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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 99: JOANNA STERN – IN THE ELEVATOR WITH

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. The elevator certainly not one of the great venues for communication. When most of us are in an elevator, we usually look up, look down, or look at our phones. Having a conversation in an elevator is rare and often uncomfortable. Well, in October, the Wall Street Journal changed that when it launched an online video series that has quickly become popular with viewers and leaders. It's called In the Elevator With. Each episode features a short conversation around two minutes in length that takes place in an elevator between reporter Joanna Stern and a business leader. Guests have included the CEOs of General Motors, Intel, and BuzzFeed. Arianna Huffington, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Shaquille O'Neal have been featured on the series. Stern, who is the Wall Street Journal's tech columnist and deputy head of video, joins us on the podcast today to talk about in the elevator with, how it's produced, and what it's like to interact with the best in business. Here's our conversation with The Wall Street Journal's Joanna Stern.

Ken White

Joanna, thanks so much for sharing time with us today. I absolutely love the series. How did you come up with the idea?

Joanna Stern

Well, thank you for saying that. I feel like we should have done this interview in an elevator, but we should get some dings in here. We should get some floor ding.

Ken White

Right.

Joanna Stern

So the idea actually came out of a brainstorm we had here at The Wall Street Journal. We were gearing up for one of our bigger conferences of the year. It's called WSJT Live, and

it's a tech conference where some of the biggest and brightest names in technology come and speak to us in front of a audience in Laguna Beach, and we had wanted to come up with a new way of sort of presenting conference video because video with two people sitting on stage doesn't tend to be all that enthralling to watch. And so we had this big brainstorm, and somebody in the room said, you know, something that always happens to me at conferences that get stuck in an elevator with someone really important, and I'm not really sure what I should ask or should I ask them anything. And is there a way to recreate that? And so a bunch of us started thinking, oh God, it's so hard to shoot in an elevator. How would we do that? How would we stop the elevator? How we would stop people from coming on? How would we even get these luminaries in the elevator? And a couple months later, we had a elevator set and a great production team to make this thing come to life.

Ken White

You've got to be having fun with this because you look like you're having fun when we watch it on video.

Joanna Stern

I'm definitely having fun. Though, like, I think maybe I'm getting pretty good at concealing how nervous I am that some parts of this production won't go right. Obviously, there's a lot of magic in editing, but right now, we script out the questions we ask. I ask about 15 to 20 questions of the guest. And then we sort of edit together some of the best, and some are not that great. Some are some answers are not that great. Some are stronger, and then we try to find the best balance of good questions vs. bad questions or bad answers.

Ken White

The guests are fantastic. I mean CEOs of Intel, General Motors, BuzzFeed. How do you come up with who you want to interview?

Joanna Stern

So I mean, the beauty that we had was we rolled this out at our WSJT Live conference. And so we had on on the docket there a great list of people we had appearing on stage and I sort of narrowed down that list to the people I thought would really be well and do well in this setting and were to answer questions in a really lively way in this setting and also, of course, we look at sort of what is our audience interested in right. Our audience is obviously interested in technology. They're interested in bigger picture themes about what is the emerging technologies are coming out, so someone from Intel would be good, but obviously, are audiences also interested in media, so somebody from BuzzFeed would be good.

Ken White

What have you heard from your audience? What kind of reaction have you gotten?

Joanna Stern

So there's a mix. I think some people really feel like there's a lot of fun in this. There's fun in pretending at least that we catch some of these people off guard, and there's also the interesting side of seeing some of these guests, you know, a little bit laid back, and we're asking some fun questions things from what did you want to be when you grow up to you know what's one way to make sure meetings don't suck so there's a lot of good reaction on that. I think some people feel like, oh, this is really staged, and there's, you know, some of these guests are trying to act, and it's not working for them.

Ken White

Wow, I think they come across great. It's funny. I think we forget when we see CEOs and leaders. We know they can communicate. We just assume they can communicate in every setting. This is an odd setting. There's a camera, two cameras probably in the set. You've got a set. You've got lights. It could be, you know, it could really throw them a curveball, but I think they come off fantastic. What kind of reaction do you get from the guests when they're done recording?

Joanna Stern

So definitely, the guests feel like, oh wow, this is something I've never done before because many of these CEOs or luminaries have obviously been trained. They're media trained, but they're definitely not media trained to sort of act as if they've been caught off guard in an elevator with an interviewer. So they all sort of step out and say oh wow did I do good there? Did that make any sense? That's going to be a terrible video. Then many of them are always pretty shocked when we edited it together that it actually seemed like a pretty natural conversation on an elevator. But yeah, it's a set. So there's a lot of, you know, there's a lot of acting that has to go into this. I mean, you know, I would say really true method acting that we have to all get into our roles, but we you walk into a set, you pretend to push a button. We don't actually have a button there. And then we've got three cameras. And a crew of people watching. So it's you're also sort of performing for the people in the room.

Ken White

You know, I get the feeling, having been a big television fan throughout my life, you know, there are certain series where actors just really want to be on as guests friends was one of those shows. Will and grace was one I can see this year series becoming one of these as CEOs and especially their PR people saying wow, this is a great setting for our CEO to be in. So do you have people pitching to you? You know, talk think about our CEO or think about one of people from our company as a guest?

Joanna Stern

Yeah. So so we right now, I'm getting lots of pitches from public relations companies, etc., talking about or asking for their clients or different people they represent to appear on in the series. Right now, I'm trying to keep it to really C-suite executives and people who you know we had Shaq in there for the last time, so Shaquille O'Neal, who is working with a tech startup called ring, had been sort of for lack of a better word schilling for four ring but we got him in the elevator, and we got him talking about a lot of different things. Yeah, we definitely have a lot of people interested. It's now just making the call on which are the right guests and what do our audience actually want to see.

Ken White

So you said you started at the conference. Did you have the set set up at the conference as well when you first started shooting? Where's the set now?

Joanna Stern

We did. So we had we actually had the set built for the first time in a hotel room at the conference center. So it was in a hotel suite which was a was a very tight squeeze in there both in the elevator set and in the actual room, and now we have in our Wall Street Journal studio in New York, which we've just recently redone. We have it positioned in the studio, and we know where we're trying to schedule shoots about one or two days a month so we can get you know a number of people in and out of the elevator so we can shoot all at once and don't have to keep tearing down the cameras and the lights.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with The Wall Street Journal's Joanna Stern in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. Once again, the Center for Corporate Education is offering its popular certificate in business management program in April. It's a five-day experience designed for the working professional who wants a cross-functional understanding of business. Each day is devoted to one business-related topic, including communication, operational effectiveness, strategy, managerial accounting, and leadership. The five core topics taught in our highly ranked MBA program. To learn more about the certificate in business management program, visit wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Joanna Stern.

Ken White

Your primary role is tech columnists, right? Is that correct?

Joanna Stern

It is, yes.

Ken White

So this was somewhat new for you. Is that right?

Joanna Stern

It is, and it isn't, so my role at the Journal since I started about four years ago has been a tech columnist. So I was hired as one of the tech columnists to replace the great Walt Mossberg, who really pioneered tech or gadget reviewing in the media world. And so when I was hired, part of that was that they wanted to have someone who was strong at video, and one of my one of the things I've worked on over the last ten years is how to build a personality on video around reviewing gadgets and reviewing technology, and so I had a lot of video experience I had come from working at ABC News Network then both on the TV network and on their digital properties. And so every week I did a column, but I also did a really nicely produced video where I was sort of telling the story in video form, and that's how I've I've really kind of, I think, come to be known at the Journal and outside the Journal as being sort of having this unique video voice and then actually about seven months ago it is now there was a big turnover in our video department here, and I helped sort of spearhead the change, and we are I am now currently one of the deputies of the video department. So I also help run the video department, so that was sort of the melding of two worlds. Here I was on camera, but I'm also helped manage behind the scenes this project.

Ken White

You know, back in the day, a print reporter was a print reporter, and someone who did television was television. The media are blended now, aren't they? Reporters are expected to know how to communicate on all channels, it seems. Is that a fair statement?

Joanna Stern

Yeah, I mean, I would say one of the challenges and one of the things I do here at the Journal is help people or help print reporters figure out what their video voice may be. And recently, I've worked with our tax reporter Rich Rubin who is very busy this week informing a series around taxes and how do we make a video series about taxes that's lively and interesting and fun and really leverages Rich, who is just a world-renowned reporter on taxes. And so it's a challenge. It's not as simple as just throwing a reporter in front of a camera and saying tell us what you know about this subject, and in some cases, I mean in the case of the talking taxes series, there's multiple editors in there in sort of the process of both scripting Rich but also figuring out what are the visuals that help enhance an explainer on taxes. So yes, I would say it's changing, and you find many reporters who are open to figuring out how to take on a different medium. But it's very different, and the storytelling you do on the page is very different than the storytelling you do in front of the camera or behind the camera.

Ken White

Why is it important for the Journal to do cool series like these and post videos like these, and showcase their reporters online?

Joanna Stern

Yeah, I mean, I think it's important in the sense of what what we feel at the Journal is important is that we want to be the leading publication for business, finance, markets, news, technology news, and we want to be that leading publication in all forms for our audience. And so part of that is obviously reaching people in the ways that they've known about the Journal, may that be on the page and that be in actual print and newsprint or whether that be in the digital, you know our website or our apps and video is a really interesting distribution for us because we can reach our current audience, but we can look at other types of audiences who are looking to consume news in a different way in a more visual way. And so, for us, it's about the tried and true mission of the Journal, which is to be this outstanding publication but to deliver the stories in new and different ways.

Ken White

This might be an unfair question so I won't ask you who your favorite guest has been. But do you have a favorite experience that maybe you've had since you started producing the series?

Joanna Stern

I think the Arianna Huffington experience was very fun. It was very funny. It was our first one, and you know for, people have an eye for how video should and shouldn't look. You can see that we clearly didn't know what we were doing fully on the technical and production level there. Like the lighting cues didn't work, the shots weren't the best, but the funny story really is we told all of the guests, you know, we want to go through the questions two to three times, and we laugh off a period of time. And Arianna came in. She did the interview, and it was good. It was really good. And you know, people who watched that one really appreciated her and appreciate the questions I asked. But we went through it once, and so I said, okay, it's great we're gonna go through it again, and she just said no. She said no, that was great. I nailed it but we're done. And we were like, but we still have 10 minutes left. She is no, no. We're done here. So she felt really confident in her performance, and you know, she felt like it was time to move on.

Ken White

There you go, one take, and that was it, right? That's fantastic.

Joanna Stern

Shaquille O'Neal, I think you know you see it there in his presence how much bigger he is than me. But I think that actually like kind of psychologically affected me because I was standing when we first started. Like going through the interview, I was realizing, God, this guy is really huge, and you know, he was definitely a little bit more on the dry and sarcastic side than I thought. And so I felt sometimes I was kind of pulling at him for some answers, but yeah, it was a real that was a very interesting experience.

Ken White

Yeah, and that was the first one I saw. And I just thought it was fantastic. Yeah, he is very dry and very sarcastic, but some of the questions, especially when you ask him if he's jealous of any of the players in the NBA today, and he's, yeah, all of them because they're not half as good as I was and they're making a lot more than I was making. I just thought, you know, great. It seems like a lot of really good give and take, and it seems like the people, the leaders and CEOs and guests you have, they've got to be authentic, but you've got to know how to have a little fun too, don't they? They can't be so serious.

Joanna Stern

One of the issues that we do run into is that many of these CEOs and media or executives are media trained, and so they want to say the answer that they've prepared in their head, but it's actually not the best answer or the best delivery for this format. And so you really have to have someone who's sort of good at improv, good at really winging it and responding to a question off the cuff.

Ken White

Yeah, and you're media coaching in a way as you're interviewing them at the same time that it sounds like.

Joanna Stern

Yeah, it's tough. It's a different.

Ken White

Moving forward, not to give away any secrets, but is there anyone you'd really like to have on as a guest or someone you're looking forward to having on?

Joanna Stern

I do have some hopes and wants that should probably actually start to ask these people, but I guess so. If Tim Cook if you're listening, I'd love to get you. I'd love to run into you in the elevator. Funny enough, Tim Cook is, was the one who prompted this idea because we ran into Tim Cook in the elevator in real life in our at our conference, and you know

what do you say to the CEO of Apple in a conference? Can you fix my iPhone, maybe? So that would be one. Mark Zuckerberg if you're listening would love to get you inside the elevator. I think those are my top ones from the tech perspective. I'm sure you know anyone else any other big names out there right now. People are buzzing about would be good.

Joanna Stern

I think we would actually leave Harvey Weinstein off the list.

Ken White

Good point. Yeah, good point. Joanna, thanks so much. I know you're busy. I really appreciate you taking the time to join us today. Thanks very much, and good luck with the In the Elevator With. We appreciate it.

Joanna Stern

Thank you.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Joanna Stern of the Wall Street Journal, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization meet and exceed your goals with business and leadership development programs that fit your needs and get results. If you're interested in learning more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Also, if you have any feedback or suggestions pertaining to the podcast, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest this week, Joanna Stern, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.