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#162: How To Build Authority with AI with Cyndee Woolley

Janice Hostager: You have probably spent years building your reputation as a business owner, but now AI is deciding whether or not people see it. The world of public relations is changing fast because today credibility is not only built through traditional media, but it's also built through the signals AI tools pick up about your business online.

And whether we like it or not, tools like ChatGPT and Perplexity and Google's AI Overviews are starting to shape who gets recommended and who gets overlooked. So how do you build authority in a world where AI is helping influence visibility and trust?

Today, I'm talking with PR strategist Cindy Woolley, founder of C2 Communications, and she has over two decades in the PR game. She was doing press releases and media placements long before AI was a thing, and she is here to tell us how traditional PR and AI search come together. And spoiler, the rules have changed big time.

Because PR is not just about publicity anymore. It's about building a reputation strong enough that both people and AI recognize your expertise. Here's my chat with Cindy.

Hey, Cindy. Welcome to My Weekly Marketing.

Cyndee Woolley: Hi, Janice. It's So nice to see you.

Janice Hostager: So you've been in PR for a while, right? So, when did you realize that AI was a game changer, and what made you really go all in on it?

Cyndee Woolley: You know it's so interesting how AI has been really evolving the market, and I had a client, gosh, it was probably like 2022, who approached me and said, "Hey, I have some AI agents that write my press releases. I really just need you to see... send them out." And I read them, and they were terrible.

They were absolutely terrible. So I was hell-bent against using AI for the [00:02:00] longest time, but we've... We really went very deep into training about a year and a half ago to try and see how we could leverage it, how we could make it?

better. And I tell you, it... When you learn to use the tool correctly, it saves you so much time.

And so, Yeah.

Janice Hostager: Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: about a year and a half we're- we've been all in. Obviously not cutting the human out, but definitely working the AI in.

Janice Hostager: Yeah. It is very powerful if you know how to use it, like you said. If you're just tapping the surface, it's okay. But I think once you really get in and start applying it to tasks in your office, and especially, looking at data and summarizing things and all of that, I think it becomes a really powerful tool for small businesses.

So that's on the internal side, right? So let's talk a little bit about how it's used or how it's changing externally. So we talking about GEO is generative engine optimization, right? So explain that to me like I'm five. What does that all mean?

Cyndee Woolley: Well, it's you, we were most concerned about how are we found when you Google yourself, right? You

know, when I launched My business, my, my company's 17 years old. I've been doing PR and marketing for 25 years now. When I first launched, we were doing a lot of educational programs.

What does Google say about you? What can people find about Google? They're going to ChatGPT, so now it's what does ChatGPT say about you? And it's- It's really funny to see that some of the larger platforms, municipalities especially, they're not coming up first on, on AI platforms. A small nonprofit client that has started [00:04:00] taking...

When we've got people searching for certain topics, and we support a local municipality, and nonprofit blog is coming up just as often as municipality's \$150,000 website. And I'm just guessing it's 150,000. I don't know the actual number of that. But it's just so fascinating to see how that dynamic is and if you're not adjusting and leaving what I call your blueprint across multiple platforms, it's gonna be a lot harder for you to be found.

Janice Hostager: That's really interesting, 'cause I've had that same experience... and I'm a small podcast, I have a small business, and

I've had several people say, "Oh, I found you on ChatGPT," or, whatever, and it's surprising to me because I haven't really done a whole lot other than my typical SEO, and we can get into that a little more about how that overlaps, but I haven't done a whole lot in terms of just getting my reputation out there. But that's not to say that there isn't something that I'm doing without realizing it, right?

Cyndee Woolley: Mm-hmm.

Janice Hostager: So, I guess I would ask, how do you implement an authority blueprint? what is that? How can a business use something like that?

Cyndee Woolley: I think right now you've got your AI tools that are doing deep research on individuals and they're looking for press coverage.

They're looking at your LinkedIn profile. They're looking at the structure of your website-- can they navigate it? Are there headers, the right headers in there? And podcasting is really coming up as one of those one of those indicators of authority

And so that's like your podcast is likely why you're coming up on, on these AI platforms.

But I think it's a good idea for executives especially to go to AI tools [00:06:00] and don't just say, you know What can you find out about Cindy Woolley with C2 Communications, right? Because that's a service level, it's very broad. I would suggest that you do a deep research prompt that says, "I'm a B2B customer," or, " i'm looking to... I'm meeting with the executive named S- Cindy Woolley and here's her company and here is her LinkedIn profile. What can you... Can you give me a briefing about her so that I can go in the meeting more prepared?"

Right? And that deep research prompt, which I'll provide you with a sample of What that is so that? your listeners can have it. When you get that prompt, you get a very specific understanding of what kind of work they do, where they've been in the news and you're gonna be able to see where you've got gaps or where you're not really being found, but it's similar for companies where they can start searching for communications companies near me.

What are the top communications companies that you can recommend in my area? And start seeing what populates, because that's gonna tell you ultimately where you've got gaps. Once you do that?

though, now you need to build your authority foundation and set your sights for creating and optimizing your content moving forward, maybe making some changes that make a little more sense on your past content.

But I tell you, executives really, really need to consider writing books and doing podcast tours and ensuring they're contributing their thought leader articles, because that's gonna... That's, at the end of the day, that's where they're gonna get found.

Janice Hostager: Okay. [00:08:00] Those are - in the visibility And authority stages, right? So it's less, maybe a little less SEO search engine optimization, so your website isn't necessarily the-- I would say the pivot that would change things. I mean, you can have a great website but not be seen as an authority because there aren't these authority markers out there. So you're saying that we should look for articles that were- Writing maybe on other sites or that were written about us and podcasts that we are guests on, books that we've written. Is that the sort of things?

Cyndee Woolley: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'll tell you, I've had lots of conversations with individuals about using AI tools to generate blogs and generate their thought leader articles.

And I think that there's a very valuable way to use AI to get the brainstorm, but you can't leave the human element out of it, because the thing that's gonna set you aside, is the locality, it is your specific knowledge set, and it's what you know about that community, right?

So your thought leader article that has real insights, real human insights about knowledge and leadership, the things?

that are said in the meeting but not written down for AI to generate from, those are the articles that are gonna be really the strongest. And that's the kind of level that you're gonna need to be thinking on now. So it's, I guess it's really gonna up the game.

Janice Hostager: So yeah, I think you're absolutely right, because I can usually tell if somebody has really thought it through versus being very surface level, which a lot of blog content honestly is. A lot of blogs out there just don't go deep. What about the location? Does it matter? I mean, if we publish something on, say, Substack [00:10:00] versus our website, are there authority markers like, there is with, domain authority, like there is with SEO, or does it seem to pull randomly or does it pull from everywhere and then look at everything or,

I

Cyndee Woolley: Everywhere it looks everything- Yeah. Oh, definitely. You'll definitely see, news outlets ranking high up there, as a, as sources that have high authority. But it will crawl your website. So everything you can put on your blog, on your website that's, that's high level content, will be helpful.

And, something that I advise my clients too is if you get an article, if you get something in the news or a notice that, that might be, not heavily publicized on a, on an external platform but, it's a blip out there, Put a little blog introduction to it and put that link on your website, and now when AI is crawling your website, it will find that article more easily.

It'll find that recognition more easily, or the different pieces of the puzzle that, that you're putting out there.

Janice Hostager: Okay. So if you wrote something on another site, is that what you're saying? And then shared

Cyndee Woolley: Mm-hmm.

Janice Hostager: Own site with an intro. that doesn't flags for, Google that having duplicate content out there.

Cyndee Woolley: You don't wanna copy the exact content, and you don't wanna put the entire article, but if you put, a two-paragraph summary of the article on your blog, and then a link back to the original content, now you're not gonna get flagged for SEO. You're gonna have, more authority because it's gonna appear, it's gonna appear more, and it's gonna be easier to find.

Janice Hostager: Okay. Okay. Good tip. So you have, a four-step process, right? About, for working with AEO or GEO. I'm already confused.

Cyndee Woolley: I know. Between AI and Geo, it's definitely hard. Yes.

We've got a [00:12:00] four-step guide. We've, we s- we've talked about two of the steps.

Janice Hostager: So step one was...

Cyndee Woolley: Audit your digital footprint, so that's when you're gonna go do a deep dive on how you appear. Then you're gonna build your authority foundation.

Step three is earn external validation. That's where I want you to pursue actively, third-party mentions expert, the expert contributions.

Hand- having a podcast tour now is even more important, right? So you're producing your own podcast, which I have my own podcast too, which I love 'cause I have such great conversations. But, reaching beyond your existing platforms into other parties, so those names are gonna definitely help you.

And as much as PR people are afraid of AI at the time right now, just pushing press releases and getting some media mentions about your clients right now, it's gonna help them get, get noticed and racked up on, on AI so quickly. So that's... I think that's ex- exciting right now. And then I guess I kinda skipped ahead to step four with- Create a connected presence, making sure that you're putting all of those links together and you're sharing the third-party mentions, you're sharing the articles, where you're quoted, and you're creating all of that so it's cross-referenced on your content.

Janice Hostager: Gotcha. Okay, I'm gonna hop back here. So let's go back to audit your digital footprint, which we talked about a little bit for sure. So what happens if some of that information up and, it's wrong or incomplete? What tools do we have or what recourse do we have to fix something like that?

Cyndee Woolley: That's a great question. You're gonna ultimately have to go back to the original source, the original website, where it's at.

Janice Hostager: Okay.

Cyndee Woolley: because ChatGPT [00:14:00] is not storing that right there, on... it's not gonna store that and give the same data over and over. Every search is a new search, right? So if there's an error on your LinkedIn profile, go fix your LinkedIn profile.

And if there's a, an error on a listing on a website, that's something you're gonna have to go back and correct too. But sometimes you have to manage the do I go back and fix or do I produce more, right? Because if you're investing your time and you're a small business owner, sometimes it's just producing more to push down some of the old stuff,

That makes a lot more sense.

But one of the reasons LinkedIn is preferred as a source of authority and credibility on AI tools is because it's got your work history on there, because people are there to do business, so there's some reliability. , It's got, some of the endorsements and the connections, and so forth that, that give it the sense of I'm here intentionally creating, content that, that is, updated, that's accurate, that's got my work history, that resume.

So, I would say if you have not touched your LinkedIn bio in a while, definitely that's... you wanna put that on a high priority on a quarterly basis.

Janice Hostager: do we still have to worry about keywords in something like that? I know Google was saying that it's less important in terms of search, but what about AI-- how does AI pick up on, on different things? Do they use individual words or do they use, concepts? I don't even know how this all works, so yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: You know-- keywords are still utilized, but I think that the problem with keywords is when people are flooding the internet with blogs that are, quote-unquote, "SEO optimized" in the, in [00:16:00] the prompt that are give- that's given, that's creating a lot of junk and a lot of noise out there.

The... One of my clients is a real estate brokerage, and so we've seen, studies come out from the Florida Association, of Realtors that, \, recommends when you're putting a thought leader article, don't just talk about the statistics in a market, talk about what can \$700,000 get me for a home in this market, or what is it like living in this neighborhood, because the questions that people are asking is changing, and that's what they're asking on ChatGPT, and other AI tools.

And so if you're putting , the question out there and you're answering the question, you're not just dropping surface level keywords out there, you're actually providing, something that's of value, that's an interpretation, that's a humanistic element that, that, , is gonna give them something better to work with.

That's gonna increase your authority more so, than just dropping the keywords of the market, Right.

Janice Hostager: Right.

Cyndee Woolley: and it's gonna bring You more qualified candidates too.

Janice Hostager: You would really need to think about who that ideal customer is and think about the types of questions that they're asking, which is something you always want to do in marketing anyway. But I have heard that before too, that AI platforms love the question and answers. They love bullet points near the top of the page, something that they can scan quickly and get an answer back quickly

Cyndee Woolley: You know, I think AI and the influencer age really led to a glut of false testimonies and people out pushing a s- the same narrative to try and generate affiliate commissions, and links. And, , they're hustling and they're trying to earn some business.

But it's a... It's really disrupted the advertising market because you get a lot of [00:18:00] clicks , or the intent is there and you're getting a lot of views, but it's not necessarily, generating the,.

Revenue, right? The actual purchase. And I think from a PR standpoint, that's where we need to really be conscious that- What we're putting out is authentic and that we're developing content that is of high value and not just mass-produced, that, that's gonna flood the market and disrupt what we do, right.

That if we get really strong articles out there, or , we're getting publicity because of the human element and the story and the brand and the connection that goes with your brand and your thought leadership, that's gonna be so much, so much more powerful. I was just reading an article about from Joe Pulizzi, I'm...

I think I'm saying that wrong, with Content Marketing Institute. He's the founder.

And, he was saying, or exploring- th- this idea that we're no longer building these large communities because those large communities are just overwhelming at this point. , The quantity, outweighed the quality, and now the focus needs to be on, authentic trust, and I think it's a time for small businesses to shine in that element.

Janice Hostager: Yes. Yeah, I would 100% agree , with that because we have-- We, can only be authentic. When, once you start, getting the bots out there, and, , you're dealing with videos of people that aren't actually videos, then, you lose that pretty fast. And as small businesses, we have that opportunity to just be ourselves and put ourselves out there because people like to do business with people. Talk to me a little bit [00:20:00] about press releases. I-- I actually started in PR, so this is back in the dark age.

Cyndee Woolley: Age.

Janice Hostager: we actually, would type up a press release and send it out physically in an envelope to... I think email was just kinda coming on the scene then. But send it out physically to the press to have them run things, and

Cyndee Woolley: Mm-hmm.

Janice Hostager: That's not the way things are done anymore, obviously. But, what's happening with media right now? Do we still write press releases for media? Do we write it for SEO? Because that seems to have been another benefit of press releases and putting them online. how are those being viewed in today's age?

Cyndee Woolley: Yeah that's a... There's a change, in how that structure is. I..., i would say that if I have a genuine story, I have A one-off that I know is perfect, I don't write a press release. I j- I just pick up the phone or call or email, , the reporter. , Actually, most of the time we're texting.

Sometimes we e- I- they don't respond to my email and I'm like, "Hey, did you get my email?" And they're like, " no, just text me, man." , So it's just crazy. Think, pitch emails and stories that when you've got that trust is definitely more for those in-depth stories that you can pull together, right?

And that human side of things. There's still, a big room for , the press release. I don't think that it's just an SEO tool, but it's content. So I always tell people, "I'm drafting a press release. We're sending it out. , It's gonna generate something,, but put it on your, put it on your blog so that it's there.

Put it on your social, but don't just put it on your social, put it on there two or three times in different formats so that you're maximizing that." , And I think that there is still really a strong push for press releases that get to the heart of the story, that [00:22:00] really have something meaningful to share.

We've all seen the corporate press releases that have, it's the mandatory announcement that says nothing.

And that doesn't get the same amount of traction as the one that really has something, to connect , with the people, and that's, that's powerful. So I don't, I think that from a media relations side, , there's always gonna be a human, but I am concerned about that next generation of PR person, because when you've typed it up, and you've taken the time to really type it up and make sure you get the message right

And mail it out, and you know how expensive that was, right? Yes, it does

Janice Hostager: I didn't... yes, it was corporate, but yes. Yeah. Well,

you hit on something that's really important. The other thing that I had was a big fat list of contacts that I

Cyndee Woolley: that Mm-hmm. That

Janice Hostager: call

and

talk to, and I

had developed a relationship. They knew my name. They had a

question about s- the industry that I

was

in.

They would call and talk to me "Do you have a story about this?" And vice versa. I would pitch them stories. So that

Cyndee Woolley: story. And my first one ever was a great story

Mm-hmm. And I have a relationship with

Janice Hostager: there. So I would imagine going forward, that's still gonna be important. They're still gonna be writing stories. A good reporter's not just gonna turn to ChatGPT to get content.

Cyndee Woolley: yeah, no, the reporters are still looking for people.

Janice Hostager: Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: I think they're going to ChatGPT for, fact-checking or researching or tipping into things. But no, that... I think the relationship's even more important now in, in knowing which reporters to go to, and which editors. But they move so quickly now, you know.

Janice Hostager: Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: I think, that's why the cellphone's so important. I work with a client in the sporting industry, [00:24:00] and we literally had four sports reporters. Their contracts ended at the same time, and they all moved into different markets, so we had to onboard new reporters.

But, it's just, you gotta reach out and rebuild and restore those relationships sometimes, you know?

Janice Hostager: Right. And so for a small business owner, it's okay to reach out. Now, I, see I used to do that on Twitter. Now Fewer are on twitter I've noticed too. I'm not on Twitter anymore. But, , if... Just trying to figure out who those people are that you wanna outreach to, and also

most people

have a story that they're actually really interested in. Because like you said, that corporate kind of dry press release that there's no story there, right? So then they get bombarded with sort of thing. So I was just kinda curious, like if that's changed at all since AI's come on the scene, or if that's really the same process as a business owner, that if you have something that really it has a newsworthy element to it, that you should just reach out to reporters. And you're saying, go ahead. Yes. Right?

Cyndee Woolley: Absolutely. I will say, we use, we do use a distribution service, as well as in-person relationships. And, I have seen, I have seen some reporters on LinkedIn, rep-journalists, very established PR people get upset when they receive a broadcast press release. and I was like, "Man, you're on the list.

You're getting the news. If you don't like it, just hit delete." There is, there's so little time in the day. Don't get upset that you got a freaking press release that, went through the broadcast. If it's interesting, pick it up. If it's not, hit the delete button and move on, you know?

Janice Hostager: So, , we already talked about your authority foundation and how to build that up. What if somebody feels like they're behind on all of that? Is there a place that you should start with building that authority? I know you mentioned LinkedIn. Is there some other place? It takes a while to write a book. [00:26:00] Podcasting, I would assume.

Cyndee Woolley: I think that the biggest step that people miss is really what is your goal and who's your audience? Because so many of us are trying to be everything to everyone, and that's just never gonna work, right? We have limited time.

And if you're a generalist, you're a generalist and we're in an age of specialists, right?

Especially when you get deeper into your career. So really take time to sit down and establish your goals, and your target audience. And from there, I think it's great to start a podcast and start having conversations, and you can use AI tools to help you brainstorm those, topics that might be in a book or, a- an editorial calendar for your thought leader articles.

Because if you can plug in and bounce those ideas off of ChatGPT and say, "I think that this is my target audience. This is my goal. Can you help me come up with some ideas for thought

leader articles? What's trending on s- based on social media in the past, week or two weeks that I can comment on?"

That's where you can get the AI to help you narrow your focus and then be able to leverage some PR, leverage some thought leader articles or really refine your social media presence, by utilizing some of the research that's there. So, I think that's the place where you really start is get an idea on your editorial.

Get your plan together then get your editorial, calendar kinda guideline rolling, and then find the medium that works the best for you. Podcasting, fantastic. Absolutely gotta be on LinkedIn. I am not on Twitter anymore. I'm a listener. I'm a lurker there. But, I'm not even that active on [00:28:00] other social networks. LinkedIn's really where it's at, I think, right now

Janice Hostager: And it might be a good place to be for getting discovered by journalists as well. So if you have an expertise in an area, journalists use LinkedIn too, correct?

Cyndee Woolley: Mm-hmm. Absolutely.

Janice Hostager: Okay, step three was earn external validation. We just talked Quite a bit about that, and then I wanna go to step four, which was get a connected presence?

Is that what it was? Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: presence, right? Make...

Janice Hostager: So what does-- Tell me-- Talk to me a little more about that. What does that actually mean?

Cyndee Woolley: Yeah. So when you're on a podcast, when you're a guest on a podcast, don't just be a guest and let them share you. You share the podcast. You share a video clip. You share... Draft a blog about it and what, what went well about it. Post it on your social media, right? So now you've got the authority of being, that th- on that third party endorsement, Right.

When you're on that someone else's podcast, when you leave the little breadcrumbs of content, in other areas, it's gonna make it easier for you to find, and it's a win-win situation. I love podcasting too, because it's a longer form conversation, and for a while, as Twitter erupted, what, 15, 20 years ago, we were really so proud of how much we...

content we could get into 144 characters, right?

Janice Hostager: Right.

Cyndee Woolley: the depth and the understanding and the connection in that element is, it's a lot lower than someone who's gonna sit there and listen for 30 or 45 minutes. So that's... I think

that's part of my big shift into, promoting podcasts too. Not just because AI is there, but because it's, it feels a little more authentic in [00:30:00] itself.

Janice Hostager: You're right, a podcast episode is long-form content. It can be broken up and repurposed. It can be,

Cyndee Woolley: Mm-hmm.

Janice Hostager: Know Every podcast interview that we do on my podcast gets put in a PDF format. oftentimes I will create blog posts around it as well, definitely social media around it.

And those are things that AI can help with. They can, do that fast. Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: 100%., I will tell you too that, So we've got... We've put a few of our clients on podcast tours recently, and, Some of them were newbies,

Very new, very low following. I said, "That's okay," because we all need a little practice. But a few of them had significant channels where they were getting, thousands of downloads, in a month, or they had a YouTube channel with 50, 60, 70,000 viewers.

So part of this cross-connected platform is, when you're capturing the video, even if you don't put the whole thing on YouTube, putting a 60-second to 90-second clip on your YouTube channel with a link back to your podcast is now boosting your SEO,

it's boosting your GEO, and, it's giving people the bite-sized content that they're engaging with on, on YouTube.

And so you can just expand, and honest to God, that used to be, such a barrier to entry for small-time podcasters, because who's gonna edit and clip and, when you listen to that podcast, 3,000 times and trying to get the right 60-second clip. You've got Opus Clips, Opus Video Pro.

I don't know. My assistant uses it 'cause, she's amazing, but it's Opus, and it cuts your [00:32:00] video's content down, and it gives you suggestions, and

It's just fantastic. So totally worth that investment, to save some time

Janice Hostager: Yeah.

Cyndee Woolley: and get yourself some more, content out of it, more bang for the buck.

Janice Hostager: Yeah. Descript does

Cyndee Woolley: Yeah.

Janice Hostager: well. It'll give me, five different options just, the... in a flash. So it's very easy that way. Where can people find out more about you, Cindy?

Cyndee Woolley: Absolutely. Look for me on LinkedIn. My name is spelled uniquely. I'm sure you'll see it in the show notes, so I'm very easy to find, one of the blessings and curses of a unique name. Just search for Cindy Woolley, or you can go to my website, which is c2-com.com. And I'm really excited because we're taking this blueprint, and we are turning it into a public impact book series.

And, so we are looking for some authors that are looking to get their word out, get their authority out there, and really, head, head strongly into the next season of AI.

Janice Hostager: Great. Thank you so much for joining me today. I appreciate your time. Good stuff.

Cyndee Woolley: Thank you so much. Thank you, Jen.

Speaker 2: I hope you learned a few ways that you can use AI to increase your visibility and your authority today. For more information about anything we talked about, you can visit our show notes at myweeklymarketing.com/162. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.