



Callie: in our penultimate episode of Season 5, I'm talking with Lisa Leander from Women in Business Education. Now, Lisa has a very specific niche for her membership, with only a few hundred people in the world actually in this market, which is definitely one of the smallest niches we've seen.

But because of that small market, Lisa has been able to focus on and grow her membership mainly through personal outreach and word-of-mouth, rather than more traditional online marketing methods. And in this episode, we're talking all about how Lisa has done that, as well as how she was actually forced into changing her membership plans from being a side hustle to a full-time business when the pandemic hit, how she plans to expand despite her small niche, and how she invested in growing her team right from the start, plus lots more besides, so let's dive in.

Announcer: Welcome to Behind the Membership with Callie Willows, real people, real stories, real memberships.

Callie: My guest today is Lisa Leander from Women in Business Education. Welcome to the show, Lisa. I am really looking forward to talking with you about your membership and your journey so far.

Lisa: Thanks so much, Callie.

Callie: And so, let's get started with a bit of background info then. What is your membership? Who is it for? How long has it been running? All of that good stuff.

Lisa: I launched last year and I was hoping to launch Women in Business Education as a side hustle, alongside my current full-time job. And I'd been working on the side, started in January I'd say, when I joined the Membership Academy working on the roadmap.

But then the pandemic happened and my current job basically said we couldn't be flexible, I had two kids at home, and I moved up my timeline a lot. I ended up launching, quitting my job before I had a single member.

And we're focused on bringing women leaders, senior academics, deans, associate deans from business schools together. We have Live workshops, we have convenings, and this fall, we're hosting our first virtual summit.

I'd worked in higher ed for many years, but what's unique about my audience is that in business education and business schools, there are so few women leaders. In fact, of the top 100 business schools, there are only 19 women deans.

Callie: Wow.

Lisa: And when you look at my audience, there are only 300 women deans, maybe around 500, we've been doing a lot of market research now, in the entire world.

Callie: Wow, that's-

Lisa: And I think a lot of people are surprised that I would quit to launch a membership full-time when my total customer base was somewhere between 300 to 500. And while I'd worked in business education, I would say I only personally knew a handful of those.

Now, I wouldn't recommend doing this to everyone, but in my case, I needed a flexible position that would allow me to stay home with two children and virtual school, and it's been a journey so far.

Callie: Yeah, I love that. And I know we're always joking in the academy about you kind of having the smallest niche that we've seen, but I think it just goes to prove that you don't need thousands and thousands of people out there.

And so I'd love to know then a little bit about how you actually launched the membership and kind of approached those people, that small audience.

Lisa: When you're working with a niche, it's really important to understand, can you find them? Right? I was able to find four deans in Croatia and three in Lithuania.

The good thing with my audience is that they are very identifiable. Their name, photo, and typically their email is all on the business school website. They're also easily identifiable on LinkedIn.

And so my first process was building this list of who are they, how many are out there, and who is interested? The other thing I heavily rely on is referrals. So once I had this list, you can't just cold-call and spam people, is that everyone I knew, I share this list with and say, "Well, who do you know? Who can you share this idea with?"

And typically, they didn't do a straight referral, but they'd recommend, "Well, Mary would be interested. Send it to Mary. Or Sarah would be interested, send it to Sarah." And so I did identify them and then use the referral network.

And then I just threw it out there. I said, "I'm hosting a free event for business school deans." I got free Mailchimp, I bought a Zoom account, and I put it out into the world. I guess you'd call it then, MVP, which I had been following the roadmap. I followed the roadmap very closely on the Membership Guys.

And my MVP, I didn't put a price to it because I knew my value was going to be the other deans in the room. And I had to ensure there were other deans in the room. I am not an expert, I am not a dean, I am not an academic. But what I'm really good at is bringing people together.

And I threw it out into the world, not knowing if one person, four people... I thought seven was the minimum. If I got below seven, I might make an excuse and reschedule. But if seven showed up, they'd find value in each other. Well just purely through word-of-mouth, through advertising, through LinkedIn invitations, 42 deans from 15 different countries showed up for my first event.

And that's when I started testing my membership. I didn't even know the price yet. So I'm going to be launching a membership in the fall and started testing what they actually wanted. And originally, I was going to build this gorgeous site. I think at the time I was working with you, Callie, and trying to figure out what technology I was going to use.

And I want to be clear, this is my first time into entrepreneurship. I had to Google the word 'affiliate'. I didn't know what a sales funnel was, I'm still figuring it out. And I'd always had a team, a large team, doing all my social media. I never tended to MailChimp before, I had a team member do that for me.

But what makes me a bit unusual and why I was able to grow so fast is that I've been a membership director for 10 years. I had the experience of knowing what members want, the customer service, and the value of convening.

And so we'll talk a little bit about all the unusual things I've done in my membership. But I also brought the 10 years of understanding how to run a membership organisation.

Callie: And so I'd love to talk about that for a minute, then. So, that 10 years as a membership director, was that with a university, a college? How did that work for you?

Lisa: I've had two different roles. My most immediate role was working with a business council. So I actually worked with corporations, a membership organisation, working on business in the Middle East.

Before that is when I was working in membership with business schools and universities. And that's how I understand the world that I was living with, is I worked with about 100 different business schools in 22 different countries.

Callie: Oh, wow.

Lisa: And that's how I brought the audience or had the initial audience to launch a specific membership focused on women.

Callie: And so, what was the inspiration for creating this particular membership for you? What made you want to go down the membership route?

Lisa: I've been sitting on the idea for five years. And I know there are so many out there. I owned the domain name, which is wibenetwork.com, for five years. I had this great idea because I'd been working with a lot of the top business schools, working on programmes, flying over the world, working on events. And I worked with all these amazing women.

But again, when you're looking at only 30% of faculty, when you're looking at 20% of leadership, women are almost invisible. We're not showcased as much in conferences and events. And I always had this dream of bringing us together, but I couldn't figure out the sustainability model. And that's why I'm so grateful for the Membership Academy because it really laid it out for me.

I knew there was something there, but I couldn't put my arms around it. And it was so small, I never thought it could sustain a career, right? That's that niche. I couldn't figure out how to create a sustainable business model, so I gave up.

I kept paying my \$12 every year. I'm sure a lot of you are out there, have this great idea, but how do I actually execute it? And I don't know, without the pandemic, have I literally said, "You cannot work full-time and have two kids at home. What are you going to do?"

I don't know if I would have jumped off the ledge, so I might have been pushed. But I have been running and I've never looked back. I love what I'm doing.

Callie: Awesome. I love that. And so, going back then to... You mentioned before, you started off with the MVP where you were bringing people together, testing the idea, and you were

doing that for free. What happened when it came to you actually launching the membership then? When did you actually launch the paying membership?

Lisa: So my first free event was in July. My second free event was to say I have this idea. And then my second free event was in August, where I brought them back again with the intent of saying, "I'm going to launch September 15th."

And I knew it was a good idea because all the women wrote to me asking me why they didn't receive an invoice yet for their membership. Now, I didn't have my site even up. In fact, that's another journey of creating. Again, I haven't used WordPress before. That is a huge learning curve. I thought I was going to build a site on my own, and that took one hour before I hired a developer. And I realised that I had to move fast.

Again, I started out thinking this was a side hustle, and then I turned it into my main income generation. I had to move fast. And so I did line up, I highly recommend, if you want to move fast, it is worth the investment.

Originally, I was going to go with Kajabi, but I knew it was a long-term now path for me, so I hired a developer and turned that around. And it's pressure when people are saying, "We want to give you money and we want to give you money right now." And I felt pressure to launch, I felt pressure to take their money.

I'm glad I waited. I wanted the website up, I wanted them to be rebilled every year so I didn't have to worry about invoicing them. So I put a lot of them on pause, hoping they'd come back when I was ready.

And I want to encourage everyone, it is so tempting to take that money, but I'm glad that I had the team in place, I had the technology in place that they waited from July to September 15th to become official members.

Callie: Awesome. But that's such good validation for you though, that they were actually saying, "Take my money. Let me give you some money. Here, have it."

Lisa: It was a good sign, and I would say I leveraged, I call them my first 15, my founding 15. And I would say, still today, they are my greatest champions. They bought in.

I brought them on this journey with me. I say I don't sell a membership, I'm selling a movement, because it's not just an organisation where we're bringing together women. We are here to disrupt what it looks like to lead in business education.

And I think that movement piece is important for any membership, that it's bigger than you or me, it's bigger than coming together for a workshop. So when you're thinking about

your membership, what are you impacting beyond the individual? And I think that they really feel a part of the movement we are making.

Callie: Yeah. And so you started with those 15 members in September, is that right?

Lisa: Yeah. And I think that's so nerve-wracking, is I got the first 15 really fast and then it was crickets. Where you think everyone's ready to give you your money, and then nothing. And it's that pure panic of, "Oh my gosh, I've committed all of this time, energy, and benefits for 15 people?"

And I think that's a really make-or-break moment of... We had to grow. And 100%, one is keep showing up, a lot of that, keep showing up. But I focused a lot on... There's a course, actually, in the Membership Academy on the Marketing Flywheel, how to delight your customers. And I buckled down on that.

And so each week, we really focus on "This week, we're really going to delight our members. Next week, we're going to focus on recruitment. This week, we're going to delight, then recruit, then delight." And I can tell you that I have not ever paid for a single ad.

It has all been referrals and word-of-mouth. And we are at 120 members today, so we are eight months in. It is an annual membership at a pretty premium price, it is \$599 a year. The good news with an annual membership is that I do have that commitment. The bad news is that you really need to show that value right away.

And as a membership director, I can tell you, you have three weeks, three weeks for people to feel that that value is worth it to them for an entire year. We are very focused on any new member getting the highest quality customer service, highest exposure, personal high-touch within that three weeks.

Callie: And am I right in thinking that pretty much everything you're offering in the membership at the minute is Live, isn't it? You're not offering things like courses and recorded trainings.

Lisa: [crosstalk 00:14:26]. Again, this is a unique model and it's understanding my niche. And I want to be very clear in everything that I say is understanding your audience.

Callie: Yeah.

Lisa: I originally was going to have the full-on Membership Academy. I was looking at the IP Board and having this online communication and the app and developing courses.

But in conversation with my members, they don't have time to watch recorded webinars or interest. They did not want a Facebook group. They are not on Facebook. I think I have eight followers on Facebook right now. I'm doing it because I think I'm supposed to be

doing it, but I'm always like, "Oh, wow, eight people saw my post. I'm so glad that I did that."

It became very clear that their value was (1) they're so busy. I mean, this was in the middle of the pandemic when business schools were shutting down, I was launching this. Their entire business model was transforming. After five years of waiting, when I launched, time was their most valuable asset.

Everything I do is to make their life easier. I know all their assistants' names, so I work through them to arrange the workshops. They don't have to register for any of our convenings. I send them a calendar invite and they say yes or no. We use the exact same links so they don't have to ever think about a link.

I offer the same session at 10:00 AM and at 7:00 PM. We repeat it, the same session, so that if they miss 10:00 AM, they can come at 7:00 PM. And/or I'm a global audience so I can target Asia and Australia as well.

But now I've only just launched the Circle community. I've only just launched the technology for that. Again, eight months in, they've all paid their membership for the year without that. And I'm hoping to get more content on, but I only have one piece of recorded content.

But at this point, I do have very happy members because they find value from each other. And that's the other thing, the value is not in me or even as much... It was in Live workshops and meeting and connecting with each other. Particularly, when all conferences, events, and networking, at a time it was not available to them.

And that is my greatest value-add. I'm going to build on that. And I gave them a founding rate and I want to continue to provide more value. And as I grow my niche, we are launching to faculty this fall, the younger generation is going to want the forums, they are going to want the content.

So even the niche within my niche, I am thinking through every single value proposition of what they actually want. I'm so glad that I did not build that whole website and then launch to my members because they would not have used it and not have valued it.

Callie: Yeah. And I think that that's really important what you say there about actually knowing your audience, knowing your niche essentially. And if you don't actually know what they want, asking them because...

And I think that's where your previous experience as being the membership director comes in because you've had the confidence to do that from the start, whereas maybe somebody who didn't have that previous experience would have gone, "Well, this is what everybody

else is doing, so that's what I should do." Even though, as you've said, that isn't right for your audience, at least not right now, at least.

So I think it's great that you have the confidence to just go with what your audience, what your market wants and needs, rather than trying to pile too much on because it feels like you should or something like that. Yeah, so [inaudible 00:18:00].

Lisa: [inaudible 00:18:00]. My audience at first said, "Oh, we should meet with the same group every month. We should have small group discussions. I want to be with a cohort and we meet every month."

And that was the intention. I develop cohorts, we come together, and they meet with the same people. But very quickly it turned out that they couldn't commit to each month. And a cohort could fall down to one to two people. And it's like, this actually... You said that you wanted this but it turns out it isn't actually what you want.

I think that's so hard for memberships. So many times people tell you what they want but they don't actually use it.

Callie: Yes.

Lisa: And it's still what people are saying and what they're doing. And so we tried it out and then we quickly removed that from the website. And now it's mixed, every single... They don't have a specific small group cohort.

Callie: And so you've mentioned a couple of times convenings, so just for clarity for people listening, what are you exactly meaning by that? What does that entail?

Lisa: Thank you. So we've delineated our content into workshops, which is facilitator-led. I bring in an outside source to come teach content. And a convening is when we just bring the women together around a topic and then break up into small groups to discuss that topic together.

And this gets around that I am not specifically a content provider. My membership is truly bringing individuals together and bringing experts to my audience.

Callie: Awesome. And so you mentioned as well that you're planning on opening up the membership to faculty as well. So what does that look like for you? You've got the deans in there at the moment. It was deans you mentioned, wasn't it? The initial members.

Lisa: Yeah. Yeah.

Callie: And then will that faculty... Will it essentially be everybody having the same content mixing together or is there going to be some distinction there? How is that going to work for you?

Lisa: I think this is so important for anyone when you start with a small niche. In order to be a sustainable organisation, I absolutely have to grow or create a new product line. Mine is very high-touch. I want to be clear that I have a team supporting me and I've had a team since day one.

Because even small at 120, because I don't have loads of Live content or a lot of workshops available, it's a lot of people time, a lot of visibility one-on-one, and there's no way I can manage that.

And again, this is not a side hustle, this is my full-time commitment. So I do have right now a team of six part-time staff or virtual assistants, which you wouldn't necessarily think that with 120 members, that does not have as much online content.

Because it is so high-touch, it requires a lot of people. So perhaps I haven't invested in advertising, I have invested in the marketing side on the people side.

When you're looking to open up your niche, we're doing it very slowly because a huge value is deans being able to network with other deans. When you're bringing in your next audience, naturally, your membership again is going to feel... Is it going to be overwhelmed by my staff?

I think anytime you find that... You have to grow to be sustainable but your membership doesn't want to grow. And it's a tricky balance to have as a membership manager. I've built my entire site and why, from day one, I knew I was going to grow in this direction.

My site is actually three different membership sites. The deans go in and they only see the deans, they only see their events. I've built out the community forum, so they have their own private forum that nobody else can see.

I've done this with the associate dean level as well. They go in, they only see their events, they only see their forums. And I built the faculty as well.

I originally was going to go with a preset form, it would have been easier for me, it would have been cheaper for me, for sure, to launch. But I knew this model of keeping them within their peer groups, absolutely, I had to go with a bespoke website.

And I'm so glad because at this point, I'd have to be converting all of us over to a bespoke website because the value-add is that you're being paired with like-minded peers. So the faculty is a whole different level. It's like I'm running three different memberships in one with a slightly different brand.

Callie: So is there actually interaction or crossover between those three groups or is it all completely separate?

Lisa: There is. We do joint workshops so they can be exposed to each other. We also have, in the community forum, the all-member forum so they can all engage in the all-member forum. And we are running our first large virtual summit for men and women this October.

Callie: Oh, awesome.

Lisa: And we're hoping to bring around 500 stakeholders and participants together. So yes, you can start small and very effectively grow big.

Callie: So I'd love to know what that then, the virtual conference, obviously, the membership, the network, that's all for women. So what's made you decide to do the virtual conference for men and women?

Lisa: In thinking through the mission of our organisation, yes, very much focused on women and membership, but a big piece of ours is the movement, to disrupt, that we don't have as much gender balance or diversity in business school academics.

And we can't just be in a silo of us women talking about it and writing about it. We have to do something to change it. And so my membership is not just professional development individually, we're about changing the world globally.

The virtual summit is bringing everyone to the table to say, "It's time for change." This hundreds-years-old institution, we need to see more diversity of those teaching our future business leaders.

So we're bringing together deans and associate deans and faculty and men and women. If you go to a typical business school conference, what inspired me to run this, this year - I wasn't planning on it, it's a lot to take on along with running a membership - is that I've seen, again and again, a lot of the same faces and not enough diversity. And so, our conference is 50/50 diverse, new faces, young faces in keynote positions, because this represents the future of business education.

Callie: Awesome. I love that. And so, going back to what you were saying before about already having a team in place and starting off with a team in place. What does that team actually look like for you? What are those team members doing?

Lisa: And I want to share this with all solopreneurs because I was starting out alone, this was just nights and weekends, I have two kids in a pandemic. I looked around me and said, "I need a team."

And I'm not great at social media. I didn't have a huge following, still don't have a huge Twitter following. And I utilised anyone I could find. So my best friend does graphic design, she helped me think through and just have calls with me on the logo. My husband does IT,

he helped me get the hosting agent and some of the cybersecurity, helped me with accounting.

I was walking my dog and the neighbour said, "Hey, my high-schooler..." She was babysitting for me and I said, "Does she want an internship? I could use some market research done." He's like, "Yeah, she'll volunteer for you." And so she started researching, finding the deans for me.

And she got a great piece on her resume to get her next job and I got some extra support. I went to a free meeting through my city and it turned out they offered new business owners mentoring programmes, so I signed up and I got a business mentor.

Because running a business, I didn't know how to become an LLC or what a registered agent was in Virginia, right? The learning curve of starting out is huge. And I looked around and I didn't have the money that I was using. I was investing in the website.

And so I built the team literally from people around me. And I'd encourage it. Your team is so much larger than you know. There are people, especially for women entrepreneurs, there are people out there that want to help you.

So I asked my nanny, who was watching my kids last summer, if she had any friends looking for a summer internship. She said, "Yeah, my two roommates, who happen to be students at a business school in business education."

Again, I do want to caveat that I have run internship programmes for many years. There's a lot of laws around this. I'm in the state of Virginia. So I knew a lot of the laws, I knew how to run an internship programme. And so I started out with a summer internship programme that I designed and delivered. And then I ended up hiring them all as part-time employees once we were up and running.

I had a team in place, they helped run my Twitter, they helped find the 500 women deans, they went and researched who they were. They now manage my LinkedIn because, again, a lot of it is high-touch, so they manage my account.

A lot of the customer service, I've now hired a virtual assistant to handle a lot of the customer service with the members. I am 100% focused on growth and I decided that from day one, this was my full-time job, I'm a CEO, I'm not going to spend time on Canva, I'm not going to spend time researching.

They write emails for me and they live in my drafts, and then I go in there and do a final edit and review them. My team ranges from a high school student whose age is 16 to a grandma in Florida.

Callie: I love that. And yeah, I love that you've got that variety in the team there and how you've built it up from the people around you as well. I think it's interesting that you made that investment quite early on, investment in your team essentially, rather than investment in your time and trying to learn everything yourself essentially.

Lisa: Right. And contractors, obviously, where I've learned to lean on that. When you're thinking about building your team... And again, I had the experience of managing staff. I knew that I was good at convening and I'm good at delegating. We all bring different expertise to the table.

Hiring staff is scary, especially at first. I made a lot of investments in this membership, knowing that it was going to be a long-term investment for me, that I was really committed to making this a success.

And I hired before I really was ready, right? You really want to have a couple of months salary so you feel confident. And when you can offer someone a position, it's a very scary feeling to realise you're responsible for yourself and for someone else.

But what I found was that I felt more motivated to ensure that this was successful because I had a staff to support. And spun that around a bit. Instead of feeling I might feel so stressed and I'm going to have to let them go in a month, instead, it was, "I have a team, we have to meet these targets. And every month, what are we focusing on this week? What's our target to meet? And all of us as a team, we're going after these targets." And we kept meeting them and meeting them and meeting them.

Callie: I love that. That sounds awesome, the way you've done that.

Lisa: The other thing I did want to mention too. Again, for women entrepreneurs, constantly, there is support out there for you. One reason I can have so much stuff is I did apply for a grant to have a payroll processor cover my first-year costs.

Callie: Oh, wow.

Lisa: And because they liked my mission as a woman-owned business, they ended up offering it to me. So again, I had support that then allowed me to hire the staff. But I can tell you, if you keep your eyes open, the opportunities to help you, they are out there.

Callie: I love that. Yeah, I think it's something we don't necessarily think to actually look for all of the time as well, because I think you get into that mindset of, "Well, I'm doing this as my business. I'm setting it up." The way you do that is you start off and you do it all yourself. And as you say, you don't realise what opportunities are out there to get support and help, even if it's not contractors or employees and things.

Lisa: Well, I had to do all this with two kids at home. And I'm not going to lie, it was a lot of nights and weekends and I wish... And interruptions constantly for anyone out there who

made it through this last year. My children are finally back in school and I can't believe how much I can get done in a day. I needed the help because at that time, my focus was very much split. It's been really a tough year for anyone in business or launching a business trying to balance your family and your priorities. I don't think I've always done it right, but you have to figure out how to delegate to remove that off you.

Callie: Yeah. I can't imagine trying to navigate parenthood and family at the best of times, let alone during the last year, and home-schooling and things like that, yeah. Absolute respect for any and everyone that's been managing to do that, but yeah.

So speaking of that, actually, that probably comes into my next question, which is: what have you found particularly difficult? Or is there anything you found particularly difficult or challenging about transitioning to being a membership site owner?

Lisa: I, like everyone else, when you're starting out, I started out as scrappy as possible. I started out with a \$10 camera that we found at Goodwill and a 10-year-old Apple Mac laptop. This thing was so slow, but I had to give all my work technology back.

I made a \$20 logo by myself on a logo maker and I found someone on Fiverr to help me at least get the basic marketing site up, a very basic site. I started scrappy but where I invested the most was in myself and in my team.

And I think we all have... The world, especially for women entrepreneurs, is saying, "There's a great chance you're not going to succeed." Right? Even my nichest audience, everyone, even my developer when she was working on it said, "Looking at your model, if your hope is to get 60 members," which is my goal, I think it was 60 members in my first year, "I'm not sure I see a business model here."

And with so many small businesses closing and business schools having a tough time, I think this fear of failure hangs over you. For women in particular, the fact that we rarely ever go over \$100,000 a year. I think the amount of work... Memberships are not about making money overnight. It's about consistent growth, right?

My model is not making money. This year is that all my members return next year. That's a major overwhelming. For me, stepping into this visibility, stepping into the mindset that I'm good at this and that I could be very successful, I did not realise... Everyone talks about the entrepreneurial mindset, but I did not realise until I was living and breathing in it, how much that will dictate my success.

And so, the investments... I lived with that old laptop for 10 years, honestly. We upgraded it to the next operating system and we lost Microsoft Word and Excel because the computer was so old that it could not handle Microsoft anymore.

And I said, "That's okay. It still does Google Docs. It works well enough because I want to invest in other things." I want to, again, shout-out that through the Membership Guys, constantly I was on their community constantly for help.

And anytime I couldn't figure out, I found all my vendors through referrals. So my copywriter, because I'd never written a sales page before. My developer, because I've never worked on a website before. And I also found my mastermind group. So I met, through the community, a bunch of other memberships that launched in September and we just started meeting on our own just to share advice and share expertise.

And I can't... I would say the hardest, and the one thing, for me, individually was stepping into this new role, what that means, and having the mindset to make it a success. And very grateful that you have to build the community around you to meet that success.

Because now I'm leading over 120 senior women academic leaders. My face and my mission is no longer my own. I am representing them.

Callie: I think that's such an important point. Just to touch on that there, did you say that your original goal was to have 60 members in that first year? So you've actually doubled that and you've still got time to go.

Lisa: Yeah. I think I have to look back. Well, honestly, I look back to five years ago and I think I wrote that I wasn't sure I could get any dean to join. I thought, "Well, maybe I can make them an advisory board." So I think that I've, yes, definitely been overachieving on the targets.

Callie: Awesome. I love that. And so, when it comes to getting new members in, you've already touched on this a little bit, that most of it's through referrals, but what specifically are you doing when it comes to marketing?

Lisa: Right. And I am planning on starting ads, but again, I got to watch a course for that. We are learning. We are building the plane and learning while we go and that's okay. Our main recruitment efforts, again, it's very high-touch and very individual. A lot of it is through my LinkedIn, on an invitation to come to our first event. And all members who are considering can come to a convening, they can meet all the other deans and participate in their first event for free. And that's essentially our sales funnel, is to encourage and invite potential women members to come to a free event. And where I didn't realise that I was a bit of a unicorn, is that my conversion rate of those who attend is around 50-70%.

Callie: Awesome.

Lisa: And again, I did not realise that that was a really high conversion rate till I started benchmarking. Because again, my members, again, time is their greatest asset. And if

they're willing to give time to come to a convening, there's a good chance that they would want to be a part of this.

Also, again, providing quality content, providing quality discussions, delighting your current members, all helps get the word out. One thing that we do is we always post about our events and then all of our members write about what a great time they had. And in doing so, they're essentially marketing it to their very wide audience.

We have had so many responses to their... "This is a fabulous group. That was a great meeting." And then they get a response saying, "Hey, I haven't heard about this. What is this?" And so my influencers are my members.

Now, I don't have an affiliate programme, I don't imagine I will. It's just, again, not appropriate for my audience. But they want to be surrounded by their friends and colleagues, so we use... By referring, and again, those that refer, I send them a very nice note, I send them a hand card, very high-touch in the appreciation that I do.

But at this point, my members are my influencers, and they help recruit. I do hope for the summit, I do want to start running ads so I do want to dive into that. But at this point, LinkedIn has been a major source of outreach, both in my personal account but also in all of our members' accounts.

I encourage you to think about, are your members proud to be a member? How are they... Can you encourage them to share that anywhere? And sometimes they're very happy to do that.

We take screenshots of when they write nice things, we take screenshots and do that. We write a monthly newsletter to try and get consistent visibility.

Callie: I love that, and I love that you've really got that kind of... Your marketing and retention working hand-in-hand there, which I think a lot of people find it difficult to do, but it sounds like you've got that really nice balance there, of your members doing the marketing for you, essentially. And obviously, that then helps them stick around because that means more people for them to interact with as well.

Lisa: And again, if you can bring your membership to that next level, what is the bigger picture that you're selling? Right? What is the bigger movement that you're making? How can you make it more than just about you?

Callie: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And so you mentioned earlier that you only actually added the community forum, you're using Circle I think, to the membership recently. I think you mentioned in the academy, you'd added a job board as well.

Lisa: Yeah.

Callie: What made you decide to add those features now rather than at the beginning or in another few months' time? What made you decide this is the time to do that?

Lisa: If anyone wants to talk tech, we can look at all the grey hair that I have because of my tech. I'm telling you, no, I mean, even last week... This is such a learning curve.

I sent out a huge blast about the virtual summit, and I kid you not, so many people went to my site and apparently I bloated it full of speaker photos, the whole thing crashed. Yes, database down, website down. That was a very stressful hour of rebooting my site.

If I make a mistake, if a mistake could be made, I will do it with tech. It's a process for sure. One of the things is I spent a lot of time thinking about the tech.

In fact, I paused for two months. And Callie, you know this, we were going back and forth on so many decisions. And one of the best pieces of advice you said was just, "At some point, you just go for it and you figure it out along the way."

Now, I'm really glad I went with the bespoke model but I went to it with this full vision of not what I wanted today but what I wanted next year. I always knew I wanted a jobs board, I always knew I wanted a community.

I probably want more of a learning system. I want to sell individual courses, right? I wanted that roadmap. I spent a lot of time actually building out a specific tech roadmap with version one, version two, version three.

And I worked with my developer to develop that roadmap of what I want today, what I can afford today, what I can afford tomorrow, what I can afford. And the benchmark was that when I hit 100 members that I had enough for a community. The problem with a community, you know with a hundred it's still like, "We got to grow, guys. This is painful." Right?

You need a minimum number of participants to have a vibrant community, otherwise, it's a lot of money and a lot of your time to really push people into this system.

I've been watching the technology for the community, and so the one that I did choose was Circle. And I waited till the day they launched the app, and literally the day after... I was like, "I wanted it to be on a phone, so I'm going to wait." And so the day after it went on the phone, I bought it.

But also, I wanted the business model. Don't go make all these investments. It's surprising what people really value. Invest in what they value and then slowly grow it out. And so I

have plans for next year and building it out and building out your roadmap. But again, I was able to take that top perspective but I've hired everything out.

Callie: And so, I'd love to know, this might not be something that you know off the top of your head, but with a lot of membership sites, there's only a certain proportion of the membership that will actually engage in the community Live course and things. But obviously, with your model, the Live is essentially the membership; the networking, the community, the turning up to those convening sessions and things. So do you have a rough idea of what percent of your members are actually turning up for those events, are engaging each month?

Lisa: We do track it, and I highly recommend, in the podcast that I've been following is, again, really tracking your success. So we've created a CO tracker so we can track how many people come to the events, we track who's on my social media, we track our website.

We started out in January, and I'm glad that I did. I think when your first three months are starting, I didn't even know how much I made. I finally sat down and was like, "The launch is chaos." Any kind of launch, it's just, keep running, keep everyone happy, worry about it later.

I'm glad now that, again, that I have a system I created in Excel where I track all of this. So I can very confidently say about half participate in the monthly convenings, but it's the other half, right? So although everyone comes to every other event, but they still come to a variety of events.

Now, like all memberships, I do have a couple of members that have joined but have been focused on other areas. But what's great about my membership is that by joining, they're supporting our mission and the movement that we're making.

If time is their greatest asset, they're helping us move the needle by becoming a member, and that they don't have to show up, and that it's a great way to bring gender equality without having to dedicate your time or your energy. And that's okay for those members too.

Callie: I really like that. It sounds like you're getting great engagement there anyway, but as you say, you're never going to get 100%. But the fact that actually... Even if they're not showing up to those events, they're supporting the cause essentially, the movement, as you say, rather than needing to show up to everything themselves as well.

Lisa: When you're starting out in membership, and again, this is my years as membership director as well, having happy members is absolutely your best marketing and advertising business model.

So if I don't have a member who's really finding value, it's going to hurt me way more than not having them at all. So, yes, I do have the cancellation policy, but if anyone isn't really finding value and moved on or it's just not a good fit for them, that's okay, especially in your first year. That any negative voice is going to be way louder than the 10 positive ones.

It's why customer service, our members, my team, we very much focus on creating that experience, creating that value, the visibility, the response time. That's where we've invested.

Callie: And so, as we start to wrap up then, I would love to know, what impact would you say having the membership has had overall on your life, your business?

Lisa: I think, for me, realising that it could be a life-changing event, that it's not just a simple side hustle of bringing together people. That the impact your voice is making, the impact of the value of connecting people.

In fact, I took Gallup's StrengthsFinder and they said my number one strength was a relater, that I like to relate to people and talk to people and bring people together. And it makes sense because I've helped friends get married and made lots of connections.

I thought, "That's not a great skill. I want to be a doctor or an engineer. Those are great skills. Out of all these skills, that's the one I get? I can make good friends? That's not valuable." I've realised, as a membership owner, that is a massively important skill. Bringing the right people to the table is absolutely critical to make change and to change the world. So I think the greatest value is recognising that there is more for me, more for the membership, more for women. And that I hope and encourage those working on membership sites to stay committed, because it doesn't feel that way when your site burns to the ground and you spent hours of your team getting it ready and now 500 people are not going anywhere.

Or the event that you spent a lot of time working on that very few people show up for, or the newsletter that you thought was absolutely brilliant and 20% of your audience maybe opened it and then didn't hit a single click, right?

I think it's those days that you have to step back and realise that there is something bigger out there for you. And that the process, the process of what I've gone through these last eight months. I've earned an MBA in these last eight months.

And I think if it all goes to muck, if it's just not going to work out, I got to return to the private sector; what I have learned, what I've experienced, who I've met, what I've had to build and hire and learn, that is the most valuable experience I've had probably in my life. It's definitely been a life-changing event for me.

Callie: Awesome. And so, I would love to know actually, you mentioned at the start that this was originally going to be a side hustle for you alongside your full-time job. And then circumstances ended up with it becoming this full-time project. Is that your long-term plan, for it to be full-time now? Or are you going to look to transition it to being part of something bigger in the long run?

Lisa: I think what most entrepreneurs realise is that this has been fun, this is great, this is only project one, this is only business one. So I'm very much focused on WiBE, it's my calling to make change. But I also am always out for that, "Hah, what's my next... I got this. What's my next adrenaline rush?"

And so I have a lot of ideas and plans, writing my book, launching my next follow-along, growing my audience with products to men and women, delivering content. I think most entrepreneurs realise that, "Hah, this is a great adrenaline rush, what is next?"

But I can't move on too quickly. You got to stay focused. WiBE is definitely my calling, but there's a lot of energy left. And for me, it's "What's next?"

Callie: Awesome. And so, if someone's listening then and they're thinking of starting a membership or maybe they've just started one, what's one tip you would give them?

Lisa: One tip. When you're thinking about your audience, that you don't have to have the perfect website, you don't have to have the perfect technology, you don't have to have a fancy microphone, video, or even any video recordings.

I literally threw out events and said, "I'm just going to bring people together." You can start out scrappy and build towards something great. You don't have to have all the pieces. This doesn't have to be your full-time job, it doesn't even have to be your full-time income. If you feel called to do something, if you feel called to bring people together, it does not hurt to throw it out there and see if anything sticks, so just do it.

Callie: Yeah. I think that's a great tip. And so if someone wants to check out the membership or they want to connect with you, where's the best place for them to do that?

Lisa: Sure. You can find me at LinkedIn at Lisa Leander, and you can also find us on our website at wibenetwork.com.

Callie: Awesome. Thank you so much for talking with me today, Lisa. I've loved watching your journey in the academy, it's been really inspiring to watch how you've grown the site and where you started to where you are now. So I'm really excited to see what the next 12 months have in store and how you continue to grow.

Lisa: Looking forward. Thanks so much, Callie.

Callie: That's it for another episode, folks. Thank you so much for listening. And a big thank-you, once again to Lisa for joining me and sharing her story too. If you'd like to find out more

about Lisa, download the transcript from this episode or read the show notes, then head on over to themembershipguys.com/btm53. And be sure to tune in next week for the final episode of Season 5, I'll see you then.

Announcer: If you enjoyed this week's episode, we invite you to check out membershipAcademy.com. The Membership Academy is the essential resource for anyone at any stage of starting, growing, and running a membership website. Whether you're still trying to figure out what your idea is going to be or whether your website is already up and running and you're just looking for ways to grow it and attract new members, then theMembership Academy can help you to get to the next level. With our extensive course library, monthly training, exclusive member-only discounts, perks, and tools, and a supportive, active community to help you along the way with feedback, encouragement, and advice, the Membership Academy is the perfect place to be for anyone looking to start, manage, and grow a successful membership website. Check it out at membershipacademy.com.