

# The Power of Participation:

How Community-First Events Drive Long Term Revenue



**Natalie Ulrich**



**Meghan Morin**

# Natalie Ulrich

is the Director of Development at Safe Passage, where she leads efforts to build meaningful community partnerships and secure vital resources to support survivors of domestic violence. She brings **more than 11 years** of professional fundraising experience, including peer-to-peer campaigns, giving days, major donor engagement, grant writing, and corporate sponsorships. At Safe Passage, Natalie oversees the organization's annual Hot Chocolate Run, a peer-to-peer and sponsorship-driven event that raises **more than \$750,000 each year**.





# Meghan Morin

is a marketing strategist and nonprofit leader with more than 25 years of experience building marketing and communications platforms. She and her husband co-founded Bikes Fight Cancer, a grassroots cycling event that has **raised over \$500,000 in 2 years** to support cancer care and patient services.

Her career spans both corporate and nonprofit sectors, with leadership roles at Hasbro, Yankee Candle, Greenfield Savings Bank, and Build-A-Bear. Drawing on her background in brand marketing, community engagement, and peer-to-peer fundraising, she now runs her own consulting practice and helps organizations design events and campaigns that inspire participation, deepen connections, and maximize fundraising impact.

**Do you know the average participant return rate?**



30%



# 70%

Have to be:

- recruited
- introduced to your mission
- trained to fundraise



**We flipped that.**

**You can too.**

# A Case Study:

## Bikes Fight Cancer and The Hot Chocolate Run for Safe Passage





Founded to make athletic fundraising accessible and empower more people to join the fight against cancer. What began as a small, local ride has grown into a passionate community united by purpose.

With a limited event footprint, our growth comes from deepening engagement and turning participants into champions for the cause.





**62%**

Participant return rate  
(30% industry avg)

**74%**

Fundraise  
(20% industry avg)

**63%**

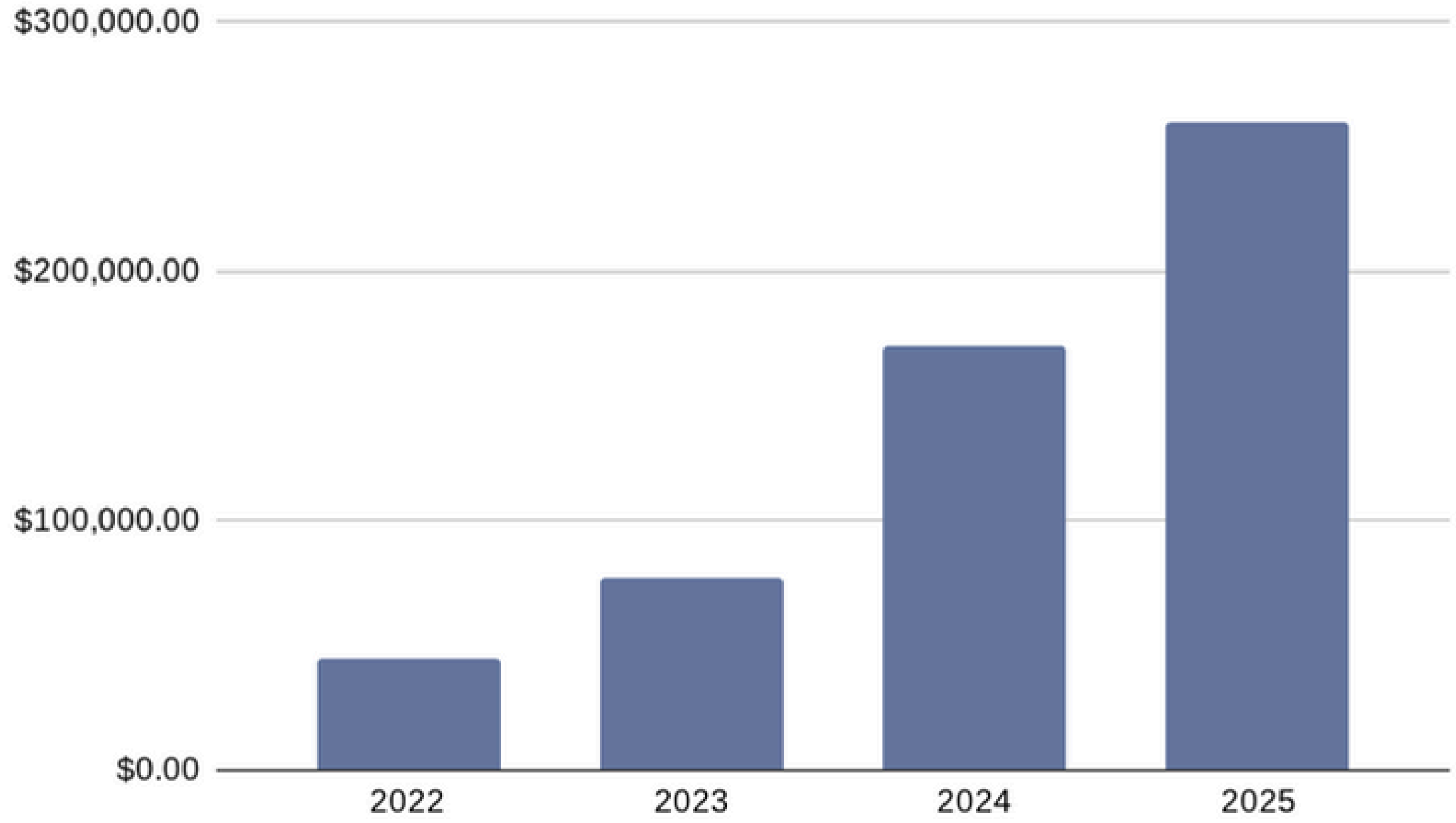
Hit the suggested  
fundraising goal

**Sold Out**

4 Weeks before the  
event in 2025



# Fundraising Growth





What started as a fundraiser for Safe Passage's children's program and hosted only 400 participants its first year, the Hot Chocolate Run has turned into one of the largest fundraising events in Western MA. This year we anticipate 6,000 runners and walkers.

Families and friends gather to celebrate survivors of domestic violence and survivors themselves get the opportunity to connect and share their stories.

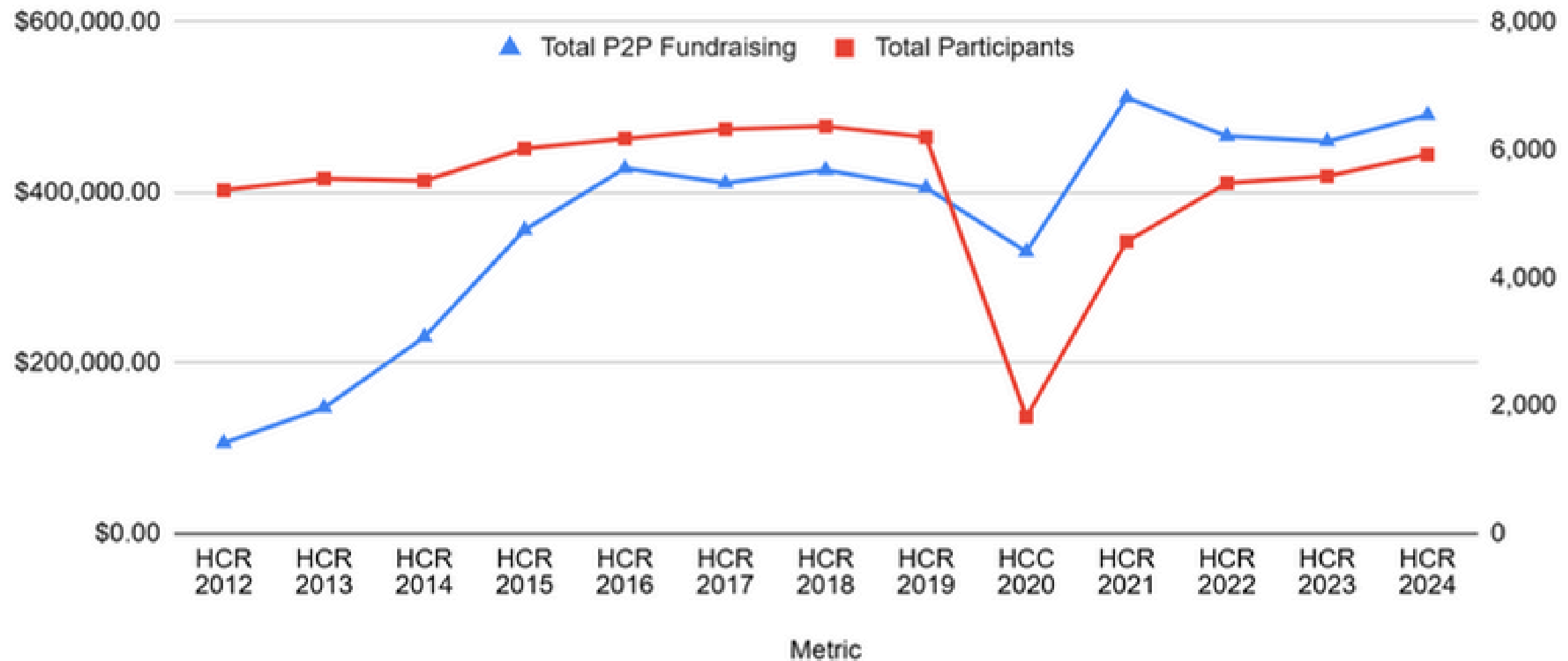




# 22 Years

With growth almost every year

Registration and Fundraising, Y/Y



**42%**

Participant return rate  
(30% industry avg)

**32%**

Fundraised  
(20% industry avg)

**76%**

Fundraised by teams



# Today's Journey



RECRUIT

EARLY & OFTEN



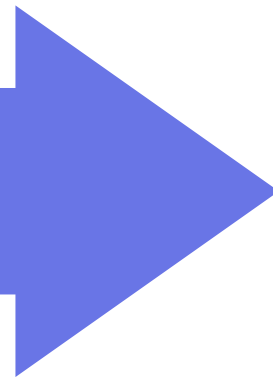
**First 50%** raised **380% more** per participant than others & raised **79% of total funds**



**First 50%** raised **120% more** per rider & raised **71% of total funds**



**RECRUIT**



**TELL EVERYONE**

**56%**

of event participants find out from friends,  
family, teams & word of mouth\*

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**45%**

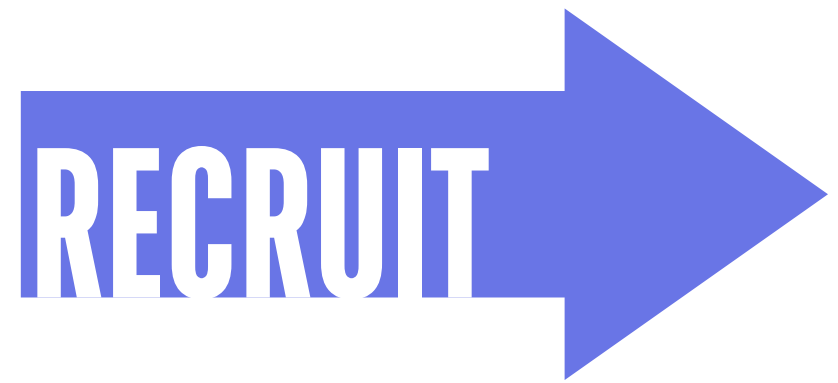
Find out from Social Media

**RECRUIT**

# **USE YOUR MARKETING \$ WISELY**

**ONLY  
9%**

of participants  
find out from  
local papers,  
radio and news



# RECRUIT **TIPS**

- Focus on early registrations
- Use price increases
- Use all communication channels
- Encourage team recruitment

**ENGAGE**

**COMMUNICATING, MOTIVATING AND PROVIDING  
AN EXPERIENCE THAT SURPASSES EXPECTATIONS**



**ENGAGE**

**TALK TO THEM OFTEN**

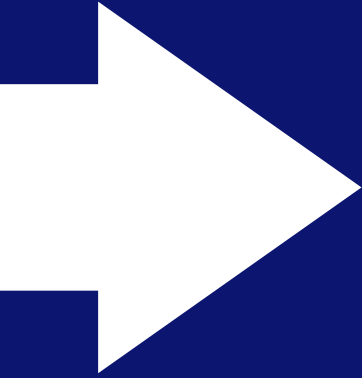


Avg # of emails  
received by a  
participant

**20**

**19**

**ENGAGE**



**GET THEM FUNDRAISING ASAP**

## **Bikes Fight Cancer**

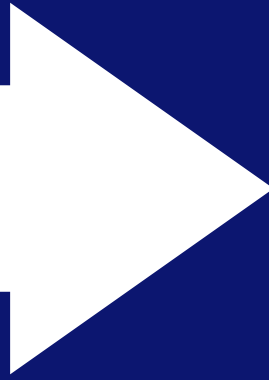
Participants who got a donation in the **first 14 days**:

- **Raised 86% more** than all other participants
- **82%** reached the \$100 goal (vs only 44% of all others)

## **Hot Chocolate Run**

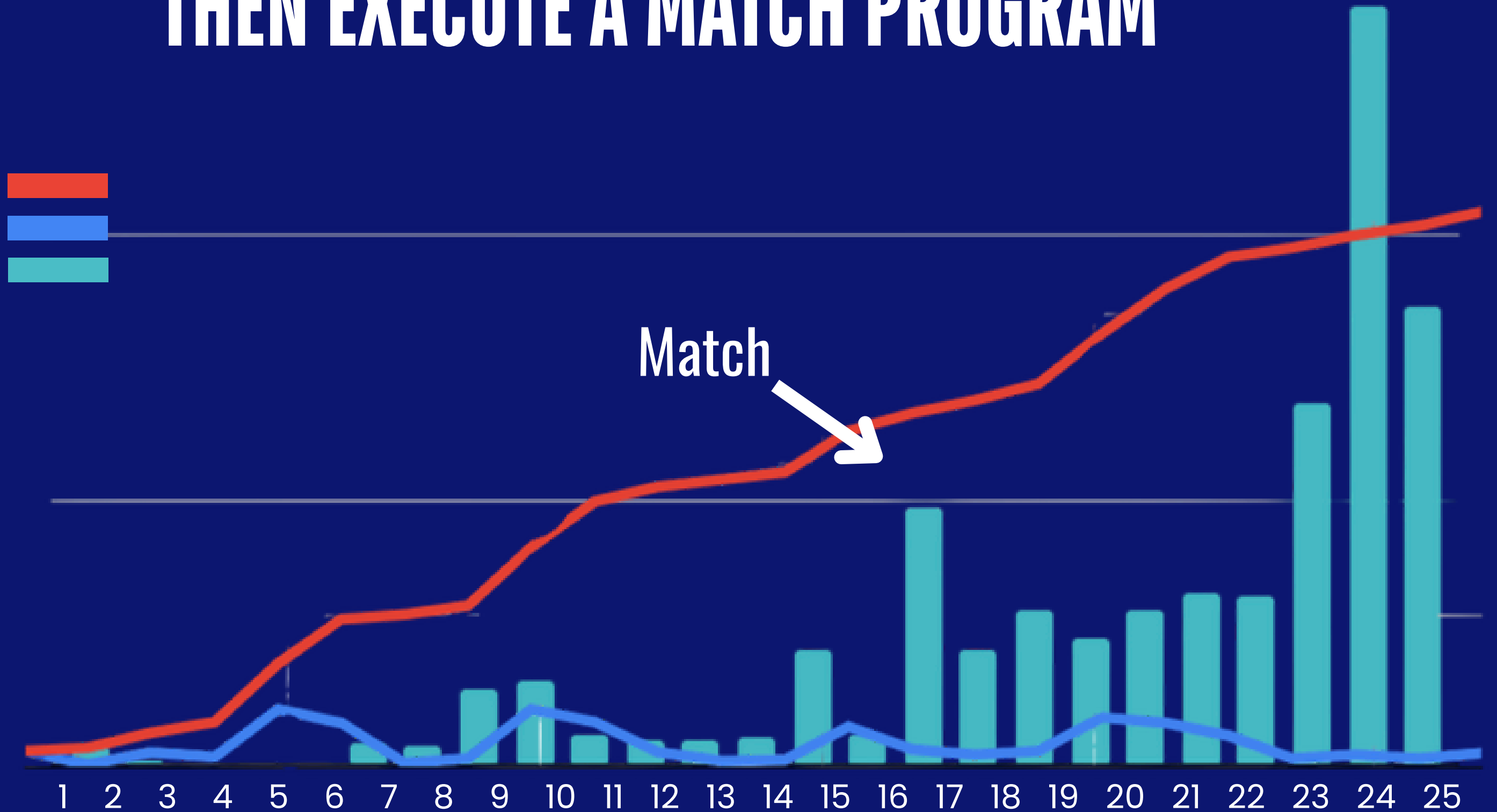
Fundraisers who start in the **first 7 days** raise **~40% more on average.**

**ENGAGE**

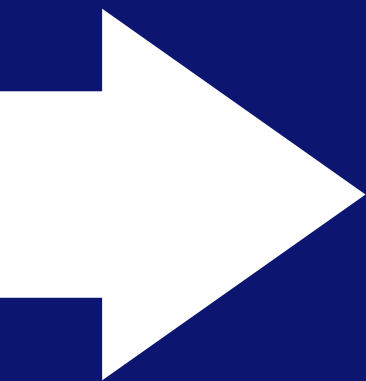


**FILL THE PIPE LINE WITH REGISTRATIONS,  
THEN EXECUTE A MATCH PROGRAM**

Cumulative Registration  
Weekly Registration  
Fundraising by Week



**ENGAGE**



# THE POWER OF TEAMS

Average 70% of participants are on teams

Teams raise on average **80% of funds**



Northeast Solar

Sponsored · 🌐

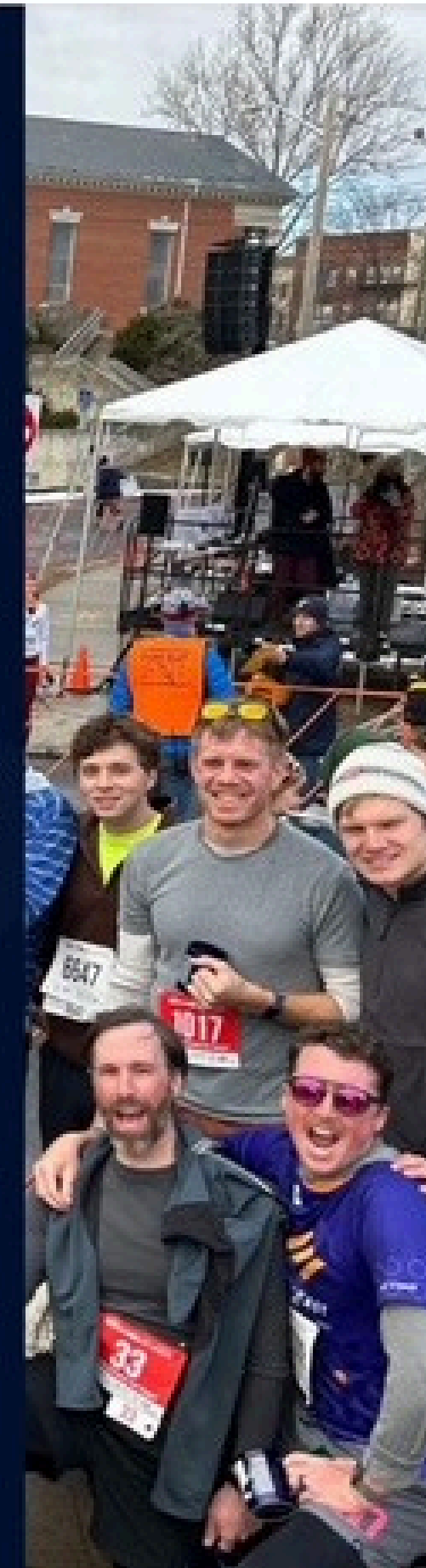
Northeast Solar is proud to participat... See more

**HOT CHOCOLATE** **RUN** safe passage

**RUNNING  
FOR MORE  
THAN JUST  
THE FINISH  
LINE**

Since 2016

Join Northeast Solar &  
UMass Ultimate



**ENGAGE**



# **PROVIDE AN EVENT EXPERIENCE THAT SURPASSES EXPECTATIONS**

- Communicate useful information
- Remove friction at the event
- Ensure you highlight unique elements
- Be thoughtful about flow
- Have quality signage
- Fundraiser recognition

# ENGAGE TIPS

- COMMUNICATE!
- Get them fundraising early
- Set up a match
- Engage the teams
- Make the event memorable!

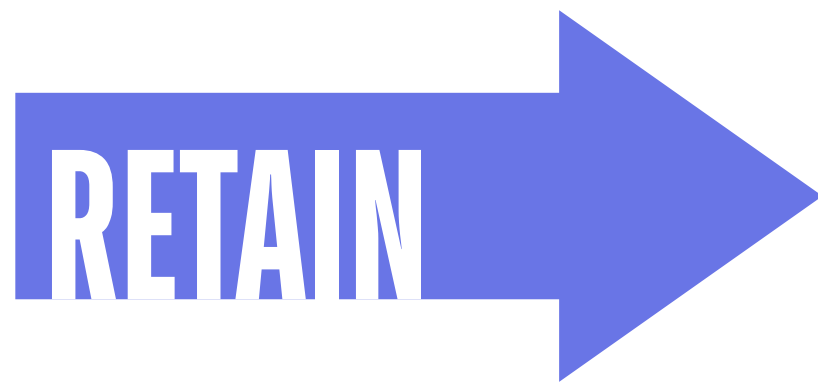


**RETAIN**

# CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT:

**FROM ONE-TIME PARTICIPANTS TO  
LONG-TERM CHAMPIONS**

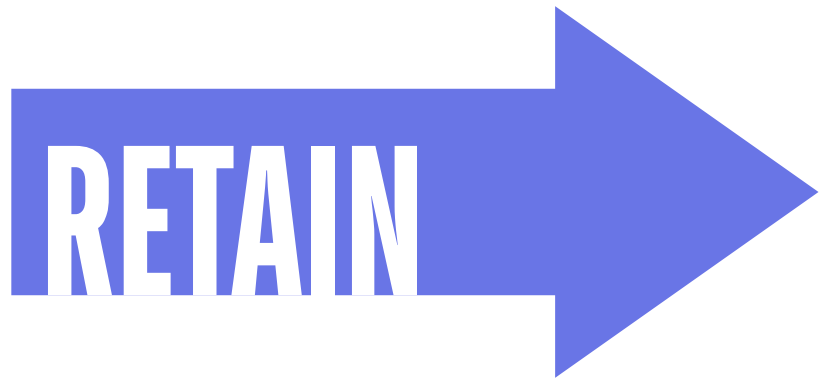




# STEWARD TOP FUNDRAISERS

**LIKE THEY ARE MAJOR DONORS OR SPONSORS**





# SHOW MEANINGFUL APPRECIATION FOR ALL FUNDRAISERS **...ESPECIALLY TOP!**

- Recognize them publicly
- Reach out individually
- Send handwritten notes
- Personalize communications
- Invite them to your events
- Offer special gifts and thanks

# RETAIN COMMUNICATE ALL YEAR

- **COMMUNICATE** with participants,
- Share impact and success stories
- Inform of any upcoming changes
- Surveys – ask their opinion
- Remind them about what makes your event unique

This September, one of our BFC Charity riders, Justin Kasunick, will be tackling the tallest peak in the contiguous 48 states! Justin is a cancer survivor and 4 time BFC rider (and former elite road racer!). ... [See more](#)



Meet the [Semi Sweet Savages](#) 🍫 From a "trot" to a tradition! What started with two best friends 10 years ago has exploded into a fundraising powerhouse for [Safe Passage](#).... [See more](#)

## THE CHOCOLATE CHRONICLES YEAR 22- NO. 2 | 50¢

### SEMI SWEET SAVAGES — FUNDRAISING WITH FRIENDSHIP, FUN, AND FIERCE DETERMINATION

What began as two friends encouraging each other through their running journeys has grown into Semi Sweet Savages, a spirited team known for their creativity, ugly sweater tradition, and community-centered fundraising. The name itself—rooted in the Hot Chocolate theme but flexible enough to carry into other events—has become part of their identity. "We wanted something memorable," Bryanna explains. "Semi Sweet fit perfectly—because we're a little fun, a little crazy, and just a little savage."



What truly sets this team apart is their inventive approach to fundraising. From trivia nights and bingo tournaments to a one-of-a-kind "Tips-Giving" event, the **Savages have turned creativity into community impact.** "We like to take the pressure off and make fundraising something people want to be part of," Bryanna shares. "Come play bingo, come laugh with us, and along the way, you'll learn about Safe Passage and why this work matters."

That mix of fun and purpose is deeply rooted in their personal motivation. For Bryanna, participating in the Hot Chocolate Run has also been a journey of self-discovery. "I didn't realize for a long time that I had been in a domestic violence situation," she reflects. "At the time, I told myself, 'I'm strong, I'm not getting hit, so I don't need support.' Looking back, I see how much I did need it. Each year I share a little more of my story because I know there are others in that same headspace. Fundraising is my way to say, **'You're not alone.'**"

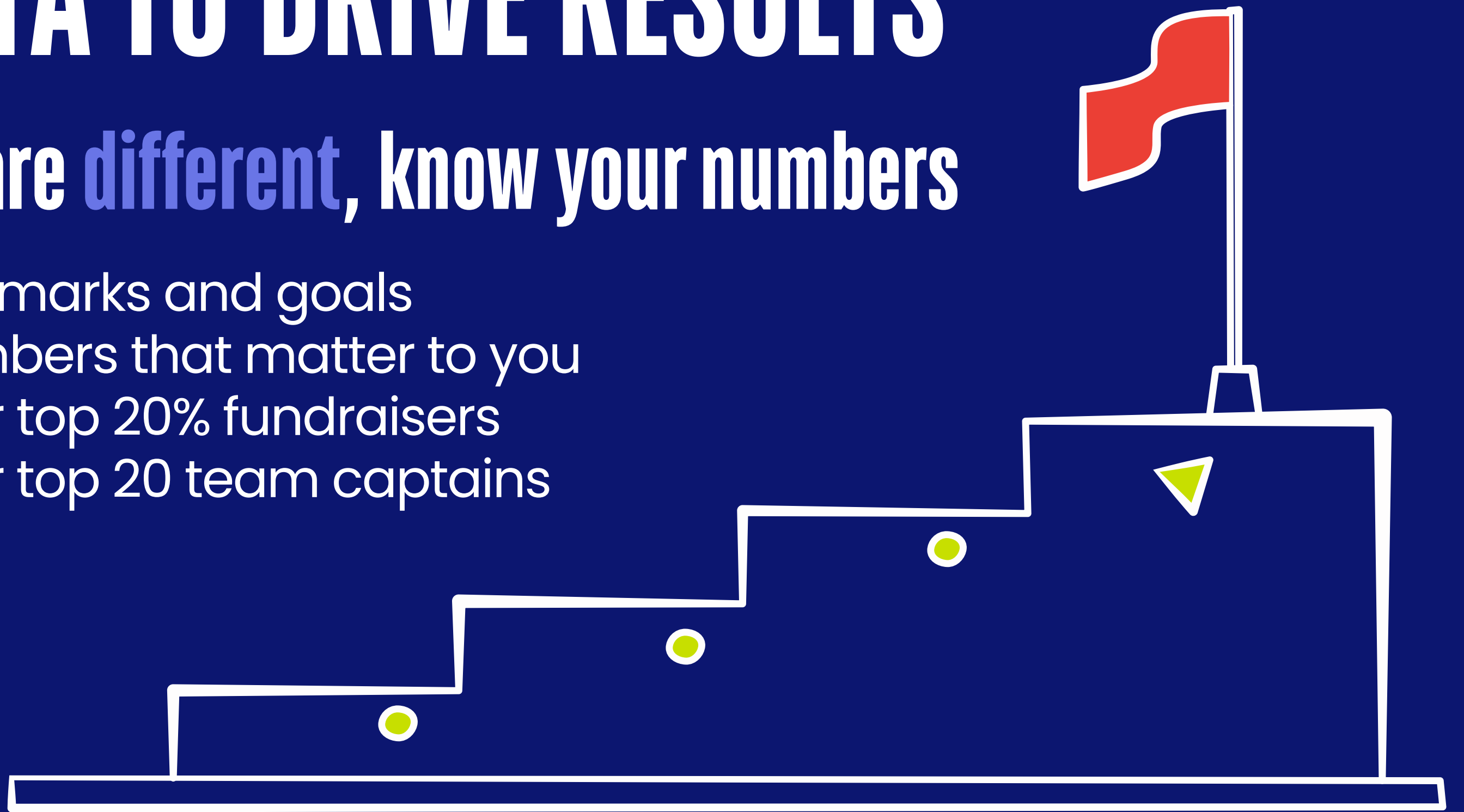
# Summary



# USE DATA TO DRIVE RESULTS

All events are **different**, know your numbers

- Set benchmarks and goals
- Track numbers that matter to you
- Know your top 20% fundraisers
- Know your top 20 team captains



When you focus on **Recruiting, Engaging and Retaining** your participants your **event revenue** should look like this:



# WHEN YOU INTENTIONALLY ENGAGE A COMMUNITY TO NOT JUST PARTICIPATE BUT TO BE A PART OF YOUR MISSION

- Retention grows
- Fundraising deepens
- Recognition is amplified
- Mission impact multiplies
- A community is built



**THANK YOU!**

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