

MoS Rapid Response Script – Stacy Brown-Philpot

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This will pass, and when it does, I want to be able to look back on it and see that we've done something good for humanity. Our Taskers are the heroes here.

[THEME MUSIC]

BOB SAFIAN: Hi listeners. This is Bob. Welcome to Masters of Scale Rapid Response. Today I'm talking to Stacy Brown Philpot, CEO of TaskRabbit. TaskRabbit's platform connects individuals who want something done with others willing to take that task on. That includes things like putting together Ikea furniture, which is one reason that Ikea has invested in the platform. With the Coronavirus lockdown, that furniture building business has stopped and so have requests for other high demand tasks like cleaning someone's home. But as Stacy explains, demand for other tasks has risen dramatically. And taskers have become heroes.

Stacy explains how she got early insight into the coronavirus as a board member at Nordstrom, which is headquartered in Seattle, one of the first U.S. outbreak locations. She explains how TaskRabbit pivoted between safety and fulfilling essential tasks, and notes that new Taskers continue to join the platform – some because they've lost other jobs, others as volunteers, contributing to a new program, called Tasks for Good. Stacy calls it the worst of times, but she also believes that the very best of humanity is coming out. When COVID first hit, her own tasks were about reacting. Recently though, she began thinking about recovery and the future. Lets listen.

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with [Stacy Brown Philpot](#), the CEO of TaskRabbit. At Masters of Scale Rapid Response, we're interviewing business leaders who have agreed to share their experiences and perspective amid the COVID-19 crisis. Stacy oversees a platform that has quickly taken on an essential role in communities as social distancing and other mandates have reshaped our society. She's also a board member at HP and at Nordstrom, so she's seeing the impact of the coronavirus from many perspectives. Stacy is coming to us today remotely from her home in California as I asked my questions from my home in New York. Stacy, thanks for joining us.

BROWN-PHILPOT: Thank you for having me.

SAFIAN: It's been a crazy kind of mind bending couple of weeks since the coronavirus began rippling through American communities, disrupting plans and lives and businesses. Looking back, I realized that I was slower to appreciate the implications than I might've been. I remember my 16-year-old son worrying about going on the New York City subway for a school trip about a week before school shut down and I thought he was being overly dramatic. Of course, I was wrong. When did you first appreciate that this was a watershed moment that something different was going on?

BROWN-PHILPOT: It really happened when we were supposed to have an offsite with our global leadership team in early March and we were on the phone, and we were debating: Should we let people still travel? And it wasn't clear, we didn't have the facts. We didn't know the severity of the issue, but we went to a priority, which is the safety and health of our employees, and we called it and we said, we're going to cancel this offsite. We're going to have people stay and we're going to do half of what we could accomplish virtually. And that was the moment we realized that this was pretty real.

SAFIAN: Yeah. For me, it was kind of this rolling realization that I was hearing things from different places at different times. Did you hear some things through your role at TaskRabbit and other things as a board member at the other organizations that kind of added up to something?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah, well we had a lot of information coming from different places. So we operate TaskRabbit all over the world. So we were looking at global data. Every city and county was providing information, and of course everything on social media was feeding us information. And then my boards were having regular calls that were updating us on what we were thinking about in terms of stores.

Now, luckily I'm on the board of Nordstrom, which is headquartered in Seattle, which is where the epicenter in the US really started. And so I had a lot of early information about the magnitude of the virus – but what I didn't have was how fast it was going to spread. It was still not clear in February how fast this virus was going to spread across our country and ultimately, across our world. But knowing all those bits of data just helped us make a call that said, you know what? We care about our employees. We care about their safety and their health. So let's just not bring people together and now let's react to what is about to be a crisis. And that was before we named it a pandemic.

SAFIAN: So what were the steps? So you canceled the offsite, you do some of those activities remote. What were the next steps? Everyone's trying to remember, "How did I get through this? What did I do?"

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah. Well, the next step was, do we still come to work? And that was a big question and that question really hit first in California where we have the largest piece of our team. And we made the decision to work from home and it really was based on a lot of other county and city level data. Schools were closing and we have parents who now have to be at home. So the next step was what do we do? When do we decide to work from home? And it was a rolling decision. We made the decision first in California and then we followed with New York, and then we followed with London, and finally Austin, which was really based on what the data was saying. We didn't have a lot of facts, so we were just reacting very quickly to the facts.

SAFIAN: Tasking has quickly become an essential service. Did you recognize that right away, that the platform that you were operating was going to be a core part of how communities grappled with this?

BROWN-PHILPOT: TaskRabbit was founded in 2008, which was still to date, the worst economic recession of our lifetime, of my lifetime. And so I knew the business was going to become a necessity. And so after the decision to work from home, we had to make a decision on do we keep the marketplace open? And that was a pretty easy answer because people, we were in a crisis, people needed help. And in fact, people who were at risk and vulnerable needed a lot of help. And TaskRabbit is a platform where people can get that essential help that they need. And so we made that decision because we knew that that help was going to be necessary for our country and for our world.

SAFIAN: But then the question is how does everybody do that safely, right?

BROWN-PHILPOT: That's right. That's right. And so how do we do that safely? The way we made that safe was that we immediately started communicating as a team. What does it take to stabilize? And after we stabilize, what does it take to adapt? And stabilizing is looking at our marketplace and figuring out what are the essential tasks that people need to get done? Turns out it's deliveries and errands and shopping, and those essential tasks for elderly people and healthcare workers.

Now, how do we adapt our business to make that happen? And adapting really was putting up a banner on our website, which was "What's a contactless task? Here are the tasks that you can do. Here are the tasks that we encourage and here's how you do them. Here's how to do it in a contactless way and we're going to provide you with the necessary PPE, the hand sanitizer, and the gloves, and the masks, in order to be able to do that." Our Taskers were so happy about this because they had the choice to decide on whether to task and if they made that decision, they could do it in a healthy and a safe way.

SAFIAN: So contactless became the kind of base level of what was required to do a task. Like you're not going in and cleaning people's homes anymore because it's hard to do that in a contactless way. Like all of the tasks or a lot of the tasks shift, the kinds of requests and the kinds of things that are able to be, or people are comfortable offering.

BROWN-PHILPOT: That's exactly right. Many businesses have been hit by this pandemic, including ours, but we've seen an increase in contactless tasks like deliveries and shopping. People started turning to us for those things that don't require coming inside the home, that don't require those hands on interactions that you're normally used to using TaskRabbit for.

SAFIAN: How are the numbers in your business overall? Can you give us some sense of that?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Well, our business is growing year over year, which is quite exciting. Even given where we are, when we look at the total year, we still see a huge demand for TaskRabbit. But certainly since this pandemic hit, and especially in the last month, we've seen a dramatic change and shift in the types of work that gets done. We've seen a slow in categories like furniture assembly.

Our partner, Ikea has closed almost all of their stores all over the world. And that's about 25% of our business today. And so that's a piece of our business that we've shifted. They still have operations online where we're still able to help people get things delivered, but we are very happy

that our business is not just slowed down in some areas, but it started to grow in other areas, which are around those essential services that people need, like deliveries and errands and shopping.

SAFIAN: With all the job losses, are there more people who are becoming Taskers? Or is there some sort of equal number of people who are like, "Yeah, I'm afraid to go out."

BROWN-PHILPOT: We've seen a shift in both of those things happen. Our Taskers have 100% control over whether they want to task or not. And so some of them have opted out, some of them are from vulnerable populations, or at risk, and so they've decided to opt out. But some of our taskers are ... They need to make money, and we've given them a safe way to do that.

You've seen all the unemployment numbers, it has skyrocketed. So yes, we are seeing people sign up to task on TaskRabbit as a way to make money in a safe and healthy way. But what we've also seen is that people want to volunteer their time too. So we've expanded what we're doing and adapted what we're doing to open up our platform to a new program called Tasks for Good, where people can volunteer their time at no cost to help the most at risk and vulnerable populations.

SAFIAN: Now, if I have this right, Task for Good launched as a pilot program in New York, right? About a week or so ago, and you're now expanding it. Can you explain what it is and sort of how it came together, and what your hopes or your thoughts are about it?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah. As we started to adapt, we really thought about what is the power of TaskRabbit today? Our mission is to make everyday life easier for everyday people, and it's really, really hard right now. It's especially hard for healthcare workers on the front lines. It's especially hard for people who are ... Who have to go to work, who have to earn some income, and it's especially hard for people who can't leave their homes. And as we thought about that, we also got inbound interest from people who wanted to help. They just didn't have a way to do it.

So we quickly came together in just a matter of weeks, built a volunteer program that now people can task for good. They can sign up to task on TaskRabbit to help some of the most at risk people with tasks that they need. So whether it's delivering PPE and other supplies to healthcare workers on the front line, delivering groceries. We have a great example of when this launched in New York last week where one woman, her 98-year old grandmother is in New York. Her daughter posted a task on TaskRabbit to have someone deliver her groceries for her. And as part of that...

Say hi. That's my daughter and our new puppy. Okay, mommy's in an interview. Okay.

So let me start that over. So we have a great example of where our Task for Good program has actually designed to help people who are most in need. A woman who's 98-year old grandmother can't leave the house, she hired a Tasker on TaskRabbit to go and pick up groceries at no cost and then in the end she ended up tipping her \$50 anyway, just as a huge thank you. That's really what this platform and this program is designed to do, really to help those who are most in need and allow people to give back to their communities.

SAFIAN: Because this is all volunteer, aside from the tip, but the idea is this is all volunteer.

BROWN-PHILPOT: This is all volunteer. It's all volunteer. It's really just a way to extend the power of what we're doing. We are assuming the best here. This is the worst of times in many ways, and so in the worst of times, we have to assume the best, and the best of humanity to come out. And I think it's coming out where we're seeing all these volunteers sign up to help someone else who can't get out of their home, who's afraid to leave their home or who physically can't leave the hospital because they're helping people who are already sick.

SAFIAN: You're in, I don't know, 50 or more metropolitan areas across the US, and I know you have a lot of data, you mentioned all the different communities you hear from. Is there any patterns or things in that data that tell you something about how the pandemic is unfolding, or places where it's either going faster or slower or is there any indications about that that you get warnings about or insights about?

BROWN-PHILPOT: You know one of the things we noticed is, as shelter in place has happened across the different states in the United States, the shift in our business followed. Which is, if I'm sheltering in place, I can't go outside, I need to turn to a reliable service to get things done. And so you saw a wave. We saw Seattle, we saw San Francisco, and the rest of California. Then obviously we saw New York. Recently, we've also seen with the launch of the Task for Good program, people are emerging: "How do I help?" So we saw the trend of help happen. There's an initial fear over, "This crisis happened to me," and the way you respond to it is different for everybody, but we have a lot of people who are responding with a way to help, and Tasks for Good is a way that they can do just that.

SAFIAN: So in New York City we now have this ritual, joyous ritual, at seven o'clock every evening where people clap outside for essential workers. Hanging out their windows, applauding, playing music, banging on pots, and it's great. There's also been some controversy around some gig economy workers, some protests, some strikes about the way they're treated. I'm curious how the different parts of the gig economy are either coming together or fracturing in this environment?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah, the gig economy is really at the forefront of this in a lot of ways. In fact, our Taskers really are the heroes. They're the household heroes who are really helping people right now. And TaskRabbit has always been a marketplace where people have had the flexibility to choose their hours that they work, how much they want to earn, they could set their own hourly rates, and when they wanted to work. And so with that flexibility comes the opportunity. So they've always had choice.

What I see happening with the gig economy is that we really have an opportunity to create more ways for people to earn a meaningful income. We've talked about how unemployment has skyrocketed. When we start to recover and as we start to recover, the gig economy will become more of a standard way that people make ends meet and have a flexible income and have a flexible way to work. Many of them have that option now. They're homeschooling and every once in a while they can go do a task, for example.

So what I see happening is that, yes, we haven't figured out how to make the gig economy work for everybody, but we need to come together to do it. I ultimately hope that we figure out a solution for things like portable benefits, and other ways to make sure that the gig economy is something that's here to stay. It's going to take a lot of innovation, but I think there's a lot of opportunity to do it.

SAFIAN: Are Taskers eligible for relief through the CARES Act?

BROWN-PHILPOT: We're so happy that the CARES Act got passed because yes, they can apply. And it's a great option for them to consider for how do they match the way that they meet their income needs. Most of our Taskers aren't full time on TaskRabbit. They could have gotten laid off from some other way that they were earning income and so the CARES Act is an excellent way for them to supplement that and it's very good to see that that's an option for them.

SAFIAN: You mentioned earlier hand sanitizer and gloves and masks and other personal protective equipment. Have you had any trouble sourcing that for your Taskers? I know that there's been a lot of demand for those, and I'm curious if there are any issues or efforts you've had to do in that area.

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yes. Everybody has had trouble sourcing. In fact, we have been the source of helping with the sourcing. We've had many Taskers be called to help deliver PPE to hospitals and other places that need them. But we were able to structure a contract with the company to secure enough PPE for our Taskers. It took us some time to get that done, but we're happy to be able to do it. And I think you'll see more and more companies that are in the production business to produce more hand sanitizers and gloves for people, which is amazing.

In fact, HP is using 3-D technology to print the clasps that go on the back of masks for hospital workers, which is incredible because they've shifted some of their 3-D printing work to focus on helping during this time of crisis.

SAFIAN: There's some indications that the pain and the risks of coronavirus are falling disproportionately on less affluent communities and people of color. And I'm wondering if that's something you've been struck by or concerned about or been able to address in any way?

BROWN-PHILPOT: I feel this every day. As an African American woman, I am very much in touch with all communities, including my own. And I'm lucky to have the resources to help my kids, and a house and space. But, I know 100% that there are a lot of people out in the world who aren't in that situation, who don't have space, who can't do social distancing in the way that we want. And so I am not here to tell everybody what to do. What I am here to do is say that TaskRabbit is an option for you if you need help. And if we can help you, we are here. We have an example of a Tasker, who delivered a package, his name was Frank, and he was sort of hired by a client in San Francisco to deliver a package.

And the package had food, PPE in there, supplies, and it also had a laptop with information on how to use the wifi, find a job, and sign up for TaskRabbit. So there's so much recognition that other people are suffering way worse than I am, way worse than many of us are. And then there's a lot of people out there who understand that and are using their time and their talents and their skills to help those people, up to and including the homeless people as well.

SAFIAN: I imagine some of the Tasker's have gotten sick. What do you do about that? Or does the company get involved in that in any way?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Absolutely. We have available support for all of our Tasker's – phone, email, everything – and we have a crisis monitoring team in place. We put a task force in place to launch

our Task For Good program, and we put a team in place to do monitoring. And so every day we get information about when a Tasker reports that they've been in contact with someone or they have COVID-19, or when a client reports that they've been in contact with someone or have COVID-19 – we are taking the measures to keep the community safe. We are giving them the information: Here's what you do, here's how you contact us. And we're letting the community know if and when it happens, because we want people to trust TaskRabbit through this very difficult time.

SAFIAN: It's just so fascinating, right? This kind of tracing and tracking of each other and sharing of information, which at a previous point we might've said, "We're concerned about the privacy of that." But, now it's sort of a communal need, right?

BROWN-PHILPOT: It's a necessity. It absolutely is. A client may cancel a task because they found out that someone that they came in contact with had COVID-19. And they tell us. And that's helpful information, because now the Tasker isn't confused about what's happening and then they're kept safe. This is the best of humanity really coming together. We're partnering with the community. We've even partnered with United Way, so beyond just going on TaskRabbit, if you call the 2-1-1 hotline on United Way, you can get volunteer tasks done for free as well.

SAFIAN: So, you mentioned that there's been a lot of demand on TaskRabbit. And some industries have seen even more demand. I don't know whether HP is one of them, but a lot of digital groceries and others have seen a lot of demand. There are other areas that have been more exposed. Retail, I imagine, things at Nordstrom's are a little more difficult. And the longer term implications of all this are hard to envision.

Do you have any instinct about how these implications may play out, if you're a digital company like HP, if you're a retailer like Nordstrom, and if you're someone like TaskRabbit and you have a marketplace like you do. Is it different for each of them? Do you think about it differently in each place?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah, the consistent thing that I've heard is that we've got to prepare for the recovery, whatever that is. And so stabilizing and now adapting is what we've done at TaskRabbit. You've seen that happen at HP, where they've pivoted and are having 3D printers build masks and face shields and other things. You've seen Nordstrom invest in their online business ahead of even something like this happening. And so that's an opportunity to capitalize on. So we're adapting, but most importantly, all of us are preparing for when this is over. We don't know the date, but we know that when it's over, the world will be different, there will be a new normal.

And so how does our business need to react to that? Some of what we're learning around the volunteer program is teaching us a lot about customer behavior. Some of what Nordstrom is learning about being an online business is teaching them a lot about what customers really need and how do they engage online. And obviously, some of what HP is learning about where is their demand for 3D, which is innovative technology that they've been selling to a lot of people already, it's teaching them a lot.

You have seen so many people buy laptops. So many school districts have invested in technology for students all over the country, potentially couldn't have gotten a laptop before, but now the school district is funding it and it's going to help all those kids who used to do their homework on their cell phone, now actually have a much larger screen to do their homework

from. So the world is going to change and the important thing is for all of us to be prepared for the recovery.

SAFIAN: Yeah. Do you think your kid's education is going to be dramatically different because of this period we're going through?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Well, I can confidently tell you that my kids will be so excited to go back to school, which is not something that I would ever thought I'd hear come from their mouths. But we're learning as parents what the value of the educational system is. And so, many of us sometimes take for granted that our kids go to a building for five or six hours a day and they come home with information in their head. And so for me, it's been sort of being very close to that.

I've really got a chance to see how important teachers are in my children's lives and how important technology is to their growth and development over time. But the human connection cannot ever be replaced. They miss their friends and they're not afraid to talk about it. And I know you miss your friends. I miss my friends. And I'm looking forward to the day when they can reunite with them, as much as I can reunite with my team at TaskRabbit.

SAFIAN: These are stressful times, right?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Absolutely.

SAFIAN: I'm curious how you manage your own stress and whether there's particular advice you give folks on your team about how to manage theirs.

BROWN-PHILPOT: Managing stress during this time is not easy. I am so happy to have a team, a leadership team, that is inspiring. We move quickly. Even that alone gets me up in the morning: What are we going to do today? What are we going to do tomorrow to help somebody? That keeps me going. But we also have to take time to find balance.

So we've implemented a variety of different techniques for people to make sure they're maintaining balance from signing up for various programs, like Headspace, that people can do mindfulness; to employees in the company, hosting virtual videos of cooking, and candle making, and yoga; to making meetings end five minutes before the hour or half hour so you can stand up and stretch or walk and give your kid a hug. So, these small practices are really good ways to accept that we're in a different environment and that we've got to take care of ourselves. Many of us are still exercising, trying to clear our heads, and find time to clear our heads when we have a moment to do that. That's very, very, very important too.

SAFIAN: As I recall, you worked in India for a time when you were at Google. I'm curious how you weigh what's happening here, local and national concerns, and the global situation, maybe friends and colleagues you may have overseas. Where do you think it may go in those places where maybe it hasn't been fully embedded yet?

BROWN-PHILPOT: I did work in India and I lived there and I miss that team so much. We saw and experienced a tremendous amount of growth when I was running Google in India, but I also saw a huge gap of income inequality. We did everything we could to help close that gap in the business that we were building. When you look at a pandemic, it doesn't see money. It doesn't

see status. It sees people are hurting. Some people are going to hurt worse than others. That's for sure. What I hope is happening across India and other countries in the world, like we're experiencing here in the US, is that we're realizing that we have to all come together and the least of these has to be helped, because if we don't help the least of these, then we don't actually all get over this pandemic together.

SAFIAN: With things changing so fast every day, it's only been a few weeks really since you had to cancel that offsite and yet so many different things have happened, how much planning can you do and how much of what you do each day is just reacting to whatever the next element of this crisis is that comes along?

BROWN-PHILPOT: Yeah. The first month was pretty much 90% reacting. That's because we were trying to understand what's happening and also trying to implement a new operation for how we were going to govern ourselves, how we were going to lead in this time. We've now got that in place. We are meeting daily, we have communication channels set up and we've started to think about the future and recovery. We're spending time planning for that future.

We don't know when that future is going to come and we don't actually know what tomorrow is going to bring, but what I do know is that I have an amazing team in place that can react, adapt, stabilize, and then get ready for recovery. We're spending more time now on recovery and thinking about what that looks like, but we are absolutely ready to react if something else happens tomorrow.

SAFIAN: I don't want to make this sound the wrong way, but you seem optimistic almost, I mean, reassured in some ways by where you are and where your team is, even though the external environment remains very unsettled and disturbing.

BROWN-PHILPOT: I am optimistic. It's the way that we're processing this. This will pass, and when it does, I want to be able to look back on it and see that we've done something good for humanity. Our Taskers are the heroes here. I am so grateful to all of them who have decided to help right now, and all of the people in the community who've decided to help right now. I'm holding my optimism in the community that's focused on trying to do something good in what is a horrible time and a horrible crisis for our world.

SAFIAN: Now I want to ask, is there anything that I didn't ask you about, anything that you didn't get a chance to talk about that you want to that I missed?

BROWN-PHILPOT: My only comment is that I really just want to say thank you. I want to say thank you to the household heroes who are our Taskers, who are the community, who are getting up every day and deciding to help someone else in need. We know that this is not easy. We know that it is essential. We are just eternally grateful for everything that you do.

SAFIAN: Beautiful. Well, Stacy, I want to thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today and we wish you great luck.

BROWN-PHILPOT: Thank you.