

Episode 204: Adding Mentoring Sessions & Experiences into your virtual summit.

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Speaker: Brittany Cole

Dr. Mark T. Wade:

Hey summit hosts, Dr. Mark T. Wade here, founder of Virtual Summits Software, and your host here on the Virtual Summit Podcast. Well, we are in for an absolute treat on this episode. We're going to be diving into some unique aspects of summits, especially a summit that originated as a live event. So hold on, we're going to get into some amazing content. That's all possible because we've got legendary Brittany Cole here with us today. Uh, Brittany, I'm so excited to have you here with us before we jump into all the amazing details we're going to talk about with your summit. I'd love for you to give the audience just a little bit more information about yourself.

Brittany:

Absolutely. Well, one, thank you for having me on the show, Dr. Mark, I'm really excited to share all the things that we learned and even some things that didn't work so well with our first virtual summit. I'm Brittany Cole, I'm the CEO of Career Thrivers and author, and I do coaching and speaking around leadership. So we had our first leadership conference last year with Career Thrivers, and it was a great success in terms of my day-to-day work. I get to partner with organizations all around, having a more equitable workplace. So whether we're doing consulting or coaching or speaking and training, um, that's the space that I'm in. And when I work one-on-one with clients in a coaching capacity, it's usually around personal branding for the purpose of career advancement.

Dr. Mark:

Love that. Well, it's very interesting that combined, combined with a virtual event, a virtual summit here. So I'm actually going to, I want to go right from that. How did you take this position, this role, this, you know, this impact you're making in the world and decide I'm going to do a virtual summit, take us into that point.

Brittany:

Yeah, absolutely. So we all know when it comes to career advancement, navigating their career, oftentimes it's the stories of other people that they become really inspiring to kind of help to guide you along your path. And so any way that we can share stories, whether it's through video podcasting or what was originally, as you've mentioned a conference. So bringing people together to hear those stories, to hear lessons learned, but also to take ownership in their own career development was really the genesis for this conference in 2020. And so we wanted to do something really special. I'm a native of Nashville, Tennessee. And so we were bringing together, um, a leadership here in Nashville with a focus on sponsorship. So, and not sponsorship through the lens that you're probably thinking in terms of companies, but sponsorship through the lens of having people that are more than mentors to you, meaning that they're able to help you navigate to the next step of your career.

Brittany:

Not only because they're personally invested in you, but also because they have the positional power or influence to help to open a door or pull a seat up to the table or make an introduction, et cetera. And so our vision for this event was to bring together emerging professionals with established professionals that would serve as these sponsors to help to move people along and have this, you know, opportunity

to meet, hear stories, learn lessons, and really be developed, um, in a very thought out space. However, with COVID-19 we couldn't do that in person as we had originally planned and we're really excited about. And so we've made the decision pretty quickly to turn around a virtual summit instead.

Dr. Mark:

Well, and I, I love this. That is actually a different, uh, you know, meaning our use of the word sponsor that we, you know, that we're normally talking about here. Um, but I think there's some creative things that came out of incorporating it, like the way you were planning it with a virtual summit that we can even implement, and apply to other virtual summits as well. So I think it's going to be pretty creative once we dive into this. Now tell us a little bit more about the actual summit. So give us some of the details. How many days, how many speakers, what was the premise behind it, help us understand what it was?

Brittany:

Absolutely. So, as I mentioned, this started out as a live event. And so our goal was to plan a Friday through Sunday experience for our attendees. So we originally had planned seven speakers, including myself, and we were planning for about 75 attendees because again, we really wanted a highly curated, highly specialized opportunity for people to meet and make a meaningful connection, like not just coming to soak up content, but to really have an impactful connection with someone that sponsor that would help them get to that next step. So with us transitioning to a virtual summit, um, it changed things tremendously. So we went from seven speakers to 40 speakers. We went from three days to seven days. And so we, we completely revamped, uh, with the opportunity of, of technology and going virtual to really provide a more holistic experience.

Brittany:

So we've stepped into not only career in business, but we also had a wellness track as well. So we had three tracks for people to attend. And the virtual conference was a combination of both live sessions on demand sessions, which were of course pre-recorded content. That was a whole lesson learned. Um, and then we also had a mentor matching opportunity where you could meet and greet people within the platform. So it was very comprehensive. Um, again, we, you know, more than quadrupled our planned attendees and speakers with being able to dive into the virtual setting with this kind of offering. The last thing that I'll say that was really unique that we did with the live sessions is that, you know, again, thinking how can we engage people in a way that is meaningful, that keeps their attention as, and you've got to think, well, I didn't share the date, but this was May, right?

Brittany:

So we're two months into quarantine. Um, people haven't Zoom fatigue is kind of setting in, but not all the way where we kind of hit that, um, early. Um, but we do want to make sure that it wasn't as engaging as possible. So we enlisted the help of a local visual artist that did visual note taking during the live sessions. And then, um, that, that artwork, which was content we were able to share out in, um, we did boxes for our VIP attendees. So we, we ha we tried to find a way to be as comprehensive as possible in terms of virtual live on demand, but also providing, you know, a physical touch point via the mail as well.

Dr. Mark:

This is incredible. Brittany you've just kind of gone right through and hyper-speed so many good points. We've got to dive into these. Um, where do I start here? First off boxes for VIP's taking one step back this visual note taking this is incredible. I've never heard anybody do this on a virtual summit before. Talk us through that process. Cause this sounds phenomenal. Like what was that exactly. Kind of explain it for us. I'm a little dense over here. So help me understand it. And then kind of what was the feedback on that?

Brittany:

Yes. So there is a fantastic visual artist here in Nashville. Her name is Ayumi Bennett and essentially what she does is she helps listeners, attendees be able to retain the information that they listened to by having something physical, to take away. So she literally sat in on Zoom because right, we're all I'm sitting right here, you know, curating all of the content, producing it all from right here in my home office and she's on Zoom. So she's, she's in the background. So if it's a conversation like the one that we're having right now, she would be in the background taking notes on her iPad and think of notes, like not like lined paper notes, but like, um, pictures, animated kind of icons of the speakers. And then, you know, um, little like word bubbles of quotes and then almost like a diagram of the flow of the conversation with takeaway points, with the title of the session, the speakers, the contact information.

Brittany:

So everything that you would want to be able to recall that you gained from that session, from the speaker's name, to the speaker's information, to what were the main points you would have something to show. And so before, well this was after Q and A, I think we actually positioned it before Q and A, because it was kind of the surprise, like get the conversation flowing. So right before Q and A, before the speaker ended, she would come on screen and share the note. So if you were live in the session, you would get a chance to see the note. And then on the backend she would finish the notes, send me a PDF. And then on our daily communications, I would send that out. And then for our VIP's they actually got a physical copy of it. Actually, you know what, Dr. Mark.

Dr. Mark:

I was literally just going to ask, do you have anything?

Brittany:

So this is what it looks like. This is an example. So this is our conference Thrive Together. This is one of our sessions and I just printed them front and back. So this was my session, thriving through loss with real resilience. And so, you know, this became a nice keepsake for our VIP has got, you know, these for every live session, but you, everyone got, you know, a digital version of it. So.

Dr. Mark:

That is so incredible. And we'll, we'll link to an image of that over in the show notes as well. So all the listeners can see that, but essentially a card visually written out with all the notes right there. That is, that is amazing. We'll have to link to her as well. I'm sure we'll have some people now wanting to use that in their next summit. So this is amazing. So that's really great creative ways to add value also adding. So you sent these out, like you actually had these printed in, these were sent out. So I mean, if you didn't want to print them out, you can always have it as a digital gift or surprise and delight, but by adding that physical component, you really increase the experience. And I just want to highlight that for

a second there, Brittany, because, you know, we think that's a big thing, especially where now we're seeing lots and lots of people coming into the virtual space.

Dr. Mark:

I mean the virtual summit space livestream conference spaces is probably bigger than it's ever been and growing dramatically. Um, so adding that experience, that extra touch, that creative aspect is so important and last with your audience. So that's a wonderful example of that. Now let's kind of circle, um, into, you had mentioned that, uh, you ended up quadrupling the attendees more than you had anticipated. Now I'm sure part of that was of course, cause it's now virtual, but what other aspects would you put into to, or give some credit to of why it helped, why you were able to grow it and have a larger audience than you originally planned?

Brittany:

Yeah, well, I would definitely say, um, several reasons, but one, it started out with just sharing the story, you know, um, stories they tell, but what they really do is they connect, right? They, they, they do the selling for you. So I was just honest with our audience and said, Hey, we really plan to do this live. We have this beautiful leadership center here in Nashville. The deposit was paid, vendors were lined up and we can't do that anymore. So just letting people know that we still want it to provide value in an expansive way, but tapping into the audience to say, you know, what are your ideas about how we can still bring this to you? And so even though we had kind of thought along the path, but just that storytelling to bring people into the journey really helped to connect with like, Hey, I really want to be a part of how this is going to evolve into, you know, the plan B of the conference.

Brittany:

And so I would say one that really helped to boost engagement. The other aspect is the speakers. I mean, we had some amazing speakers, like, you know, Minda Harts, Drew Nguyen, who is over at BYOB, Minda has a best-selling book called Women in the world or the memo. Um, it's a book about Women in the Workplace. And so we had some really fantastic speakers that really helped. And so one of the things that we did with all of the speakers was to ask them to, you know, do a little quick 32nd video giving a preview of what they were going to be talking about. They shared it with their network. We shared it with ours. We had a really tight, um, powerhouse team. Let me just say that kudos to the Thrive Together conference team. Cause they were amazing. We had a really, really tight, um, email campaign leading up to, um, the, the conference that included even as people were registering and attending, just giving them little tidbits of information.

Brittany:

Um, the other aspect was bringing Nashville to our attendees. So again, just playing along that story and that journey of saying, Hey, we wanted to invite you to Nashville, but since we can't, we want to bring Nashville to you. And so we partnered with a local media outlet here called urbanite and Ashley over at urbanite, we did some, you know, custom mask on videos to show people, you know, cool areas and sides of Nashville that maybe you don't see in the mainstream media that really helped with engagement. So people got that feeling of like actually being here. Um, and then last but not least, I would say just the physical components and just really thinking through, you know, Career Drivers is a learning and development firm overarchingly in terms of the leadership space. And so, you know, we're really thoughtful around how do we share good information, but really how do people retain it well?

Brittany:

So they can then implement cause that's where the transformation happens. So we have things like online workbooks, you're letting people know that, Hey, you're going to get resources here that are gonna help you, not just to feel good in the session, but to be able to do something, you know, with the insight and inspiration that you're going to get so that you can implement it in a strategic way. And so I think all of those kinds of resources really spoke to people. Um, and they registered and registration was easy eventually and streamlined, you know, so that whole back end process, you know, as the host is on part of it too, just making sure that you're, um, you know, making, making the process as seamless as possible and providing as much value upfront as possible. So that's what we tried to do.

Dr. Mark:

Oh my goodness, Brittany, this is so good. Every you're going to have to, everybody listening here is going to have to go back and re-listen to this episode, there is so much value you are dropping here. Um, and, and I want to highlight here. You, you are doing, I mean, you're saying it like just so casually, but for everybody listening here, listen to all of these pieces that Brittany has brought together to create an experience for this audience doing a tour live stream tour. So, I mean my last, uh, virtual summit, we did opening and closing ceremonies. We gave some awards to attendees, you know, think outside the box here. What, what relates to your summit to the, you know, the concept or the problem you're solving? How can you add value to that? Brittany doing a live stream tour of Nashville is a way for people to connect, engage, and really creates a whole other experience versus just watching the on-demand version.

Dr. Mark:

So, um, and you talked about how telling the stories, expanded it and how you said, look, it's not just sit back and watch, but here's the workbook you're going to get with this. You added value in this, in those steps now, um, I want to kind of circle back to the on demand aspect. Um, well actually before we get to the, on the main aspect, I want to go all the way back to something you had mentioned a few moments ago was about the mentor aspect. You created a mentor track, break that down for us because this is a huge area, um, that I have not seen regularly on summits that I think could be a great inspiration for our audience today.

Brittany:

Sure. So, you know, typically with virtual summits, you are squarely focused in, in terms of partnerships on sponsorships, but also the speakers, right? So who are you going to get to speak? Who are those names that are going to help to drive, um, attendance, quite frankly. Uh, but in addition to that, again, we want it to build on this theme of, we want you to get good information, but what we really want you to do is to do with, to connect when I really helped to cultivate community in this space, even though it's online. So we did a call, um, just after we secured all of our speakers to say, Hey, who is open to providing, you know, 30 minutes as many times as possible. I think one of our mentors, um, signed up for five sessions. So 30 minutes to, to meet with our attendees.

Brittany:

So to do a meet and greet and the way that we operationalized this was literally through Google sheets, just being frank with you. Um, so we had all of our mentors, we had about 12 mentors raise their hand and say yes, which was more than enough spots for everyone in terms of the number of spots that they signed up for was more than enough for every attendee to meet once with a mentor. Right? And we

didn't mark, we didn't, you know, market or message it that way. We just said, Hey, this is first come first serve. This is available for you. It's included with the conference at every, you know, conference, uh, price point in terms of the registration. And we only had, we had like general and VIP, so we only had two price points, but it was open to everyone. And so we had the mentor share their, um, you know, area of expertise.

Brittany:

So we were able to kind of, you know, categorize the, the mentor conversations. And then we communicated people that signed up that, Hey, this is a 25 minute conversation. And the great thing about the platform is that it had a timer on there. And so it led both the mentor and the participant know that you're coming up on the 25 minute mark, which gave the mentor about five minutes of grace to transition if they were back to back. So we communicated, you'd have 25 minutes. We asked the mentors for 30 minute spots. And that aspect was probably one of the most like shared and talked about aspects of the conference because people were able to ask questions related to, you know, their career, their business, and even their wellness. And so, um, that was, that's definitely something that we will continue to do in the future asking people to say, Hey, you know, I, you know, I'd be, I'd be okay to volunteer, you know, an hour of my time, you know, one of these days and then signing up and, and doing that matching so that people, like you mentioned, um, get that additional value through the virtual conference.

Dr. Mark:

Yeah. And it's creating a, another touch point, another level of experience for people versus just sitting back and statically watching a video, it's creating an active experience. Um, I love this, like, especially from the mentor side, I love the positioning of that. And, uh, you didn't necessarily have to tap into your speakers to do this. You were able to open up more spots for people for this, which from a promotional standpoint, anybody listening to this, you know, if you're trying to look for more collaborative opportunities, this is a way to also do that. Um, I like bringing speakers into it too. For example, we'll do like a live panel with our speakers on our summit. The reason I like that is, uh, let's say the speakers have done an on demand version and on demand recording. Well, by having that live aspect, they still show up. They now feel like they have some ownership or some, some aspect and they get to start to meet the attendees. Well, then they get excited and involved in your conference, in your summit as well. So that's why I'm really glad we highlighted that, Brittany. That was great. So.

Brittany:

Dr. Mark, I would add to that just as the host, it also takes some pressure off of you in terms of providing content, because initially, we planned for the mentorship spots to be all of our Thursday day. And we ended up with, you know, being able to do some other things, but initially that had freed us up from having to plan for Thursday's content because Thursday was all about mentorship. And so those mentors were driving those conversations. And of course, you know, I, I did a couple of sessions in some of our team, uh, team did as well, but, um, it freed us up from a, from a planning, um, and strategizing perspective.

Dr. Mark:

Yeah. Like to reduce some of that fill that there with valuable content as well. Well, speaking of the content and the sessions, uh, you had meant, you made mentioned at the very beginning, you had live and on demand eventually is that you, you kind of highlighted, there was some, some learning lessons

there. Well, let's talk about that. Talk about us, the difference between the live and the on demand, what lessons were learned and what advice do you have to give?

Brittany:

Yeah. So we provided over 40 hours content through this experience. And so roughly 10 hours of that was live. The rest was all on demand. And so I would say a couple of things, you know, in terms of lessons learned and the process for that, just to share, um, we, I just utilize Zoom. So I utilize Zoom and I asked the speakers, it was a completely their preference of whether they wanted to do more of like a Q and A conversation, kind of like what we're having now, or if they were kind of more of a speaker, they did more of like, I intro them and they did their thing. So, um, it ended up being a really good mix of you're getting a workshop. You know, some people use slides, some people didn't use slides and sometimes it felt more like you were listening to a podcast interview.

Brittany:

So it was great variety from that perspective. Um, I would say the system is, I would say the biggest takeaway in terms of thinking through how you go from on-demand content to whatever platform you're using, if they're not integrated. So the platform that we used, it wasn't integrated. So I was using Zoom to record, and then I would have to wait for the file to, you know, finish loading and then upload that video into the platform. So in terms of like the behind the scenes labor that was involved in making that happen, it was higher than I had anticipated just with, you know, the long hour long video, you've got to do all the things, download and then upload. So that was a lesson learned. Um, so if there's a platform out there that kind of lets you integrate all of that, um, then I think that that would be helpful.

Brittany:

So that was one lesson learned, but overall, the on demand content was helpful because the way that we set up the agenda, you know, it felt like you were at an event and it felt like, okay, I can go to this session or I can go to that session. But what our, um, our attendees really loved was that they didn't have to like plan out the on-demand. So it was very clear what sessions were on demand, and they knew that they could catch those at any time, even if it was a Tuesday. And there was a Friday session that they wanted to listen to. So we didn't really drip it out. We just went ahead and uploaded all of it. And then they had the live schedule for the live events every day.

Dr. Mark:

Amazing love this. Well. Um, any other lessons learned, any other challenges you experienced that, you know, you can give to the, the, the, our summit hosts that are listening right now to help them avoid those challenges or prepare for them?

Brittany:

Yeah, I would just say, um, this is something that we did, I did it later than I probably should have and would do again, is in terms of thinking about, um, how you're kind of marketing the event as it's happening. So I think like the, maybe like the day before I thought of like, okay, I'm not going to have time to like, you know, as we're doing this sure. Behind the scene clips and share stories and like, do you know, do all the things that you would like to do. So I would just say think strategically about the team that you need to execute and be okay with delegating. Right. What isn't in your wheelhouse in terms of your, your zone of genius. It's like, okay, well, yeah, I can, you know, take little snippets and post quotes, but like, is that the best use of my time as the host likely not.

Brittany:

So let me bring somebody on that can do that for me. Like, Hey, can you, you know, take, take, catch takeaways and posted, especially if you're allowing for a rolling registration during the event and if it's a long-term event, which we did, um, for the week and that actually helped with, with registrations, even like people were seeing and they were getting the FOMO online and saying, okay, like how do I register and sign up for that? Um, the other thing that I would say that was really helpful is to be thoughtful around vendors. So we did vendors because again, this was going to be live. So we'd like we had a space and tables and all the things. So we were like, how can we pull that into the virtual setting? And the way that we did that was through our live session. So the live sessions, there were two vendor or sponsorship spots at the top and at the, at the end.

Brittany:

Um, and so one of the vendors that reached out was a PR firm out of DC. I'm in Nashville. She reached out, she's like, Hey, I want to sign up to be a vendor. And I'm thinking PR hadn't thought about PR like, Hey, wouldn't you like to partner, you know, and do a pro bono, we'll waive the fee you do PR for the conference and all, everything will be great. And it ended up working out really well. And because of the virtual setting, you know, of course with the repackaging that you do have the content, um, we had some PR spots that were technically after the event and we were still able to sell registrations from those because the content lived on. So I would just say, be really thoughtful even after the date of your event, especially if you're doing a hybrid of on-demand and live about ways that you can leverage it by partnering or hiring, um, post the event.

Dr. Mark:

That is such good advice right there. Good, good little, uh, piece of information. Everybody should be utilizing well, Brittany, this has been absolutely phenomenal, so much good information here. Again, I highly recommend everybody listening and go back and re-listen to that because Brittany was sharing so much valuable insight there. Um, Brittany, and I know everybody's going, I need a little bit more Brittany in my life right now. So where are you hanging out at and where can they, how can they best get in touch with you?

Brittany:

Sure. So you can connect with me at <https://www.brittanyncole.com>. So that's my website. You can go there and learn more about my coaching. I do coaching in the personal branding space speaking, but also you can grab a free personal brand assessment. So if you're looking to utilize virtual summits to really establish your thought leadership and your expertise in the area, or to grow your business, which have both been great things that have come out for me from this first virtual conference year, um, then definitely you want to make sure that, that you've got a great personal brand, you know, your story and how to tell it. And so there's a free resource there for you for that. And you can also connect with me on Instagram @BrittanyNCole and LinkedIn. I hang out on those two platforms the most.

Brittany:

And I'll also, Dr. Mark. I'll share with you, you can feel free to link it in the show notes the overview of the virtual summit. That was the other thing that we did from a sponsorship perspective to just show the value we packaged this. So we had a 14 page document that gave the highlights. It gave screenshots, even some of the virtual notes are in there. It gave quotes, it gave the data, Oh my goodness, I didn't talk about this, but whatever platform that you're utilizing to capture information from your registrant's

based on your industry and what you need, make sure that you get good data. So we had everything from industries to age to reach of geographically. All of those things have become really important to brands. We packaged that and shared it, um, with, you know, links to, to learn more for potential partnerships, uh, for the, for the following year. So I'll be sure to share that with you. People wanna take a look at that they can.

Dr. Mark:

Well, I'm sure they will. We'll make sure we get that attached there, Brittany. Absolutely phenomenal. Thank you so much for sharing with us, your time, your energy and your wisdom today.

Brittany:

Thank you for having me.

Dr. Mark:

And thank you summit hosts for hanging out with Brittany and I. I'm Dr. Mark T. Wade, your host here on the Virtual Summit Podcast and remember your message matters. And one of the most powerful ways to get that message out to the world is with a virtual summit. So don't forget to get out there and make an impact and we'll see you on the next episode.

Dr. Mark:

Now I want to end this episode by saying to all the summit hosts listening right now, I believe in you and you can do this summits are by far one of the most powerful ways to quickly grow your list, launch your platform, make more money. And most importantly, make an impact in the world, even if you're just getting started. So don't get caught up in analysis paralysis because the world needs to hear your message. And there are people who are waiting for you to help them just get started because imperfect action is always better than no action. Thank you and see you on the next episode.