go. You're welcome. Anytime.

[00:29:57] **Cheryl Broom:** Well, I really appreciate your time and your expertise, and for those of you wanting to connect with Alex, find him on LinkedIn or go to San Joaquin Delta. He spoke at a conference on this, so I know that you're out there as a resource to other marketing directors, so. Appreciate you so much.

[00:30:12] **Alex Breitler:** All right. Thank you.