

Doug Smith ([00:06](#)):

Hey leader and welcome to episode number 326 of the L3 Leadership podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith and I am your host. And today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. If you're new to the podcast, welcome, I'm so glad that you're here. And I hope that you enjoy our content and become a subscriber, know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel as well. So make sure you subscribe there. And if you've been listening to us for a while, thank you so much. And if the podcast has made an impact on your life, it would mean the world. To me. If you would leave us a rating and review on apple podcast or Spotify or whatever app you listen to podcast through, that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders.

Doug Smith ([00:46](#)):

So thank you in advance for that. Well, in today's episode, you'll hear my conversation with AJ Vaden and it was such a pleasure to get to sit down and learn from her. If you don't know, AJ, let me just tell you a little bit about her. AJ Vaden is the co-founder and CEO of Brand Builders Group and international speaker million dollar producer, and the co-host of the influential personal brand podcast. As a personal brand strategist, she challenges and inspires people to reinvent themselves as a part of building and monetizing their personal brand. AJ has personally worked with thousands of individuals to help them focus their expertise, expand their reach, build their reputation and brand. The one thing that no one else has their name over the last 10 years, she has been part of founding launching and building a very successful eight figure coaching business, a multimillion dollar consulting business, and a seven figure speaking business.

Doug Smith ([01:31](#)):

Along with her company Brand Builders Group, AJ was featured in a three page spread and success magazine on the impact of personal branding, as well as recently being named as one of the top five personal branding speakers of 2019. Her client roster includes working with top level executives from organizations, such as Bridgestone, Verizon cellular sales, home franchise concepts, and direct TV, as well as working with well known speakers, bestselling authors entrepreneurs, and online influencers, such as mega podcast, host Lewis house and original shark creator of the infomercial and serial entrepreneur. Kevin Harrington, AJ has taken 25 years of setbacks, successes, tragedies, and overcoming distilled them into simple, yet powerful lessons that will help anyone become better than ever. And in our conversation, you'll hear us talk about all things building and monetizing your personal brand, which I know is a huge interest to a lot of you.

Doug Smith ([02:22](#)):

And so you're gonna love AJ and I hope that you'll connect with her company afterwards. I think she could help you in a very significant way for you're interested in the subject. But before we dive into the episode, just a few announcements. This episode of the L3 Leadership podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors, the financial advisors at Beratung Advisors, help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their website beratungadvisors.com. That's beratungadvisors.com securities and investment products and services offered through LPL financial member, FINRA, and S I C Beratung Advisors, LPL financial and L3 Leadership are separate entities. I also wanna thank our sponsor. Henne Jewelers their jeweler owned by my friend and mentor John Henne

and my wife, Laura, and I got our engagement and wedding rings through Henne Jewelers and had a wonderful experience.

Doug Smith ([03:15](#)):

And not only do they have great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes into the store engaged, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage. And we just love that. So if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out, [Hennejewelers.com](#). And with all that being said, here's my conversation with AJ Vaden. Hey AJ, thank you so much for taking the time to do today's podcast. And you were known for helping others, find their uniqueness, make a difference and become the known go-to expert in their area. And can you just tell us a little bit more about what you do and how you do that?

AJ Vaden ([03:48](#)):

Yeah. You know, this is actually a really interesting question that's not supposed to be interesting, but one of the things that we have learned about ourselves, so I'm the CEO and one of the co-founders of a company called brain builders group and publicly facing, like we're known as a personal brand strategy firm. Right. But it's kind of like, what does that really mean? And one of the things that, you know, my husband, who is my business partner, his name is Rory Vaden have really discovered about ourselves is as much as we are a personal brand strategy firm, we're really a self discovery company. I mean, that's really what we do is we help people tap into their calling. We help people figure out like, what is this thing that I feel like I was put on this earth to do? And how do I do it in the pursuit of helping other people?

AJ Vaden ([04:38](#)):

And how do I become known for this? And it's a part of that is figuring out what legacy do you wanna leave? And we kind of do it under the pretense of personal branding, right? Because that is a part of it. It's helping you become known for what you wanna be known for. But what we weren't so clear on until probably the last six months, honestly, is, you know, like what our real calling is, is helping other people find their calling and finding a way to discover what, what your purpose is. And, you know, that's how people all the time it's like, if you've got something within the, within you that you just cannot contain, like it's just coming out of you, like, and it's gonna be coming out no matter what and random conversations or in interviews, or just in front of your own team, it's like, that's kind of the ideal client for us. It's like, you just feel like you have this like deep calling to make a difference and to do something and you need organ organization and structure around, well, how do I do it to be effective and efficient and the most impactful for people, that's really what we do. And then we also can help people figure out how do I turn this into a business and make money by it and all the things, but personal branding is what we're known for. But the way to get there is really, it's a self discovery process.

Doug Smith ([05:53](#)):

Yeah. Well, I love that. I wanna talk to you about all of those things and let's just start with, with calling, cuz I am curious, you know you help people narrow down their focus and you know, I think there's a lot of people, myself included who wanna make a difference who wanna make a difference with their own personal brand. But really we wanna do everything. We wanna reach everyone. We wanna reach every audience and we wanna be known as an expert in every subject you can imagine, how do you help take someone like me? Who's a D D like that, and really start to narrow it down to the questions we should be asking. What does that look like?

AJ Vaden ([06:24](#)):

Yeah, it, it really is a process of asking questions and our job is to be really great at helping ask the right questions. And we act as the bumpers, we're the guard rails that keep you in the lane right through this process. And that's a huge part of our job and it's, it's not an easy job to be honest. But here's what I would say for most people. Is that just because you can do it doesn't mean you should. Right. And I think most of us suffer from being good at multiple things. And at the end of the day, that there's a distillation process of figuring out how do you contain all of that through one linear focus, because that's really what it is. And it's it may look really disconnected and discombobulated on the surface, but for most people, there's a through line to all the things that you wanna do and be known for and be an expert in, and all the things that, you know, you wanna talk about and the people you wanna serve, but most people are looking at it on a very surface level.

AJ Vaden ([07:25](#)):

When if you took take everything down with some really strategic questions and a really strategic conversation, there is a natural through line through most people that there's a theme that has been present through most of their life and our job is to find it, to see it, to pull it out of you. It's not to tell you what it is, it's for you to reveal what it is through a series of exercises and questions. But one of the things that I always find fascinating about people, all people, not just our clients, it's all people is we are most often, you know, the old saying you're too close to the the forest to see the trees. Hmm. Yeah. We are too close to our own situations, to our own life experiences, to our own accomplishments, to see the amazingness that you are. And that's a huge part of our job. I cannot tell you how many times I've been sitting with someone and as they start, you know, they'll introduce themselves as you know, well, I've got this business, right. That does. And then as we start talking, it's like, they've also, I've been awarded, you know, nominations by the Pope or they've, you know, like, I'm like, I'm sorry, come again.

AJ Vaden ([08:43](#)):

Where, where to do this, that, or it's like, they fostered 36 children or these amazing things that they're like, you think that's important. Like you think that's significant. Yes, yes I do. And even for the, the seemingly insignificant things that people don't put any cl to, because they diminish their own accomplishments, they devalue their own contributions. And it's, it's unfortunate, but it happens all the time. We all do it. We think it's not a big deal until someone else steps in and goes, I'm so sorry. Let me take that back a not, and repeat back to you what you just told me right. And that's a huge part of it. But, you know, for most of us, there is a theme of things that we have overcome in our lives that we cannot just have, you know, firsthand expertise around, but we have real life experience around. We don't talk about it or teach it from a place of academia. We teach it from a place of I've lived this, and that's what we're trying to find in that uniqueness. And it may seem like a lot of stuff, but at the end of the day, there is a core theme. There is a core through line and through the process, we help you find out what it's.

Doug Smith ([09:58](#)):

Yeah. And so you mentioned a process and I'm sure there's someone listening to this right now saying I need that. I need someone to really help me think this through, you know, what services do you offer to help people do that in case people are interested?

AJ Vaden ([10:09](#)):

Yeah, so we do we work with clients in two different ways. We have a in my opinion, I'm biased, but a really cool membership program where we do we do live events and they're live events, but they're really interactive workshops. And so you get to go through this process with other like-minded people. And the workshops are intimate. They're 35 people. And we have a one to five strategist, a client ratio. But you also get paired with a strategist. You get all of our full access course curriculum. There's a whole bunch of awesome stuff, but it's a membership. So it's like you, you join a community. And more than that, it's really joining a movement of, I wanna be someone who is known for making a difference in this world, even if that is my, my family or my local community.

AJ Vaden ([10:52](#)):

It's like, I wanna make a difference in the lives of people around me. Money is cool. And I wanna make it, not that I don't wanna make it, but I'm about mission over money and finding a like-minded community, that's all working together. And then we also do intensives, right. And that's really for the person who's going. That all sounds really good, but I don't have a lot of time. Can't be coming into all these events and we get that too. So we do intensives. But the, the process is the same. It's just, are you gonna do it through a more extended, a relationship engagement? Are we gonna do this like crash course intensive little bit of like, make your brain hurt work for two days. But the, the content itself, the, the process is the same, no matter which way you go.

Doug Smith ([11:35](#)):

Yeah. So, so someone goes through your process and now they're feeling a little bit better of, okay, now I at least feel like I have somewhat of a better idea of what I am called to do. Then it becomes a question of, okay, but can I actually make a living doing that? Is it always gonna be side hustle? Is, am I always gonna be in a miserable job, not doing what I feel called to do in your experience? Can anyone truly take their calling and turn it into a, a living?

AJ Vaden ([11:58](#)):

Yeah. Well, here's the thing that I think this is where I think personal branding has really really what a personal brand has really been miscommunicated or misdefined in the marketplace. In my opinion, now our definition of a personal brand is the intentional formalization of your reputation. In other words, personal branding reputation are the same, same dang thing, right? They are not different. And we all have a reputation. Thus, we all have a personal brand, right? When you leave the room, what did people say when you leave? How do they introduce you before you come in? What do they think about you when you're not around? How do they associate you? Those things are already happening right now today for every single person who is listening to this podcast. Yeah. You already have a personal brand. You're just not the one building it. And that to me is the, the connection point of reputation and personal branding is personal branding.

AJ Vaden ([12:58](#)):

Isn't a business model, right? Personal branding is an extension of who you are and what you wanna be known for. And I can just, you know, speaking from my own personal experience, it's like for 13 years of my professional life, I was unintentionally by default becoming known for something that I did not wanna be known for. And I think what happens is that most of us who become good at anything naturally become associated with that thing that we've been doing, not who we are. And for me, I was a, you know, a fortune 100 consultant and a really good one for a long time. I was an amazing salesperson. Still am don't, you know, it's like, I will too, my own horn. It's like, I'm really good at that. Yeah, but I had

become known in the marketplace as someone that companies brought in to help increase the top line on the bottom line.

AJ Vaden ([13:49](#)):

And at the end of the day, you know, looking for a long time from now, that was not the legacy that I wanted to leave. Wow. I did not wanna be known for helping big companies increase their bottom line, but because I wasn't being intentional about my reputation and how I wanted to be seen these things were naturally happening all around me because I was just good at this thing. I see that happen every single day to my friends, my colleagues local, you know, entrepreneurs that I, you know, I'm a part of organizations with. And it's because for the most part, people don't know what they wanna be known for. That is where I say, it's like, we're a part self discovery company. That's what I mean for most of us we are living somewhat in this default capacity of, we started doing something because we got good at it. And then we just kept doing it, not necessarily because that was the, the life's calling that was on our heart. And with that said, you know, kind of tying personal branding and reputation together, here's what I would say to you. It's like you can build an incredible personal brand and never be a speaker, never be an author, never be a podcaster, never write a blog and never make a social media post. And you can have a life changing world changing personal brand.

Doug Smith ([15:06](#)):

So good. Wow. I I've, I've actually, I've never even thought of it from, from that angle before. That's so powerful. I never thought of it just in the sense of what do you want your legacy to be? What do you wanna be remembered for at the end of the day? And that's your brand that's, that's so good. I was gonna ask, you know, why should anyone care about building their brand intentionally clearly that, that, that is a reason, but you know, we're on a, a podcast for leaders and you guys did a huge study, which I, I want you to talk about, but a stat that I saw from the study that I loved about why someone should care about their personal brand is you found that 82% of Americans believe that companies are more influential when the executive or founder have a public facing personal brand. And so, you know, is that really true? And, and why should leaders be paying attention to this whole concept of personal brand?

AJ Vaden ([15:52](#)):

Yeah, well, you know, we, the whole reason we did this study it's called the trends in personal branding. It's the first ever national research study on the state and the impact of personal branding. And, you know, we did this to kind of like put our flag in the ground of going, no, we wanna be the first that are talking about this because we believe truly this is a trend. This is not a fad. This is a trend. And that trend is growing and it's not going away. And generationally speaking with millennials and now gen Zers, that's growing exponentially faster. And I'll tell you why. It's because there are these things out there called Facebook and TikTok and Instagram and YouTube that make it easier than ever for us to determine who we wanna do business with. And there was an expectation even five years ago in the marketplace where I would give you my money and you would give me value.

AJ Vaden ([16:49](#)):

That's not the expectation today. The expectation today is you give me value and I will decide if it's good enough for me to give you my money. We are no longer living in a place where we have to pay for information. It's everywhere. Go to Google, go to tech pro, go to YouTube. You can learn how to do about anything. Go listen to a podcast like this. This is free. You're not paying for this information. I'm giving it to you. And if you decide it's valuable enough, then you go, Hey, AJ, I wanna learn more about

what you do at Brand Builders Group, but it's only after I've given you value. And here's the correlation that we've made with that Brand Builders Group is not here talking to you today. AJ Vaden is here talking to you today on the behalf of Brand Builders Group.

AJ Vaden ([17:35](#)):

Now you're not gonna fall in love with Brand Builders Group. You're gonna fall in love with a human or humans inside of brand builders group, right? You're gonna stay because of the relationships and the community that you build with people, not some brand, some logo, some set of words on a page like where, when did we ever think that was actually what was happening? Like that's never been what it is. And the reason it's more prevalent today is because access has increased and trust is a currency in the marketplace. And with the amount of you know, not to get, you know, too political, let's just say, we're not gonna get political at all. Mm-hmm, but with the of issues and dare I say the word corruption and situations that we've encountered over the last decade between all different kinds of movements.

AJ Vaden ([18:31](#)):

There is question in the marketplace of, well, who the heck has been, have been behind these companies and how did we not know that this was going on when we thought this is what it was. And there is an expectation to note today to go, I wanna know who's running this. I wanna know if I align with their values. And if I do, I am more likely to like them follow them trust from buy from them, promote them, be employed by them, stay with them, et cetera. But people don't fall in love with companies. People fall in love with people and that's not new. We just forgot it.

Doug Smith ([19:08](#)):

Wow. So, alright. You sold me. Well, I didn't need sold, but okay. Maybe I didn't realize why. As a leader of a company, I need a personal brand. Now let's start to get into some of the tactics. You know, leaders are busy people in your, in your opinion, should leaders outsource their brand and, and just get people to post for them and kind of write for them, etc. Or do you think that's something that they should do personally? What are your thoughts there?

AJ Vaden ([19:31](#)):

Yeah, here's what I would say. And I would say this to any person where time is your, your most precious asset. You have one job create content. It's the one thing you cannot outsource. So do I think someone else should be making your videos and putting words in your mouth? No, do not do that. And if you do, do not ever say you heard that from me. Now in terms of the tactical pieces of posting it, and you know, like one of the things I would, say's like, there's a whole bunch of different ways to make this really easy. And including myself, it's like, this is what we do. It's like, my job is, you know, as a thought leader, I have to be the one to produce the thoughts. You cannot create my thoughts, that's my job. But if I make a, a video or an audio, I can have my team transcribe it and edit it.

AJ Vaden ([20:18](#)):

And from there they can make pretty graphics. They can make audiograms, they can do all the posting, they can do all the things. What they cannot do though, is take the thoughts out of my head. That's my job. But it's, you know, I would say it's the hardest and simplest job. It's the hardest, because you have to be able to put those thoughts together. You have to be clear in what you wanna say. That's what we help you with. Right? That's the strategy. But once it's out, once it's on video, once it's in an audio, there are very qualified people who can take it from there. That doesn't have to be your job. You don't have to

become an, you know, an expert in social media platforms or blogging or podcasting to get out there and build your personal brand. What you do have to know is what do I wanna be known for, right. What is my message? Who is it intended for? And how do I wanna get it out there then from there, it's like, there are people who are very well positioned to do those things, to help you, but they cannot create content for you, in my opinion.

Doug Smith ([21:18](#)):

Yeah. And when it comes to content creation, you know, where should someone start? If someone's just starting from scratch, they're not on any social media platform you know, should they start a podcast? Should they start a blog? Should they write a book? What would you encourage? 'em Be to just start.

AJ Vaden ([21:31](#)):

Yeah. So little bit of a different thought process. I would take, instead of asking where, or what I would be asking, who I would be asking, who is my audience? Who is this for? Who do I wanna serve? Who do I wanna help? Who do I wanna be known by? And once you have that super dialed in and super clear, then you can ask, where are those people? Because once you know who, who is it's a lot easier to identify, what podcasts do they listen to? Or do they listen to podcasts? What platforms are, are they on? Like, do they like listening versus watching versus reading? What do they read? Like where do they go to read? Like once you know who demographically and psychographically speaking, then it's a heck of a lot easier to ask, where should I be? And what should I be doing? Most people, however, do it the opposite. And they go, okay, I gotta be on all the platforms and I give you, no, you don't. No, you don't. Unless your audience is on all the platforms, then I would most likely say, they're not, they're interesting, they're on a select amount of those platforms. But you just gotta know the who, then you can ask the what and the where.

Doug Smith ([22:47](#)):

Okay. So let's assume you do that. What, what's your opinion on amount of content production, you know, should people aim to post once a day? And then you have, you know, the Gary Vanderchuk who say I post a thousand pieces of content a day on every platform and that's not enough <laugh>. So where where's the balance on how much we actually produce and put out there?

AJ Vaden ([23:05](#)):

Well, I would say first and foremost until you are Gary V and you've got a full production team behind you compare yourself to Gary V and I think that's a big thing. It's like one of the biggest things that I've learned through this whole process is don't compare your step one to someone else's step 1000. Yeah. It's not an equal comparison. It's not apples to apples. So put blinders on a little bit and go, they got to where they are after doing this full years and years, you may be on day one. So baby steps are just fine. The other thing I have learned is that you do not have to have millions of followers to make millions of dollars. You do not. Right. I do not have millions of followers and I'm doing just fine. Right? I think that's all good for us to remember.

AJ Vaden ([23:51](#)):

It's like, I think sometimes we look at social media and a little bit of this vanity project and, you know, one of the things I have to remind myself of all the time is that offline and the offline world, which that still exists. Right. if I knew that I changed the life of one person, would that be enough for me? And it would like if one person came and said, AJ, your message changed my life. Would that be enough for

me? And it would for most of us, but yet we get on social media, we make a post. And if we only get one like, or one share or one comment, we think it's a failure, right. That's still way one like, yes. You know, so I would say in terms of consistency, yes, I do think there's a rhythm to that. And I also think that that is important.

AJ Vaden ([24:50](#)):

And I think those other things are equally as important of, you know, as much as it's a, a tendency for us to talk about social media. We at brain builders group, we talk just so much about the importance of your offline, personal brand as your online. And nothing's really important and somewhat unique in this very digital world that there is still an offline world to be discussed now, online speaking, you know, and I agree with this, right? And it's Gary V who says this, he says, content may be king, but consistency is clean. And I agree with that now, consistency, consistency does not mean every hour on the hour or even every day. It just means how do you want to communicate to your audience? And what can you give to them to create a set of expectations that you will deliver on?

AJ Vaden ([25:40](#)):

It could be once a week, right? I, I don't think I would say have it less than that, to be honest, but it doesn't have to be every day. It may just be once a week. In fact one of our clients in a really good friend of mine, his name is Ian Coniac was last year named LinkedIn sales influencer of the year. And he posts every Wednesday, not every day, every Wednesday, but it is like clockwork. It is same time, same day, every week. It's creating that expectation of when I'm gonna be here and when you're gonna get new content from me. So I think it's just, I think, honestly, take a deep hard look at what can you do and what can you commit to, and just do that and let it grow over time. But it does not have to be every day, doesn't have to be on the hour. And I would be quite contrary to many digital marketers out there saying it does not have to be everywhere. I don't agree with that. I fundamentally disagree with that because I don't think that you can do that very well unless you have a full team behind you.

Doug Smith ([26:44](#)):

Yeah, this is so good. We've covered so much ground already. So we talked about, you know, getting clear on your calling and who you're called to and your audience. We talked about why personal brand is so important both online and offline. And then we just started talking about tactical things people can start to do. So let's say someone's kind of laid that groundwork in their life. You know, you've helped you personally have built multiple multimillion dollar businesses and help others do the same. Now someone wants to start moving into, Hey, maybe I could do this for a living and monetize my brand. What, what does that look like? And where would you encourage people to start that process?

AJ Vaden ([27:17](#)):

Yeah, I would say there's two different ways of monetizing your reputation, right? And the first is just becoming a, a lead attractor for the existing business that you're in. Right. we have a unusual amount of professional services clients in our community. And one of the things that came out in the study that we did the trends and personal branding, national research study was really freaking interesting. And we asked Americans, what industries do you think that it's most important to have a personal brand now naturally being kind of in this space, we were like, oh, sure. It's gonna be like, you know, info marketing. It's gonna be like podcasting speakers, authors, consultants, trainers. Like, it's gonna be that vibe. We were not more wrong. We were so wrong. And I'm so glad for it. But here's what was fascinating as the

number one profession that Americans said that they expected to have an established personal brand was doctors.

Doug Smith ([28:15](#)):

Wow.

AJ Vaden ([28:15](#)):

Number two was lawyers.

AJ Vaden ([28:18](#)):

Hmm. And number three was employers their employer. And we were like, what? Yeah. Like this wasn't on our radar. It's like, I don't even know if we had any of those clients at the time. And we were like, why? And then through the rest of the study, we started connecting all the, the data points. And like we spent almost six months just sitting and studying the data. Once we got it back rather we're slow or there was a lot of it, I don't know. But we spent a lot of time in this. And here was the, the aha moment that came to us through a series of collection of data points that finally made sense. And it's basically this, the higher trust is required in your profession. The more established your personal brand must become

AJ Vaden ([29:11](#)):

And trust and trust and personal branding are synonymous. In fact, personal branding is an accelerator of trust in the marketplace. And then you started thinking, it's like, well, of course, that makes sense. It's like, I better freaking trust my doctor. Like my life is in their hands. Right. And I better trust my attorney, my lawyer, my freedom is in their hands. And yes, I need to know and trust this employer. If mine is signing my paychecks, my livelihood is in their hands. So there's this trust equation in that whole mix. And so I think that there was a, a really big correlation of you don't have to do something different to monetize your reputation, to monetize your personal brand, but becoming known for something you will naturally become a lead attractor for your existing business. So that's one really important thing is you become known for something.

AJ Vaden ([30:06](#)):

And at the same time, you start attracting leads for the business that you're already in, or you start getting attention for promotions, or you start getting recruited by other companies because you're known for this thing, right? It's like, you're known for something now, for those of you who are going. Yeah. But maybe I do want to create this side hustle one day full-time business. And here's what I would say to that. It's this exact same process that you would take, even if you weren't doing that is you have to get clear on what problem you solve. What is the unique way in which you solve it, which is your message, who do you solve it for? And how do you want to make money solving it? And that's a huge, important word. I don't wanna skip over that. How do you want all casts want to make money solving it?

AJ Vaden ([30:58](#)):

It needs to be something you want to do, you enjoy doing. And then you start creating content, right? And that could be audio content, video, content podcasting. Maybe you just start speaking to your employees. Maybe you just start speaking to your clients. Maybe you start offering free webinars. Maybe you head on down to the local chamber of commerce. Who's always looking for a free speaker and go, I can do that. Right? You go to the rotary club and, you know business journals and schools and

wherever that will have you. And you say like I started with, it cannot be contained. You have, you feel compelled to talk about it because you're on a mission. This is your passion. This is your calling. And it's like, I don't care if I get paid for this right now. I feel so compelled to share this, that I'll do it for free, knowing that if I keep doing it for free one day, I'm gonna make money doing it. Right. And that, that can happen sooner than later.

Doug Smith ([31:57](#)):

Yeah. I, I wanna dive into a few areas that I know you have expertise in, but before I do, you know, this has been so helpful and I'm sure there's, you know, hundreds and thousands of leaders listening to this saying, Hey, I'm, I'm kind of interested in what you have to offer. You mentioned the, the study, which is available for free, that listeners can get, and you also offer a free call. Can you talk about both of those and, and where leaders can connect with that today?

AJ Vaden ([32:15](#)):

Yeah. So our study is it's lengthy, so don't let it overwhelm you. It's like 82 pages, but 75% of those pages are graphical to make it easy to digest. You can get through this entire study in a 10 minute sitting. So I would highly recommend to go download the study cuz it talks about it in four different arenas. One, what is a personal brand? Two? What are the impacts of personal branding versus traditional marketing and advertising and the shifts that are already happening in the marketplace? What are the impacts on a personal brand on your company, which is really significant. And then how do you build an influential personal brand? So those are the four parts of the study. And if you go to freebrandstudy.com/ three, you can grab and download that study for free. We'll shoot it straight to your inbox.

AJ Vaden ([33:03](#)):

And it'll come in a, a beautiful PDF. Second thing is that if you are listening to this going, huh, I wanna learn more. Like I do wanna figure out, like, how do I leverage this calling that I do have? And how do I figure out how to like tie that into what I'm doing? So every single person that we work with starts by doing a free call. And I would say free calls also lead to learning about our services. They sure do. I'll be transparent upfront, but we almost say it's a prerequisite to do a free call. We do not work with everyone. Why cuz we're not a fit for everyone. We may not be a fit for you. We will still do a free personal brand strategy call with you. And if we're not a fit for you, we will clearly tell you and we will send you free resources and send you referrals and send you on your way.

AJ Vaden ([33:51](#)):

And we'll stay connected with lots of free stuff. But we do this free call because we wanna make sure that you have clarity on what you're after. And if we think we can help, then we may be a good partner for you. But if not, you're still gonna have 45 minutes of a free personal brain strategy call with one of our strategists to go through the process of what is my calling and what is my business and what is the problem and what is my message and who is my audience, all these things. We're gonna start doing that on that process. And if it's a fit great. And if it's not subscribe to our podcast, we'll give you some free stuff. And we'll just, you know, be virtual friends and we'll keep on chugging along, but you can go to freebrandcall.com/ three and request a free call with someone on our team to check it out and see if it's a fit for

Doug Smith ([34:39](#)):

Youj. Thank you for sharing that. And again, we'll conclude links to all of those things in the show notes and everything that we've discussed. The four things I wanna talk about before the lightning round, and again, these can be relatively quick, but I wanna talk to you about writing a book. I wanna talk to you about speaking coaching and podcasting, all things I love. Your husband's written two books you know, you've helped multiple people come New York times bestsellers. Why should I'm sure most people listening to this, want to write a book? Why should people write a book? And what advice would you have to them in the whole process?

AJ Vaden ([35:09](#)):

<Laugh> yeah. Here's what I would say. Why should people write a book? Because you feel like you have to, it's the only reason why you should really writing a book is very hard. It's very expensive and it's very time consuming. It is not for the faint of heart. It is because you feel like you need to put your words on paper to create a part of this legacy that is really important in your life. If not write a blog, do a podcast, right? <Laugh> so you can do that too. I think that's this, that's just the hard, honest truth. Like one of the things that, you know, I was meeting with a client earlier this week who has written two books and has sold them less than a hundred copies of both. Why? Because there was this passion to get it on words, but then I'm like, but who is it helping if they only sit in your garage?

AJ Vaden ([35:51](#)):

Like, and I think there's a part of, you've gotta be prepared that just because you write it doesn't mean people will read it, that you also have to have a very big marketing engine behind you to get it into the hands of the people that you think it will help. And y'all, that's a business plan. Let's, don't be confused. So why should you write a book? Because you feel like you've got a message that will change your life and books do have the power to change a life. They really do, but that's a business plan. That's a business and that's an engine, right. Unless don't be confused about that. But I do think like in general books increase credibility, right? Just like doing research. They, they enhance a perceived credibility. And it, it gives a, a framework and a pathway to help people learn and be better and do better.

AJ Vaden ([36:37](#)):

So I would say that's why now I would say a couple of things about when, why, how all the things here's what I would say. That's really important, more, more important than anything else. People often start with writing a book, writing a book is not what you start with writing a book is what you end with, right? You do not vet your content by writing a book. You vet your content by speaking about it, right? You vet your content by writing about it, blogging, podcasting, doing interviews, speaking to groups, doing panels, and you don't start by writing it. It's like, how do you know that's what the audience needs? Like you fine tune it over the course of talking about it for a long time. And I'm not gonna tell you 10 years, but enough time to go. That's it. That's what I have to say.

AJ Vaden ([37:29](#)):

That's what people really need to hear. And you don't do that by just starting down, sitting down and writing it for the first time. It's the last thing you do, not the first thing you do. Now tactically speaking, there's a lot of different ways to do it. And I would say everyone needs to start with the end in mind, which is why are you writing this book? Are you writing it for notoriety and credibility? Are you writing it for money? Are you writing it because you care that deeply about people getting their hands on it. Are you writing it just to have in writing your own legacy? It's really important that you're super clear on that because the routes and how you write it will be dictated by what's the end result that you're hoping

that comes out of this book. Is it to get more speaking engagements? Is it to increase your fees? Is it to get you on national media? All those intentions need to be really clear on the front end because they will very much influence the entire process of, do I need an agent? Do I need an editor? Right? Do I need a book launch team? Should I go traditional publisher? Self-Publisher one of these hybrid routes. Right? All of those are decided by the end result in mind. So that's what I would say about writing book

Doug Smith ([38:50](#)):

And you, your organization also helps people with all of those things

AJ Vaden ([38:53](#)):

We do as well.

Doug Smith ([38:54](#)):

So just one more reason to take advantage of that free brand call. So again, make sure you check out that link. Let's talk speaking again. I know you and your husband are both rockstar speakers and you've helped others do the same. What advice would you just give to aspiring speakers who wanna make that a part of their business plan?

AJ Vaden ([39:10](#)):

Oh, this is clean, simple and easy boom. The more you speak, the more you speak,

AJ Vaden ([39:18](#)):

<Laugh> go out and speak. Both my husband and I spoke for hundreds and hundreds of organizations before we ever got paid to do it. Hundreds of times now Rorys was on the path to being the world champion Toastmasters, public speaking world championship. And he was speaking to audiences of three people in the back of a Denny's right. We both, as a part of our first business, we're doing three workshops to sell tickets to big motivational sales conferences. I would do three to four speaking engagements a week for free. I did that for about four years and I say for free, because at the end of that, I was selling something, but I wasn't paid to come and speak. I was like, I was begging people to come and let me speak for free. That's what I was doing for a really long time.

AJ Vaden ([40:05](#)):

But it's like I have found, you know, throughout the course of the years and a little known fact about me, I started and built and ran a speakers bureau for almost 10 years. And so I haven't just been a speaker, but I've been on the other side of actually building a bureau and booking speakers for speaking engagements. And I would say there's two reasons why people get booked to speak. One, someone saw you speak <laugh> two, someone saw you speak and then referred you to someone else. That's typically how you get booked. So maybe it's to the, the graduation of your kid's middle school. You just never know who's in the audience. You know, I have a, at one of our clients, his name is clay Harbor. He's a former NFL player. And he's been, you know, speaking to some high school graduations and just trying to build up the muscle of speaking.

AJ Vaden ([40:53](#)):

And he was, you know, speaking to this group of people. And I said, just don't ask, don't forget to ask for referrals. Don't forget to make an ask from stage. Well, guess what in the audience was a

superintendent and there's a, you know, Illinois superintendent association, right? It's a really good example of you just never know who's in the audience. And there's organizations all day every day, looking for speakers to come and speak for no money, some money or a lot of money, but the more you speak, the more you speak, it's the best thing you can do to build a speaking business is to just get out there and speak.

Doug Smith ([41:25](#)):

It's so good. Yeah. I was interviewing John Deloney over at Ramsey solutions the other weekend and yeah, that's how he landed his job at Ramsey. He was speaking to his college that he worked at and there was someone from an executive at Ramsey and they were like, I'm gonna hire that guy. Yeah. So, so good. I wanna talk podcasting, you have a podcast. I do listen to, I think you guys do a phenomenal job. I'll just leave it open and I have a specific question, but should everyone have a podcast and, and you know, what advice do you have and what have you learned through, through your podcast?

AJ Vaden ([41:53](#)):

Oh, should everyone have a podcast? No, they shouldn't. I really don't think so. One as you know, it's a lot of work. Yeah. It's a lot of work. This is not some hobby and most of it is free work. Right. It's passion work it's interest work. Here's what I would say though. It's a, having a podcast, being a podcast, host, having a podcast is one of the last one of the best learning environments I've ever been in. Yes, it's so cool. And it's so good. And I love being on a guest too. It's it's just learn meeting people, right. It's networking. It's strategic relationship building is really great for those things, but again, like many things, like it's a lot of work and it's a passion. Also it's consistency, right. People expect that you're gonna release a podcast at certain frequencies.

AJ Vaden ([42:43](#)):

Right. and so I think too, there, there, there comes a time of I'm gonna learn and dedicate myself to honing skills in a new craft. I don't think everyone is in the state that certain faces of their life that they're ready for that. I also don't think everyone is naturally great at interviewing that's okay. You've got other skill sets. You need to hone in and figure out like, what do I love doing? And only do that. And who's my audience. And you know, if your audience is not someone who are, you know, podcast listeners, then why do it right? They're you're not reaching the people you mean to reach. And you're also trying to do something that naturally is hard. Don't do things that are hard, do things that are natural and lean into those things. I remember this story I heard a long time ago, right before I had kids.

AJ Vaden ([43:29](#)):

Now I have two kids. I have a three year old and a five year old. And that I remember this story. I heard it as probably from a speaker probably. Cause I love listening to speakers. Right. but I remember them saying it's like, as a parent, I've always found it interesting that when my kid brings home their report card and they have four A's and a C I only wanna focus on the C I wanna go, all right, Johnny, how do we get your C up to a B instead of going, okay, let's talk about this. C do you enjoy this subject? Right. Do you like learning about this? What don't you like learning about this and okay. Let's talk about these. A what do you like about them? Are they easy for you? Are they natural for you? Are you interested in these and how come as parents and as teachers that we don't go, there's a natural inclination that these things that you're naturally good at, I'm gonna help channel that into something extraordinary versus try to take your less than average and make it average. Why do that? It's bizarre, but we do it as adults all

the frigging times. So you're not good at it. Frigging. Don't do it. Go do what you're good at and do that a lot of that.

Doug Smith ([44:34](#)):

Yeah. Well, thanks for all of your advice on brand building and speaking and writing and podcasting. With the time we have left, I wanna just dive in the lightning round, which is not necessarily brand related, but a bunch of fun questions I asking. Yes. A lot of fun. And you're, you've been a, a fun guest. So the first question is just, what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

AJ Vaden ([44:54](#)):

Oh, best advice I've ever received. Probably embrace that embrace. What makes you weird and different? That is your strength, right? You know, we have a saying at our house we say it with our kids almost every day. We say I weird, I weird <laugh>. And we're really trying to instill that. It's okay. To be different. In fact, we want you to be different. I weird. So that is your strength. It's not your weakness. It is your strength.

Doug Smith ([45:21](#)):

Wow. I might try that tonight. I, I have three little ones as well, six four in, in one and a half.

AJ Vaden ([45:26](#)):

Yeah. So

Doug Smith ([45:26](#)):

You're right. Weird. I like that. Yeah. if you could put a quote on a billboard for everyone to read, what would it say

AJ Vaden ([45:33](#)):

Your new life will cost you your old one?

Doug Smith ([45:38](#)):

Hmm. You wanna say anything more about that?

AJ Vaden ([45:41](#)):

Yeah. I went through a really unexpected, I would say somewhat dramatic business exit of our former company. My husband and I were business partners before we fell in love and got married and we had two other business partners and may of 2000 and 18, there was a pretty dramatic exit. And I'll just leave it at that. You can take that and do what you want with it, but it was very unexpected and I was employed one day and was no longer there the next. And that's all I'll say about that, but what I found in the days to come really months to come is that I was mourning something that I never really wanted when I had it. And I couldn't figure out why do I feel like this loss of identity when I was losing my soul in the process.

AJ Vaden ([46:29](#)):

And it was a really unusual thing to go through. Cuz I was a, a founding member of the team. I was, you know, an owner stock, you know, equity holder. And it was just this odd moment of going. I knew that I,

I shouldn't be there, but I kept going on because I was making a ton of money. And there was a lot of pride and ego tied to this, but there was also a lot of responsibility and you know, I recruited at this point probably 50, 60 people to be a part of this company. And I didn't wanna leave because it's like, you know, I was living into this Kool-Aid that I'd sold everyone else on and simultaneously inside I was going and I just feel like this I'm losing myself. And then when it was all gone, there was this moment of identity loss of, well, who am I, if I'm not this sales consultant, if I'm not this leader, if I'm not this entrepreneur, like who the hell am I?

AJ Vaden ([47:22](#)):

And it was a, a really sobering time in my life of going and I am mourning something that I did not want when I had it. Why and through a lot of my own self discovery and therapy and coaching <laugh> and everything in between I was really learned. It's like really what I was struggling with was change. I was really struggling with change and not fully embracing the new opportunities that were ahead of me, cuz I was trying to hold onto this old sense of self, this old sense of identity instead of reinventing and going. I get the chance. I, I get the fortunate chance of a clean slate with no baggage. What am I gonna do with it? And it wasn't until that moment that I really, instead it's like this all happened for a reason. And so that I could live into my calling because I wasn't for a really long time. And this is only four years ago. It's not that long ago really. Wow. and it was, but at the same time, it's like I had to let go of friends. I had to let go of a lot of titles and you know, had to let go of a lot of pride had to let go of a lot in order to embrace this, this new life, this new identity that was right around the corner. So

Doug Smith ([48:35](#)):

Well, thank God that happened. I mean I'm not even brand builders and and I can, I'm sure that thousands and thousands of people were grateful that you went through that change show. Thanks for being willing to do the hard work. And again, your new life will cost you your old life. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> so good. Best piece of advice. You'd have you run a business with your husband? I know it can start that way. What for those family business owners, what would you tell them?

AJ Vaden ([49:00](#)):

Ooh you know, I would say it's like, my advice probably has changed over the years. But I would say that the best advice that I would give to, you know, spouses who are working together is I, I would say two things. One is don't let the business interrupt the romance.

AJ Vaden ([49:23](#)):

Hmm. And that's easy to do. Right. It's easy to let business just kind of lure into the evenings into weekends. And this took a lot of discipline, still takes a lot of discipline, especially now with two toddlers, but don't let the business interfere with romance. And so we've done everything. We have a very scheduled date night. We, we at all costs try to stick to our Wednesday night date night. We try to do a, at least a two night just Roy and I once a quarter and then a week long, just Roy and I vacation every year. And one of the things that we have found is like, just because we're married doesn't mean we shouldn't be dating. Right. And so it's continuing that courting, that dating process of and he's really great at it. And I try to be really good at it, but it's like, he still leaves me love notes and sends me flowers.

AJ Vaden ([50:08](#)):

And don't, don't let the business interfere with the romance. That would be my first and that's, that's just discipline. That's intentionality. That's what that is. But then I think the second one is really focus on the strengths of your partner. I E your spouse, not their weaknesses. You're a team. You're a partnership, which means you naturally have strengths and weaknesses. That's why you make a good team, right? It's like, Roy's strengths are not mine and mine are not his he is, I mean, the man was gifted from above with the ability to put content in a digestible manner. He literally thinks in acronyms, it's a it's, there's no other way to say it. It's like, I just remember this one night we were putting our kids down to bed and this was just like six months ago and mid story time, which is something that's really important in our family.

AJ Vaden ([51:06](#)):

He pops up and he goes, babe, I have to go, I'll be back. And I'm like, were you okay? He goes, I just have to go. And I was like, are you sick? Like, is there an emergency? I'm like panic, like sweating, like what? So I finished putting the kids down and like, I run upstairs to go and find him and he's not upstairs. And I'm like, where are you? So finally he emerges out of all places out of the bathroom. And I'm like, are you sick? He goes, no, I'm not. I'm like, what was that? And he goes, I just wrote a book. And I said, I'm so sorry, what? And it's been 45 minutes. And indeed he emerges out of his sacred place, the bathroom

Doug Smith ([51:45](#)):

<Laugh>

AJ Vaden ([51:45](#)):

He has written an entire, an entire children's book.

Doug Smith ([51:50](#)):

Wow.

AJ Vaden ([51:51](#)):

And it's all based on his first book, take the stairs. But it is an entire from beginning to end, fully vetted, fully done kids book in 45 minutes. He

Doug Smith ([52:03](#)):

That's a gift.

AJ Vaden ([52:05](#)):

It's. But I would rather focus on that or I can focus on the fact that he never checks his emails. He's always behind on company information. He never knows what the hell is going on. We had our company meeting last an in person, company meeting last week, first one in three and a half years at I E since we started the company and one of our employees saw him and they were like, Hey, are you gonna be at the, the baseball game? And he goes, what baseball game? And they're like, oh, are you not coming on Wednesday night? And he's texting me am I supposed to be at a baseball game? And I'm like, yes. Is the companys social event. Yes, you're supposed to be there. So I can focus on that or I can focus on his gifts, his strengths, and that's a choice. And that's what I would say to people in business. It's a choice because I can get really irritated and stressed out with the lack of things that he does, or I can allow him to do what he does best do it only he can do and let him run in that space and he can do the same for

me. And it's like, one is a very happy business, partnership and marriage, and the other one is very conflict field. That's a choice.

Doug Smith ([53:10](#)):

So that's so good. And I think you'd be very good friends with my wife. It sounds like we have very similar marriages and giftings, so awesome. Awesome. A few more quick ones. Let me see what I wanna go with here. What is your biggest leadership pet peeve?

AJ Vaden ([53:25](#)):

Response time?

Doug Smith ([53:27](#)):

Ooh,

AJ Vaden ([53:27](#)):

I, my personal core value is responsiveness to me.

Doug Smith ([53:32](#)):

What's your, what's your standard? Like 24 hours. 24 minutes. 24 seconds.

AJ Vaden ([53:37](#)):

Yeah, 24 hours. But it's like, when I think about even like customer service, it's like if people would just respond to me quicker the state in which you would greet an unsettled customer is drastically different just based on response time. Right? It's like, if you get back to me in 30 minutes, Hey, AJ, we're so sorry. And I'm like, oh my gosh, I feel important. I feel valued. Like I'm not just a number versus, Hey, it's taking seven to eight days to respond to customer inquiries right now. I'm like, are you kidding me? Eight days? And then they don't do it and you have to follow up and you have to follow I'm going through this right now. I ordered a new office chair and after four weeks I have just said, cancel my order. And only until then, I'm like, oh, ma'am can we have a call? No, you may not cancel my order. It's response time, responsiveness. I guess to me it just makes me feel important. Makes me feel valued. And say same with my, you know, my employees, my team. It's like, if I send you something, I need you to acknowledge that you have seen it. And I try really hard to do the same. Right. but re responsiveness is mine.

Doug Smith ([54:40](#)):

Yeah. I'd love to keep going. But with the time we have left, I'll just leave this open ended. Anything else you wanna leave leaders with today?

AJ Vaden ([54:47](#)):

Anything else I wanna leave? Yeah. Yes. One last thing. So here's what I would say kind of sums up my interpretation of personal branding and reputation. And you can take from this what you will, but I have found it to be true. Both in business and in life that people care much more about who you are than what you do. And if we spend a little bit more time focusing on who we are versus what we do, we would all be much happier, more productive human beings at work and at home.

Doug Smith ([55:22](#)):

Well, AJ, this did not disappoint. I'm now listening to your podcast. So I know basically everything you say is gold. So that's what I anticipated. But for the leaders who are listening, if this is your first time listening to age, I really encourage you. They have a phenomenal podcast. Make sure you connect. If you wanna hear content like this on a consistent basis, check out their podcast and all the great work they're doing. So thank you AJ so much for your time. And thanks for investing me and everyone who will listen to this podcast.

AJ Vaden ([55:44](#)):

Ah, been my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Doug Smith ([55:47](#)):

Well, Hey leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with AJ. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with her and links to everything that we discussed in the show notes at lthreeleadership.org/326. And as always leader, I wanna challenge you that if you wanna 10 X your growth this year, then you need to either launch or join in L3 Leadership mastermind group. Mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last seven years. If you don't know what they are, they're just simply groups of six to 12 leaders that meet together on a consistent basis for at least one year in order to help each other grow, hold each other accountable into do life together. So if you're interested in learning more, go to [L3 Leadership.org/masterminds](http://L3Leadership.org/masterminds).

Doug Smith ([56:26](#)):

And as always, I like the end every episode with a quote and I'll quote Dave Ramsey today, who said this? He said, if you've decided on the principles and values, you live by, most of your decisions are already made leader. That is so good. I hope you've taken time in your life to decide on the principles and values that you'll live by. If you haven't make sure you do that well, I hope you enjoyed this episode with AJ. I hope it gave you some thoughts around personal branding and monetizing your personal brand and just know that Laura and I love you. We believe in you. And remember, don't quit. Keep leading the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.