

Newsworthy Founder: Sara Alepin, Community Collaborations, Social Proof + Chablis

SPEAKERS

Lexie Smith, Sara Alepin

Lexie Smith

Today we're talking with Sara Alepin, master-connector, CEO of Photos from the Party, Podcast Host, and CEO of District Bliss Events - a community of ambitious creatives and business owners. As an extrovert living in a work-from-home world, Sara has found ways to leverage connections and continue to expand her multiple businesses, even during the pandemic, and that's exactly what we get into on today's episode. Sara and I dive into all things community relations, and organic ways to grow your business and network. Additionally, she gives all my wedding industry folk a great pitching opportunity and we end by talking about a hugely important actionable topic that you should be integrating into your communications strategy. Alright, without further ado, let's get started.

I think it was in January or February of this year when Sara and I first met in person at an event this was pre COVID. She came up to me and immediately made me feel so welcome in a room full of strangers. We had been connected on Instagram I think for a while, but it truly felt like I had known her in real life for some time. Since then, we have collaborated with our businesses and bonded over our mutual love of wine puns and dogs, which tees me up perfectly for my first question. So Sarah, we're going to get into all the career stuff here shortly. But first, can you share with us a bit about who Sara is outside of work?

Sara Alepin

Well, you just made me laugh a little bit, and I was trying not to audibly laugh. Because when we met, I thought I was convinced that we knew each other in person. So it's so funny that you mentioned that. Oh, boy, those were good days.

Lexie Smith

lifetime ago.

Sara Alepin

Oh, I know. Thank you so much for having me. Lexie. I love THEPRBAR. I love you. And I just love that you're doing this. But a little bit about me. Um, I am kind of a serial entrepreneur. My background is in photography. I have a master's degree in photography and digital imagery, and I actually got injured. Um, so I kind of had to, like pivot and change a bunch of things. And now my life consists of

quarantining with my and my French Bulldog, Clouseau. But it's been fun. So I mean, it's not that bad. But I'm allowed laughter, I'm a feisty, spunky lady, and I definitely love my coffee and wine.

Lexie Smith

So with you there, and I know that this is a podcast, so no one can see your shirt. But can you please yes, it says half coffee half wine with just speaks to my soul. 100%

Sara Alepin

I love that for you.

Lexie Smith

Thank you. I feel honored. Um, okay, so you are a podcast host and photographer and you are the CEO of District Bliss, I want to talk about all of that. But first, give us a little bit of a Sara history. So talk us through your career, what led you to becoming this triple threat that you are today?

Sara Alepin

Triple threat, ooh, I love it, I'm gonna have to put that in my bio, we'll do. Um, so I am an extrovert living in a work from home life. I was a darkroom photography teacher, and I got injured at work. And I couldn't go back, unfortunately. So I ended up you know, I, I had started my photography business as a side hustle years before that. And then I could continue with photography, but not with teaching. So I did a little bit of a pivot into just full time photography. Well, a lot of what you need when you're starting a business is a community of people. And then you also need people that you can bounce ideas off of, you can get ins and outs on and you know, really just like referral partners too. And so I started going to networking events, and I got a lot of the Oh, I'm a photographer too. So I don't need to know you and then turning around and like icing me out of the circle. And that's just not my jam, because I'm not everybody's ideal photographer. Not everyone's my ideal client. And I just can't take all of the work that I get. So I ended up founding District Bliss, because I wanted that welcoming, warm place where you could go and get education, do networking, and just have fun and find your people. And then because I love having a lot of things on my plate, I decided that I wanted to do the wedding dish, which is my podcast, one of my two podcasts. Again, like I said, I cannot stay busy enough. I'm much like you Lexie, now that I think about it. And when I started the wedding dish, it was sort of to create a community where engaged couples, married couples, and entrepreneurs could kind of come together to ask questions, get information, get inspiration, and really find out about some of the nitty gritty stuff that goes into weddings and building a business in the wedding industry. Since I'm primarily a wedding photographer, although district bliss isn't wedding related.

Lexie Smith

Okay, so tell us a bit more about what District Bliss really is. I know it's a lot of things, but for anyone listening who doesn't know a thing about us, catch us up to speed.

Sara Alepin

Okay? So District Bliss is a community of entrepreneurs and creative small business owners, and we support each other. We have business roundtables, we offer tons of education. We have networking, socials, that even in an online world feel like it's in person, because I need that in my life. And I built a

company that provided the things that I needed because I figured everyone else does, too. And so it's just a really lovely warm place where you can get business building resources, inspiration, education, and then also really feel like you found your people, every time we have an event, somebody comes away, after like a networking event, they'll say, I can't believe that there are people like me out there, and I had no idea. And so it's just, it's really, it's a way to connect, a way to build and a way to really, like, accelerate your business without compromising the fun.

Lexie Smith

So one element of PR that I'm a huge fan of is what I call community relations, aka your brand's relationship with different communities. Now, this can be a physical community, like the city you live in, or it can be virtual, like a Facebook group, or it can be a hybrid, like District Bliss. So can you speak a little bit more to the importance of establishing strong community relationships in business? It's one of the most important things in business, and it is so commonly overlooked. Because we all have that idea of networking is work, right? So we get this anxiety immediately when we hear that word. And we're like, oh, God, I don't want to leave the house, or Oh, I don't want to be on camera again, like, half the days already on camera at this point. But building my business, the reason that I have been so successful across the board is because I've built community. And if I, if there's anything that I need a referral to a bookkeeping person, or information about hiring a VA, or how to build out your team, and actually train them so that you don't end up then scaling back down. If you fail with the first person on your team. It having those people that you can reach out to is invaluable, it is more important than taking workshops online, it's more important than getting out there and attending events, just you know, to show your face or whatever, building that community where you trust support, and upholds, you know, you bring each other up. Whether or not you are competitors, per se, doesn't, you know, like I said before, I am not everyone's ideal client, I'm not a not everyone is my ideal client. And I'm not the perfect fit for every job out there. And it's so important, I mean, client care even to refer, if I'm not if someone is not my ideal client, and I refer to another photographer that they will be the ideal client for and that there'll be a better fit for, then that makes me that's client care. I mean, that makes me look great. I may get a referral from that person later, because they had such a good experience. And they didn't even hire me. And there's huge value in that. I could not agree more. In fact, one of the main strategies that I've used personally to grow THEPRBAR, his community relations, it's so important, I cannot stress that enough. And that kind of brings us to one of the things we collaborated on, which was an event on how to build a media kit. And I know if you go on your website, one thing that you outline is you offer brands the ability to apply to co host an event or workshop with your community as a form of promotion. So can you walk Through the details and strategy behind why hosting an event is essentially great PR.

Sara Alepin

Oh my gosh, it's such good PR. I mean, you're standing on the shoulders of giants when you're collaborating with other people. As long as you're collaborating with someone who is actually in, that is going to support you. And who actually does the other half of the collaboration, you know, you don't just go out there and reach out to anyone who has followers on Instagram and think it's going to work, you should definitely find the people who are in your niche, who are, you know, gonna get you in front of your ideal clients. But that being said, You are essentially elevating each other. You're getting your business in front of a completely different community. Before this Lexie, THEPRBAR inc. and district list

did not have any crossover and community. Well, actually, that's not true. We had two people, I think that were in both of our communities. Shout out to just Jess Joswick. And Kylie Hodges, yes,

Lexie Smith

yes. I love them. They're wonderful. But it's interesting to, to get in front of other people's audiences. And then you're able to showcase yourself as an expert. And you after that event, you booked at least one other speaking gig, you got two killer testimonials that I'm aware of. And you I'm sure gained traction in other ways. And today we are you happen to be taking over my Instagram. So hopefully you'll see some traction for that, too. So collaborating on events like that really gives you traction in different ways that you may not have gotten before. It's always worth it to collaborate. If you are collaborating with the right people, Again, couldn't agree more. And I have to give you a huge compliment because yet another thing that you are freaking on top of is garnering testimonials. When we look at testimonials from a PR lens, they serve as a great form of social proof. So can you speak maybe to the importance of social proof for a business and why? You know that is become a regular thing that you ask from your partners for District Bliss.

Yes. I so much insight into testimonials, social proof, if I recommend THEPRBAR, Inc. It's so different than if Lexie recommends her own brand. So essentially a testimonial is someone else doing the selling for you. They're saying, Hey, I hired this person or I bought this and I went through this and it was amazing. And you should do it too. Instead of saying Hi, this is why I'm so great. All right. Yeah, that's when we start to feel salesy. And that's when entrepreneurs start to take their foot off the gas because you don't want to feel slimy or salesy. Testimonials, remove that friction. So it's so amazing to you know, it's someone else selling your brand, your products, your services for you. And one of the reasons that we get them so quickly. And so such good testimonials, is that we actually offer linkbacks for testimonials. So, THEPRBAR inc has, I think like four different linkbacks across the District Bliss Academy, which is on hosted on teachable, so that's a completely different like server, even two places on our website, I believe even in our blog. So if because we also have the testimonial about your workshop. So it gives you this, you know, all of this SEO, which is search engine optimization, because you're getting all of this cross traffic that's coming from my site, but also Google loves it. They love to see that you're linking to other people's stuff and that other people have links to you. So it's actually good for both sides SEO.

Lexie Smith

So Sarah is nailing on a huge benefit of PR and that is this not only the third part third party credibility, right, someone else saying you're cool, is more important or more effective than you saying you're cool. But also backlinks, right? And she's so right, I'm nodding my head this whole time. I am winning, because I get all these awesome backlinks through this collaboration through her community. So just SEO one thing I don't think people usually think about is PR and SEO are very related. SEO is a PR strategy. So anyways, just everything you're saying I'm nodding my, my head too. I have one more final question here. And then I want to shift to talk about your podcasts. So what have you found to be the most effective way to organically spread the awareness about district bliss? Well, there are two. So I'm cheating, although I Two i sbetter than one So because we have such solid SEO, our blog has been a huge hit. That was one of the ways that we first took off, because if you have 700 words, and several

links, and you're using headers on your blogs, then Google loves to crawl that I'm increasing the amount that I'm sharing. But then I also can repurpose that on to my social media, which is the other way we've grown. And we've gotten bigger now, because of social media, I think, and the blog is taking a backseat to that. But it's so easy to repurpose my blog content into bite sized pieces and put it on my social media over the course of a week. And it's the one blog, so I'm not writing twice, and I'm giving tons of valuable information. So I'm not asking for anything, I'm giving something. And that's why people come back, they they know that we're here to give support. We're here to provide information. We're not asking you to necessarily attend anything. If you can get what you need from our social media or a blog, then it's like hell yeah. Do your thing. And that's kind of so that's those two things have been I guess, they fall under the umbrella of providing services and giving resources. But yeah, social media and the blog are probably the two biggest ways we've we've grown the business. Is there a specific social media platform that has been more successful?

Sara Alepin

Instagram, for sure. Yeah, definitely.

Lexie Smith

So now I want to shift gears a little bit. You briefly mentioned it, you are the host of two podcasts. Correct? Because one isn't enough. Let's do two. So can you tell us you already talked a little bit about the wedding dish, but can you tell us about the other one? Okay, which is my favorite thing ever, by the way? And I think you're going to be on it at some point Not to give it away not to give it away. Sorry, Go And so my other podcast is called laughing with gingers. I know you can't see me, but I am a redhead. My co host is also a redhead. And we happen to be super loud laughers. Just really, for some reason, we laugh a lot. And we laugh loud. And so we did for a long time these business brainstorming sessions on Fridays. And then I got off the call one time and I was like, why don't we just do a podcast. It has nothing to do with business. It's just fun it is the greatest like dopamine hit ever because you're basically just making each other laugh the whole time. So your your brain is just like on fire with happiness afterwards. So it's great, but we have so we have guests that come on, but they have to wear something red on their head. If they're not redheads. They can be on very redheads. And like yesterday, it was a fireman, the earlier this week the episode that will drop at the end of the week was owllet or something from the PJ Mask. I don't know it's like a cartoon or something. I don't know what it is. I'm not I don't have kids. So I'm or I might not have time for my million jobs in pot. Right? Well, you have a first child. So in my in my world that counts. I just to give everyone some context. When Sarah and I were talking when I asked her to be on this podcast. She mentioned her podcast and she said but there's a caveat. If you come on the podcast, you have to have a red wig. And I was so thrown off. I think it's the funniest thing ever. I am so down to get a red wig. I have a brown one. But I don't have a red one. So I'll just put it on that you know, it's a business expense. Right? put that on my company credit card.

Sara Alepin

Exactly. Exactly. Because you get to plug your business on there too, even though it's not business really

Lexie Smith

I just think it'd be fun. I love it. Um, so I know that that one was for fun. The wedding dish now was the intention of launching that any in any way related to developing your business. So it wasn't necessarily intentionally related. Um, I had always wanted to do a podcast and weddings is really like one of my areas of expertise. And it's really only used when I'm doing the photography portion of my life. And I don't, I'm in a position where I don't have to take on every wedding that comes my way. Another really awesome thing as you build out businesses, you get to be picky about your clients if you do it, right. So I only take on clients that I absolutely love. And I don't really get to exercise that like wedding expertise in my normal everyday life. So the idea of doing a podcast where I got to share that with a greater audience was really exciting to me. I had a kind of a unique wedding because we only had we had a pre-covid we were on way, on the top of the trends because we had a pre COVID wedding in 2012. With 17 guests. Oh, man, yeah, you saw it coming.

Sara Alepin

So the idea that you can get the wedding day that you actually want, where you're not looking back and saying, Oh, I shouldn't have just relied on Pinterest, or some of those other things where everyone's kind of doing the same thing, even though you think it's unique at the time, is, you know, that's kind of the goal, like to support everyone for whatever the shape and size and the look and vibe of their wedding is. And same with business, you know, getting the idea that there are businesses out there that focus primarily on regional weddings that are Nigerian weddings, because they have very specific, huge, amazing celebrations that span over several days. It's not necessarily easy to find people that are really skilled in that kind of thing. So it's really fun to highlight businesses that have these niches that you didn't even necessarily know exist.

Lexie Smith

Yeah. So can I ask you this to put you on the spot? Are you open to being pitched if we have any listeners who are within the wedding industry? Okay, so what type who listening would qualify as someone you'd like to hear from? So we interview engaged couples, we interview wedding, married couples, sorry, not wedding couples, that's not a thing. And we, because we talked about the planning process and that kind of thing, but we also interview businesses. And the qualification really is a positive attitude. well spoken. And not like, I'm not into the kind of person that's just a money grabber like you should you need to be like an expert in your field, you need to be heart centered, in some capacity. That's not saying that you aren't making money, you should be making money. If you're running a business, please be making money. It's that you shouldn't be one of those people who's just saying, like, you know, turning around and walking away from me, because I'm a photographer and you're a photographer, you should be a good person. Otherwise, we won't we just won't have that great of conversation and you won't be a great fit for the podcast because it won't make either of us sound. You know, good. So here's my tip to all you listeners, if you are within the business, or the wedding industry, really listen to the last two minutes and take some notes on everything that Sara just said. So you can nail your pitch. Okay, so I want to shift gears one more time. Because during our event together, which was in July of 2020, you and your team opened my eyes to this whole new concept of accessibility made easy. So first, can you high level Tell me what it means to make content accessible?

Sara Alepin

Yes, because the common misconception with accessibility is that it's just your website, that your website works for screen readers, or, you know, and even like colorblindness or differently, you know, inefficiencies. Those are, those are the two things we think of when we think of accessibility, or we think of having ramps or elevators, right, like we don't think about something like a podcast being accessible to the deaf. And my podcast, both of them are actually accessible to the Deaf and hearing impaired communities. Everything's transcribed, it's super easily available on our websites, and in the show notes and things. So it's really like you can actually be part of it. If you are deaf, and I have to give Erin my, my business manager for all of my businesses and my producer for the wedding dish, props for this because she's taught me so much. Her business is called Mabely Q And she actually has an Accessibility Made Easy course that she just built out for people. So when we host workshops and things we have, we make sure that everyone puts on closed captions at the bottom so that it's accessible both during the workshop and when we repurpose the video into the District Bliss Academy. And we make sure that every that people have visual aids on the slides because of the different types of learning. You know, some of us are kinesthetic learners, some of us are auditory learners, some of us are visual learners. And having the combination of those things allows us to serve the greatest number of people. And it also, I think it's impactful to other business owners because it really does showcase that we not only have our finger on the pulse of what needs to be done in our society to be, you know, successful and inclusive, but also to really like, we're value centered, community centered organization. So that really shows that we're not just saying that we are that that is, you know, that is who we are. And I Lexie, I'm sure you can speak to how, how it felt for you to experience that as a collaborator of ours.

Lexie Smith

It blew my mind, it had never been on my radar just to be completely transparent that that was even an option. And, for example, guys, when I was working with Sara and her team, they asked if I would build out my PowerPoint slides in Google Slides because Google is ahead of the game. And they allow you to click a little button that does close caption. So I highly encourage anyone listening who does presentations to look at Google Slides. Hopefully the rest of the platforms catch up soon. And I just wanted to bring this up. Because as we talk about developing our communication strategies as business owners, it is so freaking important to think about inclusivity Now I'm not saying market to everyone, because when you fall, when you start marketing to everyone you fall, you know, to the you speak to no one but what I am saying is it's really important to not forget about making your business accessible. Do you have any? And this is my last little question before I we wrap we begin to wrap it up. If someone wants to learn more about how to be accessible, where's a great first place to go? Or to start?

Sara Alepin

Absolutely go to Erin's website, it's mabelyq.com And I'm going to spell that because I know that this is a podcast and I can give you the link but most of you might be running or on, you know, doing something while you're listening. So it's M A B E L Y q .com and it's Erin Perkins is the CEO. And she has a little tab up there that says resources, and she has resources for transcription. And everything she does is bootstrapping it. So it's not meant to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars that you don't have as an entrepreneur, quite frankly, to make your business successful. It's doing little things like \$1.99 for an app that puts captions on your Instagram stories. And who can you know, of course, I'm

gonna pay that that makes my life so much easier. I don't have to type it out. I actually, personally don't love that app, or the either of the apps because they put an H on my name, and I just can't spell my name.

Lexie Smith

She is Sara without an H. Everyone listen, if you're pitching her do not put that H,

Sara Alepin

secret thing about me is that if you continue to spell my name incorrectly, I will start inserting H's into your names.

Lexie Smith

Oh my God, that's amazing. I love that so much.

Sara Alepin

I'll put it an H at end of Lexie.

Lexie Smith

People spell my name wrong all all the time too. Because Lexie can be spelled five different ways. So I do relate to you.

Sara Alepin

So and it also actually E R I N. But they do the boy Aaron on Google Slides and on some of the transcription software isn't so it's not perfect. But we're not going for perfection, we're going for doing what we can to be better and to reach more people and to serve more people and just to do the right thing. So she has, you know, an otter.ai is one of her transcription software's it records the audio and it transcribes and I use it when I take workshops online, because how often do you miss stuff when you are taking a workshop and then I can go back and I'm like, Oh, that's what they said, if I'm taking notes, so it's helpful for a million different reasons. But that will allow you to transcribe your podcasts like \$6.99 a month for so many minutes that you could never even use them all. So this is again, all like bootstrap budget. And it's AI, you're not sending this to like a human, it's not going to be perfect, but you can edit it and make it perfect. And they keep the audio with it so that you can hear what it says like, you know, if you if it said the other day, it transcribed Erin to say I'm their number one killer, when she's your leader, cheerleader, killer, same thing, right

Lexie Smith

killer cheerleaders,

Sara Alepin

but it dropped the audio on the end of cheer, or on the end of leader or something, they get dropped in there. So it sounded like killer to the transcript. So you do have to read it, you know, it's not like you can just turn around and throw it up online. But it's, it's super easy, and it's super easy to adjust it. Um, and I'll send you links for all this stuff. So you can include them in your show notes. Lexie, if you would like to do that.

Lexie Smith

Yes, please. Thank you so much. I think it's so so important. And before we go, I have one more question for you that I like to ask every single guest and I remind you that my podcast is called Pitchin' and Sippin' so we've talked about the pitchin', Now I have to ask what you are sippin' so what is your favorite beverage it can be non alcoholic or alcoholic of choice.

Sara Alepin

Ah, I am really in the mood for a Chablis today.

Lexie Smith

So I don't what is that? All right. What is that? The delightful French white wine that's very light and crisp. I tell you every single time I ask this question, a word or a cocktail or something I've never heard of comes out and I thought I knew things. I have so much to learn. That sounds lovely though.

Sara Alepin

It's so funny what you learn when you actually sit down and have conversation.

Lexie Smith

Yeah, yeah. Wow. Okay, I'm gonna have to look that one up to adding it to my list. Um, Sara, thank you so much. Last thing before we we head off, can you tell everyone where they can connect with you and learn more about district lists? I feel like I should make a website that just has links to all the crap that I do 20 million things Yes.

Sara Alepin

So my photography company if you are interested is photos from the Harty h AR t Why? a riff on my maiden name. And my you can find District Bliss at districtbliss.com or @districtblissevents on social media and laughing with gingers you can find at laughing with gingers or anywhere you listen to podcasts. And the wedding dish you can find at the weddingdishpodcast.com And you can find that anywhere that you listen to your podcast. So across the board, they're available on all formats. And if you need the transcripts, they're available.

Lexie Smith

Thank you so much, Sara, you've been awesome. As always.

Sara Alepin

Thank you. I love that you're doing this amazing podcast, so many tips, so many awesome business professionals that you're bringing together. I just really admire you so much Lexie and thank you for continuing to give so much value to the community

Lexie Smith

and Mic drop