EPISODE 49 – Michelle Perez

Interview Transcript

Show notes available at: http://savvyeventpodcast.com/49

Copyright – Tom Crowl – SavvyEventPodcast.com
Tom: Michelle Perez, I want to welcome you to the Savvy Event Planner Podcast. How are you today?

Michelle: I'm good. Thanks for having me.

Tom: I'm thrilled to have you. I think we originally connected on Twitter, if I'm not mistaken. Is that right?

Michelle: Yes, it was on Twitter.

Tom: Okay. And I saw that on March 14th of this year which is 2016 in case people are listening to it way in the future, you made a post, "I quit my corporate job and launched my dream job." Congratulations.

Michelle: Thank you. It was really a good time. I'm still riding that wave.

Tom: Fantastic. It's a big step. So I'd like you to start out by telling us a little bit about your background and how you become involved in the event planning industry?

Michelle: So I just started in the event planning industry, actually, kind of by chance. I always had a secret addiction, I guess, to weddings in particular and watched all of those wedding shows growing up. However, I didn't think that I could make a career out of it and I intended to go to law school and wanted to see that all the way through. However, once I started law school, I realized that it wasn't necessarily for me and I realized that I wanted to do something with my life that I would be genuinely passionate about and happy to do on a daily basis.

So event planning kind of became that new goal for me, emerged two my passion which are events and throwing parties but also being of service to people and helping people on their important days like weddings and corporate events and things like that. So that's how it all started. I quit law school, decided to follow my dreams but obviously needed to pay bills. So that's how I got into the corporate world and worked my way up to a corporate event planning position with a firm and did that for a couple of years.

Then I got into that next gut feeling which has been the biggest one so far which made me realize that I needed to really go full force and pursue whatever it is that makes me happy and not look back. So that's what I did. I started saving up so I could have a little nest egg. And then when the time was right, I left my corporate job and have not looked
Tom: Fantastic. I love it when somebody is able to take what they love to do and just make it happen for themselves. Now, I get a lot of questions from beginning event planners or people interested in this and they always asked me the same thing: How did you come to the decision that this was the right career for you? Was there a catalyst? I mean, you decided that law wasn't right but was there something else that involved you or what emotion did you get when you decided this is really what I needed to do? How did that come about?

Michelle: So really it was kind of a mix at the time that I realized that a law degree wasn't exactly what I wanted. I looked back at my graduation party that I threw for myself and realized, "Wow, I really enjoy throwing events and being involved in the logistics and creation and seeing an event all the way through from beginning to end." I would say that my graduation party is what really made me realize that I thoroughly enjoyed it and was good at it.

And then it wasn't until the law school debacle, if you will, that I realized, "I could make a career out of this." I started seeking out other people who were event planners and who had made life changes like the one I was trying to make. So that's how that started for me. So I guess it wasn't necessarily one pinpoint, it was maybe a series of events that kind of all added up to me realizing what made me happy.

Tom: Now, when you were reaching out to these different people, was there one bit of advice that you really took to heart?

Michelle: Yes. I think the biggest piece of advice that I cringed when I first heard and didn't want to actually put into action was networking. That was the main thing that everyone always told me, "Network, network, get out there. Start conversations, talk about what you do." And I'm more of an introvert. So that was a little difficult for me and I've been working on it I guess ever since. But I would say that that was the most uncomfortable part I guess of event planning is that you really do need to get out there and network and get to know people and make connections.

Tom: That's some great advice because I know where you're coming from. I mentioned this on a couple of shows earlier. I'm kind of an introvert myself so I understand exactly how hard that can be. Now, you started, you say, with a company. What was your original position in that
company before you worked your way up to event planning?

**Michelle:** Actually, I want to correct myself. So simultaneously I had two jobs. On the side, I coordinated weddings and my full-time corporate job was with a Fortune-500 firm. With that firm, I focused on internal corporate events so I did things like Town-halls, receptions, lunches, dinners, client dinners and conferences, things like that.

**Tom:** You've kind of focused on weddings. So we're going to go there in just a couple of minutes but I want to ask you what are the pros and cons you felt working for another company as compared to branching out on your own?

**Michelle:** And are you referring to social events or just corporate or events in general?

**Tom:** Events in general. When you were working for the company, was there something, were there cons about that, it kept you away from something else or what was the pluses and minuses of being in that position?

**Michelle:** Well, I think that event planning is a field where people who do really well in it can multitask and reprioritize and reprioritize their day and their events as need be. So I think that especially in the corporate world as oppose to me owning my own business, the difference was that I was managed as opposed to managing myself and I think that that was one of the bigger reason why I wanted to branch out on my own. Also, I wanted to be able to cover social and corporate, not one or the other.

**Tom:** What did you find most challenging about setting up your new business?

**Michelle:** I think pricing is the more difficult thing that I had to deal with because I think that the misconception is that because I'm good at something then I can do it for free in a sense. I don't know if that makes sense and that might resonate with some people where you just love doing something, you'd be willing to do it for free. But obviously you have to charge accordingly. So I think that pricing it in a way that makes sense to the consumer or the clients but also being able to turn a profit while doing what you love is really difficult when you're starting out with your own business.

**Tom:** Actually, I can relate to that. Now a question for you. You're new
in this business in the aspect of running your own business. So what is a day in your life like?

**Michelle:** So a day in my life is, one of my little simple pleasures I guess is, to be able to wake up without an alarm which I couldn't do before working in the corporate world. And having a cup of coffee and kind of preparing my mind for what's ahead. Usually, I create a To-do list the night before for the next day. So that way I don't have to think about that, I just start my day and start crossing things off of my list as I do them. But usually, since I work from home, I get ready as if I were going to an outside job. I think that that helps with productivity and also helps with morale because you can get into that working-from-home slump which I've been pretty good at avoiding, thank goodness.

But once I have myself ready then I just get on my computer. I like to start off with creative work which is what I find more fulfilling. So if I need to create invitations or a design, a quote or anything like that, I work on that in the first part of the day. Then usually will work on social media and financials and things like that towards the later part of the day. Caveat to social media though, I usually plan that in advance so my postings still go on throughout the day but I need planning ahead for it. I do that in the afternoon.

And then, every day is different which is a great thing. If I have a vendor meeting, I try to schedule them usually on one day so that I'm out of the house and can make them most sense of my day as far as traveling. Vendor meetings, client meetings those sorts of things get clump into either full days or half a day if it's possible. And then I try to attend, as I said before, networking events are important and get out there and meet new people. But every day is different, which is the best part I think outside from being able to help people. I think that being able to have a different day the next day, the next to the next day helps keep me alive and invigorated to keep doing this.

**Tom:** Do you have a favorite type of event that you like to do?

**Michelle:** Yes. Weddings are my favorite.

**Tom:** Okay, why?

**Michelle:** I think that weddings are my favorite because it's a happy event that everyone who's attending wants to be there and wants to take part in all the amazing moments that women do. They are a lot more
difficult in the sense of it's a once-in-a-lifetime deal, right? So everybody wants their wedding to be perfect. So there's little bit more pressure on there, there's no redo, a second chances. But I think that just watching my bride transform and then walking down the aisle and the first dance. I love every single part of it. There's not much that I don't like about weddings.

**Tom:** That's very cool. So now on your site, it mentions that the client can be as involved as they like. And by the way, I want to say I really like your new site. I know you worked very hard on that.

**Michelle:** Oh, thank you. Thank you.

**Tom:** But it does say that, it mentions the client can be as involved as they like. Has that ever led to problems for you?

**Michelle:** No, because from the beginning usually my client will either show me their personalities or I'll be able to dig it out of them. So for example, if I have a client that is a type-A personality, I know what I'm walking into. I know that that person is going to want regular updates, he's going to want consistent communication, and by consistent I mean like hyper-regular, reoccurring often. And I know that that person is going to have very specific ideas of what they want and how it should be executed.

So with those clients I treat them differently than the clients who are more care-free or easy-going who will maybe leave actually some of the decisions to me to make as a professional. So I think that it kind of just depends. You have to... Am I the service? I mean, I'm sure you know as a service provider you kind of adjust as you need to, based on personalities or based on the work that needs to get done.

**Tom:** Exactly. I do have some of these questions from a standpoint of somebody who's never done this before. Is there any kind of major difference, say between planning a corporate event as compared to planning a wedding? Or are there specific things that are totally separate? Or is it pretty much across the board the same process?

**Michelle:** I mean I think that the core of it is the same, as far as sourcing vendors and getting a logistics prepared as far as arrivals, set up and then take down. Social events versus corporate events are different in the sense that social events have more fluidity and you're able to kind of roll with the punches if you need to.
Corporate events are a little bit more difficult because if you're dealing with conferences and things like that, there's a very specific timeline and every minute counts. And so there's a lot less room for error as far as your timeline. However, on the other side of it is, well, you can't redo a walk down the aisle for a wedding. So I think that the core is the same but I think that you're applying different logics and different importance on certain things depending on what event you're planning.

**Tom:** Now, when you first meet with your client, what are some of the questions that a good event planner should ask?

**Michelle:** Budget is definitely one of the top five because that will tremendously change where you go with your design and stuff that you're providing or with the vendors that you want to use. I think that aesthetics is really important and also it's really, really important to make sure that you understand what their goal is with this event. So whether it's a wedding or whether it's a conference or a 50th anniversary party, you want to understand what are the important things to that specific client. Because believe it or not, it'll change from client to client and the outcome that they want to see will be different. So you always want to make sure you pinpoint that in the beginning so you know exactly where to focus your time and energy on. I will say those are the top three.

**Tom:** Once you consult with a client, do you have any processes for developing your ideas for events?

**Michelle:** I think that my process is more... It's difficult for me to be able to explain. It really just depends on the vibe that I get from that client and the time that I have to let's say create a proposal, create a design proposal for them. If it's an event that's further out, then there's a little bit more lead time for me to be able to seek inspiration or to do a lot more research, whereas if an event is coming up soon, then I need to kind of go into action really quickly if that makes sense.

I mean, again, that's the beauty of event planning. It really is just so different from event to event and client to client that I don't think I have a specific process. I think I kind of go with the flow of the client and the sense of urgency I guess.

**Tom:** Okay. When you're designing an event one of the things you mentioned is no design element is too big or too small. What would you consider a small element design that maybe you pay extra attention to?
Michelle: A small element design might be the way that a napkin is folded. Or a design on an escort card, or I don't know, it could be something as small as whether you'd put a logo on a certain notebook that's going to be placed at the conference table, you know what I mean? That could be so small but such an important detail because branding is really important. And you also want to create cohesive theme regardless of what your event is.

I would say that a big one, a big design element would be installing a complete light system, or a chandelier that are maybe unconventional and that has to be designed and created from scratch. Transforming rooms with drapery is a huge undertaking. While I don't do it personally, you have to make sure that you force the right vendor to do that sort of thing and that has the right reputation and that takes weeding out the bad ones which takes time.

Tom: I'm sure it does. Do you have any recommendations for somebody who's getting into this for weeding out bad vendors or vendors that aren't going to be able to work with you as you desire?

Michelle: I would say that as a key is to search all of their social media, search their testimonials, read through those and see what kind of review they have obtained. Honestly, I usually will just start as simply as a Google search and just see what comes up for that company's name because now with the way that the world is set up through social media and what not, you can find the good and the bad reviews and it's not as easy as before for vendors who may be, you know, make something disappear, if you will.

Tom: That's some great advice, right there. I like the way that came out. Now, every event planner has had what we call a horror story, something that went wrong and at that time it seemed devastating. I'm wondering if you've ever had one of those situations, and if so what did you do to kind of circumvent it to make it work out and what did you learn from that experience?

Michelle: So as soon as you started to ask me that question, I immediately already had my answer. So every event planner starting out needs to know that they're going to have that one even that will make them cringe forever. And that event for me is a wedding I did three years ago where, literally everything went wrong. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. It was at a cabin in the forest. And literally it started
from a golf cart that I was riding on died in the middle of the forest. So I had to walk my way out of the forest in the night time by myself with no flashlight.

The power went out in the cabin. Even the shuttle driver lost the keys in his shuttle right in the middle, right at the entrance of the cabin. I mean, this wedding... and that's just to name a few because I could go on forever with that wedding. And so the sad part is that, yes, a lot of things did go wrong but my team and I did absolutely everything to troubleshoot and to fix every problem that we had. And so the bride and groom were happy at the end because they understand that life happens and things happened that are out of our control.

So I think that my advice to anyone that either hasn't experienced it and is afraid of when that time is going to come, or already has experienced it, is to not beat yourself up, it happens to everyone. You just have to always be prepared and that's why having a very clear idea of what that client wants is important because you'll know how to react as they would, which is, I think, key. I think clients want to entrust that you will serve in their... I guess almost as their advocate, if anything goes wrong or if things go awry so that they can enjoy their day or their event.

Tom: Again, some great advice. I appreciate that, Michelle. One of the other things that I usually ask my guests are about an event experience they've had that's amazing. Maybe one you've created or one you've attended that was just over-the-top. Does anything come to mind when I mentioned that?

Michelle: Yes. A conference actually that I did a couple of years ago was really amazing because the client actually noticed all of those very minute details that I took a lot of time to create and to put together. So I think that anytime your client notices what you're doing is great but then also when the guests come up to you and want your information because you did such a great job, which happens very often if you do a good job and you never have to kind of sell yourself in that sense because your work speaks for itself.

Tom: So it's the details that you put into the event that really threw it over-the-top then?

Michelle: Yeah. I think for that one it was the details and the level I guess of coverage that we provided, because everything was taken care of and no one had to ask any questions or fix any issues because it was
all planned almost to the T.

**Tom:** Fantastic. Now Michelle, some of our listeners are working for their companies as an event planner and in some cases they do reach out to hire different event planners to help them with their work. Where are you located?

**Michelle:** I'm located in New Brunswick, New Jersey. But I do travel all over the tri-state area and abroad.

**Tom:** Okay, and if somebody was interested in learning more about your company and finding out more about you, how would they reach out to you?

**Michelle:** They could go to my website, michelleperezevents.com, and through there they can see the packages that I offer, the services and also contact me directly.

**Tom:** Okay. Michelle, I really do appreciate you taking the time and to sit down and talk with me today. It has been a real pleasure and I wish you incredible success with your new business.

**Michelle:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate the platform and the opportunity that you're providing event planners. So I'm happy to be a part of it. Thank you.

**Tom:** Thank you, Michelle.