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SHE SAID/SHE SAID PODCAST WITH Laura Cox Kaplan EPISODE: 192

TITLE: The key component needed to build a strong, authentic brand can also help you build more INFLUENCE!

GUEST: Sandra Campos, fashion exec/entrepreneur

SHOW OPEN

Building influence is something anyone can learn. It's an investment you can make in yourself and it can hold the keys to achieving your dreams and having the life and impact you want to have. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I've learned a lot over three decades about building and sustaining influence and how using it and using it effectively can make a big, big difference in your life and career. Here on She Said / She Said podcast, we're digging into the different dimensions that help us build and sustain influence. If you thought being an influencer was just for social media, think again. Whether you're starting a business, raising money for a cause, negotiating a promotion, running your household, or trying to connect with those who don't share your views, understanding and using the different dimensions of influence will increase your chances, success, whatever your goals may be. Listening to She Said / She Said podcast is a smart, efficient investment you can make in you. I'm really glad you're here and I'm excited we're on this journey together.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

Welcome to she said/she said podcast

Today we're talking about how your personal and professional brand are inextricably linked to your ability to grow and sustain influence.

While we don't always think about either concept that way, there is an undeniable link.

Today's conversation will help us bring all of that to life. It's with fashion executive and entrepreneur Sandra Campos. She has had an incredible array of career experiences in and around the fashion business. But the piece of this conversation that really jumped out at me and that I think will resonate with you is how Sandra thinks about building a powerful brand....now, that applies whether you're trying to connect with your customer -- or potential customer, your audience, your listener, or your potential client, or even building your own personal brand.

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Your brand and its consistency and its authenticity can play a major role in creating and sustaining real influence in your life and career.

In today's conversation, you'll hear Sandra's advice from the perspective of how she's advised some of the biggest brands in the fashion world -- think DVF, Ralph Lauren, DKNY, Selina Gomez, among others --- and this over a three decade long career.

You'll hear how she went from the daughter of tortilla factors in Texas to her first job in New York. and, how and why she's embraced so many pivots in her career, and why she's focused on investing in others.

As you listen to the conversation I want to give you a couple of important topics/ questions to think about as you listen:

-- think about your own story -- the story you craft to reflect your personal brand. Is it truly authentic to you and the way you want to connect with your audience?

-- and as you think about your brand is it reflective of the problem that you are particularly well-suited to help your potential customer, potential client or potential connection to solve? Are you a consistent spokesperson for the value that you can and are trying to provide?

Sandra shares great perspective on these questions, and her advice can help you think about your own brand journey and how it's evolved or evolving.

But Before we jump in, Just a quick reminder that this conversation with Sandra continues our collaboration series with The Southern Coterie. The southern c is a network of creative founders and entrepreneurs who are connecting and collaborating in incredibly unique ways to achieve business and personal success. I'm honored to be hosting this series and to be part of The Southern C community.

It's sometimes hard to quantify the ROI of an investment like this, but I can honestly tell you that in my case it's at least quadrupled and continues to do so. To learn more, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode, and all of the conversations in this series.

For now, here is my conversation with fellow Texas native the amazing Sandra Campos.

CONVERSATION:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

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Sandra, welcome to She Said/She Said.

Sandra:

Hi, Laura. Thank you so much. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm delighted to have you. As you and I talked about briefly, you've had this incredible career in the fashion business. Tell us how you got your start.

Sandra:

So first of all, listen, I don't know that any of this was really planned per se, but I grew up as a first generation Mexican American in Texas. And at the time, I had parents who had come... My father had not had an education past eighth grade. My mother had left the beginnings of university in Mexico City to be able to go and join my father in the United States. And so they were entrepreneurs and they had to figure out whatever it was going to take to put food on the table. And they had six kids and as they were growing their family, my father decided to start a tortilla factory because other members of his family had started tortilla factories. And so that's kind of what I grew up with, was being around two entrepreneurial parents who were focused on businesses like a tortilla factory, which had a retail store in the front, and also had shipping and dock and logistics in the back and everything in between in terms of manufacturing of the tortillas themselves.

So I grew up with that experience. I have no idea why I thought I could ever be in the fashion industry, but somehow I was fortunate enough to have a mom who didn't care what I did at the house. So I was covering the sofas, making pillows, making drapes, and everything was floral and color and I had absolutely no taste, but in terms of I was doing at the time, I thought it was just grand. So I started making-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You start somewhere, right?

Sandra:

I mean, I guess, but I look back at it now and I just kind of laugh. I mean, it was a really great attempt, but it was a lot of patching things together. So I started making clothes for my sisters and prom dress and this and that, and I wasn't that great at it, but I had the interest in it. So when I went to school, I stayed in Texas and I went to Texas Tech University. And in Lubbock, Texas, which is West Texas near the panhandle, it is not necessarily fashion-forward. In fact, it was very much not fashion-forward. And if you think about dirndl skirts and very Prairie looking apparel, that's kind of what it was. And so again, I don't know why I thought I was fashion-forward enough to be able to move to New York City and have a job in the industry. But I think I was just naïve enough that I didn't really know what that meant.

My parents didn't have... they did everything that they could and we had what we needed, but it's not like we had Vogue Magazine or designer dresses or any kind of luxury in our house. So I just didn't know enough. So what I did know and the brands that I did know were the brands that people around me were wearing and the things that I understood as being fashion. So I sent a resume to a company in New York, a resume to a company in LA. I got the first response from New York and I said, "Okay, I'll go." And I interviewed. I got a job. And within two weeks or 10 days, I was in New York. And I will say now looking at it, I'm not sure why they took a chance on me, but they did. And my boss at the time whose name was Arthur List was actually from Brooklyn. He is no longer living, unfortunately, but he was from Brooklyn and had a very thick Brooklyn accent and I had a very thick Southern accent.

So my very first introduction to the industry was somebody who I couldn't understand and who couldn't understand me either. So we really figured it out. And for a year, he basically sat next to me and would make sure that I enunciated my words and I lost my Southern accent. I learned from him more about what was needed in terms of working with the retail community at large. He was a seller. He could sell anything. And I thought I wanted to be a designer, but I was terrible at pattern making. So I had to figure out, okay, if I'm going to do this, I need to figure out another road and another path. So I started really looking at what these other executives and CEOs, presidents and CEOs, how did they get there? What they were doing at the time because there were a lot of retail stores across the country, a lot more than there are today. They were focusing on sales. So I pivoted myself from my very first job, which were plural jobs because moving to New York City on a salary that I was making, which was not a lot of money, I had to work several jobs, but I was working in retail just in a store at nights and on weekends. I was working in a buying office. I was working and then I started moving into sales.

So that's kind of where I started. And again, I don't really know why I had the interest and why I thought I could make it, but I was determined. And so once I arrived, that was that, I never really looked back. I knew I wanted to be in the industry. I was never one of those people that took a chance on trying something else at that time. I just was pretty steadfast. I grew up like you have a job, you have a career, and that's what you do. And that was my path. I didn't know anything else and I started down there and kept going.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So I love that. To back up your story just a little bit though, I'm curious how your parents reacted because oftentimes, it sounds like your parents were very scrappy folks. I come from similar scrappy people as well. It wasn't a matter of living your "passion." It was finding a job, making money, becoming financially independent. I mean, those were sort of the values that were instilled in me. And I suspect this is probably true for you as well. I'm curious what your parents thought when you said, "Hey, I'm going to pursue a career in the fashion business. I'm going to become a fashion designer or something of the like." How did they react to that?

Sandra:

Well, I will add to that that as immigrants, their goal was to have their kids succeed and have a better life. Right? So that's why they moved to the United States. That's why they were making all the sacrifices they were. So I was the second child out of six. I think they were like, "Okay, that gets her off of our plate. She can go and do and live her life. And we've got all these others we have to worry about now." So they were supportive because again, my mother let me take her curtains down and replace them with things that I was making, which I would never do. I would never allow my child to do that. She was letting me slip-cover her sofas and do other things. So she was clearly supportive of it overall. And she did come with me to New York when she dropped me off. So she was definitely supportive of it.

But I think, again, they were busy building a life and with kids that were younger than I was. And the difference between myself and my youngest sister is 13 years. They still had younger kids at the time that had to be home for. So they were definitely supportive, but I think like anything else and like anyone else at the time, they didn't think I was going to make it in New York that long. I had a boyfriend that was in Texas at the time. Everyone thought I would be back in a year. And I said, "I'll be back in a year." And then after a year being in New York City, I said, "Oh, I'll be back in three years." And then I just never stopped. I never talked about it after that. I never even brought it up again. So they just realized at that point in time that was my life.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Well, and at that point, you started getting bigger and bigger jobs, right? And so you begin to get sucked into this amazing career experience. So you talked about that first job that you got, but maybe sort of walk us through what happened next.

Sandra:

So I was making \$17,000 a year. Okay? 17,500 to be exact. So at that point in time, you know you're looking for something else that's going to give you more money. If it's not in that company, somewhere else. And so I made the big jump from \$17,500 to a whopping \$30,000 at the time, which was a big jump. But it was at Donna Karan and they were long DKNY division at the time. So I gladly went over there. Again, I had no idea. I didn't know any of these people. A lot of them had grown up together in and around New York and I was just this kind of fish out of water. And many times, I still feel I am, but coming into Donna Karan, I had a great opportunity of being in a business that was launching. It was new. They had a lot of power. Donna herself was very involved. I got to experience the real fashion shows. I got to experience what it truly was like to have Vogue in your showroom, to have Donna Karan, this incredible designer, talk about merchandising and see what was important to her in terms of the Seven Easy Pieces and all the things that I started learning there was about product and assortment and the power of a brand.

And the executives, Denise Seegal, who has been... I don't know where she is now, but I don't think she's been in the industry for some time. She was the president of DKNY and she really led with grace. She led in a very powerful way that gave us a lot of power with the

retailers. So being a part of that at that time was pretty incredible because I came in and I didn't know anything. And I got a chance to work with Neiman Marcus and these incredible retailers that existed out there that I hadn't ever shopped at myself, but I was traveling all over the country and I was involved in the fashion industry. And that to me then was the first time I felt like, "Okay, I'm in the fashion industry," because now it's actually truly fashion. And there were billboards and it was exciting and there were fashion shows and you could see Donna Karan's name everywhere. And so that was pretty cool.

Sandra:

I really left for the money.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's fair. So I don't remember from reading about your educational background, did you study business or the business of fashion or something along those lines or was it just design? Where did the business piece come from, I guess, is the more precise question I'm asking?

Sandra:

Well, it was more marketing and then design. So I had that dual focus in school. Again, I don't know exactly why I chose what I chose, but that's what I studied. I think I was just going to school. I was doing what everybody thought you needed to do. You need to go to college. Your parents were expecting that. I stayed in Texas because I had a boyfriend in Texas and I just went to the school and I was like, "Okay, I'll study this." And it wasn't really a lot of thought put into what my future would be at that point in time because again, coming from where I was, anything was going to be a step up from where my parents had been if I were in a company or a corporate job or anything like that because they hadn't had corporate jobs. They were really sitting as entrepreneurs. And at the time, entrepreneurship wasn't as sexy as I feel it is today.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree with you. So you mentioned a couple minutes ago about feeling like a fish out of water and feeling like somebody who you come from a place that as you said was not particularly fashionable. I can relate because I grew up not far from there. And so how did you overcome that? How did you not let that sort of feeling like you were a bit of an outsider, how did you keep that from discouraging you?

Sandra:

I still have to deal with it. I think I still deal with it all the time. I don't know that I've ever actually felt like I fit in per se because I am always looking for something new and something different and new skills to add. So anytime you go somewhere new to add a new skill, you don't know what you don't know. And so you're learning with and you have other people around you that know a lot more than you do. So you kind of, at least I have, felt a little bit like that fish out

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of water. So for me, it's always been like I didn't have a choice. I didn't have a backup plan. My backup plan didn't exist. So I was going to make it. My goals were all about I was going to be at this place from a title and a compensation standpoint by this age or by this year or whatever it was and I just didn't have a plan that was going to take me in any other direction.

So I was pretty focused on what I wanted and how I was going to get there. And if I got knocked down, which I still get knocked down, I have to get right back up again. I have three kids. I've been a single mom for a long time. The most majority of their lives, my youngest was not even two years old. So it was me. They were depending on me. I was depending on me. So I didn't really have a choice.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Where were you at the point in which you got divorced and had responsibility for these very little people? What were you doing at that point in time?

Sandra:

I actually was a senior executive at Polo Ralph Lauren. So I was running a business that was a 700 million Lauren division and had hundreds of employees. And what was happening then too which I think about now, which I'm sure many people can relate to, I was traveling every week. I was getting home at 8:30 at night and I was like, "I can't do this if I'm going to have this full responsibility for these three children." And it was unfortunately not an amicable divorce. So I went through divorce court for seven years. It was like a long drawn appeal. So I knew I had to change my life then and I knew I needed to do something different, but I was running that division of Ralph Lauren. I went and I became the president of Oscar de la Renta, and then I knew I needed to be able to change.

Well, it actually also happened because they forced it on me. It was Sun Capital, which was a new owner of Kelwood, which was a company that had Oscar de la Renta, they came in and shut down that division of Oscar that I was running as well as a couple of other divisions. So at that point in time, I said, "Okay, what am I going to do? I need to create a new life for myself." And I was introduced to this guy, Tony Melillo, who became my partner and very good friend. And we built the first, which now we look at and we didn't realize it was going to be the first, but the first teen celebrity brand management company. It was at the time when there weren't very many celebrities who were out at retail with their own brands and we went for it. To go back and answer your question, that's what I was doing. I was running big businesses worth more than a billion dollars at retail and sales, hundreds of employees, and needed to make a change in my life.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I mean, it's incredible to think about that being maybe sort of a right sizing of your career and life as you think about all of the elements of starting a new business with someone. When

people hear that, that does not exactly sound like sort of taking your foot off of the gas pedal. Right?

Sandra:

And you add to that that it was actually 2009 after the 2008 crash.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Holy cow.

Sandra:

We were taking a risk. So I think that's also another part if I think about why I've done certain things or why I'm comfortable doing certain things that I've been doing in terms of pivoting within my career. I am a risk taker and they're never easy risks to take. It certainly was not easy to leave a cushy beautiful office, corporate job with lots of perks, but I knew I had to make that change and I believed in us and I believed in the idea. And so I did it and that's what would say in every other story that I can tell you since 2009 where I have pivoted and I've taken a risk and I've made changes. And as I always tell my kids, decisions are you either go left or you go right. They're going to take you different points in life, and they're going to bring different people into your life. And it's not that either one or bad choices, it's just a choice you're making and it's the direction they led by. So that's what I did at the time, which was to become an entrepreneur.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So you went from entrepreneurship to, pivoting back, and I should mention too, that you worked with Selena to build her brand. I'm sorry, Selena Gomez. You worked with Selena Gomez to build her fashion brand with Kmart at the time. This was a very new path to take and support that and to help her with marketing efforts and really creating this new dynamic. Talk a little bit about that experience if you would.

Sandra:

So this was when I needed to pivot into entrepreneurship because I wanted to be a mom that was actually home at night. I had experienced traveling a lot in my career up to that point. I had experienced what it was working late at night, and I didn't want to do that in my life. So I wanted to be able to have the flexibility and to be home for them. And they were young kids and going through a lot with divorce and whatnot. So when Tony and I, my business partner, when we are talking about what we wanted to do and creating celebrity brand, we went to Kevin Huvane who's one of the founders and head of CAA, Creative Artist Agency in Hollywood, and he said, "Great." We presented our business plan. He said, "Great. Who do you want?"

And because my three kids were of the age that they were Disney kids, I knew Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, Miley Cyrus, and those girls. And he said, "Who do you want?" And I said,

"Selena Gomez." And we had talked about Selena Gomez because of all of the Disney kids, we felt that she was the most relatable. We felt that the Hispanic Latino aspect of her certainly connected with me, but we actually saw that in the future that it was going to be important. So she was 15 at the time. She actually grew up in the same hometown that I grew up in Texas, which is Grand Prairie, Texas. So that was one bond that immediately was there in existing. And we had done a lot of research. And so Tony on the creative side, because he's been a designer and a creative director and stylist and editor all of his career, and me on the business side in terms of building brands and focusing on all the things that started happening then, which were focusing on e-commerce and in store brick and mortar and all the marketing and the social media, et cetera, we really built this business and it had 14 different categories.

It was six years that we were together and we watched her grow up. We watched her grow up and evolve, and yes, we did create the first product categories for her. And her life has obviously become very successful since then. So we really bet on the right person. It was a risk. It took us a lot. It was almost 100 nos to get between retailers and partners for joint venture and licensees that we went to to really build that brand because people would say to us, "Well, she's just a teenager. What if she gets pregnant? What if she does drugs? What if she does this, that, and the other? The retailers will cancel it." And we just had a lot of naysayers, but we kept pursuing it. And we finally got the partner that we needed and the partners that we needed and Kmart was very supportive. And John Goodman is the name of the CEO at the time and he was really visionary also and wanted to bring on the celebrity impact. That was a great six-year time period. When people ask me now, today, what was the most impactful, that has been the most impactful for me in many ways.

That's happened during that time period.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What was it that kept you going? So hearing all of these nos, and I hear this from guests all the time, I got 100 nos before I finally got that yes, but what was it that kept you going through this process? How did you know that you needed to stick with it versus pivoting or retooling or recalibrating? Right? How do you know?

Sandra:

Maybe this is terrible, but we didn't have a backup plan.

And I don't know that I would recommend that to anybody, not have a backup plan, but we didn't. So in not having that backup plan, we just were not giving up. And if you knew Tony, you would understand why he also does not give up. He is not going to take no for an answer. So the two of us combined together, we just knew that that's what we wanted to do and we knew that there was a space for it. We knew retail enough. We knew the consumer enough. And I started really focusing in on the generation Z and millennial consumers. Well, at the time, generation Z were very young, but really on that whole new changing demographic and what was going to be important to them. So since then, I've really focused myself on being a student of culture, a

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student of the consumer, and that's what I love. That's really what I love. When I go back and think about from my very first job and jobs, what had impacted me, and it's always been the consumer. I've always been not only curious, but very aware of the consumer and the interest and the changing landscape and the dynamic of what was to come.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What's your best advice for really understanding your consumer and really tapping into a market that you're trying to get into?

Sandra:

Be there. Be there with the consumer. I can't tell you how many places I've traveled to, including Edina, Minnesota, which probably you've never been to. Right?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I have not, not yet.

Sandra:

I mean, I have been to South Dakota, North Dakota, everywhere throughout the Midwest, all throughout the south. I mean, I have been so many places because I travel to the stores. I was in the stores. I would travel to go see customers and still today, I still do it. Going to Dubai. I don't just go to Dubai and go sit in a conference room. I'm talking to people. I'm going to stores. I'm watching what they're doing. And I pay attention. I think that's the best thing that you can do, is really be there. So with Selena, as an example, we would go to her concerts and we would do cross-marketing collaborations. We'd be in the store, we'd have personal appearances. You see the customer. You see what they're wearing. You see what their pattern is in a store and where they go and gravitate to. You see now with social media, obviously over the last 10 years, the responses, influencers that they follow. You just pay attention to the consumer and you be there with them. You read, you follow them, you watch them, and you embrace that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Can you give us an example maybe of something specific that was so surprising to you that you learned as you have gone and had these experiences as you go into Kmart stores and you watch consumers or you go to Dubai and you talk to people as they're having this experience? Anything that you witnessed firsthand that you're like, "Okay, that just surprises the heck out of me?"

Sandra:

Yeah. I'll tell you what I have always been... since the first time that I went to China and I started going into the shopping malls in China and seeing the consumer and seeing what they do, that has always surprised me because they are so far ahead of anything that we've ever done,

whether it's from a technology standpoint or visual merchandising standpoint, the stores are amazing. The city's in shopping. They just shop and there's so much of it. I also would say the same thing about the Middle East and the Middle Eastern consumer within the middle east, whether it's Saudi Arabia, certainly Dubai, or Qatar, or some of the other locations that I've been to, they love the experience of being in a mall. And watching that is very different. You're not going to the mall because you have to be there. It's an experience. You're there as a community.

I mean, when I went to Kuwait and went to the mall, it's like that's what they're doing all day long. It's hot outside. There's a lot of military there as well from the US and there's a lot of military families, but it is an experience to be in these malls. So I think that was probably, if you're asking in terms of any surprises, those have surprised me when I've been there. And I realize that this is their lifestyle as well as their necessity, but it's their lifestyle.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So interesting. So you pivoted again from entrepreneur back into a corporate fashion role if my list is correct here. I believe you went from there to Diane von Furstenberg to become the CEO of her brand?

Sandra:

So the stop before that was I was the president of Juicy Couture and six brands within a corporation called GBG, Global Brands Group. And I started as the president of Juicy Couture, and the goal was to bring Juicy Couture back to relevance and really create this brand that could have different licensees and operate globally, et cetera, which it was, and it still very much is. But then within that timeframe that I was there, I also inherited BCBG, and Bebe, and Herve Leger, and a brand called Tretorn, and Buffalo. And so I had these six brands that were all women's brands and they were quite significant in international scope as well. So the time that I was there, I started really focusing and spending a lot of my time traveling internationally. So we had a lot of stores in mainland China, in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East as I was mentioning, in Russia, in Europe.

So I expanded my skillset from doing everything that I had been doing and focusing on even with the entrepreneurial aspect in terms of e-commerce, the wholesale aspect before that, international addition and understanding distributorships, partnerships, and again, the consumer throughout all these different regions of the world. And so I did that and one of the brands that I had, Bebe, I had a creative director, Nathan Jenden, sorry, Nathan and I became very good friends and we worked together really well. And Nathan had been Diane von Furstenberg's creative director for 10 years, from 2000 to 2010. And she had made some changes within her organization and she wanted him to go back to be the creative director and revive her brand again.

He came to tell me and I said, "That's amazing. That's great. You need to go and do that." And he said, "Well, yes, but you need to come and meet her." So I did. And Nathan was really

the reason I ever met Diane Furstenberg and the reason that I had that job because I met her and we had many conversations over a couple months time period. And I went in as her CEO. And part of the reason that I did that was also because I had gotten to a point in my career that I also going back to saying I'm a continuous learner and one who's focused on culture, I could also feel that things were shifting into being very much about purpose and power of a mission.

And Diane for 45 years, her mission was about empowering women and what better brand to connect with for me than to help empower women through a career that I'd been in for at that point 25 plus years? So for me, it was a joy to be able to say, "Okay, I've had a lot of brands that I've built with names on them, brands that I have turned around with just names on a label, but now it's actually a purpose-driven, mission-oriented business that's been around for 45 years with an iconic designer." That's a golden brand. So that was that reason for going there and being able to head up her brand and learn about Diane and be a part of that legacy.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Any specific takeaways that really have stuck with you from that experience with her? Because both she and the brand are very iconic.

Sandra:

I would say overall, because the brand is iconic, she is beyond iconic and incredible in many, many ways. And at the end of the day in our industry and certainly fashion, there is always the ability to revive a brand. Nothing's ever truly dead. You always have a way to be able to come back and revive a brand, but there's also the core DNA of any business that still needs to be consistent. So while things may change, styles may change, lengths of dresses may change, colors may change, seasonality may change, the core DNA of what that brand is should never change. So how it evolves and how it modernizes, that's an important part of an evolution of a brand, but the core is there. You can't all of a sudden become minimalistic if you're all colorful and print-oriented brand and you can't all of a sudden become print-oriented if you're a minimalistic brand, so vice versa.

So those things I think are really lessons that I learned and continue to learn in each of these experiences. It's getting back to the core basics. It's like Juicy Couture as an example, too. It's like that was a velour tracksuit brand. That never goes out of style and it's still the mainstay of that brand business and making sure that you evolve it, you modernize it, you bring it to today's consumer base. That's one thing, but you don't walk away from something that you originated.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So interesting. I've had several founders, they've all been in the fashion world. This has largely been as part of this collaborative series that we've been doing with The Southern Coterie, this conversation with you as part of that conversation, and we're talking all about growing and evolving in our lives and our businesses or companies. One of the things that I

would love for you to speak to is this idea of being the face of your brand and what that means maybe over time as your brand and your company ultimately evolve, how do you stay fresh as you continue to grow and evolve and kind of keeping your brand fresh as well? How do you manage that?

Sandra:

Right. No, I think it's really important to be the face of your brand because it's even more important today than it's ever been. Having that connection, having a personality, it's definitely always been important, but it's more important now than I think it's ever been and being able to be authentic. And again, I talk about the core foundation, the DNA of the brand and who you are as a brand, it comes from the founder, right? What was the purpose? Why are you creating something? What do we need it for? And what are you going to do to make sure that we can't live without it? So I do think it's more and more important to make sure that there is that alliance with the founder. At the same time, depending on a founder's future vision, do they want to exit the brand? Then they have to make sure they're protecting and maybe it's not their name on the brand. That's a different story, but being the face of it, I think, is if you think about Spanx, that's Sara Blakely, right? Obviously, you think about DVF, it's Diane Furstenberg. You have a long list of who you think of when you think about what that brand is you because those individuals created an identity for that brand. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How about advice for really shaping the story of your brand, the story that you tell to your potential consumer, and maybe advice for how you do that?

Sandra:

There's several questions that I always think about, and I'm actually going through this right now with a few different founders in talking this out with them. And even my business partner, Tony Melillo, as I mentioned before, as we talk about something in the future as well, and it goes back to like, what are you here for? What is the point of whatever it is that you're creating? Why do you feel the need for it? I am very focused on white space opportunities and being able to see how something can be improved upon. So it has to go into, is it just more stuff? We don't need more stuff. Why do you bring this to the table? What is it that you're doing? Is it different in terms of fabric? I'm speaking fashion right now, but let's say is it different in terms of fabrication? Is it different in terms of sustainable packaging if you're a CPG company? Is it different because what? Are you putting something different in the ingredients? What is the end result? What is the problem? What's the solution? How are you going to be able to identify?

It goes back to just the basics of, do you have a problem? Do you have a solution? And then how are you going to be different from anybody else? And that core question, I'm telling

you, I'm going through it with several founders now. It still always boils down to that. And then you start with that basic, and then you say, "Okay, now, so it's not a made up story. If you actually have a problem..." I won't even get into this other specific company because it's not in the industry, it's completely outside the industry, but there's a lot of global problems in this industry, happens to be ag tech. So you look at the global problems and you say, "Okay, well, what are those solutions to fix it? And why is it going to be important to the consumer?" It's the same thing from ag tech as it is in fashion. You can't just bring more stuff in. Yeah, you can, but there's a lot of stuff out there. What are you doing that's uniquely different? And I think today in today's world, and we're talking about The Southern Coterie as an example, I was floored when I met all those designers. I thought it was amazing.

And I was so happy to see that there's all these entrepreneurs in the south that are coming and creating really unique identities for themselves. Whether it was a Shop BURU or...

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Mignonne Gavigan.

Sandra:

And they're just doing things that, again, doesn't exist. 12 years ago, I was working with... I was asked to do a project for a year with Kendra Scott. This was before she became a global brand. And it's still, when you look at that, very specifically what she was focused on in terms of the materials and the color bar. She was focused on from the beginning. And it didn't click in initially because it wasn't the right timing. But as the ideas developed more and more, as the strategy developed more and more, she started to create a showroom and started to create a retail brick and mortar presence. Then more and more people started to see that that was her unique point of view on top of the story of being a woman and starting her business from scratch, et cetera. It was her point of view. So I think going back again like what's your point of view and whether it's any of the women that are entrepreneurs from The Southern Coterie, it's their point of view on how they're going to differentiate in how they're going to disrupt that space. Whether it's apparel, CPG, footwear, whatever else, and I met a lot of them there that are in all those categories and I think it's really exciting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah.

Sandra:

Steph is a great example.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, absolutely.

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Sandra:

I mean, who's another one? Well, okay. Who else is doing it? You can't even compare it. So there's a lot of excitement there.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

To remind listeners, this conversation is part of our continuing collaboration series with The Southern Coterie. We've had an incredible line up of founders and entrepreneurs who represent what The Southern C is all about. You can find links to all of those episodes in the show notes for this episode. So be sure to check them out!

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How's the best way to get good feedback as you're building and crafting your brand story? Talk about how you get the best feedback, who you should go to, how you should evaluate the feedback that you're getting because the reality is you're never going to appeal to everyone, right? So how do you know how to continue to fine tune and which pieces you should sort of carve away at or maybe tweak a bit?

Sandra:

Well, and that will change. It's not always the same when you start 5, 10 years into it either. But I'll give you an example of an entrepreneur that I have been working with for the last few years. She's not part of The Southern Coterie but she's a fantastic entrepreneur. Her company's called Bubble Beauty. And she really took a good solid two years of time to create focus groups. She has a business that is a beauty brand for generation Z. And she took focus groups. She had a couple of thousand people that she was in a group. It was like Slack, but not Slack, but they were group messaging. And she did a lot of back and forth in these focus groups as it relates to color, branding, packaging, product. Literally spent a tremendous amount of time and she was going directly to her customer base.

I think that's fantastic, right? Because who can tell you better than the customer and the community that you're building product around? You're not building a community around your product, or I guess you can, but it's better to actually build product around the community. You know the community you grow into, especially more and more and more now, we say that word and it's so overused, but it truly is, what is that community you're focusing on because you can't be everything to everyone anymore? It used to be that case or you'd have a handful of brands and those were your mainstay. They were at the every single store you would go to. And it was the Ralph Laurens and the Calvin Kleins and you know who they were. And there weren't a lot. Now you've got so much. And the more niche you can be, the better.

The more focused you can be on who that community is. Is it just an outdoor person? What's that psychographic? It used to be about demographic. It's now about psychographic, right? Because you can have two people sitting next door to each other, living in the same place,

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same level of income. But one of them is ladies who lunches and the other one is somebody who's going hiking and that's her life. Right? So you have to think more psychographically and how you communicate. So who better to tell you and to get guidance from than the customer you're trying to do business with?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. And that customer is more likely to become your raving fan, if you will, to use that vernacular. Yeah.

Sandra:

And an ambassador. And there's some great examples of that like Michelle Cordeiro Grant who's the founder of LIVELY and how she just... Again, she was a designer at Victoria's Secret and decided that she could do it better and went and had 10 ambassadors and 100 ambassadors. She used these women. She was using them for her product direction, and then also to go out and be ambassadors of her brand. She went from 100 to 1,000, to 10,000, to 100,000. And by the time she had 100,000 ambassadors, her business is acquired. She's still the CEO running it, but it was acquired because she built a community of women who were fully dedicated to that lifestyle, to that fabrication, to what she was doing to create intimate apparel that was comfortable, that was seamless, that people would enjoy.

So there's lots of examples of women who've done it. And I don't know that any one of them would say it was really a roadmap that was set in stone. It does change, but you have a certain thing that you go for initially. And then as you see things develop and as you see customer or macroeconomic issues that impact whether it's pricing or we've got a war and you've got all the different things that are happening inflation wise, or whatever's going on in the world around us, you might have to make those changes, but still the core and the community, who you're targeting, doesn't go away.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. Such great advice. That's really, really fabulous. Okay. Let's get back to your resume because we're missing a few stops here still. So take us from DVF. You left there several years ago. You started a couple of entities, one of which you've now sort of pivoted into a different way, but you started Project Verte or you joined Project Verte as the CEO and you also founded Fashion Launchpad. So maybe let's talk about both of those and how they fit together.

Sandra:

Yeah. So what happened with DVF is the pandemic came. We were on a path to turn the business around and have a profitable business that was 38% ahead of where it was end of February. And then all of a sudden, March 12th and we had to go home. So by June, it was... March, April, May were very doom and gloom for fashion and for retail and especially for \$500 dresses when we were all sitting at home in quarantine. So it was a matter of having to change

and pivot from a business standpoint. The business plan entirely had to change and the business model had to change. So by June, it was evident that the way that the company was going to go was I had to basically furlough 75% of the team. We had to shut down our European operations. We closed all of our 68 stores. I mean, it was just not a fun time, but it was clear that the company had to pivot and look for different ways to be able to move forward.

And so by that time in June, I left the company. Now it's a very different company today. I think there's, I don't know, under 30 people there, it's a very different company set up and there's different structures, but it's still very valid and it's a good thing for her. But with that, when I looked and I was trying to determine what I was going to do at that point in time sitting in a pandemic, I knew I didn't want to do the same thing again because it just felt wrong. It felt wrong to worry about a \$500 or \$1,000 dress at a time when the world felt like it was crashing.

So while I had certain opportunities, I chose not to take those because I didn't want to go down that path again. But what I knew was going to continue was technology. And for the last 12, 15 years, I've really been focused on a lot of technology from a digital perspective. And that has been a lot of what I've done in bringing these legacy retailers and really bringing them to the digital forefront, focusing on e-commerce and all the tech stack that's involved in terms of everything digital marketing, performance, customer acquisition, et cetera, et cetera. So I focused on technology and I said, "Okay, well, I've been asked to be a member of this board for the last few years." They approached me at DVF and I decided to join their board and then kind of become this interim CEO for a bit.

The company, Project Verte, as you mentioned, was focused on supply chain technology. So people will say to me, "Why the heck did you go to supply chain technology because it's all about 3PLs, fulfillment, logistics, et cetera?" And number one is because when you look at logistics, of course, the CEO has responsibility, but are you really in it? Do you really understand it? I wanted to understand it more. I wanted to understand like, why does it take three weeks to negotiate and look at a contract for a warehouse? Why can't we have subscription businesses here? What are we looking at in terms of product market fit? That company had pivoted several times in terms of their product, their technology. And I wanted to be able to come in and say, "Okay, we need to really focus this in because retail needs X and this is where we can actually add benefit."

So it was more of being able to get deeper with knowledge in that area and understand that more obviously coming from a B2C business to consumer type of business for many years, going into a B2B and was very different. And I think there was a lot of good learning there, but I also wanted to join boards and I joined the Big Lots board last year. And I have been advising small brands like the Bubble Beauty, which has actually done phenomenal, and I've been investing and I have a couple of other retail tech companies that I advise as well. So I've had a lot of different areas that I have wanted to explore. And with that exploration obviously comes other opportunity. So when I started looking at what's happening in the world, it just felt like, as I said before, such doom and gloom in our industry. We had so many people losing their jobs.

It was terrifying for so many people. And I looked at our industry. I said, "We have to change. We don't have learning and development. We're not focusing on educating and continuing to have education for our employees." And I was getting calls and still I am getting calls every single week and it's always from a woman. I have never had a man call me on this, but always from a woman that needs to either come back into the workforce. I had somebody who called me and her husband had worked for me and she had been in the same company as well. And she said told me that he had passed away and said, "I've been home with my kids for 10 years. I need to get back into the workforce, but I have no idea where to start and the business has changed so much. How do I even get started to learn again?"

And I've had people who've said, "I've been at home for five years or I now have to go back into work because of COVID, my husband lost his job, and how am I going to learn and get up to speed again?" So I realized that we don't have a place where people can go and learn the skills that they need to learn to either pivot from where they are now to something that's more digitally focused because now obviously, digital and e-commerce is in every single industry sector that exists, or to be able to get them up to speed of like, "Here's where the industry has come to."

So Fashion Launchpad was exactly for that purpose. It was to create on demand courses and workshops to be able to help individuals within our industry understand more about the new vernacular. I, as a CEO, was going to Google summits on a quarterly basis and was hearing all these different words that I was like, "Wait, what is that?" And new things, I was like, "What, what, what, what, what?" Every single quarter, I felt like it was changing so much. And if you aren't on top of it, you really feel out of it. Right? And that was just even at my level. But nonetheless, at any level, there's just been such a change and such an evolution into digital that I felt like it was important to be able to do that.

So fast forward now where we are in terms of Fashion Launchpad, it is evolved and evolving into being more about next generation skills. Because what I realized was that the soft skills we created curriculum for is not really where the majority of the jobs are. If you look at the job market today, it's all digital something, digital marketer, digital this, data scientist. There's a lot of next generation skills. And then in the past 12 months, we've had blockchain, cryptocurrency. We have NFTs, Web 3. We have all of this that now we as women at a time when men are learning it at the same time, we have the opportunity to learn together so that we can bridge that knowledge gap and we don't fall behind. And in particular, women of color, in particular Latinas, I want to help give the opportunity to women to be able to do that.

So I'm working with a couple of different organizations and have other organizations supporting that to be able to bring this education that is the next gen skills to women. We're going to do it more regionally, we're going to do it globally. It'll be more hybrid between in person and online.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

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Yeah. Is it something that people join? Do they pay for the content? Is it free for them? How does that work?

Sandra:

It is not free because... I say that as the first thing, because we have seen from others actually that when there are free options, people don't show up.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's not as valued.

Sandra:

It's not as valued, but it's nominal in terms of what the costs are. And it's nominal under \$50 and there are supportive companies that are going to help support those efforts so that we can keep it very accessible because that's also the point, is to keep it accessible and not be something that's so inaccessible. I do a lot of conferences myself. I know a lot where you have to pay for your travel, you have to pay for accommodations. And then it costs \$1,800 to be there. And you're like, "Well, that's really out of reach for a lot of people." So we are going to be doing both. And in fact, I'm going to talk to Whitney about this as well because we should do it with The Southern Coterie.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's a great idea. That's a really, really great idea. Okay. Let's talk for a minute just about how you think about the concept of influence. That's a real theme in this podcast. It really was built around this idea of the importance of understanding influence, understanding how to build it, understanding how to sustain it in order to get what you want. How do you think about influence in your life and career?

Sandra:

Well, it's funny because I certainly didn't... I've been living my life and I've had a lot of life and ups and downs. And as I mentioned, there's no one that doesn't get knocked down and has to get back up again. We all have it. It's just in our own different ways. So I guess when I started understanding more the influence or the impact that I was having was when I started having people that worked for me or that had worked for me come back and say, "I learned this from you and thank you so much." I'll be like, "Wow, really? You did?" And that was 15 years ago or that was 20 years ago, or that was 5 years ago.

And that's when I started realizing that, okay, you're always going to have your naysayers. There's always going to be challenging people within an organization that won't necessarily welcome you. And I've had it, trust me. I've had it and I will still have it. And for various reasons, I've also been in turnarounds and turnarounds aren't easy when you go onto organizations and say, "Well, these things are wrong. We got to fix them. Right?" And it's never

100% welcomed, but nonetheless, you have to stay the course in terms of your experience, your knowledge, and being able to be authentic so that what you say is, "You know what? This is the direction. We're going to go there not because I want to go there, but because we have data behind this, because this is what the industry is showing us, or this is..." Whatever the other facts are around it.

And also be as inclusive as possible with those decision-makings, but realizing that you have people at all different levels and people who have come from all different experiences with all different backgrounds. And so having to give them the knowledge based on what your experience is is telling the story, right? It is telling a story and giving those examples of like, "We could go this way or we could go that way. Now, if we go this way, these are the things that can happen. If we could go that way, it might be wrong. We might have to pivot again, but at least we're going to take a chance."

And as I mentioned earlier, I am a risk taker, and I'm a risk taker in a lot of different ways because I like new innovations and I like testing new innovations in business. So on both sides, I think that comes into it. But on the influence side, I think it's really... mentorship comes to mind when you think about influence. And I don't really know that I ever thought about mentorship. I certainly don't think I ever had a mentor. I've had lots of mentors that I think about in terms of who has influenced me because they were really great. I have 25-year-old who influences me by some incredible things that she's doing. So I get influenced by seeing people who are really passionate about what they do, who are innovative in the way that they think, and who are taking those risks. That's what influences me, and that's probably who I will influence more as well when I'm giving people opportunities because I believe in them that they might not believe themselves in things that I'm pushing people to do because I know it's the right way to go even though they don't know it today, they might realize it later.

TikTok would've been a perfect example because I brought that up years ago. And people get a little bit uncomfortable, but hopefully if they see that they're being influenced by being uncomfortable and it's okay to be uncomfortable and to do something that you're going to test and learn so that ultimately, you're more comfortable with it. So being authentic, being yourself, learning with data and being able to point those things out to share and include people in that thought process and giving them the different visibility because at this point, I certainly have a lot of that visibility and I've had a lot of those experiences. So that's probably the best that I can give you in terms of influence.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. Okay. One last question. If you could go back and give 22-year-old Sandra one single piece of advice, maybe it's a life hack, maybe it's a mantra, what would you tell her?

Sandra:

Remember, networking is everything. And literally, it is so much more important than I ever realized. And it is who you know in many, many ways. It took me a long time to get there. And I

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would say for anyone who is listening who is on this podcast that is at home or taking time with their family and ultimately goes back to the workforce, one thing that I didn't do is I didn't keep up with those contacts when I was... I didn't keep networking. I didn't go to the events as an entrepreneur. When I was at home, I was at home with my kids. I was home at night. I was single mom again. So I was at home. I was doing things. But I should have continued to build those relationships during those times. I wish I would've done it because it was a lot harder to get back in.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That's great advice. Really great advice. Sandra, thank you so much. I really loved the conversation.

Sandra:

Thanks, Laura. I appreciate it.

SHOW CLOSE:

Friend, thanks so much for joining us today. I hope you enjoyed the conversation with Sandra as much as I did, and I hope she gave you a lot to think about as it relates to your personal brand and how it's evolving as well as some key questions and considerations to keep in mind.

As always, I'd love to hear your feedback on this or any of our She Said/She Said Podcast episodes. You can reach me via the contact link on our website at She Said/She Said Podcast .com or on social media — Instagram, Linked In Facebook or Twitter. you'll find me @Laura CoxKaplan. You can also leave a comment on any of my social posts.

To learn more about Sandra Campos and our collaboration series with The Southern Coterie, be sure to check out the show notes for this Episode.

Until next week friend, I hope you found this investment of your time worthwhile. Take care and I'll talk to you again soon.

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