



How Ana Flores Is Helping Latinas Grow

One of the original innovators in the personal blogging space, Ana Flores is not only an early adaptor but also a born innovator. She saw an opportunity in connecting brands to popular online personalities – today’s influencers – and ran with it. Her company brought in millions one year and filed for bankruptcy the next. Like a phoenix, Ana rose from the ashes to build the super successful We All Grow Latina.

Alicia Menendez:

Ana Flores is the gracious and kind founder of We All Grow Latina, a network of influencers that connects online, at local events, and at an annual summit. If you’ve followed what Ana’s built, then like me, you might have imagined that it just blew up overnight. In reality, Ana’s journey has included many detours. She almost filed for bankruptcy, and offers lots of powerful lessons about tenacity, adaptation, and the art of reinvention.

Ana, thank you so much for doing this.

Ana Flores: Thank you for having me, Alicia. This is, it’s just so wonderful to have you face-to-face in front of me.

Menendez: I know, in person, because we’re internet friends for years.

Flores: IRL.

Menendez: I have been following your journey since Latina Bloggers Connect.

Flores: You have?

Menendez: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Flores: Not a lot of people remember. I mean, it’s only been five years since we switched the name, but that’s incredible. Why would you following?

Menendez: Because I was blogging, and someone probably said to me, “You’re a Latina who blogs, you should know Ana. She’s a Latina who blogs.” Which is sort of the genesis of the whole thing, right?

Flores: That’s how it all started. I was a Latina mom blogger, like some like to say, La Mami bloggers. I was at the top of the game back then. It was 2009 when I launched Spanglish Baby with my best friend from college, Roxana Soto, and it was really out of the need of... I was looking for bilingual books, I knew I wanted to raise my daughter at the time, she was like nine months, and I knew I wanted to raise her not only entrenched in the culture, but being completely bilingual as I was. But that’s really what started out the need to monetize, because I found a medium that I loved. I found a medium that democratized our voices,

our stories, that allowed us to tell our stories without anybody needing to edit it or tell us that it's not good for the bottom line.

And I come from TV. I had been producing content for Latino TV for over 15 years. Univision, MTV Latin America, et cetera, so all of a sudden I'm faced with this new digital media platform that I could create on my own, and I was out of work, because I had quit when I became a mom, and then I was faced with the recession, and tried to get a job, but it was impossible to do, making enough to be able to support having somebody take care of my daughter, so child care was just impossible. So anyway, I found this medium, I started blogging, Spanglish Baby became a really big hit, but we weren't monetizing.

Menendez: I was about to say. It's a platform that you have so much control over your narrative, but then the challenge falls to you to monetize it.

Flores: Yeah. I was freelancing. I would get little freelance gigs here and there, on TV, fun stuff, but all I wanted to do was get back to my little blog, and the connections I was starting to make through the blogs were other bloggers, other Latina mom bloggers. Because I don't know if people remember this, but before Twitter... I mean, Twitter had just launched, but before Instagram, and really connecting on Facebook much more publicly, we would connect via comments. Remember comments on blogs?

Menendez: Yes. I'm old enough to remember comments.

Flores: So, you would leave a comment, and it would link back to your blog if you had one, so people would leave comments that would link back. I'm like, "Oh my goodness, she's a Latina blogger." And then I started finding them on Twitter. One day I sent out a tweet. I was like, "Where are the #latinabloggers?" And I kind of kicked off that hashtag, and then I started finding, and more and more we started finding each other, and all of a sudden I had this network that we were all friends that were helping each other figure out this space, but also where we felt we weren't the crazy ones. But then I realized that there was this whole group of mom bloggers, general market, let's call them, and they were monetizing. And they were doing a great service.

Menendez: How were they monetizing?

Flores: They were working with brands. So, Google AdSense would take you so far if you were making maybe over 100,000 unique monthly views a month, whatever, but really where you would monetize was partnering with brands and writing content from your voice, from your story, from your niche, from your topic, where you were organically integrate their message. That was like April of 2010, and then by November 2010, I had launched Latina Bloggers Connect. I started reaching out to brands that were reaching out to me, and offering my service to them. I started partnering with Clorox, with Veme, with different brands, to reach Latina bloggers.

Some of the general market bloggers had created these networks where they would do that, which now is known as influencer marketing. Those were the beginnings of influencer marketing. They would tell me, like, "Why aren't you doing the same thing for Latinas?" Because even though they could sell us, we could be part of their network, they didn't know how to sell like a Spanglish baby that was very in culture, so I decided that we would do that and November 2010, I launched Latina Bloggers Connect, literally with no money, with a laptop at home, with my daughter at home and a friend that did a logo for me. I did the whole WordPress site on my own and launched with a blog post and a link to a Google

Drive form that said, “If you’re a Latina blogger and want to work with brands, sign up here.”

Menendez: That feels so quaint.

Flores: I know.

Menendez: In the shadow of We All Grow, which seems at this point pretty ubiquitous and firing on various cylinders. Draw the line for me between how Latina Bloggers Connect became We All Grow.

Flores: Drawing the line back, I think we were stuck in the middle after many years, because we were so successful. We know that Latina-funded businesses, it’s less than 1% that actually hit the \$1 million mark. I hit the \$2 million mark in 2016, and in 2017 I was about to file for bankruptcy.

Menendez: How does that happen?

Flores: Because things were going so well until they weren’t, so all the clients were coming to us, but then the industry matured to a level that the agencies were doing influencer marketing in house. They didn’t need us anymore. Even though we had guided them, taken them by the hand, et cetera, et cetera, but we didn’t scale up to what they were looking for, which was technology that informed data, et cetera.

Menendez: Slow down for me, though.

Flores: Yeah.

Menendez: Because a lot of us who are not as familiar with this space think that it is as cute as someone being like, “Oh, I like this person’s Instagram. Let’s give them...” This is now completely data and metric driven.

Flores: Completely. Completely. So, what those marketplaces do, they have the algorithms that basically were promising and promise that they’re going to match the brand with their ideal influencer. So, it’s basically a brand will pay a monthly fee to be part of a marketplace, and they can literally just search. I need a mom in New York, that speaks Spanish, with toddler kids, with 100,000 followers on Instagram or more. And it will give you profiles of where to invest, right? Who to reach out to.

That removes a human element, because at the end of the day, you are dealing with a human, and the relationship and connection aspect of it was what had driven us and me to build that company, and that is what we were starting to lose. When I hit publish in November 2010 to the first blog post announcing the company, ended with the line that said, “When one grows, we all grow.” And that’s the sense of what I felt had been lost, right? That connection of how we’re helping each other build our businesses, build our voice, open our doors to each other, so that’s when I launched the conference in 2015.

The conference was really a place to connect us all in real life, and all the business that I had gotten, the connections that I had, my clients, other influencers, et cetera, that I was meeting was all through this conferences, through all these spaces, so online can connect us, but we still need those in real life things where we can meet, and it becomes even more special when you’re in a room full of Latinas that are like you, that get it. That have the same drive that you have. That have taken the same risks that you have. That have the same ambitions and aspirations.

Menendez: I want to say, because I've not been to your conference, and I think sometimes when I see conferences like this on Instagram, it's very hard to sort out what's real and what is very glossy and pretty, but there's no there there. And I want to say in full transparency everyone I have spoken with who has gone to your conference lauds it, and they laud that sense of community, and people talk about walking away feeling both very fulfilled by it, and feeling like there was a real value add. That's a special alchemy. It is not easy to do that. How did you figure out the secret sauce?

Flores: By treating people the way I want to be treated. By realizing when I went to these conferences, what I loved, where I felt special, where I felt like a number, and understanding that really the only hard part about it is that I have to be very involved. I'm very involved in every single thing, but everything we create comes from a place of is this gonna make us feel special. And even with the brands that we work with, if they don't get it, then we're okay. They can pass.

Menendez: Something that I'm so struck by as someone who is very invested in this idea of community and has tried to build community, Latina to Latina is for me the most community-driven project I've ever been a part of, I can be so precious about this is the brand, this is the logo, this is the name, and now we cannot change it, because that is how people know us. And so, there's something both alarming to me, like the hairs on my arm are standing up, and liberating about the fact that you were willing to be so iterative, that you have tried this in a variety of different ways and shifted very quickly. What for you is the lesson there?

Flores: Oh, many things. I mean, I think the Latina community ourselves, we're trying to find our space, and we're trying to find our moment. We're trying to define ourselves, and I want us to be able to shift and transform and show up for the community where they're at, where we are at, and that means that if we have to change the name, because now it feels like AMIGAS is really what we are, right? If we have to change the tone of the conversations that we're having on the programming-wise for We All Grow every year, then we're gonna go that way. Right?

We saw the shift in 2016, after 2016. I don't even need to say what happened in 2016, that we all, especially when we were as such entrenched in this influencer world, beauty, and fashion, and parenting, and et cetera, that was so siloed and so niche in what you were allowed to say in your space, right? And all of a sudden you're like, "I have followers and I have a lot to say. How do I say it? And are they gonna stop following me? Are they gonna stop caring because now I have a voice and I want to do it?"

And we saw that so many were speaking up.

Menendez: So many. So many. And it was interesting, because most of those posts that I saw sort of came with a, "Screw it."

Flores: Yeah. Exactly. A screw it attitude.

Menendez: And with a like, "I know that there's a risk in my weighing in on politics and society when you expect fashion from me, but screw it."

Flores: Exactly, and we stood up and applauded that. And we had to find our voice, too.

Menendez: Were you scared of that?

Flores: We work with brands. It's scary. It's where are you gonna find your place? So, yes. I mean, 2016 was that year that we made 2 million, and then next year we were gonna file for bankruptcy. I think all of it had to do with it, because I feel we were all in this collective depression, trying to figure out how meaningful what we were doing was, and how that was gonna be part of being the change that we needed, and we were hurting. As a community, we were hurting. It was the first time that we felt this level of attack. And what were we gonna do? And that's really when I was like, "I'm done with this influencer marketing part." But it's almost as if the universe heard me and was like, "Okay, you're too scared to take care of it yourself, because that means having to fire your team, which are your friends, and women that you know, and families that you know, so we're gonna have to take care of it for you."

And then, that's when all of the brands basically stopped knocking on our door. From one day to the other, there was no more contracts.

Menendez: So that's it. Because that's a question I have. When we talk about bankruptcy, I can never tell if it's like a slow train you see coming-

Flores: Oh no.

Menendez: No.

Flores: This was literally filed my taxes at 2-point something million for the company, we had the Summit in March that did well, but right after that, there was no contracts, no proposals, nothing coming in. We had an event in New York City that we had to cancel, and a month later I was firing my team. But it was like that. Because we're self-funded. We have remained self-funded, away from your typical VC investment, et cetera, because we want to be able to pivot quickly. We want to be able to take decisions and knowing where is the community going, where are we of service, but at the same time we're not a nonprofit.

So, even that helps us with the brands that we work with, the brands that are showing up and adapting to this conversation as well, and understanding what the Latina really needs. What they care about. What's next for us. How do you show up for us in an authentic way?

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Menendez: In that moment, where you realized that you were going to have to file for bankruptcy, it would have been easy to be like, "Okay, I've tried my hand at this. It's time to walk away and pursue something new." What made you stay?

Flores: It was a series of events that can only be described as magical or guided, honestly. I'm a very spiritual person, and I've been on that path for many years. I started filing for bankruptcy, I had paid half to a bankruptcy lawyer I found online, when I went hiking with a friend who had just sold her company, and she was like, "You're not gonna file for bankruptcy." I'm like, "I already started. It's done. It's happening. I'm gonna close the company. I'm gonna give up the name." Because that was the only asset I have, really. "And I'm gonna consult. I'm gonna create anything else."

She's like, "No, you're gonna talk to my lawyer." Like, "I have no money to talk to your lawyer." She's like, "You're gonna talk to my lawyer." Long story short, I called up her lawyer. Turned out that this man, his office was the same office that I had two years prior. He was sitting basically on my desk. He sat down with me. Within minutes, he's like, "You're a warrior. I'm not gonna let you fall. I'm gonna help you for free. Pro bono." And he guided me. He explained to me everything I could do. He's like, "You have to understand that all successful companies in this country carry debt." Because I was scared of the debt that we had, and having to cancel that out, and he's like, "No, you're gonna be able to do it." So, basically he trained me how to call the companies, and they were all happy to help out. They don't want to hear the word bankruptcy.

So, they were all happy to help out, and then at the same time, the two girls who are now my partners, Roxana and Melissa, and Roxana was already a partner in the company, and they both came up to me and they're like, "Listen, it's summer. We want to spend the summer with our kids. We know that you're gonna get out, come out of this. We don't need to make money right now, so take your time. We're here. You don't need to pay us. We're gonna work with you."

I was given the gift of a clean slate. Now that I knew better, because when I launched the company in 2010 as Latina Bloggers Connect, I didn't truly understand where it was going, what we were capable of doing, and we were in a new era. And in this new era, I could launch with that knowledge now, and already that community base. I mean, we were influencing the influencers. You know? And we already had a great reputation, and now we could decide what really mattered.

Menendez: Understanding your value is a big part of your ethos. Did you always understand your value?

Flores: I don't think I still truly do. I feel like I'm constantly unlocking new layers of that understanding, when I think that I'm like, "No, no, no. Of course, this is where I'm at." And then I realize that there was something else that I hadn't given value to myself. Where it's hard for me to really place a real value is when it comes to money, to finances. I put value in my knowledge, in my wisdom, in my ability to create, but I don't know how to translate that into what I should get paid for that. That's really hard, and especially when you're, like a friend was putting it yesterday, when you're like the one carrying the machete. Like opening and clearing up the space. We were the first ones in that space. We didn't know what to charge.

Menendez: I say this with love and admiration, but it is jarring to me that you are someone who advocates for other people to know their value.

Flores: I get it.

Menendez: And you're not totally there yourself.

Flores: No. But I'm always honest about that, and we're honest about those conversations, and how we really are... When one grows, we all grow, right? Like we really are working on that together, and I think even the conversation that we were having this year about Latina Equal Pay, right? And we're always really honest about yes, and there's a funding gap, and there's a gap in what we are able to offer. It's hard for me to talk about Latina Equal Pay knowing that I can't pay people sometimes what they deserve. And it shouldn't be like that. We should all be able to access what we are definitely... what our value is.

Menendez: What do we, as Latinas, need to understand about our power and value as consumers?

Flores: We need to understand that we have that power and that value. I think we've been doing a lot of work in the last few years releasing that data, and once that came out, that really helped us, armed us and so many others, to be able to go to the companies and brands and be like, "This is your consumer. This is the people that we're talking to."

So, I think we have to start there. We have to inform ourselves and understand who we are, and the collective power that we have, so that we can definitely take decisions and make our next moves from a place of abundance.

Menendez: How do you personally leverage that power?

Flores: My personal power or the power of-

Menendez: Your personal power.

Flores: Now we start with the hard questions. So, I told you earlier that I have a really hard time seeing myself as others see me. So, I act from a place of knowing when I take decisions, it's from my gut, and I know, and I get like those chills, and I just know what's the next thing we need to do. But even then, I don't see it as powerful, because powerful was a nasty word for me. I grew up in El Salvador during the civil war, in a military family, and for me, power was always power down. From up to down. It was top down. It was exerting power. Power meant... Power and money were intertwined, and they were both harmful and evil.

So, I didn't want to be powerful, so if you start from that place, where power is negative to you, then how are you gonna access it? So, I needed to transform what the word power meant to me, and I am grateful that I have built the community I have around me, because it's been them that give me that power, and they're the ones that make me feel powerful every single day.

Menendez: It sounds like you've done a lot of therapy and a lot of excavating to get to that answer.

Flores: So, I just started therapy for the first time this year.

Menendez: That has been an efficient use of therapy. Because you're born in the States.

Flores: I was born in Houston.

Menendez: And then moved back to El Salvador.

Flores: Yeah.

Menendez: Do you remember that?

Flores: Absolutely. So, it was when... I mean, not the specifics, but I was six. My sister was three. And thankfully my parents divorced, and my mom moved back to El Salvador, and my dad

stayed in Houston. So, he's still there, and he had... I'm an entrepreneur in my blood, because we've both been entrepreneurs, but he had the first Latino night club in Houston.

Menendez: Yes.

Flores: In the eighties.

Menendez: Yes!

Flores: It was a fun place. Yeah. Yeah, so I grew up, I was in El Salvador in the American school until I was 18, and then I moved back to Texas and Florida for college.

Menendez: And when you say being in a military family, what did that look like?

Flores: Well, it wasn't military, because they weren't active duty, but my one grandparent had been a general and the other one had been a colonel, so they weren't... They were already retired by the time I was living there, but I was in a privileged society. Grew up there in a time when you are told who the good guys are who the bad guys are, and then once I left, I was able to start seeing things on my own and with perspective.

Menendez: Right. When did you start to question that?

Flores: When I was 18. When I went to UT Austin. University of Texas, and I remember the first time... Austin is definitely very political, and there was a table for the ACLU. I didn't even know what the ACLU was. But the hot item, the hot topic that they were dealing with at that moment, that the ACLU was talking about was the civil war in El Salvador. The peace treaty was signed in '91, and this was '90, so it was super, super, super hot, and obviously what they were talking about and the perspective that they had was not the one that I had, or that I had been told, so I started informing myself more and I started realizing that what I was told were the good guys were actually not, and vice versa, and there was no good guys or bad guys. Everybody was on the same side.

And then even learning people that you knew were involved, and so it just became very messy for me.

Menendez: What is your counsel to someone like me, who is very, very uncomfortable with jumping before I'm ready and everything is set?

Flores: See, I don't know how to... When I explain my journey, I'm always like, "This is my story. It's not do as I say." Because I am very... I take risks because again, I'm opening the way. I'm usually in places where no one has been. So, when I'm asked about mentors I'm like, "I've had incredible women that can tell me their experience, but nobody that has done the things that I've done at that moment." Right?

So, when I announced the conference, I didn't even have a hotel. We started selling tickets. Within two weeks, this brand new hotel called the Lion Hotel, super cool, had opened up in Koreatown in LA, and they came to me. They're like, "Do you want to do the conference in our hotel? We seem super aligned." It was the exact place that I needed. It was perfect. Neutrogena signed on. The other brands started. That year we had Dove, we had Neutrogena, we had Disney. It just... It grew.

But I had to announce it. Neutrogena had to know that I was gonna have the guts to do it before they signed something. I didn't have a product. I needed to create the product to be able to then continue selling it. So, sometimes it is those risks that you need to take. I

mean, the worst that could happen is I was gonna have to refund everybody their ticket, right? I mean-

Menendez: Is that what you tell yourself, though? Do you walk yourself through, “This is the worst thing that could happen?”

Flores: This is the worst that can happen. Can you handle it? Sometimes you’re the one that has to take the next step to say, “Yes, I’m brave enough to do it.” And for the universe, God, whatever you believe in, to help you bring everything else into alignment. It’s that energy that attracts everything else.

Menendez: My final question: Where are you taking your machete next?

Flores: The first thing that came to me right now, and I’m gonna trust, I’m gonna say it. I think I finally need to do that book. I had a book deal last year and I said no. From a very big publisher and I said no. Because I felt there was still a final chapter that I didn’t... I wasn’t ready for. And I think it’s coming, so I’m gonna go there, and allowing my voice to have a bigger platform.

Menendez: Ana, thank you so much.

Flores: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, so email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Pandora, Spotify, or wherever you’re listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

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