EPISODE 51 – Allison Edrington

Interview Transcript

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

Allison: I'm doing great, thanks. How are you?

Tom: Oh, I'm doing wonderful. I appreciate you coming on the show. Now, we originally connected because you sent me an email.

Allison: Yeah, I was looking for more information about being a better event planner and started listening to your podcast, and I wanted to reach out. I appreciate what you do.

Tom: Well, I appreciate that. I don't hear from that many listeners. I'm starting to, but it's a work in progress. Any time somebody has feedback, whether it's good or bad, or suggestions on how to improve, I always appreciate it. The reason we're talking today, though, is that you are planning events for a very unique industry. That just caught my attention and I thought, "Wow. I've never thought about that." You're a media consultant. You're a freelance writer, and planning events in that market. Tell us a little bit about your background and how you started planning events.

Allison: The quick version is I went to...I live in California, and I went to Chico State and I got a journalism degree. I moved to Humboldt County, which is a major cannabis production region, for a journalism job. And eventually, I wanted to stay in Humboldt but I didn't want to keep that job, so I started freelance writing and doing business writing, and eventually got into political writing, which led me to work in the cannabis industry, doing content editing and eventually event production. There's a lot of cannabis events that are starting to develop in this sector. There were a few before, and now there's more and more but not very many of them do it well.

Tom: I've gotta ask you, because of all the legal issues that are going on...I understand it's medically okay in California. How many states is it currently legal for medical use? Do you know?

Allison: I believe it's 25. I haven't looked that up recently. It's changing day-to-day and it kind of depends on how you define medical, because some states have just a handful of conditions that allow cannabis use and some are more broad. California has been very broad. It's led to this grey market, where there's a lot of things that just aren't regulated or aren't addressed in legislation, so nobody knows what's actually legal.
And that, in terms of event planning, has been difficult because venues, that's a concern for them. Especially if they have a liquor license, they don't want to have unnecessary liability. So, a lot of my job is working with the venue and finding what they're comfortable with and what that county is comfortable with in terms of how cannabis can be handled in an event.

**Tom:** Okay. That's got to be a challenge for you. So, are there different rules for different counties in California? How many counties are you producing events in for that?

**Allison:** I've mainly produced events in Humboldt County. I've got one coming up this summer that is in Mendocino County. Those are both considered The Emerald Triangle, which is where cannabis production is heavy in California. So there's more, I would say, cultural acceptance of cannabis, but that doesn't mean law enforcement accepts cannabis. So Humboldt has been...I should start with I haven't had any problems with law enforcement.

I've seen law enforcement walk through an event that wasn't mine and then just leave. These aren't really the things that concern them, but it's something that concerns folks involved with it, like the venue. Because if something does go wrong, they're worried about that.

**Tom:** Yeah, I can certainly understand that. So we've talked about the political and the legal aspects of it. Is there any type of public perception that would have an effect on your events, or have you not noticed one?

**Allison:** There is a public perception in that sometimes people think it's going to be an irresponsible rowdy event, which it almost never is. But not so much, not so much. I should say that we did once...it was going to be an all ages event, we did once have to, after putting out all the posters and selling some tickets, retract that and make it an 18 and up. Which wasn't great for public perception, but it was what the venue was comfortable with, so we felt we needed to make that change even though it was burdensome.

**Tom:** Okay. Now, cannabis production has really changed recently with all the legalization and everything that's going on. It's not the stoner growing it down in their basement anymore, is it?

**Allison:** No. And when we're talking about the cannabis marketplace
and industry in California, the conversation has become much more small farms and niche manufacturing, particularly in northern California, where there's a lot of [inaudible 00:05:27] that they're already using for wine grapes and that sort of thing.

The production is definitely of a higher quality. And as someone who's gone to these events just in the last couple of years, you can see the trend in the kind of advertising and businesses that are involved in it. There's a lot more sustainable...I can't say organic because that's a federal term, but organic in that type of paradigm.

**Tom:** So, would this maybe be a very early wine industry? Are there any parallels there that you would think?

**Allison:** Oh, absolutely! Absolutely. And the beginning of the alcohol industry in the United States after Prohibition. It's a transition that happens. I think the interesting thing with wine is that it was the Chamber of Commerce and a vineyard that originally established what [inaudible 00:06:27] was. It built from there and they've established this [inaudible 00:06:35] system within wine that is completely applicable to cannabis. It's being further explored now, but I look forward to when that's even more developed.

**Tom:** Well, you have a Cannabis Chamber of Commerce that you've created, correct?

**Allison:** Yeah. We had our first mixer in May, and we had over 100 folks come out. That was fabulous. The goal of that organization is to bridge the business community within Humboldt County with, I like to call it, the regulated business community and the cannabis business community together, because there's been an artificial separation locally.

There's industry that was only kind of regulated and kind of still underground. And that's changing. It's in a very transition state. And that's what these events are for, too. There's a lot of education that goes on that I've helped put together to help improve farming practices and production.

**Tom:** Well, let's talk about that, because I noticed on one of the events, as I was going through your website, you've got all different types of issues that apply to the industry. It's not just...if somebody thinks cannabis, like I say, again, it sometimes has a stigma to it. So, tell us a little bit about the events you're planning and what kind of educational
Allison: The events that I've been helping put together, they're often a combination of festival and education and sometimes a competition. Because the festival, and having vendors, and not a party atmosphere but a lively friendly atmosphere where people can gather, that brings people out.

And then we have the education, these panels of scientists and professionals and farmers and distributors that are knowledgeable and can really talk about what kind of organic practices should you be utilizing, what does site remediation look like, and how do you package your product in a way that meets regulations. There's quite a few topics. And that's actually the hardest part, is figuring out which panels to include, because there's so much that the industry needs to know.

Tom: Well, when you're looking for panelists, how do you go about that search? Give us a little idea of how you decide on what kind of topics you want to present.

Allison: For me, I really am connected to this community. Being where I am, I talk to a lot of people. I read a lot of social media posts and articles in this industry, so I can get a sense of what kind of questions people are asking and they need answers to. And I don't usually know the answer, but I can find connections to folks who probably can answer those questions. So that's my approach to it. And when I worked with Ganjier [SP], one of the people who heads that up, Kevin Jodrey, he has many connections that we utilize to bring in a lot of world class knowledge into the Ganjier events.

Tom: Now, they had a Spring Kickoff. Was that a festival atmosphere like you were describing?

Allison: Yes, yes. And actually, the unique thing about the Ganjier Spring Kickoff is that it was a cannabis event that did not include a competition, which is fairly rare, particularly in Humboldt. Most of the time, they draw people out with a competition where you enter cannabis flower or extract or edibles into a competition. Somebody wins, somebody loses.

But this one was focused on education, and also getting farmers started for the season with seeds and other products. The education was all focused on "Well, if we catch you early in the season, you can plan a
better whole season." A lot of these events take place later in the year but people have already put their plants in the ground or wherever they put them. They can't make those adjustments. So, catching them early in the year. That was February that we had that event. Yeah, I produced that event. We had a great turn out. I was very proud.

Tom: You should be. From what I saw online, it looked like it was a blast and everybody seemed to enjoy it. Now, you also produced the Golden Tarp Award. Talk to us a little bit about what that is and what went into that planning.

Allison: The Golden Tarp Award is a light deprivation cannabis competition, and it's a very industry title. Light deprivation is just a method of growing cannabis that controls the light, pretty specifically. So it's a very niche competition. The way they broke down the competition by flavor category was very different, so that drew people out.

Because a lot of these competitions, it's a panel of judges and maybe there's a couple of categories, like type of entry. But this was all flowers and broken down by flavor. We had to organize judging the day of and on site, which was a challenge. Well, actually, it was off site, I mean to say. We had to organize judging off site, but the day of, and it was randomly selected from the crowd.

Tom: When you're planning these festivals, is there any coordination with Humboldt, the city, the town, the county, that you have to do?

Allison: Yes. We've let the Sheriff's Department know we're having an event, because it affects traffic and other matters. Where we have held these events has been a pretty small town, so it's a big impact when 1,000 people come out.

Tom: You had sponsors for the event. Now, talk to us a little about the...because I was amazed at the range of sponsorship that you had.

Allison: Yeah. I put together those sponsorship packages sort of...the last round I put together based on the ones I'd been doing, but I researched other industry events and figured out what our projected attendance was and made it fair. I like to tell people I like to throw parties where people could make money.

Tom: That sounds fun.
Allison: Right? One of the first events we threw, we got a great turn out, more than we expected. And all of the vendors and sponsors were happy and they were telling me how much money they made. It was people coming up to them and buying seeds, or buying nutrients, or soil, or consulting for property or whatever.

That was an amazing feeling, that I helped these people with their businesses. We selected these vendors because we thought that they were people that were worth talking to and knew what they were doing. So, to be able to help them was really satisfying. I try to repeat that with every event because that's how you benefit in industry, is you support those kinds of people in that way.

Tom: That's a win-win for both parties. Now, you had multiple sponsorship levels. How did you decide on that?

Allison: It was doing a lot of research on what other events were doing within the cannabis sector. And then honestly, making phone calls and feeling people out and negotiating.

Tom: Well, that sounds very basic, I know, but it's important because a lot of our audience or people who haven't planned events yet are moving into the industry. So, just giving them that background, giving them that feel of how you reached out is appreciated. Now, every event planner has a "horror story," and I use the air quotes for that. Were there any hiccups or something that happened where you went, "Oh my gosh, this is devastating," at the time but you were able to work it out? And if so, what kind of lessons did you learn?

Allison: There's definitely a few, but I think the worst that I felt most personally responsible for is I told you that at the Golden Tarp Award, we randomly selected a few of the judges at the door as sort of like a cool, be a part of the process thing. I had gotten this bingo wheel, but I had not tested it, and I waited until the last minute and it ended up being super dysfunctional. That was really frustrating at the [inaudible 00:15:46]. So, my take away from that was, test everything. Never leave anything to assumption. That could have been prevented if I'd just done that.

Tom: Now, we've been talking about the events, but one of your big things is you're a media consultant and a freelance writer. You also help to market the events. So, let's talk a little bit about event marketing, if we can. Give us some ideas of how you promote and market these events.
Allison: Social media is huge. Although, it's funny because most advertisements can't go through because it's related to cannabis, on social media. And as we've made these events bigger and bigger, we've been able to attract the interest of other local media and state media, which has been pretty satisfying in terms of opening it up for other cannabis businesses. We started advertising in a local weekly because it was the only newspaper that we knew of that would allow cannabis advertising.

We were doing that regularly. This was through Wonderland Nursery and the Ganjier. We suddenly start getting calls from other advertisers who see what we're doing and want us to do that. And as we do that, they're also opening their doors to other businesses, like I said. So we did social media, we did print advertising. We got an e-billboard, one of those digital that cycles through eight seconds per minute. It's a wide range of stuff, but across northern California particularly.

Tom: When you're talking social media, what social media outlets were you able to use?

Allison: Facebook and Instagram were the most successful for this particular community. Twitter as well, but I don't know, where the cannabis community that has developed around these events, doesn't seem to be where they are.

Tom: Okay. Well, you've got to know where your audience is, so that's...

Allison: Mm-hmm.

Tom: When you were doing these types of events, do you have any types of follow ups that you do with your sponsors or your attendees?

Allison: Absolutely. For the sponsors, I've been sending thank you posters printed on vinyl. Essentially, the thank you poster is a version of the poster that has removed all of the other sponsor logos except theirs. It's just a nice thank you letter on letter head. And for the last one, we had an illustrator who's locally famous. So I asked him if he would sign all the thank you posters before I sent them off.

Tom: Wow!

Allison: It's doesn't happen without the sponsors. I was always truly
grateful to all of their support. It was important.

**Tom:** Well, that's a beautiful touch. I mean, they get something like that. They can display it. It's something that keeps you top of mind for them. Just that little extra thing probably makes them want to rush out and sponsor you again in the future.

**Allison:** Yeah! And I like to share that with people, because I think other events should also thank their sponsors. I saw one other event that's in the cannabis arena. They didn't do quite that, but they had their whole crew sign one poster and send it off to a sponsor. That's a creative twist on that. I like it.

**Tom:** I think that's brilliant. I know every event's different, but what would you consider your objective for, say, the Spring Kickoff?

**Allison:** The Spring Kickoff was specifically for educating the community to prepare for the season ahead. So, that was seeds and education and solid products, but primarily education. I think that time we had eight to eleven hours of education in one day.

**Tom:** And did you have a way of verifying those objectives, post event? Did you do any kind of query of your audience, or did you just listen to response?

**Allison:** I didn't do a specific follow up with the audience. I did spend the entire time, this last event, in the education stage, because I was the person running it and why it was on time. People were engaged and asking questions. Every seat was full for every panel, which was...I was very happy about it.

**Tom:** Great. Well, I know that you're not used to doing these kind of podcasts, and I appreciate you taking the time to come on. If you had any advice for somebody who wants to get involved in event planning, what would it be?

**Allison:** To really consider what the person who attends is going to experience, and walking through the event in concept as the attendee. Because you can plan a lot of different things, but at the end of the day, that person has to have a good time or else we've failed.

**Tom:** Excellent advice. If people are interested in learning more about what you do, how could they reach out to you?
**Allison:** They could visit my website, allisonedrington.com. That's A-L-L-I-S-O-N-E-D-R-I-N-G-T-O-N.com. I'm also on Facebook and other social medias.

**Tom:** Okay, we'll make sure we have all the links to that in the show notes. Hey, Allison, I really do appreciate your time today. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on the podcast.

**Allison:** Thanks so much. It's been an honor. I really appreciate the chat.