

Jason Altmire ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I am Jason Altmire. Today we have Rich Thau as our guest. He's the president of Engagious, and that company you may have heard because if you watched the cable news and they talk about public opinion and social science, if you read Axios in the morning, they have a contract and do some behavioral research, and I'm really interested in the work that they do. I was at a meeting recently, involving other large national associations and Rich presented and what he does is, he creates topics that he has a focus group and the focus group can be based upon whatever the client wishes. What he does for Axios is, he does Trump-Biden swing voters and he tests various messages and comes up with some really interesting data. I'll let him describe what the company does for other clients, but generally speaking, it does exactly that.

Jason Altmire ([01:06](#)):

It tests messaging in a way that is the gold standard for the industry. We are grateful to have you with us, Rich. Thanks for joining the show.

Rich Thau ([01:15](#)):

Jason, thanks for having me. I wanted to start with that very point, talking about when you create these focus groups and you take on a client and you do message testing. How would you describe what Engagious does? Engagious does a couple of things. The thing that's our bread and butter is, we do message testing and message refinement work, largely for trade associations and advocacy groups in DC. We basically build messaging platforms. We help our clients figure out what to say and why, and what to stop saying and why to stop saying it. We do that in the context of focus groups, specifically what are known as dial test focus groups where respondents hear arguments made by our client's side and their opponent's side.

Rich Thau ([02:00](#)):

Basically, a point counterpoint debate. And the respondents give their moment to moment feedback on a scale from zero to a hundred, in terms of how much they agree or disagree in real time. Based upon that feedback, we discuss these videos in the focus groups and refine the messaging after a couple rounds of research and present a messaging platform from start to finish. That's one side of the business. The other side of the business is, we do something called the Swing Voter Project that you referenced, and your listeners can go to swingvoterproject.com and see all the videos. So basically starting in March of 2019, we started doing monthly focus groups with what were then Obama to Trump voters, people who voted Obama in '12 and then Trump in '16. After the last presidential election, we pivoted and since then we've done Trump to Biden voters, people who voted Trump in '16 and then Biden in 2020.

Rich Thau ([02:50](#)):

We do these in key swing states, the most competitive states in the 2020 election. What we're trying to understand is how they look at politics and look at policy.

Jason Altmire ([02:59](#)):

I'm going to delve into that in a moment. It's really interesting what you've uncovered with regard to the Swing Voter Project and especially the current topics that your focus groups have seen. But to kind of set the conversation, can you explain how you ensure that a focus group is assembled in a way that you're getting accurate results that are representative of the entire population?

Rich Thau ([03:24](#)):

Let me be very clear about this. Focus groups are not polls. They're not meant to represent an entire population. They enable us with a small group to go deep and understand how that group, which mirrors in some ways what a large group might look like, to understand how they see things.

Rich Thau ([03:38](#)):

So rather than counting heads, I'm going inside people's heads. I'm trying to understand how they view an issue, how they think through a challenge, how they think through a problem, how they think through solutions to a problem, how they evaluate messaging provided by my clients, for example. Part of it is understanding that if you want to have true representation in terms of statistical accuracy, you need to do a poll to compliment the focus groups. And some of my clients do that, but a lot of the time they're relying on me based upon my two plus decades of doing this work, to say, well, you know what? We just did a couple of groups and they kind of sound like other groups we've done and other issues over the years. I can't say for a hundred percent sure that they're a hundred percent representative, but they're close.

Rich Thau ([04:21](#)):

What I'm trying to do is to help my clients understand if you talk to people who fit a certain profile, there's a certain way that they're going to respond, and to figure out how to convince them of something or convince them away from something or to understand a certain argument or a case being made by one side or the other. Our job in those focus groups is to have some confidence that the results are accurate. And if I don't think they're accurate, I'll be the first one to speak up and say, we've got to go back into the field and do more research.

Jason Altmire ([04:49](#)):

It's theoretically easy if you're a business to bring your executive team together and sit around a conference table or your marketing team and bounce ideas off and think, well, I think this would resonate with the public. Same for a campaign, for a news organization, for an association to kind of have that internal discussion. But what you do is, you take that message out to the public and you

actually test it and see what the public thinks. How often would you say when you do this testing, do you get a result that is very surprising to your client?

Rich Thau ([05:26](#)):

I've probably, in my career moderated more than a thousand focus groups. I'm always surprised by something in a group. There's never been a focus group where I've walked away and said, you know what? I knew everything I was going to hear. Every group seems to lend itself to shedding light on a topic or an approach that I and or the clients had not considered. So it happens all the time. And getting out of the echo chamber, not relying on your internal team to figure out what to say, is extraordinarily important because you can't guess how people are going to react. You have to ask them.

Jason Altmire ([05:57](#)):

And one of the things you and I have talked about in the past is the lack of understanding of issues from the people who often believe they know the most about it. And we see this in business and in politics and in other things. But with regard to the Swing Voter Project, you have brought groups of voters together, you have tested their knowledge on certain issues, and then you have found that frequently the people who feel most confident in their opinion are the people who may not be as well-informed on the issue as they believe themselves to be. Can you talk a little bit about how that translates into when a client, whether it be political or business, whatever it might be, wants to target a message on an audience, how you factor that dynamic in?

Rich Thau ([06:44](#)):

Unlike some other people in the research business, I want to know what people know before I ask them what they think or believe about something.

Rich Thau ([06:51](#)):

I find it's very hard and very dangerous to make assumptions about what people know, because oftentimes they don't know as much as the people who I'm working for know about their own topic. I am constantly dismayed. It's one of the great occupational hazards of doing my kind of work, is to discover how much Americans don't know. The thing I'll tell you is that Americans generally have good judgment, but they often don't have good facts. In fact, they're lacking in facts, and I find all the time that they don't know what's going on in Congress or on Capitol Hill or in the White House. Or if they know anything, it's extraordinarily superficial. The first thing I ask in my focus groups is, tell me what you know about such and such? Before I ask them their opinion one way or the other. Critically important step to take.

Rich Thau ([07:33](#)):

And I think it keeps me from making assumptions about what works and what doesn't because I want to know for sure are the opinions that people are sharing with me, are they rooted in some level of intelligence or are they, as my high school civics teacher called it, an exchange of ignorances? It's a wonderful phrase, Joe Katz, the late great Joe Katz used in when I was back in high school, and I see it all the time that we have to avoid having an exchange of ignorances.

Jason Altmire ([08:01](#)):

You mentioned that the Swing Voter Project, where you test some of these political issues, especially current events, you have a website where people can go and actually watch the videos and see some of this play out in action. And I will tell you, it is both shocking and disappointing when you see how this works. I would encourage folks to Google that and watch some of the videos, it's pretty interesting. Can you, along that line, can you give an example of one of the more egregious examples of when that has happened?

Rich Thau ([08:32](#)):

What happened back in January... Jason, I mean, you and I are political junkies, we pay close attention to what's going on on the hill, so when Kevin McCarthy was going through that 15 rounds of voting to make him speaker, I don't know, I was riveted to my TV for hours and hours watching all these votes. We did focus groups literally three days later, after he had finally won the speakership, and I showed pictures on screen, unidentified official photos of people like McCarthy, and have about a dozen people, but four could even identify him by name. We showed pictures of Matt Gaetz and Lauren Boebert who were so visible during that voting process, and only two or three people could tell us who they were.

Rich Thau ([09:11](#)):

So we make assumptions that these people who are huge personalities inside the beltway have recognition that people have of them outside the beltway and they don't. And I think we just have to be really mindful that a lot of Americans just don't pay close attention to what's going on in Washington. DC produces a pipeline's worth of information every single day, and Americans are interpreting it through the equivalent of a sippy straw. They're getting just a little sliver of information, and I'm always curious what's getting through and what's not.

Jason Altmire ([09:39](#)):

When you think about messaging, you hear rules of thumb that we've all learned over time that people can only remember seven numbers at the same time, and different groups influence each other in different ways. What are some of the key factors that you would advise your clients to think about when they're trying to create a message that appeals to a general audience?

Rich Thau ([10:04](#)):

There's one thing that matters more than anything else, and that's making sure that your messages and the audience that you're listening to share their values. You can throw tons of information at people. If they don't think you share their values, they're going to reject you. They will say, "I don't know if that fact is true or not. I don't know if that's believable or not." But if you signal to your audience that you share their values, suddenly there's a kinship there. And if there's a kinship there, then the facts that you want to use as part of your argument can be used as supporting material. But if you merely come out with fact, fact, fact, fact, fact, and you haven't established a shared set of values, people don't know what to do with the facts. They don't know whether to agree with the arguments that the facts are being used in, because they don't know whether they could trust you.

Rich Thau ([10:49](#)):

So it's critically important to make a values-based argument to people about why something is good or bad or right or wrong. If you can successfully do that, everything else will fall into place.

Jason Altmire ([11:02](#)):

I've heard you talk about that in related, in other settings. It's about developing that trust where you can be right on the issue, you can present facts and data in a way that overwhelms the opposition in a debate, but if you're not doing that in a way that garners the trust of the audience you're trying to influence, you're going to fail.

Rich Thau ([11:24](#)):

Exactly, because establishing a shared set of values is exactly what you're suggesting, Jason, which is you're establishing trust when you do that. If they know that you share their values, then they can trust you and then they're willing to listen. They're giving you permission to make an argument. But if you merely throw at people a blizzard of facts, which my clients in DC tend to love to do, because they have a lot of facts on their side. People again, don't know what to do with those facts if they haven't heard the facts before, don't necessarily trust the source of those facts, maybe aren't even hearing the source of those facts. They're just being presented as fact. And that is the surest way to lose an argument, is to present fact upon fact, upon fact, without putting it in a values-based context.

Jason Altmire ([12:07](#)):

We've been guilty of that ourselves. We, as you know, are the national association who represents private post-secondary career schools generally in the for-profit sector. Politically controversial to some, and we do have these public debates, and we feel that the facts are on our side and we present data while our opposition appeals more to emotion and to preconceived notions about for-profit motive and different things that have happened throughout the sector over time. And it is difficult to push back on that when it's all about emotion, as you just said, when the opposition can present things in a way that paints our sector in a bad light, we do feel that we can show facts that can refute what they have put

forward. But as you said, if we don't do it in a way that connects with the audience, it might not be the best way to look at it.

Rich Thau ([13:01](#)):

It's not a problem unique to your group, it is a problem that is endemic, and a challenge endemic across all of the association world, which is that, again, the facts are many, but the persuasive tools are limited unless you establish a shared set of values.

Jason Altmire ([13:16](#)):

Let's say you're a Fortune 500 company, that's one of your clients, or a large association that's debating a marketing campaign or an advertising message, and they're thinking about that very point. How can somebody like that or an organization like that appeal to an audience in a way that garners that trust among whatever the market segment they're trying to appeal to?

Rich Thau ([13:41](#)):

Well, the thing to do is really do your research, don't guess. That's the first thing. So when we do our work, for example, and we haven't worked in a particular field before, I'll suggest to the clients that we do a series of in-depth one-on-one interviews. We'll just sit and talk to people one at a time, not in a group. We'll do it for 45 minutes or an hour, and we'll go really deep, and I'll want to understand how do people think about this particular question or topic or sector of the economy? How do they process information about it? Where does the conversation open up for them, where they're willing to listen? And if you do that, person after person after person, you basically at least a dozen interviews, you start to see some patterns emerge. You start to hear the same things coming up among people who are completely unrelated to each other, don't know each other.

Rich Thau ([14:28](#)):

And that starts to suggest, wait a second, maybe there's an opening here, or maybe there's an opening here. And then what we'll do is, we'll maybe present some arguments on both sides of a debate and ask people to score how much they agree with each one, on a scale from zero to 10. You start to see patterns of which arguments tend to resonate more. And based upon that, we're able to make the early stage attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff, rhetorically. Set aside a bunch of the arguments that have no resonance, for reasons that they explained to us in the interviews. But for the arguments that do resonate, then we can start to build out a narrative. Okay, this argument works, well, great, tell me why it works for you? What more do you want to know about it? What would make you more comfortable with the argument?

Rich Thau ([15:10](#)):

You're building out in a qualitative research context, the ability to make an assertion, have it base, be rooted in people's values, and then be able to tell a narrative around those values. That's how we would go about doing this. It's basically like building a building brick by brick. And making assumptions about what's going to work is one of the dumbest ways to do it. It's like putting the roof on first and then building the walls and the floor. You can't do it that way, and you can't do it fast. It takes some time and it takes a lot of probing to understand what's going on for people. You have to ask a lot of follow up questions. In many ways, it's an art as much as it is a science.

Jason Altmire ([15:47](#)):

I want to turn to the Swing Voter Project. You have a contract with Axios, which is a large media organization with a big focus on politics. They do other things as well. And you moderate the focus groups with Trump, Biden swing voters and have different subjects each month. And then that's picked up by various news organizations like CNN and SiriusXM's POTUS Channel. I know you've been on there a number of times. When you think about over time what you've seen develop, and I know you've seen themes that repeat themselves month after month. How would you describe what you've learned in doing those focus groups with those groups of voters?

Rich Thau ([16:28](#)):

Sure. Well, one thing I should clarify is that with Axios, we have a partnership, we don't have a contract. This is all done on a handshake. There's no money that changes hands, and I get to ask whatever questions I want. So just be clear about that. But in terms of things that I've seen over time, one of the things that I recently uncovered, actually was very interesting is, we asked about the CHIPS Act that recently became law last August.

Rich Thau ([16:52](#)):

The White House recently announced in late February that companies that want to get at least \$150 million through the CHIPS Act to build semiconductors, need to provide childcare to the employees of those companies. I was really curious about that linkage. Do people think it's right to take a law that was focused on bringing semiconductor manufacturing back to the US and turn it into basically a series of regulations requiring childcare for employees? And when I asked about it, most of these respondents, and these were respondents across Wisconsin, were very negative on that. They thought it was important to provide childcare. They thought it was important to bring semiconductor manufacturing back to the US. They weren't comfortable with the Biden administration taking one thing and turning it into another. I had seen this pattern over the years in other research I had done, not just going back to the Swing Voter Project the last four years, but going back about 20 years.

Rich Thau ([17:46](#)):

I saw, for example, and Jason, you might have seen this when you were in Congress, people upset that the Social Security Trust Fund was being used for SSI. Wait, no, it should be used just for senior citizens.

Expanding the Medicare program to people under the age of 65. Wait, no, it should just be for the elderly. Taking the children's health insurance program that there were proposals in Congress, in fact, laws passed in Congress that President Bush vetoed that would've enabled adults to benefit from the children's health insurance program. And people said, "Well, this the program's for kids, why are you giving it to adults?" I saw this again, and I was so intrigued to see this again with the CHIPS Act because it was yet again, one of these examples, I describe it as a silo mentality when it comes to laws, that people see that each thing should stand in its own silo by itself.

Rich Thau ([18:34](#)):

So if the law's purpose, for example, is to build semiconductors in the US, that that's the purpose of the law and you shouldn't taint it with something that is seemingly unrelated, even if it has merit. So that was one interesting theme I've come across recently that seems to rear its head every number of years in public policy. I think that this lack of people being informed with a major theme, the fact that these people don't get their news from any consistent source. They get their news from a wide variety of sources, but seemingly, even after taking in the news that they say they take in, they still don't know terribly much.

Rich Thau ([19:07](#)):

The lack of informedness that I see among citizens, despite the fact that they say they get their news from well-known news sources like Fox, CNN, MSNBC, and elsewhere, just causes me to think that they're endlessly distracted. They're not paying really close attention, and there's a lot of stuff that they miss because either the news is not filled with useful information or the news that they are consuming, they're not paying close attention to, or perhaps they're not being truthful in their answer. That's another option. And that was one of the things that struck me, and folks who Google it and see your focus groups, the session I was in with you, you showed it and it looked like your traditional Zoom box with the nine Hollywood Squares type setup, and you see all the faces there, and you just went around one, two, three, four, five to all of them. What's your source of news? And invariably, almost every one of them had a different source. Well, it's my local news outlet, it's CNN, it's Fox, it's NPR. I read the newspaper, whatever, everyone that we had had a different source.

Rich Thau ([20:11](#)):

But then when you asked probing questions on how much do you know about current events, very few, if any of them really knew very much. And so it does make you wonder, how are you using these new sources? Why aren't you more informed?

Rich Thau ([20:26](#)):

Yep, very much so. I had that question myself every time I do these groups.

Jason Altmire ([20:30](#)):

I'm guessing your answer is it's too soon to tell. But as these are Trump to Biden voters, and as former President Trump has been more visible, as his campaign continues to get more media coverage and he's traveling the country. What have you found, as far as the trajectory of the beliefs of these voters? Have you found that some of them maybe are coming back home to Trump? Have you found that they're sticking with Biden? I mean, what seems to be the trend that you've observed?

Rich Thau ([21:03](#)):

The obvious trend is going to sound like a cop out, but it's really not meant to be. Merely to a person, these swing voters across these states want neither of these gentlemen to run for office again, ever again. They're done. They're ready to move on. When I ask people what the ideal age should be for a president upon inauguration, the average age is in the early to mid-fifties. When I ask what the oldest acceptable age is, it's the mid-sixties. So you're talking about two candidates who will be more than a generation older than people's ideal, and about a half a generation or more beyond what's acceptable to them. Again, I'm not trying to be ageist in saying this, this is merely what people think, and I ask about it every month, they are ready to move on to a new generation of leadership and leave a lot of their frustrations with elderly leadership behind.

Jason Altmire ([21:50](#)):

And we know the Republican field has pretty much come into focus. We know most of the names that are going to be involved in that race, but the democratic field, of course, is frozen because the expectation is President Biden will run for re-election. Have you asked the question among these voters if President Biden does not run for re-election, who would you like to see run, especially on the Democratic side?

Rich Thau ([22:16](#)):

Again, it's the lack of familiarity with who's out there and what the possibilities are. Back in February, I asked a bunch of swing voters in Michigan whether they wanted to see Biden challenged for the nomination, the Democratic nomination, and all of them said yes. And then I asked, well, who should he be challenged by? I had one person who suggested Senator Corey Booker from New Jersey. One. The other 12 were silent, they had no idea who they even should be thinking about as a possibility, they're not walking around with any clear sense as what an alternative might look like.

Rich Thau ([22:49](#)):

Again, just a general lack of familiarity with who's out there. There isn't some person that they see waiting in the wings that they're all excited to have run instead of Biden.

Jason Altmire ([22:58](#)):

That's always the case in politics, and it's why challengers sometimes have an advantage against an incumbent who is more negative in their popularity, because if you're the unknown challenger, the person will paint you to be whatever they would like you to be, because you don't have a record yet. I think there's a lot of that going on. Rich, thank you so much for being with us. This has been incredibly interesting for us to have this conversation. If folks in our audience wanted to learn more about what you do or contact you, how would they reach you?

Rich Thau ([23:31](#)):

I would suggest the easiest way is to go to swingvoterproject.com. Again, that's swingvoterproject.com. Through that website, you can actually see the Engagious website. Actually one is part of the other, and you can learn more about my company, Engagious.

Jason Altmire ([23:46](#)):

This has been Rich Thau, President of Engagious. Thanks, Rich.

Rich Thau ([23:50](#)):

Thank you so much, Jason.

Jason Altmire ([23:53](#)):

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