

NicheTalks™ podcast

Episode #11 – Penny Lee and Polly Lavarello

Penny:

Hello, Polly. I'm so happy to have you on. So we stumbled upon each other in a corner of a room in person in January, but I'd heard of you and seen you. You were sort of in my world, I'd seen and been really loving what you were doing. Then we got to meet first in January and got talking and I just knew that I'd love to get you on the podcast to talk a bit more on it.

Polly:

Hello. Yeah I think we should clarify it was a book launch, we don't just hang out in dark corners of rooms!

Penny:

Well, speak for yourself. It's where I meet all my best people.

Polly:

The best people do tend to hang out though in the corners of the room, I'll say that for sure.

Penny:

It was a book launch for Sarah Dalrymple's More Sales and she was a guest on season one. I know you guys do quite a bit of work together.

Polly:

Yeah, she's amazing.

Penny:

So we're just going to kick off basically about your niche. Let's do it. So as we were saying, the first part is how did you get started with your niche? But I think going backwards really, like what started you on the path of doing it differently? Choice, necessity, all those things. Like what's led to you carving this space for yourself?

Polly:

Let's do it. It's been a number of things. I was always fascinated by marketing. I actually grew up with my mum who owned a graphic design agency. So we never went past a billboard without her making some kind of analysis as to what was going on in the billboard. We never watched an advert without her talking about positioning. There was always some kind of, I mean, she wouldn't call it positioning, but looking back, that's what it was. Even the way a film scene was set up, she'd be like, well, that's gonna happen because that, I mean, we were just that analytical kind of creative family. But I went into normal workplaces. When I say that, I mean offices. I worked in graphic design agencies. I was an account handler. I did that throughout my 20s. And so I was involved in the marketing world. I kind of wedged myself in there. I had no

qualifications to do marketing. I actually studied French and Greek. But I love marketing. I was obsessed with it. And then I got pregnant with my daughter. I was made redundant and I was living in a small country called Gibraltar where I found it really hard to get work because everyone was like, you're pregnant. You know, of course it's hard for anyone really. Looking for work where everyone knows everyone's business. So they knew I was having a child. And I told myself, I will just take this time out. I will just, you know, take it easy. My partner was the main earner. But in that time, I got really itchy feet. I actually, the thing that kind of propelled me into entrepreneurialism, and this isn't something many people know, is that my daughter was born five weeks early, but my waters actually broke 11 weeks early. So I was alone in a hospital in Spain for about six weeks on bedrest before she came. And when I came back to Gibraltar, I felt really alone. And in those early mornings, doing those early morning feeds, I just thought, I've got this phone here, I've got this ability to connect to people, but I don't have a community to tap into. So I decided to create it. So I launched a website called mum on the rock, which I ended up selling before I left Gibraltar. But it got me on stage, it got me a job on TV and it gave me two magazine columns. It was insane. And actually that's the beauty of the niche, right? I found a problem. I created a solution. It was super niche, specifically for mums living in Gibraltar and on the rock, nobody else had done it yet. And it was funny because at the time I thought, you know, Mumsnet exists, but nothing like that existed in Gibraltar. And so again, when people talk about original ideas, context is everything, right? And because nothing existed in that context, it really took off. Unfortunately, when my divorce happened, I left my very stable, steady, kind of well-resourced life with my ex-husband, moved to the UK, and next thing I knew I was on benefits in a very tiny flat with my children, wondering what the hell I'd done. And would we be living on beans and toast the rest of our lives?

Yeah, it was scary. I actually applied for various marketing roles thinking I had just achieved all of that, surely that would count for something. But all of these job roles had things like we have Prosecco Thursdays and Bowling Fridays and all these things. I was like, that's great if you're in your twenties, but not great for someone who's got two small children and is a single mum and most things just weren't going to cover all our expenses. So when people talk about, oh, you're brave, you're an entrepreneur. I didn't choose this life. This life chose me. I just was like, okay, well, you know, I'll look for freelance work while I wait for that perfect job to come along. And before I knew it, I loved freelance life. I loved the flexibility it gave me. I loved that I could pick my kids up from nursery. Then, it turned out my daughter was neurodiverse. She has ADHD and autism. She was diagnosed autistic first. And that actually was really eye opening for me because I saw all of it in myself too. And that also really helped me recognize why I used to have awful migraines when I worked in those busy marketing environments, I used to find it nerve wracking, picking up a phone. I'd be really happy in an in-person meeting, but I hated picking up the phone.

I guess being your own niche, being your own personal brand and having people seek you and creating solutions for them rather than fitting into somebody else's box to support them. So in 2020, I did that. Early February, 2020, I launched a personal brand as a digital marketing expert. So it was really broad back then. I used to just call it digital marketing made simple. So I didn't really know what I was doing entirely. But obviously it was a heyday of online business, right. So

it wasn't difficult for me to kind of get in there. But what I felt really passionate about was recognizing the power of being a freelancer, the flexibility that gave me as a mother, it almost felt like a feminist movement to me, it just felt like I want to support more women to not have to work crazy long days to barely cover nursery fees or after school clubs and childcare, when actually they can build a business that allows them to be a mum and a business owner.

So that was kind of what originally fueled me. And it's still there, to be honest with you. That's never gone away. I predominantly support women for that reason, because women are more disadvantaged in that sense. So that's where it all began.

Penny:

It's the force forcing to fit, the forcing to fit is exactly it. It's the same drive for me. I had the same thing with those agencies. Like I'd find myself going in later and later and staying later and later. I avoided people if I could, I was getting in around 11, 12, but I'd stay till 8 or 9 because most people left at 6. It gave me three hours to do work without the phone ringing and without anybody around and just having the place to myself. You realise you're doing things but you don't understand why. I could only do that because I didn't have kids. So obviously if you do have kids, that's not an option. You're forced into those times and those Prosecco Thursdays and those kinds of things.

Polly:

Exactly, all this like forced socialising that you don't actually, I mean, I loved it in my 20s. I loved all the networking. That was one of the main things I loved about marketing was all the wonderful people I got to meet. But it's much nicer that now I get to do it on my own terms and meet wonderful people like you when I go to book launches, rather than feeling forced, you know.

Penny:

I was listening because you have your podcast, I've been listening to it all morning.

Polly:

It's called Make More Money Without Selling Your Soul. Funny enough named because my podcast producer said, I was like, I don't know what to call it. And she's like, well, what do you help people do? And I was like, well, make more money without selling your soul. She's like, that's it. And I was like, okay.

Penny:

No, and I love it. I've been listening to some this morning and certainly check it out, everyone. There was a name that you had before that. So you were doing a podcast before, it was a really boring, serious name.

Polly:

Yeah, Embodied Business Revolution, I called it.

Penny:

There you go. So I think what's interesting as well is for people to see those steps because one of the podcasts, when I was looking through the chapters, there's some great ones, and one of them of course was to niche or not to niche, obviously I'd have a listen to that. And a point that you had that I totally agree with and I absolutely love is this thing about being a generalist first, like getting going then that getting to your niche. Like you say where you were saying, I'm a digital marketer. And now that feels really broad, but at the same time, it's a step to niching down because it's just a step closer and then you're doing that. And then within doing that, you're finding out which part of that you really love and who you love doing that for. It was funny because I was thinking about it. I was like, all my clients are 10 years in. They've got a lot of experience, things that they've tried, things that they've done. And we literally just get down to the thing that's lighting them up and that they just want to do more of and that where they can level up and all those things. I just thought that was a really excellent point. I think it'd be good to hear about how you've done that with your brand because you've got niched. So where did that go? When you went from, I'm a digital marketer and then the Facebook ads and to where you are now, like how've those steps gone for you? That generalist to niching down, how's that worked for you?

Polly:

I think the most important thing is almost more about the intention we bring to business and just being endlessly curious and leaning into what, you know, as you shared earlier about the stuff that lights you up, when you allow that to be your beacon as you go into online business, like it won't steer you wrong. And I think one of the challenging things about the online space is there are so many people selling speed. Like this morning I saw someone say, create a sales page in 10 minutes. I'm like yeah, you can do that with chat GPT. Will it be a good sales page? Probably not. Like, you know, it actually upsets me when I see people kind of, you know, like, what's wrong with the intentionality of sitting down for one business day and creating a knock it out the park sales page that people won't forget?

Penny:

And enjoying it! And spending the time to really enjoy this thing that you're going to love helping people with.

Polly:

Exactly. It's a valuable business asset. This whole kind of disposable approach to online business, that you just create a new offer every single month, create sales pages in 10 minutes. People are shooting themselves in the foot with that approach, you know? And particularly if you're in business for a long time and you're still taking that approach, you're really shooting yourself in the foot. So in terms of my journey, when I started out, I actually did something that I think was kind of sensible. I started out with a one-to-one service, which at the time was Facebook Ads Management. But what I found, and actually that's how my offers evolved, because I came into online business thinking, I'm running Facebook Ads for coaches. I'd started off doing some e-commerce, but I didn't like it. Just wasn't enjoyable. Again, I think it's that whole human connection piece. Like I loved supporting coaches because I loved seeing

individuals succeed. And I loved that they were doing good in the world and that I was learning about such amazing things. There were life coaches, spiritual coaches, wellbeing coaches, and it opened my eyes to a whole new world that I wasn't aware of before. I was introduced to all these wonderful human beings. But the one thing I saw that they all had in common, so they were more established than me, evidently, because that's why they were running ads. Most of them, they'd been their own personal brand, usually two to three years. But the one thing I saw, I was looking at who were the ones, because obviously as an ads manager, you want people to stay on and work with you for a long time. And the last thing you want is someone coming in, throwing their money at you, throwing the money at the ads, and then being like, oh God, it's not worked in the first like two weeks, I now need to stop all of this. So I had to get really, really good at recognizing what were the signs of someone who was destined to be successful so that it was a sure bet taking them on as a client. And then I also similarly had to obviously recognize what was a red flag for the fact that they were not going to be successful. And so in learning all of these things and learning the importance of data and the importance of positioning, the importance of a sales page that actually works. And an offer, of course, like, you know, it doesn't matter how many new eyeballs you get on a rubbish offer. If the offer's rubbish, you're just magnifying that rubbishness. You're not actually gonna sell it. But what I saw increasingly was I kept on turning away potential ad clients, because I would vet their funnels and say, you are not ready, my friend, in the nicest way possible. But I could see what they needed to be doing and I started to recognize that's actually quite a skill and a skill that people would pay me for. And people started to reflect on me as an ads manager, they were like, well, we hired you because we needed help with ads. But actually, you basically become our business strategist. And then obviously, any business mentor I had at the time would always say, and you should be charging for that. But I didn't have the confidence, you know. So eventually, I basically got to the stage where I started phasing out my ad clients, accepting less and less and focusing on developing offers, group programs that enabled me to share this knowledge. And in 2021, I went all in, after a year actually of being in a group program where we were encouraged to live launch. And I tried to do it alongside running my ads and I just got so burnt out, it was exhausting. I actually had long COVID in 2020. And so my energy levels were like a really valuable resource that I had to manage really, really carefully. What I recognized was, you know, this coach at the time was saying live launch every two months, or she was actually saying every month, but some people were like, I'm gonna do it every other month. And I was like, even every other month sounds like hell to me. So I kind of did lots of investigating around what Evergreen Marketing was. And so basically all the pieces fell together. It was essentially similar to Mom on the Rock where I looked at, okay, here's the problem. People are being told to live launch all the time. Here's the problem. Not everyone needs to be doing this.

Bearing in mind, one of my first ad clients who I worked with in 2020 made a million pounds within six months with an entirely passive evergreen offer. She and I have been working together, we still are, for four years with this evergreen funnel. So I'd worked firsthand on various evergreen funnels that were immensely successful. I'd done a lot of testing and tweaking alongside these clients to know what worked. So I decided to wrap all of that up into an experience. And at the time, I called it Scale with a Power of One.

But niche was a problem for me because at the time, evergreen was the niche. I was like, well, hardly anyone's talking about evergreen. But what I recognized was going to become the case was that more and more people were going to be talking about evergreen. And also, someone once said to me in terms of PR, if someone's going to introduce you on a stage, what are they introducing you as? And I thought, they can't introduce me as the evergreen business mentor. Nobody in the real world would know what on earth that was. And I wanted to have more staying power than that, you know? And also-

Penny:

And a bit more personality and vibe and stuff.

Polly:

Yeah, and as it comes, you know, with niche, I think the biggest challenge that we all have is that we are all ultimately our own niche, but the majority of us haven't found the words for it. You know, I think there is a mindset work around it as well in terms of giving yourself permission to trust that you get to attract in those like-minded cells you want. Yeah.

Penny:

That is huge. It's absolutely huge. It's like when we say about the forcing fit, there's a lot of unlearning, unpacking to do in terms of we get started for whatever reasons, all different reasons, necessity, redundancy, choice, like free will choice. But it's all this like you need to, you're getting going and feeling like you need to prove yourself, particularly as women.

And if any work comes in, you're like, oh great, yeah, I'll do that. And then eventually you often find yourself doing things you don't necessarily want to be doing. And the only person responsible for that is you, but we forget that we have a choice. And I think that permission work is vital.

Polly:

Yeah, 100%. It's this kind of, I have talked to my clients about it in terms of saying it's like, you need to start with you, your values, what your strongest strengths are, as I refer to them in terms of like, where do you-

Penny:

I love that by the way, I love that. I've written it down.

Polly:

I love that. But where do you get your clients their best results? So that's the cerebral piece, and obviously a heart piece too. But then there's also the piece where I kind of say, and it's a co-creation in terms of like, what language is your ideal client using around that problem? And where are they at? And what problem are you solving for them? And when you can marry those two pieces together, then you've got a really strong niche in my mind, like in terms of offers, like when I see someone who can marry both those pieces, that's the most important thing. But I also think it's really important. They often get stuck in this sense of inaction when they think too

much about these things, because they're so afraid of getting it wrong. And as you can see from talking to me, like, obviously my business has existed for like over four years now. You know, I've been through so many evolutions, like you say, the embodied business revolution, which I like to forget about, you know, which I created.

Penny:

It's good to hear these things. I've come out with some corkers in the past as well.

Polly:

But you know, I think ultimately, the most important thing to recognise with any kind of business growth is about the learning. So as long as we can be open and receptive to those learnings, like for me, I found myself really struggling to record the embodied business revolution because I felt like I needed to be somebody that I'm not. I thought I needed to be calm and grounded and speak really slowly and be that, you know, and I was like that.

Penny:

Late Night Radio.

Polly:

That's not me. And I love the people in my world who are like that. But that's not me. And so you know, make more money without selling yourselves more tongue in cheek, more daft, more like who I am, you know, and also, from a marketing perspective, more catchy, you know, someone's gonna be like, make more money, I'm curious to know more. And obviously, that's similarly trickled into the most recent brand photo shoot I did with, you know-

Penny Lee:

Which I love. And that was, is it with, I wrote a name down...

Polly:

Ali Mappletoft, yeah. Yeah.

Penny:

Yeah, I'll put a link to your website in the show notes, but I just love how different and ballsy it is.

Polly:

Yeah, I lost quite a few new followers actually when I launched it, which didn't surprise me at all. But it was one of those moments where, you know, I think you develop a resilience the longer you're in online business and you start to have a bit more of a fuck it moment where you just think actually life is too short. And I did think about, you know, one of the people I really admire in the online business space is Elizabeth Goddard, and I've never actually worked with her, but I've never forgotten her because she's always wearing her giraffe onesie.

And every time I see it, and so I've just never her name is never a name I struggle to recall, because I just see that vision. And so similarly, you know, myself in the pink background and the

towel around my head, the amount of people who've messaged me and say, every time I see your profile, I have to stop because I'm like, what is that on her head, even if I know it's the towel, and I'm like, all of that stuff, you know, like it's what I know for so many of my clients, I'm always encouraging them to be their biggest, boldest, most fully expressed selves in their business, because life's too short not to. But I hadn't really truly unleashed that for myself. But it's been so much fun doing it.

Penny:

Yes. Because it fits the other thing when I was listening to your podcast on it was when you'd done that unpacking of your own things and it was something you'd said about cushy. And it was a cushy business. And I think it's when we can own that language ourselves. So I had the fuck it, I'm going niche. And I literally just said it and somebody laughed. And so I put it on a badge and a t-shirt and then more people laughed. So then I was like, okay. And it was a way of making brand strategy my own, but also relatable to people who weren't in the agency world. Cause they're like, why do I need that? If, you know, I'm not Nike.

And it made it fun as well, instead of like, we're doing these businesses and we're working hard, but essentially you're building a life and a business that you wanna work for you, that you wanna enjoy. And you can, and you can get dressed up and work with an amazing woman to take amazing photos and talk about it in a way that, and also does really good business, that's what I love.

Polly:

Yeah, no, I mean, I think the truth of the matter is like, it's increasingly saturated, the online space. We even did a podcast episode with Ali on like, you know, the girl next door brand is dead, which is not true. That was a bit clickbaity. But for me, that was definitely a reflection of how I felt. I thought I'm not here to be palatable. I'm not here to be relatable. I am here to change your world and help you change yours. And I'm here to be like you know, if I can, have that level of fuck-it-ness about how I approach my business. I want to give you that permission slip too. Because again, when I look at all my clients who are the most successful, they are the ones who are, I hate to use the word most embodied in their mission, but it is that whole piece around like they've given themselves that permission slip to be unapologetically themselves. And that's really hard work. Like you say, there's a lot of conditioning to work through. And, but you know, in this day and age, you cannot afford to not have a strong niche. You know, when people talk about it, there's a lot of people talking about the cost of living crisis. How it's harder than ever in the online business space. And the way I see it, the antidote to that is, one, having an offer that actually does what it says it does, which unfortunately various people don't have. And secondly, and probably most importantly, is having that strong niche, making yourself unforgettable. So you are that person with the, you know, I don't know, with the towel on her head, or you are, so that people at least visually remember you, so they can look for you later when they want to work with you. It's recognizing launching alone is not gonna be enough. People are increasingly saying, launches don't have the same impact they used to. They can do in certain contexts. Again, I'm not like generalising here, but at the same time for the average

small brand, being able to sell every day is way more important than the ability to sell every month or every two months of the launch.

Penny:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's the walking the walk as well that I always, any advice that I give clients or anything that we work through is all stuff I've done myself. So when you're saying that launch is changing, like when people say about our niche, I'm just doing the same thing, it means doing the same thing or just doing one thing. But that's really rigid and it isn't. You need to be fluid and be able to move with it because everything changes. Like in the last four years even, like how things are working and how things are marketing. So if you're strong on your niche itself.

That can go in many different ways, like you're saying with yourself. And it's recognizing and being able to see that. So I don't see it as restrictive. I see it as you get seen as who you are and then you can keep doing these things in different ways. And what you said really at the beginning about being curious, like keep learning, keep being curious, keep trying new things, being playful with what you're doing as well.

Polly:

Yeah, I see it as the biggest business insurance policy, a strong niche, because ultimately, when people trust you as a brand, when they know what you stand for, if suddenly no one wants to be in group programs anymore, for example, I'm not saying they do, they do, but if they didn't, whatever alternative you create, people will still trust you as a brand because they trust what you stand for and they want to be in your world.

And it gives you a lot of flexibility with how, you know, people kind of say to me, what if I attract someone who's here? What if I attract someone who's like, I'm sorry, just did a visual. What if I try someone who's like, I don't know, super premium, what do I do if I attract someone who's like needing a group? And I'm like, when you have a strong brand, like there's a way to make all these pieces work. It's when you look at everything in a really dissected way, offer by offer, client by client, that it really confuses things. Like just having that strong core nucleus to your business, which is a strong brand is absolutely everything.

Penny:

Love it. Love it, love it, love it. I think that's a good segue then into seeing about where, what's coming next for you, either in terms of something you've actually got lined up or where does your brain go when it's like, this could be some really interesting things to try out in the future.

Polly:

Well, since the introduction of my new brand at the beginning of the year and the new website, there's been a kind of offer suite tidy up. So I've been gradually introducing funnel offers, but really, really slowly. Like I've been wanting to really perfect them and make sure they are the best in the end. I mean, I can't teach people how to create group programs and not create exemplary experiences myself.

So there's a lot of effort and time going into that. So I've actually given myself a bit of a break between now and September before I enrol anyone else into any of my group courses. I'm gonna have a low ticket offer I'm selling in the meantime, but I'm also creating space and time to write the cushy business book. So there's quite a few things coming, but it's been really nice to create a business that allows me to take that space and, you know, focus on, you know, have enough kind of recurring revenue to take that time out.

I'm getting married in July, and then going to Sri Lanka for three weeks in August. So I decided it felt like a good thing for me to actually just close down my groups for that time period so that I can just be really present. Because if I'm being really honest, and let's be honest here, the last four years have been pretty intense, you know, I did get myself off benefits, I did move my family into a house, we did get a cat.

And I got my business to the stage where it's a multi six figures, but that hasn't been without some kind of sacrifice along the way. And while my business is significantly, hence why I love the word cushy, cushier, one of the things that felt like the ultimate flex would be to finally take a holiday without a laptop, which I've not done since 2020, no 2019. So, when we go to Sri Lanka, I will be laptop free. And then in September, that's giving me a nice timeline to kind of update my offers so I can be inviting people into some group offerings. And I'm hoping to create the spaciousness to also start writing the Cushy Business book, which title is yet to be defined, but it's gonna be all about the Cushy Business philosophy. You know? Ha ha ha.

Penny:

I don't say anything wrong with the cushy business book. I'm all about, and with Niche Talks, I'm all about what it says on the tin.

Polly:

Yeah, no, I'm super duper excited by it. I've got some really big ideas for it. So my main priority right now is just deep, like for me, I just like having less clients and really deep impact for those few clients I have. At one point, my goal with Evergreen was to scale and go wide. And what I recognized recently, that just does not suit my neurodiverse brain. It doesn't matter how well I organise those larger containers, I just don't get joy from it. So I've really, again, it's one of those moments where I've had to reprioritize.

Penny:

Nice, nice. That's lovely to hear you say that. That's really lovely hearing you say that because I'm having the same experience and I was like realising I was trying to do this and I was fighting myself. Like, that's another thing. This is constant work. Like, we fall off all the time. Like, what should I be doing? No, what do you want to be doing? What?

Polly:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. I had to tune in with what I actually wanted. What does success actually look like? At one point, I wanted to make 100k months just because, you know, I could because I have the skills and knowledge. Why not? And actually, I was like, but I considered the number

of clients I'd need to have to achieve that. And the size my team would have to be to make me feel like I could manage that in a way that felt within integrity. And that just suddenly felt like a larger ship that I don't want to be like the master of, you know?

And I was like, what does feel good? So I kind of put it down on paper and I was like, less clients, deeper impact. And like you say, the more experienced clients who are craving that next level of support around hiring and advertising and scaling and realising just because I'm not choosing to do that doesn't mean I can't continue supporting my clients in that same realm, you know?

Penny:

Yeah. And I had a saying as well. It was like, just because you can doesn't mean you should. Because I can do lots of things. And then, but then so then I was trying to do lots of things. And that for me, my yours was in the digital marketing, mine was in the branding side of things. And the strategy part and the niche finding part was the bit that I loved, but it was almost like, I didn't even value it myself because it was something I found easy. It's this zone of genius. So you almost don't value it. We've had this conversation before where you don't value it enough, so then sit and then because I can do design and all that, I can do design, sorry, somebody's just.

Because I could do all of the other things and extra bits aside of it and run events, do this and do that, doesn't mean that you should. And actually it was that work that I loved and narrowed it right down to that. And then you do, you can just go deeper on it and you think, oh, is it enough? Of course it's enough. It's the thing that you love doing. So you get absolutely in it and hyper-focused.

I absolutely love hyper focusing on a client and just getting really into what they're about. And then, and it's just, I just love it. And I can see all those bits in it. And when you see that work and you see the impact it has on people, because it's the work that you're doing in that zone of genius for people. So it has the biggest effect on them. It's lovely. Everyone, everyone wins, but it is a, it is a bull move.

Polly:

It's just leaning, you know, like just because there's lots of other people talking about a certain measure of success doesn't mean it has to be yours.

Penny:

Well, I love that. That's, I think, what a great place to finish. Thank you. Thank you so much, Polly.

Polly:

Thanks so much for having me. It's so much fun.