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BOOK MARKETING: How to Best Organize a Successful Retreat

Interview with Michelle Villalobos

Susan Friedmann: Welcome to book marketing mentors, the weekly podcast, where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas, and tips from the Masters. Every week, I introduce you to a marketing master who shares their expertise to help you market and sell more books. Today my special guest is a Business Alignment Expert.

Michelle Villalobos is the CEO of “Superstar activator,” she's a speaker and mentor who work with influencers, thought leaders, and other superstars to develop new business models and backend revenue streams to monetize their magic.

She's the author of the upcoming book “Small events, big impact,” the definitive guide to designing filling and profiting from retreats, seminars and mastermind groups. In 2016 she became a member of the National Speakers Association; Million dollar speakers group. She's one of my favorite nationals because Association colleagues, and a fellow certified speaking professional. Michelle, what an absolute pleasure it is to welcome you to the show and thank you for being this week's guest expert and mentor.

Michelle Villalobos: I'm excited to be here, thank you for inviting me.

Susan Friedmann: Michelle you claim to fame, at least that's how I know you, and that is the retreats. And since it's a subject, in the 4 years that we've been doing this podcast we've actually not covered that. We're going to put a change to that and go right into it. In your world Michel, what exactly is a retreat, what doesn't retreat look like?

Michelle Villalobos: By my definition a retreat is an intimate experience, I say between about 5 people to 25 people, though it can be more and it can be less,

1

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that delivers some sort of breakthrough outcome. And that serves as the foundational program where you consolidate, synthesize, where you compile your core content, your most important content, your foundational content into one experience. And that serves then as a foundation that helps people have this breakthrough and then leads them into what's next. Some sort of mastery program to keep working with you. So I see retreats as an event experience, but more importantly I see them as a part of a profitable sustainable scalable business model.

Susan Friedmann: So in your world, a retreat would be an entree to working with you in a more intimate, more refined manner, where they would learn will go deeper into the subject matter.

Michelle Villalobos: Exactly! And that's not to say I don't have retreats that are more for... as part of the mastery but really what strands formed my business the most, and what I see working with others is to 1st create that foundational program. That like you said serves as the entree into what it looks like to work with you, and sort of entices people to take that next step.

Susan Friedmann: I love about that would entice. Woo! Oh Yes-yes, yes-yes. Let's talk about it as a business model, our listeners as you know are non-fictional authors, who primarily the nonfiction authors, and they're looking to create an author marketing platform for themselves. Where would you see this business model fitting into that?

Michelle Villalobos: What I've seen, what I have experience for myself too is that you can do a lot in 3 days. So most retreats, the ones that I teach most of my clients are using a 3 day retreat model. And basically it comes in what I call... so I divide business into these 3 major components, "Frontend, backend, big backend." The front and is everything that goes into marketing, and I actually include books and speaking in that frontend.

I don't see for example book sales or speaking sales, selling speaking engagements as the best backend or big backend for a business, because generally book sales as you well know... generally you have to have a lot of mass to make money selling books, a lot of volume. And

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with speaking you're selling your time for money.

So neither of those to me is the most ideal big backend, which I'll talk about in a moment. So I see those as falling into the front end, and then those are ways to generate visibility audience credibility, which then lead into the backend. The backend is where the retreat seats, the backend is the deep dive experience that delivers what I call a juicy outcome in a compressed amount of time. It's something that people really want and need but it's not a huge commitment for them.

The retreat is where you give them some sort of big breakthrough, and then the big back in and what people can lead into from the rich Street is some sort of mastery program. Ongoing support, leadership coaching, done for you services, retainers, anything that has a monthly recurring revenue model for you, and that delivers ongoing mastery or support or value for the client. And that is in my opinion a very simple way to set up a very successful and scalable and stable business.

Susan Friedmann: In terms of where our authors are, once they have published that book could they go straight into conducting a retreat?

Michelle Villalobos: Possibly, very likely! I mean I did my 1st retreats without a book at all. I was using other marketing strategies, mainly networking, and speaking. But having a book I believe really positions you well to have people want to go deeper. So for the ideas in a book, you can lay out the framework, you can explain the concepts, you can share the philosophy but you can't really hands on work with people.

And if you have positioned yourself as this expert in your book and people love the book, chances are there are going to be a percentage of those people that are interested in what would it look like to work with this person directly? Can I work with this person directly? Now of course a one on one, you could work with people one on one, but that's not very scalable or very lifestyle friendly.

A retreat offers an opportunity to say yeah you can work with me, and the way I work is I do this transformational or informational or skills based or whatever type of retreat it is, and you can attend. That way

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you get people together, and what I've seen happen with retreats too is that I used to think that I was the source of all the magic. Susan I used to think that I had to have all the answers and if a client came to me for support then I needed to give them those answers.

And what I've learned is how to instead cultivate an experience that creates the conditions for them to find their answers. And that's more powerful, not to mention that there's no magic in the group, in the cross pollination of the group that happens without me and that I couldn't possibly deliver if I tried. There's so much magic in a group experience, I think it's really in that maybe I'm partial, I recognize that. I just think it's such a model, especially if you like speaking or delivering experiences or facilitating groups.

Susan Friedmann: Of course, I have to ask this question because based on our current situation, I know that you've been conducting these retreats live. Now what happens, can you do the same thing on a virtual basis, because it sounds as if you might lose some of that magic, will that cross-pollination. How does that work, what can you do virtually?

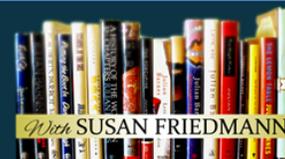
Michelle Villalobos: That is such a good question, and honestly Susan if you'd asked me that question 3 months ago, I would have said no, no-no, you've got to do it live, it has to be live. And I will say that I do still prefer live, I'm partial to it, but I had my retreat scheduled for March, I think it was 28 to 30, or something like that. And I had to make a judgment call about 2 weeks before, we were right in the beginning stages of this, or you know heading into this. And I said well either "I pull the plug, or I go virtual."

And I don't want to pull the plug, because I had paid clients, and I had clients in my big back in program that wanted to do the retreat again. They were signed up, and I was like well, let's try it. Let's do the experiment, we did it, it was successful, it was different, I wouldn't say it was as enjoyable for me, but it was pretty sweet not to have to fly to the venue, and get a hotel room, and all that stuff, and ultimately we did have the magic.

The magic happened, and I think the reason it happened was because

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I was very intentional about setting aside space and time to make sure that the people connected with each other. Just to give an example usually in our retreats, we send people you know give him a 90 minute lunch. Then we invite them, and encourage them to connect with each other and go to lunch together. Obviously, that wasn't going to happen. So what we did was ahead of time we sent an e-mail asking people to please have their food planned out for the weekend.

So that they could take a short break to prepare the food and then bring it back and we were going to have lunch break out rooms, so we were going to put people into smaller groups while they ate lunch and then we gave them activities to do with each other. For example, take the people in the room in your group on a tour of your office, or a tour of your house, or share something that's in your home that's meaningful to you.

We helped that along by creating, you had to do a lot more, I'd say imagination, and imaginative thinking, but ultimately we did get the results in the sense that we had a good solid, not our best but a good amount of enrollments into our big back end program.

Susan Friedmann: Congratulations! Wow! So I mean that was a real shift not only in thanking, but just how you conducted this whole event. And you still kept it to 3 days, is that correct?

Michelle Villalobos: We did, and that was challenging. Especially since I'm in Denver, and the event is usually in Miami, so we kept the East Coast time. But we did 9 am to 7 pm each day, which for me is 7 am to 5 pm each day, but it worked out well.

Susan Friedmann: I attended one that was Monday through Thursday, so it was 4 days, it was exhausting. All day, looking at the screen. And you're right, we did break out rooms, and then we had a lunch period, that we were on our own, and then we came back to the event. That it was very tiring, very tiring, but I know that these retreats are.

Michelle Villalobos: Well, you know that's the truth, and when we're in person, it's very tiring as well. But I feel like we have a really nice rhythm. I'll share that,

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the way we structure the days, it's very rarely me just talking to the screen, we have a lot of dynamic interaction. A lot of exercises, we do hot skit, we mix it up a lot. And generally our group is also very engaged, there's a lot of activity in the chat, there are a lot of people wanting to share.

I've been to a lot of retreats, not retreats sorry... virtual events now lately, and I have to say we do it better or we did it better. I'm proud of the way that people at the end said I thought it was going to be excruciating, and it wasn't. It was fun, it was awesome, that was the kind of feedback we got.

Susan Friedmann: Congratulations! Now the question is if you do it again, what would you do differently second time around knowing what you know about a virtual event?

Michelle Villalobos: I would mail out a package in the mail earlier with different things in it. So one of the things we did was send out a care package with our playbook, I waited too long to send that, and it ended up costing us an arm and a leg. I would get that out earlier, and then along with that I would send out some fun things, this time we sent out a couple snacks, we sent out some pens but I probably play a little more with that piece.

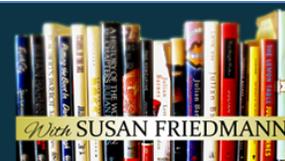
And Other than that, I don't think I'd change to much else, I feel like we did a really good job rolling with it, and the breakout sessions were good. Oh, one of the things that went really well was that on the 3rd day during the action planning session, we figured out to break out each client's into their own breakout room. And then the coaches that were there supporting would go and pop in and out of the rooms to check on people.

That way they got the feeling like we do in person of having the one on one support, which I wasn't sure how we were going to do that, and that's ultimately how we figured it out. That worked really well!

Susan Friedmann: Our on listeners love learning about mistakes and I'm sure there are hundreds here but what are some of the common ones that you find people make when they think about or even conduct one of these

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retreats?

Michelle Villalobos: There are a few for sure, one of them that's universal I think to both virtual and live retreats is that people try it out on paper first, and get it perfect and get it perfect before they'll get into action. And what ends up happening a lot of times is they don't ever get it perfect, and so they don't ever actually do the retreat. Or they create the whole thing, they create all these marketing materials, and websites and brochures, and then they start promoting it, and it's not landing, and then they're like "oh it's doesn't work, they get discouraged, they lack confidence."

What I've seen work better is what I call sell it 1st figure it out later. And what that looks like is instead of trying to market the retreat, market you, market your process, market having a meaningful conversation with you. Let me back up a 2nd, I'll also say that I've never myself sold a retreat by having someone just click on a button, and buy it every time I've sold a retreat, it's been over the phone or in person.

And the reason for that, is that this model for... at least the way I do it Susan, and I want to be cautious because I'm not trying to tell people that this is the only way to do it, but the way I do it, and the way... I've seen it work really well, is this is not a 3 day experience, that's \$200 or even \$500 or even \$900. I really operate on a boutique model, like you deliver an outstanding outcome and you charge a price that's worthy of that outcome.

Usually, the retreats that I do, that my clients do, start in the neighborhood of about \$2000, a \$2000 sale is not an easy thing to do by having somebody look at a brochure, and buy. Or having somebody go to a website and buy. Not to mention a retreat is a situation where you want to make sure that the people that are in the room or in the experience are a good fit, because more than with almost any other model, one bad apple can really spoil the bunch.

I say all of that to preface this, by saying that all you need to do is have what Mark Le Blanc, one of my coaches calls "meaningful conversations with people." And so rather than spending so much time and effort creating all these marketing materials, I would say do all your

7

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marketing and just focus on getting people on a call, a meaningful conversation, and then in that call, sell it. Even if you don't know exactly what it looks like, even if you don't have all the details exactly worked out, if you have a date, and you have of that in you and you have meaningful conversations with people who are interested in the breakthrough that you provide, sell it first, and then figure it out later.

That's what I did, I said hey I've got this, be on the phone with someone, they were a right fit, we were vibing, I knew what they needed and say listen "the way I work is everyone starts with this immersion experience." I call it the "superstar business breakthrough retreat," and the outcome of that is you're going to have the clarity that you're looking for you told me that you needed this, this and this. Well these are all things that we're going to do in that room over 3 days.

"Are you available on these dates?" And then that's how I sold it, instead of; "Oh, here take a look, I'm going to send you a brochure, see what you think." Does that make sense? You sell it and then you can actually craft the experience to the people that you unrolled.

Susan Friedmann: I think one of the points too that you said was that you have to know what the outcome is, and you have to know what people want, that's the end results, that you're going to get into the retreat, so that they can get what it is that they need, whatever that outcome is. Now for you, what is an extraordinary outcome?

Michelle Villalobos: I'll give you a couple of examples one of my clients Leon Webster, she's a good friend to her just on the phone today, and she has something called "The Lead Machine Weekend." And her immersion experience, her retreat is that people come in, and then 3 days later they have created all of their email marketing foundational, or fundamental she calls them. In other words, they've got a landing page that gives away a free gift.

They have the free gift created, they have a follow up email sequence, it's all uploaded into an e-mail platform. And they can start collecting leads and building their e-mail lists, and they have their 1st 90 days of e-mail content mapped out. Essentially in one week and they've

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created a little Lead machine, that's a juicy outcome, that's a very practical tactical outcome.

I'll use myself as an example, and mine is a little bit less, slightly less tangible I guess in the sense that people come into my retreat to get clarity, and focus and know what's the new business model that I'm going to add to my current business, and by the end of the weekend, they've got the new offers associated to that model, they have clarity on the target audience, they know what the price points are, they know what their big backend is, and they've created a business plan.

So, really the big outcome is they walk away with a new business plan, and action plan, but I also have a client and a friend, who I'm her client as well, who has a spiritual retreat that the outcome is you're going to walk away with a deeper connection to The Divine, and you're going to learn to access your own intuition, and you're going to tap into your feminine energy. Those are much less tangible outcomes, but no less exciting for the right person. Those are just a couple of examples.

Susan Friedmann: That's great! Now if our listeners think yes, this is something that I would like to do, but I have no idea where to start, what would the 1st step be that they would need to take? There's a lot of different ways to get started, I'll give you a couple of ideas. At the core though, I think that the key is to know what the big breakthrough is; "Know what the promise of the retreat is," some people can just jump right in, and say; "Oh the promise is this."

I know that they're going to have this outcome, they're going to create their lead machine in a weekend, or you know they're going to create a new business plan, whatever that looks like. But sometimes you need a more roundabout way to get there, if you're not sure what that promise would be, or what that big breakthrough is. You can also think about well what is the mastery it looks like in your world? What does the ongoing piece look like? What would you like to be delivering over time to a group of people consistently? What could you deliver forever? And from there that's the big backend, work backwards into well, what do they need to get there?

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For example, if you're like you know what, "I really want to create a mastermind group for people to share best practices in our industry." Cool, then you've got to ask the question who are these people. And then once you know who they are, you can ask yourself what's the problem that they have, that they know they have? What's the problem that keeps them up at night, is there some breakthrough retreat experience that could solve that problem for them, because if you solve that problem for them chances are they'll want to keep working with you, and working with each other.

Susan Friedmann: I love that, it is so exciting, it's like I have got to get started on some of this. Let's have you tell our audience how they can find out more about Michelle, and your different events, and how they would get involved with you?

Michelle Villalobos: Oh sure! You can find me at superstaractivator.com. There's events dates, and links to the events, there's a contact form, everything you need is there. And if you are really curious about this retreat model, I do have a free gift. It's the road map, I've created a 7 step, what I call "the retreats to riches road map." That basically is very simple, but it's simple because it's a very distilled down one sheet roadmap, that basically takes you through all 7 Court components of designing, filling and monetizing, and retreat.

And then there's a legend that goes with that kind of tells you what to do for each component. So it's a 2 page thing, very simplified but very distilled down to its essence. And you can get that at retreatstorichesroadmap.com.

Susan Friedmann: And I'm going to put that in the show notes Michelle, because I downloaded that. What an invaluable tool? Wow! Listeners, make sure all that you do click on that link and pick that up or download or whatever you want, but it is invaluable. And you'll find out more than we were able to fit in the time that we had with Michelle. And Michel if you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget, what would that be?

Michelle Villalobos: I would say to take imperfect action. So often, people like us Susan, I'm

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going to guess you and I are very similar. We want to have it all figured out, and what I've learned is that... and I don't know who first said this, "but you can't turn a parked car." It's important to get into action, and then from being in action; meaning talking to people about your retreats idea, sharing, preparing, setting a date, looking at venues.

I would say from that being in action, what you need to do become clearer, and clearer. Especially, if you're willing to take imperfect action, and to be kind to yourself and allow yourself to be in the exploration of it, in the discovery of it, rather than having to have it all figured out.

Susan Friedmann: I love that you said that, because you're right, I'm one of those people that I have got to figure it out, the plan has to fall into place before I do it, and it just adds to procrastination which is as you know a vice.

Michelle Villalobos: Yeah, it's a dream killer you know.

Susan Friedmann: So that imperfect action is so perfect, because yes we can to allow ourselves to be able to do this. Michelle you've been amazing, I knew you would. Listeners download this PDF from Michelle, and just look at this as another opportunity to add to your author marketing platform, and I think Michelle you would agree, it's a profitable. Wouldn't you agree with that one?

Michelle Villalobos: I would, it certainly change my business and my life.

Susan Friedmann: Well, I know that you changing hours, just by sharing with us. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom. And thank you will be taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview, and I sincerely hope that it sparked some ideas you can use to sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.