

Grow Your Business Faster with a "Bullseye" Brand | Mallika Malhotra | Power Lounge S3 E09

Amy Vaughan: 0:08

Welcome to our weekly Power Lounge, your place to hear authentic conversations from those who have power to share. My name is Amy Vaughn and I am the owner and Chief Empowerment Officer of Together Digital, a diverse and collaborative community of women who work in digital and choose to share their knowledge, power and connections. Join the movement at www.togetherindigital.com. Let's get started Today. Get ready to be inspired to curate your skills and strengths to create and specialize a specialized brand. Along with Malika Malhotra, known as the brand CEO, she is a distinguished branding expert, mentor, speaker and author, with a rich background in corporate advertising. Her extensive experience includes working with major brands such as L'Oreal, oil of Olay and Hidden Valley Ranch. Malika is dedicated to guiding women entrepreneurs to master their message, stand out in crowded markets and create magnetic, memorable and lucrative brands. Passionate about empowering women to achieve leadership success, malika brings a dynamic blend of expertise and vision to the branding landscape Faced in beautiful Maine. She enjoys coffee, red wine, reading and dreams of global adventures with her husband, three sons and mini-birdledoodle Jax.

Amy Vaughan: 1:48

We're delighted to have you here with us today, malika. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I'm so happy to be here. Yes, we've got a great conversation ahead for all of you, those who are listening to the recording, and also to those who are listening with our live listening audience. So don't shy away from asking questions live audience. We love hearing from you. We'll have time at the end for that. But, malika, let's start with a little bit about your journey from working with big brands, like I mentioned in the past, and corporate advertising to becoming kind of your own brand CEO. What inspired your shift and your mission, in particular, to empower women entrepreneurs?

Mallika Malhotra: 2:26

Yes, so I feel like a dinosaur sometimes because I've been in the entrepreneurial space for over two decades and prior to that, as you mentioned, I worked in advertising, in corporate. But really what led me to sort of shift into the entrepreneurial world was I

became a mother and I just felt at the time I always had these big dreams that have the corner office in advertising and be working on those big brands like L'Oreal and Oil of Olay. But then when you have a child, sometimes things change and I wasn't really expecting that. But for me at the time, living in New York, it just made better sense for me to kind of opt out and be home with my son. My husband was also a surgery resident, working 100 hour week. So it was just kind of our season in life where I wasn't really able to do all the things that I thought I was going to be able to do, which is hard right. But when I entered the entrepreneurial world it kind of gave me that freedom and that flexibility to think about like what can I leverage in terms of my skills and my strengths and how can I design a life where I have a business that I can do? You know, wherever I go, because we kept moving different places for my husband's career in his training and I started off doing handbags and then I went to children's t-shirts and I think I tried these different things because it just was that creative fix. I had Definitely not lucrative businesses but more of like this hobbyist type of business. But once we moved to California and I had two young sons at the time, I had picked up a camera. And once I picked up a camera and started taking pictures of my own children there was something about that California beautiful sun and the light and also having family that was living on the opposite coast I really wanted to tell the story of my children. It opened up this whole world for me and it became really like a lifeline for me. I took their pictures. I was the kindergarten photographer and the next thing I knew people were asking me can you take pictures of my family? And so I started this like new business and I did that for many years as my children were growing up.

Mallika Malhotra: 4:37

But again, after a few more moves, now I find myself in New Jersey where it is very, very competitive and saturated for this type of photography. I start networking to try to figure out, how can I stand out? And I start meeting these other women in business like myself and I hear about their stories and I hear about how they want to stand out and I think I can use the camera to help them too. So it starts off with headshots, and this was about 2015,. So, right when social media is starting and blogging is starting, and so I think I can take their business to be beyond headshots so we can do storytelling photography.

Mallika Malhotra: 5:15

Brand photography right Now is a point in term, but back then no one really knew what that was, and so I made the change in 2015 to kind of go all in on that brand photography, because for a long time I was doing all of the things I had children's and I was doing senior portraits and headshots and brand photography and strategy and it was just too much and I decided to niche my own brand and I decided to go all in on brand photography. And then I wrote a book about it and I became very well known. My

reputation around brand photography and helping women show up as the face of their brand. That was super important to me to empower them. And then over time I learned my process for doing really good photos was to incorporate strategy. I thought everybody did that Are they asking the questions about vision and mission and values? And I found out that the other photographers were not, and so soon I had like a very signature process. But then people came to me for strategy as well, so I was able to take my niche but then diversify a little bit and then we had another move again.

Mallika Malhotra: 6:23

This is what happens after 20 years of being an entrepreneur. It's like the saga. But I moved to Maine and I moved during a pandemic and the culture of Maine and a pandemic really shifted my focus out of brand photography, because the culture was different in Maine. People weren't wanting the packages that I had created of hair and makeup and styling. It was just different. And then, when it came to the pandemic, no one wanted to take pictures. So I really went all in on brand strategy and, to be honest, I think that is my zone of genius. It's really what I was meant to do and it's been able. With that decision I've been able to scale my brand. You know, really help women all around the globe and do some really good work for them to help them build their brands.

Amy Vaughan: 7:09

I love it. Thank you so much for sharing that story. You know it's funny. We have a lot of and we've talked about this before, but a lot of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs that we support within the together digital community, and time and time again I hear about how many women you know we do. We create businesses out of necessity, not just necessity for the market, where we see there's a product, market fit, but also necessity because our own lives, because the systems in society does not support that kind of common conundrum of wanting to be a good mom but also being an ambitious woman who wants to sort of kind of have the ability to drive forward the types of ideas and in promotions, packages, offerings that you see that are needed in the world. So I love that you shared that. I also love that.

Amy Vaughan: 7:53

You know your story just really conveys adaptability and evolution. I think sometimes, too, we get so fixed in like this is who I am, this is what I do, and don't see that opportunity to kind of grow and evolve ourselves and our business to kind of again not just meet our own needs but meet the market needs. So I think in that sense, you're just such a great, great example of that fluid entrepreneurship that I think is just, you know, much needed and is really a way in which you can work. You don't have to start a business and build it up to hundreds and thousands of people Like you can be effective

in your market just by kind of owning your zone of genius and niching down. So let's talk about niching down and the power of niche. Your focus is helping entrepreneurs to craft that niche and stand out in the market. Why do you feel having a niche is essential for businesses and how does it contribute to what you refer as being magnetic and memorable, which I love?

Mallika Malhotra: 8:51

the alliteration and I love those words. I'm really obsessed with niching people's brands, and you know this is a strategy and sometimes people they get really tense or stressed when they hear the idea of niching. And so just to keep an open mind about it and be curious about how this can work for your business because I have seen how it's been a game changer for myself as well as my clients and so the idea of niching is really, instead of positioning yourself as a mainstream, generic kind of Jane of all trades, instead you're assessing your skills and your strengths, you're looking at the data at hand of who your ideal client already is and you're making some decisions for your business strategically. To say that, instead of appealing to everyone, I am actually going to decide to focus on a certain specialization and focus on a specific market Right. And when you compare those two things together, you actually are able to carve yourself a space that helps you stand out in the marketplace. Right. You are able to be then seen as an authority or a go to expert, because now you are distinctive and differentiated from everybody else.

Mallika Malhotra: 10:02

Price is not the decision making factor. It is expertise, it is value right, it is experience, and so it is very hard as a solopreneur you and I and many of your community were solopreneurs to think that we can appeal to everyone. The honest truth is the time, the energy, the funds are limited and so we cannot do that well, we can't have these micro businesses with micro audiences and then you're very scattered. If we want a sustainable brand that's going to be in it for the long term, in my opinion, we need to make some decisions to narrow it down and knowing what we are very strong and skilled at that zone of genius and who we are best meant to serve and when we can identify that, that is going to make it much easier for you to be remembered because you are standing out, referred, you are going to be more findable on Google or online because you are just much more specific.

Amy Vaughan: 11:02

Yeah, I completely agree, you can't be for everyone and the best marketing is really not just identifying those that you want as consumers, but attracting the right consumers and detaching the wrong, because the last thing you want especially when, if, say, you

are in the initial instance a bit of a solopreneur you want the kinds of clients like the reason most women go into business for themselves is because they want to be able to hire and fire the clients that they do or don't want to work with.

Amy Vaughan: 11:27

And so, again, if you're not niching down like you could be running that risk of having to, you know, kind of deal with and manage clients that really aren't your ideal client or customer anyways. I'm kind of curious this is like a bonus question in the list that we've got here and a bit of a follow up to that what are some of the common kind of questions, explorations, because I think sometimes niching down just feels a little intimidating because it feels like a lot of work. But are there some things we could kind of start to look for, pay attention, to ask ourselves, to sort of figure out what that is?

Mallika Malhotra: 11:58

Yeah. So you know, a lot of my clients will say I need to work with everyone. Everyone is my client. And I'm like say to them actually not everyone is your client. You should look at your last 20 clients and identify who they are. What's season of business, what industry? Really kind of do a deep dive, because that is the data that's going to give you the clues of what your niche is. We're not just picking out a niche in the air, right, we're actually looking at data. So you're actually not meant to work with everyone. You're actually probably already working with someone specific. You're just not committing to that and you're not articulating that in your messaging.

Mallika Malhotra: 12:35

So a great exercise is to list out your last 20 clients and profile them and really look at what are the patterns, what are the common threads here, what are some of the things in terms of their problem or the results, or the industry or the season of business that I can now use as the ideal client that I'm trying to look for. Because then, once we define that, then we want to clone that person, then we want to really understand them inside and out, versus trying to understand every single you know person that comes to you. That's just not feasible and it's not sustainable. So that's the one thing. The other thing is I'm a multi-passionate, I have so many areas of expertise and that's great, but that is not helping your client.

Mallika Malhotra: 13:21

In some ways, your client has a specific problem. What in your skills and strengths, what in your experience and expertise can you solve that problem? And let's bake that into your positioning so that it is crystal clear that you are meant to do this and not meant to do all those other things. Once you start doing the laundry list, you've diluted the power

of your brand and it just makes it harder for people to see you as an expert and to pay you as the expert.

Amy Vaughan: 13:51

That's such a great point. Such a great point, yeah, and I mean, you know, trying to be for everyone. It also makes it very hard to stand out, right, because the market's pretty crowded and you know it's important to be seen as distinct, so people kind of know what they're coming to you for, what to expect. Again, it creates a lot, of, a lot less work for you, especially when you do have limited resources, as you mentioned before. So what advice would you give to our entrepreneurs on breaking through the noise and creating a unique presence within their industry? Because, again, it is a very crowded, noisy space and we, again, we're a small blip on a big scale. How do we begin to stand out?

Mallika Malhotra: 14:31

Yeah. So I think you have to do this deep dive into your brand story, right? You have to think about a couple of things. One is how are you different when you look at the competitive marketplace and you're assessing what everybody else is bringing to the table? What is your special sauce, what is your superpower? And sometimes you need to ask your clients and your peers for that information. Sometimes you need to look at your testimonials and read through them to see, like, why are people hiring me over someone else?

Mallika Malhotra: 15:00

The second thing you can do in order to differentiate is do you have a strong perspective, right, Like a passion or perspective about your industry that might repel some people, like you said, and that is OK. The more polarizing, the better, Because, again, this is going to allow you to differentiate and people remember passionate and polarizing perspectives. You might not agree with it, but you will remember it and so baking that into your brand as well, that you think a certain way, that you have some thought leadership in a certain way that might be different than other people. Then there's your personality, right, I know it sounds cliché, we're all snowflakes, but we are. You know. We all have our own special vibe and people do business with people. It is not transactional anymore, right? When you hire a copywriter or a web designer, you're probably in that relationship for a couple of months, and so personality makes a difference, because you want to make sure that you want to get along with that person and enjoy that working relationship. So you're going to want to speak to your personality,

make sure it shows up in all of your marketing collateral and all of your touch points and use that as an advantage.

Mallika Malhotra: 16:12

And then the last thing I would say to really help you stand out is look at your process. You know a lot of us have the same products and services, the deliverables, but the process could be something that is unique. And can you create a signature process that is branded? That is yours, your intellectual property of how you create results. Is it a formula, a methodology? Use that, create that, put that into your branding too, because that is the value that people are going to see. That says, wow, this person has a whole five step process. That's going to get me from problem to solution. I might work with them versus someone else who's not even telling me anything about their process or just talking to me about the features and functions that everybody has five one on one calls. You know, you know, a library of assets, like having something that is much more unique and specific for your brand.

Amy Vaughan: 17:11

That's all such great advice and I agree with you. I've done a couple of different talks about taking your tone of voice, your POV, and making it, or your tone of voice to be, and making it a POV, a point of view, because so often I think we get so kind of obsessed with, like this idea of a brand character but that we don't have any idea what it stands for. In the world and I think you know, again, based on a lot of consumer trends, people align with brands that align with their values and their purpose and their passions, and so if you don't have a point of view, you kind of come off, coming vanilla. I can always think about like I'll see an ad this is always evident when I see an ad, usually for insurance, and it's kind of the same tone of voice as every other sort of kind of off skew, semi funny insurance ad and I'll be like I can't tell you which company it was. They all sounded. Now they all look the same to me. They're not standing out in that crowded sea.

Amy Vaughan: 18:06

And then I also think too it's and I'm going to dig in and this little point here with you a little bit too, because again we know stories powerful right as an entrepreneur, you know we're kind of like what I was asking about creating some distinction or niching down. Sometimes it feels weird and hard to kind of define what your quote unquote story is. Where's like a place to start with that? Because sometimes people are like I just didn't want to work for corporate anymore so I started a business.

Mallika Malhotra: 18:31

Yeah, but I think we all have stories, right, you have an origin story. Like you asked me what my story was today, we all have an origin story and I think when you share your origin story as part of your brand, you're pulling the curtain, you're making it more human, right? Is there transparency of why you started this business? It's not just because I like brand strategy and I want to make money. No, it's because I want to empower women. I want women to be confident or be leaders, and I went through my own journey and so I learned so much and I want to share those lessons with others. Right, there's always an origin story, so that is one thing that you definitely want to share. And then, like you said, their value story right. The things that you believe in, what you want to put a stake in the ground. That's so strong, because that's what's going to make your brand sticky and soulful instead of flat and vanilla right, and so you might think you have stories, but you do.

Mallika Malhotra: 19:27

You just have to kind of do the work to kind of figure out what those layers are, and sometimes your stories might not be yours. There are your client stories, right, so you're sharing case studies, you're showcasing the results that you get, but they're still tied to your brand, so they're still your stories. So there's so many different ways to create a narrative for your brand. I think sometimes you feel like, oh, it's just the business. I don't want to get too personal, right, but I feel like in 2024, as solo entrepreneurs, the personal and the business are integrated. People want to do business with people, not faceless corporations. And so, yes, you don't want TMI, you want to go to a place where it might be uncomfortable. You want to always keep your customer in mind and making sure whatever you're sharing, there's a bridge to something that they might believe in too right. So I think the idea of storytelling is hard, because it means that you're vulnerable, it means that you have to share about you. But those are the connecting points that we need to do in today's modern marketplace.

Amy Vaughan: 20:34

Absolutely, I 100% agree, and I feel you get that sense when you come across websites and social media of folks who kind of just they have that right, they have it figured out, they understand themselves, they understand their story, they understand their values and their brand comes off that much stronger for that. And I also wanted to kind of retouch on that point you made of really owning it, of making and creating a process that works well, that you can then talk about improve. But then I also love that you added that you kind of give a little bit of that away. Another great example, actually, not that they're paid sponsor, but we use Buzzsprout for our podcast hosting.

Amy Vaughan: 21:13

I chose that platform because they had a number of educational, short, concise, easy to understand videos on how to build and establish a well-run podcast, and I thought, well, this is amazing, they're teaching me how to do it. So now I've got their trust, or they've got my trust. I had a good experience I'm getting leverage from as my platform of choice. So I think giving that little bit of education consumer education to some degree about what you do and how you do it is a great way to bring people to your space, your platform, your business.

Mallika Malhotra: 21:49

Yeah, and just a little further on that. I think that showcases brand leadership, right. When you are generous with your expertise and you are sharing it with others with no kind of wanting something back right. You're just being able to share it. You know you're going to get it back some way somehow, but you're really trying to share your experience, your expertise, your proven processes in a way. That's why people are on podcasts. They're sharing them, right. That's why people do free speaking events. It's a great way to build that no-liking trust factor.

Amy Vaughan: 22:21

Yeah Well, and it plays into that idea of reciprocity, right, Because that's like a thing out in the world too, right? When you create a consumer or customer experience that is a value to them, they feel the desire to reciprocate in some sense, in some way. So there's always that as well. Let's chat a little bit about learning from your corporate experience, because, again, you spent a number of years working on a lot of corporate giants. What valuable lessons or strategies can small business owners and entrepreneurs borrow from these giants to improve their branding and messaging?

Mallika Malhotra: 22:57

no-transcript. Yeah, so I think it's funny that we think like, oh, these big giants, they have all these principles that are separate from the solar panel, when they're actually all the same. I learned that working and advertising and now doing campaigns for my clients. One big thing I would say is consistency. The big brands, they get it. You need to be consistent, you need to be cohesive. There has to be a strong voice for your brand. It has to have a visual aspect for your brand and it has to go across all of your marketing channels. That is what's going to build a powerful, potent and memorable brand.

Mallika Malhotra: 23:35

I think, as solopreneurs, sometimes we forget that and we are a little bit scattered. We just don't have the time maybe to update something so that it is consistent with another platform, but it can hurt us because that scatteredness means that it just, first of all,

doesn't look professional and it might hurt the trust that a prospect sees. You want to keep a consistent and cohesive voice. I think big brands also we were just talking about storytelling. They do a great job with storytelling, telling stories, so that it's not just about the deliverable, about the product and service. We, as entrepreneurs, we can do that as well. We can incorporate all of these stories so that we can add that depth and soul to our brand, so that it's not robotic. Especially with the era of AI, where everything feels so generated and robotic and not human. That storytelling component is going to help our brands build connection and just feel more authentic. I think those are two things that big brands do really well that I think that all of us, as solopreneurs, can also apply to our businesses.

Amy Vaughan: 24:43

I love it. Fantastic, yeah, could not agree more. Something we both share in common as well is empowering women. Part of your mission for your business includes empowering women to unleash their power. How does this empowerment translate into their approach to branding? How does it impact their overall success in the work that you've done with them?

Mallika Malhotra: 25:04

Yeah, branding is branding, but I do think branding is part empowerment being able to own your truth, being able to articulate your value. Those are proponents of branding. The part of empowerment is building that confidence muscle. When I work with my clients, I sometimes have to have them put down on paper all the things about their personal and professional experience. We call it the brain dump. It's like your brand resume. Everything that has happened before, during and top of that are your passions, are your values, any interests or hobbies. It's just this mess of all the things about you as a brand.

Mallika Malhotra: 25:48

What I find sometimes with that exercise is that people forget all these amazing things that they've done that they should be leveraging into their current brand story. Then it transforms them. They become more confident because they're like I've done this. I have this personal experience, a professional experience, and this is what I believe in. This is some of the metrics that I have behind my brand. Once we see it holistically, it really boosts their confidence.

Mallika Malhotra: 26:16

I think once you have that, that helps you feel a new sense of worth. Then when it comes into the business, once you have that new sense of worth, then you can sell

more easily. You can charge what you should be charging instead of undervaluing yourself. When you have that confidence, you say yes to more opportunities. You take space. If you can't get to the table where all the magic is happening, you create your own table. I feel like once for branding. It is an empowerment journey. It starts with the confidence and that leads to leadership. Because once you feel confident, then you take risks and you say yes to different opportunities. Then you build that leadership muscle as well. Then you inspire others. Then it becomes this domino effect where you're starting to inspire other women around you. They are starting to take chances and they're starting to say yes. Then you have now this legacy of women that have gone out of their comfort zone, have stopped playing small and are now playing in a bigger field as leaders.

Amy Vaughan: 27:26

Love it, love it so much. Again, all these things make me so happy Because, it's true, I think branding provides clarity and clarity provides confidence. It's as simple as that. But then, with all those wonderful, amazing things you just said as well, I love it. I'm so glad we asked that question. Let's talk about balancing specialization. We talked about focusing on niche and why it's powerful. How do you balance specialization and adaptability, especially when you're dealing with dynamic markets? Again, let's just say it clients who ask for everything in the kitchen sink or come not even knowing what they want.

Mallika Malhotra: 28:04

Yeah, I think to answer that question, when you have a niche and you have those clients, you have to set boundaries, you have to define the scope of the project. It's less about them, even though that's frustrating and annoying, it's more about you. Are you standing in your zone of expertise? Are you really articulating what you can and will do for your clients? Is that clear on all of your messaging and your marketing, so that they're not asking you for these other things because you have committed to the niche and you're saying what you can deliver? Right? I think that's one idea. The other idea I would say when it comes to niching and adaptability is you heard my own personal story of having a niche and then evolving. Just because you commit to a niche doesn't mean it's on your gravestone. It doesn't mean it's like for life. Branding is organic. Branding is ever changing. We always have to be checking the health of our brand and our business and the marketplace. We have to be checking in with a competition. We have to be checking in with a client. Technology changes things. You might find that your brand pivots at some point and that's okay. When it comes to niche, you want to make sure that you

commit and give it time to grow. But you might see that there's another opportunity. There might be a gap and so you might slightly pivot, just like I did.

Mallika Malhotra: 29:26

I was a brand photographer for so long, but then my process of doing it allowed me to see that there was a need for brand strategy. Then I started to do both. Then I found that my skills and my strengths were actually more equipped for the brand strategy. I was able to scale my business, which meant I could work from one to many versus one to one. You're always checking the health of the business and the brand. I think people, when they think of niching, they think it's like you pick a niche and that's it for the rest of your life. I am like the example. I will tell you, I went from brand photography to brand strategy. Even in brand strategy, I'm actually now evolving to be about niche strategy, because that's my obsession and what I know about and what I study and what I do on a daily basis. You could go even deeper into something else. It is always changing, but it's not always changing. I know that sounds. It's hard to wrap your head around, but you want to commit, but there's always opportunity to evolve. Yeah.

Amy Vaughan: 30:35

Co-Hatch is a new kind of shared work, social and family space built on community. Members get access to workspace amenities like rock walls and sports simulators and more, to live a fully integrated life that balances work, family, well-being, community and giving back. Co-hatch has 31 locations open or under construction nationwide, throughout Ohio, Indiana, Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee. Visit www.cohatch.com for more information. How often would you say we ought to be kind of like looking at I don't want to say like a full brand audit, but how often should we be kind of coming back to and considering our brand, our niche and all of this?

Mallika Malhotra: 31:28

That's a great question. I mean, I always do a six month and then like the end of the year kind of an audit to kind of look back, because you just need to check the health of your brand, because the markets are so organic and dynamic and everything is changing. So you want to make sure that you're still relevant, you want to make sure that you still resonate. Does the solutions you provide, do they still matter? Are people paying for them? What's the competition look like? Are there new technologies that can make things better, like look at just AI, how AI has affected the copywriting space? So I think you always I would say every six months, and every six months you should be checking, so there's a midpoint and then the end of the year point, and that way you'll just be able to assess and evaluate the health of your brand.

Amy Vaughan: 32:17

Yeah, and as you said before too earlier, when you're kind of trying to create that clarity and assess what your niche ought to be like.

Amy Vaughan: 32:23

Asking for feedback, I think, is also another important aspect of that, because I'm always, I think you kind of go into your marketing and your advertising with good intent, but then obviously interpretation is another thing.

Amy Vaughan: 32:36

So kind of going and approaching your ideal customer, existing customers, past customers, and saying what do you, what do you come to me for when I say together digital, what do you think of? Those kinds of things, I think, too, can help bring that additional clarity so that if you think you're kind of headed in the right path with the right messaging, but other people are taking different things away and they don't quite get it, that can be big too. I think that kind of came to fruition for me when I was a part of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program last year and I was in a cohort of business owners who were not in digital tech, advertising or marketing and I realized how jargon filled and convoluted my business pitch was when I was speaking to somebody who wasn't in that field. Not granted, they might not always be my audience, but it is important for me to make sure that when I'm talking to a general audience, there is a clear understanding of who we are and what we do.

Mallika Malhotra: 33:30

Yes, and it's funny because I just did a reel about that today with elevator pitches, right, like to really be clear and almost speak in a basic language so that a fifth grader could understand, because a confused mind never buys, right? You want to be clear, super clear, hyper clear, and that way you can always have follow-up conversations. I get to maybe the 2.0 level, but that first introduction you want to just make sure that they understand the basics who you are, what you do, who you serve and how you're different.

Amy Vaughan: 34:01

I love it. That's great. Yeah, good framework there too. Well, we're going to have time for questions at the end. So we know we've got a couple of our live listeners here with us who are business owners, so please don't be shy about adding your questions into the chat. All right, malika, let's talk about memorable brand experiences while our listeners are thinking of some questions. Hopefully we've talked a little bit about storytelling, so let's chase that down a little bit more. And what role does storytelling play in creating a

memorable brand experience, and how can entrepreneurs effectively incorporate storytelling into their branding strategies? Okay, we've got this great brand story, malika. What do we do with it now?

Mallika Malhotra: 34:40

Yeah, so storytelling makes you humanize your brand, and so it is that connection point, and so it also helps people feel like you're not just there for the sale promotion promotion. It's tying in something deeper, something that has more soul and depth for your brand. And so, once you have some stories to tell, we now have platforms that we are at our fingertips to share it, and so you could be doing video, you could be on social media, you could be writing a blog post. Often, you have to do many of those things in order to really create that cohesive, consistent and powerful brand, but I think the first step is for a brand is defining your purpose behind your brand. What is your mission? Getting very clear on that, because people want to hear why you have created this business. They also want to hear what you believe in and what you don't believe in. What are the values and the principles that guide your business.

Mallika Malhotra: 35:38

If we think about brands like Patagonia, warby Parker, third Love, corporate brands or startup brands, we know their value system and we feel an alignment with them, and that is because they have done the storytelling, and so we, as solar entrepreneurs, should do that as well.

Mallika Malhotra: 35:54

We also want to tell stories about where we're going, what is the vision behind our brand and that is so inspiring, right, just to kind of put yourself out there to share those big juicy goals. You need to do this work for your brand strategy anyway. You might as well be sharing it in your storytelling. This is what I tell my clients, because we go through this framework and it's not just that these things are going to be hidden in a Google doc. We should be taking these ideas and these statements and we should be sharing it with your audience so that they can get to know what this business is made of. Right? So I think, thinking about how you started, thinking about the results, case studies, thinking about the culture of your brand, all these things, that the minutia to the macro level, there are all these stories at your fingertips. It's just a question of you getting out there and starting small and just getting in the practice of sharing more than just a launch or a sale.

Amy Vaughan: 36:56

I think that's great. I think that's again where your point about how bigger corporate brands do it is through consistency right and, as you were speaking as well, it actually maybe started thinking question how can we help consumers become a part of the story, the journey, the experience right? So much for together digital. We're all about empowering women who work in the space through our knowledge, our power, our connections, asking without any sense of fear or judgment and giving without any judgment, creating like transact, not just transactional relationships but more transformational relationships. All of these things and it's like it invites you to become a part of, to have that sense of belonging. But other brands I think of that do this really well are Chewy.

Amy Vaughan: 37:42

I can't tell you how many times people have shared with me. We were talking about pets before we went live. You order your pet food. It comes every week, maybe every two weeks, depending on your animals, and so you know when an animal passes. Oftentimes they will send you flowers, they will refund or take back the food that doesn't get eaten or used by the animal and donate it to a shelter. They are taking their values, their story, their passions and they're making you a part of it. I think that's such a good example of how you know the memorable brand experiences are part of bringing that. It's not about just your story, it's how do you bring others into that story and experience. Because you know again, I can't tell you how many conversations I've been in with people, whether it's podcasts or just in the general public out and about something about Chewy or something about Disney. If they're like Disney World, it's something comes up and happens. There's just always the sense of care and attention to detail that not all brands take the time to do and involvement right.

Mallika Malhotra: 38:40

They are always asking questions for their audience, their clientele, their polls. They actually value our opinions and you see them incorporate that into their brand stories or in their marketing, and so I think that's a big part of powerful brands are the involvement with your audience and even for us as celebs, asking questions on an Instagram story, you know, seeing people getting feedback from them right. That's a great way to build that sort of interaction and the community behind it.

Amy Vaughan: 39:12

Yeah, absolutely Well, it gives you that direction too and what you need to provide your customers. I think that's another thing I've enjoyed. Despite the obnoxiousness that COVID brought for us, it allows us now to connect more virtually. So I do remember one on ones for all of our new members to onboard them to the experience, which is great.

But I love it because I get to know each of these new members that before, when we were just meeting in person, I wouldn't have had the chance to meet. And I understand why she's here, what she needs, in order to sort of make the most of her time in her experience here. Because I know, as women it's hard for us to prioritize connection and networking, but it's so critical to our career success and happiness that it's like we have to find better ways to show up for ourselves, for each other, and doing those one on ones helps me figure out the kinds of content we need to bring forward, the ways in which we need to show up for women, to make these connections happen in a way that's more advantageous to women.

Amy Vaughan: 40:06

All right, looks like we've got a couple of great questions coming in from our listening audience. I'm going to ask my last few questions, I'm going to go ahead and jump into these. So our first one is when you're just starting out with a very small to almost no budget for hiring experts, what's the best way to go about it? The brand strategy, visual identity, et cetera. What should come first? Websites, brand photos, what? Where do we start?

Mallika Malhotra: 40:32

I would say what comes first is the strategy, because I have seen so often that when someone doesn't have a strong foundation of the story of their brand and then they launch a website and then they do brand photos, it doesn't demonstrate or articulate really what your messaging is. Or maybe because you didn't do a lot of that groundwork, first it changes and then you find that you have to go back to the drawing board. So it's so important and really there are only like there are four key questions that you can ask yourself. It is what do you believe in as a brand, who are you best meant to serve? And, getting very specific in that niche, how are you different than everyone else? And that could be some of the things we talked about could be your positioning, the personality, the process.

Mallika Malhotra: 41:19

You have a point of view and then what is the transformation that you want to deliver to your client? So how are you changing their lives? And when you can kind of put that down on paper first and really spend some time thinking about those thought provoking questions, that's going to help you start shaping the brand of who you are, and then, of course, you're going to want to look at your two or three competitors. You don't want to obsess and go deep dive but you want to kind of see how they're talking in the marketplace and then make sure that you're not too close to how they're talking and kind of carve your own way. But I think when you can speak to what your specialization

is, who your specific audience is, how you stand out and then like your solution, how you solve things differently, that's going to really that's my niching framework, that, with those other questions, are really going to help you get to the nitty gritty of what your brand story is.

Mallika Malhotra: 42:17

I would do that work first and then I would say then, after that, what you're going to pull from that are what are the photos you know? Like, if you have certain process that you have, you might have photos that showcase that process. If you have certain values that you believe in, you might want to somehow demonstrate that in your visual storytelling. So, and then with the website, how are you going to create a website when you don't have a strategy in place? Right, so it really comes. It's like strategy. Then, obviously, website with website comes copywriting and brand photography.

Amy Vaughan: 42:53

I love it. It's fantastic. We've got another question in here which actually dovetails off of that very nicely. How do you formulate your branding formula itself? How do you collect your clients responses, save and store their answers? Are there any particular software programs that you're using to pull, aggregate this data?

Mallika Malhotra: 43:12

I work with my clients in one way. It's through a mastermind format. I mentor about 16 women in a four-month container and so I have a framework. I have a couple of frameworks. I have the brand CEO methodology, which has it's like a wheel with certain pieces of branding and it's very clear. It's like identifying your mission, your vision, your values, your positioning. So things you may have heard before. It's not like I've recreated anything. It's nothing new, but a lot of us have used the same formula. But I showcase it in a way to my clients where it feels a little bit easy and everybody can come where they need to come. You don't have to go from A to B to C to D, because sometimes it doesn't work that way. Sometimes you are ready to define your purpose and your mission and your values, and sometimes you're ready to figure out where your signature talk is. So what I've done with my clients, the formula that I use, is that creating this sort of branding wheel so that when people come to me they're coming with what they need in the season of their own business and with the issues at hand that they have, and the way that I collect responses and save and store their answers.

Mallika Malhotra: 44:26

I'm not sure this is what you're looking for is, when I work with my clients, we have a shared Google doc. So for four months, in every interaction that we have, if we have a

one-on-one call, I'm writing my notes for them. If they're in a hot seat and a group call, I have my notes for them. I have my recommendations for them in terms of strategies or scripts. So everything is very personalized.

Mallika Malhotra: 44:47

And so you were talking, Amy, about how you have that one-on-one, that kickoff. It's like that same feeling I want my clients to be seen and heard and we're doing it together and so that's kind of how I everything is recorded so they have access to all those things. But really having that shared Google doc has been a little bit of a game changer in the last two iterations of my mastermind, because it allows them to also see their progress over time. And then in terms of what software programs I use, so my tech stack, I mean I have ConvertKit for email, I use Trello sometimes for organizing contacts, I use Notion for my own social media management. With what as I outsource, I use Slack. I mean I feel like I use it all. So I kind of have a series of different pieces.

Amy Vaughan: 45:42

That's amazing. As you're talking to, I'm getting reminded of our last week's episode actually, so some of you who are listening I have to go back and listen. The title is not misleading, but it might seem odd. The topic was is your team generative AI ready?

Amy Vaughan: 45:58

But what Katie Robare, our guest, and I kind of ended up really focusing on was that when it comes to this idea of shiny objects, especially when it comes to brand, sometimes we end up in this place of being a solution in search of a problem, and I feel like that's kind of where that's the parallel I'm seeing between our discussion this week and last week, because I think your approach to brand and niching down really does help you focus on.

Amy Vaughan: 46:27

What problems are you trying to solve, how can you truly help those people that you need to help, and then kind of crafting and shaping your solution to meet the problem, versus again being a solution and out of the box thing, saying this is what I do, this is exactly how I do it and I'm going to look for somebody who has the problem, versus having people come to you. Because, again, your branding is clear, your messaging is clear, your solutions themselves are clear, but you understand the pain points and the problems that come with that. So if you guys missed last week, I think it's a worthwhile complimentary listen to this episode. All right, Malika, we've got a couple more minutes left. I'm going to ask you about any advice that you have for aspiring leaders, for women

who are aspiring to achieve leadership and success in their entrepreneurial journey. What advice do you have based on your own experience?

Mallika Malhotra: 47:17

Yeah. So one is keep your eyes on your own paper, right. I think it's so easy for us to look at what everybody else is doing and get misled by everyone's highlight reel and feel bad about ourselves. Really, we need to resist that temptation to look over our shoulder and actually just look at our own journey and think about the personal best, right. What is the next best step for ourselves? And that was a big lesson for me, especially when I was a photographer. It was so easy to see everyone everyone else was doing, but once I put my blinders on and just focused on my own path, that was very, very helpful.

Mallika Malhotra: 47:58

The other thing I would say is build your network right. Find your circle, because being an entrepreneur can be very lonely and there's lots of up and downs, and so you want to make sure you have that support system of people that are going to not only be your cheerleaders but also call you out on things and tell you where you're playing too small or where you lower the price and you shouldn't have. And that was a bad decision, right? You want to hear that feedback from peer. So if you're not in a paid mastermind or want to anything, create your own, do a peer led mastermind. But it's important to kind of have that for the tough moments, and I feel like I've been an entrepreneur for 21 years because I've had that circle of people always behind me.

Amy Vaughan: 48:48

Yeah, Go ahead. Oh no, I was just going to say I agree so much. Comparison is such a buzzkill. If you really just want to depress yourself, just start scrolling and compare. It's such a trap and it's such a again, a total buzzkill. So I couldn't agree more there. And again, it's not going to help you stand out and be distinct by just following along with what everybody else is doing. But then also, I do agree with you that there's these pricing woes that we have as women.

Amy Vaughan: 49:20

I think, again, it's hard for us to not undervalue ourselves, not to underprice ourselves, undersell ourselves. And so I agree with you having connections and community. I mean, I know our entrepreneur soul, open-air group, will be really open and say these are the rates I'm charging. And I can tell you what. It's so eye-opening when you hear and see a fellow entrepreneur and she's charging twice what you are and has no trouble closing clients, and you're like, oh wait, what I can do this. So yeah, I think, for the sake of solidarity, for the sake of confidence building, but then also just in that sense, healthy

comparison, right, Like let's talk numbers, let's know what's really happening out there so you're not just stabbing in the dark.

Mallika Malhotra: 50:01

Yeah, and then one last thing I would say is just continue to invest in yourselves and your learning right. It's because entrepreneurship is a long journey. There's lots of highs and lows. Sometimes you can't do it on your own. So either finding a mentor or a coach to help you, or investing in yourself by delegating and building your team, but just continuing to learn right and making sure that you have the resources and the tools and the people that you need on your side to keep growing the business. I think I know so many people that I started out with two decades ago that are no longer in business anymore. Right, and you wonder why. And I asked myself how am I still doing this? And I think it's because I've always had this passion for learning. I'm always continuing to do it, and the more you learn, then it might give you a little pivot, it might help evolve you and it could just be like a mindset shift sometimes. So I think learning is very important as well.

Amy Vaughan: 51:03

Yeah, yeah.

Amy Vaughan: 51:04

I always joke and say there's nothing more humbling that causes you to establish a lot of self-awareness than owning a business, and especially when you start to step into the space of being the face of a business which I know is also very awkward for some of us sometimes, but, yeah, it requires a lot of personal growth, personal development which I learned very quickly, especially since I literally took over the reins of Together Digital in November of 2019, right before the pandemic and then, in the midst of the pandemic, bought the business and it was just like everything was upside down. We have a nice nuanced question here for one of our live listeners and I want to make sure we get to it Because this might be the case for some of our listeners now and later in the podcast. Do you believe that one needs to separate websites or social media pages for different businesses under one founders? Because we do. We got those multi-founder folks out there. How do they work this?

Mallika Malhotra: 52:00

This is a tough one. I mean, I've seen it both ways right, where you have the website, the social media for one business the micro business and then there's another micro business, but you kind of have to ask yourself, in terms of capacity, can you really sustain doing all the work for both of them? Or is there some way to create your

personal brand, to overarch both of them, where you can connect them in a way so that it is like a one-stop shop? It is difficult, it requires strategy and thought to figure out creatively how you can do that so that it's not confusing, right? But in some ways it also can work. We see this with a lot of personal brands, where you have a personal brand, they have a book, they have a podcast, they do coaching, they have a membership, but it's all under a very tight umbrella brand, and I love when that can happen because that just means it's easier for us as entrepreneurs. Right, and so are the values. Is the process? Is there anything that's similar across all those micro businesses that you can lean into in the overarching brand and then use that as the lane or the lead and then you have on the website. It's easier than on social media, because on the website you have four ways to work with me.

Mallika Malhotra: 53:23

On social media. It might be that maybe one week is dedicated to one business and then the next week. You have to create some kind of rhythm that showcases the different businesses, but still they have to be linked. I had an instance recently with a wedding planner I'm working with, and so she's a wedding planner but she also has corporate, and so it's like they're two different beasts. But what we are trying to do is have that overarching brand. Her brand is all about. She has had 30 years of experience. It is flawless execution. She has a certain formula that she uses. It doesn't matter if it's a wedding, a bar mitzvah, it's the same formula. So that is what we're leaning into as the brand. And then we have those micro themes.

Amy Vaughan: 54:09

That makes a lot of sense From a strategy standpoint. What's awesome about that is if your personal brand is that umbrella, you can borrow equity right. So if you create or start a new endeavor, then all of a sudden that carries through. I think an example that just comes to my head is a past guest and a favorite speaker of mine, cindy Gallup. She was a former agency executive, did lots of speaking, I'm seeing, at a 3% conference is how I met her. But then she has pivoted recently into being a tech founder for a company called Make Love Not Porn, and Cindy's always been known as somebody who will show up on stage leather clad and her 60s boyfriends in their 20s, and so her kind of leaning into and starting this whole Make Love, not Porn.

Amy Vaughan: 54:55

It fits so well within her personal brand and how she had always presented herself as somebody who likes to disrupt the status quo, like that's Cindy, that's what she owns, and so when you own kind of that slice, I think you would love this. She used to call herself the Michael Bay of Advertising because she likes to blow shit up. Now she's the

Michael Bay of Business because she likes to blow shit up. So again, like very clear sense of Cindy in her brand and it carries through on whichever project that she's doing. The other one was if we ran the world was another and I think it's still existing website that she did. That was all about women empowerment and a foundation, I believe, where you could submit ideas for businesses and then they would help to potentially fund those or launch those or make those ideas happen. So, again, being disruptive is kind of like her deal in every way possible and she really owns that throughout. So I think that's fantastic advice.

Mallika Malhotra: 55:49

That's almost like it could be your mission or your values that are connected to the overarching brand.

Amy Vaughan: 55:55

Exactly, exactly, all right. Well, by before we wrap up, it looks like our guests have been really intrigued and gotten a lot from what you've shared today, so thank you, malika. What is the best way for our listeners to connect with you, reach out to you, maybe work with you here in the future?

Mallika Malhotra: 56:09

Yes, thank you for asking, so you can. I'm always on Instagram. I love to be active there, so connect with me at malikamalhotraco, which I know is a mouthful, and hopefully there'll be a link somewhere. Yeah. Or you can also visit my website, which is malikamalhotraco, for all that information. I have a lot of free resources, free communities and different ways to work with me. So if you're struggling with your brand or your niche, I would love to support your community.

Amy Vaughan: 56:35

Thank you so much, malika. We love the work that you're doing. Kaylee, thank you so much. She's popping up all of those amazing links into the chat, so ladies who are listening live, please make sure you grab those as well, as we'll include them in the show notes, of course. All right, malika, this was so much fun. Again, thank you so much for the work you're doing, for the clarity you're bringing to help empower women's owned businesses. We're super aligned with all that you're doing and we're excited to keep talking with you.

Mallika Malhotra: 56:59

Yeah, thank you so much for this opportunity. It was so much fun.

Amy Vaughan: 57:02

Of course. All right, everyone, take care. Next week we're on a little bit of a break. I had a guest cancel and I'm kind of just going to embrace it because it's International Women's Day, so I think we all just deserve a break, and so we're just going to chill. Make sure you check out past episodes and listen. We've got three seasons worth of amazing content, so you won't be starving for much, but we'll see you the week after that. Until then, everyone keep asking, keep giving and keep growing. We'll see you later. Bye.