



UNSTUCK: How PR Pro Lissette M. Rios Connects the Dots

The founder of Chic Influence, a public relations firm, shares her tips for telling an individual or brand's story so that others want to listen. Plus, the powerful exercise she relies on to gain clarity and make big moves.

Alicia Menendez:

As a person who hosts a television show and a podcast, I am on the receiving end of lots of pitches. Many of them are really bad or off base. You would be surprised how often we get pitched men or non-Latino women for a show that is called Latina to Latina. But in this overflowing inbox, every now and then a pitch pops out. That was the case the first time I heard from Lissette Rios, the founder of [Chic Influence](#). She's the one who booked her client, Julissa Prado, for us. One of our very favorite interviews. That interview, the three of us crammed into a tiny New York City hotel room, crying together, was the start of a beautiful friendship.

Lissette knows a thing or two about being stuck, but she also knows how to position people and brands so that they can get unstuck.

Lissette, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Lissette M. Rios: Oh my gosh. No, thank you. It is a deep, deep honor to be speaking with you and also to be on this side, because so much of what I do is always to get my clients interviews and kind of in the media, so this is an honor.

Menendez: We're gonna talk about how this all came together because I think it is important, but first, can you tell me about a time, Lissette, in your own life, when you felt stuck?

Rios: There have been many, but I think the most prominent one was when I was making the jump from my corporate career to launching Chic Influence, and it took so long to make that decision for a variety of different reasons. One, as a woman. Second, as a Latina and someone at a very young age, on paper had great success. Originally from Miami and I come from Cuban background, and I knew that I had to come to New York if I wanted to work on the biggest and best beauty brands.

And it was great, because I had an incredible job at one of the largest PR conglomerate companies, so it opened up my world to working with the Unilevers and the Procter & Gambles of the world, working on campaigns like Pantene, and CoverGirl, and it was incredible. I was like, "Wow, I've made it." And I get promoted to senior vice president at the age of 30, and literally, everyone is 10 years my senior. But as I started realizing, and I have an incredible, supportive husband, and he is already at that time, and he still is an entrepreneur. I felt like my potential wasn't being fully tapped.

And no matter how much I advocated for myself, and at the time, yes, I was a senior vice president on multicultural practice, but I'm a very big picture person. I know that I'm being tapped for Latina initiatives, but to me, Latinas are mainstream. So, I was like, "We need to go bigger. We need to go broader. We need to do this." So, I was just like, "I think I want to start my own business." But I was terrified because also at that time, I was worn out. I was super unhappy at my old job, and it manifested for me physically. I was losing my hair. I had severe stress acne. And then it was just like it doesn't even matter how much money they throw at me at this point, I'm just so unhappy.

But what I realized in kind of helping me get unstuck is that I went through this exercise, and it took me a few months.

Menendez: Okay, I'm ready.

Rios: And I do this every time I'm literally stuck. So, you know those big Post-it notes that you can put on walls that are like gigantic?

Menendez: Yes.

Rios: So, I remember I stole these from the office, and at that time I was living alone in this tiny apartment, and I took four sheets and I peeled them on the wall. I did four columns. The first column is what am I really, really good at? The second sheet is what do I love to do? Because I think that's very different. I think you could be really good at something, but you don't necessarily love it. Then the next sheet is in an ideal world, what is the next five years going to look like? And then the last sheet is what do I absolutely hate?

So, for a month, I would just sit down and stare at it, and I would just write, and write, and write across all four columns until a month out, I remember just sitting there, like staring at it, and it came to me. I love PR. I genuinely do. And I love the marketing of beauty brands. What I did not love were the clients that I was doing it for. Not the people themselves, because my actual clients were great, it was just the brands. I just wasn't moved by who I was doing it with, so I reframed my thinking in being like, "If I can work with brands and people that I am personally passionate about, I will love what I do again. But I also will not work, and I say no to so much business, for people who don't let me do what I do how I do it, because I know that it could work."

So, if a company comes to me and says, "This is how it's going to be," then I say, "I'm not the best fit for you." For me, that was an exercise that came very full circle for me, and I still go through that exercise at least once a year. And especially after 2020, I went through that exercise again, like my four-column process.

Menendez: Did you make that type of gradual transition or did you just make the change one day to the next?

Rios: So, once I knew that I wanted to go off on my own, it took me six months. I was building my capabilities deck, like I wanted to make sure by the time I quit, I had clients, because my biggest fear at the time was how do I strip away a six-figure salary to nothing. So, what I also did in this six months is that I just saved and saved and saved and saved. So, I created the initial startup dollars of my company and then a cushion, and also too I was building a brand, because what I also wanted people to understand is that I wasn't a freelancer. I'm building a business and words matter, so that's why it's like when I came out, I had a logo, a name, the initial shells of a website, a full-blown design capabilities

deck, like my unique selling proposition. I thought all of that through so when I went out, this is my business.

Menendez: One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is because you have crafted some of the best pitches I've ever seen and while there are a lot of us who won't necessarily pitch a client, or pitch a brand, we all have to pitch ourselves. And so, I wonder what your process looks like for beginning to craft those narratives and tell those stories.

Rios: I think I just always look at things through like a human lens. That's how I internalize it. Even now, when we're working with clients, and obviously it's very hard for a client who always is gonna think that their product is the best, and the most incredible, and the most innovative, for me to tell them like, "That's cool, but five other brands have already launched that, right? So, we need to figure out another way to tell that story."

So, it's kind of like a multipronged approach. I consume content all day long. I read all day long. I can't go to an outlet and tell them like, "Talk about this mascara that has this ingredient," and then they're like, "We already wrote about that like a year ago. Why am I gonna write about it again?" So, it's like you have to be so strategic in how you consume, but also the same goes for in my instance, like I have very strong founder-backed brands, and how media, even somebody like you, how you talk about founders. All I do is literally the complete opposite of what everyone else in the industry does. I sit with my clients, I look at what the story that we have to tell, and I always try to humanize a pitch or really just kind of pull something up that I know is gonna be relevant to the outlet that I'm pitching.

And then I sit down, and I craft individual emails for every single person I am contacting. I just think about if I was on the receiving end, what do I want that email to look like? I don't want it to sound like everyone else.

Menendez: It was also very clear to me the first time you pitched us that you had actually listened to the podcast, if only to get a sense of how to pitch it, and I think that there is a corollary there when you are doing outreach on your own behalf to anyone else, which is you need to be informed about who they are, about any common points between the two of you, that's something that Daniela Pierre Bravo, who's been on this show, talked a lot about, right? Say, "Oh, we both grew up in this place. I see on LinkedIn that we both know this person." Whatever it might be that creates some common ground between the two of you. And saying, "I've spent the time to Google you and know a little bit about who you are and what it is that you need."

Because that's the other thing I hear when you talk to me about your pitches, which is you have a need, I have a need, and I am trying to find the place where those needs align. Chic Influence's services include talent management, brand strategy and partnerships, strategic media and PR, marketing to Latinas, influencer strategy and relations, and research and development. Now, I'm gonna guess that when you launched, you didn't have all of those services. Where did you start and what did you do to make sure that you weren't getting pigeonholed into just one identity?

Rios: Technically, I was not allowed to start a PR agency, so for the first year, I did, and I told them that I would not touch consumer packaged goods. Any. So, what that created was that I was gonna do PR for people, and I say the handcuffs lasted for a year. So, while I was doing PR for people, like my celebrity hair stylist client, my celebrity fashion stylist client, because I was also thinking long term, that the name of my company did not pigeonhole

me in case that I needed to pivot for whatever reason. I'm a PR agency that understands culture, but I can make it mainstream. And then through the services, after the one-year handcuffs were off, I started working with consumer-packaged goods and Reina Rebelde came to me, and that was incredible, and when I met with Regina, her mission was the same. She's like, "I want to see my brand in Allure. I want to see my brand in Cosmo." And I'm like, "Oh my God, that's exactly what I'm on the mission." And she had interviewed PR agencies way bigger than mine and she's like, "You're the only person that understood what I was trying to do."

And then naturally, with working with somebody like Reina Rebelde prelaunch, it's like you get so involved with the brand beyond just PR, so that was like an incredible learning experience that I've been able to apply to my other clients. And then I wasn't planning to manage talent, but I also knew from my old life how much brands were paying creators and influencers. So, I started dipping my toes with my celebrity hair stylist client, because he's just like, "I have these opportunities and I want to go bigger than just being a Latino hair stylist." And I was like, "I got you." Then I started seeing people are like, "Oh my God, I love working with you. Do you have more talent?" And I was like, "No, I don't, but let me see."

And then I met my first client, Viva Glam Kay, through a mutual friend, and at that point she had like 1.1 million followers, and she was literally charging way below the worth of her content. And I was like, "Girl, you can charge 10 times that." People who are very creative have a hard time talking money. I'm the complete opposite. For me, asking for money has never been a problem. So, that's how it started.

Menendez: What is your best advice for someone or a brand that feels like it is stuck?

Rios: I think if anyone's feeling stuck, it's just really taking a step back, but also putting things into context. I felt stuck. I had a horrible breakdown at the end of the year because normally between November-December, I have all these plans for the next year, right? I do my projections. I have my two to three marketing objectives and goals of what I'm gonna hit to bring on new clients. I have the whole year set. And for the first time in my entrepreneurial life, I had no plan. And I freaked out because for me, that is not okay.

And so, my mantra is I'm gonna have to roll with the punches. I can't plan out a year out. I'm just gonna plan quarter to quarter and figure out what is the value of Chic Influence and what can we provide to our clients. And then personally for me, I just felt very stuck because I love to be out. I love to work out. I love big goals and for me running is a huge outlet. And to not have a race, that also added to my meltdown. I was like, "I need a race. I need something to look forward to." And then even from the business side with our clients, we were going through it like, "How do we market products that are not deemed essential? How do we sell to a new era? A new world?" How we approached things pre-2020 no longer apply. We're starting from scratch and starting all over again.

And for me, the way that I got unstuck was my four-column approach, was really sitting down and saying what are non-negotiables anymore. For me, those non-negotiables being rushed with work and having this expectation that I'm gonna answer an email in 24 hours. That's not okay. Because my mental health took a beating. I got unstuck. I went back to therapy because I'm like, "I cannot unpack this myself." And I luckily got into the Chicago Marathon, so now I'm forced to run again. So, now it's given me purpose, but I had to look

out for those things to get me unstuck, and that also had... It had a huge effect on my business. If I was happy, then my business was happy.

Menendez: It's also just really impressive that you're growing, because I think the other thing that happens when you're... I think when you are an entrepreneur that begins your business with you as founder and employee, it is easy to get into the model where you are simply accepting fee for service, and that you begin to internalize that as your business model rather than continually thinking about how you will expand the services to not require you to do all of the labor.

Rios: Yeah. But it takes a long time to get there. You're gonna have to be in the weeds for a very long time. And I think seeing my husband do it, I understood what I was signing up for. He sat me down and he was like, "You need to understand the only way you can grow this business is that you're gonna have to make a monumental life shift, because it is all on you." And this was like the one thing I learned and now everybody understands is what is the best use of your time. The best use of your time is not taking every phone call, not taking every meeting. I could not reconcile that. I was like, "But I have to take the meeting." And he's like, "You will fish out the people who are gonna waste your time."

So, that was one huge learning curve for me, was understanding the best use of my time, which is why I don't take 90% of the calls or meetings.

Menendez: Well, I like also part of what you said, and I think this is a place where I could use a lot of work myself, which is assessing how I spend my time and reassessing how I spend my time. Because I think that is another way in which it is really easy to get stuck. Because I was raised to be gracious, there is a part of me that feels that I owe people my time, that if someone reaches out to me asking to have a conversation, that in some way I owe it to them. Part of the way I've weaned myself off of that is by setting time limits on those things, by saying, "I can give you 15 minutes on a Thursday in this window." But if you don't do that, it's really easy to get stuck in habit and routine. That doesn't serve you.

Rios: Correct. I've always had severe boundaries with my calendar. If your ask is impeding my ability to be productive, I'm not okay with that because I'm the only one that sits with my to-do list. Even at my old job, I would enable even my teams to be like, "Manage up. Ask me what is the point of the call, or if you're gonna ask me for a call, I need a clear agenda with a clear takeaway." And then because I would force that exercise, and then they'd realize like actually, I don't need a call. I figured it out on my own.

It was actually a book that I read. I do not remember the name of it, but it helped me reframe my own boundaries with time. You have to sit down and figure out when are you the most productive? I'm a morning person, so in the morning I wake up and I'm just like my brain is going, and that's when I do my best writing, that's when I can just zone out and usually around 2:00 or 3:00, I'm just good with the mundane tasks. So, what that told me is that every single day from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM, I take zero phone calls. Zero.

Menendez: Wow.

Rios: And then the other thing too that I think people don't understand is that just because somebody asked you for a meeting, that person doesn't know what's on your calendar. Why is it so hard to say, "I'm not available," and when I do take a phone call, I only take phone calls on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 2:00 and 6:00. Anyone who emails me always gets the same response. When are you available? Tuesdays and Thursdays

between 2:00 and 6:00. I have Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays of eight hours of complete productivity time.

Menendez: Wow.

Rios: So, that's why people are like, "I don't understand how you get everything done." Because I don't have people wasting my time.

Menendez: You are an inspiration, and I am setting those boundaries starting today. I love it. The one final thing I want to talk about, I think it's important that we address how you ended up on the podcast today, which is that I had reached out to you about two other agenda items for the two of us and I've always wanted to have you on the podcast, but you volunteered yourself. You said, "If you need someone, I have been trying to put myself out there more." Can you talk to me about what that looks like?

Rios: Yeah. It is my knowledge and my experience that is kind of like the unique selling proposition of this agency. I am the face and the spokesperson for this company. I don't particularly like self-promoting and I have a hard time doing that self-promotion. And then when you reached out to me to kind of coordinate that thing that we're working on, I feel like if I were to pitch myself, I feel comfortable pitching myself to you. And you already knew me from all the *locuras* from before, so I was just like, "You know what? Let me just put it out there. Let me just say hey." I was very honest. I'm just like, "I'm just trying to put myself more out there because I feel like a lot of women relate to me, so if I can do that through your podcast, I'm here."

Menendez: And this is what I want people to take away from your and my exchange on this specific point, which is you've been on my list. You've been on my list since you and I were in that hotel room. The fact that you said, "Hey, how about me," meant you went from on the list but maybe number 20 to, "Okay, let's schedule this." And I think so often that is the difference. Sometimes people just need the nudge.

Rios: Yeah. There's a lot of women in my circle that have a hard time championing for themselves but I'm like, "If you don't do it, then who will?" When I look at another woman killing it, I'm so insanely inspired. I know this is gonna sound very cheesy but having gone through the New York City Marathon experience really made me realize that your best growth happens when you are insanely terrified and put into such an uncomfortable position that the other side of it is this insane growth.

Menendez: Thank you for giving me time in what I now know is your most precious window. I feel even more special than I did before.

Rios: Thank you so much, Alicia.

Menendez: Okay, chickadees. Here are my top three takeaways from this conversation with PR pro, Lissette Rios. One, she felt stuck because she knew how she wanted to approach her business and the place she was working didn't grant her the freedom or the flexibility to do things her way, so she left. That's one lesson, but the bigger lesson is that when she began creating her own business, one of her core commitments was selecting clients and partnerships that were bought into doing things her way. Otherwise, she would have become stuck in the exact same way all over again.

Two, Lissette's four-column approach. What am I really good at? What do I love to do? What do I want the next five years to look like? And what do I hate? Or asked another way, what are my non-negotiables? I think those prompts can vary a bit person to person, but I like Lissette am a huge believer in just putting it all down on paper, seeing where the overlap is between what we love and what we are good at, and how much of that we can create without any of the stuff we're trying to avoid.

Three, one of the most immediate ways to get unstuck, one that does not require a move as dramatic as leaving your job, or your lover, or pursuing a different life path entirely, is just assessing how you spend your time. I like to spend a week or two periodically just doing an audit of how I spend my days. And let me tell you, most of the time the imbalance is right there on paper. From there, it's about the shifts Lissette talks about. When are you most energetic? And then how do you shift your to-do list to match your energy? How do you create boundaries, so you have the time and the space to change those patterns and get unstuck?

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure and Paulina Velasco are our senior producers. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colon mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Remember, every time you share the podcast or you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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