

Women & Events

TALKING UP SKILLSETS, CAREER GOALS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT WITH SOME OF THE SPARKS LEADERSHIP LADIES

This year's Women in Event activities, conversations and experiences brought the community together—and sparked a ton of dialog. About the state of women in events. The future. And everything in between.

Women in Events Week top partner Sparks has been with the movement since, well, before it was a movement. The leading experiential marketing agency (wearesparks.com) features a predominantly female management team and a corporate culture anchored by support and respect. In an effort to extend the Women in Events Week conversation a bit, we grabbed a coffee with four of Sparks' leading ladies.

PARTICIPANTS:



Robin Lickliter
Chief Experience Officer



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Vice President-Events



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EM: How has the women's movement impacted your work and how you create events?

LICKLITER: For our programs, we've seen brands become much more conscience of their audience acquisition strategies and speaker selections to be more inclusive of female representation. Personally, in my work, it's a very exciting time to be a C-level leader in our space. Leading a large team of women is something I take pride in and all of the momentum surrounding the past 18 months has been exciting. It's great that the masses are putting more emphasis on women and the need for equal opportunity across many areas of life and business.

EM: What are the necessary skills required of an outstanding experiential marketer today?

NICOLAIDIS: In order to be successful, experience marketers today need to be able to work in a fast paced environment in which the plane is often still being built while we're trying to fly it. We need to be able to adapt and pivot with changes in our clients' businesses, no matter how close to the event they may be. An outstanding event marketer also needs to be able to challenge the status quo, always thinking outside the box. While brands want to leverage best practices, they also want to create unique experiences that have never been done before - more and more we are getting briefs asking us to "ruin" or "disrupt" the expected or traditional experience.

EM: What makes a great leader in experiential marketing?

HAWLEY: The characteristics that make a great leader in experiential marketing are the same as for any other industry. A leader needs to have strong communication, vision, integrity, empathy, accountability and most importantly passion.

EM: What are you looking for in a new hire or a star member of the team?

LICKLITER: Our agency culture is at the core of what drives our selection for new talent. Given the collaborative nature of our business; a new star needs to be adaptable, accountable, eager to learn and willing to grow (#agencylife #workshouldbefun). There are times we've taken chances on rising stars with all the right attributes over skilled candidates who seem too rigid or unwilling to adapt to the non-traditional nature of experiential marketing. Building a team fueled by the same passions yields great results.

EM: What is a big challenge facing women in business today?

ELISANO: You don't have to watch the news to know that women still encounter ridiculous obstacles in the business world, including sexism, discrimination and sexual harassment, among other things. These are real problems that may never fully disappear. Although there is still a considerable way to go here, I do believe progress is being made and, more than ever, women are impactfully using their voices, positions and platforms to affect change.

EM: How are your teams preparing for the next generation(s) of workers and attendees?

HAWLEY: Today's largest generation, millennials, has made the event world adjust to their mindset and interests. Luckily, this generation is all about experiences vs. things so they naturally gravitate to experiential and sharing on social media and within their influencer network. How this audience likes to interact must be considered when planning for B2B or B2C events.



EM: How do you stay current and make sure your events and strategies are relevant?

NICOLAIDIS: Our agency stays current by always being aware of what others are doing and leveraging our strategy team to be constantly analyzing industry trends and which brands are creating disruptive experiences. We challenge ourselves, asking questions and poking holes at our work to ensure we are providing the right solutions to clients. We also hire people with diverse backgrounds that bring new perspectives to the team.

EM: Is the experiential industry a different space for women than it was say five or ten years ago?

ELISANO: There is no doubt that significant progress has been made. Over the past 5 years, more and more women have been promoted to executive roles – at Sparks, an agency with tons of women in middle and upper management positions, we even saw our first C-level woman executive appointed last year. “Marketing” has always been a more available middle management role for women. But in both the agency and brand sides, we’ve seen women in high-level, influential decision-making positions, as well as gender balance across various company positions, increase. It’s still a harder climb for women than it is for men. The business world and society puts more expectations on us. That’s just an unfortunate fact. But despite it, the executive numbers are climbing which is positive momentum.

EM: What are some ways women can boost their careers? What has worked for you?

LICKLITER: I would encourage women to be confident and approach career growth head on. Recognition can come naturally, but often needs to be asked for. If you deserve a promotion, build your case and ask for it. Lead with experience and not emotion. Also recognize that you can’t do everything all the time, everywhere. Be your own superhero.



HAWLEY: I have always encouraged young professionals to gain as much experience as possible, even outside of their specific job responsibilities. Instead of starting out working for a large brand or agency, work at a smaller agency or company that allows you to be exposed to more things and involved in different projects. The more experience you obtain over the years, the more you have to offer future employers. And never be afraid to take on something new. It is the only way we all learn and grow.

EM: Lessons learned about being a woman in business that you wish you knew sooner?

HAWLEY: Being a woman in business has certainly changed over the decades of my career. What I learned is that regardless of the situation you should never hesitate to have a voice in the conversation. And, be yourself and not what you think someone wants you to be.

EM: Why is it so important for Sparks to play a leading role in industry activities such as Women in Events Week?

ELISANO: Due to the inclusive nature of our ownership team, in my 16 years at Sparks I’ve never felt the impact of the challenges that some women in business face. Our Women in Events program wasn’t started eight years ago to negate a stereotype or jump on a cultural bandwagon. We launched the program with the goal of creating an open platform for women like us, women with shared experiences to exchange ideas, discuss various issues, and make valuable connections. Women gravitate toward this type of camaraderie and community support, and we wanted to create opportunities for women at various points in their careers to come together, discuss women-related issues and offer peer-to-peer support. Fast-forward to today, and these connections are even more important as we aim to inspire more women to drive business policy, attain leadership positions, and change the world.

