

Episode 136: How A Mission Based Virtual Summit Elevated An Industry!

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Speaker: Stephanie Slocum

Dr. Mark T. Wade: Hey summit hosts, Dr. Mark T. Wade here, founder of Virtual Summits Software, your host on the Virtual Summit Podcast we are in for a treat today. Get ready because you are going to get some tactical solutions, information strategies and suggestions on your virtual summit and I and that is going to happen specifically because we've got the legendary Stephanie Slocum here with us today. Stephanie, thanks for hanging out with us.

Stephanie Slocum: Thanks for having me, Mark.

Dr. Mark: Well, we're going to have a lot of fun. I'm really looking forward to this episode. To this interview, uh, because you've done some pretty cool stuff with your summit and you've got some amazing insights and experience. So I'm really looking forward to tapping into that. But before we jump into those specific summit details and gems, I'd love for you to tell the audience just a little bit more about yourself.

Stephanie: Great. So my name is Stephanie Slocum. Like you said, I am an engineer and author, and an entrepreneur. So I started my business 18 months ago. Uh, I worked in the engineering industry for 15 years before that. Uh, and my business is focused on helping women in engineering. Um, so I like to tell people, I hope women in engineering get unstuck. So if they hit points in their careers that they're having the, they hit a ceiling and they're not getting where they want to go, they're not getting that promotion that they want. That's what I hope.

Dr. Mark: That is so good. I can already hear people's ears pricking up over there in the podcast world listening into this right now. So what I'd love for us to do now is let's, let's talk generically or an overview right now of your law of your summit, the summit you just hosted. What was it called? Why did you decide to do it? Like kind of take us, I mean, you just said you're an engineer and you've already mentioned not a computer engineer. So how did this idea of a summit even come around and why did you decide to jump into it?

Stephanie: Okay, so the summit, so first I'll start with the name of this summit. The summit was called the She Engineers Summit. Uh, the reason that name was picked was because the book I authored is also called She Engineers. So that brand is, is known from when I launched the book in 2018. Um, at the time I first learned about the whole concept of summits. So, uh, this time last year, I had not even heard of the concept of a summit. Uh, I mean I knew what an in person conference was without a, um, I had the book, so super like low end item and I also was in the middle of launching a high ticket course and I had nothing in the middle. Um, and so I was sitting at a conference and it was actually a marketing conference because as you would suspect as an engineer, marketing was a huge hole of mine when I started, started my business. Um, and one of the speakers was talking about the whole concept of virtual summits and it was like this huge light bulb went off in my head. For women in engineering, we know that 40% are

considered only. So that means they're usually, you're often the only one on their teams or in their offices.

Stephanie: And in a lot of cases those aren't, they're not going to get permission to go to women in engineering conferences where they can meet mentors and hear about [00:04:00] some of the problems specific for women in male dominated fields. And so it was like, as soon as I heard that idea, I'm like, Oh my goodness, that's, it fits well in my value ladder. It allows me to get some of these tools and tricks and all these mentors I've met over the years, give them a voice so that we can reach all those women who don't have access to other women like them.

Dr. Mark: And what an amazing way to like get that is. So when you were hearing that actually when you heard about this concept of summit, did you immediately go, Ooh, I want to do that? Or were you like, meh, and you came back to it later?

Stephanie: No, this is pretty immediate. This was a definitely want to do it. Um, I learned about it maybe a couple of weeks from now, this time last year. Um, and I looked at that and said, okay, I got eight, nine more months this year. I want to get it done this year. Um, and so it took me awhile to like plan and find a mentor on this. Because if I've learned nothing else in my career path, it's that find the people who've done what you need to do and model them and learn from them. And that's some questions. Um, and so it took me a while to find that and then do all the planning. Uh, but we eventually, you know, finally launched the summit in December of last year. Um, we ended up delaying it a month. I'm sure we'll get into details about why that was and what I learned and, and all that things, all those sorts of things. Uh, but this was my very first summit. I had not done anything like this before.

Dr. Mark: So as you, when you, when you decided to start working on this summit and the theme, the idea, was this difficult to come up or were you already like, I'm just going to go with the theme of the book and kind of talk through how you decided what you were going to do the summit on and what categories, what subjects, what topics.

Stephanie: Got it. Um, so the book itself runs a really broad swath of topics. It is very heavily focused on mindset related things, leadership related things. Um, figuring out like where you want to go in your career and having that be the driver for you to own your career. Um, because I had also been launching like pilot programs for my course and I had this kind of core group that I could essentially use as, uh, test discussions for topics. Um, what, what I found was that when I ask people like what parts of the course, what parts of the book resonated with you, it varied widely. Um, and so what we did is we, uh, I started writing things. I would like to interview people on and then we broke them up into dates. So, and then we, so we did theme days, five days of themes.

Stephanie: We did two on career paths, uh, because what we found was our audience was very interested in like how people got from point A to point B. Uh, we did a day on engineering entrepreneurship. We did a day on stress relief related to, you know, things you could incorporate into your professional day to help with that. Uh, and we did one on what I call power skills. So things like negotiation, dealing with gender bias, um, and interviewing experts on that. Um, so I would say that bell very naturally for me that it

was a matter of I had too many topics and how do we shrink them down to what fits on which day, which speakers are really good fit. Um, and that sort of thing.

Dr. Mark: I like this. Like I want to, I want to circle back to one, one of the things you were talking about. You said you had like a test group. Uh, so did you do a survey? You ask questions, talk us through that process of what you asked, what you were doing and how you use that information to get to this point.

Stephanie: Um, so I had a, I had two things going on. I had a pilot group of students that we were starting to run through our pilot program. And this is the high ticket program I mentioned I had at the beginning. Um, and uh, as part of the pilot I would get on weekly calls with them. Uh, and usually we do a question and answer session, but I asked them one time, I said, would you be willing to just pop on at the end and let's talk about this new thing I have coming out, uh, because I'd really like your input on the kinds of topics you would like to hear. And so it was essentially became a brainstorming session on zoom with my students about what they wanted to hear. Uh, I also did email the, uh, email my small list that I had accumulated from the book launch. Uh, and them similar questions as well. Um, you know, specifically and I mean if anyone wants to know some of the specific questions, like what I asked was, you know, what parts of the book resonated the most with you? What would you like to learn more about? Uh, I actually asked if you were interviewing somebody about this topic, if you had your dream person, who would you want to interview? Um, because that also helped me develop my speaker list for who I was going to reach out to.

Dr. Mark: That is so smart. Either there just have them tell you who they should have on it. I mean, this is great. So you took that information and then you sorted through that, you condensed it down into these topics and that's kind of what you said. Did you, did you know you wanted to do five days or did you let the topics determine how many days you are going to do the summit? How many speakers kind of, how, how did you decide that?

Stephanie: Um, so I let the, the topics determine how many days we were we were going to do. Um, and I also knew that from listening to what my summit mentor was telling me, that 25 to 30 speakers, if you're doing them over five days, was about all you wanted to take on if you were, if this was your first time. Um, and so I took that to heart. Uh, I stopped at 25 and so that worked out well cause we had five, you know, five speakers per day. Um, and of course being an engineer, I had a whole spreadsheet for this with all the topics by day, all the speakers, you know, the first speaker I was gonna ask the fifth speaker I was gonna ask because I certainly didn't get yeses when I asked all of these speakers the first time.

Dr. Mark: This is so good. Well, I want to kind of dig down into something that I think stands out about your summit and, and, and what it was like. This is a summit that was a niche within a niche. Like this is very, very niched space and we're going to come to the mission aspect in a second and what, what was around that. But I'm curious just your thoughts on on, do you think it's, it was a good thing, a powerful thing for even for other people if they're, if they're going, let me just take a step back here for a second. We've got a lot of summit hosts that are going, I've got to create this really broad summit sort

of attracts a lot of people into it and that's a very common thought process for summit hosts getting started. So I'd love for you to kind of propose or talk about the opposite aspect of that because again, a niche within a niche and how that benefited you.

Stephanie: Yeah, that is, that is such a great question and you're exactly right. People don't tend to think about that. So I think when I started with the summit concept, as we just talked through, I started with my audience, what do they need? What are they feeling? What are they not getting at work that we can give them in the summit? And because of that, it made it easy to pick topics. It made it easy to pick speakers because for example, the niche within a niche, there's a lot of companies out there doing leadership diversity things for women in engineering for organizations. I knew right off the bat that sort of speaker that could only speak to the organizational aspect was not a good fit for my summit because the women that were already reading my book that were already kind of in my community, they were individuals that wanted individual solutions they could use when they were having all these experiences at work.

Stephanie: Um, and so I think because it was such a niche within a niche, when I reached out to speakers, I got more yeses than I would've expected given that I had never run a summit before because I was very, very specific about this is who this is for, this is who we can reach, this is who we can impact if you're willing to come on the summit. Um, because one thing I would like to point out with the niche within the niche, so I'm, I interviewed all women in engineering, women in STEM. This is traditionally not an audience who is super comfortable doing any sort of video interview. Um, this is not a group that is comfortable being in front of a camera period. Um, and, and it's a group that I had to explain to them what a virtual summit was. So it wasn't just a pitch to let me interview you. It was a pitch to use this software platform that you don't know how to use in this format that you've never heard of in a lot of cases. So.

Dr. Mark: Yeah, so some, some, some challenges to overcome, but being so specific and the mission which we'll get into in just a moment, definitely helped overcome that. So let's talk about it from the audience's perspective. How do you feel like being this specific in this, you know, in this, you know, small of a window, how did that, how was that perceived by the audience? What did that do from an engagement standpoint?

Stephanie: Okay. So I first, I will say that that was my first summit and I've watched some other summits, so I don't know that I can like, say numbers versus engagement other than what I saw in terms of like percentage of people that went to the page and signed up and percentage of people that bought the thing. Um, so to give you, give you a perspective here, like lots of people expect thousands and thousands of people to come to their summit. Um, I got just under a thousand that signed up. Um, and it was, you know, for my first summit we were at about a 30% opt in rate for anyone's curious about, yeah, I'm an engineer, I know these numbers. Um, I launched the page and I in two days later I was like, these numbers aren't what I want. So I immediately had my mentor come look at the page and say, how can we tweak this so we can get, we can get up there.

Stephanie: Um, but then the people who are like buying the thing, we were selling with it, which is, uh, an all access pass. Our percentage overall was close to 5%, which was really good.

Um, at least from what I've been told for a first time summit. Um, and so from a feedback standpoint on this, um, I had a whole lot of people email me personally and I'm definitely one of those. I try and respond to all the emails and we had a Facebook group for it. So interaction there. Um, but I feel like this particular niche, it's, it's a small but mighty and very engaged list and I would much rather have people on my list who are going to engage with me, read my stuff, um, and be involved then thousands of people showing up for this that are going to unsubscribe from my stuff as soon as the summit is over and I'm never going to hear from them.

Dr. Mark: 100% with you on that. We are trying to lead essentially this evolution of summits where it shouldn't be what we call list grabber summits where it's not about the size of the list, but it's about creating a qualified and engaged audience that moves on with you. And I feel like this is perfect and, and I hope that our audience right now is listening to this all you summit hosts out there, it's better to go niche. It's better to go small and don't worry about trying to reach 10, 20, 30, 50,000 people as far as opt-ins get that thousand to 2000 people that are just really engaged, that are standing behind what your summit stands for, which I feel like this is a great segue into, let's talk about the mission of the summit and how that also helped you as some of the speakers and maybe some of the ways that you were attracting them.

Stephanie: Yeah. So, um, the mission of the summit was simply to reach these women in engineering with these very tactical tools and tips and advice, uh, that they wouldn't have access to otherwise. Um, so we were able to interview, you know, senior female engineering leaders, experts in particular areas of women in the workforce, like gender bias. Um, and we were able to like, you know, do the interview, use an hour of their time and get that out to all these, all these different women. Um, and so as we were reaching out, um, what I, what I did was, um, I had been recently turned on to a software called BombBomb, which if you've never heard of it, you can record a personalized video and it actually sits in the email. It doesn't just send you a link and send you over to like Vimeo or YouTube or something like that.

Stephanie: Um, and so I went old school, I made these little signs that said hi speaker name and I, that was the first thing in the videos that when they saw their email, they'd instantly realize, Oh, this is just for me is not some mass email she's sending to all the speakers. And I definitely internet stalk, the whole bunch of them. I went on their LinkedIn profiles, I went on their websites. I'm like, okay, how do I connect them to this mission that I need to interview you because we need to reach all these women and we need to change the retention rate of women in engineering and keep more of them in the field. Um, and I mean that is truly my mission anyways, but it was connecting what the speakers were doing, you know, with their own businesses or with their own careers to my mission.

Stephanie: And then that's how I invited them into the summit. Um, and we had a, there were two speakers specifically, um, one uh, has given, has given Ted talks. Uh, the other is considered an expert in salary negotiation, uh, for women in engineering to the point that she's been asked to like the Geneva Convention stuff to talk about the gender wage gap. Both of those, when I first, when we first came on, like the intro call before we started the interview told me, they're like, I get asked to do these all the time. And I

always say no, but because of the way you reached out, because of the way I could tell you, it actually looked at my stuff. This wasn't a mass reach out and I connected with your mission. I'm saying yes to this one. So I'd encourage anyone listening, uh, make your summit the mission, first of all, uh, and when you're reaching out, make it really, really personal, especially for these kind of big name speakers, uh, that you may think there's like no shot of you getting it all.

Dr. Mark: I mean, that's what they're looking for a lot of at that level. I mean, the big names up there, they're getting reached out and asked on a regular basis and to stand out, you've got to do. Yeah, it took more work. It was a little bit more challenging, a little bit more difficult. What look the, you know, Stephanie was able to land these big name speakers on her summit and you guys can gals can do that too. Um, Stephanie, now you've had a lot of success with that summit. You. It definitely created awareness and exposure. And I actually love to just hear maybe like one thing, one positive benefit besides, you know, building an audience, some revenue that has come from you hosting that summit.

Stephanie: I would say probably the biggest benefit that I have seen. So I already had written a book, but I don't think I necessarily realized how much the summit would really cement my expertise and what I was known for in this space. Um, I mean, yes, the list building aspect was huge, but even like the week after the summit, I had people reaching out to me, asking me about, you know, could I run a workshop, um, could I help them run a project to help with their retention of women in engineering in their organizations? Um, and so I think the, this is kind of a surprise to me cause I wasn't expecting it, but there was a whole lot of unintended consequences related to this summit. Um, that now I'm being seen as even a larger expert in this area than the book had already caused. Um, and so it, you know, it was a happy surprise to me that, um, although I got, you know, some monetary value from the summit itself, there was a heck of a lot more just because now I'm perceived as an expert and people are reaching out to me for other things.

Dr. Mark: Wow. And that is so powerful. We call these the intangible return on investment of doing a summit and there's so many, uh, and that's so good. So although there was a lot of great things that happened and a win overall went very well, there was probably some other aspects that didn't go so well. So let's talk about like maybe some of the challenges or issues that you experienced when running your summit.

Stephanie: That is such a great question as well. Okay. And I'm going to speak very specifically to like newbie mistakes because as I said, this is my first summit. Um, it was actually also my first time using the particular tech platform I chose for the summit. Um, and, and it was my first time doing this sort of cold reach-outs. Uh, and as you would suspect, just to reiterate, my background is an engineering. I worked as an engineer for 15 years. I am completely not comfortable emailing somebody cold or doing a follow up phone call. That is, that is not in my wheelhouse at all. Um, but if I can do it, you can too. So things that didn't go well. Um, let's start with speaker reach outs. Um, so he took a heck of a lot longer than I expected. Uh, I had originally allotted a month to do speaker reach outs.

- Stephanie: It took almost two. And part of the holdup, um, was that some of the speakers were working for large corporations and actually had to get permission to come on my summit. So we had to do all this like paperwork stuff and things like that. Um, and it was, it was well worth it, but it just, it took a lot longer. Um, because of that, pretty much, I had set the date from my summit starting out that we were going to run this in November before the holidays. Uh, we ended up actually having to delay the summit to mid-December because the interviews ended up getting pushed back. And then we had to do all the video and transcripts and all the, all the backend stuff that goes with it. Um, and so I think, uh, that will bring me to my next, next thing we didn't do well or next maybe thing that didn't go as well as I wanted.
- Stephanie: We did not hit our numbers on the summit, so I did not hit the numbers I wanted to get. Now, granted it turns out I probably had higher expectations than I should have given that it was my first summit. But for example, I wanted 2000 people to show up at this summit. Um, I only got 1000. Uh, and part that was because I had expected that I would have 50% opt ins and people that went through my page, which was very likely unrealistic, um, for what I got. Um, and but so moving into December, I think we had less opt-ins than we would have had otherwise. Partly caused by, you know, the delay with trying to get the speakers to respond. Um, so lesson learned there. Uh, I would say, you know, give yourself more time, especially if it's your first one. Uh, I gave myself initially four months from start to finish, I needed five this year's I'm giving myself six. Um, so speakers, numbers, trying to think if there's anything else. I would say this, this is the two biggest ones.
- Dr. Mark: And those are common. Most summit hosts are trying to jump in, ambitious, they want to get it done and give yourself more time. And if you're not going to hit it, it's okay to push the date back. It's okay to push something back to make sure that it's done correctly as well. Um, so Stephanie, let's also like dig into, so those were the initial potentially challenges that you experience. Now let's say the summit's going, we're going online, live or it's launching. Did you have any challenges with speakers or anything during the summit and if so, how did you overcome it?
- Stephanie: Okay. Um, so one of the things we were super proud of is like I said, this is like the first time using this particular platform. Uh, and we had no tech glitches of which I am aware, uh, for the, for the whole thing. Now granted I am an engineer so I was not a computer engineer. I'm an architectural engineer. Um, but I was like anticipating tech issues. So we check things 20,000 times before, before it went live. Um, the one challenge we had is, remember I said I had issues getting speakers to get back to me. There was one speaker in particular that kept on saying yes, she would do it. Yes, she would do it. Yes, she would do it anytime. I tried to nail her down for the actual interview time. Uh, and to be clear, like I wrote out a very detailed list of interview questions, sent that over to them.
- Stephanie: We had back and forth on this. We had already gone through this project process with this particular speaker. Um, every time I tried to get an actual interview time, there was no time and this was like two months running. So it should not have come as a surprise when eventually she didn't do the interview at all, which meant now, okay, so I had 25 speakers, five per day. I now had a hole at prime time on Tuesday. So from the noon to

one Eastern time slot that she was going to go in that we needed a speaker. Um, and I'm like, okay, well what am I going to do? So her, her topic happened to be one. I also teach. Uh, and so I'm like, you know what, I'm going to record myself teaching my framework for this. Uh, and I'm going to be the, the noon speaker on that day. And that's what we did. Uh, we recorded that literally the week before this. Um, so the, this is pretty much a last minute thing. Um, that session was one of the ones we got the most positive feedback about. So, uh, I guess it goes to the importance of being flexible when you're running that, that first one especially.

Dr. Mark: Oh, that is so important. And you, you've gotta be resourceful entrepreneurs gotta be resourceful. Gotta be able to act on your feet and you handled that very well. So as we start to wrap up this interview here, Stephanie, I'd love to kind of look at maybe from an overview, lessons learned, uh, you know, what is some, like maybe a big takeaway that you've got after running your first summit that you could share back to our summit hosts?

Stephanie: Yeah, I would say the first biggest takeaway I would share, especially if you are one of those people, you're like thinking about doing a summit, but you haven't done one yet. If it's your first one, find that mentor, find that course, find that program, find that person who has done this before. Uh, I can say the, the, the mentor I had, like I had her go into my pages and check things when they did not work. Uh, I attribute that to not having any tech glitches because I was able to do that. Um, you don't know what you don't know. Um, so it sets you up self up for success by having someone guide you along that process.

Dr. Mark: That is so important right there and that is a great takeaway. I've got another question that actually just popped up to my mind being this was a niche, a niche within a niche and most of your audience is, is used to like live or physical things, but even like the speakers were unaware for the most part, like a virtual summit, there's different kind of platform like from a customer service standpoint when you are building, when this audience was coming on app, the opting on, I can only imagine as I've had very similar experiences in health professional niches and things like that. How did, what were the kind of more, more common, either, not necessarily complaints but questions or you know, oversights that maybe on the next one you'll be more clear so people understand before it actually even happens.

Stephanie: Okay. Uh, I would say one thing actually was related to the tech stuff. So the platform I was using, um, works really well on any of the modern internet browsers. Internet Explorer is a modern internet browser. However, because some of the people watching, uh, including some of the speakers were, are watching on enterprise software at their firms. Uh, when they tried to play some of the videos, they didn't work on Internet Explorer. Um, so that was probably one of the first questions I got that caused me to go back and send an email out to everyone saying, please watch this on Google Chrome or really anything else besides Internet Explorer. Um, similarly, the language I used to talk about this is, I didn't necessarily call it a virtual summit until right before we were ready to actually launch the virtual summit. I talked about it as an online conference because people understood that, you know, it was relating to my audience in their language.

- Stephanie: Oh, we know in an in person conference is, so an online conference is, is the same kind of thing except for instead of only speaking for 30 people, you can speak to whoever wants to show up. Um, and so I would say those are two big things. If you are in a niche that is not used to the whole online world, which I say this is kind of ironic in a way, right? I mean we're engineers, um, but we're not used to seeing virtual summits, conferences online. Um, I also had a number of speakers be like, how can I do this in my organization because they really like the idea. Um, so yeah. Does that answer your question?
- Dr. Mark: Yeah, absolutely. That is awesome. Yeah, and that is a question customer. The customer service aspect is one that I need to start pulling out of more people because that's a large aspect that we, we don't really talk about a lot, um, on this podcast anyways. Um, and it's a big part of summit is you've got a thousand or 5,000 or 10,000 people watching your summit. Are you prepared to handle the customer service aspect of Hey, I can't get my internet, the video to play? Where's the workbook out? Where is, you know, so that was excellent. Now Stephanie, this has been absolutely phenomenal before we like round this out here, I know people are, you know, are some of those are going, Mark, I want more Stephanie in my life. Where can I ask her more questions about her concepts and maybe I'm a female engineer wanting to reach out. Where are you hanging out at and what's the best way for them to get in touch with you?
- Stephanie: Okay, so I am hanging out at engineersrising.com, is my website. Um, if you go there you can contact me. You can see many blogs, lots of free resources, connections if you are interested in my book. Uh, also if you want to know more about virtual summit, so I am summit host. As I said, I've been on a summit. Um, some of that is not necessarily anything I will teach, but I am also happy if you want to pick my brain, hit the contact button and just send me an email. Um, and you can also follow me on social media. I'm StephTheEngineer on Instagram, StephanieSlocumPE on LinkedIn, and I'm sure we're going to link to all these ins units anyways.
- Dr. Mark: Absolutely, definitely. Go follow Stephanie there. Reach out to her, pick her brain. That's such a generous, a generous offer you've given us all there. Stephanie, I just want to say thanks again for taking this time and pouring everything out on the table for us. This has been phenomenal.
- Stephanie: Oh, thanks for having me, Mark. This has been a blast.
- Dr. Mark: Absolutely. I had a lot of fun and thank you all you summit hosts for tuning in to Stephanie and I. I'm Dr. Mark T. Wade, your host here at the virtual summit podcast. And just remember your message matters. So go out and make an impact in the world. Don't forget to check out all these amazing goodies and links over to Stephanie over at the show notes at podcast.virtualsummits.com/136. 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. 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.