



How Candice Smith is Helping Other Founders Tell their Stories

This serial entrepreneur built her firm, French Press Public Relations, after launching two start ups of her own. Candice shares her insights on how building a service-oriented ethos can take some of the 'ick' out of personal branding, the value of choosing which social media platforms to invest in, and the editing required to tell your brand's story.

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- Alicia Menendez: Most founders of public relations firms build their businesses after years as an in-house publicist, a journalist, a producer, or a marketer. But Candice Smith's path was different. She spent two years in a classroom as a Teach for America corps member before launching two tech companies, pretty much back to back.
- Now, Candice runs French Press PR, where she's taking the insights she learned as a founder and helping other founders tell their stories. Be sure to stick around to the end of this episode when Candice shares some of her best insights on personal branding for people who scoff the idea of having a personal brand.
- Hey Candice, thank you so much for doing this.
- Candice Smith: Yeah, thanks for having me. I am so stoked.
- Menendez: I was thinking about you and public relations and personal branding and how all of that goes back to who we are and the story we tell about ourselves. And I have to imagine that with a name like Candice Smith, you were constantly having to assert your latinidad to other people.
- Smith: No question. My dad's side of the family is white, German, English. That's where Smith comes from. My mom's side of the family is Puerto Rican, and actually, my dad's side of the family hired my mom's side of the family. So like growing up, it was always positioned to me that my mom's family was not words I would use, but "the hired help." And so I was as a young child, conditioned almost to hide and to code-switch. I had that internalized shame that I didn't realize was plaguing me and plaguing how I thought about myself and how I felt about myself.
- And my first paper in college was trying to figure out for myself who I was and trying to figure out my identity as a Latina woman through the lens of my grandmother and my Awilla. And it ended up being like a 50-page paper, like a pseudo thesis because I was interviewing them and really learning about how to be proud of my heritage.
- It was a really big realization for me that I wanted to help others who were carving out their own paths and figure out how to amplify others' voices, even as I learned how to amplify my own.
- Menendez: That desire to help others pave a path doesn't begin in the startup world, it doesn't begin in the PR world. It begins at Teach for America. You spend two years in Phoenix as part of the corps. What is your sort of most vivid memory of being an educator?

Smith: The end of the first week of teaching my first class, I decided to buy all of my students a composition notebook. And I asked them to write me letters, telling me about themselves. I wanted to know what their passions were, what were they excited about, what did they want to do with their future, what were they worried about. And I remember just reading these notebooks and sobbing on the phone to my mother, hearing about what these 14 year olds ... I was teaching freshman English, what these 14 year olds had to endure. So that was really pivotal for me in getting a sense of what life was going to be like for the next couple of years in the corps. And just realizing what responsibility I had on my shoulders to make sure that I showed up for these kids and did everything that I could for them.

Menendez: Where in that journey do you realize being an educator in the front of the classroom isn't necessarily the only or the best way that I can be of service?

Smith: For me, it was seeing how crowded my classroom was, and I constantly felt frustrated because there wasn't enough me to go around. There wasn't enough time in the day. And also just seeing the learning gaps. Most of my students in the ninth-grade were coming to my classroom with a third or fourth-grade reading level. So I realized that there were a number of different issues that kept me feeling stuck and frustrated. And as a human being wanting to do more outside of the classroom.

Menendez: That then leads you into the next chapter of your life, which is becoming the CEO and Founder at Scholar Advance, which I understand to be an e-learning platform. What surprised you most about that experience?

Smith: Oh, well-

Menendez: I think a lot of people want the CEO title. They want the founder title, and we hear the success stories. Give me the real.

Smith: I've bootstrapped every business that I've been a part of. What that has meant for me as a founder is creating from scratch, starting from the ground up, educating myself on everything from the creation of a platform to networking, to figuring out funding to who's going to be the first client, to what is the service I'm offering, what is the product, the end product, the user experience. So ultimately, Scholar Advance was a solution to provide distance learning.

Before it became a thing in 2020, I would hire teachers to go into these classrooms virtually and help close student learning gaps to help them get to the next stage in their learning. And what we found out was that the infrastructure and what the rest of the nation found out in 2020 was that the infrastructure just is not there for e-learning unless it is consciously designed into the infrastructure of a school or a district. It was incredibly difficult to find actual adopters because school funding is always an issue. And so that was ultimately one of the big reasons why I decided to sunset Scholar Advance after years of building everything on my own, finally starting to bring in partners and just realizing that the infrastructure wasn't there in the way that we needed it to be.

Menendez: You move on to Tango at a time when subscription boxes were really hot. Isn't it sort of hard to remember now that that was the thing, like everything was going to become a subscription box? And your idea was that couples who play together stay together. You realized fairly quickly that the model you have is just not going to work at the price point you need to be selling it at. You have about \$6 in your bank account. I feel like \$6 in the bank account is often both the end of a story and the beginning of a story. So how did you turn? What was an end into a beginning?

Smith: This was the start of French Press PR. So I had realized with starting Tango, which was a kind of sex education in a box for couples, I was starting to get recognized in the sex tech world. And in some of those more specialized circles for being able to get my own PR. I realized that I couldn't get myself out there on Instagram, I couldn't get out there on Google Ads. I was getting taken down left and right on all the social media platforms. And I was like, "How do I get my voice out there? How do I talk about myself? How do I find the right folks to connect with?" And that was where I started to discover the benefits of public relations and of representing myself.

Cut to February 2020, it was just Valentine's Day, and we had our best month, yet we had so many sales. I was sitting on the floor surrounded by boxes feeling empty because I didn't know how I was going to pay my rent. The cost of actually paying for the products in the subscription box were so much higher than the actual profit margin that I was making. And so every time that we were making sales, we were still losing. So I had exhausted all of my savings from Scholar Advance. I had exhausted my options. I said, "I can't do it. I need to survive. And right now I am a slave to this business. I need to cut it right now, or I don't know where I'm going to end up." I ended up putting out feelers in a few of my networking groups. I'd had people asking me for help on how to do PR and how to represent yourself. And I said, "If anyone needs help, let me know." And I booked my first client the next week.

Menendez: I want to underscore though, this is without a formal training in public relations; this is purely experiential and self-taught.

Incredible. How did you place those first few pieces to prove both to yourself and to your client that you actually had the capacity to do what you said you could do?

Smith: I like to say that I approach it from an entrepreneur's perspective because I think that a lot of public relations advice out there really is not designed for early-stage founders. I know how to represent myself. I know how to tell my story. And so when I would sit down with my clients, especially at an early stage, I'd say, "Well, let's figure out how are you talking about yourself?" A lot of times founders get so stuck in their head about the day-to-day. You're wearing so many hats, you're absolutely exhausted that when it finally comes time to give your elevator pitch to the world, it's like, well, everything's important, right? But it's not. And there's a right story to tell to the right person at the right time.

Menendez: When you say that most people, I think I agree with this, are bad at telling their own story. What is the exercise you go through with clients as you onboard them to help them really figure out how to tell their own story? I mean, so much of that I imagine is editing down the many ways one could tell their story.

Smith: So, we go through and we figure out what are the parts of the narrative first that you feel comfortable telling. And then we figure out what are the parts of your story that you would like to tell, and what are the of your story specifically, because I tend to work with founders and thought leaders who are trying to reach a specific audience, who do you feel needs to hear your story. And that's who I like to dive even deeper into and build out what I call an ideal client avatar.

Because when we build out that avatar of who this person is that needs to hear from you, that would benefit from hearing your advice, your insight, buying your product, downloading your app, what have you, that's where you figure out not only what your secret sauce is and how to describe it to people, but that's also where you get out of your own head when you're in interviews and you're imagining instead of "how good do I

sound?" It's what are her fears, what are her pain points, what are the pieces of advice that you could give her if she was sitting in front of you right now?

When we build out that avatar, that's really what starts to shape those narratives in a way that turns it from talk about my company, this is who I am to, this is a compelling story that can provide value to folks.

Menendez: Candice, I've often heard you say that one of your goals is democratize PR. What does that look like? How do you do that?

Smith: Yeah, so I'm a full service agency. We work a limited one-on-one with a small number of clients. But again, kind of like when I was in the classroom, sometimes I find myself feeling a little stifled because there's not enough of me to go around, and I want to make sure that I can help more and more founders understand what steps to take if they want to represent themselves, or even if they just want to figure out how to tell their own narrative before hiring somebody in-house or outsourcing, because that's always a good strategy. So I'm actually really excited because this year is the first launch of our hustle program, which is going to be an accelerator for founders who want to learn how to do their own PR. So we've actually created bite-size lessons specifically for busy founders. Everything is actionable. Everything teaches you all the way from overcoming imposter syndrome down to how to make sure you are properly following up with journalists and what is proper etiquette when reaching out to folks. So we literally cover the entire gamut and we do it all for the fraction of a cost of actually hiring a publicist. If you have the desire, you have the time to figure out how to tell your own story, it's probably one of the best investments you can make in yourself.

Menendez: Candice, I don't need to tell you that I think a lot of people hear personal brand or personal branding and they're like, "Gag me." Both because it can feel inauthentic to think of yourself as a thing or commodity that needs to be sold. And because I think to a lot of people, it can feel braggadocious that a personal brand is just the highlight reel. How do you distinguish between who a person is and what their brand is? Because they're not always exactly the same thing.

Smith: And they're not always Beyonce and Sasha Fierce either.

Menendez: Correct.

Smith: So I like to think of it as your personal brand is a combination of what you say about yourself and what other people say about you. So when you think about your personal brand, especially from the perspective of what I like to call your digital footprint, right? Digital footprint is just where you can be found on the interwebs. It's very nebulous, but when you put it together, there is a comprehensive picture. What is that narrative and what does it say about you? That's your personal brand.

So when we think about creating a personal brand, I personally think it's better to control some of that narrative. But think again, who do you want to reach? If you're thinking about who you want to reach and it's coming from a service-oriented perspective, rather than "look at me, this is who I am." If you think about it from that way, it is very "me-centric." But when it's service-centric and you're focusing on doing something to help other folks and you're talking to them, that's how you can step outside of yourself a little bit more. And so that's usually what I recommend or the way that I recommend folks think about their personal branding.

Menendez: Candice, I want to go back to the beginning of our conversation because you said both that this struggle around identity has shaped the trajectory of your life. And I wonder now

that you are working in service of founders who you want to make sure are getting the time and attention are being helped to tell their own story, if you feel that doing this work has brought you into full alignment.

Smith: I do feel that way. There were many years, especially in my adolescence, throughout my twenties, where I struggled to figure out what my identity was, what my place was, "should I change my last name? I don't really identify with Smith." "Do I take my mom's maiden name and weigh those different options?" And I think learning other stories and learning how to tell other stories really has helped me figure out what my place is and even more so, I think it's helped in healing a lot of the generational and ancestral traumas. It's really helped me heal a lot of those wounds in seeing the stories of the women that came before me and in being able to tell the stories of other women around me. That in and of itself just feels like purpose. It feels like my mission is being realized.

Menendez: Candice, thank you so much for doing this.

Smith: Of course. Thank you again for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise@latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on radio podcast, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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