

NicheTalks™ podcast

Episode #10 – Penny Lee and Sally Mansfield

Penny:
Hello, Sally.

Sally:
I have instantly gone awkward, like we've just started talking. Hello, Penny.

Penny:
Well, I instantly say hello weird as well, I don't know why I do that. Well, this is our first time meeting. I've been a longtime fan, and I'm absolutely delighted that you could come on and speak today. So, you're in Barcelona right now?

Sally:
Thanks for the invite. Yes, I'm not going to turn my camera around to show you how wonderful it is outside. But yes, I'm in shorts.

Penny:
Your own shorts? Nice. Well, we shall start the conversation where we always start and let you pick from where you see that point beginning. What set you off on doing your own thing? In particular, the clothes, Manners, but I'd like to hear whatever you have to say about what started you off.

Sally:
Sure, I mean, it's an easy starting point, but it's a bit of a heavy one partly. It was born from a really, really shitty time. I was living in Bali and my son was five, and I used to get everything made there because there's just the most amazing makers of everything there. Partly that and partly because I'm like 10 sizes larger than the largest person there. But I had to make a very sudden decision to leave for mine and my child's safety. And the day that happened, I happened to have a box of things made for me in my size, and maybe about 15 pieces, medium tops, large bottoms. We left everything else, kids' toys, I mean really everything. And we arrived in London the next day with a couple of hundred quid and a five year old, nowhere to live and a very small box of a few things I thought I could potentially sell. We ended up subletting a council flat just by Portobello Road Market. A really shitty little flat full of broken washing machines.

I'd never lived in London before, but I crossed over the road and I found this market. So I went home and got my kid, went to Sainsbury's, bought a succulent, took this little box of clothes and went and found the guy that ran Portobello Road Market and said, I need a stall. And he was like, there's a five year waiting list for a stall. And I was like, cool, we'll wait, sit down. We just sat there. I was like, I got nowhere to be. So, and so we just waited and I was pretty sure that I would win. And I did. It got to the point where he couldn't bear it anymore. He gave me a stall and I basically sold everything on the first day. So I phoned the guy in Bali that used to make my

clothes; who at that point just had one sewing machine. His wife cut the patterns and he sewed. I speak fluent Indonesian and I just phoned him and said, can you send me 50 things? And I'll pay you afterwards if I sell them? And if I don't sell them, I'll pay you a lot afterwards. So he sent them and I sold them. Then I moved to Spitalfields Market and he sent more and I sold them and I paid him back. And yeah, just really chipped away at it like that. It was pure survival while I started it, in summary. And a really big part of it was that I was determined that I was never going to be answerable to a man ever again in my life, which meant potentially never dating again, but also not having a real job, because somebody probably at the top was going to be a man. So it was really just like fighting to come back to life, to get myself back, to put myself back together, to make a future for me and my kid in the time when it felt like there wasn't really anything bright in the future.

Penny:

And full on independence. Because as well as the clothes, it's also for the survival part, but also the necessity in terms of needing some clothes that fit in countries, and UK high streets included in that, that don't cater.

Sally:

Totally, a big part of it was that as well. I think sometimes it sounds very dramatic. I say like these clothes saved my life, but not only did they because they gave me independence, but also having something, I've always been a larger woman and I've always struggled to find clothes that fit. And just having something that made me feel okay in my body really helped me put my life back together and fight and feel some little part, little bit of confidence in myself. So yeah, there were lots of elements to it.

Penny:

Well, and I always say, the niche thing, it starts with you. It starts with what you want to do, what's of interest to you. So for you, you've said, this has saved me and helped me put my life back together. But then that extends because, of course, there are people in a similar situation. And I know for you, Sisterhood is a massive thing. You've done some beautiful writing about it as well, it sort of manifests through your clothes, brand stories, brand messaging stuff, which is just beautiful. But you see that being then shared by others, which must feel quite amazing.

Sally:

Yeah, absolutely. And I always talk about confidence or whatever you want to call it. Sometimes self-love feels too big and too impossible, but it's contagious, you know, being that woman who's sitting on the beach with your belly out, with your saggy tits out. That sparks in someone else and then that continues, that glow continues to pass forward. Women have saved my life. And just getting to be with women every day, getting to choose who I work with, we have so many notions of what we couldn't, shouldn't, mustn't do, wear, say, and to be even a tiny part of someone going, go on, yeah you can-

Penny:

I think sometimes we don't even know it as well, it's like fish in water, we're so indoctrinated and get these messages from so early on. There was one quote that you said, this is your writing - I'm loving your words as much as your clothes - lashings of self-adoration, I think you said.

Sally:

Yes, as much as you put lashings of butter.

Penny:

When we say about sticking it to the man and stuff as well, I know we've just mentioned it before and I know it's a bit cringey, but when you were on Dragons Den, it was just so interesting to watch. Because Peter Jones is so confident in what he's saying.

Sally:

Ugh!

Penny:

But what you're doing is just so irrelevant to him. It's crazy. When you see it laid so bare, it's quite a thing.

Sally (09:14.058)

And like the plus size fashion industry is totally saturated. Where? Saturated in floral stuff. Drowning in them. Like there's a lot of us, right? Most things have been done, apart from crazy tech advancements. Like, yeah, there's not that much new stuff.

Penny:

No, well, yeah, again, when it comes back to the niche thing, and it's like whatever new thing I've gone into, as soon as you get there, there's a whole load of people already there. But doing it their own way, it's still a new voice and it's still coming from a new place and you've still got a new thing that you're introducing about it.

I just thought that was just quite telling. I love the phrase about taking up more space. And when you get those kind of comments, when Peter Jones was like, well there's plus sized stuff already. He can't even imagine what it's like. Can't even imagine that we need more space.

Sally:

Sure, yeah, I mean, it's like, oh no, there's enough. There's one fat person, one black person, one disabled person. We're cool. We've checked that. Now let's go back to making sure all the mainstream people are all right. It's just the same tokenistic nonsense. I mean, it was a long time ago now, going on there. It was really awful. It was so awful. And I hate being on camera, which no one believes because I am all the time but that's by myself!

Penny:

Well, you are the best model for your clothes as well. I mean, you've designed them and made them for you and they absolutely look amazing when you're doing it. And it is that thing of like putting yourself out there as well to give that confidence for others.

Sally:

Yeah, I mean, I didn't want to be on Dragon's Den. I got approached to be on that. My plan for being there was to try and not look like a dickhead, but definitely not to get them to invest because I couldn't think of any people that could be less aligned with my philosophies or business than any of them. Some of the women were okay, but still, that was not my goal to be on there. It was just to try and get a bit of extra business and a bit of recognition. It's a hard line to walk.

Penny:

I love that, because when we talk about value driven businesses and things, it sounds a bit cliched but it's true when things really do mean stuff to the people that have made it and who really it runs through everything. You're working with women on every part of it as well. It's like all those different areas running all the way through.

Sally:

Yeah, and I've got women in all different places now, all different women working for me. I've tried and tested this. There's loads of ways of running business which are way more effective, way less time consuming, like bulk doing stuff, batch writing newsletters... I just can't do it. People are like, oh, what's your newsletter schedule? My newsletter schedule is when I fucking feel like writing something. It may come once every six months or I might write for three or four days in a row. I'm not going to do it any other way because every time I force myself to do something or people are like, oh, we love blue, we'd buy something blue. I don't like blue. But I make stuff in blue and it doesn't bloody sell. Or I write something because I've got a deadline and no one responds. I may as well have just had an extra hour in bed. So I really, the more I do it, the more I realize that unless I love it, I'm not doing it, I'm not writing it, I'm not making it, I'm not designing it, I'm not sharing it, I'm not saying it, if I don't fully love it.

Penny:

I just love hearing you say that because I've tried batching, I've tried scheduling, I've tried organizing, and I know that it's more efficient and I know that it's all these things, but it just comes out dry. When I feel it, it flows. And you feel that in your writing. Like, whenever I read something, it's like, even though I hadn't spoken to you before, I do feel like I know you.

Sally:

Yeah, for sure.

Penny:

I think it's really, yeah, really personal.

Sally:

Thanks love, yeah it's been very strange having the shop and having people coming in and that... I'm totally impulsive, if they come in they're like, oh my god! So nice to meet you and I'm just bright red! I'm like, what? What do you mean?

Penny:

It's you! Well that brings us well to the shop. So you did the market and then it was online. Then we came to the shop. So how long were you doing it online?

Sally:

Well, I did the market for four years. June 2024 will be nine years since I landed in London, which is wild. I did the market. Yeah. I did the market for four and a bit. I've been online for maybe five years now, but I mean, it started off really tiny, obviously. Um, so yeah, online for about five now.

Penny:

And the shop, did it open in February? Am I right with that?

Sally:

Yeah, not sure if it was a bad idea. I'm still working out how that works in my life, or if I just need more therapy and less projects.

Penny:

So it's Manners Studio and I loved the writing piece about it. So it's a stone's throw from your house. Orange Tree Line Street, setting the scene. And also this thing for wanting connection because the online stuff is great. I have it too. I can work with people much further. We can have this conversation right now. So much of it has given a lot of people freedom. But then it's also this, the real connection thing and face to face. And it's this constant quest for the sweet spot, I think. I think if I have to be with people all the time and have to be somewhere all the time, I can't do that. But it's, yeah, that sweet spot. So is that, I'm presuming that the shop, the studio is a little bit of a scratch of that.

Sally:

Yeah, I'm hoping so. It's super early days. You know, I never wanted a shop. Obviously living in Spain post-Brexit as well makes it way more complicated. If I was in the UK, it would be much easier. My brother says all my plans go step one, then reach a point of no return. And this was a perfect example of that where I was just like, yeah, I'll open a shop. Then I realised, oh, it needs to be a whole separate business with a Spanish accounting team and like payroll and everything all in Spanish. It can't even cross, it has to be completely separate. So it's still in its early days but I was there today and like three or four lovely people came in. One woman who had my clothes, who was on holiday with her family, came in, stayed for ages and tried loads of things on. So it's a work in progress. I opened it and then had

a couple of trips booked, and I literally never go away. So I had to just hand it over to people and now I'm back and I'm in and it feels... I mean, it's literally, I never wanted to open the shop. I walked up, it's my favourite street. Someone put a for rent sign on the window and I was like, Ooh, can I just come and have a look out of curiosity and walked in and was like, Oh shit. This is my shop. I mean, it's got a sunny terrace out the back, it's beautiful and yeah it's just a lot of work, it's going to be a lot of work but it feels nice to not just be behind my computer screen. I love meeting people, I love seeing people try my clothes on, I love remembering things like why I'm doing this, why I started it, why it's still going, why it will keep going. Yeah, it feels really great. I just need to iron out a few of the little beginning bits. And then it will be.

Penny:

Well, when you see, like, there's Manners London, and then when you see all the videos and things that you make for it, the people sharing your clothes, it feels really community building-led. Would you say that?

Sally:

Yeah. I mean, that's really my thing. Getting people together is my thing. Getting women together and feeling good is my thing. Whether that's getting people to go to the sea and swim in freezing cold water in the winter, which they'd never usually do. There's nothing greater for me than communing of women. Especially when they're half naked or whatever, just really free. When there's no men around, when people are just getting changed and chatting and it's just pure, pure magic for me. Yes, yes, I love it so much.

Penny Lee:

Yeah. Taking up all the space. Did you do something like a business mentor program or something that was to help women do what you've done? So that like, why are you doing it? Who are you? What's your voice? That sort of angle.

Sally:

Sure. So we did that in the pandemic when there was a bit more time, partly was because I was lucky that I'd left the market just before the pandemic hit and so many people on the market had to pack up. Lots of people had cash businesses or whatever, things that were just a bit... There was no backup, right? Suddenly, you couldn't get any help from the government. Loads of people were just so fucked. And so me and my best friend who does all my marketing, who has been absolutely pivotal in everything, really. I wouldn't be in Barcelona without her. She's amazing. She does Facebook marketing, meta marketing. She's Ukrainian. She's a single mom. She's just a wonderful human. She was the real pull to come here, but we decided that between us and her partner who does systems kind of stuff. We were like, right, let's try and see if we can help some people fast track their product business or if they had a market sort of whatever, let's see if we can just get some people going. It was really, really great. But then the pandemic slowed down and life sped up and there just was no capacity to do it. But it was really fun and really great.

Penny:

I think it's really great, that honesty to see, for other people to see how to do their story and just tell it how you tell it.

Sally:

Yeah, and I just think no one really knows what they're doing. But if you don't know what you're doing honestly, then you'll be alright. I just think you'll just muddle through somehow and no matter what you're selling or sharing or whatever your product or your service or whatever it is, if you're really truthful in it, then someone is going to connect to that, even if it's a bit crap. People who see something of themselves in it, like whatever it is, if it's in its early days, if it's not yet what you dream of it being-

Penny:

I love that, so it doesn't have to be perfect to begin with, it polishes your gold. It's like you say, you have a few pieces in a box in the market and then you've got to where you are now nine years later, but you've got to start from somewhere.

Sally:

Yeah, mine's far from perfect. Absolutely. Step one, reach a point of no return and then work out the fine print afterwards.

Penny:

It's a bit like making the jump and building the wings on the way down.

Sally:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And I think if you're doing something that comes from a place of genuine, I don't know, there's so many gross business models, which are just scaling and money and, you know, I could change my suppliers. I have to put my prices up soon because the prices are going up, but I could change my suppliers and get my clothes made in China and it would completely turn my business into a profit making thing, which it's not at the moment. But I just don't, I'm not going to do that. I really want my beliefs, my philosophies to really stick on all the layers of my business, not to be a sales pitch. It's really important to me. They're made by people who I have a relationship with, who I care about. We've built this together and I just think that's so important. And I think that's why men really win at business because they care less. Is that a really terrible, this gendered thing to say? But I think generally the business model, the white male kind of CEO model-

Penny:

Well, the Peter Jones type, and that's why he couldn't understand it. Because I think it's sort of a piece of art, the whole thing. It all runs really deep and it's more than a business. I think that's-

Sally:

Yeah, I really love it. I do sometimes think, that's it, I'm gonna try and sell it. And then I just think, well, firstly, I just couldn't. Firstly, what would I wear? I don't wanna wear anything else. I was like, well, I'll sell it, but I'll buy like 10 rolls of fabric and store them. And then I'll sell it. And then I realised that yeah, it's a labour of love. But I can't imagine doing anything else. I just love what I do so much. I love to see women feeling good in their bodies. It's the most magic thing and being on photo shoots. I started outsourcing a bit of stuff, I've got an amazing team so they can do photos, videos, whatever, without me, they're just brilliant. But I just missed it so much. Just that, like just seeing women being so fucking kind to each other and bigging each other up and this room full of women who didn't know each other that morning, sitting around half naked, getting changed, sharing food, sharing stories. I can't imagine what my life would be without that.

Penny:

Have there been a lot of people that you've met through doing this as well? Because I have a thing that's like finding your niche leads to finding your people, both in terms of customers but also the people that you're working with, the people that you're collaborating with, the people who get in touch, the people who you're talking to on a podcast, this sort of vibe.

Sally:

I mean, it's brought me all my friendships pretty much through my business. I've had people message me being like, I was at a festival and like three of us saw each other in your clothes and we all ran to each other and hugged and they're like, if this is what your customers are like, could you have a huge party? I moved here and part of my newsletter blog was about leaving and starting over and the process of packing up my life and moving with my kid here. And now my best mates here are women who followed me and responded to my email and like, hey, I live in Barcelona, do you wanna go for lunch? And I'm out with them and the rest is history. My best friend brought me to Barcelona and she just started doing Facebook ads. We just worked together on Zoom for like three years and then became like closest friends, our kids are friends. So yeah, it saved my life, this business.

Penny Lee (28:35.877)

Fantastic. Saved and not created - that feels too much but it's like it's shaped it.

Sally:

Totally shaped it, yeah. In so many ways, how I'm able to be a parent, the people I know, the hours I work, the people I meet, yeah, just everything. It's like when I moved, when we landed in London, I ended up doing like a full-time law degree as a backup. I was just like, if I really can't make this work, I need something else. It was total madness. I can't remember what the point of it now was. At all. No, I've lost it.

Oh yeah, and loads of people were like, babes, you've got a kid, and we lived in temporary accommodation for four years in a bed bug riddled, hellish apartment just piled with clothes and stuff. Quite a few people pulled me aside and were like, babes, you need to get a real job. There were times when people were like, we know you really want this, but... And even Peter Jones

was like, well, you've got a law degree to fall back on. But I really, I trusted that this was what I was supposed to be doing. It wasn't always easy. That's why I did a whole law degree because there were moments of doubt for sure. But really, this is what I was supposed to be doing and I feel very grateful to be able to be doing something that I truly love and care about. It's a real gift that not many people get the chance to do in their lives, to do something that they really love.

Penny:

No, but it's the chance and also the bravery to do it. A lot of people, if they were having people around them questioning them, that's a lot to still keep that trust and power through and persevere and come out. Yeah.

Sally:

Yeah, it was pretty rough for a while for sure.

Penny:

And now you're in Barcelona. What's your next plan?

Sally:

Oh, there's lots of things that I want to do, but they feel like huge, huge things. The biggest is that my dream would be to, like as a long-term single parent and a survivor of domestic violence, like I haven't rested. I've never had space to rest. There has been no place where I feel like I can just lay down. I don't have a very close kind of family. It's just been a lot of work, and I only have one kid, I just can't imagine having more. My real dream would be that I could create some kind of foundation. I hate the idea of retreats, but like, I just have this vision of having some beautiful, cosy, big house. It's like the clothes thing is about women feeling like, oh, I could never, I should never, I would never, but I love to have that idea in like a space that you could go to when you've got no money. You don't go on holiday as a single parent. If you're very lucky, you find a way to turn your life around, but it's fucking hard. And I would love to be able to create something with Manners that offered like a holiday retreat centre was heavily tiered, so offers loads of free places to people who just can't afford it. I just want women to rest. I just want them to be all the things they think they could never do. I feel like I'm going to cry now. I'm a real crier. I want to be that hand that goes like, come on, I found a way. You can. You can sit down. You can put your feet up. You can have a break. Like, I love the idea of having a kind of retreat centre that's got like some kind of kids camp, which is far away from it. So you can really rest. Like, this one's on me. Just put your feet up. I've got this.

Penny:

I love that it goes from like the feeling from when you're in the clothes to the feeling of how you could be in life, like the same thing running through.

Sally:

My thing in life is to be that little voice that goes like, go on, but maybe you can, like just try it. Whether that's like, take your bra off, wear something backless, or whether it's like, yeah, just go and do something that you've really told yourself you can't. More than even anyone's told you

necessarily, but that you've told yourself is just not available to you, like something that just gives you a bit of fucking joy. Because there's so little joy and I really want to encourage you that there maybe there is more than you think, that you're able have access to in whatever shape that comes in.

Penny:

Oh, I love it. I absolutely love that. I think that's a great one to finish on. I think that's a mic drop moment.