EPISODE 52 – A.J. Steinberg

Interview Transcript

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Tom: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm on the line with A.J. Steinberg from Masquerade events and Queen Bee Fundraising. A.J., how are you today?

A.J.: I'm wonderful Tom. How are you?

Tom: I'm doing great. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today. I think we are gonna have a lot of fun. Just talking with you this short time before we went on air here, I'm looking forward to this. Wondering if you'd start out by giving us an idea of your background and how you became involved in the event planning industry.

A.J.: Well, that's a great question. Like many people, I was just very good at throwing my own events. And somebody suggested I do this. The reason I named my company Masquerade Events, was I felt I was masquerading as an event planner because I had no experience and a real background. I picked up the ball and took on the event planning mantle in 1999 and started masquerade events. I live in Malibu, so I'm lucky I had a lot of high-end clients immediately. I've always had a passion for non-profits. Since college I has been non-profit fundraising, so it became natural that Masquerade Events not only did high-end social events, it also dovetailed into the world of special events for fundraising.

Tom: You literally had no background in this when you started the company.

A.J.: I think most people don't have a technical background in event planning when they started. I think we fall into it and that was 1999, before the Internet, before Google, and before Pinterest. So it was a very different beast, you literally had to figure things out, your resources were what you had on hand, not what you could order through the internet. It was a much more creative, seat-of-your-pants kind of an experience back then. Now it's a much more established type of career. But at the beginning, at the very beginning, it was seat-of-your-pants.

Tom: I absolutely love that. I've gotta ask. Once you started this business, was there something that surprised you early on? Something that just totally threw you for a loop?

A.J.: Aside from the fact people paid me to put on parties? Yes, I would say. Especially for the nonprofit events, I was constantly surprised with the nonprofit events, with how often people were reinventing the wheel
with each event they did. They didn't think smart, and they lost a lot of money and a lot of resources because they just weren't organized. That always surprised me for the nonprofit events. You would think that that would be down pat, everybody would just know what to do, but the truth be told is, everybody, it doesn't come naturally to them.

Tom: Now when you started you mentioned you were doing a lot of stuff for celebrities. How did things change over the years? Or has it? Have you constantly been involved with the nonprofits or did that evolve through your connections?

A.J.: Yes and yes. The celebrity portion happened because of the demographics in Malibu, Beverly Hills and West Los Angeles and because I work with nonprofits, there's often celebrities that are affiliated with that. And with nonprofits I just... Once it became known that I specialized in helping smaller nonprofits learn how to put on events like the big kids, it was pretty easy to get clients. I became in demand because it's not a niche that a lot of people service. Also, too, is I deal with committees, a lot of smaller nonprofits and a lot of big ones use committees to help plan their events, not because it's the most efficient way of being an event planner, but because they bring resources to the table and help fill seats and sell tickets. Once I became a specialist in that, it became pretty natural just for the clients to fall in line there.

Tom: Now you also hooked up with a gentleman by the name of Marc Pitman who was my guest on Episode 46. Would you tell us a little bit about how you two came to work together?

A.J.: Yes. Marc Pitman is one of the gurus, one of the real influencers in the nonprofit community. He runs the Nonprofit Academy which teaches smaller nonprofits all over the world how they can effectively raise funds and shepherd their donors and complete their missions. I myself have been picked up by the Charity Channel Press to write a series of 12 handbooks on how to run a nonprofit special event. Through my Charity Channel Press contacts, I got put together with Marc Pitman and I was lucky enough to be on his webcast last month helping people to understand better how they can put on a nonprofit event successfully.

Tom: We'd definitely get into that conversation. That's something I do wanna talk about. But one of the reasons that we have you on here today, when we first started connecting, you were talking to me about planning events with a tight budget. And I know that a lot of event planners suffer that. If somebody is working with a tight budget, give us
your thoughts on that. What in your opinion is the most important thing people should budget for when they're planning events?

A.J.: Well, first of all there's nothing wrong with a tight budget. I am a big believer that a lot of creativity and a lot of really great engaging things comes because you can't just throw money at lighting and throw money at flowers. So let that be known. I think that for a tight budget the most important thing to know is, check your resources locally. Now I know that you have people here who are event planners for just regular parties for social events and we've all had that no budget. Meaning you have no budget, the sky's the limit and no budget meaning you have no budget, kind of event. If you really don't have a budget, I do a lot with graphics on the computer and then have them printed into posters and very inexpensively. There are some amazing resources out there for inexpensive printing that you can do online and that cuts budgets down a lot, even for weddings. When you do things with small live plants instead of huge bouquets of flowers, there's always a way to make things meaningful and beautiful because people really won't remember the flowers in that center of the table, but they'll remember a welcome note that's been tucked into everybody's napkin. And that costs almost nothing. You can have them beautifully printed for under $100 for a wedding. People will just talk about how meaningful that was. So you don't have to throw money at everything.

In terms of having a huge gala with a tight budget, that's a lot of creativity and just using your head. I believe that engagement is a key and you don't need a lot of money necessarily for engagement. I use a lot of resources in the community. I use community colleges and high schools for people to do talent, to have musicians, to play. I, lots of times, will have interactive things with the guests. I use sororities, fraternities, high schools, for people to help as volunteers with those. I use print shops from... I'm right next to Pepperdine and Pepperdine is a big university and they have a big print shop that lays idle for a portion of the year so I go and I get my printing done at a fraction of the cost for my nonprofits because they have to keep their people busy and I need to cut corners on printing. So there you go. Everybody who spends money on posters, big posters that are expensive, they should all go to Walgreens online because you can actually design your own posters and have them printed for a fraction of the cost at Walgreens and they'll just mail them to you. The quality's every bit as good. So knowing the resources and little ways that you can cut corners, I find it fun. I really always feel great when I can come in under budget for a client and then make them a ton of money on top of that with the appeal from the stage.
So, there you go.

**Tom:** Is there one thing that you've done that was just one of these cost-cutting measures that you just felt was so brilliant? I guess I'm asking a question and I'm not quite sure how I wanna phrase it but I think you get the idea.

**A.J.:** I know. Is there anything that's just like stuck out in terms of cost-cutting?

**Tom:** Yeah. Something that just, when you thought about it, you were like, "Eureka. Why didn't I think of that before?"

**A.J.:** Yeah. Now, of course, my cost-cutting... Because I do nonprofits, not only do I wanna save money, I wanna make that engagement with the people who are there. I took over an event that was way over budget every single time and one of the things they spent money on were these lavish flower centerpieces which to me didn't make any sense because they got taken home for free and we were out $125 a table for lunch. So, what I did was we had...it was for Children's Hospital, and we had toys all donated. Because anybody who knows about a children's hospital is every time a new patient comes in they need all new toys because of the germ factor. All old toys have to be thrown away. We knew that the charity was desperate for new toys for children so we sent out an S.O.S. to corporations and I got on all these new toys donated and we arranged them in the middle of the table to be this beautiful vignette with little toys. Then we put little pictures of children saying, "Thank you from the bottom of our hearts", just little pictures I printed out and put on card stock and we auction off each of the center pieces, each of the center pieces, could be bought for $100 and they didn't take them home. The toys went to Children's Hospital. So not only did we save $125 per table for 50 tables, we made money at $100 a table for selling the center pieces which were actually donated.

**Tom:** I absolutely love that. That's incredible. It kinda makes me tear up a little bit because it's such an important cause as well. What are some of the other, if you don't mind my asking, some of the other charities that you've worked with?

**A.J.:** For me, Cystic Fibrosis, Muscular Dystrophy, Breathe LA which used to be the Lung Association of Los Angeles, Jane Goodall's Organization plus her Roots & Shoots Organization. Reef Check International, blah, blah, blah, Cardiovascular Disease Foundation.
There's a lot. I've been doing it a long time.

**Tom:** Is there is there one charity that you work with? I mean you're hired in to work with these different charities. Is there one that you put your time into? Most people have something that's near and dear to their heart. I'm just curious if there is to you.

**A.J.:** Yeah, I have one based in Malibu. It's called the Emily Shane Foundation and about six years ago when I was doing more social events I did this beautiful Batmitzvah for this beautiful little girl named Emily Shane. That was in March and it was a great event. I knew Emily since she was born and I went on vacation and on the last day of my vacation, a month later I saw on Facebook that she had been struck and killed by a car. Yeah, she was just waiting for her parents to pick her up on the side of the road, P.C.H. and some crazy guy ran off the road. Anyway so her mother started a foundation and that's my special heartfelt thing that I do every year for them. They give mentorship for underprivileged children. They do a mentor program which is just amazing. So, that's mine. That's my personal one.

**Tom:** Well, I appreciate you sharing it with us. That has to be hard. Now you mentioned planning events by committee for nonprofits. Talk to us a little bit about that because when I'm picturing committees, I'm picturing a number of different people who have a bunch of different ideas and sometimes they don't all come together. Give us some thoughts on this. How does that work out for you?

**A.J.:** That's a great looking at it. Tom, you're spot on. A lot of people are afraid to use committees to create their events because they're more work than not. That's just a fact. It's a lot harder to get 10 people together, to get their ideas, to organize them, to keep them on task, to move them forward. Why use committees? I think committees, especially for a smaller nonprofit, are the way to go, based on the fact that you are bringing 10 people in who have skin in the game. When they're helping you to create an event, they're going to feel pride in it and a pride of ownership and they are going to bring their resources to the table because of that. They will get auction items, they will help reach out to sponsors who are their contacts, they will then sell tickets and have their friends come to the event. They also have good ideas but part of events with committees is knowing how to do committee leadership, which is why some people call me on and I actually sit on the committee or do it via Skype and I also do workshops on how to effectively lead committees.
It's not hard. Nobody's born knowing how to lead a committee but it's important to have the right leadership, because let's face it, these committee members are neither event planners professionally, nor are they fundraisers professionally. They're the worst of all worlds. They're just people who are there wanting to help with no training and no background. So these nonprofits, who have spent endless resources honing their brand and honing their message, are basically turning over to these committees the branding, their message, their checkbook. It can be really dangerous if you don't properly lead them. The beauty of the committee is it helps an event really catapult it to the next level, it sells tickets, it makes it so these people on the committee actually become long term supporters and donors because they really have more of an emotional attachment to the nonprofit after having worked from it...with them, if they've done it right. That is why I'm such a fan of committees especially for smaller nonprofits.

**Tom:** You mentioned the emotional attachment and that was something I remember you talking with Marc about. Are there other ways you can appeal to those emotional heartstrings of your donors to keep them on board?

**A.J.:** Oh, absolutely, and that's what an event should be. An event is not just about raising money. When else can you have a group of 300 to 500 like-minded people in the same room or in the same space, where you can really hone in on them and let them know what your mission is? But the most important thing and Marc is spot on this and most real professionals know this. It is so important to make the messaging of your event be as a thank you to the guests and donors about what they have done for the Mission. A lot of non-profits especially the smaller ones I hear them say, "We're working so hard and we're doing so much and I work ten hours a day, and I went to Calcutta, and I did this." But that is not going to make donors want to participate in a meaningful way. What's going to make donors feel they are participating is if they say, "You as the donor have made this happen by your contributions, and your energies and your support, you've changed the world." And that's the way, whether it be an event or just going and doing your regular fundraising, that is one of the key tenets of any fundraiser is to know that the donor is the hero, not the fundraiser.

**Tom:** Love that. Now A.J. I wanna get back a little bit more toward the event planning side of things and ask you the question that I ask everybody who comes on this show. We've all had horror stories.
Something went horribly wrong and you're just like, "Ah, can't believe this happened." Can you share with us a horror story, or two if you want to, and maybe, you know, how you dealt with it at the time, what you learned from it and how that benefits our listeners?

A.J.: Okay. In terms of, if anybody is a nonprofit, my worst moment as an event planner was with a nonprofit where after five years of successfully raising oodles of money and me writing out the program... A program is from the stage. The people get up and talk on the stage. The Executive Director of this particular homeless shelter nonprofit decided he wanted to take control of the stage program and the messaging, rather than me. You would think that would be a good thing and he thought it would be a good idea right before our Fund a Need, which is where you get up and you ask people to raise their hand and donate large sums of money, he decided that having one of the women from the homeless shelter do a comic routine was a great idea. As you know, if you've ever seen a Fund a Need, they get up and you usually tell a heart-wrenching story, bring somebody up who's had this amazing transformation and it's a very meaningful moment.

Well, this woman got up on the stage from the homeless shelter. She wasn't a professional comedian. She was just somebody that liked to tell jokes when she was at the homeless shelter. She got up on stage and she was poised enough. But unfortunately, her entire comedy routine revolved around making fun of everything that they ate, and wore, and did at the homeless shelter. So she got up and the first thing she said, "You like this outfit?" She goes, "Yeah, it sucks because that's what they give us to wear." And my heart dropped to my stomach, oh my gosh. Every joke she made she complained about the food in the joke. She complained about the sleeping quarters and everything she was wearing and had eaten was specifically given to her by the people sitting in the audience and it was silent. People were appalled and right after when it was time to have people raise their hand for the Fund a Need, we raised maybe 20% of what we usually did each year because this woman had completely turned off the audience. That was my nonprofit worst horror story. That was awful. Don't ever lose your messaging. Always have control over your messaging.

For my social, there's so many things that happen at social events. I try and put them out of my mind. I guess the worst thing for me was when I woke up at 8:00 in the morning for a large event, and I had a call saying that the water main had broken, to the venue, and the whole entire event with 300 people had to move. So, I don't take no for an answer.
and if you're an event planner, you're bossy. You know you can take care of things. So, I got on the phone and it was next to a golf course so I had them divert one of the sprinkler lines to at least get water to the kitchen from the sprinkler system. And then we got a portable water truck brought in and we got porta potties for just in case. And the show went on. So you just do what you do, you check your resources, and you do not take no for an answer.

**Tom:** I love that. I'll tell you as a comedian myself, I often see people who think, "We can handle the program better than the pros even though we've never done it before."

**A.J.:** Oh, don't you hate that?

**Tom:** You're just like, "You know I've only been doing this over 30 years now. I've only done a couple hundred events every year for those 30 years so you might wanna take some advice."

**A.J.:** How many times has it worked out when they've taken control?

**Tom:** Very seldom. Maybe a handful. I can guarantee, I can count it on one hand. When you're talking about the comedian that comes in and is not a pro, so many people seem to think, "Well, Joe's funny in the office. He can get up there." Take Joe to an open mike and put him up in front of a real audience and see what he does before you throw him in front of your people.

**A.J.:** It's so true and you know because you're the professional. You know what background you do. How to do you research it, and how you get up and mentally prepare. You know how to read the crowd because you're a professional. That's the same as when people say, "We want to use this auctioneer. He's a volunteer and he's free. So we can save $1,500." I do everything I can to say, "Don't do it. You're gonna lose so much more money." Of course, they lose a ton of money because the auctioneer doesn't know how to do it really. He's not a professional. You can't expect them to be at that level. There's a reason that people like Tom Crowe [SP] get up on the stage and just kill it. And there's a reason that the guy from down the hall bombs when he does his comedy, Tim, right?

**Tim:** Oh, yeah. I love that example of the auctioneer because they're gonna save just a tiny little bit of money and you have to know how much is it going to really cost you to do that? It's not until the event is
over and they're sitting there cringing, that they realize. They're like, "Ah, if I would have just done that." But you know sometimes they go, "Well, I've got that tight budget." And that brings us back around to that.

**A.J.:** It does. But you know what? A tight budget is not a stupid budget. Okay? We all know where you can cut corners. You don't need the expensive centerpieces per se. You can have a cocktail party instead of having a sit down dinner. You can do so many things. You can have musicians who are extremely talented, college kids, or even high school kids, instead of paying. I had one client who had a large budget and threw $10,000 at a completely unknown talent act to get up and play music. Not one person even paid attention to the three songs they played. That's throwing money away. There's ways on a tight budget. You don't ever have to worry about cutting little corners, but when it comes to your stage program, when it comes to engaging people, when it comes to entertaining people, that is not where you're going to be cutting those edges.

**Tom:** Yeah, and especially on a tight budget, like you mentioned the "no one was paying attention" music. You've got to make sure that it's going to enhance the purpose of the event. I think that's some great advice and I do appreciate you sharing it. Now we've also gone to the other end of the spectrum where you've attended an event or you've thrown an event that was just over the top. Something just made it stand out in your memory. I'm wondering if you could share one of those either, again, something you've planned or something that you've attended.

**A.J.:** This is a hybrid event. Would be I attended it and I did the decor for a portion of it. I started out doing a lot of decor for my events because I am such a tight budget girl. Once nonprofits found that I could do amazing décor for very little, I got hired to do that. But one of my favorite events I ever worked at and attended. It's an annual event, it's called, "Wine masters," and it's for Cystic Fibrosis, which is one of my favorite charities as well. And they do this huge event where the finest wineries around, and the finest eateries in Los Angeles come together and do an event where, and I think now it's back on the lot over at one of the movie studios. When I did it, it was at the Pacific Science Center. They have thousands and thousands of people and they have hundreds upon hundreds of items in their auction. They do a live appeal with thousands of people there, that's where you stand on the stage and do your Fund a Need, or Raise the Paddle, or whatever.

First of all, Cystic Fibrosis is an amazing organization and runs under a
tight budget. Believe it or not, it's big. It's on a tight budget but one woman has made this event just one of the jewels of the Los Angeles fund raising scene. Even with thousands of people, the quality of the food's amazing, the quality of the wine's amazing, they engage people, people look forward to it every year, they make a ton of money for a great cause. So I would say that would be my favorite, most impressive event.

**Tom:** And what exactly does put that over the top for you? Sorry if I...

**A.J.:** No, that's fine. I'm rhapsodizing about the event without even getting to specifics. I think the sheer number of people. To engage 300 people in a room that is finite, meaning you have a cocktail area, and then you have a ballroom. That's easy. I've done huge events like the International Day of Peace for the U.N. with the Jane Goodall foundation where you have tens of thousands of people in a huge area. But you don't need to engage them all at the same time because all of these people are coming and they're going to booths that are put up. It's a festival, it's a street festival.

To have an event that is so large with thousands of people and have messaging that still gets across about the nonprofit, is pretty spectacular. The fact that they were so organized and they wet everyone's whistle with amazing wine, and they had fabulous food that was being served by these famous chefs just for thousands of people. People had a great time and yet they still got people's attention at the silent auction, they were still doing messaging at the silent auction, where they would have to sign ups where you could just make straight donations aside from just putting your name down for fancy wine. The fact that they had such a great presence on stage and they were so organized about the timing and the quality of every ingredient of the event, from... The audio visual was great, you have to have good A.V., you had to have good staging, and a good auctioneer. The way that they did that, it's hard to compete with something on that level, that large, that's done so well. It's like watching one of those huge blockbuster movies like The Fast And The Furious where they have so many details going on and you know there's so much behind it. That's what Wine Masters is to me. It's a beautifully done event with so many moving parts and each one has great attention to detail.

**Tom:** Absolute love it. The detail, or the attention is to the details, that's fantastic.
A.J.: Right. It's a long...a lot of words to get to just that. I'm sorry, long-winded, yes.

Tom: No. I appreciate it because that gives our listeners the background and that's why I asked you here. A.J, tell me a little bit about the workbook series that you're putting out that you mentioned earlier.

A.J.: Yes, those are going to be a series of 10 workbooks and they're geared towards... As I said, I work with committees. One of the things I noticed when you go to committees is everyone's reinventing the wheel and they have to figure everything out for themselves every time a new event starts. So these workbooks are geared towards the 10 committees that are within each Events Committee structure. So one event committee would be the silent auction, one commitment committee is marketing and P.R., one event committee is the day of running of the show. Each of these workbooks is given to the person in charge of that, and it's a blueprint. All they have to do is go through the workbook and all of their questions will be answered. They can write their notes and hand it to the person next year. And the next year the same person can look at the notes, or the new person can look at the notes and follow the same blueprint for another successful event.

Tom: Excellent stuff. And that comes out in 2017. Do you know when?

A.J.: Towards the end of it.

Tom: Well if somebody is interested in learning more about Masquerade Events or Queen Bee Fundraising, or you, or the workbooks in the future, how should they reach out to you?

A.J.: They should go to Queen Bee Fundraising which is www.queenbeefundraising.com or they can get a hold of me at AJ, no periods, just AJ@queenbeefundraising.com. And if you go to my site we have lots of resources and I have lots of e-guides. So if anybody is thinking...if they're working with a nonprofit and they are not sure about something, check out the website because I have guides that you can just download that tell you how to fill seats and sell tickets, how to do basic event planning for non-profits because it's different than regular event planning, and I do teach webinars. I have one coming up with Pamela Grow [SP]. Coming up next week, a four part webinar that teaches people how to put on nonprofit events.

Tom: I believe your webinar will probably be over by the time this comes
out, although it is gonna be coming up soon, but they can check back, right?


Tom: And also follow A.J. on Twitter because that's how I found out about one of your How to Get People in Seats or How to Sell Tickets, I guess it was. You've got a great Twitter presence and A.J., I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today.

A.J.: Well thank you Tom. I appreciate what you're doing. I listen to your podcast and I love it. So it's fantastic to speak to you in person, on the phone.

Tom: Well thank you. Thank you again so very much.