



Elisa Camahort Page: “Just A Girl” Season 3: Episode 7

Speaker 1: Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology, a series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans, touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda: This episode is brought to you by my company, TimeshareCMO.com. But it could be your company here. We've got season three of Stayin' Alive in Tech completely booked already, with an additional 10 more guests on the wait list and close to 30 more on our list of people to approach. Currently, we publish twice a month most months of the year, but we could go to a weekly format and more frequently if we could engage more editing and social media time, as well as cover our current costs. So please consider a sponsorship for your company. We've got fabulous content reaching some pretty senior folks in the technology sector, and you're doing your part to help capture the living history of the technology profession.

Melinda: It's not a stretch to say that Instagram as we know it wouldn't exist without our next guest. Elisa Camahort Page is best known as the co-founder and COO of scrappy-startup-turned-global women's media company BlogHer, Inc. She co-founded BlogHer in 2005 with Jory Des Jardins and Lisa Stone and served as COO until it was acquired in 2014 by SheKnows Media, where she eventually served as chief community officer until 2017.

Melinda: Most notably, Elisa ran BlogHer's conference line of business and owned their PR and social media strategy, including conducting and presenting consumer research that validated the market they created and presaged industry changes. For those of you who are not aware, BlogHer was a movement that created a market, ultimately becoming a national women's media brand with 100 million web users, thousands of conference attendees, and more than \$30 million in annual revenue.

Melinda: In addition to owned and operated properties and conferences, their network grew to aggregate and curate 3,000 publishers and 12,000 social influencers, ultimately paying \$36 million to those creators over the last five full years they were a standalone business. At the forefront of social web revolution, BlogHer was, in effect, one of the first groups to build value for women online. BlogHer created a model on how to build community, grow a business, support diversity in words and action, and defend transparency and civility as content, community, and commerce collide online.

Melinda: The BlogHer founding team were named among the most powerful women entrepreneurs by Fortune, the most powerful people in new media by Forbes, the most influential women in technology by Fast Company, the winning women class of 2011 by



Ernst & Young, and the most influential women in Bay Area business by the San Francisco Business Journal. In addition, they were awarded The Social Impact Award by the Anita Borg Institute and the Iris Awards' Vanguard Award by Mom 2.0 Summit. Elisa herself has been named a social media legend by The C-Suite Network, a top woman in media by Folio, one of the Alliance of Women in Media's 60 honorees, and NCWIT Hero by NCWIT, and was honored with the 2018 Purpose Award by EGAMI Consulting.

Melinda: Elisa is also an Astia Advisor and a founding fellow of The Society for New Communications Research and serves on numerous boards, including for the NanoSTEAM Foundation, The What, Hack the Hood, Our Hen House, and has been on the South by Southwest interactive programming committee for 13 years. She's given talks at the Commonwealth Club, The United State of Women, DLD Women, South by Southwest, DENT, TEDx, and of course, BlogHer. And she herself has interviewed luminaries such as Martha Stewart, Gwyneth Paltrow, Christy Turlington, Kim Kardashian West, Caterina Fake, and Guy Kawasaki.

Melinda: It's always intimidating to interview the interviewer, but I can report in advance that Elisa is tremendously gracious to me. Because of the impact of BlogHer, we're going to spend a good part of this episode talking about what it's like to start a company with other people and to maintain good relationships with no drama, and then sell that company. We'll also ask her about the future of influencer marketing. But then we'll look at what Elisa is up to today. Her debut book, Road Map for Revolutionaries: Resistance, Activism, and Advocacy for All, was published by Ten Speed Press about a year ago, and it was an Amazon number one new release. A hands-on resource guide to activating around the causes people care about the most, Road Map for Revolutionaries features contributions and/or endorsements from such diverse activists and advocates as Gloria Steinem, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Patrisse Cullors, Soledad O'Brien, Ricki Lake, Guy Kawasaki, Bobby Jones, and Carla Hall.

Melinda: Today, Elisa is the CEO of Cygnus, a Do Big Things company, bringing a new technical solution to progressive candidates and causes to help them avoid information overload and fact underwhelm when looking at their campaign data. Cygnus extracts insights and facilitates decision-making out of data. Elisa also does a ton of short-term consulting with entrepreneurs, thought leaders, and organizations. Wow, that's quite a bio, isn't it? I hope it's obvious now why the title of this episode it is a tongue-in-cheek anthem by No Doubt called "Just a Girl." You can listen to it on Spotify. Enjoy.

Melinda: Elisa, welcome to the podcast.

Elisa: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Melinda: So Elisa, I'd like to ask you, I know you live in the Bay Area now, but I'd like to ask you where you grew up, and when you were small, what you thought you wanted to be when you grew up?



- Elisa: Oh, I am one of those few hardy native Bay Area residents. I was born in Berkeley while my dad was a grad student there, and we moved, we took a couple of years. We lived in Massachusetts, but by the time I was 10, we moved to Sunnydale, which is in the South Bay area, and my mom still lives in that house that I grew up in there.
- Melinda: Wow.
- Elisa: Yeah. Other than after college, I went and lived in New York for four years, but other than that, I have lived in California ever since.
- Melinda: So, you are a California girl?
- Elisa: I am.
- Melinda: We do have plenty of them on this podcast. They do exist. Lots of natives. Do you remember the first time that you touched a computer or when you became aware of technology?
- Elisa: Well, I am maybe a little older than your average bear in the tech industry. I'm 55, and I did not touch my first computer until after college. I typed my papers in college on a regular electric typewriter. I moved to New York, and I did, as any self-respecting starving artist, would-be artist does, I did a lot of temp work. I remember very clearly that this client didn't really have that much for me to do, so they kind of threw a manual for WordPerfect, which existed before Microsoft, and threw this manual to me and sat me at a computer and said, "Oh, you can teach yourself." And so that was really, I must have been 22, and that was really my first experience with a computer and technology.
- Elisa: Later, I was very utilitarian about computers even when I was in high tech. So, my first foray into high tech, I worked for a couple of different companies that made hardware for cable operators, and so it was my job to help products come to market that were delivering, for example, the internet. But I wasn't really using the internet. I had a computer that I did my work on, but I wasn't really drawn into everything that one can do until, I remember it very clearly, my now spouse sat me down to watch the Steve Jobs keynote where he introduced the iMac where it was like a little lamp. You know, so like it had the base and then it had the screen, it moved around, and he talked about the iPod, and he talked about iTunes, and he talked about iPhotos. I was kind of miserable in my job, and I just went and bought ... I did what I call one of my misery purchases, and I bought ... Well, I was making all this money, but I never had any time to spend-
- Melinda: Retail therapy. Yeah, retail therapy.
- Elisa: Yeah, never had any time to spend it, so I bought the whole kit and caboodle. I'd never used a Mac before. This must have been about 2002, bought the whole kit and caboodle, bought a digital camera, and just started messing around with the more



creative uses. Got my very first blogging software application through buying that Mac, that first Mac. They offered it as like a free add-on.

Melinda: Was it called blogging at that point?

Elisa: It was. The tool was called iBlog, and it was hosted by the mac.com service. I started blogging then in 2002 or '03, I guess, and ever since then I sort of got even more deeply immersed. It's funny because maybe my jobs back at those other tech companies were more technical in nature because I was working with engineers on developing really hardcore products, but I didn't really leverage the technology personally until a little later, and then once I was in there, you couldn't kick me out.

Melinda: Elisa, I don't know if you know this, and I don't expect you to know this, but I have a theater degree, too.

Elisa: Oh.

Melinda: And there are actually, you're the third guest on this podcast, as it turns out, that have a theater degree.

Elisa: Well, I think it speaks very much to how much we still need not just the liberal arts and the value of learning the skills you get with any liberal arts degree, but the arts and how much they offer. I have a friend who's a very, very senior engineering VP at Google and she says when she's hiring engineers, she looks for what artistic endeavors they're into because it speaks to how you use your brain and how you think about things. I feel like I will take ... People talk about sports and how that builds teamwork or collaboration or a sense of responsibility, and I'm like, "Try putting on a show. That will teach you all you need to know." And so, I think that we'd be surprised at how many people have these little hidden checkered pasts.

Melinda: I like to say that theater is really the only collaborative art form. It truly is not something that can be done alone. It has to be done with other people. I feel it's the most marvelous preparation, but I'd love to ask you how you think it's affected you in your career. Here's our pitch to our arts major friends, you know? How has that helped you in your career or affected the way you think about the work you do?

Elisa: Well, I think it's helped me a lot because, and this sometimes throws people a little bit, but I'm kind of an undercover introvert. I'm not that comfortable in big crowds. I don't get energized so much from that, but you don't have to be an extrovert to enjoy performing different arts. What the theater background does is allow you to communicate and to be with people, including in front of people, and have a comfort level that has nothing to do with introversion or extroversion. It's training, basically.

Elisa: And so, I think that it's that idea of communicating, and that was always ... When I got into tech, I did not have a tech degree, I did not have a tech background, and I

happened to get into tech during the Dot-Com Boom, so I was lucky. There was a lot of room for advancement. But one of the things I kind of brought to the table was that I could communicate concepts, and I could adapt how I was communicating based on the audience. So, if I was talking to the executive staff versus engineers, versus the press, versus the sales team, I could phrase things differently and communicate differently, and also listen and be in the moment and hear what their response was to understand what I should say next.

Elisa: So, people ... Yes, I did scripted theater, so you have a script, but the technique of acting is all about, even though you have a script, it's living in the moment and really listening and responding like it's the first time. And so that combination of knowing my stuff, knowing what I want to say, and pairing that with hearing how it's landing and seeing what people are responding like and what they need in response--I think those two things together are really great skills to have when you're trying to translate especially new and innovative technology ideas to people who have very varying levels of understanding or experience with them.

Melinda: I couldn't have said it better myself. Also, I think it makes us flexible and adaptable because we're changing. You're getting a play up, you've got to learn quickly, whatever you're learning, if you're doing a play. I often say we did this play about Northern Ireland in the '80s and you had to learn in six weeks what you need to know in order to be convincing or tell that story, and so it teaches you to get up to speed quickly and be flexible.

Elisa: Yeah. It's interesting because once I started doing theater when I was probably about 12 or 13, so before then I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian. You asked what I wanted it to be. I thought I wanted to be a veterinarian because I didn't really have a good concept that veterinarians did more than play with cute animals all day. I didn't really get you'd have to operate on them, like sometimes you'd have to put them to sleep, and sometimes ... I was very naïve, and then when I got into high school at 13 and I took my first biology class, and I think we did dissection, and I was like, "Oh, wait. Whoa, wait a minute."

Elisa: So, then I got into theater and I decided ... theater and music, singing, and so I decided that was it for me. I was very directed about that. Like my mom grew up in New York, and my grandmother still lived there, so I was going to go to school and then I was going to move to New York and I was going to be on Broadway. All the decisions I made were kind of geared towards, how do I set myself up for that? So, I actually went to San Jose State and lived at home and saved my money, because I didn't want to go to New York and be super poor. So, I'm like, "I'm just going to ..." I got a job. I went local. It was very affordable back in the day. And when at San Jose State, I met an instructor who had a relationship with a summer stock theater who, if you went and apprenticed there for two summers, you got your union card.

- Elisa: And so, I immediately set about with that was my goal. I was going to get picked by her to go to that theater. I just wanted to get in and out of college because my parents really expected me to go. I always like to say I'm here to give hope to all the parents who think their kids are smart but they just don't apply themselves in school. I did not apply myself in school. I did not really care. I squeaked by, and in my family squeaking by was that I got some As, mostly Bs, a few Cs. Like it's not squeaking by like I got all Ds. My family definitely had different expectations. But even in college, like I was still, I was a theater major and I took the minimum other stuff I had to take to get in and out in four years and get myself to this summer stock, get myself my equity card, and move to New York. And I was really like, "That's what I'm going to do."
- Elisa: And then I did move to New York, and I did audition a lot and do a variety of things, and I realized something that in retrospect I was really naive, but I felt very jaded because I thought, "Oh, making it in theater isn't just about being talented or working hard. Like you have to schmooze. It's all about who you know. There's so much luck and timing. There's so many things you don't control. That really sucks." I mean, little did I know, that's every industry in the world, right? That there's an element of that. So that was my naivete. That jadedness was actually very naive because I didn't expect that everywhere I went from there.
- Elisa: But anyway, at the age of 26, I decided I was wrong. This is not what I want. I do not want to do this, which was have other jobs, live really, really paycheck to paycheck, and be frustrated. That's not actually what I wanted to do. It was sort of like the veterinarian where I imagined I would just play with kitties all day. I think I just thought, "I'll move out there and I'll do awesome work all the time," and you do a lot of crappy work on your way to awesome work. And I was tired of not having money, and to be honest, I missed California. Like the weather alone was a brutal awakening.
- Elisa: So, I moved back to California. I still continued to do some acting, but I always say it was quite liberating actually to be 26 years old and to say, "Okay, the thing I thought I was just going to do and have no fallback for, I better figure out what my fallback is. I guess it could be anything in the world because there's nothing else in the world I really wanted to do." And that was actually liberating. It didn't matter. I could try anything. If it failed, it couldn't be worse than failing at the thing I thought was my life's purpose. Right? So, I might as well.
- Elisa: So, I worked for a commodity trader, and I got into doing, even though I was math-phobic in high school, I got into doing accounting for commodity pool operators, and I just spent like seven years in that industry. Then I was like, "Hey, what's this tech thing? This sounds interesting and very, very hot in this area. Let me see if I can get a job in tech and see if I like it," and that's what I did. I got a job in tech. I took a really entry level admin role in a marketing department to see if I would have aptitude for it and like it, and I lucked out with timing. I lucked out with the first people that I worked with who really saw promise in me and mentored me, and turns out I did have aptitude, turns out I did like it, and so I've been in tech for 20 years now, but I always say that losing the



thing I thought was going to be my be-all-end-all opened up a world of possibility rather than shutting it down, because like I said, nothing ... What was going to be worse than failing at the thing you thought was your life's purpose?

Melinda: That's a phenomenal story. It's almost like you were reading my notes for the questions I wanted to ask you, so this is gorgeous. You are a storyteller. You mentioned in your bio as I was reading that you were one of the earliest practitioners, and I didn't know this until I read your bio, to think about the way organizations bring marketing and social media together. So, I thought it'd be worth, because this whole podcast is sort of about the past and sort of how it affects where we are today, to stop for a moment and talk a little bit about social media and marketing kind of at that phase. It looks like early 2000s, like what did it look like for people who weren't doing it then?

Elisa: Well, so like I said, when I made that misery purchase of the Apple products and got that first blog, my first blog was just a personal blog and I really didn't expect anyone to be reading it. It was just writing for fun. I was doing writing for work. I was a good communicator, and that did translate into being a pretty good writer. My personal blog was all restaurant reviews, movie reviews, theater reviews, like I just reviewed every little thing I did, and what I started to notice ... And at that time there was no social media. There was blogging and there were some nascent online communities as in Yahoo Groups, as in tribe.net.

Melinda: The WELL?

Elisa: Yes, there were chat rooms, there were forums. There was IRC. There was no real social media. Blogging in itself was pretty new and revolutionary in 2002, 2003. What I started to ... I had a few experiences where I blogged about someone who was relatively well known, compared to me. One was a musician, the other was a woman who was an activist, a feminist activist, and I just blogged little things about them, and they clearly already had Google Alerts set up on their name, and they came and commented on my posts. I remember being like, "What? Oh, yes, this is public. This isn't just me blathering."

Elisa: But the real aha moment, or what I like to call my peanut butter chocolate moment, because I'm old enough to remember those Reese's commercials, is that I went ... After I left my tech company, it was like I had been there, they'd gone through seven or eight layoffs. There was the spiraling down of the bust. We're talking 2003, and there was a layoff coming. They had not talked to me about laying anyone else on my team off, which was good because I don't know who I could have laid off, and frankly, everyone reported to me and I reported to the VP, and two VPs ago I had gone and made an appointment with the CEO to ask him what it was going to take to promote me to that role instead of having me be this person who managed everything but didn't get the title. Right? And it was exactly what kind of frustrating, annoying conversation you would expect in such a situation where it started with him asking me how old I was. And



I was well prepared. I was like, "Well, I'm three years older than you were when you founded this company and became its CEO."

Melinda: Oh, snap. Snap.

Elisa: Snap. Yes, but un-phased he asked me what I did because my skin was so good, so it was a really super appropriate conversation. So anyway, so two more VPs later and I'm like, I was thinking, "This is it, this is the time I'm going to get laid off." And I had heard what the package was, and it didn't sound that bad, so I'm like, "You know? I'm ready. It's good. Like I'm really, really burnt." A Friday came and went, another layoff happened, and I was not laid off. So once again, I was going to have the whole team reporting to me, product management and product marketing across four product lines, and I was going to report to this new VP who was not going to know, who did not come from our sector, did not know our customers, did not know our technology, did not know, as far as I could tell, crap about what we were going to be doing. And I could just see I was going to be training another guy.

Melinda: Been there.

Elisa: And I was just like ... So, I went home that weekend. I was like, "Oh, my God, I'm so depressed I have to go back." And then on Monday morning I was like, "But why though? Why? Why do I have to go back?" I was a very thrifty miserly little person, and I had about two years' worth of a take home pay, not my gross, but the net, in the bank. And I'm like, "Okay, I know we're in a bust, but I bet I could stretch this out a good long time."

Elisa: And so, I went in on Monday and I asked the acting COO if it was too late to get on the list to be laid off, and I'm going to put myself on the list. It turned into somewhat of a drama. The CEO wanted me to just quit. The CTO, they were brothers, the CTO wanted me to stay. I finally had to put in a good word with the general council about some of the stuff that had been going on that wasn't really okay, and I said, "And I'm willing to go nicely and quietly if you give me this package." So that resolved everything. Once I talked to the general counsel, it kind of resolved everything very quickly. I stayed for another six weeks, got my package. I actually stayed on and consulted with them part-time on a project, so it was all very amicable and really ... And so, I just started blogging more because I don't know, I had time, so I was having fun.

Elisa: I went to meet someone at this Greek restaurant that was near our office, our old office where I used to work. There are a lot of these places in Silicon Valley, falafel places basically. You go, you get pita, you get falafel, you get gyros, you get that kind of thing. And this place was kind of a cut above. It had tablecloths, and it had-

Melinda: Upscale.



Elisa: It was really nice, and so I wrote a review of it and I sent it to three people at my old company, and said, "This is right around the corner from you guys. You should try it. It's better than those other places we were going." So, two weeks later I go to this restaurant, and there's like 10 different people from that company there, none of whom were the ones that I had sent the review to. And so, I said, "Hey, what are you guys doing here?" And they're like, "Oh, yeah, we saw your review got passed around the company and now this is the new company place. We're all coming here basically."

Melinda: Wow.

Elisa: And I was like, "Wow, that is amazing because ..." and it sort of made me think about, why is that? And I realized, at that time, when blogging was still pretty unusual, you had the power of word of mouth, which I think marketers have always known is the most powerful reference, is from someone you know. So, you had the power of word of mouth, but you had the stickiness of it being on the web and discoverable, but also re-findable. Like if I had told someone verbally about this restaurant, six weeks later when they wanted to go someplace, they'd be like, "What was that place Elisa mentioned? Yeah. I don't know," but now they could like Google it or go to my blog and they could find it again, and the social weight of, I wrote it down, I took care with my words and I wrote it down, and it just combines these two powerful things, the power of word of mouth and the power of the internet and the share-ability amplification and distribution of the internet, and it creates this perfect storm for organizations.

Elisa: So, I started to think about, how could organizations use this in a way that would help them market? And because I was blank slating here, people weren't really doing that, I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to help theaters market their shows?" Because theaters rely so heavily on word of mouth. Subscriptions are usually only about half their ticket sales, and it's like they're starting over every show to get that word of mouth, and often, word of mouth can't build till opening night. I'm like, "What if you could start building word of mouth beforehand by telling stories about the actors, by telling stories about funny things that were happening at the rehearsal, by making people feel like they were inside?"

Elisa: Because the thing about theater that you don't get in other art forms, like movies or TV, is that what you are seeing is unique to that evening. You've probably experienced this. When something happens that's clearly unexpected, there's no favorite moment for the audience, there's no more favorite moment than when something happens that actors have to, like you said, respond and adapt and work around. That's what makes people feel connected. And so, I said, "What if you could start to create that feeling through creating content?"

Elisa: And so, I went to a colleague of mine who was the artistic director of the theater I was still doing theater at, and said, "I don't need you to pay me. Just give me a discount code you can track, and give me access to your actors and your creative staff to interview them, and let me try this blog for you." He was like, "Sure." And I'm not sure, he did end



up paying me to do many more shows for him, and I'm not sure he ever read a single blog because he was not an internet guy, but he gave me that first thing, which gave me a case study, which I then took to other theaters and started doing all this work to create blogs for theaters.

Elisa: I mean, I realized after a while that theaters don't have very large budgets and it's hard to get them to pay you on time, and so I realized I needed some enterprise clients if I wanted to actually like replace my corporate salary. So, I expanded my focus a little bit, but that's what I was doing when I met Lisa Stone and Jory Des Jardins, who ended up being my BlogHer co-founders. I was consulting, and it was almost entirely blogging and then distributing, like sharing those blog posts in some online communities and doing a little bit of online advertising like Google Search ads. There was no social media. That hadn't really happened yet. BlogHer in fact was founded before Twitter, before YouTube, before ... Facebook was just for college students when we started. Certainly before Instagram and so many other tools. It was really, those things weren't things, you know? So, our life changed a lot over the life of the company.

Melinda: That's actually where I wanted to go, which was to talk about the founding of BlogHer and how it started. My next question was, how did you get the word out? Because in those days, you don't have them. And I would just like to stop for a moment and say what you were doing was content marketing before it was called that.

Elisa: Yes, indeed.

Melinda: Pretty much straight up content marketing. It's what we still do today on some level.

Elisa: Yeah.

Melinda: But yeah, going back to that, that's one I was thinking about, what I wanted to ask you, was just how big BlogHer got before there was social media. I thought it would be fascinating to hear how you guys did that.

Elisa: Yes. So BlogHer is basically a women's media company that I co-founded with two other women, and we started in February of 2005. At that time, I like to point out that the cultural environment we were in was ... This was just after the 2004 election where the numbers of women in Congress hadn't really budged, and so there was lots of, "Where are the women in Congress?" There was lots of, "Where are the women on the Sunday morning talk shows and on the op-ed pages?" Because there were no women covering these races either. There was also, "Where are the women in tech?" Which unfortunately is an ongoing discussion, and, "Where are the women speaking at conferences?" And there was lots of calls to action and people making lists of great women you could have at your conferences, and that was the typical response, which is, "Well, here's a list of women. Invite some of them to be at your conference."

Melinda: Here's your binders of women.

Elisa: Binders of women. Yeah, for sure. And so, when I met Lisa, I met her through a mutual friend. I knew him from theater, she knew him from her workplace, and we were both talking his ear off about both politics and blogging. He was like, "You know, you guys should probably just talk to each other. You should meet." And so, we just, we had lunch at Coupa Cafe in Palo Alto. I always say that Michelle Pfeiffer was leaving the cafe as I was arriving, and that's how I knew that our project ... We didn't even know we had a project yet, but I always think of that was like our good luck charm. She doesn't even know it, but I consider her to have been our good omen.

Elisa: So anyway, so we meet for lunch and we're talking about this latest round of, "Where are the women? Where are the women?" And a male political blogger who's still around, he wrote this post, "Where Are All the Women Who Blog?" but it was a rhetorical question because his thesis was that women won't blog about politics because women don't want to mix it up and have to defend their ideas and operate in that rough and tumble world of political blogging. And I was a political blogger. By that point, I had like seven blogs, three or four of them were for clients, but several of them were for myself, one of which was I was writing a blog for the local political party here in my county as my volunteerism effort during the 2004 campaign. And so, I had a political blog, and Lisa was covering politics and political bloggers for the LA Times. She covered the 2004 conventions.

Melinda: Wow.

Elisa: Yeah. So, we were just like doing your normal, "How dare he? How dare he?" And then Lisa said, "Well, I had this wacky idea. Do you think if you held a conference that was just like all the other tech conferences or blogging conferences that are out there now, but all the speakers and experts just happened to be women, do you think anyone would be into that, would go to that?" And I said, "Well, I would totally go to that." And I just looked at her and I said, "We should do that. Why don't we do that?" And she said, "Okay." I said, "Okay."

Elisa: I really do think that that's a little bit of the spirit of Silicon Valley that I do admire and still really cherish, which is a sense of everybody sharing their big ideas and then, what the hell, let's do something together and figure it out as we go, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. That's the upside of ... There's many things that aren't so upside about Silicon Valley, but that to me is still one of its greatest attributes, this constant fulcrum of great ideas and people willing to work together and give things a try, try something new and share something new, and everybody's got a little something-something on the side that they want to talk about. It's exciting. It's energizing.

Elisa: And so, we just are both super type A, and once we said, "Okay, let's do that," we did that thing, and pretty soon we were like, "Okay, this is going to be a lot of work." Neither one of us had ever produced a conference before, and I had met Jory Des Jardins at a conference, and I had talked to her for maybe 45 minutes, which is all it took. I mean, Lisa and I had been sitting there for maybe 45 minutes when we had this

decision, made this decision. So, I said, "Listen, I know this great gal, she's over in Oakland. I feel like maybe she could be a big help. She's also a blogger and a consultant."

Elisa: So, I called her up and said, "Hey, I'm doing this thing. You want to help?" And she came in, and she had actually worked for a company that had produced ... She was in biz dev at some point in her career at a company who produced conferences, so she was like, "So do you have any sponsors? Like how are you paying for this?" We were like, "Oh, we're going to charge everybody \$99 for the one-day event." And she's like, "Great, are you going to have projectors and screens? Are you going to have microphones? Are you going to have a cocktail party? Are you going to have lunch? Are you going to have internet? Like, who's ... You need my help. You need money." We were like, "Oh, I guess yes, we do."

Elisa: So, 120 days later, we produced the first BlogHer Conference, and a lot of people don't know that the conference was first, but that is actually what was first, and it was just a labor of love. Like, "Let's do this thing." And it was only after the conference sold out, the conference got this press attention, and all of a sudden after the first conference, we were getting all this feedback and we were like, "You know what? What do we do next? Because there's something here."

Elisa: And to your question, at that time, feedback really only came in three forms. People wrote blog posts, people sent you emails, or people filled out the survey. There was no social media. I can't imagine what it would've been like if there had been Twitter at that time or whatever. And so, in pretty quick succession, there were three pieces of feedback, and the first was, "That conference was awesome. When's the next one?" So, we set about scheduling the next one the next year. "That conference was awesome, but I don't want to wait for a year to connect with other people who are blogging, other women who are like me or not like me, just other people who are really into this. Where can we find each other every day?" So, we set to work building blogher.com, the first website.

Elisa: The third piece of feedback was definitely a smaller subset, and they were saying, "I feel like I've found something I'm good at and I love, why can't I make money at this?" We were like, "You know, why can't you? You should be able to." And so, by one year later after we'd launched the website and we were at the second conference, we introduced the BlogHer Publishing Network, where we acted as a publisher for all of these disparate bloggers on their own. We let them stay on their own sites. We didn't bring them into our walled garden, and we acted as their publisher. We sold advertising, we created a technology that allowed us to manage at a centralized point, distributing advertising across hundreds of different sites, which at that time was still pretty challenging.

Melinda: And unheard of. I don't remember there being any place where women were gathering to talk online specifically.



- Elisa: Well, so there was iVillage and that-
- Melinda: Okay. Oh, of course, I forgot about iVillage. Yeah.
- Elisa: And iVillage, Lisa had worked at women.com, which iVillage had acquired.
- Melinda: Yes. Yes.
- Elisa: So those were very early chat rooms, and so that was sort of an informing aspect of her philosophy, which was that you give women a shot and they will definitely use the internet to talk about everything, but you need to moderate, you need to make sure that things don't get out of hand, and this is where I feel like ... The early social media tools, women were really involved at the outset, and that gets buried. So, Flickr was founded by Stewart Butterfield, now Slack, and Caterina Fake, and Blogger, that got bought by Google, was founded by Evan Williams and Meg Hourihan, and Six Apart, which made TypePad, Movable Type, that was founded by Mena and Ben Trott.
- Elisa: All of these early tools, there was a woman in leadership, and all of these early tools I think had something that these later social media platforms didn't have, which was someone who understood moderation, understood the unintended consequences of what happens when women are visible and prominent. Because, as Lisa said, people at CNN, the women always got way more hate mail and death threats than the men. And even before that, when she was writing on newspapers, the women columnists got way more negativity than the men.
- Elisa: So this was not an unpredictable outcome that these social media platforms could be places where toxicity really fomented and gathered, and in the early days, why so many of us, I call myself, I was an internet utopian, and there are a lot of us from that era, the early aughts, the mid aughts, we thought this was the solution to everything, that it would break down barriers and that it would create a world of people who had more empathy for one another, who knew people who are different from themselves, who spoke to people every day, who broadened their minds, and it had that promise. I think a lot of that promise became corrupted by monetization, let's be honest, but also, I think by a sort of lack of taking it seriously when people were calling out problems culturally early on. Everyone talks about the 2016 election, but we were experiencing bots and sock puppet accounts trying to foment discord on BlogHer in the 2008 election. So, this is not ... What's new is how automated and how much it has scaled. The action of trying to manipulate in that way is not really that new.
- Elisa: So anyway, to your point, this was the first year of our growth was based on rolling out all of these ways that people could be a part of our community, and we didn't require you to do all of them to be in our community. You could just read blogher.com, and you were in our community. You could write for it. You could have a blog where you made money or not make money. You could go to our conferences or not make our conferences. And at that time, the way it grew was through blogs and bloggers. They



had scaled reach and the ethos of reciprocity, of sharing links to one another, of sharing and spreading the good word of whatever it was that you were into. Was very, very powerful.

Melinda: Women talk, we have always talked. Over the fence post-

Elisa: Absolutely.

Melinda: ... the laundry line while we were folding clothes. We have always talked.

Elisa: 100%.

Melinda: So it's just unleashing our natural sort of desire to collaborate with each other and find each other, which is, I just remember it exploding, and I seem to remember that there was sort of a progression, and a lot of the focus at the time was what came to be known as mommy blogging, regardless of sort of your take on it or sort of like people's opinion about it, but this idea of the mom raising the kids, which feels like it went to Instagram, feels like it from my outside perspective. What do you think of that? Was there a publishing reason why that seemed so visible at the time? I know BlogHer was so much more than that.

Elisa: Well, right. That's funny because Jory and I, neither one of us had kids when we started BlogHer. Jory, eventually, five years after we started, had her first kid. I never had kids. And mommy blogging, this is the thing, different segments of bloggers saw that we were driven by demand, and after the first conference, we had at the first conference in 2005, we had a track called A Room of Your Own where it wasn't really an organized panel. It was more of a let's have a conversation, and we picked topics, and then we went through the people who had signed up to ask them if they would be discussion leaders. So, a sort of un-conferencee.

Elisa: And so, we had decided, "Let's have one about mommy blogging that's going to be ... We think that's going to be important." The first few people, I went through the list and I asked a few people and they were like, "No, no, I don't want to lead discussion about that." But finally, we found three women, Jenn Satterwhite, Jenny Lauck, and Mindy Roberts, and they all agreed to help lead this discussion. After that, they actually formed a little media outlet themselves called mommybloggers.com, because that URL was still available. After they led the session together. That's the untold story of BlogHer, which is I wonder how many businesses and projects and initiatives and media outlets were created out of that? I know a lot of stories, but I don't really know the full scale.

Elisa: Anyway, so we have this Room of Your Own in 2005, and it was packed. Packed. And it definitely helped that we got Heather Armstrong from Dooce, we invited her to speak and she came, and definitely she had a huge following of people who were either mommy bloggers or would-be mommy bloggers. I'll always remember that a woman named Alice Bradley from a blog called Finlippy, she stood up during our closing

keynote, which was more of a round robin group discussion/what do we do next, and she wanted to say that she thought mommy blogging was a radical act. Because throughout history, no one gets to know the viewpoint of the mother who is responsible for so much and who is responsible, really, for all the history that ensues. Every single person who made history was raised by someone, and likely it was a mother who had a tremendous impact on what they went on to do.

Elisa: People have this kind of gauzy, filtered view of what motherhood is, and what mommy bloggers were doing is talking about the real stuff that everyone who's had a kid knows. And she stood up and said, "Mommy blogging is a radical act," and she brought down the house. People have referenced that statement for years to come because it was an impactful moment.

Elisa: So, after that first conference, a bunch of women who blogged about parenting said, "We want more panels." So, when we put out a call for speakers, that group got together and said, "Let's submit a lot of stuff." And so, at 2006, there were lots of mom bloggers who were on panels, and the food bloggers were like, "Hey, why isn't there as much stuff for food bloggers? Let's get together, let's submit a lot of stuff. We need to make our voices heard." And so over time it was very, it was interesting. It was a representative democracy, I guess, because at the end of the day, we were a company, a for-profit company. Lisa, Jory, and I ran it. We made decisions, but we were very driven by what the community asked for and what they needed, and we were pretty transparent about why things went the way they went. You don't always have to say ... Oh, you may know. Do you know the play "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You" by Christopher Durang?

Melinda: I do, but the audience may not.

Elisa: So, he's an absurdist playwright. Was big mostly I think in the '70s-ish. He wrote this play "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All to You" about this terrifying nun at a Catholic school, and all these students come back for a reunion, and much of it is monologues from her spouting her view on theology. But one of the things she says that's great is that "God always answers your prayers, it's just sometimes He says no." And so that's the thing about managing an online community, is that you need to answer, you need to explain, but you're not going to, especially if you have a diverse community, you're never going to give everybody everything they want. It's impossible.

Elisa: So really, that's how different groups would get different elements of recognition and dominance and programming and things created for them, and the thing is, CPG companies recognize the power. Consumer packaged good companies recognized the power of moms and women online before government did, before the media did, before politicians did, because they have always needed to market to women and moms. So, they were the first ones who were like, "Wow."

Melinda: They were like, "Yay, aggregation points. Yay."



- Elisa: Yeah, "We need to hop on this. This is where the action is, and this is where the influence is," and that's what really created and only exploded more once there were more channels for that influence to be expressed. That's where it really exploded was on blogging, and then ultimately, social media as well. That's where influencer marketing really started.
- Melinda: Hi, it's me again. Thanks for your support of this season and Stayin' Alive in Tech. Can you believe that we're now being heard in almost 70 countries? I love seeing the stories of our guests travel far beyond the confines of the apartment where I'm recording this podcast. And if you love tech, you know how algorithms work, so I'd consider it a personal favor if you took the time to write a review for us on iTunes, Google Play, or wherever you get your podcasts. Also, we're a labor of love, but if you or your company would be interested in sponsoring our podcast to offset the costs of our sound engineering, domain hosting, social media marketing, and audio equipment, please visit stayinaliveintech.com and let us know. Enjoy the rest of the episode.
- Melinda: You founded this company with these two amazing women, and I think it's worth talking about sort of what people should look for in their co-founders, and what are some lessons that you've learned as an entrepreneur about working with co-founders?
- Elisa: Oh, yes. I talk about this all the time because the fact is, people used to say to us all the time, "Wow, you're three women and you're still together running this company." And I'm like, "I'd like you to find how many companies that have been around nine years," which we were by the time we were acquired, "that still have all their founders together, male or female." I think it's pretty rare.
- Melinda: Especially three, three is notoriously unstable.
- Elisa: To me, three is the best number, and here's why: because if you respect your two other co-founders, and if you think they're the smartest people you know, which I basically thought about Lisa and Jory, if I can't convince at least one of them that my way is the right way or that my idea is the best idea or that what I think should happen next is what should happen, maybe I need to explore the idea that I might be wrong. But you need three, I always say that you need three things. You need to have a similar work ethic. Partnerships fail all the time because someone isn't pulling their weight, and unless you're going to scale the ownership to match the effort, if you're going to be equal owners, then you for sure need equal work ethic.
- Elisa: Now, I'm not saying you all need to be the kind of type A animals that Lisa, Jory, and I were, but you all should be type B together then. You can't have like one type A and two type Bs. That's just a mess. So equal work ethic, but complimentary skills, different skills, different backgrounds, so that on any given just general function or area of expertise, someone's the recognized subject matter expert and the other two can really support them or provide alternate views, but you're not beating your heads together, arguing some finer points of a thing you're both experts on. You're not chest beating. It's not

competition rather than collaboration. It's bringing different things to the table. That allows you to form, like if you watch Steven Universe, it allows you to form this fusion of greater capabilities when you fuse together all of your different backgrounds and expertise.

Elisa: The third thing I think is really important and is very hard, I think especially in Silicon Valley, is the ability to communicate especially about tough things. So, it's really fun to have the big ideas and to talk about how you're going to do them, to have the vision. What's not so fun is when you miss a target, or what's not so fun is when you hired someone that isn't going to work out, or what's not so fun is when this feature just isn't going over like you thought it was going to and that's throwing a lot of things about your plan into question.

Elisa: Like you have to be able to depersonalize the discussion, talk about the data, talk about not throwing a lot of recriminations. Talk more about the future of what you're going to do about it than the past of how you got there. And those are tough conversations, and a lot of people are very conflict avoidant or averse, and you're going to have conflict. If you don't know how to speak your way through conflict, communicate through conflict, you'll break up a partnership pretty quickly.

Elisa: So those are the three qualities I think you're looking for, and then my fourth thing I always say is work on a project that you're not necessarily thinking is a company. Do something that's a labor of love. Find out what your work ethics are like, find out how you communicate, do something for a few months together. Like don't put all your eggs in the basket until you have a real sense.

Elisa: I also think it was good that we were not friends or colleagues when we met and started working together. We had just met. We didn't have baggage, we didn't have a hierarchy, we didn't have preconceived notions. So, I just think when you're under stress, those things can kind of rear their head and be problematic, and we just didn't ... That was not something, I'm not saying we had no problems ever, but that wasn't one of them. The past, the deep past, was not something that was going to get thrown into the conversation. So that's really my advice about what to look for.

Melinda: I know I wanted to talk about money, about raising money.

Elisa: Yes. Yes.

Melinda: I think one of the things we both agreed that we thought we should talk about in this podcast was the psychology of how people give you money. I think women ... I certainly have struggled with this in tech. I think people struggle with it at jobs where they're trying to pitch for resources or to get their ideas heard. They struggle. Obviously, they struggle to raise money, but even sponsorship, like you said for BlogHer and finding those partners, so I cannot wait to hear what you have to say about that.



- Elisa: So, people don't give you money because of the past. They give you money for the future. That's the key to investment, is that they're looking to what you're going to do in the future. And this applies, though, to getting raises at work. People like to think of a raise, for example, as a reward, and there's certainly an element of that, but it's mostly because they want you to keep hard-charging in the future or they want you to keep advancing or they want you to stay and not be mad and leave. But it's all forward looking. Right?
- Elisa: So I think a big aspect that people don't realize is that people want to know that their money is getting them something new in the future, not either rewarding something in the past or helping whatever you did in the past go smoother when you do it again. They don't care if you do exactly ... If you want to do what you just keep doing, they don't care if you're working hard. Nobody cares. Like if your big reason for raising money is so you can hire a few people so you can take the load off, that will not ... borrow money from your friends and family. Borrow money from your mom and dad. Because no one who's an investor wants to give you money so you don't have to work as hard. And that-
- Melinda: There's the quote.
- Elisa: Well, but that is what ... People often raise money and they phrase it as they want to raise it so they can hire these people who will share the load, and that's not a reason to invest money. That's a reason you give money to someone you love because you don't want them to burn out and whatever. That's not a reason I'm going to invest money. I'm going to invest money because you're going to take that money and you're going to build something new or deliver something new or serve new customers. What's the new thing you're going to do with this money? Because if you want to do just what you're doing now, you don't need my money. Start working smarter. You know?
- Melinda: And for a raise, yeah, that's fascinating because if you think of the raise, I've never ... I mean, for investing, it makes sense. I've never thought about it from a raise perspective. You think of it as like, this is the investment for the next phase. So, it's like, "I've been paid X to do Y, I'm prepared to do Y plus Z, and this is what it's going to cost."
- Elisa: Yes. Yeah, absolutely.
- Melinda: Fascinating.
- Elisa: And people always say, "Oh, dress for the job you want, or act like you're at the level you want." And I'm like, "Yeah, that's great, but you better be great at what you're already doing or you'll never get that shot anyway," and it's the same principle, which is everything you're doing now that you're great at, well, you've now set a bottom line, so you're just going to have to keep doing that for the same, and to get more, you're going to do more. You're going to-



- Melinda: Right. You're not going to get a raise to keep doing the same thing. Fascinating.
- Elisa: And it's not always that do more means you're going to do more functions or ... You're going to operate at a higher level. I had an employee once who was a manager, she really wanted to be a director, and after she'd been there a certain amount of time, she just felt like that should be the time. And I'm like, "Well, what are you directing? Like I can tell what functions you're managing. I can tell what projects you're kind of overseeing." And she was like, "Well, what does that mean?" I'm like, "Well, I'm sorry no one ever told you." Like I was sad that no one had ever kind of put it to her this way before, because I'm like, "Directing means I'm still setting the strategy that you're then going managing execution of. When are you going to come to me with strategy? When are you going to come to me and tell me something I don't already know, something I haven't thought of, something I should do and I should approve, instead of all the creation happening above your head and you just being the good person who gets it done?"
- Elisa: We need people like that. And you know what? There are plenty of people who are happy to be that person. There are plenty of people who are happy to be the manager who just gets it done. Absolutely. And lots of people are good at that and like it, and there's lots of room for that as well.
- Melinda: God bless them, yeah, because we need them.
- Elisa: Yes, yes. But if you're asking, "How do I get to this next level?" Well, how are you thinking next level? It's not necessarily about do more stuff. It's about think different stuff, bring different ideas and thoughts to the table that, frankly, take a load off my brain, right? If I'm your manager, if I'm your executive. And that, to me, is the difference between a manager and a director, and that's the step you got to take, not just be here a certain amount of time.
- Elisa: I still want you to stay. I will still find ways ... And I think it's a huge problem actually in tech that there are not a lot of ways to reward engineers as individual contributors, and what you often see is that they get promoted into being a manager of people because that's like the next, that's the step of advancement available to them, and a lot of them suck at managing people. So, they've been just boxed into a corner, where, in order to advance and make more money and have more sort of credibility and seniority and respect, they have to do something they're not good at.
- Elisa: Some companies, like Intel is one, HP is one, where they have fellows or principal engineers or they have these honorary titles that indicate, "Hey, this person is just a brilliant engineer," and I feel like all tech companies should make room for that, should make room for the person who's just brilliant at what they do. There has to be a way to reward them and advance them and continue to get the best out of them without making them necessarily manage people.



Melinda: Indeed. Indeed. And it honors that too, and it creates less political ramification because you don't have as much. You're always going to have competition, but it's like then there's not a lot of hurt ... You don't have people leaving for hurt feelings. You celebrate what they do well, which is-

Elisa: Exactly.

Melinda: And that you don't have to be a manager to get paid well, I think is really an appropriate thing.

Elisa: Yes.

Melinda: And so, coming back to BlogHer, and I know you've written a book and you've got a new organization, which we want to talk about. You sold this company, and maybe now that I've been a founder for a few years now, I'm curious about what that felt like and was it hard to do? Was it an obvious step? You sound like a person who threw yourself into this night and day, and then all of a sudden one day it's not yours anymore. Like, oh my gosh, how do you get used to not being the boss anymore?

Elisa: Yeah. Yeah. We were one of those really, really, really rare all-female executive team, founder team companies that raised VC. We did eventually four rounds of VC over nine years, and because we were in such a ... Media and internet is a very dynamic, some might say volatile market, where, when we started, there was no smartphone. When we started, there was no social media. When we started, there was no video content being created by regular people, and not even much video content being created by digital outlets. It was all television. You know?

Elisa: So, every time we raised money, it was to invest in the next phase of what we needed to do. Again, new people, new ideas, new technologies, new products, new services, new customer segments. That's what people will give you money for. So, it was always about that next thing, and we got to the point where we were like, "You know what? We are not appropriately ready for the video wave." This would require investment. We had, I think ... There are very few things I go back and say, "Oh, if I had but known." The one thing I always tell people now is raise more money early than you think you need. We raised our first round in '07 and the recession hit a year later, and it really put us in a position where we had to raise again too soon, and we should have just raised more the first round. We were cocky, we thought we had the answer to achieving profitability and not needing to raise again, and that's all very well and good, but you don't control macroeconomics.

Elisa: So, we were looking at this idea after having run the company, and like you said, being all in for nine years, raising again to really build out our video capabilities. We thought, "You know, maybe it's just time to join forces with a company who is really well-invested in this space." The other thing we kind of felt like was a gap we needed to fill is that, for many years, our model of being all about the distributed web and not



destination websites was very hot, and then things cycle and people started to be like, "Oh, but how big is your own website?" And we're like, "You don't own those other websites." And they're like, "No, but we have contracts and we have a long ... This is our business model." Right?

Elisa: So, we thought we could fill in some gaps here, we could join forces. And you know, frankly, after nine years, we were kind of ready to not be still sort of in scrappy-startup world. So yeah, so we went out and found a partner that we thought we really intersected well. What we had, events, online community, a distributed network, they did not have. What they had, destination websites and video capabilities, studios, production, talent and gear, we did not have. So, we felt like it was a good match.

Elisa: Now, on the one hand, there's something freeing about it. Like I don't think I ever even met their board. I didn't have to, that was wasn't my problem anymore. And there were a lot of things, like some of the stuff I did, they weren't doing at all. They did not have an events business. They did not have online community that was basically grown for its own sake rather than to drive traffic to editorial pieces. So, there were things I was doing that I was not overlapping or stepping on anyone's toes really, so that was great. I had my little area where ... Oh, and they weren't doing market research and consumer research, and so I started developing a practice in that for them because BlogHer had been doing that, but there was a whole bunch of stuff I could offload. They didn't need me to run PR. They didn't need me to run editorial.

Melinda: Accounting.

Elisa: Yeah, they didn't need me to run a bunch of stuff, so I was off the hook. It was a little harder. When you talk about Lisa as CEO, well, they had a CEO. And Jory was our big biz dev, like managed all the upper, upper, upper level customer relationships. Well, they had a chief revenue officer and a head of biz dev. And so, I think it's a little harder sometimes when you come into a company where you're basically, they love you and think you're super smart and know a lot of things and have different relationships, but your function is somewhat overlapping. I had quite a nice tidy job that wasn't overlapping, and it's I think why I stayed considerably longer than my co-founders did.

Elisa: So, there was something freeing about that. There was also something frustrating about that, because, at the end of the day, yeah, I don't run the show, and I could give them my really strong advice, and plenty of times they took it, and plenty of times they were like, "Yeah, we're going to do this other thing." You can't always do things the way you ... My favorite phrase always is, "Well, we can't just do things because that's the way you've always done things." And I'm like, "There's no one thing that's ever the way we've always done things, because a company is a living thing." You're constantly, if you're doing it right, you're constantly adapting, re-examining, evolving. Just that phrase, like, "The way you've always done things," I'm like, "There's nothing. This whole company, nothing about it is the way we've always done it."



Elisa: So, there's definitely something frustrating. I would not lie and say there isn't something frustrating about it not being your baby anymore and you not having the same ... Like BlogHer, doesn't matter if it was my department or not, if I went and asked somebody for something as a co-founder, like even if I wasn't their direct chain of command, they would probably be pretty responsive to me. But you go into this bigger company, and yeah, there's a whole different sense of chain of command that I am not ... You get a little spoiled, I think. So, there's two aspects. There's definitely the liberating side of it, and then there's the frustrating side of it.

Melinda: So, this takes us into your latest endeavor and the book that you wrote last year. I noticed that, I think it's pronounced Cygnus. Do I have that right?

Elisa: Yes. Yes.

Melinda: Why don't you tell us a little bit about Cygnus? What is Cygnus?

Elisa: Well, Cygnus is a very nascent company being spun out of another company called Do Big Things, which a colleague I've known for more than a decade, Cheryl Contee, runs. They are a digital and technology agency that serves candidates, causes, nonprofits, foundations, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and in the two years between when I left SheKnows and when I joined Cygnus, I wrote a book about activism and everyday activism and how to be more engaged in your community, in your workplace, in your kids' schools, how to make a difference, how to be a change maker.

Elisa: When I spoke to Cheryl about this company she wanted to spin out, it was at this intersection of doing good and technology. And I'm like, "These are the two things I know the most about and care the most about." Basically, Cygnus is a data analytics and visualization platform designed, built for these kind of organizations that allow them ... They have really unique kinds of campaigns because they're doing paid and organic social media, but they're also very heavily invested in email and direct response, and for political campaigns, they have stuff happening in real life too. They have door knocking and filmmaking and text banking. And right now, there is no reasonable affordable solution for any but the biggest of organizations or campaigns to see all that data in one place and make smart decisions because of it.

Elisa: So, this is a problem we had with BlogHer. We developed something very much like this. It started out as a proprietary back-of-house tool we used for our clients. We ended up productizing it, and that's exactly what's happening here. Because we would give people their reports, and they would see this data. Here's what your reach was, here's your click through percentage, here's your conversion percentage, here's all these numbers. And almost to a person, most clients would look at you and say, "Is that good? Like, okay, I understand the math, but are those good results?" And so, Do Big Things, somewhat like BlogHer, has had these years of running these kinds of campaigns for folks and has some proprietary benchmarks, and so we want to not only help people look at all this data together, but understand how it performs, and is that a good

answer? That's a big part of it, is just helping people make better decisions with the data they have in order to create more impact.

Melinda: That's remarkable. I actually, I'm looking forward to seeing the results of this and seeing what you're going to be able to do with it because it's a problem a lot of marketers are facing, but especially if you can't get your hands on the big tools. They really need it. So now we're getting into the last few minutes of the podcast, and I have a series of sort of broad general questions I like to ask all of our guests because it's so interesting to hear their different perspectives. But the first is unique to you because I think you have so much to offer from your past, and that's: what's coming next for blogging and influencers? Where are they going?

Elisa: Wow, that's a big, big question. I feel like right now the trend is really towards getting bigger by getting smaller, creating more closed-off, private, hidden spaces. It's going to be very hard for marketers because people have become more and more conscious. When I go on Facebook now, for example, so much of the activity is around groups, and it's not necessarily as easy for marketers to see what's happening in group conversations as it would be. It really takes us back actually to those online community days where you had to join those online communities. You didn't just use a social listening tool and find all the mentions. You had to join chat rooms and forums and tribe.net and Yahoo Groups to actually see what was happening in them, and we're kind of replicating that a little bit.

Elisa: So, I think that's one thing, is ... And I think it's going to be useful for brands and companies and anybody who wants to build a community to create their own, to have their spaces where they invite people, and to participate in their community members' spaces too. So that ethos of reciprocity is coming back, and I think it's going to be a hard adjustment because it's a very natural tendency to want to automate things, to want to depersonalize things so you can scale more because that'll be more economical, but I think people are kind of searching for the places where they can feel secure. It's not that they don't want to talk to marketers, it's that they don't want to talk to trolls more than anything.

Melinda: Or they don't have their name plastered all over the Wall Street Journal for something that they said.

Elisa: Right. So, I think that's going to be a big challenge moving ahead, and influencers can be a bridge for that because influencers ... I mean, that is one of the earliest things I used to do for clients besides write blogs for them, is that I was a person who was involved with tons of online communities and I would be like, "Okay, you want to reach this kind of person with this kind of product. You know, there's this random Yahoo Group, and there's this ..." I was a bridge for these brands to lots of places because I was a trusted member of those communities. So, influencers can be a big bridge I think, and that I think is going to become more important.



- Melinda: It's been a tough few years in tech. I think you've alluded to that. I like to ask our guests what's inspiring them. Like what gives you hope for what's next?
- Elisa: I think it has been a tough few years, and there are a lot of things I'm upset about every day. I think one of the things that gives me hope is to see the people in my both in real life and online communities who are more vocal and paying attention and caring about what's happening in the world in ways they never did three or four years ago.
- Elisa: I think a lot of people have had their consciousness awoken and raised about how much impact we can have if we band together and try to make change, and so I think that that's very hopeful. And then I'm really hopeful that there's, with the advancements that, particularly women, but other more under-served communities have made in the last few years in raising their voice and being heard in halls of power, I am hopeful that that continues, that that is what our country is heading towards as far as ... California is only 37% I think non-Hispanic white people, so our country, demographically, is heading towards such a diverse place. If we can get through this period of time we're in now, I think we're going to inevitably have voices who haven't been heard, they're going to get to be heard, and they're going to get to have impact, and I think that can only change us for the better.
- Melinda: So I like to ask too, if you could go back in time, you've already pointed out some good things that you've learned along the way and some things you would do differently, but if you went back and talked to your younger self, what advice would you give her?
- Elisa: I think that the advice I would give her is something she figured out anyway, which is you can learn anything. You can figure it out. You are not in a box. You are math-phobic but you can do accounting for registered commodity pool operators. You are not an engineer, you did not get a tech degree, but you can go do a tour of European presses to introduce them to a new routing technology and all the technological aspects of it. You can be over 40 and start a company, having never really wanted to do that before. If you are excited about it and you want to do it, you have the fundamental tools to figure out how.
- Melinda: Phenomenal. Last question: best advice that anyone has ever given to you, and if you feel like sharing, who gave it to you?
- Elisa: Oh, yes. I always share this. I love this advice. When we were going to get our first round of funding, Lisa and I went and had tea with Caterina Fake, who was the co-founder of Flickr, who had sold to Yahoo. A lot of people thought they sold the Yahoo too early, that they could have made way more money if they had stuck it out, and she articulated it this way. She says, "When you're looking at any deal ..." and I have since applied this to both investors, but also partners, anything really. She says, "Prioritize people, then terms, then valuation."



- Elisa: What she meant by that was that, first and foremost, when you are creating partnerships with people of any kind, it's the people first that matter. Do you trust them and do they trust you? Like when you're looking for investors, they have to believe in you because you are going to pivot, you are going to have changes, so they have to believe in you as much as you trust them, and that you will lead through that storm of change, right? So, if you don't have a good feeling about somebody, it's okay to say, "Walk on by." There will be another person. You are going to be in a sort of relationship with the people who invest in you, with the people who partner with you, for a long time if it goes as planned. So, it better be someone you like, you trust, you feel like you can talk to.
- Elisa: And then terms versus valuation means that sometimes people dangle these big pots of golds in front of you. Could be the valuation they're going to set for your company, could be some big, big goals they think they can hit around a partnership. But then never let that blind you from looking at what the actual terms of the deal are, because it's a lot better to walk away with a big chunk of a small payback than 0% of something big because you got sort of seduced by a big valuation and ignored onerous terms.
- Elisa: You need to at the end of the day feel like it would be fair. If this went really, really well, your outcome would be fair. If this went really, really badly, the outcome would be fair, and that you're sharing in this really good or really bad outcome. And so, when you kind of look at it that way, it helps focus you on what's really important in a deal.
- Melinda: That is phenomenal advice. Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't? I could talk to you for hours, but it's a long time. You've been doing most of the talking.
- Elisa: Oh, no. We've covered a lot of ground.
- Melinda: Fantastic.
- Elisa: I don't need to write my autobiography now.
- Melinda: Oh, well, yes, I would like you to write your autobiography. I think many of us would. There's so much to learn about what's happened through these stories. So, Elisa, thank you so much for coming on the podcast.
- Elisa: You're so welcome.
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