

**EPISODE — CASSIE CHERNESKI****[INTRODUCTION]**

**[00:00:04.1] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to the Creative Empire Podcast. Each week, Reina Pomeroy, the life and biz success coach and Christina Scalera, the attorney for creatives are taking you up close and personal with successful influencers in the creative community and tackling your biggest business hurdles. Their mission is to help you, creative entrepreneurs, think beyond your daily biz so you can make the brave decisions that build your Creative Empire.

**[INTERVIEW]**

**[00:00:35] SC:** Hello everybody. Welcome back for another episode of the Creative Empire Podcast. My name is Christina Scalera and I am joined by Reina Pomeroy.

**[00:00:42] RP:** Hi everyone!

**[00:00:43] SC:** Our guest today is Cassie Cherneski of Flaire Weddings and the Cultivate Retreat. So you probably have seen her around on Instagram every once in a while when her tickets are up for sale and when she is doing these amazing, fabulous styled shoots like the one she recently did over in France.

So, without further ado, Cassie, would you like to just give our listeners a background about how you have become this really great wedding planner based in Jacksonville and retreat leader?

**[00:01:13] CC:** Sure. Thanks guys for having me. I'm excited to be here. Just to give everyone a little bit of background, my name is Cassie as Christina said, and I own a company called Flaire Weddings & Events that I started in 2005. I'll be completely honest, when I started my company I had zero training. I knew nothing about weddings other than I had just gotten married and some of my friends from college had gotten married and that was pretty much my sole introduction to weddings. I kind of jumped head first into this crazy industry. So I don't necessarily recommend that route, but it's my story and it's how I got started.

So along the way I've really had to refine and think about just a lot of the way that the industry is changing and the way that weddings are changing. And so my company has kind of grown over the past 11 years, as everyone's has. But really because I started at such a point where I really didn't know anything at all, I can see massive growth from back then to where we are now.

**[00:02:06] CS:** What kind of growth have you experienced? Like what are we talking about for the beginner business owner who maybe doesn't know what to look for as far as what that growth looks like?

**[00:02:17] CC:** Sure. So when I first started my business, I read some books. The Internet was a thing, but it wasn't the thing that it is now. So there was no social media, there was no way to really connect with anybody else. So I ordered some books and I read those things, then I just kind of plopped a website up and along the way I found some professional associations. I joined the Association of Bridal Consultants and from there I really met people who helped guide me and told me my prices were too low, and, "You should be doing this," and things like that.

So I'm really, really thankful for those resources, but I know that business owners today have so many more resources. So you kind of have the ability to glean a lot more information and maybe not make so many mistakes as I did. I will say my website was terrible. It was a completely DIY job and I just threw it up there. I looked around at what everyone else was charging and I said, "Okay, these are what my prices are going to be. I'll be really similar to those, but I'll be a little bit lower because I'm so brand new."

So I really did everything wrong, and along the way I have met people, I've attended conferences, I have spoken with other business and asked them what they're doing, and I really just refined the process so that now I am charging what I need to be charging, that my branding is attracting my ideal client. And basically I'm getting the kind of events I've always wanted to be planning, so that's exciting.

**[00:03:35] RP:** That's so great, Cassie. I think we have a very similar story. I was a wedding planner as well, event coordinator as well, and I did my DIY website thing, I charged really low

prices, and I actually ended up being pretty profitable by the end of it. But when I quit I was like, "This is not for me." So you stuck around and I didn't. So kudos to you.

As a veteran of the wedding industry, I'm curious, what are you seeing that's happening now? You already told us what's different since you started, I'm wondering what's happening now in the industry and what you foresee to come in the future? I mean you're doing education for wedding planners now too, so I'm just curious to hear what you think is on the horizon.

**[00:04:18] CC:** Well I feel like there's been sort of a rise and fall of Pinterest. For a few years there Pinterest was what everyone was bringing to their initial consultations, they would just show me their Pinterest board and a lot of times they had very random things pulled together, things that didn't feel very cohesive, and even the weddings that were coming from that time kind of felt that way. Like there was details that didn't seem to fit with the couple and lots of random things sort of cobbled together. I personally see that trend fading away.

Less brides are coming to me with Pinterest boards that they're super concerned about. I'm sure they still have them, but they're not saying, "Replicate this board." And I'm seeing more of a desire for a cohesive event with meaningful elements that are very customized. Brides don't like packages, they don't want to feel like they got the same thing that the bride before them got. So I'm just seeing this return to the couple really wanting to express who they are, what they care about, and show this amazing experience to their guests.

**[00:05:14] CS:** No packages?

**[00:05:15] CC:** No. We don't do packages at all, which is hard when people email us and say, "Can you send us your packages?" and I have to respond back, "Well, we don't have packages." But what we try to do is get them into a conversation to find out a little bit more about what they're wanting to create, and from there we can send them over our customized proposal.

**[00:05:32] CS:** So without packages and with this new rebrand, what are the biggest changes that you are seeing in clientele? Do you see different people approaching you? Do you see

more inquiries? What are some changes that you've seen in the last couple of months since you started this refresh?

**[00:05:49] CC:** Sure. So we're actually seeing less inquiries, which for me is a good thing because it says that the branding and the messages we're putting out there is much more niche, it's much more specific. So instead of this wide net that's drawing everyone in that we're having to really turn a lot of folks away. I feel we're really connecting with the people who appreciate what I have. I think the result is, like I said, less inquiries but a higher conversion rate from those inquiries, which is exciting.

**[00:06:16] RP:** Yeah, I think a lot of newer entrepreneurs would actually freak out if they were getting fewer inquiries, and I'm really curious to see how you got to that mindset of "fewer inquiries is actually a good thing"? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**[00:06:32] CC:** Sure. So probably everyone has a story of a client that was just a nightmare, just really bad experience. Those experiences, while you don't like them while you are in them are actually really refining and they teach you a lot about yourself and about your business and so I had one of those experiences several years ago and I realized that we were just trying to serve too many people. We were trying to be all things to everyone who inquired and that was not good for them and it wasn't good for us.

So what I was able to do was just really strip back what I loved about my business and what I didn't love about my business. So with the rebrand we're trying to restructure so that we're consistently creating events that we love and that the clients love. So everyone who doesn't inquire, it's good for me because I don't have to tell them that we're not a fit, which is never a pleasant conversation to have. So we're actually serving them better by showing them upfront that we're not going to be a good fit to work with them. So, like I said, it's good for them and it's good for me.

**[00:07:29] CS:** And because we're doing audio, people can't necessarily see what we're talking about here, but I would love it if you could explain some of the visual elements that you pulled in. Because at the Cultivate Retreat, you were very specific about what you wanted your brand to look like, visually, even though we didn't have the website right up in front of us at that

moment, and then I was able to see the pictures that Laura Foote had taken of you and your team and it was very clear to me what it is that you were trying to convey to your audience.

But just this being audio, can you bring in some of those elements and explain to us where the inspiration for your new brand came from and then how you hope to convey that visual message to your new clients?

**[00:08:13] CC:** Sure. So the inspiration for my new brand is this idea of European aesthetic, kind of a fine art feel. So I started with a very soft neutral colored palette, one that I love but that I also reflected in just architecture and things like that. I am in love with the country of France, so really the country of France is sort of in a nutshell the inspiration for my new brand. But our color palette is very pale, dove gray with blush pink and touches of gold. So I feel like it's soft, it's feminine, but it's a little bit unexpected with the gray and the gold together.

So when I look at pictures with French gardens, I see these beautiful chateaus which have those gray tones. Then of course there's floral in the garden with the pink tones and things like that, and their royalty lived in the chateaus so of course there's gold everywhere. So I feel like the color palette just kind of pulled in this picture that I have. I've been to France three times. I hope to go many more times, but every time I go I just am in love with the architecture in the chateaus.

So I wanted my brand to feel very regal, very sophisticated, very luxurious, but also something comfortable and hospitable just like basically the entire country of France. So that's part of the inspiration of the color palette and then I had Laura Foote come in and do branding photos of myself and my assistant, Brooke and we had a linen and a dove gray. We had gold flatware and gold chiavari chairs, we had pale blush florals, so just kind of bringing that color palette to life in a setting that felt very elegant but also comfortable.

**[00:09:46] CS:** Yeah. It was in your house, right? Which is a gorgeous...

**[00:09:51] CC:** It actually was in my office.

**[00:09:51] CS:** Oh, okay.

**[00:09:52] CC:** But yes, it's an old bungalow from the 1920's. So it's got wood floors and wood mouldings and things like that.

**[00:10:00] CS:** Yeah. It's gorgeous. I think it's interesting that we found out there as well, I know I would love to get her on the show. We've both worked with Marjorie Preval, who's a photographer based in Paris. Marjorie's great. I don't know if she'll ever be willing to come on the show, because she doesn't like that kind of attention or visibility I think. But what were some things that you did to prepare for your photoshoots out there? Because that's no small undertaking. I mean when you have props, when you have outfits or you have, I mean just practically speaking, how did you infuse your brand into that so that you did have a good result? Because she's Marjorie. She's not...

**[00:10:42] CC:** Sure. So when I worked with Marjorie in Paris, my husband and I were there for our 10 year anniversary and I knew I wanted to work with a photographer who shot on film. So I just kind of put an all call out on social media, "Hey, does anyone recommend a good Paris film photographer?" and I heard several people give me Marjorie's name and she was phenomenal to work with. So that was sort of my first introduction to having photos taken in France, and it was a really amazing experience.

But I wasn't necessarily intentional at that time about doing something for my company. It was a personal session, but it definitely planted the seeds. So when I came back from that trip, I almost immediately started looking into the possibility of returning to do a styled shoot specifically for my brand. And so I really just watched plane tickets and when they came to a price that I felt comfortable with, I kind of jumped on it. I talked my family into going with me. My sister and my mom came along as my assistants for the photoshoot.

But during that time I just reached out to various professionals. I looked at hashtags on Instagram and I found an amazing photographer in the specific region that I wanted to shoot in, called Loire Valley and she was using the hashtag #loirevalleyweddingphotographer and so I just reached out to her and said, "This is what I'm trying to do," and she was 100% onboard. Then for finding our gowns for our models, there was a brand that I really liked called Rue de Seine, again with the Parisian inspiration. And I just looked on their contact list of the various

locations that carried their gowns and I found a shop in the city of Tours, France, which is in the heart of Loire Valley.

So I just reached out to that shop, I said, "I see you carry this line, I'm doing this shoot," and they were completely onboard and they actually ended up being a really big resource for me as far as connecting me with the models, with hairstylists, and then the photographer had some recommendations on locations. So once I met those key players, I was able to kind of use their networks to find out about things that I may not have known and it all really came together pretty easily. I was concerned because there is obviously a language barrier. I speak French a little bit, but they speak French amazingly. They also have better English than I spoke French. But it was an amazing experience, and I had a great time.

**[00:12:47] CS:** How have you been able to use those images to help build the brand that you have now?

**[00:12:53] CC:** So right now they're awaiting publication. So I haven't plastered them all over social media. I want to wait until after they come out on the publication and then they will be all over my website. But within the new website that we're launching, those photos are featured very prominently and I think they just communicate the sense of timeless elegance with the touches of the fine art feel that I'm trying to go for.

**[00:13:14] CS:** Was, and maybe this is a crude question, but was it your goal to get published? I think it's fine if it was, but I also just know you and I think you are going to have a really good answer.

**[00:13:25] CC:** So for me personally, just having the photos to represent my brand was enough of a goal. But I knew that I was asking other professionals to contribute their time and their energy to this shoot and so I didn't want to be the sole beneficiary of it. So I feel like a publication is sort of this shared benefit that everyone who participated in the shoot can realize. So publication is a goal for me when I do have other people involved because I feel like it rewards their time and efforts to the shoot.

**[00:13:53] CS:** So do you feel like you have to be a designer wedding planner to organize something like this? Or do you think that anybody just starting out could, maybe not do a styled shoot in France, but do you feel like they could do something collaborative like this with other people and maybe give some examples of ways that you've done this in the past, before you got to France? That's obviously a much bigger undertaking.

**[00:14:16] CC:** Sure. For me personally, my focus is on design. So whenever I am doing a styled shoot, I'm wanting to showcase a design that I have dreamed of in my head. I get that not everyone has that ability to visualize and design things, but I think that anyone can put together a styled shoot. So if you're not the designer type, I think you absolutely can do a shoot. Just recognize that design's not your strength and pair up with a designer. But for those of us who do like to design and can visualize things, absolutely. If you can visualize something and if you can see it in your head, just start sketching it out and reach out and make the contacts that you need to put it together.

I think styled shoots are beneficial for everyone involved because you get a chance to really operate without the confines of client expectations. There is a lot of times that we put weddings out that are very beautiful, but they're very much a reflection of what the client wanted and therefore not necessarily what I personally would've done in their space or with that color scheme or whatever. So a styled shoot is really just a chance to show potential clients your level of creativity and the design eye that you bring to the table without any constraints really.

So yeah, absolutely. Even if you're not a wedding designer, pair up with somebody who can help you realize your brand vision. Even if you're not in the wedding industry at all, there are brand stylists and there are brand photographers who can listen to you and who can help you kind of put down into concepts what you're trying to convey with your brand and help you create a photoshoot that will really showcase those concepts.

**[00:15:42] RP:** I think that's such interesting information and I love the fact, Christina has told me and I stalked it on Instagram, while you were doing your Cultivate Retreat, the most recent one, you were doing the photoshoot and a couple of different styled shoot vignettes, I guess. Can you talk a little bit about why you decided to incorporate that as part of your conference and also talk a little bit more about your conference as well?



**[00:16:05] CC:** Sure. So I'll just give everyone just a real brief introduction to Cultivate Retreat if you're not familiar with it. It is a specific wedding industry event. I created Cultivate Retreat for people in the wedding industry who wanted education. But we have four core values that we try to express in every event. So first we try to offer relevant education and by that I mean classes that people want to hear. Not just things that we think they want to hear, but we're getting feedback from our attendees and our audience about what they're wanting to learn from. So we want to make sure everything's relevant.

Secondly, and this is maybe even more important than the actual education, it is one of our core values to have authentic and friendly speakers, and in turn we have authentic and friendly attendees who come. So we really don't want any ego, we don't want people who feel like it's all about them, and I really see that every year, that the attendees have the same openness and everyone is just sort of sharing, and there's not an "us versus them". The speakers and the attendees are all seated together at every meal and it's just a really open and free environment, which I love.

We also try to have inspiring design. I want the meals to feel really special and really elegant. That's one of the chief ways that we care for the attendees. We show them that they are valued by sitting them at a table with a luxurious linen and a beautiful place setting, as well as things like gifts and surprises throughout the retreat. And finally, this is a core value that's really important to me, my associate Brooke has coined the term "conscious consumer". So I'm somebody who is willing to spend for quality but I don't spend frivolously and I view my retreat in the same way.

I don't want it to be a frivolous or an outrageous expense for folks, so we try really hard to keep the price point at something that's affordable that newer business owners can comfortably spend to attend. So within those core values of Cultivate Retreat, we wanted to bring in the idea of the styled shoot just so that people who are coming again with having this be relevant to them, would be able to walk away with having experienced something creative to kind of recharge their creative batteries, but also have maybe some portfolio images that they could use to showcase their time and what they did at the retreat.

**[00:18:13] RP:** Yeah, that's very cool. Christina, talk about your experience because I got to hear from her what she thought about it and I think it's such a reflection of what exactly you just said.

**[00:18:22] CS:** Yeah. I felt like every meal was a new styled shoot, honestly Cassie. It was so gorgeous every single time and I was just kicking myself for not being Laura Foote and being able to take a great picture. I'm really glad that you had those great photographers there to document that for us, Alex Thornton and Laura Watson as well. Obviously they were there as the photography sponsors and Laura was actually there to tell a story about her own experience growing up as a photographer. Is that the right way to say it? So I don't want to minimize Alex and Laura at all.

But yeah, it was seriously one of the most intentional experiences I have ever seen happen and I think it's because you are so detail oriented, Cassie. I mean even preparing for this interview today, that was great. I wasn't expecting you to come on and say, "I have some notes and I'm ready to talk about this and that." It speaks to the level of detail that you're willing to bring to your clients and to your business, and I'm really excited to see your rebrand because I've seen some of the pictures, but what you've been talking about here today is just, it's making me gnaw at the bit for a rebrand myself.

You know, the way that you've been so intentional at setting those values first and then layering on the design elements and the photography and the visual elements on top of that. I think so many of us start with, "I need a brand. Okay, I have to find a graphic designer who's going to make my logo and then that's what I'm going to use for the next two, three, four, five years and that'll just be me. I'll just adopt the logo." So it's been really refreshing to meet you and to see the way that you do things very differently where you take a very foundational approach and work your way back up. But it's also interesting to hear that it sounds like it wasn't always that way. That's totally fine.

I think for a lot of our listeners, including myself, I mean right now I have a DIY website, to be totally honest guys. People love it, but it's just a template and a Square Space template at that, and that was because that was what I had at the time to work with. I guess moving forward with all this changing in the wedding industry, it was interesting what you said about Pinterest too

because I didn't realize that Pinterest was going away. I knew that a lot of people in the wedding industry are kind of over Pinterest, and brides are still on it. But, you know, it's just really interesting to hear that things are changing and hopefully moving forward in a positive direction.

I did see a statistic the other day that less people now are getting married than ever, and as we've known for a long time, people have been getting married at a later age than ever before as well. Have you ever, I mean you've been doing this for a while now, Cassie. I feel like you're one of the foundational retreats, you are really a veteran in the wedding design and planning sphere.

[BREAK]

**[00:21:13] CS:** Do you a business that serves other businesses? We would love to feature you as a sponsor on our podcast. Each week, our episodes reach thousands of listeners and they are hungry and eager for the solutions that you would provide. If you would be interested in advertising with the Creative Empire Podcast, we would love to have you. All you have to do is jump on over to [creativeempire.co](http://creativeempire.co) and learn more about becoming a sponsor and getting your services and your products in the hands of our thousands of listeners. We're so excited about what we can do for you.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**[00:21:50] CS:** With your years of experience and then hearing these statistics, or knowing how the wedding industry is changing from the inside, what are some things that beginner business owners who are maybe just starting out or they just had a wedding or they planned a friends wedding and they really want to get into to, what are some things that they could be doing to build an intentional business when it feels like maybe it's not a very hospitable environment for them?

**[00:22:16] CC:** Sure. So yeah, I mean I can totally relate to that. I reached out to planners at the beginning and there was a lot of suspicion and things like that. Like, "Who is this person? Why is she talking to me?" And while there may still be some of that, I do feel like the industry in general is moving towards educating the newcomers and helping everyone to feel that they

have an opportunity and things like that. So one thing that I wish I would've done that I did not do is to try and intern or work for someone who was already in the business.

I just jumped right in, and like I said, I had zero wedding experience except for my own and my friends and I feel like if I had had the chance to kind of work professionally with someone for a year or two, it would've given me far more of the background knowledge that I needed to be able to price efficiently. I think part of the reason my prices were so low when I first started was because I didn't really grasp the full amount of work I would be putting into it. And so once I got in there and I realized, "Wow, this is a ton of really hard work and I'm not being compensated for this," that was really a wakeup call.

So I kind of learned trial by fire like, "You cannot charge this or you won't be able to stay in business," and things like that. So I feel like if someone is considering this business, definitely shadow, intern, do whatever you can to actually work in some capacity in the field before going out on your own. The background knowledge that you will gain from that will be essential to helping you price where you need to price and reach who you need to reach when you start that business.

**[00:23:39] RP:** That's so interesting. Christina and I have had a couple different discussions, not necessarily about wedding planners, but people who are starting in any industry actually, and how sometimes we need to take the un-sexy jobs in order to really learn the backend of a "successful business". And I really appreciate you saying that because I think much like in the corporate world, you might need an internship before you really get to that first employment type of position and I think it's true for entrepreneurs as well and just learning the backend.

**[00:24:10] CC:** Yeah, absolutely. And I don't want to minimize the power of starting on your own and bootstrapping it, but I can see how in my own business if I had done this it would've been very beneficial. But I also want to caution people to not just assume that everyone can give you an internship. I get approached for internships all the time, and I just physically don't have the time to give everyone an internship who wants one. They're very time intensive. To do them legally there needs to be a clear benefit to the intern. It's not just free, unpaid labor.

So it is a difficult thing, and don't get discouraged if you reach out to five, 10, 15 planners and no one has time to give you an internship. I would also say be willing to invest financially in an internship or a mentorship. Again, if you can find someone who's willing to offer you this at no charge, that's amazing. But there are people who do have paid interning and paid shadowing type programs and so take advantage of those if that's your only option. Because even so, that'll give you such a groundwork and a foundation for when you start your business it'll be well worth any investment.

**[00:25:10] CS:** Yeah, and her husband's an attorney. I'm going to out him. So she knows all about the legal ramifications of hiring those interns. But it's totally true, yeah. I mean there has to be some benefit there. You did touch on pricing though Cassie, so I have to ask, what — for someone who's just starting out and they're scouring the Internet for these pricing strategies. What's a low price for a wedding planner these days? What's a middle price, and what's a high price?

And I know this is going to vary by location. You're in Jacksonville, Florida so maybe somebody in New York City it's different. But what just is like a good rule of thumb if you're starting out and you're thinking, "I'm going to do my first wedding for \$500."?

**[00:25:52] CC:** Sure, that's a great question and I'll happily share kind of what we're doing in our market as well as some numbers that I know in other markets. First of all, there's two different levels of planning service and I think as anyone gets into wedding planning they'll start to find this. There is the base that media calls "day of coordination", which is really a terrible term and everyone that I know is doing everything in our power to make that term just die and go away forever.

But what we're doing is calling it "event management" and I have to credit Valerie Gernhauser of Sapphire Events for that term. She kind of had this big push about a year ago for everyone to stop calling it "day of coordination", and I've personally seen quite a few planners both who have attended Cultivate and also who have met with Valeria for her Sapphire Sessions who have rolled out this term "wedding management" or "event management". So it's not day of coordination, it's management because obviously we're working with them well in advance of the day of their wedding.

But so what I'm charging for that is \$1,750 and that's a starting price. If you have multiple locations, if you have a large guest count, any sorts of things that will require me to spend more time or more staff on your event, the price goes up. We do have people in our market who are charging under a \$1,000 for that, and I would say that they're doing a disservice to themselves, to the industry. Like no one should be charging less than \$1,000 for event management. I think in Valerie's market it ranges from \$2,500 to \$3,500 and I think it's comparable in New York and out in California as well.

So just to kind of throw a low number out, no one should do this for less than \$1,000. If you're doing it correctly it's anywhere from 25 to 40 hours of your time. So you just want to make sure that you are charging enough that you can really serve your client well without feeling bitter or resentful of everything they're asking you to do. For full service that really is a different beast because it really depends on what the client wants. But what we're moving to, again kind of with Valerie's model that she's put out there and anyone who's in the wedding world have probably seen her talk about this.

But she has a model where she charges a flat design fee and that's variable. You can charge whatever you feel your experience and your knowledge brings to the table on that. Our design fee is \$3,500. I want to say Valerie's design fee is \$10,000. So there's a range. You can charge whatever you feel your market would be able to bare for that. But then we're doing a production fee for the actual planning of the event. So that's a percentage of the budget, and there's a minimum production fee so you can't come to me and say, "You know, I've got a \$5,000 budget, so my production fee's only going be \$500." We do set a minimum to kind of cover us for the time that it takes to invest, regardless of what their budget is.

Then the final fee, because we're still managing their event on the day of, we are charging the event management fee as a separate component. So again, that's Valerie's method. If you haven't heard her talk about that, look her up. She does a training session called the Sapphire Sessions where she talks about that very in-depth. But if anyone is new to the wedding planning world, I highly recommend that they look into that because that method has been great for a lot of planners who have finally started to see some real profits from this business, which is exciting.

**[00:28:48] RP:** Yeah. I love Valerie's work and I so agree with what you're saying. She's such a thought leader in breaking the original wedding mould and yes Valerie, we're coming for you, by the way.

**[00:29:01] CS:** Yeah. Valerie was, she had some eye-opening points there. Her pricing is just the tip of the iceberg, that's for sure. And I think she's a good example as well of someone who's taken her background and turned it into something that's uniquely hers, just like you have Cassie.

So with this pricing in mind, and someone's just starting out, they are looking to get some events or some weddings in their portfolio, they are maybe looking to get some styled shoots under their belt, how long is a good — and I struggle with this as well — how long is a good amount of time to wait until you're, like when is your goal met and when is it not and you move on and separate yourself from a project or separate yourself from a service that isn't bringing in profit for your business? What does that look like for you and what have you seen in your either conference attendees or other industry professionals where this has worked out well for them where they say, "This isn't serving me," or, "This service just isn't working out," or, "This business just isn't working out," even?

**[00:30:06] CC:** Sure. So specifically with a service, when I first started it was very common for someone to offer partial planning as a service. And I was first challenged on this idea by a gentleman names Sean Lowe who speaks at a lot of the Engage Events. He and I were at a cocktail event and he just asked me flat out, "Why are you offering partial planning?" and I just hadn't even really thought about it. I'm like, "That's what everybody does." And then he's like, "Why would you give someone full access to your planning brain and only charge them half the price?" and it was a really, really good questions. I came home from that conversation and I scrapped partial planning.

A lot of other planners I know just don't even offer it either, so we'll do your even management or we'll do your full planning, but this partial planning is a difficult beast because it's really hard to draw boundaries, and what's included? What isn't included? How do you keep a client from creeping into more and more of your time? So that was a service that I was able to say, "This is

not working, we've cut it." So now people either book one or the other and it's great. I'm happier, I'm sure they're happier too. So I've seen that. I've also seen, I haven't ever scrapped a business per se, but I'm always really willing to readjust.

So just to kind of give you an example, the very first Cultivate was actually called Cultivate Workshop. This was in early 2012 and it was a one-day event. And it was good, but I got a lot of feedback that people wanted more time with the speakers, more content, they felt kind of rushed through everything because we were trying to cram all this content into one day. So I used that feedback to just kind of go back to the drawing board and completely revamp what I was doing with the retreat, and the very next year we came out with an inspiring location. We were in Palm Coast Hammock Beach area of Florida on the coast. It's a beautiful location.

We had multiple speakers, we had three days to really connect and engage. So from then we've kind of honed each experience but I would say as a business owner, be open to feedback, try not to accept it as criticism and don't get defensive and see it as people giving you answers and solutions to help you grow. Because really that's what they're doing. It hurts to hear painful feedback, but if you grow from it it benefits everybody.

**[00:32:18] RP:** Yeah. Feedback is opportunity, right? And I love that perspective that you're giving, that it's not bad, they're giving it out of love, hopefully. That they want you to improve and improve that experience. So I appreciate you sharing that.

**[00:32:32] CS:** How do you tactfully ask for feedback from clients or from your workshop participants?

**[00:32:38] CC:** So generally I do a survey, and this is a lot harder for me to do for clients, I will admit that. Because with clients there's this very personal relationship and so to send out a survey feels a little bit impersonal. But for my workshop attendees, usually about a month to a month and a half of the event, so they've come down off the emotional high of attending and they can really think about what they experienced, I send out a survey and ask for things that they loved, things that they didn't love, things that they would like to see differently. I try to read those responses, like I said, not defensively and use those, any responses, any feedback that they have to grow.



With clients I try to be very intuitive and so I listen for signs that they may not be happy with something and then I try to be the one to bring it up. "So if you're upset with how this is going, or if you're wanting to handle this differently, please let me know." I try to sort of head off any concerns before they really become concerns and then afterward when the client sends me a followup message after the wedding, you know, they usually reach out and say some sort of thank you in an email.

That's when I specifically ask them, you know, same with people who leave us a review, if there were any issues that they'd want to discuss, before doing so to please let us know. But most of the time I know whether or not the client's going to have negative feedback. You know, you just get an idea of working with someone if there's anything that they're not happy about. And so like I said, I try to address that intuitively upfront before it becomes an issue.

**[00:34:04] RP:** Christina, how do you ask for feedback?

**[00:34:06] CS:** That's a really good question. As attorneys, and I struggle with putting testimonies on my website because there's obviously certain legal rules, if you will, regarding my licensure and what I can put on my website with pictures and what clients say, and things like that. So that's something that I'm looking into actively right now because I think having client feedback as social proof on your website is incredibly valuable. So don't take that for granted when it's super easy to come by and you can just throw it up on your website, you don't really have to have your clients' permission.

I've gone about doing that by, I'm starting to implement surveys in my business and the other way that I've asked is again, like Cassie says, every single person that I've worked with I have a personal connection with. There's actually at this point quite an interview process before you even get to work with me now because I want to make sure that I can give you a good result that you'll be satisfied with and I don't have the time to work with people that maybe, unfortunately, not to sound mean but that just are not willing to invest in the service that I can provide for them.

So hopefully I have tried to offer them as many different alternatives as I can, but that being said, like Cassie said, I only work now with people that I'm really excited to work with and excited to help get them a good result. So the results of that is usually, I would say about 50% of the time I get a lot of unsolicited positive feedback and I ask them if I can use that as a testimonial if I ever get those up. And then the other 50% I will just ask them in a very formal, "Hey, would you mind leaving me a review or giving me some kind of information about your experience, how can I improve it?" But that's something I haven't been great about and that's something I'm looking forward to actively changing in my business.

**[00:35:54] RP:** For me, I think in my business, testimonials are great I think, but for me as a coach when I work with people on an on-going basis I need more of that feedback so that we can improve our coach-client relationship.

**[00:36:08] CS:** That's a good point. [Inaudible] on and on-going basis.

**[00:36:12] RP:** Yeah, so different. Especially if you're a wedding planner and you're doing like a full service type of situation, then you're working with them for a long time, right? I'm really curious to see like, if you feel like it's not a good fit or there's like some weird vibes undercurrent, you feel that. I'm wondering, Cassie, how you cut through that tension and make it so that it's a better working relationship or how you get out of a contract if that's the right move?

**[00:36:41] CC:** Sure. So I've actually had to do that a couple of times and I did ask for my husbands' feedback. I'm like, "What am I allowed to do legally here?" But I had a situation where a client came to me and she had a beautiful vision, one that I was 100% excited about creating. And so we — she presented her vision, she hired us, she was a little concerned about budget and pricing but she was going to personally invest in the wedding planner and then her mom was taking care of the actual wedding. So he hired us, she paid us the retainer, and we got to work.

She did ask me to adjust my payment schedule, which at the time I was just like, "Okay sure, I'll accommodate her." She wanted to pay monthly instead of in our quarterly payments that we had contracted for. So I went against, you know, it was a little bit of a red flag and I went against my better judgement and I said, "Okay, fine. We'll do this." So she started getting behind on her

monthly payments, which is obviously a big red flag. But the other issue that happened was this vision that she had cast that we had begun planning was very different from the vision that her mom, who was paying for the wedding, had.

So we were bringing her vendors, she was signing the vendors' contracts and then waiting on mom to send the deposit check only to find out that mom had already gone and hired who knows who. So it was this really terrible situation for us because we were being put in the middle. We were leveraging these vendor relationships and bringing them to this client who's committing to them and then not paying them and in fact hiring someone else. So I talked to my husband about like, "I cannot keep doing this. This is going to damage my business. She's behind on her payments. How do I get out of this?"

And he actually looked at my contract and he said that, "The way it was written at the time," and fortunately he's helped me revamp a lot of this, "I couldn't let her go without being in breach." So he suggested that I come up with a solution she couldn't refuse. So basically I offered her a partial refund to just walk away, and at that point it was, she knew she was behind on payments so for the fact that she would be getting money back and just "no hard feelings, we understand this is not a match anymore" she saw the wisdom in taking the offer that I gave her and she did walk away from the contract.

So it was one of those learning experiences that I've learned from those little red flags, you have to listen to them from the get go, you can't push through them. And while it was hard to go through, I know at the end of the day her wedding was what it was and my company felt good about everything that we were doing too. So it was the right decision.

**[00:39:10] RP:** Yeah, sometimes you have to make those calls even if it's maybe not the best financial decision or maybe it's just in order to make sure that it's honoring the contract or whatever and it's always difficult to make those decisions in the moment because you're emotionally tied into it, or there's a lot of things happening behind the scenes. But yeah, there are a lot of those calls we have to make as business owners and I'm glad that you had your husbands' legal expertise to be able to figure out what was good and what wasn't.

**[00:39:44] CC:** Yeah, definitely.

**[00:39:45] CS:** Yeah I think the key there is even if you don't have an attorney involved, go back to the money and see, "How can we make someone happy here, and including ourselves?" But just in wrapping up here today, I'd be interested to know, Cassie, if you were to go out and tell someone, "I would love to see you build your own wedding/design/photography/styling, whatever it is, empire. What are some things that you would tell to that person, and how would you encourage them to do that in this Pinterest, Instagram, maybe less so now but this very visual, very in-your-face "I have it more than you do" kind of world?

**[00:40:25] CC:** Sure. Well I would say to not focus so much on what people are putting out via social media. We're actually not that great at consistently posting what we're doing and so sometimes that maybe gives off the vibe that we're not doing events. And I know social media is still important, but at the end of the day, if I have a big client event I'm going to devote my time to working on that client event. So we consistently get referrals and word of mouth recommendations and things like that because people experience our work at our events and that's the main way I've grown my business.

So I think sometimes newcomers come in and see someone with an amazing Instagram account, tons of followers and they feel like that's what they need to do to be successful. I would just advise that while that's important and it's a great way to market yourself, it's certainly not the only path to success. And really know your craft, become an expert at what you do, form great relationships in the community, get to know the other players and form that referral base and for me that's how I've built my business and I think it's a great way to do it. Rather than just relying on this social media persona that may or may not accurately reflect your level of expertise.

**[00:41:32] RP:** Yeah, that's so good. I think that the wedding industry can be a little bit, you know, just outwardly pretty and I love that you're saying that you can have a business without necessarily doing that all the time. Can I ask you one last question before we roll off? Who is the best fit for attending your retreat?

**[00:41:51] CC:** Sure. So the people who seem to get the most out of our event are folks who've been in business for several years. So they have a little bit of a framework with which to think about a lot of the concepts that we're introducing. Definitely wedding industry folks. We get a lot

of planners, stylists, photographers, florists. So being in the wedding industry, having had a business for a few years, and valuing community and valuing relationships and really wanting to develop that network of people that you know, maybe in a different market or around the country who you could call. You know, "I'm going through this, what do you think about this? How does this work in your market?"

So yeah, folks who have been in business for a few years who are in the wedding industry and who are really looking to learn in a community of other learners and form connections and network with some authentic and friendly people who are going to be there.

**[00:42:45] RP:** Yeah I was about to say, they sound like they have to be nice too.

**[00:42:49] CC:** Obviously if you're mean we won't say you can't come. But what I've found is that mean girls are not attracted to our event. I've gotten some really good feedback from attendees about how they didn't know anyone at all and just felt really included and really welcomed, and that to me, that's the reason we're doing it. So that makes me super happy when I hear things like that.

**[00:43:06] RP:** That's awesome. Well, Cassie, thank you so much for coming on the show. We are super excited to share this interview with our audience. Could you tell our folks where they can find you, where they can find more about the retreat as well?

**[00:43:19] CC:** Sure. So I am on Instagram @flaire\_cassie, and the retreat is there as well. It's just @cultivateretreat, and the websites for both companies are listed there on Instagram. Again I've kind of said how I'm not as great at social media as I should be, but we do have a strategy to put things out there, so hopefully you'll be seeing more picture as we roll out this rebrand and start to post information about the 2017 retreat, which we're super excited about.

**[00:43:47] RP:** Well congratulations on your rebrand. It made me really excited to see it too.

**[00:43:51] CC:** Thank you so much. Thanks for having me guys.

**[00:43:53] RP:** Absolutely. Well thank you so much for coming on the show. Thanks everyone for listening, and go build your creative empire. See you next time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:44:02] ANNOUNCER:** Are you ready to build your own empire? For more information, show notes, downloads, and tips on how to do it head to [www.creativeempire.co](http://www.creativeempire.co) where you can find out more about this week's episode and the two lovely ladies behind it all, encouraging you to build your own creative empire.

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