



CREATING A VALUES-DRIVEN JEWELRY BUSINESS WITH MELISSA JOY MANNING

THRIVE BY DESIGN WITH TRACY MATTHEWS

"If you aren't authentic and they know it, they're not going to come back. They're not going to give you a second chance. Why should they because if you're manipulating, you probably aren't someone that they're going to come back to nor should they." - Melissa Joy Manning

You're listening to Thrive-By-Design business marketing and lifestyle strategies for your jewelry brand to flourish and thrive. Let's get started.

Tracy: Hey there it's Tracy Matthews your host today on the Thrive-By-Design podcast. Welcome to Episode #30, and today I have a special treat for you because I have Melissa Joy Manning on the line, and I'm really excited to dive right in to the interview.

Let me tell you a little bit more of why I'm so excited to interview Melissa. I've known Melissa for a long time. We started our businesses around the same time in the 90s, within a couple of years of each other. And it's really fun to see someone grow and evolve over the years and sort of watch the evolution of their brand, and Melissa's been someone I've always admired for multiple reasons. I mean she's really been able to position herself. She's really been able to create a unique and strong design point of view for her collection, and she's really been able to build a business based on her personal and core values of the things that she really values in life and in business. It's evident through everything that she does. It's evident through the design. It's evident through the way she markets her brand. It's evident through how she puts herself out there in the world.

I love chatting with Melissa because every time we talk there's always some amazing, new insight. And I am so grateful to have Melissa back. She's done multiple interviews for the Flourish and Thrive Academy community. She's talked to our mastermind several times. She's also come and done some interviews with us for our Thrive-By-Design series. So I am just thrilled to have her back and





without further adieu I'd love to jump right in to the interview with Melissa. If I were you, I would definitely pull out a notepad, if you're sitting somewhere where you can write down or listen to this interview several time because Melissa's wisdom is just going to be so amazing for you to help you really create a business that stands out and sets apart by building your business based on your values and what is important to you in your business and really learning how to position yourself in a way that makes you stand out from everyone else, and Melissa has done just that so I'm excited to have her here today. Alright without further adieu let's get started. So Melissa once again welcome. I'm so excited.

Melissa: Thanks Tracy.

Tracy: You're so welcome. It's so fun to talk to you always. I would love to just have you tell us a little bit more about your journey, and tell us sort of the process of how you got to where you are today.

Melissa: Sure. [3:00] Well I think my process is very similar to a lot of people who do what they love, relatively accidental. You find something you like to do, kind of wish and dream that you can do it, and a lot of times maybe lack the knowhow of how to create a business around your craft. I had been working in high-end retail after graduating from college after studying jewelry design and sculpture, and my parents were super high overachievers, sent me to a vocational counselor and took all these tests and they said you should be self-employed. What can you do? And I said I can make jewelry, and that's how I got kind of pushed into making a living out of what I've always loved. I mean I've made jewelry since (3.44 Montessori?) School.

So it was kind of an evolution in learning how to run a business around making things. So I went to an entrepreneurial school in San Francisco called the Renaissance Entrepreneur Center and basically took a really in-depth course on running a business. So everything from marketing, pricing, positioning to strategy and came out of it with a business plan and somehow started with \$500, walking around the Bay Area asking the stores that I liked to carry my jewelry, and with every success just reinvested back into the





business. Eventually started showing at trade shows, eventually moved to New York, opened our showroom here and then started branching out into retail. First e-commerce and then the Berkley store and now the two stores here. So certainly that's a very short answer to a long question, but it's been just about forging my own way and listening to my gut and trusting my instincts and surround myself with great people.

Tracy: Well I love hearing that, and I also love what you said kind of about you know you started with a \$500 investment and then every time you would get an order you'd reinvest that money back into the business. So I know that that's something that a lot of people who have product based businesses, especially for jewelry design, there's a lot of reinvestment back into the business.

Melissa: Oh yeah.

Tracy: Go ahead. I was going to ask you how long did it take you to start paying yourself?

Melissa: I've never been in this for the money. I mean I feel incredibly grateful. I was just actually thinking this morning, especially this time of year, that anyone buying anything I make or anything that comes out of anyone else's head is one of the biggest gifts that we can all receive as jewelers. So I'm always continually amazed and thankful for that. In regards to your question, probably close to three years. I mean I started my business, worked on it every second, but I also had a second business at that time. I was advising, doing some retail advisement, advising work for buying. Looking back I was like wow the service business had a lot of [6:00] potential, but I love jewelry so much that I supported myself through other means and then kept building the business until it could support me.

I mean as an entrepreneur when we're all starting out you aren't usually a corporation so paying yourself is a tricky thing. It's kind of easy to flow all of your expenses through a business if you're working from home whether it's internet, rent, electricity, all those things. So we can all live, I mean and I lived so leanly for so long and





I still do especially when I want to grow the business and reinvest in it like now having retail.

Tracy: Exactly.

Melissa: Paying yourself as an entrepreneur always kind of comes last. It's doing what you love that comes first.

Tracy: Absolutely. I love that answer because we're all in this because it's really a passion that we have for our design or for making or being able to work with your hands or whatever it might be. It's different for everyone, but I love hearing that. So I've known you for a long time and it's been really fun to watch how your business has evolved. It seems like, as an outsider looking in, that your business really started to prosper and grow when you came into alignment with some of your core values. And I was checking out your newly designed website and you call that Ethos right?

Melissa: Ethos mm-hmm.

Tracy: Ethos, sorry.

Melissa: That's okay.

Tracy: So can you talk a little bit more about how this whole process of developing this strong company culture and your Ethos kind of evolved?

Melissa: Sure. So it's a very interesting question because for me they aren't two different things. I think that, and I know I'm not unique in this, it's just how we can all verbalize this. It's interesting and especially now that people are realizing that we can't look to big government to solve our problems. There's so many social entrepreneurs in the community now. I guess the easiest way to say this, as an artist I drive most of my inspiration from the environment and from the people around me. Growing up in Northern California I was always outside hiking, diving and swimming, just really in love with nature and found it always to be something that whenever I was stuck creatively could unstick me and provide the inspiration that allowed me to work in a way that felt authentic to myself. And then similarly





also being in the Bay Area, such an amazingly diverse community that people watching has always been something that fascinates me.

So for me people and my place in the world are what allow me to come up with my ideas and what comes out of my head in terms of being blessed and being able to make jewelry, and it always felt relatively disingenuous of me to be making something without giving back because as creators we're incredibly selfish. We're looking and taking [9:00] whatever we want from our surrounding and processing it to make something that we find fulfilling as artists, but similarly I think as an artist I have a responsibility to give back to my community. In learning about how detrimental my need whether it's for gold or stones can be to the planet, I just realized that I wasn't really feeling good about what I was doing anymore. And then being surrounded by so many other people who don't have the same blessings that I do in my life made me realize that I really wanted to create a culture of people of other artists who could also learn living working wages. Because when I started in '97 and I used "proactive" in my business plan, people were like that's not even a word and you're never going to be competitive in the fashion industry by making things on chore.

Luckily I have the personality type where it was like well you tell me no, I'm going to figure out how to do it. And to me it was really important post (10.05 Naphtha?) to bring craft back to the United States, to bring it back to artisans here who rather than being pencil pushers and never really loving what they do that we could all share in the ability to make things. And when I kind of came to that realization that as an artist not only could I make jewelry but I could create proactive cumulative change in my community, I think the two values aligned so much because one feeds the other and in doing so really came to my own voice. And that voice not only reflected in the work but also in the marketing and the communication with customers who then fueled the desire to buy the work and it's just a cyclical process.

Tracy: And I think you know having that culture and value system behind you it makes people want to buy your jewelry over someone else





because you know who doesn't want to support the local economy and who doesn't want to support you know creating jobs in this country. So it's really amazing.

Melissa: It is and what I think is so amazing is I can't believe I have a business old enough to vote. I've done this for 18 years and back in the day when we used to talk about this people would literally look at me like I was crazy, and now there's this whole movement of makers in the US and everything is made in America and I just think it's the most amazing cool thing that there's so many people out there who realize that they can take what they do and not only use it for their own game, but that they can leverage it within a community to create the type of community that they want to live in, and I just think it's a really interesting time to be an artist and there's so much power within that.

Tracy: Yeah it's so true, so amazing. So I wanted to segway, we've sort of talked about some of the things that you founded the basis of your company, but I want to dive a little bit deeper into some of the values that you've really built your business around. [12:00] How did you derive some of those values?

Melissa: Well I mean I think every great business, whether it's a tech business, pharmaceutical business, whoever, you have to have a mission statement. So I challenge all of your students or fellow designers to really create a mission statement around what it is that you want to do with your company and create those key words that you can use to drive your values. So for me they're very personal, and I look at what our business goals are and how they align back to those values. And if I find them meaningful, I will make the sacrifices I need to make and the work to make the values realistic, or if the values don't align it's not necessarily a project in which we participate. So using those core values to make decisions strategic as well as artistic in the business really help kind of align the voice that I was talking about throughout our reach.

Tracy: So I really loved hearing more about that, and I'm curious. Everyone's kind of got a process to how they sort of define what's important to them and get really crystal clear on the core values that





mean something. So how did you sort of derive that and how do you feel that building a business sort of derived around these core values has really helped your success?

Melissa: Well I mean I think it's a lot of looking within right.

Tracy: Mm-hmm.

Melissa: So for me I know what I react to. I know what upsets me. I know what I find unacceptable in life, and then I look at those and think how can I change what I do and live authentically so I'm not participating in any of that. And those values then become core driving principles for me. And on the terms of how did I find them, I think they've always kind of been within me. It's about listening to my instincts and doing the work whether it's the hard work of being honest with yourself about how you're maybe not being as truthful as you like with yourself and how to change your behavior whether it's through yoga, meditation or any of things. I mean I think it's a personal journey in terms of finding what those values are for everyone because they are incredibly individual. That's why too I don't feel like for me I don't necessarily always to anyone what my values are. I think they should be apparent in how we run our business because they're incredibly personal.

I think that's true for most people. And then also living really authentically to them because when you live in a glass house you have to be ready for stones. So always thinking through what you're saying and how you're saying it and being as honest with your community and your market but most importantly with yourself.

Tracy: Yeah, and integrity.

Melissa: Absolutely. Yeah. So for a small example [15:00] about our stones. I mean it's really impossible to find completely transparent sourcing on stones. We've dropped entire vendors because we don't like the answers we get or started paying a little bit more to work directly with mine owners. Part of my new participation with the Nest Group is hopefully going to look at some solutions there. But it's really about having the honest conversation and saying we do as much as





we can and we're always looking at what we can do better and how we can do more. And I think the honesty within that conversation and starting it really, being willing to say what we're not doing right, what we are doing right leads to an authenticity that I think is powerful and then people really believe what we're saying and understand that there's no green washing going on and that this is really a strong piece of our puzzle of who we are and then it lends an authenticity to it that makes them feel confident in us as a brand that aligns with their own values and who they want to be as a consumer. Because I think the most amazing thing most consumers don't even understand is in a supply and demand economy they actually hold all the power.

You can see that when people boycott certain products and then they immediately change things because if you're not buying anything, nobody can make anything. So it's about creating an honest dialogue with your market I think.

Tracy: An honest dialogue and full transparency it sounds like.

Melissa: Yes.

Tracy: This is it right.

Melissa: It is because also if you aren't authentic and they know it, they're not going to come back. They're not going to give you a second chance and why should they because you're manipulating, you probably aren't someone that they're going to come back to nor should they.

Tracy: Absolutely. Yeah it's the truth. It's interesting, it's interesting that you say that because when I was first kind of marketing my business I was thinking back to some of the emails I used to send out when I first kind of built my e-commerce website, and it just didn't really feel like me. And it's funny, once I began to start writing in my own voice and really speaking from who I was, people started to react and respond. And I think it's such a multilayer process from how you build your business, the communication that you put out there, how you're even speaking to people and this whole transparency piece.





And so it's interesting the difference that you might see like when you are fully transparent. And I'm sure you've experienced this a hundred-fold. When you are fully transparent and authentic with who you are and align yourself with what it is that drives you forward as a business.

Melissa: Absolutely and also in terms of that is building [18:00] the relationships. I mean when I first moved to New York I felt like a little kid joining the big city and being a member of the CFDA and being in these rooms with all these huge names and being so intimidated. And then kind of like not saying as much or feeling like who was I to join the conversation or any of these pieces that we all have as human beings and then realizing that every single designer in that room felt the same way at one point or another. Designers were always the weird people, group. So it's just kind of like owning that and understanding that and really, I mean from the Family Stone, one of my favorite movies, is like letting your freak flag wave.

It's always when you're truly yourself is when you truly create the strong relationships that can support you while you're running your business whether it's with a key member of the press or a contemporary or a customer or someone you work with. When you let down your guard and are truly and are making the work from a very personal and authentic place that's not derivative of market, you're really going to see a strong response.

Tracy: Absolutely. I love that. So moving on. Do you have any words of advice for designers and makers? You've been doing this for 18 years, right, so it's been a process for you.

Melissa: Absolutely, but every day is always new.

Tracy: Exactly, exactly. Do you have any words of advice for designers who are trying to really tap in to either their core values or to create their company culture or to maybe align a little bit more with their authenticity or their voice?

Melissa: Sure. I mean I think first and foremost is make sure you're surrounded by great people. If you're around people who are telling





you things aren't possible or who aren't supporting your growth or your vision, you might want to look elsewhere for the kind of support that you need or inside.

Tracy: Exactly.

Melissa: Because building a business is challenging and a lot of times you can get feedback that isn't necessarily the most positive and helpful. So I always say consider the source and don't take things personally, whether it's reviews of your work or how you're running your business. You have to be authentic to yourself and you have to have a strong voice. So like I said when people used to tell me no, I always took it as a request for more information. It was never a no. It was just what else do we need to provide them with to get the yes. And really believing in myself and for designers to believe in their self. In terms of identifying core values they're there.

Tracy: Yeah.

Melissa: It's just a matter of finding the time and the space and the silence to really come into contact with them and bring them out and then figuring out ways to align them within your business whether it's a charitable give-back model or maybe just running one piece every quarter that you can donate a portion of your [21:00] sales or proceeds to something that's meaningful to you, or if it's taking time off with your team and going and volunteering together. There's so many different things and ways that you can be creative. I mean let's face it we're in creative businesses as entrepreneurs. No one can tell us what to do except ourselves. And when I think about some of the best entrepreneurs in the world, Steve Jobs, any of those guys I can't believe that they followed someone else's roadmap.

I think the reason why they're as great as they are is because they created the solutions for the problems that they came across, and then people were like oh he's a genius I'm going to do what he does. And then people create business plans and business schools around it, but I think it's really being, you know, to really be a creative person not only in the work but in how you run your business. And making sure that if you do work with someone who is very business oriented





and solely looking at bottom line dynamics, to have the voice to speak and say that sometimes you can take a loss for a long term gain, and being really holistic and long range in your vision is key to building a successful business.

Tracy: That's such an important point that you make because as you're building a business, I remember as I was building my first business there were years when I would have a loss, but then the next year we would have a much bigger gain. So it is a cyclical process. And one of the things I love that you bring up, like Steve Jobs or whatever, it's like that guy failed a few times before he was even as big of a success that he is now known for. He was so creative and innovative--this is a little bit off point but something to be recognized--really he was so aligned with his vision that he drove a ton of people away who didn't believe in it.

So to tie this all back it is really important to get people on your team who believe in what you're doing. And I love what you said about, and this is how I took it, tapping in, looking at the source when you're getting negative feedback. Because I know a lot of people, especially close friends and family members, sometimes aren't necessarily as supportive of an entrepreneurial dream or going and taking a risk because that's not what they're accustomed to and safety for them is more important. So I think it's important, as you mentioned, to listen to the source because you can get so much information and sometimes this so much information is too much information and just like distracts you from being on track.

Melissa: I totally agree. I have two driving principles in my work and the first one is from my dad and [24:00] he taught me it when I was skiing is when you stop falling, you stop learning. So what you were talking about in terms of jobs is you always push yourself and fail many times. I mean obviously as your business gets bigger your risks have to become more calculated because you're all of a sudden responsible for a lot more people than just yourself. So understanding the selfishness within that, but also how you can be protective and still take the risks and grow dynamically personally as well as professionally within the business I think is really important.





And then the second piece for me is my other favorite. I don't know who said it, but it's "Life begins at that edge of comfort." And as entrepreneurs we have to be fearless and understand that when people around us maybe not as supportive, it's not coming from a place where they don't want to be. It's that like you said, they're just a different personality. They're coming from a space of wanting you to be successful and safe when as an entrepreneur what you always have to do is be fearless and jump and it's a very different thought process, but one that you have to understand how to navigate. For me there was so many people when I first started who aren't around anymore, and I've learned so much from that and I wish I had known how to negotiate those relationships differently than how I would now. And that's one of the biggest things I've learned too is how to be graceful within that and not just so like well fine I'll just do it, but how to have grace within that not alienate people around you I think is really important too.

Tracy: Absolutely. Well that is a great note to end on, but before we go I want to know just something that you're really excited about right now.

Melissa: Transparency in culture. This isn't totally even about jewelry, but I mean I guess it is because for me I derive all of my inspiration from community. But I just think that as much as what's wrong, there is as much that's right. And I think we live in a really amazing time to be able to find the positive stories in our communities and see how people come together. It's like living in New York, the idea that people aren't so nice, but they are. I mean I'm excited to see that I find and see niceness and kindness around me all the time now, and I feel like there's a movement towards being kinder. It used to be cool to be mean and now I think it's cool to be kind. So I find that really exciting, as dorky as that is.

Tracy: No I love that. It's cool to be kind. What was that 80s song "Cruel to Be Kind"?

Melissa: Something like that. Something like that that I probably have on my iPod somewhere.





Tracy: Yeah I know, I might start singing it.

Melissa: Yeah.

Tracy: So Melissa thanks for joining us today. [27:00] Where can our listeners find you?

Melissa: We're on Facebook. We have a pretty good Facebook. Email us and Instagram, they're all my name, Melissa Joy Manning or Melissa Joy Manning Inc. All of our stores have Shop MJM handle so you can get more direct information about the stores, and we have a blog on the site.

Tracy: Awesome.

Melissa: Yeah, and the site is just my name www.melissajoy Manning.com.

Tracy: Awesome. Well thanks again Melissa for joining us.

Melissa: Thanks Tracy.

Tracy: Oh you're welcome. And thanks everyone for listening today. If you've enjoyed the show, we would love for you to do us a huge favor and make sure you subscribe to the podcast, rate the show and write us a little review. I'm very excited to keep bringing all this great, valuable content and inspiration to you every week. I'm Tracy Matthews, take care until next time.

