EPISODE 47 – Laurel Mintz

Interview Transcript

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Tom: Laurel Mintz, welcome to the Savvy Event Planner Podcast. How are you today?

Laurel: I'm so well. Thank you so much for having me.

Tom: Oh, I'm thrilled to have you here. We tried to get this together a couple times, and I appreciate you finally taking the time to sit down and talk with me. Now you are the founder, the CEO of Elevate My Brand. You have an MBA, you have an impressive line of credits, and you're regularly featured on Inc Magazine.

Laurel: I am, yes. I have a column there. It's very exciting it's called On Brand and it covers the entire marketing spectrum.

Tom: Very cool. Well, tell us a little bit about your background, and how you became involved in branding and events.

Laurel: Sure, so I started in this world actually by accident when I was at school in Santa Barbara, Del Gaucho. I did events for Giessinger Winery, which if you've been to Santa Barbara there's a little tasting room on State Street. So I would do all of his special events, and I really developed a palette for the food and beverage industry.

And when I went to the east coast, I went to law school and business, at Rutgers. Turns out lawyers are really boring, Tom. I don't know if you know that but it was not my favorite place. So my second year of law school I decided I was done interning, and trying all the different areas of law and so I ended up working with chef George Perrier who is one of the top French chefs in the world. So I was very, very lucky to work with him at his five star concept, Le Bec-Fin, and his [inaudible 00:01:25] next door, as well as being stolen away about a year after by the Public House Restaurant group. So I've been in the food and beverage world on the event side for a very long time, kind of by accident, really.

Tom: You started your own business. What led you to do that? What took you away from what you were doing?

Laurel: Well, I still wanted to be a lawyer. I thought that I needed that to go down that path. My parents in LA still don't know what I do, even though I run an agency. They still say, "My daughter is a lawyer," which is pretty funny. But I came back from the east coast, and my dad actually got really sick. So I had to take over his business, which was, do you know the Bassett Furniture brand? Are you familiar with it?
**Tom:** Oh, most certainly.

**Laurel:** So he had several of their retail show rooms. So there I was at 26, totally wet behind the ears. And I had to step in and run his business and I'm very, very lucky to say that he survived stage four cancer, which is incredible. But he stepped back in and I stepped away after having run this business for almost three years. And I realized that I wasn't a cog in someone else's wheel. I couldn't go back into the corporate world that I thought was my direction.

So I started consulting, and I had built this great relationships and about a year went by and I woke up, and I was like, "Oh my God. This is actually my job. I can make this into a career." And that's really when I started all of my branding work, and building my website and started to hire and that was over seven years ago now.

**Tom:** Okay. Well, I'm glad you brought up the fact that you have started hiring, or had started hiring because one of the questions I get from a lot of my listeners are, when you're thinking of hiring someone, what do you look for when somebody comes in the door? What skills do they need to have? What experience? Can you give them some ideas?

**Laurel:** Sure. So I think it's really important to develop a job description. So whether we're hiring for and intern, or whether we're hiring for a management role in our company. We really clearly define what that role entails the types of clients they're going to be interacting with, the reporting that they're going to be responsible for, and all of the things that we ultimately would like to see in the perfect candidate. And after that, it's really honestly a crapshoot. You have to interview and people can be very deceiving in an interview. So you really have to go with your gut, which is I think the number one tip I always give business owners, is that your gut is never really wrong.

So if you get a good vibe from someone, I mean hopefully they're going to be a good cultural fit for your company. And I would almost say having the skill set is secondary, it's very important of course, but it's really important that someone fit in culturally with your company, because otherwise it's like putting the wrong puzzle piece in a jigsaw puzzle. It's just never going to fit. Does that make sense yet?

**Tom:** Yeah, it most certainly does. And so basically when somebody comes in to interview. Let's say they wanted to work with your company,
you want them to be authentic. You want to really see what they're like?

**Laurel:** Exactly. And we also ask some really funny questions that can kind of put people off their game, because I mean, everyone when they're in an interview is trying to be on best behavior. So we like to throw some curveball questions to throw them off a little bit and see how they react in real time to pressure and something that otherwise would never ever be asked usually in an interview.

**Tom:** Okay. Now when you started Elevate My Brand, was there any challenge or something that really surprised you as you were putting the company together?

**Laurel:** I would say there's a huge fear factor that every business owner experiences, whether you come from the corporate world and have a lot of agency background, or whether you're just like me, kind of winging it and figuring it out as you go along. I think that fear factor was really surprising to me because I've always been very head strong, I've always been much empowered, and it's really scary to be out there on a limb by you as a business owner. I think that was very surprising, but I think even more surprising was the ability to push past that, because you don't really have a choice.

**Tom:** Now as a business owner, I'm sure that that takes up a big part of your time. I have talked with one event planner who said, being a business owner took her a little bit away from planning events. What is your day like?

**Laurel:** Well, every day is a little different and that's how I like it. I'm very lucky to have a team of five amazing members at Elevate My Brand, and they allow me to really be the face of the company. So I don't deal with much of the day to day as I used to, that's definitely true. And that's how it has to be as you grow into a bigger company.

Now my favorite things to do are the creative pieces. So I'm certainly involved with those with our clients and the client relationship, but you have to understand that as you grow a bigger business, you have to delegate otherwise you can't grow. And it's a very, again a very scary thing to go from a solo entrepreneur to building a company, but the funny part is, Tom, is that once you make that leap, the universe doesn't like a vacuum, so you create this space for growth in your company, and it inevitably happens. And that's really what we saw.
Tom: Excellent, excellent information. Now what type of events do you plan for your clients? Tell us a little bit about the range of things you do.

Laurel: Sure. So we’re really a digital agency and live event production company. So we do both building brand presence online and the offline component which is the live event piece. So for the live event piece we do everything from an intimate networking dinner for 30 people for high net worth individuals for a corporate finance client, all the way up to conferences for tens of thousands of people.

Now my favorite events are the ones where we get to do a give-back factor. So we were working with a nonprofit, doing a fundraising event. We have clients like Prevent Child Abuse America, Susan G. Coleman Methodist Hospital. So those are the ones that I really love. But we have capabilities of doing everything from a very intimate event, up to a massive event for maximum exposure for our clients.

Tom: Now on your website it mentions that you’ve established relationships with vendors and partners. Tell us a little bit about the types of vendors that you feel it’s important for an event planner to partner with.

Laurel: Well, we live in an age of technology, right, Tom? So we need to understand that there are so many technologies out there that can make your life easier. So whether it's using a company like Cvent, which is a really great platform for most people in this industry, or whether you have a custom technology built to help manage your processes internally, I would say those vendors are really critical.

And then again, it's just like hiring, it's about relationships. Making sure that you have great decor vendors, and lighting vendors, and AV guys and that's what we have done best, I think over the years is really cultivating strong relationships with vendors across the country, and even around the world. So that if someone needs us to do an event in Paris, we can do that at a drop of a hat. If someone needs us to do an event in Los Angeles obviously we're local and that's very easy for us, but we have the ability to scale up, and scale down based on the relationships that we've built with these vendors.

Tom: Are there any keys to those or key elements in establishing those relationships that you feel, or I mean this may sound like a basic question, but I'm trying to put myself in the mind of the beginner. So if you would are there any key elements in to creating these relationships?
Laurel: I would say make sure you establish the relationship, the type of relationship you want early on, and make sure you have boundaries because I'm sure everybody who's listening and you probably as well have had the experience where you have someone who's super, super talented, but they're a real pain in the you know what. Those are really challenging relationships, and you really want to try and avoid that.

So it's, I think, important to understand the kinds of vendors you want to work with. And then I would say the next step in that is executing a strategic partnership agreement, a contract so that you know exactly what the terms of your relationship will look like. I know a lot of event planners bring in vendors, and build their revenue stream based on referral fees and things of that nature. So making sure that you're building that into the relationship from the beginning, so that it's super clean, and doesn't get messy as your company grows, and then your relationship with that vendor grows. Does that make sense?

Tom: Yeah, it most certainly does. One of your specialties and I apologize if I sound like I'm jumping around a little bit, but one of your specialties on your website is creating a complete marketing strategy for your clients that include the live events. Do the clients and maybe it's a mixture, but do the clients sometimes come to you and say, "I want you to do this event?" Or do you recommend events? How does that work out?

Laurel: It really depends on the kind of brand they are. So we really believe that there is so much importance in creating live events so people can actually touch their audience, touch their donors, touch their constituents, et cetera. So we really do believe in a holistic approach to marketing. Now obviously that doesn't work for every brand, but if you're for example launching a new CPG consumer packaged goods, obviously the end consumer is who you want that good to be in front of.

So while it is critical to build the online presence, building out the website, content, social, doing programmatic advise, all the creative etceteras, it is equally as critical to build out the live event component. So we try and make sure that we are very clear with our clients, that both pieces of the pie are really important, depending on the kind of brand they are. And then of course depending on budget.

So if we're limited in budget we might do it in a phase track strategy, where we're building the digital component first, because that's the most
critical touch point at that moment, and then down the road when budget is a little less lean, we can open up and do more sponsorships and events, and things to the nature. But we definitely believe in a holistic approach.

**Tom:** Now when you're creating an event, what do you do to bring the brand into it? Could you give us some examples or ideas?

**Laurel:** Sure, so we're very excited that we are now the agency of record for CSQ, which is C Suite Quarterly. It's a really great local regional magazine here in the Los Angeles area. It's very targeted to high-end C-suite level executives here. And so they do an annual event that is super high end. Now they came to us and they said, "Okay, we've done this for a couple of years. We need to elevate our brand," obviously that's why they came to us, "and we need to kind of re-imagine the look and the feel of the brand," because they were just kind of winging it and using the same logo for the magazine. And they hadn't really created the persona of this particular event that they want to have really longevity in the marketplace.

So one of the first things that we did with them was a creative brainstorm to understand really what is the voice of their brand? What do they want to be for this type of event and for years to come? Who their target audience is and how they would respond to the voice of the brand? And that really helps, the creative process really helps us understand how to integrate different pieces for this particular event. Now this brand is very high and very luxury, which is really fun. And gives us a lot of leeway and play. And it got great sponsors, which makes it very easy. But for example a great way to integrate something that we had talked about, which was the future of technology, because a lot of their members and readers are CTOs, we wanted to do some sort of amazing entrance into the event space that was really unforgettable and very technology-focused.

So I can't share with you what that is yet, but that's a great way of explaining how we ideate through the process of really integrating the brand voice into the execution of the event.

**Tom:** Okay, that's wonderful and I hope we'll get a chance to talk again, and you'll be able to tell me a little bit more about that. It sounds fascinating.

**Laurel:** Absolutely.
Tom: Another one of the big things you do is marketing the event. And creating buzz for it. Now I know you do that in-house, but could you share some examples or ideas that our listeners could possibly use for inspiration?

Laurel: Sure. So I always like for brands to start from the ground up. So especially for those who are just starting out, make sure that your client aggregates their database and has some sort of CRM, or customer relationship management tool, that they are using on a regular basis to get the word out about their events. So that really sounds really simple, but you'd be surprised at how few people really look out their click throughs, their open rates and the statistics that really help you see how engaged their audience is.

So I would say for any event planner starting out in this world, making sure that you have a strategy, week over week, month over month in terms of how you're using the existing database of the end client, is probably the first starting place there. Now once you're trying to get this out to a larger market, then we have to talk about cross marketing partnerships. So what brands are either sponsoring the event or that the client has really great strong relationships with that would be willing to help push the event out via their social platform, via dedicated E-blast, etcetera.

And then the next step above that is programmatic ad buys and publicity, like actual, traditional PR where you're getting the word out to publications, radio, TV etceteras. Of course that's all budget-dependent, but those are the steps that we work through to determine how hard we have to push this out, and of course the budget restraints.

Tom: Now Laurel, everyone who plans events has, at some point, what I call with air quotes, a horror story. So I've got to ask, and you don't have to use names, and it could be an event you attended or an event you've planned. But, has there ever been an event where something went wrong and at the time it seemed devastating and if so, what did you use to combat that, how did you solve it and what did you learn?

Laurel: Well, I think that that's why we do what we do. We love... I, at least, love the idea that at any moment something could go horribly wrong, and you have to pivot as quickly as humanly possible, and figure out a creative solution. I think that problem solving is what drives me in this industry, and I really love that. I know it's kind of sick and twisted,
but I love the idea that nothing ever goes perfectly in events, and I think people have to realize that.

They expected us to go 100% flawlessly. I've never been to an event that was 110% flawless. So I think if you go into it with that attitude, you can kind of laugh at the issues that come up and figure out solutions. But in terms of worst case scenario, we've had talent that hasn't shown up, and that's been a real issue, but you just... life goes on.

The truth is that most of these events are not... I mean all of these events are not life or death. So if talent doesn't show up, you find the executive director and you get them on stage, or you find the next most popular person that has a great stage presence, and you ask them to do you a favor, or you pull in the DJ and you get them to go on stage, that they're used to being in front of a crowd.

So I think that usually... and talent is always an issue. And then the venue. If the venue is challenging that can be really, really hard. So we've got a venue here in LA that has two different elevators that take you to different floors of the space. So imagine trying to run and rush and stay on time when you can only take one elevator to floors one, three, six and nine, and the other elevator goes to two, four... you know what I mean? That was a mad house. So I would say that probably the most challenging thing is, when the space is not really conducive to a fast-paced event.

Tom: When you came across that elevator situation, had you known about that in advance, or was that a surprise to you when you arrived there?

Laurel: We knew about it in advance, and the client had already contracted with the venue, so we had no choice but to deal with it, but we were very clear because we had been in the space before, that this was going to be a major, major challenge and it really was. And my poor team was running around like chicken with their head's cut off.

In the long run the client was extraordinarily happy, ended up contracting with us for, I believe it was four events over the next year as well. So they were really happy with the event, and at the end the day you can... as an event person, I am so critical of every single thing that we do, but as long as the client is happy, what's going on in your head doesn't really matter. I mean, other than to make sure that you are making mental notes of how not to do that again next time.
Tom: I absolutely love that answer, because yes if... I think as a... because I am an entertainer, I go out and do corporate events for comedy, and when I have a show that I just don't feel connected. there are times where the clients will come up all thrilled, and at that point, you're right. It doesn't matter what we think, it's the end result, and how happy the client is.

Now on the opposite end of that scale, I'm sure that your events are incredible. Is there one that really stands out in your mind as just being more than you even envisioned it being?

Laurel: So many great events and especially the nonprofit ones that are near and dear to my heart. The one that we did for Methodist Hospital, we've been doing that event for three years now, and I think we raised almost $2 million last year which was incredible, and the client was so happy with that. So from a financial raise perspective that was incredibly successful.

We did an event for an investor client of ours, that was Cirque du Soleil theme, but it wasn't Cirque du Soleil, it was Cirque Berserk, which is a dark and sexy version of Cirque du Soleil. But actually the theme was Moroccan night, and the Cirque Berserk was the entertainment, which they are super high-end and I think the entertainment alone was like $60,000.

And we had different levels of entertainment. We had snake-charmers and sword-swallowers, and a guy that was riding around on a bicycle pouring tea from three stories up, and a spice wall that was just the most incredible... Visually, I would say that was the most incredible event that we've done. We have pictures on the website, if you go in and look at it. That was a really... I mean that was I think the most impeccable event we've ever done. It amazingly detailed, the client was beyond happy and I was really proud of that event.

Tom: Well, it sounds like you should be. That put a smile on my face as you were describing it, so kudos to you on that.

Laurel: Thank you.

Tom: Now, Laurel, you're obviously very involved with different charities. Is there one in particular that, because your father had cancer, is there one that you work with for that, or is there something that's near and
dear to your heart?

Laurel: That's a great question. I don't actually. I'm not involved with many cancer charities to be honest, and so I probably should get more involved with. We do a lot of work with the American Heart Association. So I actually have my own community of women, we do quarterly networking event called the tea salon. It's C-Suite level executive women, invite only. And every quarter we do, we are different nonprofit beneficiary. So it allows us to give back and create awareness for a different nonprofit every quarter.

So our most recent collaboration was with the American Heart Association, for their Go Red campaign. So that was really incredible because I think one in four women is affected with some sort of heart disease issue, which is pretty remarkable. So I tend to really focus on women's issues, and empowering women through education. That's my mission.

Tom: Okay. Well, I appreciate you sharing that, because a lot of times we focus on the career on this podcast. And it's always nice to hear what people are thinking about, and doing for the community outside of it. Now at this point I have to ask you if somebody came up to you, they're getting in the business, what advice would you give them?

Laurel: So getting into the business as in starting their own company, or going into the business just in any capacity?

Tom: Going into the business in any capacity. They're interested in event planning. How would you recommend they start? What of advice would you give them?

Laurel: I would say start as young as possible, because events, as you know, Tom, are a young person's game. You run around all day long. It's really physically exhausting. So I would say start as young as possible. Intern with a couple of companies and see if you like the process before you commit your career to it, because I can't tell you how many interns we've had that we're all gung ho and excited, because let's face it, event planning sounds really sexy. And the truth of it is just like entertainment, when you're in the back end, when you're in it, when you're in the production side, it is not sexy. It is hard core, it is exhausting, and it is a thankless job for the most part.

So I want to make sure that anyone going into this career really is super
passionate about working with these kinds of clients. The detail that it takes, and the time and commitment it takes. So I would say intern first, and make sure it's something that you want to commit your career to.

**Tom:** I absolutely love your honesty on that, and the way you describe that it was so perfect. Laurel, some of our listeners are working with their companies as either an executive assistant, or HR, and marketing personnel. If any one of our listeners is interested in reaching out to find out more about the services you provide and how you might be able to help them, what would they do, how do they contact you?

**Laurel:** Sure, you can email us at information@elevatemybrand.com, and now one of our account managers will reach out and have a conversation. If you mention the podcast, I will certainly make some time for you. I really do feel it's important to give back, and if I can help just one person understand how to do better at their job, that's really why I'm here. So feel free to reach out to us via email, or of course we are on all the social platforms as well. So Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, you name it we're there.

**Tom:** You've got to have a really busy staff to be able to do all that.

**Laurel:** I have an incredible staff and I'm very, very lucky. I only have to beat them half of the time.

**Tom:** Oh, that's sweet. Laurel, I really have had fun talking with you today. We're going to include links to all of Laurel's information on the website so you'll have a link to her website, and we'll include the Twitter and all the different information. Laurel, thank you so very much for taking the time to talk with me today.

**Laurel:** Tom, it's been a pleasure.