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EPISODE Vickie Sullivan

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Best of success.

John Bowen

Co-founder, AES Nation

John J. Bowen Jr.

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John Bowen: Wow, what an opportunity. Every one of us as entrepreneurs wants to make a huge difference. The way we can make a huge difference is differentiate ourselves from the rest of the market place. That's not that easy. How do we rise above? We hear branding, thought leadership, all these things that we should be doing. And if we do it, we really accelerate our success. But you know what? Most of us aren't that effective. Well, today, I have a remarkable entrepreneur. I mean, just a super individual. And she is going to lead us through exactly what you need to do, I need to do to really stand out in the marketplace so that we can serve the right clients well, right customers, and do well by doing good. I'm John Bowen, you are at AES Nation, all about accelerating success. Stay tune for this remarkable, talented individual who is a fellow entrepreneur, but an expert in branding and thought leadership. You don't want to miss this.

This is exiting. Vickie, I am so excited to have you. Vickie Sullivan, she is one of the top branding thought leadership experts. She's been doing it since 1987. She's in Joe Polish's mastermind group. With me, and everybody's looking at her for these really strategies and there's so many successful people there, Vickie. So, first of all, I know you advice everything from astronauts to best-selling authors to really powerful companies. And I wanted to grab you and have ... We just met, and I wanted to share you with our audience. So, first, thank you for joining us.

Vickie Sullivan: Hey, thanks for having me. I really appreciate the invite.

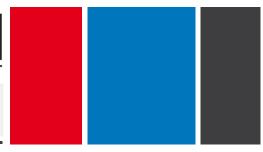
John: Well, and you know what I'd like to do, Vickie, is one of the things I like to do is always start with kind of the backstory a bit because there's no question you're going to add so much value for really our audience. But what I want to do is ... How did you get to this place? 'Cause you don't wake up as a young girl and say, "I am going to be the thought leader expert in the world." How'd this all come about?

Vickie: You know, I consider this a fabulous accident, is really what happened. I was in politics in a previous life. I was a registered lobbyist for a concern, and so I was always deconstructing an idea or a position and then repackaging it for different groups. So, to one group, I'd say one thing, and to another group I'd say another thing. And I wasn't lying, I was just choosing my details, right? And so, I did that for several years, and I got a little burned out and I thought, "Well, now I'm going to have to go flip burgers." So, I happened to answer an ad in a trade journal to promote a professional speaker. And I thought, "You know what? I'll do that until I find a real job." I did that, and within a week, I had fallen in love with speakers. They were such nice people, they were trying to do good in the world, and they needed me. Let me tell you, they needed me.

So, within three weeks, I had created a full-time position for myself. I had three speakers in my stable. And I started being an agent for speakers. And one thing that was really my claim

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to fame, what got all the bookings and all that, was positioning their ideas. Making them different than all the other speakers that the buyers had. So, I studied the marketplace for several years, and said, "Hey, there're some patterns here. There's some ways that people choose who to believe and who not to believe." And so, I opened the strategy branding division back in the '90's, early '90's.

John: Nah ... Well, I'll tell you, Vickie ... This is ... It's just so powerful. I mean, one of the things that I see repeatedly is the value created and ... Super training, doing the political side 'cause there's nothing harder ... Knife fighting in politics and so on, and differentiating. And so often, there aren't clear differences in ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: Certainly ... In the past we weren't quite as polarized as we are today.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: But one of the things that when I look at this ... As a business owner and I've had multiple business, I'm a little biased. I'm going to share the bias real ... My second book I wrote, it was in the industry ... I was in financial services at that time. And somebody picked it up in another country, read it, called me up. And my two partners and I, he made an unsolicited offer. We didn't have the firm ready to sell or anything.

Vickie: Yeah.

John: He said, "I'll pay you 25 million dollars for it." So, Vickie, I am one of the biggest ...

Vickie: That's called a clue.

John: Yeah.

Vickie: That is a clue.

John: I just want everybody to pay attention to how valuable this stuff is. I mean, this is really ... To me ... Particularly now with the internet and everything going on, there's so much noise out there.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: So, let's go kind of start for a second. What I find, what my fellow entrepreneurs, myself, too. We're seeing people who are not as talented as we are, at least in our own minds. Not as talented, and they are ... They're really considered visionaries. They're thought leaders,

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they're getting disproportionate amount of business. How come it's not me? I talk to my wife about this. I can still remember before I did do the thought leadership stuff ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: I'm getting so frustrated. And she said, "John, turn off the TV. Don't look at the ... Listen to the radio when we're driving, the financial guys. Don't read that book." Type thing. And I met somebody at the time, Vickie, like you, who said, "John, stop being frustrated. Go do it." And boy, it changed my life. But how do you do that? 'Cause this is something that I know our ... Our audience, as entrepreneurs, we struggle with 'cause we're so busy doing everything.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: How do we make time?

Vickie: Well, first off, you need to come at this strategically. All right? Too many entrepreneurs wing stuff, and this is something you got to be mindful about.

John: I mean, we don't just hire somebody to write the book for us and then we're done.

Vickie: Yeah, no. If you want a business card that looks like a book, then that's perfect. That's perfect. But if you want to be seen as a thought leader, you need to be strategic about it, and you need to be mindful about what's going on around you. And the reason why lesser people are more popular is one of two reasons. Either one, they are very, very clear and people know what to do with them. They're like, "Okay. I know what I can do with this." And sometimes, entrepreneurs know a little bit too much. And so, they ... In the spirit of education, or in the spirit of helping, we'll just overload the marketplace. And it's like drinking from a fire hose. The market's like, "What? This is brilliant, but I don't know what to do with it." So, you got to have some clarity. But on the other hand, some people get so clear that they're boring. So, you got to be compelling. There's got to be a sense of seduction to it. So, you can't just put your stuff out there and get real clear, build it and they will come. It's not like that anymore. Thank you, internet. Now you've got to be strategic. Now you've got to be clear and compelling.

John: Yeah, no. I totally agree. I mean, I see it repeatedly that ... It's not that hard to create content with the internet, so that's the positive thing.

Vickie: Yep. Right.

John: But we want to differentiate ourselves, so just being another talking head or sending out an e-book, I mean ... People aren't ready anymore anyways. Sending out the 700-page book is just not going to do it type thing. It's not going to position you.

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Vickie: Oh, absolutely. Between social media and just the internet at large, we no longer lack opportunity. Back in the good ol' days it was about getting in. There's no more getting in. Now, it's how do you rise about the noise? That's the big challenge now.

John: So, Vickie, where do we start? If we're going to be strategic ... I mean, this is one of the big challenges. We all have different business, we think we're unique, we know that we deliver a lot of value and we really want to make a difference. And in our enlightened self-interest, we want to get more clients that we can serve so we can be more successful, and have our team, all the stakeholders be more successful.

Vickie: Uh-huh (affirmative).

John: But ... And we know the value of becoming more prominent. I mean, we can look around. The world loves celebrities and so on. How do we become strategic? Because I got this day job running my business type thing ...

Vickie: Sure.

John: How do we do it?

Vickie: Well, the great thing about entrepreneurs is they know more about what's going on around them. All right? The bad news about entrepreneurs is that sometimes ... And I say this in the nicest of ways. Y'all are a little bit delusional. Okay? You can't say your service or your product is better quality or better service and think that's enough. So one of the things that I have to do with entrepreneurs is I have to explain to them that from a marketplace perspective, from a differentiation perspective, you can't just say, "Well, we have better customer service." Or, "Our product is just better. Our product is superior." Anyone can say that. So you're going to have to get ... You have to drill down a little bit and you have to look at what is that one thing? You have to start with the "what" before you start putting pretty words around stuff. You know? And a lot of ...

John: Well, 'cause we all want ... One of the things we can do ... And with your great southern accent, and being from New York myself, and we're not in California now ... We can all pretty much embellish things. It's not hard to do that.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: A little ... We're not talking about lying, but adding color.

Vickie: Exactly.

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John: But here, what we're really talking about, and I think this is so important, 'cause we do a lot of research where we're in the financial services industry and related professionals, the accountants and attorneys. And then with the affluent, all the way up to the super rich, 500 million and more. And when we talk to the business owners, the entrepreneurs ... I got to tell you, the number one thing they tells us that differentiates himself is exactly what you said. This is in rigorous empirical studies. "Our quality is better than everybody."

Vickie: I know. And I got to tell them, I'm like, "You can't spin that." You cannot lead with that. So a big part of differentiation and brand strategy is really, what do you lead with? Okay? And it's not the pretty words. You decided the lead, the underlying theme first. And then you put the pretty words and the messaging and all that around. That is the key for entrepreneurs. So, when you're in an industry like financial services, when all the services look the same, you got to have something that people can point to and say, I want me more of that. That's when you hook people in.

John: Yeah, and it's really taking the time to figure this out before ... I see all the time, fellow entrepreneurs ... 'Cause I think I've written 18 books now and I've got a partner who's written 50. He just keeps on outdoing me. And we're big believers in thought leadership, obviously. And it's ... I gave just one example, but it's so changed my life. It's ridiculous. And I can't imagine not doing it, and that's why I wanted to have Vickie on to help inspire you. But the thing is, okay. I'm going to write a book and I'm going to tell a story. Well, now we want to really think through kind of what's the end goal we're looking to do?

Vickie: Exactly.

John: And then, how can we differentiate ... And I love the one thing. What is the one thing we can do better than everyone else? And the big thing, I always find, I'm going to call it the embellishment, is that personal story around it because the story you have, Vickie, or I have, they're unique to each of us. Nobody else has that ...

Vickie: Exactly.

John: And we can bring it enthusiastic, passionately, but what is the one thing that the client's going to get from us?

Vickie: Exactly, and that's what we in the industry call the punchline. Because here's what's going on out there. There's a ... Story telling has caught fire. So everybody loves to tell a story. But the problem is from a buyer's perspective, these stories start sounding the same if you don't have the best punchline. So I tell clients all the time. There are a thousand punchlines for every story. You just got to make sure the right one hits. And a lot of times,

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entrepreneurs ... They're like the lone ranger. They're doing everything on their own. And I have to remind them sometimes that the sharpest knife can't carve its own handle. If ... It's okay to get help on some of this, because a pair of fresh eyes, if they know the marketplace, and they know that unconscious comparisons that the buyer's make, you can ... A pair of fresh eyes can find that best punchline, that best underlying theme that will differentiate everything else.

John: I think this is so important, and we actually talked about it at the mastermind group at Joe Polish of Genius Network, 'cause so many of us as entrepreneurs are always looking for the how. How do you do this?

Vickie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John: And what I ... We're sharing many of the components of that, but I think for successful entrepreneurs like you, what we want to do is forget about the how and it's the who. Because the fresh eye ... I consider myself really good at a lot of this stuff, Vickie. I don't do it myself. I always have a fresh pair of eyes ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: And the call I had before, recording a new product and service line ... And I've got other people. I mean, I have these ideas, and it's like, "Oh. They're breakthrough. Oh, yeah, that's the one thing that's how we position it."

Vickie: Exactly.

John: But you have to ... It's hard to do this without a fresh pair of eyes.

Vickie: Absolutely. And especially if you have somebody that knows the market, 'cause they know what to look for. They know what's going to hit. And that's the difference between a writer or an agency that's creative and someone who's strategic. What I'll notice is people will work with me, and then they'll go to the agency for the ... What I call the spit and polish. They'll polish it up, they'll buff it up to where it shines real pretty. But as a strategist, you want to figure out which what is going to get you there. And I find that a lot of entrepreneurs really leave money on the table because they don't know their potential. They don't know what the market will give them.

John: Vickie, help me out on the ... There's got to be a strategic approach to really leveraging this because as entrepreneurs, we get so many opportunities to speak and some do it free with the idea that they're getting a lot of value, and others are able to ... What I always love, getting paid to prospect. To me, that's like ... And I get ... I give speeches, I charge \$25,000

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a speech. I've done workshops where I've charged \$100,000, and I get clients after and I'm going, "Boy, this is really good." So how do you do that? How do you do it so that speaking really works for you as an entrepreneur?

Vickie: Well, the first thing you have to do is you have to get clear on your end game. What do you really want from speaking? And there's no right or wrong answer. Some entrepreneurs are like, "Look, I just want to get my ... I just want to raise my profile." Well, if you want to raise your profile, then you have to do more than speak. You want to leverage that speaking opportunity into a relationship with like a media outlet or something like that, so you can get ongoing exposure. So, say for ex- ...

John: Well, I'm going to stop, because this is such an important point. As entrepreneurs, sometimes we're so focused on getting things done where ... I'll called it one and done.

Vickie: Yes. Yes.

John: We're going to build a relationship ... And then we're off.

Vickie: Yeah.

John: I've been married for 36 years, but I'm going to use a dating analogy. You go out for one date, and then you're off to the next now.

Vickie: Yeah, yeah.

John: And boy, in media ... This is hard building these relationships. And if you build them, boy they can be great long-term ... I've got relationships ... I've been writing a column in our industry ...

Vickie: Yeah.

John: The Financial Services since 1994. I still have a ...

Vickie: Wow.

John: A great relationship with the editor ...

Vickie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John: There and ... It's just phenomenal.

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Vickie: Yep. Yep. And so, here's the tip for ... That any entrepreneur can do, and I call this packing the house. Most organizations, unless you're speaking to the Fortune 500 ... Most organizations will let you invite a few people. So what you want to do is you want to look at who is ... Who is out there that is either sitting on the fence? Who is out there from a media perspective? Who is out there that you really need to solidify your relationship and invite them to the speech? Even if they say no, you're now on their radar. You now have a conversation opener. Another thing that you can do to pack the house is find the key influencers of that group and ask them for a couple of tips or interview them as part of your speech. Now what you're doing is your sharing the spotlight. So those people are going to attend and because they're attending, other people are going to attend. And now, it looks like you're the cool kid on the block.

John: I got to tell you, Vickie, these are so good I forgot them. And I'm not doing them all the time now. And I don't know if you noticed, I think it was at the meeting you and I were at that Joe had a reporter there. And it just showed up ... I forgot whether it was in Entrepreneur ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: One of the magazines ... There was a feature of Genius Network ...

Inside secret. And this is so important. This is so powerful advice, because if you're going to give a speech, it's one thing for me to tell a media outlet how brilliant I am.

Vickie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John: Not very credible. But if you can have in the back of the room them seeing the response from your audience ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: In that setting. Wow. That is so huge.

Vickie: 'Cause here's the thing that a lot of people forget, and that's the power of discovery. When someone discovers something about you, they own it. And even when conflicting evidence presents itself, they still own it. Because it's their experience and they trust their experience more than they trust data and information. So, if someone goes to your speech, and gets value from it, even if it's their own idea, but it's based on something that you said or something that you inspired, you get credit for it in their minds. So, in their minds, you're a thought leader, even though you didn't have the thoughts in the first place to give to them. This is why lesser people are so popular. It's the inspiration that they give. It's the thoughts other people have that they get credit for.

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John: Yeah.

Vickie: Isn't that crazy?

John: That really is. But you know what? I find over and over again that the world is pretty crazy, and if I want to be successful, I can ... It's kind of ... I can shake my fist at the sun for getting a sunburn ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: Or I can put a hat on for a balding guy like me.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: And it's the same ... We might not like the way the media works ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: How thought leadership works. But, boy. We need to understand it so that we take advantage of it.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: So, Vickie, somebody's listening to us now. We're joined by about 10,000 friends here.

They're listening to us. They're going, "Okay. I could do this." I think I got the one thing, but I need to brainstorm them. I've got that. You got to have the fresh pair of eyes. I love the idea of getting out and creating some content, presenting, packing the house and really getting that. And then I go, "Oh, this sounds like a lot of work." How do I stay doing it so it's not a one and done type thing?

Vickie: It's easier if you have a system, it's easy. Because what happens is the system gets you on automatic pilot. I tell clients this all the time. I'm not going to add to your do list. I'm going to change how you do your to do list. Okay? So, the stuff that you would do anyway, you're just doing it in a different way that has a bigger impact. So, you're still going to give the speech. The question is, is that speech going to get you more value? Or is it going to be done in a vacuum? And that's what a lot of entrepreneurs do. And, in fact, all of us do this in way. We do things in a vacuum. It's that one and done thing that you were just talking about. So, if we can just get a little systematic about it, just think. What are the top five people that I want to talk to? And then have your team schedule it. There's even technology solutions that'll

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schedule stuff for you. You use one. Do that. You're going to put forth the effort in the speech anyway. You're just doing different things to prepare for the speech.

John: Yeah, and it's so powerful to have those thought leaders. One of the things that I loved doing, and this is why you and I are in mastermind groups is, really working with other thought leaders ... You can ... It's just the insights that they're bringing, it allows you to kind of not only use theirs and obviously give them credit for that attribution.

Vickie: Absolutely.

John: And you can really leverage this a lot. You know, Vickie, I'm going to change it just a little bit.

Vickie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John: Because thought leadership's so powerful, I want to encourage everybody get systemic and it's repacking as ... I called it repurposing. You're already doing it. You are a thought leader already.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: But you haven't organized it. This is where working with the right person can really help you do that. But you know, stuff happens. And there is ... I don't know what we call it. Bad news, I'm going to say. Negative thoughts that get out there. In today's world of the internet, to get a troll just really beating up your company, some negative press happens. And all of sudden, we find ourselves back on our heals. We're working hard, we're really proud of what we're doing, we're making a difference, and then all of a sudden ... What happened? How do we go about kind of regaining ...? People judge you by how you get back up. How do you get back up?

Vickie: Well, that's ... I'm always a big fan of grace. If you can have grace and humility and authenticity, that solves a whole lot of bad buzz. If you come out and if you've made a mistake, say, "You know what? Here's where the wheels fell off. Many apologies. Here's what we're going to do to make it right. This is important to us." You can disarm a lot of the trolls. So, my first line of attack is to disarm them. Don't fight them because they're looking for a fight. In fact, I was sitting next to a troll once in real life. I was having brunch with a family member, and I found out this guy was a troll. And what I learned is they do this for the entertainment value. I mean, it's entertaining to them. So, what you do is you no longer make it entertainment, and they will go away. I mean, it's easy. Another thing I've noticed is that people are looking to be right. They will argue with you and give you bad buzz because they want to be right.

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Look for an area of agreement. That totally disarms people. Say, "You know what? Here's how I think you're right." And go into that and lead with being right, and then say, "Here's where we diverge." Well, they can't argue with that. Because you've already made them right. So most of the time, they'll go away. So, there's a variety of ways to deal with the bad buzz. But I like grace on the ground. Be gracious. Have some good humor about it. Whatever you do, do not fight fire with fire, because they you both look like idiots.

John: Wow.

Vickie: Right?

John: It escalates and gets out of control ... Then we're in real trouble.

Vickie: Exactly.

John: I did try that once. Don't do that. That's bad. That's bad. Vickie, let's talk about resources that you have.

Vickie: Sure.

John: One of the things ... I mean, you follow your own advice and you have put together a bunch of resources. I want to go to your website and let people know ... I've got the website on for those who are following on the video podcast. If you're on the audio, remember you can always go to ... And I'll point to it, aesnation.com. We'll have the transcript of everything Vickie and I are talking about, all the links, and so on. But, Vickie, what's on your website? Really resources for what we're talking about here about how to get really clear?

Vickie: Well, the first thing that I think ... Again, as we talked at the beginning, is you need to get strategic. And to get strategic, you really want to know how people ... What are the trends out there? What are the trends that are impacting differentiation? So, if you go to my website, vickiesullivan.com. And that's Vickie with an "IE" ... sullivan.com. Right there on the home page, you can get the top 10 trends that position you ahead of the crowd. These are the secret heads up that you can take advantage of when you're looking at how you position not only your thought leadership, but really differentiate anything kind of ahead of the crowd.

John: Yeah, no I ... I love this, Vickie. I mean, give us a little of the flavor of the 10. 'Cause this is ... This is so powerful. I want to have influence. I love the headline that you have, let me put it back on the screen for a second. "Go Ahead and Grow Your Influence, Market Your Movement." And this is something we all want to do is we want to get our message out. We want to influence people so they can join our movement, our tribe, our community, your

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customer base and really make a difference. How do you see accelerating that? And I know the number one way to do is just hit the link and download the full report. But give me one idea here that would really do it.

Vickie: Well, I don't know if this is in the report or not, but I think it's a very important trend. And that is the bar has been raised. We're now in a room of very talented people. And everybody has got a great idea. They've got great ideas. So, if they've got great ideas, how do you set your great idea apart? And there's usually a variety of ways to do that, but I think the major thing you've got to understand is don't underestimate the talent in the room. Everyone has a great idea. Everyone has a backstory. So, don't lead with your story. Lead with a punchline that demonstrates the story. And I'm going to give you an example. One of the books that I'm reading right now is Shonda Rhime's, A Year of Yes. And she talks about the underlying theme of all of her television shows. And it's this one idea, you are not alone. You are not alone.

Now, that in and of itself does two things. One, it identifies your strategic territory. That's where people can point to and say, "I want more of that. I feel that sometimes." And then number two, she did ... The way she demonstrates that idea demonstrates her differentiation. So, even if the message, "You are not alone," is not unique in and of itself ... It's not. However, her stories bring you to that. So that's what makes her different. That's what gives her stories power, is that underlying theme. So, I say, in the land of the brilliant, make sure you have a clear underlying theme. And a lot of entrepreneurs do not have that.

John: Yeah, I always refer to it as kind of the golden thread. It's throughout your whole presentation, it's just so powerful.

Vickie: Yep.

John: But one of the things, Vickie, you do is you are also a speaker in your own right and you're out there. How do people who want to reach out and find you, how do they do that?

Vickie: Well, I mean, go to my website and go to Contact Us and send me an email. I'm more than happy to visit with anybody that wants to expand and amplify their thought leadership. I'm happy to visit. I ... A lot of people find me, and you would think ... I don't know how that happens. I hang out at TED, I hang out at Joe's. You and I were having lunch and it was a great conversation. And then that's kind of what happened. So, people find me. If you're out and about in the right places ... And that's another thing an entrepreneur really has to take a look at, is where do you show up? That is a strategic decision in and of itself.

John: It's so critical. And I appreciate you for showing up today. Let me go over the last part, kind of what I'm taking away. I call it the key take aways. Looking at my notes, one of the

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things ... I am a big believer in storytelling, but I'm going to agree with ... In the thought leadership ... What Vickie's saying. Story telling is all out there, and what your audience wants is they want to understand really what's in it for them first?

Vickie: Exactly.

John: What is it that you do that differentiates you? That number one thing first. And if that's aligned with them, then they want to know your story. So are you the one to actually share this? The ... You can learn from. And then, one of the big things is tying this all together with a theme, as Vickie's saying. So many people are all over the place, and we over complicate and we overwhelm and we're in a time now that everybody's being overwhelmed consistently. So if you can be strategic, not only in how you're going to use thought leadership, but the presentations ... Whether they're speeches, whether they're books, whether they're white papers ...

Vickie: Yep.

John: Whatever. This is so critical. And then, I love the packing the house idea. This is ... Whether bringing the media, or maybe one of your top perspective clients ... There's something your potential strategic partner ... It's one thing for you to tell how great it is. If they can see you in a large room or in a very powerful position ... A small CEO group making a presentation, you're going to increase so much more of the credibility, so on. And then, I know you're never going to have it. I'm going to hope to believe I never have it. But if we have bad buzz, follow Vickie's advice. Grace. Grace under pressure is just so powerful. Again, people judge you by how you get up and you react to this. Vickie, thank you for spending the time, sharing all of your insights. And remember, go to AES Nation. You get the transcript, the links to everything we're talking about including Vickie's site. And your clients, they're counting on you. Take these ideas, particularly the future ones, and execute. Wishing you the best of success.

EPISODE Vickie Sullivan

Show Notes at: http://www.aesnation.com/184



A Second Opinion on Your Finances

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John Bowen

Founder and CEO

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