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Episode 148:

“Don't Sleep on Panel Discussions as a Marketing Tool”

Mike Michalowicz:

Welcome back to the Don't Write That Book Podcast, where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now, here are your hosts, myself, Mike Michalowicz, and AJ Harper.

AJ Harper:

You know, back in the '80s, I used to be able to do that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Do what?

AJ Harper:

Any makeup... Uh, first of all, not well, I don't know how to do makeup, but just the lipstick and the mascara without a mirror.

Mike Michalowicz:

No, it's good. You were just putting it on and you kind of rolled your lips you're doing right now. I'm

AJ Harper:

Not great at makeup though.

Mike Michalowicz:

Though. Oh, no, it looks really good. Um, is there a moisturizer in your lipstick or is it just for the beautification, the collar?

AJ Harper:

Normally I have my tinted chapstick, but I forgot it, so I'm stuck with this.

Mike Michalowicz:

So it has like a moisturizer or some kind of chapstick component?

AJ Harper:

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No, this does not. Oh. This is more like a pencil.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh. Yeah, it looks... My wife has it and it has some kind of moisturizer, so she'll put some -

AJ Harper:

I have, I have... Lipstick on. I, I prefer Burt's Bees tinted chapstick over anything. Interesting. And so it's chapstick, but it has a s - it has a slight color.

Mike Michalowicz:

I had a reaction to Burt's Bees chapstick. I don't know which version it was, but I put it on there. I started getting, uh, kind of these red blotches, so it was a -

AJ Harper:

I feel like maybe you're just like a sensitive Sally. <laugh> Because, because last time, not in a bad way, but just last time you were talking about your feet.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, yeah.

AJ Harper:

Like you got some things going on.

Mike Michalowicz:

I got some things going on, yeah. Yeah. It's, it's gross stuff that we don't, don't wanna hear.

AJ Harper:

It's good. We should talk about this stuff more. What else? What else?

AJ Harper:

My wife, I was gonna sense of Sally. My wife, you see an extremely attractive person. Like -

AJ Harper:

I'm so glad you re - acknowledged that because she is a knockout. Yeah,

Mike Michalowicz:

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I got elite attractive. And, um, her skin is flawless and highly reactive to anything. Like, she is hypersensitive stuff. So, um, she got sun poisoning once, being outside for 10 minutes and bubbled up. I mean,

AJ Harper:

She's very pale.

Mike Michalowicz:

Very pale. One of the oddest things is she, uh, had a shoulder surgery. She fell in our driveway on ice when walking our dog. This is, like, almost 20 years ago. It's way back. Fell down. Shoulder's injured so severely she needs an operation. She goes in for the operation. It's identified as, like, a two-hour procedure. It's pretty articulate. Ends up being four and a half hours. Doctor comes out and is like, "Ooh, that was way worse than we expected." And so they kind of stitch her arm together and then she has to be now immobilized in a sling with all this kind of gauze and padding for pure mobilization for, I think it's like eight weeks. And then you go through PT. It's a year recovery, blah, blah, blah. A day or two into this, she's like, "I can't do this anymore." And she's like trying to itch it. They pull it back very carefully and she's bubbled up.

AJ Harper:

Oh, no, oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

No. Like a lizard. And the doctor's like, "I've never seen this before. She's so sensitive to heat." And so how do you keep someone immobilized that also needs to have the arm circulating air? What did you do? Narcotics actually. So he's like, "You just gotta knock her out for a few days because we, we cannot move this for a few days." So she went on these narcotics and she's like, "It was weird and I don't like it at all. " And she also had a reaction to that. And then they were able to get her in some s- special mobilizer that pushed her arm out from her body just to give her some air circulation. They got her different stuff. And he's like, "In my whole career, I've never seen someone's skin react this way."

AJ Harper:

All right.

Mike Michalowicz:

So she's the sense of Sally.

AJ Harper:

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So she's the one. The,

Mike Michalowicz:

The pretty sense of, sense of Sally. So today we're gonna talk about don't sleep on panel discussions as a marketing tool.

AJ Harper:

This is, I'm <laugh> -

Mike Michalowicz:

That's the most bizarre title.

AJ Harper:

No, it isn't. What's, what's wrong with that title?

Mike Michalowicz:

Nothing wrong. It's like, who talks about it? Like this is so specific.

AJ Harper:

Listen, I'm a geek for this stuff. It is my idea to do this episode. W- what's your - Nobody recommended it. It's just my nerdy self wanting to talk about panel discussions. But I said don't sleep on them because I feel like they're underutilized. They're super easy to pull off. More, they're easier to pull off than speeches and other types of engagements. They're extremely low cost. They allow you to build in, get a lot of, uh, buy-in from multiple networks. Yeah. And people aren't doing them.

Mike Michalowicz:

And they're executed so poorly in so many cases. I'll give the, those insights. Before we kick into this, we're in studio. Uh, this is AJ Harper with me. I'm Mike Michalowicz. AJ and I have written all my books together. AJ has also authored Write A Must Read, which is A Must Read, The Irony of It All. The Irony. You' worked with how many authors do you -

AJ Harper:

That was intentional, by the way.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, I know. It was very intentional. So I guess not ironically. How many authors have you worked with collectively? Uh,

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AJ Harper:

I was trying to figure it out. It's gotta be over a thousand. It - Wow. It's gotta be. So I'm just try - I just, it's been a long time. I've been in publishing 21 years. It's hard to say. Yeah. Because I had a publishing house. I also was a ghost writer for a long time. And then I'm an editor. I have my students. I also work with, um, people writing keynotes and such at Heroic. And if you just add all that up, a lot of times, you know, people will say that I've helped thousands of people and they're counting their audiences at speaking engagements. Yeah. Yeah. I'm not counting that. I'm talking - Yeah, these are direct - I'm talking about did I teach them?

Mike Michalowicz:

Small group teaching or one-on-one.

AJ Harper:

Or work with them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, of all those authors, do you have a story of someone that's been successful beyond what you anticipated or had an outcome you're like... Like, like the, the, the sad sack that comes in, you're like, they're n - they're never gonna make it and they surprise you.

AJ Harper:

I know. I would never. I would never tell you. You would never

Mike Michalowicz:

Say the name.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, yeah. No.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So just, I know you

AJ Harper:

Wouldn't. Sad

Mike Michalowicz:

Sack. Okay, but, but do you, do you have a story of someone like, oh, that, that was really a surprise or an outcome I didn't anticipate? Something

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AJ Harper:

Like that. An outcome I didn't anticipate. No, you know what? The thing is, I am such an optimist. I, I am such a believer in go for that, go for the moon. It's legitimately who I am. I'm not saying it to, because I, to BS anyone. I actually think, why couldn't you do that? That's, that's just how my brain works. Yes. So I don't think I ever felt like someone surprised me because I'm all, I'm delighted that, oh, you did do it. Mm. You know? Um, so no, I actually, but I can tell you, I know you're wanting a good story is what you're trying to get out of me. Sure, yeah. Um, like, I really wanna do a profile on this, but I wanna talk about Cara Poppett.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, interesting.

AJ Harper:

So you know Cara.

Mike Michalowicz:

I know Cara and I know a little side scoop I heard recently, but I can't, I can't reveal on show, on the show. And really good stuff.

AJ Harper:

Well, she just won an award.

Mike Michalowicz:

I love her.

AJ Harper:

She just texted me with a picture of her with the award. She won a prestigious award. She won an, um, IBPA award, which used to be called the Benjamin Franklin Award. And, um, it's just even to be nominated, I know that's a phrase we hear all the time. It actually is a big deal to be nominated. They get thousands of submissions. Wow. And their judges are actual librarians, book sellers. Like this is a legit experience and, um, real judging and, um, a, a big deal in, in the industry. And she ju - they only nominate three finalists. Good for her. And she, she won silver on it. Um, she sent me a picture of her - It's called, uh, her book is called Big Freaking Change. Big

AJ Harper:

Freaking Change. Yeah. I knew

AJ Harper:

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It had big - Which is so her. Yeah. But, and she's open about this. So she actually texted me and said, uh, thank you for believing in me. I'm so glad I didn't give up. And the thing about her is she came to my workshop. It was a big investment for her, especially because she's Canadian and so the dollars was actually way more -

Mike Michalowicz:

Not in your favor.

AJ Harper:

So she bet on herself. It was challenging for her. She's open about the fact that in school she was not, you know, it was challenging for her English class. And, um, and, but she wanted to write her own book. She, she just, she wanted to write it herself. And so I was like, "I will, if you want that and you are willing to work, I'm g - I'm gonna get you there." She was in a clas with some very successful people and it kinda freaked her out. She actually writes about it in her book.m. One of them was Margaret Andrews, who's a professor at Harvard. Mm-hmm. And Margaret's book has since come out. Um, manage yourself to lead, to lead others. But you know, it was intimidating. Like, okay, not only am I gonna be working with AJ in this 14 week gauntlet, but here's all these successful people.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Um, the thing about, the reason I wanna share about her is she went through it. Part of it is what I put her through. Like, you know, I don't tell people good enough. I'm like, "No, let's keep trying." And one of her challenges was she would turn in chapters to me that were maybe 12, 14,000 words. Big chunk. Okay. Yeah, because she just, it was hard for her to write in a simple way. Sure. It was hard for her to stay focused on a teaching point in a section. Yeah. It was hard, you know, those, those were some skills she didn't have yet. Yeah. And I just said, "We are gona crack this. I'm gona find the way to get this. " And she, her goal was not to become a better writer. Her goal was, "I wanna write the best book possible." But I said to myself, "She's gonna be a better writer.

AJ Harper:

Like that's my goal. I'm gonna, she's gonna have these skills forever. I don't ever want her to feel the way she felt on the first day of class. I want her to have, I know how to do this. I can do this. That's what was my internal goal." So I worked with her and I kept trying, "Okay, let me try this technique. Okay, now let me try this technique." And she just got incrementally better, but I made, I kept putting her back, "Okay, go back. Okay, go back. Now do, try it this way. Try it this way." I showed her. I worked with her privately. I did everything because I just felt it, you

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know? I need to help her get this over the finish line. And she had some real dark night of the soul stuff. Mm. Like, am I ever gonna get this?

AJ Harper:

Especially because in my program, we do live edits, so you're seeing other people and they're getting it. And then you're feeling like, uh, why, why don't, why am I still struggling with this same thing? Then when she finally got, she got accepted by a really great, what I thought, top tier hybrid. She turns in her manuscript, go out of business. Oh. And taught another night of the soul and she was broken. She was like, I, she fought so hard to write the book, write the proposal, get a respected publisher to actually take her on, and then they went out of business. And your money goes away with that. Money went away. And so I had asked her to s - I had sent her to page two initially and they had passed on it. Yeah. And so I'm sitting there going, okay, okay. What am I...

AJ Harper:

So I emailed Trina at page two. They never, their policy is - No second consideration. No second consideration. I said, Trina, please, please. Yeah. She's worked on it since. It's evolved. This is what happened. You, I'm not saying, like, if it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit. Please, will you do me, just do me a salad? 'Cause I just could not see this Kara Poppett give up. Yeah. I'm emotional about it right now. Yeah. Yeah. Just, I knew she, I knew she was maybe gonna give up. And she had almost given up so many times. And she's a, she has her own business. She's super successful. She has young kids. Like she had a lot going on, right? Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And a professional dancer. She almost kicked me in the face once. I gotta tell you about that.

AJ Harper:

She's, yeah. Trina, now don't send, don't try to get Trina to do this. She, she's not gonna do it again, I'm gonna tell you right now. But she agreed. And then she read it and she was like, "Oh." And they decided to offer her the deal. She said, "I never, I've never in my whole career done this. "

Mike Michalowicz:

I've never heard that with any publisher. A second consideration.

AJ Harper:

But I knew it was better. We had worked on it. Kara had worked on it. Yeah. I knew it. I knew it. And I also knew Kara was gonna bust her butt to sell it. And that that's, that's a factor, you know? Yeah. This isn't a person that's just gonna publish the book and then walk away.

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Mike Michalowicz:

And look at her, she's winning awards now.

AJ Harper:

Okay, but listen. She accepted that deal. Then she paid very... I told her, "You have got to get in front and right, right away. These are the things you need to do. " "You need to get the attention of the sales team. You need to do these things." She said, "Okay." And then she just went. She got sponsors. She got, she sold so many books in pre-order. She did so well that the publisher said, "You've done such a good job. We just need..." Not the publisher, her, um... Oh, what's the trade distributor in Canada? It's, it's not, um - Powell? No. No, it's Raincoast. Raincoast, okay. Right. So it's McMillan in the US and then it's Raincoast in Canada. They were like, "We just need to catch up with you. " And they gave her a book Intigo Bookstores main stage book tour that they paid for.

Mike Michalowicz:

Wow. Who gets that? No one gets that. And that's because of all of her efforts. Um, and then she just texted me over the weekend and was like, "Thank you for believing in me. " Oh, that's beautiful. I could, I could... And she wrote every word of that thing. Yeah, that's beautiful. And she, every word was hard.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. That's beautiful. I love those stories where someone doesn't have the natural gift, but they have the work ethic - Oh my God. To bring it about. But she does now.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh yeah, yeah.

AJ Harper:

She can do it now. She, she's not gonna write another book, but she could. And she, you, I could see it. She was also working on a keynote later. I could see the writing skills that had grown. Those are hers now. So I

Mike Michalowicz:

Wanna tell you a story about you. So this is what I admire about you. Um, it is how you are a advocate for all your authors. And that's such a great example, but I'll tell you when you don't know about - Oh. Roger Dooley. So Roger Dooley came to an event, uh, that I was doing with Michael Port, and you were at the event - Yeah. Teaching. Yeah. I asked Roger, I said, why'd you come there? He's like, "I wanna get reinvigorated about writing." He had written a book called Brain Fluence, which is so freaking good.

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AJ Harper:

Underappreciated book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Unappreciated book. He, uh, yeah, that's underappreciated. His new book that came out from that event was called Friction. Yes. And that was inspired by you. He got reinvigorated. It is extraordinary. I was fighting him about the title. I'm like, it's a negative title. It should be like basically unfriiction because it's how to be friction free. It has a title. But nonetheless, that's the title. It is such a good book and it's underappreciated. Uh, he is my favorite author in the neuroscience space, bar none. More than Cialdini, whose work it's extraordinary, is Robert Dooley. Roger Dooley. So Roger emails me. I'm doing an endorsement for his new book. And he's like, "I got the mojo." And it, he tied it all the way back to what you inspired. So that's what I admire about you. Really? Yeah. A little spark, a little word you, or phrase you said or something can stick with someone for decades.

AJ Harper:

I mean, that's all the more reason that authors should write their stuff.

Mike Michalowicz:

Uh, no. Well, that's not what I... Yeah, maybe. I mean, you were saying

AJ Harper:

Nice things about me, but I'm just saying I -

Mike Michalowicz:

Someone loves you into being. Someone somewhere - Yes. In your life will love you into being. And that's what you're doing for people. But

AJ Harper:

You can also do that as an author. For others.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh yeah, for others. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AJ Harper:

All I'm saying is like - 100%. You know, make it so.

Mike Michalowicz:

100%. Yeah. So just receive that though. That's why I acknowledge it.

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AJ Harper:

Say, okay, you're right. I need to, I need to, I need to pause it. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

You love people into being. And, and you don't even know when you're doing it. But

AJ Harper:

I, I, I get so much joy. Yeah, you can tell. If you're, if you're gonna do it, I'm gonna be next to you doing it.

Mike Michalowicz:

You don't emote often. And when you're telling the Cara Poppett story - Oh. See yourself choking up. I,

AJ Harper:

I almost wanna just do a whole profile on her and ex - show that... I mean, I have a live edit that she came to that I shared with people. She's so open about it. Just her transformation in, in my workshop. I... What is more valuable? If, if somebody's willing to do the work with me, I'm willing to do the work with them. You know, like, I'm not gonna quit on them.

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, we have s- some people that skip through the preamble on our, this, this episode. We're so far in already that even the skippers of the preamble are like, oh, they're usually good for five minutes on these different topics before we get to the main topic. I know. They're like, they're hitting forward. Like geez, they're still talking.

AJ Harper:

That was, that was, was about Cara.

Mike Michalowicz:

It was awesome. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

You, you surprised me with the question. Uh,

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, it was an important one. Um, so this episode's sponsored by Simplified the Imprint with page two.

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AJ Harper:

The unpaid sponsor of Don't Write that book.

Mike Michalowicz:

The Unpaid Sponsor -

AJ Harper:

I have to change that in the outlines.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. The Unpaid Sponsor, well, you do, of this episode and every episode is Page two Simplified. They are an imprint, um, looking for entrepreneurial authors. So if you write in this space of entrepreneurship and you have a simplified kind of, um, concept that you can deploy, they wanna hear from you. I wanna hear from you. So today we're gonna talk about panel discussions.

AJ Harper:

I know. How,

Mike Michalowicz:

What inspired, like, you had, this is so

AJ Harper:

Odd. I know.

Mike Michalowicz:

I've been on very few. Have you been on many?

AJ Harper:

Yes.

AJ Harper:

Is it, what inspired this topic?

AJ Harper:

Because, like I said at the top, I just don't think people are realizing the value in them and the ease with the, to put throw them together. I just, I just don't, you know, we're not, people aren't doing it. And I think that it's an untapped marketing tool.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Are they typically virtual in person? What do you prefer?

AJ Harper:

In person usually. Yeah. But you can do virtual.

Mike Michalowicz:

And -

AJ Harper:

It's better in person. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

So let's just talk about the in - person first. How do they come about? How do you f - get in one? Et cetera, et cetera?

AJ Harper:

Well, I think, I mean, there's lots of ways. It's, you know, if you're letting people know that you'll be... If people know who you are, they might invite you to be on one. I was just on three different panels in San Francisco for Human Plus Tech Week.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, is that the red eye you took back was from San Francisco?

AJ Harper:

Yep. And then there was, uh, a panel at Human Plus Tech Week, and then the next day we were at Chief, which was in conjunction with Human Plus Tech Week, and I did two panels there.

Mike Michalowicz:

How'd you get on those panels?

AJ Harper:

Um, I was invited to because they wanted a publishing person.

Mike Michalowicz:

So - And did you know someone?

AJ Harper:

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Yes, I knew, uh, um, Jen Kem organized that event along with Nicole Bradford who started Human Plus Tech Week. Um, so yeah, I mean, these are people that know me, so they ask, "Will you come do this? "

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. So a panel, define what a panel is and

AJ Harper:

How it functions. So it's gonna be at least two people and some sort of moderator. Okay? But it could be more than two people, but you need two people and a moderator.

Mike Michalowicz:

Does an ideal panel have differing experts? Are they all publishers?

AJ Harper:

Uh - Well, so it depends. And it doesn't have to, you know, so in my case, they were talking about, uh, one of the panels was Intellectual Legacy in the Age of AI.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, inter - okay. Very unique,

AJ Harper:

Interesting topic. Well, the other panel was what Jen calls a missing manuscript, which is about the gender gap in nonfiction. Um, so for example, women dominate in publishing. Uh, in - What does that mean? With, they're more, they're, women are, make up most of the editors in publishing. Oh. Most of the staff. Um, and also, uh, women do the best in publishing. Um, they make the most money, um, when it comes, but it's mostly fiction. When you go to, say, business books, huge gender gap. Interesting. It's just the dudes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Dudes. Is the publishing kind of mechanics still mostly women and men who are the authors or is it just dudes who are

AJ Harper:

Not - So I don't have that data. Yeah. For those in - for the business imprints.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, I, I can say from my own, uh, experience is the editors were fifty fifty men versus women. Maybe slanted men.

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AJ Harper:

I think, but the lead editors were men, except for the first

Mike Michalowicz:

One. The lead editors were men. That's correct. Um, and the publisher themselves, male. The head of marketing, male. Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah. And then, and most of my contemporaries are male.

AJ Harper:

But in, in overall publishing, women do well. Yeah. It's just this pocket. That's

Mike Michalowicz:

An interesting. I wonder why there's a gap there.

AJ Harper:

I mean... Do,

Mike Michalowicz:

Do, do - It has to,

AJ Harper:

It, it has to do with women in business.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that's what, that's, that's what I was thinking

AJ Harper:

Too. And the disparities.

Mike Michalowicz:

So, interesting. So, okay. So, she invites you to be on this panel. Yes. Um, is, is there typically a speaking fee associated with that? No. Okay. So, typically

AJ Harper:

Not. Maybe if you're famous. I don't know. That part, I don't know, but if - But typically not. Typically, no. This is not -

Mike Michalowicz:

Do you pay your own way to get there and so forth or

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AJ Harper:

Typically - Most often. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So, what's the advantage of being on a panel for you at one of these events?

AJ Harper:

Lots of things. Okay. So, and prior to this, I was on a lot of panels as a publisher. You know, I might be on a panel about diversity in publishing, for example. Okay. Things like that. Um, I, but panels at American Library Association, um, Book Expo, different, different places. For me, you know? So, those are the type of places I would be on a panel. Okay. And it's topic focused. So, one, the advantage is you're sharing your expertise. So, you're seen as, "I am an expert in this. My opinion matters here. People wanna hear what I have to say about it. And if you're on a panel with other esteemed people, um, then you're seen as equals to them." This, you're immediately equals to them. So, if you're just coming up and someone's asking you to be on a panel or you are inv - saying, "I'd like to be on a panel," and you're on a panel with someone who's maybe got more experience than you are, is more notable, immediately you're on the same playing field.

Mike Michalowicz:

I call it instant authority.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So, you have instant authority. Another benefit is you're usually at an event where people are interested in that topic so therefore, now you've got a whole audience of people who wanna come and listen to you talk about it. So, exposure to that audience. If you do it right, you know, let's say if, if you decide you're gonna... Well, I wanna talk about creating your own panels. Yeah, we'll talk about that. Like, that's another, that's another advantage. Noted. But just getting, um, just going to them, networking opportunity, exposure, um, and again, like you call it, instant authority.

Mike Michalowicz:

Do you mention your book? Do you kind of bake it in? Or the moderator perhaps pitches

AJ Harper:

In the book? The moderator will introduce you. Okay. Yeah. And then they'll usually be a bio about you somewhere in the materials if it's a big conference. But also think about this. You're having an engaged conversation with people who you may or may not know that well, but they're esteemed people in your industry. You've... When are you gonna have that conversation with them? You're doing it in front of other people. You've built rapport with them. You're going to stay in communication with them.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I think the values in the green room, which is the, right before going on stage or after, you're talking with those people and you're exchanging contact information so forth. Any etiquette when it comes to being on a panel?

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Don't talk too long. So, you wanna, in, first of all, you wanna be sure that you talk to the moderator about the main goal. Don't promote your stuff so you can plant a seed. You can, let's say, I could, you know, I definitely talked about what I do in a, in an organic way. So, I might have said, um, you know, what I see a lot with my workshop participants, or I talk about this in my book, here's a story I share in my book. But it's not prom- promotional at all, you know? So, lay off the promo, practice in advance, you know, find out, find out, okay, you've got five people, you've got 90 minutes, or you've got four people and it's 30 minutes. Okay, just do the math. You need to give everybody a chance to talk. So, practice getting your answer out without going on too long.

Mike Michalowicz:

What if you have someone that's not prepped in the etiquette and they are going on too long? As a panelist, do you ever try to intercept or is that only on the

AJ Harper:

Moderator? Moderator. Moderator cues you. You can raise your hand. So, in this last panel I did, I definitely put my hand gently up to do a comment, to add on to someone's comment. And if you're gonna do an add-on, make it quick. I'd also like to say, "Oh, that's true for me too. Can I just add this one point?" I see. But you have to let the moderator tell you it's fine.

Mike Michalowicz:

So, I'd love to know some rules for the moderator. Like, do you have any suggestions for how they should facilitate a good panel?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, they, they need to know who's on the panel. They need to understand the main objective of the panel and the questions that are on the minds of most people around that topic, that problem, that, um, focus. And then have some juicy questions that will invite discussion. So, obviously not yes or no questions. Um, and something that helps the panelists feel this seen. I was, um, Carissa Begonia did a, was a moderator on the last panel I did. And I thought she did a fantastic job. She asked all these questions that I, I'd never been asked before and that's always good. Um, so pa - Were

Mike Michalowicz:

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You prepped for those questions prior?

AJ Harper:

No, we had no prep. Usually, you can get them, but often you don't get them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Kind of like what we're doing here. Like, you don't know the questions are gonna fire your way and it, it feels much more off the cuff and it inspires interesting stories because you're not prepped. I mean, you're prepped because of your life's history, but you're not prepped and gonna give scripted answers.

AJ Harper:

They are counting on you being so knowledgeable about your expertise. Yes. That you can take any question. So, you gotta be, you gotta be ready. I'm not nervous if... I had no idea what they were gonna ask me in any of the panels.

Mike Michalowicz:

So, I've moderated some panels and so I've studied etiquette procedure for moderators and I, I can now see the erroneous things people do. The worst is one question and it rotates through all of the panel, particularly larger panels where there's four or five people. And they'll say, you know, will AI technology be transformative in the photography industry in the next year? Answer one. Answer two. And, and it's boring. What I see great moderators do is they go, "Hey, AJ, your background, based on your background. I know your bio. Um, you've been in the creative arts for so long. You actually were a playwright yourself. You saw the technology. How do you see AI transforming?" Yep. And they go to specific people. Um, they invite counterpoints is the second thing they do. They say, "Okay, so this is an interesting perspective. Based upon your background so - and-so, I think you have a different perspective.

Mike Michalowicz:

Can you give me some counterpoints to this? "

AJ Harper:

I think... Yeah, that's great. I think that's smart. And I also think there may be a question that you do wanna hear, one, two, three, four. In that case, you'd say, "For this question, I do wanna hear from all of you on this one question." But be very thoughtful about it so you're kinda mixing it up a little bit.

Mike Michalowicz:

A lot of these panels, it, it just goes up and down the line, up And down

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AJ Harper:

It's just like the same in the same order.

Mike Michalowicz:

In the same order and you wanna, you wanna poke your ears out - Yeah. Listening to something like that. Uh, another thing I see moderators do is they're very judicious with time. They realize that there are some people that are far more loquacious and just. And there's some people that are very succinct and poignant and they try to balance that out. Mm-hmm. They'll actually extract more from the poignant person and say, "Hey, can you give me a story behind that? Um, give me some color," basically. Yeah. They'll go to the locacious person and they'll start off the question saying, "We only have 30 seconds to get this answer from you. What is your most concise thought?" Yes. And I'll flag you. And they start balancing out.

AJ Harper:

Mm-hmm.

Mike Michalowicz:

Th- that allows, um, the panelists to be their natural self without being concerned because a moderator's controlling that. And I've seen those become very effective.

AJ Harper:

I also think, you know, Michael Port always said you need to, you wanna control the close. You don't wanna use a Q - a Q&A to have control over the tone of - Yeah, yeah, yeah. How things close. And that's when you're doing a keynote, right? So if you, if you break for a Q&A, don't do it at the end. Do it right before the end, then have your close so you can control how, how it's proceed at the end. But I think even with a panel discussion, you could do that. If you're opening up for questions, do that not at the very end, do it before, you know, still save five minutes at the end to do your own wrap up. Mm-hmm. So that note is not whatever question came from the audience. Yes, I like that. Yeah. So I think that's, that's a really important strategy.

Mike Michalowicz:

Michael Port once said to me, he's the founder of Heroic Public Speaking. He said, "I can show you how to get a standing ovation for every speech you do. " <laugh> And then he demonstrated and he got a standing ovation. So what he does is he has people at the end of his speech get on their s - feet - mm-hmm. And start clapping to a song. And he goes, "Thank you very much." <laugh> And then people are standing clapping already. I'm like, "That's brilliant." Uh-huh. "That's brilliant." Um, is, is there, um, presentation elements that we should have when we're on a panel, the way we dress? So should we have our books sitting in front of us? Is there, is there any of those type of things? I've seen a, a group where it's everyone in a suit and one person was wearing, like, a t-shirt. Mm-hmm. And they actually leveraged that to their advantage.

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AJ Harper:

They became the every man.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I think you have to be you. Yeah, that's great.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. I mean, you could definitely ask, ask the moderator. So for example, I was in San Francisco. I can, I wore to the, to the panel, the last one, jeans and just a sweater over it and my chucks. Would I have worn that in New York? Maybe not. Because in New York there's a little bit more of a dress code and, um, I think you just have to fill out everything and be, be yourself, but also be mindful of the environment. Experiment. If I were gonna speak at... When I was at American Library Association, I was a little more dressed up. Um, when I was at, um, one time I was on a panel at, um, oh God, I forgot what it used to be called, but it was for like the romance in- industry. Totally chill. Just whatever. Wear what you want. You know?

AJ Harper:

So you kinda have to get the vibe.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Do you talk to the moderator? Do you talk to the audience? Both. In, in the way you're looking, but also the phraseology? How, how do you do that?

AJ Harper:

Um, no. You, uh, your immediate response is to the moderator to acknowledge the question and then turn to the audience and speak to them. Unless you're in a brief dialogue with another participant on the pan - another panelist.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Do you, if you wanna engage another panelist and the moderator doesn't necessarily see, you said you raise your hand. Is there other ways of signaling that? Do you con - is there ever appropriate just to, to, when they complete your sentence say, "Oh, I'd like to add," and, and insert yourself?

AJ Harper:

It could, but just keep in mind that the moderator's always gonna be nervous about it because how long are you gonna go on? And they're trying to get through what they need to get through. I mean, you could do it. I just think you'd have to be, you'd have to be very quick about it.

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Mike Michalowicz:

For the panels you've been on, what's the typical length of time?

AJ Harper:

Oh God, this last one was long. It was -

Mike Michalowicz:

Like what would that be?

AJ Harper:

Almost two hours.

Mike Michalowicz:

Got -

AJ Harper:

'Cause it was more like a salon. But typically you're looking at an hour.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. And is there techniques for curating questions from the audience? Do, do you do that in advance? I'm just thinking of the ideal setup.

AJ Harper:

Not in advance. Usually they're responding to what they didn't get answers to while they were listening. I

Mike Michalowicz:

Heard of a tool and I don't know what it was, but basically a, a board that goes up on the wall. I saw it in a college and people were encouraged to text in questions or, or use some app to post questions on the wall and then you could do vote ups. And so the moderator was ref - the professor was referring to the wall and said, "Oh, here's a common question to students. A lot of you folks are saying this. "

AJ Harper:

Sure. If you wanna do that stuff, sure. Yeah. And you could invite people to send questions in advance. That would work great in virtual environments if you're gonna do a virtual panel discussion, which you can, you can absolutely do. But I mean -

Mike Michalowicz:

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An Author.

AJ Harper:

I think, um, there's something really organic about being in person and just what are people responding to that someone asked or said.

Mike Michalowicz:

I'm looking up a book from an author. I just wanna pull it up right now. Yeah. It's called Eureka Results by Ashley Bergoff. So she was moderating a, a panel that I was on. And what Ashley did, she's perhaps one of the most intelligent people I've met in my life, just has that dynamic of having a high IQ and EQ. And so she was assembling questions. People were just texting it to her on her cell, assembling questions and then re-paraphrasing the questions in a way that it made the conversation fluid. It was, it was masterful moderation. Uh, so now I'm kind of jumping back to the moderator. Us as authors, you said it's easy to set up a panel. If you, if it's easy to set up a panel, is it easier to be on a panel? Is it easier to assemble a, a, a panel by being the moderator?

AJ Harper:

How do you get started in this?

Mike Michalowicz:

So who else in your industry serves, solves the same problem you're trying to solve, wants to talk about the topic you wanna talk about, serves the same readership? And, um, invite them to join you in doing a panel discussion. The benefit is you're creating the event, you know all about this. When you create it, um, you have access to things. You don't have to wait to be invited. Again, it doesn't have to be for an event, but there are quite a lot of events that, for example, AWP, um, which is primarily fiction, but there's a lot, there are, is non-fiction there. That's a huge conference for, for writers and people in the publishing industry. Um, and, uh, they only accept submissions for panels. So if you want to present at AWP, unless you're a keynoter, you're gonna do a panel. So you can organize a panel and you can pitch it.

AJ Harper:

You can pitch a panel discussion at a lot of literary events, for example. Um, so sometimes it's easier to get in the door with a panel than it is with a speech or a workshop. So that's less barrier to entry. You can also, again, create your own night with panel discussions. You could combine it with readings, you could do all this cool stuff. You can do it at a library, at your community center, somewhere, some, in someone's house. I mean, it honestly doesn't have to be that complicated. So, um, it's easier to get people to say yes because they're just coming and having a conversation. They don't have to prepare anything. There's no slides. There's no performance. They're having a conversation with people they probably would like to talk to. And then if you, if

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you're the one organizing it and it's not at a conference, then you can leverage all the people on the panel the same way you would in those joint webinars that you do, where every person is bringing their audience to the table.

AJ Harper:

Um, so to me, this is an, a totally easy way to have an event that requires very little from the participants and so therefore you're gonna get more yeses.

Mike Michalowicz:

I have a question about impromptu panels. What inspires this question is, I don't remember the band, but I remember the story. Famous rock band from the '70s, the drummer so drugged out, passes out right before the concert started. And famous singer goes on the microphone, taps it, "Is there anyone in the audience who plays drums? We need a drummer." <laugh> And someone from the audience came down and they did the whole show and the - Oh my gosh. Yeah. Um, it sounds like a really risky maneuver. They were forced into it. Have you ever seen that happen, um, where, or, or is that a, you know, a prudent idea? No. That sounds pretty risky. No. But, but perhaps at an event where you have a concentration of experts, lots of authors.

AJ Harper:

I mean, I think that if you needed someone to pinch hit, yes, you could get someone to pinch hit. That's not a, it's not a problem, but - 'Cause

Mike Michalowicz:

I, I, here's another part of it. I've seen audience, audiences where the person says they have a question from the audience - mm-hmm. And it's just a download of their thoughts. Maybe it's good thoughts, but people start saying, "Well, in my experience, if I do, " and they go on for 30 minutes, is that the moderator also's gotta intercept that? Yeah. Or How, how do you watch?

AJ Harper:

And then not to bring up Michael Port again, but he, you know, with his students, he would always say, "Start every question with my question is no words come before that. "

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, That's great.

AJ Harper:

Right? My question is -

Mike Michalowicz:

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That's great.

AJ Harper:

And that forces all that preamble.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's a great primer. Yeah. Okay. A- a- any mishaps you've seen on stage?

AJ Harper:

I mean, yeah, people hog it. People don't know, you know... People think that what they have to say is, like, they just wanna keep talking and so that there's always gonna be someone like that on a panel. So you just have to deal.

Mike Michalowicz:

I think, uh, uh, this was, uh, something I did with John Bates. John Bates is my private speaking coach. I think his website's executive speaking or whatever. I've worked with him. I worked with Michael Port through their traditional class training. And then John works with me one-on-one in Salt Lake City. And, um, he said, "You gotta watch the tape." And after we do a recording, even if it's private, we sit down, we watch the entire tape, and you start seeing these little elements.

AJ Harper:

Little ticks.

Mike Michalowicz:

Ticks. Mm-hmm. Sipping water, way too much. So I've seen that on panels where, where before every answer, someone would take a sip of water or do a big exhale when they finish their thoughts. And it became, like, annoying and distracting. And I found these ticks, at least for me as a consumer of this information, starts deteriorating the value of the information because I'm distracted. Hmm. Do, do you suggest... I know professional speakers are encouraged to watch their recordings. What about panelists? Do you record, watch, consume?

AJ Harper:

I don't know, man. I mean, you're -

Mike Michalowicz:

The answer's hell yes.

AJ Harper:

Okay. Sure. I just -

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Mike Michalowicz:

If you, if you're a master of the craft - Okay.

AJ Harper:

But I just don't think we need to be paneli - a master of panelists being a panelist.

Mike Michalowicz:

I think if you devote yourself to the speaking career, you do.

AJ Harper:

Okay. Fair. And what, the reason I'm trying to hype people up - Yeah. About panels is because I actually think it's the lower barrier to entry. So I don't want anybody freaking out and feeling like I gotta watch back my panelist tape. <laugh> You know what I mean? I, I get it. I see why it's important to you. Yeah. So if you're a speaker listening, yes, totally. And I, you know, I want more people doing this because I think it's easier to get the job done doing panels.

Mike Michalowicz:

So I do, uh, all these little micro panels. Um, pretty much every single month I'll find two authors. I just did with, one with Nir Eyal. His new book -

AJ Harper:

I know Nir. Beyond Belief.

Mike Michalowicz:

Beyond Belief just came out. And, uh, Chris Gallibo, uh, specifically Time Anxiety, uh, is his book title. And we were talking about those elements and I serve as the moderator. Yeah. What we do, and I, I'm sharing this because I want our audience to do the same as, uh, I asked Neer, "Please announce this to your audience we're doing this. Chris, announce it to yours. I'll announce it to mine." Mm-hmm. So now we triple up our effect. Yeah. And the attendance, I think the registration we had was, did it surpass 2,000 people? Or 1,200? Either 1,200 or 2,000. It was, uh -

AJ Harper:

What platform are you using for that?

Mike Michalowicz:

St- still do Zoom. Um, yeah, Zoom.

AJ Harper:

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Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

So pro tip. Uh, at least as of recently, if you have over 1,000 live attendees - mm-hmm. You're maxed out. But when you hit about 800, Zoom was struggling. I did one with, and there was 800 people there live and it was bombing and glitchy and stuff. So just be really careful. The rough rule of thumb for us is about 30% of registrants for a free event will actually show up - Yeah. Live. Yeah. Um, then the measurement as a moderator is whatever the starting attendance number is, can we sustain this without losing a single person? And what I'm doing is I'm watching the participation numbers, they start dropping, that's on the moderator to get better questions there.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, for sure. I, I also wanna point out, I think a, a panelist should not just show up. I think they should look at who are the other panelists so you know something about them so that you can, you can demonstrate that you hold them in some high regard or you have some knowledge about them so you're not just in your little silo over here - Yeah. Waiting for your turn to talk.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, 100%.

AJ Harper:

Mu- much like, think of yourself as having, being a conversationalist. And then at least when you are getting ready to be on the panel, you can say, you know, I really loved your TED Talk. Or, um -

Mike Michalowicz:

That's brilliant.

AJ Harper:

You know, I have your book on my To Be Read pile. What's a f - or I haven't read your books yet. What's the first one that I should start with? You know, just something that, uh, oh, I see that you, you love to travel to Galveston every summer. Um, you know, what are your, you know, I, I love Galveston or I went there when I was a kid. Just something. A little bit of recon.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, be a conversationalist. Expect the moderator.

AJ Harper:

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Know something about them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. And also expect the moderator to control the conversation flow. I had two TV experiences that were on two ends of the spectrum. So the first one was Donnie Deutsch had a TV show back in the day called The Big Idea. The Big Idea. And there was often a panel format. They would have three, maybe four experts, and Donnie was saying, "Hey, Mike, tell me about this. " And so you could listen to the other presenters and add additional information or unexpected content or complimentary content. Then I was on a show, I think it was called Money Talks. They loved what I was doing on Donnie Deutsch. I said, "We want you on the show, Money Talks." I go on there and this was just a rampage. They wanted the panels fighting to speak. Oh,

AJ Harper:

Goodness.

Mike Michalowicz:

And I was like, "Wow." I got rolled over. I didn't go in. I thought they'd be m- moderated. And the, the person just said, well, they were just encouraging conflict and I got steamrolled. But that's another form of panel where there's this live, high energy debate where it's kind of fight for your time. It's kind of like one of those cage matches - Yeah, I know. In wrestling. But those do exist. So I, I just want, I wasn't ready for it and I got steamrolled. So I just invite our audience to know the intentionality and the design of the panel. And you can ask these questions upfront.

AJ Harper:

I also think, um, the reason I really want people to think about this is also that we want more in - person experiences. Yeah. And this one just is so, again, it's not hard. You could just do it. You could contact your library. Like, you can just get this stuff going. Get it rolling. It's not, it's not hard. You can create it in your own community. Um, and you could do it at a bookstore. A bookstore would love that if they had multiple authors showing up. Find other local authors. Maybe it's not even gonna be on your topic. Maybe it's gonna be local authors talking about authorship, whatever. Get out there and do some group experiences like that and the benefits are so, so helpful to you as an author. Live is back, baby. Live is back. So, and this is, live can be intimidating. A live event is a huge - Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Undertaking. A panel that you do one night, not so huge.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, it's not so bad. Yeah. I was with my speaking agent, Lee Hayes, yesterday. She has Go Leeword is her agency, goleeword.com, I think. And, um, I asked her, I said, "How is, uh, how

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are live events?" She's like, "2025 was the best year and 2026 is trending faster and stronger for live events." I said, "What's worst year?" She goes, "COVID, hands down." And I think COVID was the maximization of remote - mm-hmm. Virtual kind of connectivity. And now the pendulum of wift swung back is with all this digitization we gotta, we wanna be in touch again. Yeah. These episodes are better because we're doing this face-to-face. And I know it's an extraordinary effort. You're driving down to be here. Matt's coming in, texting me at five in the morning. It, it's kinda hard to get set up and there's this inner resistance I have. I'm like, uh, maybe we could just do it virtually.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, maybe we could just skip out. But when I show up, it's always better. And I think the same thing with these panels, is I'm sure someone's listening in right now saying, "Oh yeah, it's easy, but I have to show up." Show up.

AJ Harper:

Do you really think someone's saying that?

Mike Michalowicz:

100%.

AJ Harper:

Really? Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

I, I can't tell you how many times people don't show up and find an excuse not to do it and justification. Oh my God.

AJ Harper:

But think about it. If you did a panel, you, again, you could do it with, combined with readings. It could be, um, you could have books for sale. You could ha... There's so many things you could do with just a little panel disc... Oh my God. I just think it's, people should be doing them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. You made such good arguments for the alliances you can build, the community you have access to. Yes. The way to position yourself in front of people that have never heard you before. And

AJ Harper:

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Then you, and then you can get a photographer or videographer to come. That's brilliant. You then, now you're, now you have some professional photos of you with these esteemed people, um, or seen as an expert, even if nobody knows who those people are. I mean, that's, that's a no-brainer.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I know some people have done that. Mm-hmm. That's, that's a brilliant idea. Um, let's wrap things up. Um, I wanna invite our audience to go to ajharper.com. Yo, in your groups discuss things like this, strategies to market and expose yourself. So -

AJ Harper:

Yeah, all the time.

Mike Michalowicz:

What's the best way to people, for people to get access to that type of stuff?

AJ Harper:

Go to ajharper.com. Okay. And the, the best entry is to tr - join our sprint community. And from there, a lot of people, you know, join membership or come to retreat or things. But just come, just come hang out with us.

Mike Michalowicz:

You're instantly around other authors. Yeah. And, uh, authors you wouldn't expect. Uh, Josh, I can't remember. I always forget his last name.

AJ Harper:

Oh, yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

I met - He,

AJ Harper:

You mean who lives in, um - New York

Mike Michalowicz:

City, off the

AJ Harper:

Grid. Off the grid.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Um - Uh, I just did his podcast.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, what a extraordinary guy. So he's some -

AJ Harper:

In his apartment. Did you go to his apartment? No. No, I went to the apartment.

AJ Harper:

So he - I

AJ Harper:

Did. He's an ex - I was in the off the grid apartment in the West Village.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's unbelievable.

AJ Harper:

And it is right there.

Mike Michalowicz:

In the city. So extraordinary guy, but also by joining the sprint community, you get exposure to authors you wouldn't typically get exposure to. Yes. And it could inspire or bring about opportunities you would never expect.

AJ Harper:

Well, it's one of the things that I love is, and this is what I'm telling my authors too, get together with each other, other people in our T3 community and they've done it where they've created panel discussions authors who have similar readership or at least complimentary readership or can talk about a topic. And if you go, get involved in these, whether it's my author community or someone else's, it's pretty easy actually to put together a panel when you are part of a community. You can pretty quickly grab some folks and create some sort of talk or experience.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Hi, my friends. You heard from the creator of the community, AJ Harper, also author of *Write a Must Read*. Get that book right now. It's at your favorite bookstore. And don't forget to go to dwtbpodcast.com. That's our website. We have all the free resources there that AJ prepared specifically for you. You can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. We wanna get your inspirational ideas so we can talk about on this show here. And the great reminder, please don't write that book and you know who I'm talking about. Write the greatest book you can. I