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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 65: SHERI BIAS & AMORY HOLLOWAY – INNOVATION AND THE TALENT AGENCY

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly 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. In today's constantly evolving business environment, companies and organizations must innovate to stay on top. The business that embraces change and disruption is the business that tees itself up for success, as we've seen from the likes of Dollar Shave Club, Airbnb, Uber, and many others. Innovation and disruption can apply to any business. Sheri Bias is the owner of the Liquid Talent Agency in Richmond, Virginia. She works with actors, models, and producers. In the process, she's created a new framework for doing business in that industry. On today's podcast, Bias and one of her business partners share their story of how they've brought innovation to the talent agency business. Here's our conversation with Sheri Bias and Amory Holloway from Liquid Talent.

Ken White

Sheri, Amory, thank you for taking the time. It's great to be here. This is not at all what I expected. We're in your space. Not at all what I expected, so this is really exciting. Sheri, I think when some people think about talent agents, they think of what they maybe see on TV in a sitcom. You're discovered, and suddenly you're in a movie. What was the setup? Because you what you're doing is very unusual and different, but what was the old way of talent agents?

Sheri Bias

Sure. And welcome. Welcome to Liquid.

Ken White

Yeah, thanks.

Sheri Bias

We do have an interesting setup which we can certainly talk more about, but previously before we decided to go with business strategic partnerships, it was mainly agency-focused. So talent would go to an agent and discuss representation. There are a variety of types of representation, from an exclusive to non-exclusive contract. So understanding that and understanding what type of agency if you want to go modeling, if you want to be fashion, do you want to focus on talent. We focus at Liquid on real people, particularly in the casting and then the talent management that we do for our business lines. But there are just a variety of different ways an organization can be set up specifically for talent, which again is more of an older model, and what we've done is taken that and morphed into a unique position within the industry. So we have liquid performance arts. We have liquid action martial arts. We have liquid talent. We have liquid casting lots of liquid stuff here. We have Kim Alley models, and then we also have shots by Bobby. So we've got lots of strategy as far as our business partnerships, and that's how we've aligned ourselves within the community because we want to be a one-stop shop for our clients.

Ken White

So in the old days, if someone wanted to be a model, they would go to an agent, and the agent would then farm them out to a photographer and to get training correct.

Sheri Bias

Absolutely.

Ken White

And now you're doing it here.

Sheri Bias

We're doing it here. We're assisting our clients in identifying those many, particularly hard-to-find niches, as far as skill sets. We're training people to have the corresponding martial arts skill set. The dance skill sets, we do photography here, so we have clients come to us for those needs, and we can pretty much again be a one-stop shop.

Ken White

Where'd that idea come from?

Sheri Bias

It really just grew. We had a space over in Shockoe Slip behind the Martin Agency, and it seemed to be outgrowing that with our casting and talent services and found this place at Stony Point started to build out, and that's when people started really coming to us, and saying I would like to be involved from the martial arts aspect to the dance aspect. Kim

Alley with modeling. So Kim focuses on more New York type of traditional modeling, and all of us together just kind of put our heads together and said this is a great place to be and something we can really offer that's unique to our clients.

Ken White

Where are you placing much of your talent? What kind of jobs do they get?

Sheri Bias

It really runs the gamut. We just finished legends and lies, which is a national broadcast Fox TV network show. We've done feature films. We do a lot of broadcasts, so it can be national, or it could be local broadcast, and then we do industrials. We also have if you drove 64-95, you probably saw a lot of our models on billboards. So anything along the lines of that. We've also been working with some folks out of LA to place talent out there and wherever the clients want us to be. We just finished a production with Publix down in Florida, so they did the casting here, and then they flew the folks down to Orlando. Nice place to be.

Ken White

Yeah, absolutely. So how do you make the relationships with various production companies and movies and so forth? How is that done?

Sheri Bias

It's really word of mouth and getting our reputation out there. I built this company on honesty and integrity. Without that, we have nothing. So it's establishing client relationships and not only making sure talent are taken care of but also clients.

Ken White

First of all, this is exciting. We've never had two guests on the podcast. We had about 75 interviews, that we've never had two guests.

Sheri Bias

It's all about doing new things.

Ken White

Yeah, this is exciting. We're very excited about it. Amory, you've got a dual role. You're part of Liquid, but you're also a partner. Can you explain that?

Amory Holloway

Yeah absolutely. I came on board specifically in the dance region of it and then it kind of worked into more of a partnership than anything where my expertise in the dance world

lent itself so much to the casting world. And so I just it evolved. It became something that I was passionate about, and then started working on the most recent legends and lives project. And here I am, you know, kind of a full-fledged partner.

Ken White

So how much dance, how much business or leads come your way? I mean, what kind of projects are out there for those who dance?

Amory Holloway

Well, I mean, clients often need different dance niches. We did a commercial last year for a local client where it was a full-fledged dance scene right here locally, and they needed dancers, and that's a great opportunity for me to tap into my clients and say here's an opportunity for you that's outside of your realm of

Ken White

Right.

Amory Holloway

what you've done before. And get them into more of a working space which is my niche in the dance community is creating working dancers, not just the prima ballerina but a dancer that can go and book jobs.

Ken White

Yeah, find work.

Amory Holloway

Absolutely.

Ken White

I'm not so sure people understand the investment that the talent have to make. You don't just show up, do you and get a starring role in something?

Amory Holloway

Right, no, you definitely need to invest in creating your skill set, whether it's martial arts or dance or horseback riding, or monologues. Whatever it is, you really need to look for every opportunity to expand that skill.

Ken White

And Sheri, in terms of people you represent full-time, do they pursue is it part-time? What's the mix?

Sheri Bias

Usually, you find they build the majority of folks do other things outside of acting typically. It is a challenging environment to be in. So lots of my talent. I'm a non-exclusive agent. I mentioned those terms earlier. So I am perfectly tickled pink when my talent work with other non-exclusive agents. It's just if you go exclusive, then that means you can really only work with that one organization. Since we're non-exclusive, lots of my talent also work with other non-exclusive agencies, which again is absolutely fine, but that opens up the amount of opportunities they can be exposed to. Many of our clients are sole source. So they come to me to sole source an opportunity. So if you're not exposed to Liquid or have connections with Liquid, then you wouldn't get that opportunity. So, needless to say, from a full-time perspective from Liquid, I don't have any people on my roster that I would consider full-time. But if you're adding up all the non-exclusive relationships that they may have, that probably is what leads them to more of a full-time occupation in acting.

Ken White

What drove you to go the non-exclusive route?

Sheri Bias

Honestly, I don't feel like people should put all their eggs in one basket. So again, if you're not with Liquid or at least have the ability to work with us like we just did a great project with Amtrak, we've worked with Wal-Mart, we've worked with Pizza Hut. Those are sole source opportunities that clients have come to us and only asked to help them facilitating cast. So if you were excluded from working with Liquid, then you wouldn't even be an option for those clients. So to me, going non-exclusive allows you to, as a talent to, also build your skill sets with other agents on different projects.

Ken White

How did you get into this? You have a corporate background.

Sheri Bias

I do. An MBA from William & Mary. I've got a doctorate in human resources. Goodness. I worked for Anheuser-Busch, Philip Morris. I'm a corporate gal. The opportunity presented itself. My son has been acting for ten years, and the opportunity presented itself to purchase Liquid. And at the time, I was like, sure, sounds like fun, never dreaming. Again I wanted to be a marine biologist when I grew up, so never really dreaming that this could expand and flower and really blossom the way it has. So it just opportunity knocked, and I open the door.

Ken White

But did you have much knowledge and background in the field?

Sheri Bias

I had several years working with various casting directors, other agents before I actually took over in Liquid leadership. Yes. So I did have experience and built my experience on a variety of TV sets, movie sets, as well as corporate broadcast sets.

Ken White

Is that your son or through other?

Sheri Bias

Through my son and other opportunities through other castings, yeah.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Sheri Bias and Amory Holloway in just a minute. Our podcast 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 helps companies and organizations from all over the world by creating and delivering business and leadership development programs. If your organization is looking to get to the next level, contact the Center for Corporate Education to discuss how we can create and deliver a program that specifically fits your needs and gets results. For more information, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Sheri Bias and Amory Holloway of Liquid Talent.

Ken White

So what do you try? What is it you bring to this personally? What do you try to do that's different, that's better, that's unique than maybe others in this field don't?

Sheri Bias

Having a passion for what I do. I love this. It's putting the people puzzle together. And as I mentioned earlier, it's caring about clients also caring about talent, making sure that the talent have great opportunities but also making sure that the clients have great people that they're working with.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sheri Bias

And then getting that feedback and just constantly rebuilding the organization because our roster can be transient at times. So we have people going to first market, which would be in New York, L.A., and so forth. So then we have to rebuild and re-establish and make sure we have that continued supply of great people here for our clients locally.

Ken White

I had told a couple of MBA students that we were going to talk today, and they immediately went to friends, the old series of friends, and Joey and his agent, which was a pretty big role in that show. She would show up every so often, and it made me think of the relationship between you and the talent. How do you manage that? I can assume people have high hopes. They have goals, and sometimes it clicks, and sometimes it doesn't. How do you manage that?

Sheri Bias

It's realistic. Having to provide that level of realism at the first meeting. So our business model is we have a one-on-one meeting. We look each other in the eye and say are you serious? Is this something you want to do?

Ken White

Right.

Sheri Bias

And from there, we develop that relationship so that I have a feel to know what you want to do. Maybe you don't want to do print modeling. Maybe you only want to do acting. So I get a feel for the talent, the directors get a feel for the talent making sure that we understand what the talent want to do and then just being open and honest there are some opportunities that you know if you came to me and said I want to apply for this role for a 20-year-old African-American female I'd say

Ken White

Probably not.

Sheri Bias

It'd be a challenge to place you there.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sheri Bias

But just being realistic with people about what they're bringing to the table and what their options might be as far as project participation.

Ken White

So a talent, as you refer to the individuals who you represent, just striking out, you're not hitting it. Is it one of those things that it's not personal? It's just you weren't what they were looking for. Is that the case?

Sheri Bias

Absolutely.

Ken White

Really.

Sheri Bias

You can, and there's probably more rejection in this business than maybe many others, but you can't take it personally.

Ken White

Right.

Sheri Bias

Example, we did a casting for a TV commercial that's actually airing now. And the initial casting was they wanted eight-year-old Caucasian girls. We brought in a bunch of eight-year-old Caucasian girls, and the client said no, they look too old for what we want to do. So we recast the role at five years old, and that was perfect. Nothing personal, nothing the girls could have done differently. It was just they wanted a different look. And it's very it is different in this business because they can be specific about make, model, shape, and size.

Ken White

Sure.

Sheri Bias

So anything from ethnicity to height, weight, even hair color, and eye color.

Ken White

So some of it is it's not personal, but some of it is make sure you're working to have ability that can set you apart at the same time.

Sheri Bias

Absolutely. Yes. And we offer a variety of classes like we talked about the martial arts classes. We offer dance classes. We try to offer those unique courses so that we can build skill sets like on legends and lies. One of the unique things was equestrian-trained riders

or equestrian-trained actors. So you've got to be able to ride a horse and act at the same time.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sheri Bias

And we offered through a credible source that has done many features, many TV shows. He came to us and said I would like to offer this for your talent so that you can then supply your clients with good talent who are trained to ride horses and talk at the same time.

Ken White

Right, right. And Amory, what do you teach? What do you coach to the talent?

Amory Holloway

Just the dance. The dance is my realm. So if a client comes in and says we need folks that can waltz, then that is my realm to find our talent, teach them how to waltz, and then they'll now have that skill set too.

Ken White

Are they learning from square one? They have never danced, or they've got some background?

Amory Holloway

Some.

Ken White

Really.

Amory Holloway

It depends on who's interested. Honestly, if you're willing to build the skill set, we're willing to teach, and there is a spot for everybody in that world. Dance is one of those things that you just have to put yourself out there, and everybody is trainable.

Ken White

Is there a limit in terms of dance, a limit in age?

Amory Holloway

No, definitely not. Actually, dance is really one of those things that is encouraged later in life. It's good for the body. It's great stretching if you there's all kinds of studies that show that it can prolong life and can prevent injury as you get later advanced stages of life. So absolutely not.

Ken White

So for your clients, the more they know about it, the better position they're going to be.

Amory Holloway

Absolutely.

Ken White

To land something.

Amory Holloway

Yeah.

Ken White

Sheri, for someone listening who thinks well, I've always wanted to be a print model. I've always wanted to do this or that. What do you tell them?

Sheri Bias

Check out our website liquidtalentgroup.com, and you can do a new submission if it's something that you find you want to do. We don't guarantee representation to everyone. It is we when we get our new talent submissions in. We do review them compared to who's on our roster. So it's not a guarantee that you would be moved forward in the process. We are looking for new talent. So hey, that's exciting. We've got lots of projects that are coming up with the holiday is usually, things slow of it, but then Artie got some things we were just discussing on my way up here about the spring of next year. So if someone's interested, definitely check out the website. Do a new talent submission, and then you will get a response from one of us within about 24 hours.

Ken White

What kind of a role? And, of course, we're in Virginia but does state film commissions in the state. What kind of a role do they play across the country in your field?

Sheri Bias

Absolutely no. There are lots of incentives for features to come. I know we were working with one recently that actually ended up going out-of-state just based on better

incentives. So it really depends on what is being offered to the productions and if it's somewhere that they feel is viable. Obviously, being here in historic Yorktown, Williamsburg, and so forth. We've got lots of great lands to use as far as scenery and backdrop. So I think that's a definite plus for productions as well.

Ken White

Media changing like crazy. Netflix it's no more a 26 episodes series. It could be six episodes. Those changes not just in that but media all over how is that affecting your business. Do you see much of an impact or opportunity or less opportunity?

Sheri Bias

I don't really see it impacting us too much as far as what we've been involved in. I know we've had some discussions. Pam is working on, you know, piloting some things and floating some things by Netflix as well. At this point, we've got another project we're working on, possible HBO. So I think definitely it's an evolving field, but the need for talent is the need for talent, be it, you know, a wee, be it a month, or two months just depending on what the duration of the project actually is and that's where we can add value is making sure you've got those great people and that they're getting great opportunities to continue to build their skills.

Ken White

And final question is it lucrative for someone who is fairly successful?

Sheri Bias

Absolutely yes. Particularly when you get into more of the SAG or the union roles, and then you get residuals, and that can continue to build. So there are definitely lots of lucrative opportunities. You do have to start somewhere. Again back to that reality. So you have to start somewhere, and generally, people just getting into the business would start maybe as a background or an extra such as, you know, the production that we talked about legends and lies where you may be part of that interpretive piece, and you're a background so you may not be credited. Then you build up to credited roles, even gaining your union eligibility.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Sheri Bias and Amory Holloway, 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 get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education

for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Also, we love to hear from you regarding our podcast. Please share your comments, thoughts, and suggestions with us via email at podcast@wm.edu. That's podcast@wm.edu. Well, thanks to our guests this week, Sheri Bias and Amory Holloway. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.