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Nora Raggio

SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

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The interview reveals some background information on GroundZero, a Silicon Valley arts and technology organization, its agenda and vision.

SWITCH: Here we are November 7, election day, with Beau Takahara, CEO of GroundZero. Just to break the ice, tell me about yourself, how did you choose to be Chief Executive Officer of GroundZero...

BT: I'd love to tell you about that. Art has played a really really important part of my life, ever since I was a young person, particularly during my teenage years, I did a lot of studio art into college and then I got into art history. I've been an arts administrator for almost all of my life, worked like for nine years at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), three years for George Coates Performance Works, a couple of years for Yerba Buena, and particularly when I was at SFMOMA, I became interested in art that used technology...I was actually doing programming there but no one else in the museum was interested in that kind of art...video art and performance art and other forms of art that use technology...and so I curated a few shows dealing with that and so developed a real passion for that kind of art. And then after the museum, when I was at George Coates, he was using lots and lots of technology, especially around the early 90s, 90, 91...real cutting edge technology...and did some things at Yerba Buena, also with technology, mainly trying to acquire equipment for pieces that Yerba Buena had already committed to...and then I went to the Tech Museum after Yerba Buena and I was there for five years as a fundraiser but kept my interest in art and technology going. I did a lecture series on art and technology and worked with Michael Naimark to get the Interval show over to the Tech, and that show was around for six months. It was actually in the museum when we opened the Tech, when we inaugurated the Tech, opened the doors...that would have been in 98. And then we said, we got Interval in, we can get Xerox Parc in...and so I've known Rich Gold for years and so I started talking to him and brought him over and got him talking to the people at the tech and that resulted in a really really wonderful show

SW: Yes, I remember, I was at the opening of that show...

BT: An excellent show on books and reading...very very good, and, let's see, how did I get interested in this? It was not new to me to say that someone should bring together the Interactive Media Festival that Lisa Goldman and Andy Cunningham produced down in L.A. in 94 and 95 up to Silicon Valley, so that had been an idea that had been bantered around for a number of years but Randall Packard and I would get together, he was working at the San Jose Museum and I was working at the Tech Museum and we'd get together and have lunch 'cause I'd known Randall for 15 years or so, worked with him when I was at SFMOMA and he was involved with the contemporary music players and we would get together for lunch and scheme and say "you know, someone should bring that Festival up to Silicon Valley" and then we said "maybe it should be us, maybe it should be the museums, the Tech Museum and the San Jose Art Museum" and after that he moved on, went away from the museum, but I couldn't get the idea

out of my head, and I'd even called up a few meetings with Harry Saal, and Lisa Goldman, and Jane Metcalfe, and Michael Naimark, and so then I wrote a proposal about the idea and presented that idea to the Tech Museum...And right about that time I went to Ars Electronica, to their big festival, and Lisa Goldman said to me "Well talk to Andy, she's got something up her sleeve" and so she certainly did, when we came back, we got together and she was part of the Henry Crown Fellowship Program, she was a Fellow at that program, and this program develops leadership from like CEOs, you know, community leadership and she had written a proposal about starting a foundation dealing with art and technology...so we kinda looked at each other and exchanged proposals and she said "I want to start the foundation and I want you to come and be the director" and so, so that's the history of that...

SW: Excellent...

BT: And she's just remarkable, she's really really wonderful

SW: So you came to GroundZero, how did GroundZero evolve from idea or proposal to launch...what were the milestones in this development and what role did you play as CEO in each of the phases?

BT: Well, let's see...we first needed to figure out where we wanted to go...and I, since I had been working at the Tech, and SFMOMA, and Yerba Buena as well, was really committed to the idea of involving community, having understood how community involvement worked in all those cases, so that was one thing, I knew that I wanted to involve community...I put a lot of energy into this...Andy and I would talk, as well as I would talk with some other colleagues, we just started to figure out what we wanted to do, what direction we wanted to take... and we put together some meetings, one involving a lot of people from the art-tech community, people from like, say San Jose State, Joel, for instance, Joel, let's see who else was in some of those meetings...well, different community, people from that demographic, the art and tech community. And I actually went out and talked to Stephen Wilson from San Francisco State, and just got ideas, gathered ideas, what everybody's thinking was, because I knew that we wanted to be inclusive of the whole Bay Area, 'cause there's a lot of energy in the Bay Area. And a lot of these people weren't talking to each other...we talked to Greg Niemeyer, from Stanford, he came over to one of those meetings, of course Michael Naimark, Joel, as I mentioned, so we got a lot of their thinking about the Bay Area, and art and technology and how an organization like GroundZero could help make it a more vital area. And then we put another meeting from people from the community like John Kreidler, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, and we talked with Peter Hero who's with the Community Foundation of Silicon Valley, Norio Sugano, Harry Saal-so those were the two groups we were sort of dealing with...the community group and the art and technology group and out of all that discussion, and you know, it was about three months worth of discussion at least, we finally decided we wanted to be a virtual incubator, and help facilitate the art that used technology, and then beyond that, we wanted to involve community, and instill in the community appreciation of art. We do the festival to help with that process, have an educational component and an exhibition component, so there you have it...

SW: And so .artfrontiers was the launch to that?

BT: That happened when I went to one of the Kitchen's sessions at the Walker Art Center. The Kitchen had gotten Ford Foundation money to do a series of four conferences on art and technology. I went to one of them, the second, at the Walker, and Kathy Brew introduced me to Christina Yang who was The Kitchen organizer of that conference with the Walker, and the Ford Foundation apparently wanted the last in the series to be out on the West Coast...really in the thicket where the technology was being developed...and our organization seemed to fit the profile...Christina and I got along very well, and in one of our Advisory Committee meetings, 'cause we do have an Advisory Committee with about 40 people, in one of those Advisory Committee meetings I brought up that idea, the possibility of doing this conference with The Kitchen...and the The Kitchen wanted to do it a little bit earlier...and I was like...that's too early, you know, to do it at the end of the summer, and so Sharon Daniel, from UC Santa Cruz said "we'll do it at the same time that Stanford is doing their conference" and so that's why we chose that date, to do it right before that conference, so that if people were coming from out-of-town, they could go to both conferences...

SW: Excellent...so I understand from your brochure that GroundZero has a Board of Directors, a set of advisors with different roles, alliances, and network affiliates. Could you expand on how this structure was conceived, what are the roles for each body, and what was the strategy and criteria for selecting organizations or individuals for each body?

BT: Well the Board actually serves two purposes, it's our brain trust, and you know, people in our Advisory Committee are part of our brain trust too, so the Board has the

brain trust function but also we're developing a Board that can be a fundraising Board, because we are a not-for-profit, we are a 501-C3, and a big part of this effort is going to be fundraising, so people on there can help us with that effort. So those are kind of the main roles there...and we just brought on someone, whose specialty is...she's an attorney and her specialty is intellectual property because we know that's going to be a big issue...Lisa Goldman was the artistic director of the Interactive Media Festival, so Lisa brings all that experience, she's been a jury at Ars Electronica, and with other shows, she served as a juror, so she's well regarded...Joichi Ito brings the sort of Japanese component into the organization, he's based in Tokyo but he has a lot of connections in this country as well...so we're just sort of casting a net...but strategically, bringing people in...

SW: So, that's the Board of Trustees...

BT: That's the Board of Trustees, we have special advisors, one is Dick Kramlich, he's pioneering VC in this Valley, but also he has a major collection of video art and electronic art, so we just treasure his involvement...Paul Saffo, Institute of the Future, and of course David Ross is one of our key advisors ...and a business person, Norio Sugano, who's an entrepreneur, actually...

SW: What do you see as their major role?

BT: To be honest, to advise us, to act as a sounding board...but also we want to act as kind of a catalyst to get everybody on the same page in the area and so on the Advisory Board are people from the different organizations around the Bay Area...Lynn Hershmann from UC Davis, Ken Goldberg from UC Berkeley, Steve Wilson from State, Joel, Sharon...so that's a big part of it, we want people to be talking to each other, and we see ourselves as providing a forum where these people can come together and, you know, exchange ideas, because I didn't know right away that a lot of these people were not communicating with each other, so...

SW: And how about the alliances and network affiliates? Their roles...

BT: I think on a different level to provide the same function... but also those who are providing the funding, we hope to expand that...the list of those affiliates, those fundings...so that networking and funding...'cause there's so much potential here, so much is happening here, like Gerfried came over from Ars, he was like "half of the people who show at Ars are here" you know, they're here in this area...and that's true. So that we, I guess in addition to what I was telling you before as our main functions, I think we see GroundZero being able to be, in a funny sense, a PR agency for what's happening here, in terms of the whole area...

SW: In your brochure you mention that GroundZero will serve as an incubator for worthy artistic projects demanding technology input. The word incubator has several spins, particularly in Silicon Valley. So, how does GroundZero define incubator, and what criteria will be used to evaluate worthy artistic projects?

BT: Well I guess we use in the way that, in that world, you would hear virtual incubator being used. Down the road it may be different, but we want to start out by being a liaison with artists and teams of artists and industry counterparts that can help actually get these pieces produced...and we would help the artists go ahead and liaison with these industries, provide infrastructure, funding, that sort of thing...so we would not, at least initially, plan, and down the road we may find out we need to do this-but it would be our druthers not to have an actual lab where people come in and work...because the technology gets outdated so quickly and if the resources are available working with industry, then we want to see if we can use that as our model...which is a virtual incubation model, the same one that industry uses...

SW: Right... what criteria will be used to evaluate worthy art projects? Who will decide and what are the criteria being considered?

BT: We are actually developing that criteria right now and the person spearheading that effort is Joichi Ito. He has served on the Ars jury for years, and he's based in Tokyo, but as we speak, he's helping us develop that criteria...and there's a committee, there's a committee that has been formed, Joichi's heading it up, they're developing the criteria... and it will be that committee that going to be make those decisions according to the criteria that are established...

SW: And within that committee, would it be the people who are already established as the Advisory Board and network affiliates, or are they different people?

BT: Pretty much, pretty much...of course, we could go outside that group as well...

SW: Do you envision GroundZero establishing hundreds of small projects or a handful

of mega projects?

BT: I think we want to do a handful of mega projects and some smaller ones, but in terms of the scope, I can't really tell you right now...I think it's going to be fewer rather than a lot, but we want there to be a variety of size of projects, etc...

SW: And what type of financial and technical arrangements do you specifically envision for artists?

BT: Being able to use the technology that they need, have access to the technologists that they need, but also provide capital as well...

SW: So would that come from GroundZero or would it be determined on a project per project basis?

BT: It would go through GroundZero, right, but we don't have an endowment per se right now, so we would be fundraising for these efforts...

SW: You mentioned that GroundZero plans to build a sense of community around the intersection of art and technology...What will be the basis for being included in this community? What are the financial, technical, artistic criteria?

BT: Who would be included? As I mentioned, I worked in The Tech Museum, and essentially what I was doing there, was I was fundraising with major donors and developed a community of these donors around The Tech. The group I was working with, when I got there...there were 40 of these donors and when I left there were 400...and so I was involved in helping develop that community...of course, the membership really expanded too, particularly when we opened the new museum...so you're talking about those two levels, your basic membership and then that donor level...and I'm talking about getting these people together, they all would be donors on some level, you have your lower level members and then your higher level donors...but getting them together to support a cause, but also developing a sense of community with this group...and I've seen it happen, you know...it takes time, it takes effort, but you're bringing people together for different events and so on and so forth...and over time, a real sense of community does develop, and I have high hopes for this...because, people in Silicon Valley now, so many of them, they've worked really hard, they've made a lot of money, their companies have been successful, and they're asking...what else? And they want to have a rich cultural life for their kids and so they're interested in helping support something like this...there's kind of a vacuum, and so people are looking to fill that vacuum...something spiritual in a way, or cultural, or something that can kind of give soul back into their lives...and so, those are sort of our objectives in terms of building community...

SW: Other organizations worldwide such as Ars Electronica, ISEA, ZKM have created community or are trying to create community around the intersection of art and technology. How is GroundZero distinguished in this regard?

BT: I think we would be closer to what Ars Electronica is doing. Every year with their art festival, the international art community descends on Linz, and that is their main audience for their festival...but they also built a center and through that center they've made a real effort to involve the community throughout the year. So I see GroundZero operating in a similar way. When we do our festival, we will definitely try to bring the community in, but that would be the time when people from around the world would come...or if we do another conference, that would be the time when lots of people would come from out-of-town, and the art world would be your main audience, but like Ars is doing, we want to have educational events and other community events to engage the local community throughout the year. You know, I don't really know what ZKM, how how they're structured in that regard, but I'm sure they do something similar...

SW: I guess it begs the question, although it would seem fairly obvious...why in Silicon Valley?

BT: Oh yes! (laughs). Because this is ground zero for the IT revolution...and the resources are here...and the creativity and the innovation are here...so (laughs), that was an easy answer!

SW: The Interactive Media Festival held in the mid 90s seems to have sparked this Foundation. Will GroundZero be primarily focused on media technologies? Specifically, what is GroundZero's scope for incubating art and technology?

BT: Can I just back up a moment and say that another precedent for what we hope to do, was the CADRE festivals, I'm not remembering the specific name...the art and technology festivals that CADRE did in the 80s...I attended them, and they were

great...so that's another precedent...and we keep that very definitely in mind...that we're building on something that CADRE started here in the 80s...and also the Interactive Media Festival in the 90s...and I think the criterion is technology...and it can be biotech...it can be very loosely defined...but that would be the criterion...technology...

SW: GroundZero's inaugural project is Bill Viola's Digital St. John...What was the strategy behind the choice and could you give me specific details on how the art/technology partnership worked in this case...for example, what financial, technical resources did Bill Viola receive and what benefits did the partners providing the resources receive?

BT: Kevin Teixeira, who works for Intel, started working with Bill a couple of years ago...and I do know that Intel sponsored the Bill Viola web page that was part of Bill's travelling show...I know that Intel sponsored that and it may just have been developed in conjunction with the show at SFMOMA...in fact that kind of rings a bell, that's when it happened...and they started talking about this project, this Digital St. John project...Bill had done a digital piece at ZKM, that tree piece...do you remember the name of that?

SW: No, I don't remember the name...

BT: So he had started to work in the digital arena and apparently he and Kevin started talking about this project that they wanted to do...and so they worked on it intermittently using a game platform, and there was some funding from Intel and they worked on it for about a year and a half...and then last Spring, Kevin was realizing that he had to find a new home for this project...that he didn't have the time or the resources to put into it...and so he talked to me about it...and I had actually worked with Bill very very closely with Bill and his wife Kira back in 1985 when I was back in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and we had done an exhibition which was a wonderful...a smallish exhibition...but it was very successful ...I mean it was a challenge to make it happen and we worked very very closely...so when Kevin said, well there is this new organization, GroundZero, Beau Takahara is heading it up, Bill was like "yes, I know Beau, great!", so that's how it kind of came to GroundZero...and we are pretty much right now at the stage where we are going to go out and make this happen. It has been up to now, pretty much in Kevin's court, and so we're taking it over right now, so we're going out to different industry companies, talking to them...we have a plan already devised in terms of how to raise other moneys...so we're just starting...we're just getting this off the ground. It's been in the planning stages, and now we're...

SW: So, I'm curious, do you have a range of budget, people required, what it's going to take?

BT: It's all very much in the planning stages, we have figures, so on and so forth, but until we get what we call our scope of work completed, I'm not going to be able to anSWer those questions, and that's the first step, to create this scope of work, and that's going to tell us exactly what's going to be needed...so that's the first thing on our plate, and we've started to put that process together...

SW: GroundZero's worldview is that industry is the engine of culture. How do you position this perspective in a world of multicultural perspectives?

BT: Well, that's kind of a viewpoint that hovers above. In the sense that industry impacts our lives, we can't really get away from it...it's pervasive...and instead of fighting it, we acknowledge the power that it plays in our lives. I think the key thing that we need to realize is to maintain our integrity as a not-for-profit organization and also realize that the artists' integrity needs to be preserved at all costs. So we recognize the power, but we also recognize that we have certain responsibilities in the face of that...

SW: How do you rate the success of last week's launch of .artfrontiers, and what does GroundZero hope to accomplish in this first year of launch, and how about five years hence? What is your role as CEO in making this happen?

BT: It seems that the conference was really quite a success. We got the audience that we wanted, we got the panelists that we wanted, but I would say that for me, and also I know that for some other people as well, whose opinions I really respect, that we didn't take the safe route and that we actually dealt with a lot of controversial issues, like the entrepreneur as artist...a lot of people had trouble with that...but I think it was very worthwhile to explore that...and you know, there were a few other controversial issues as well...but I would say that I feel best that we were able to present these ideas and have people respond to them...and I would measure the success of the conference based on that...What were the other questions about GroundZero?

SW: After the launch, what do you see GroundZero's contribution being for this next year, and five years or ten years hence? Where do you envision...

BT: OK, another element of maybe being successful is that people, time and time again said. that you have a lot of energy going here, and so I think that we, as well as the Stanford conference created a buzz, and so I think that one of our main tasks is to try to keep that buzz going, keep these people in touch with each other, and provide a forum for that. We want to do a conference together next year and start planning for the festival...that will be a big part of what we're doing...fundraising and planning for the festival, and trying to bring the community into that, down the road...

SW: When do you envision that festival happening?

BT: I would say a year and a half to two years...

SW: OK...

BT: I don't know exactly what the roadblocks are going to be, so that's just kind of a loose an**SW**er...

SW: Right...and then in five years or a decade?

BT: I would really like to see GroundZero help in making this area be ground zero for art that uses technology...as I was saying earlier, the creativity, the innovation, the resources are here...all the different educational institutions are creating wonderful students...we're very interested in this new art...we just see ourselves as a catalyst for making that happen...

SW: I have one more question...I noticed that .artfrontiers was launched and conceived mainly by women...is that common for this type of endeavor?

BT: You know, that is so fascinating...because I did not think about that...Yes, but then a lot of people who were advisors, a lot of them were male...Michael Naimark, I was probably on the phone with Michael Naimark at least twice a day...Benjamin Weill had a great deal of input, Harry Saal, Harry has been very supportive, so there are a lot of guys, but you're right about the women and I am just chuckling...when I left the Museum of Modern Art, I worked for maybe a period of oh...about four months on a very very intense project, it was art against AIDS, and we were working at such a fast time clip, it was a fundraiser, we did an art sale and we raised a million dollars from the sale of art for AIDS research, but the whole team was women, and I remember coming from the museum and being placed with this group of women, the production company was from New York, and I just realized, wow, lack of egos, we can really get stuff done and we moved at such a fast pace and (laughs) that may be one of the reasons for our success and one reason why we could move at such a fast pace getting this conference and this launch organized because it was insanely fast...What has been your experience?

SW: Well, working in industry, I noticed that a lot of the big events are organized by women, but I was wondering whether this was a new trend for sponsoring art...I'm not sure that Ars Electronica was conceived and organized by women...

BT: Well, it wasn't intentional, it just happened.

SW: Thank you for your time...

BT: Thank you...

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Nora Raggio is currently a graduate student at the CADRE Laboratory.

::CrossReference

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