

## Marketing Smarts, Episode 35

A Marketing Podcast

June 6, 2012

Guest: Melanie Notkin

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**Matthew:** Hello. Welcome to Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant, Managing Editor here at MarketingProfs, and I thank you for listening.

Melanie Notkin is a savvy auntie – more accurately I should say that Melanie Notkin is “the savvy auntie.” Being an aunt herself and recognizing the lack of organized community or resources for women with children in their lives but no children of their own, Melanie launched @[SavvyAuntie](#) on Twitter in 2007 and [SavvyAuntie.com](#) in 2008.

She quickly discovered that there were a lot of women out there happy to express their pride in aunthood and find out more about what they could be doing for and with their nieces, nephews, godchildren, and others. Since then the Savvy Auntie sisterhood has continued to grow and grow, leading a book in 2011, numerous appearances by Melanie on radio and television, and an expanding recognition by toy manufacturers and others that aunties are a valuable and hither to unaddressed market.

I invited Melanie to Marketing Smarts to talk about the evolution of Savvy Auntie, how it grew into a thriving business, and what she has learned along the way. The following conversation is the result.

Before we get started, I'd like to remind you that if you like what you hear on Marketing Smarts, and even if you don't, you can always leave us a review in iTunes or a comment on our site. You're also welcome to reach out to me directly via email at [MattG@MarketingProfs.com](mailto:MattG@MarketingProfs.com).

Let's get started. Melanie, welcome to Marketing Smarts.

**Melanie:** I'm happy to be here. Thank you.

**Matthew:** I'm so glad you could join us. You are the brains and the brawn behind SavvyAuntie.com. I wondered if we could just start out by you explaining to everyone what a savvy auntie is.

**Melanie:** A savvy auntie essentially is any woman who loves a child that's not her own. Specifically Savvy Auntie is really a community for those who are not mothers themselves and lend their eternal love, energy, and perhaps their discretionary income and time toward the children in their lives – their nieces and nephews by relation or by choice, their friend's kids, their godchildren, their neighbor's children, their coworker's children.

Essentially I break it down like this. If a woman has ever spent full retail price at Baby Gap, she's probably a Savvy Auntie.

**Matthew:** You spend a lot of time on Savvy Auntie and elsewhere talking about how you don't have to be a mother to be maternal. What do you mean by that?

**Melanie:** You don't. As I say, babies are born from the womb, maternity is born from the soul. There are many ways to mother. One could not say that Mother Theresa was not a

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maternal being. One could not say that Oprah Winfrey, who runs a school for young girls in Africa, is not maternal.

Many women are born with a maternal instinct. There are some who say that they have no interest in children, and frankly some of those women are mothers themselves. The biology of giving birth to a child is not necessarily the same thing as those who have an emotional and maybe even an existential connection with the children in their lives.

*Matthew:* It's interesting that you mentioned Mother Theresa, because also elsewhere you wrote that if you're in a convent and not having children then no one makes a comment about it, but it seems to me that women outside the convent just in daily life like there's a lot of pressure on women to have children. There's not exactly a stigma, but you point to a lot of cases where if women don't have children people either look askance at it or they assume you've either made choices or something like that.

It seems like Savvy Auntie, the movement itself, is built around trying to counteract or even just draw more attention to all this social kind of – stigma is the wrong word – that there's almost a prejudice around, as you put it, childless women.

What are some of the things that you've been doing through Savvy Auntie to counteract that, or at least raise people's awareness about this as an issue for women who for one reason or another don't happen to have children?

*Melanie:* First of all, there's a notion that childless women are the outliers, that we're this tiny group of women who have no interest in having children of our own. In fact, 40% of American women through 44 are childless today in America. We don't even know what the number would be age 45+.

That's a resounding number, considering that in 1976 that number was just 35%. What we're seeing so many decades later is that the number is growing and has been growing faster and faster over the last five or six years since I've started to look at it.

A) We're not outliers.

B) We're not necessarily choosing not to have children.

There is without question a group of women and men who are child-free by choice, who have made a distinct decision and choice not to have children. For them it is the right decision. In fact, they are a part and component of the Savvy Auntie community. There are those on the other side who desperately want children, but don't have the biological ability to yet have children. Hopefully many of them will.

And there are some, like me, who are what I call circumstantially infertile where we are unable to have children because we haven't found the right partner. Yes, we can go back to the idea that women can have children on their own, but most of us, in fact 81% of unmarried women hope to have children one day. They are waiting for love, as I have been. So it's not that we've chosen not to have children. It's that we have in a positive way decided to have a loving relationship before we have those children.

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Finally, there's this idea of the career woman, which is perhaps the more politically correct term for the spinster or the old maid. There are no career men, so I always find it curious when someone calls a woman a "career woman."

In the 1960s, perhaps the early part of the 1970s, if a woman called herself a career woman she made the choice to go further with her career. A choice, by the way, that we don't really have today. 50% of American women work. Of those 50% many of them are not mothers, because there are no stay-at-home-aunts, right?

These women are choosing to pay the bills. As they get married later and have children later and spend more time in college and getting graduate degrees, they are not having children as soon as their mother's children. They're not necessarily delaying this on purpose, they are waiting again for a relationship and in the meantime they're also paying the bills.

*Matthew:* Right. It's funny that you say that there are no career men, I'll be honest, I had never thought of that. But, it's true, they don't say "career men." There are plenty of men who don't want children. Some very actively don't want children and some probably shouldn't have children.

It seems to me that this whole community that in a sense you've tapped into and also sort of brought into being as a community, part of it is there because of more and more women entering the work force and more women pursuing careers. So there is some element of this career focus that informs the Savvy Auntie movement, right?

*Melanie:* Well, the acronym, the market niche, I've dubbed PANK; professional and no kids. The fact that she has a job is actually a wonderful tribute to her, because she's paying the bills and she's contributing the economy.

On the reverse side, often enough as you and your audience know well, when we talk about marketing to women we often assume that all women are mothers.

*Matthew:* Yes.

*Melanie:* And quickly the verbiage goes from women to mothers, and mothers to women, as if they are all the same. Yet, we know and I've just pointed at the data that that's not true.

The number changes now and again, but let's say 85% of household purchases are made by (people say) the mother. No, it's women. When those women are single it's 100% of the buying decisions on that household.

So in fact when we look at women at work we have to not think of them as women who are heartless and not contributing to the future of America by having children. We have to think of them as women who live today who are contributing very influentially into the U.S. economy.

*Matthew:* Right. As I said before, there was this community, I would say sort of latently out there, the PANKs and the Savvy Aunties more generally, and you've kind of brought them into focus and brought this community into being through, first and foremost, the Savvy

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Auntie website. But, did Savvy Auntie the idea start out as an idea for a website or you must have had some other idea or at least some initial idea in mind that wasn't necessarily "We'll launch a website and that will be the beginning of things."

What happened before you launched SavvyAuntie.com?

*Melanie:* I myself was in the Summer of 2007, five years ago, a single and childless women. I continue to be the same. I realized then that there were no modern resources for the cosmopolitan and everything seemed like old Aunt DeeDee with 12 cats. Yet here we were.

Childless women, by the way, are some of the wealthiest women in America because they have income and discretionary income. Generally the higher educated you are, with the exception of those who go for PhDs, but those who get college degrees and perhaps Masters degrees are more likely to be childless for a longer period of time.

Those women didn't have resources to do what they love to do part of the time, which was to take care of the children in their lives. I say they are secondary caregivers and primary gift givers. Yet marketers weren't able to reach us.

For instance, my nephews first birthday a number of years ago. I had no idea what to buy him and I would buy him the world. This was years before I thought of Savvy Auntie. I went to Toys R' Us and I said, "What would a one year old boy want?" I went to the nostalgic toys, the ones I knew worked best, like Sesame Street. I went to the obvious trucks and balls.

I went to things that anybody who had any sort of brain might think of in terms of gifts. But, I had no idea what toys were hot, what toys were innovative, what toys boys really craved even at age one. I began to realize that there was nothing out there for us, and not only that but we were being neglected by marketers when we were the ones who actually wanted that information. We want to be the hero.

So I thought, "How am I going to leverage this as a businesswoman in the marketplace to discover a niche, identify the niche, and then create a place for the niche to live or exist or to communicate?" Then even more importantly on the emotional piece is, "How would I give them an opportunity to feel validated and to feel like true contributors to what I call the American Family Village?"

I decided I would launch a multiplatform media company. This is before social media really came to be. Facebook was not yet open to grownups. Twitter was already around, but I wasn't yet aware of it. I became aware of it in the Summer of 2007 right after I had the idea and actually was @SavvyAuntie on Twitter in August of 2007, just 11 months before I launched SavvyAuntie.com.

While I didn't know, of course, that there would be a Facebook page with 80,000 Facebook fans a few years down the line, I did imagine having a book. Last year in April of 2011 I published my first book and it became a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller.

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I do have many ideas of how this platform will grow and I do continue to build it. I've done television, etcetera. Thankfully I had the foresight of knowing this, a website today especially, but even four or five years ago, is an anchor. You have to have it to exist. You need a storefront.

But really people don't go to websites anymore unless it's basically a Google search. They find each other through social networks.

*Matthew:* One of the things that jumped out at me about SavvyAuntie.com itself was you have blogs, because you have a lot of people contributing blog content, you have a community and forums, things like that. You actually have a lot of staff and these experts writing for it. So it may be an anchor or a hub, but it seems like it's very rich content-centric hub where you have a lot of people contributing to it, so you're kind of a publisher. I know you kind of list yourself as the editor, it's sort of self-consciously done so.

The interesting thing to me is the difference between, as you mentioned, 19,000 followers on Twitter and the 81,000 fans on Facebook. I think as a community platform you're really showing how much more effective Facebook is because it does really allow this interaction. Have you found that to be the case?

*Melanie* Without a doubt. You're right. Thank you for building back up the website. [Inaudible 0:15:10] to put it down, nor the extraordinary experts that contribute. The content, by the way, every single article on there is dedicated to the aunt's point of view, so it's very unique and no other website does that.

In terms of community, and there is an active community on SavvyAuntie.com because it's private and can be anonymous, where aunts can bring up the problems that they may not be able to put up on Facebook when their sister might be their friend on Facebook.

On Facebook it's very interesting because the conversation can continue over a day, whereas on Twitter after a couple of hours that conversation is often just dead. It's more linear and they're able to really get in there. Also, the sharability is more visible.

For instance, if I retweet something on Twitter there is a way if you really dig to see how many people have retweeted that, but on Facebook before you share it you already see that 122 people already shared it. So you're part of the momentum. Nobody wants to be the first to the party.

What you'll see, and this is the general rule for just about anything the 20/80 rule where 20% of your fans are always first to the party. Whenever you post something you're going to see the same people always react, you can count on them. The others want to know that there are people at the party first. Those are the harder ones to get to interact.

On Twitter you can't really see how many people are at the party, how many people are part of this conversation, unless you dig deeper. On Facebook you can see immediately there are a lot of comments here and already 53 people have shared this and 102 have liked it, "I'm not the first to this party, let me put my shoes on because I want to party."

**Matthew:** Definitely on Facebook you're able to build momentum, people get a sense of what's happening. Once you see something retweeted on Twitter you don't know how many people retweeted it, just someone did. Then also people just, like they say on Planet of the Apes, "human see, human do." If you see a lot of people doing something you want to get involved too.

We're focused on the community and there's definitely a huge community, a very supportive community that's built up around Savvy Auntie, but it's also a business. It is your business and you're an entrepreneur. How did that evolution take place? Was already in the your mind that there was this business goal or is it something that sort of naturally organically became part of what you were doing in building the Savvy Auntie brand?

**Melanie:** Oh, it's a business. It was always designed to be a business. I'm in business.

Immediately I launched at 1:00 PM on Wednesday July 9, 2008 and I had to wait for the longest 23 minutes of my life before I got an email from Hasbro. Two hours later I got an email from Sephora. The next day I got an email from Disney.

Not only was it a business, those who are listening by reading Mashable and other great tech and social media blogs out there, what they were able to see immediately was that there was an opportunity to reach women with discretionary income and time that they weren't able to reach earlier.

In fact, what I ended up doing with Disney was remarkable. It was March 2009 and I helped them promote a 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Pinocchio Blu-Ray/DVD combo. It was mostly a Twitter sponsored campaign with some advertorial and banner ads, but essentially it was Twitter. A reporter from *The Wall Street Journal*, Elizabeth Holmes, caught wind of it and wrote an article about it that month. It was recorded as the first American sponsored Twitter conversation.

So I was in business from day one and thank God business was into me at the same time.

**Matthew:** In terms of coming to the attention of the Hasbro, Sephora, and Disneys of the world, how were you doing that? Was it all through this PR effort through Mashable or did you have contacts there? How were you gaining their attention?

**Melanie:** That's a great question. In a number of ways. First, I was on Twitter in August 2007 and I launched July 2008. So I was sharing this idea of what I was up to before I had launched, number one.

Number two, I started a blog outside of SavvyAuntie.com, which I don't keep up anymore, where I was telling the story of how I was building this website and this brand, what it meant and why I was doing it. I got rather personal in terms of the night I launched and how I was so anxious about it the day I launched, etcetera. I was hopefully enabling people to root for me and support me, because I was alone in this.



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It turns out that Savvy Auntie was the most tweeted word the day of the launch. So that worked.

Then I did personal one-on-one networking. I met Adam Hirsch of Mashable, then CEO at a Jeff Pulver breakfast here in New York City. We met a few times and he was eager to learn more and said to send him the press release when I was ready. I actually myself went out to a number of the tech blogs.

In fact, I'll say that TechCrunch actually wrote about it, which was tremendous, although Michael Arrington actually took it down an hour or two after it went up. To this day I have no idea why that happened, but it became this huge controversy and ended up on ValleyWag. Anyway, it was in TechCrunch and I pitched that myself.

I just pitched a number of people who wrote about social media. And then my Twitter sisters, the moms, also wanted to show support, so they blogged about it. There was all of that together.

Now, here was the other secret to the pie. I talked about the social influence piece, connecting with people and hoping that potential fans and those who write about such things would connect and would want to support it. But, also the fact that there was a person connected with it, they knew that I was the face of this brand and so there was a real connection to a person.

Then the fact that it was to a specific niche, so people knew it wasn't another mom website, parenting website, mom blog, or beauty blog, or anything like that. There was a differentiator. There's a little bit of a disruption there.

Then when they saw the site, as I believe I may have mentioned earlier that it ended up becoming a Webby Award nominated website. They saw that this was something sophisticated and this was something that I'd invested time and resources into.

When you put all of that together, you can't have one without the other, just one of those things wouldn't have worked. It's strong product, powerful focused niche, and social influence. You put that together, you've got a great story, you have something different to write about, and people hear about it.

*Matthew:* That's an awesome story. I'm totally curious, of course, about this TechCrunch thing. I'm going to have to dig into that. It's weird. I have a theory. The only theory I could come up with somehow is that it wasn't a tech story. It was a social network you were launching around aunties. That's just weird.

I do have a question then. Did it surprise you how successful this has become or what has surprised you most about the responses you've gotten, both to the website when it launched and also to the book that you published last year?

*Melanie:* I'm really on this road and on this journey. I have undeniable and unconditional belief in the success of this. So the fact that there is success doesn't surprise me. It elates me and I'm very proud of it. I can sleep at night. I think I set out to do something and am doing it, it's just the nascent period. It's only five years old since I had the idea.

In terms of things that did surprise me were how quickly things came. For instance, the book deal. Harper Collins approached me in the Fall of 2009, just over a year after I had launched. While it was in my five year plan, it certainly came sooner than expected.

The fact that this past week I spoke at PlayCon, the toy industry association convention for major toy industry veterans and C-suite level marketing executives at the top toy companies in America and the world, and smaller and medium sized toy companies. The fact that I was invited to speak at PlayCon. The fact that after I spoke that those same executives came to speak to me to learn more about this niche.

The fact that it's such an overlooked niche that those who work in the "how to get people to give gifts" business have overlooked it for so long and really were just beginning to see it and to understand it through my presentation, that I found surprising.

As I begin to understand this market and I begin to understand how those women beyond my own personal experience of women I know, now that I see it nationally – frankly, I was on ABC National Radio in Australia a couple of weeks ago, their version of NPR, and on BBC, and women are calling in and saying very similar things that they say here in the U.S. in terms of feeling unnatural as a childless woman and feeling overlooked and neglected, and assumed to have no feelings, etcetera. To see that this was a global issue and not just an American, and not even an American big city issue, that I also found to be surprising.

What I've learned is that here in America we are more what I call momopic than expected. Meaning, like being myopic, we are so focused on mom as woman that we neglect the other 50% of American women. We're so focused on the "baby bump" and "is she pregnant," and "how can she can get pregnant." My favorite hated line came from Jessica Alba, who is a lovely lady I'm sure, who was pregnant with her second daughter at the time and said, "Well, now I'm really a mother." Unfortunately now you're only a mother if you've got two kids. Right?

To be able to see how focused on mom we are. We all saw that cover of *Time Magazine* a couple of weeks ago, "Are you Mom enough?" This whole pressure on being mom. What about us who are not moms?

So not surprises in terms of where the business is going, but certainly surprises in terms of how people perceive this niche.

**Matthew:** First of all, I love to use word elate. Usually people say "elated," but I it's nice to hear the verb as in "it elates me," about success.

**Melanie:** Thank you.

**Matthew:** Speaking of words, because of momopic and things like that, my last question I did have. You do a lot of play on words around "auntie," the "auntraneue" or the "auntourage."

**Melanie:** "Qualauntie-time."

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**Matthew:** Exactly. I'm just wondering if there were any aunt words that you tried them and they just didn't work to put "aunt" in the middle of them?

**Melanie:** No. In fact, they take off. I love it when I'm starting to see women in their Twitter profiles identify themselves as, "I'm a lawyer, a pet owner, and I'm a Savvy Auntie." When people first become aunts they're "debutaunts" and they'll announce that. They'll wish each other a "happy auntieversary" when they hear that one says, "I've been an aunt now for 10 years, my nephew just had a birthday."

They love it. And here's why. Every tribe has a language, every tribe has their own exclusive way to communicate with each other. It's what makes them, in part, a tribe. So when these women have words that are allocated just for them it's sort of their secret understanding of being part of a club. By the way, it's the first time they're part of a club like this.

We all know about the parenting club and the mom club. Here they are part of the aunt club, so those words are extraordinarily magical, effective, they've got great influence on their connection and engagement on Facebook, Twitter, and throughout the Savvy Auntie experience.

So, no. If there was a failure, perhaps I forgot what it was. Perhaps one of my greatest successes was to create a language around an experience that is so magical, wonderful, and one that I am so personally proud to experience.

**Matthew:** Nice. You've definitely done that. I don't know if you are planning at any point starting an "aunt farm" or an "aunt colony," but that would also work.

**Melanie:** My first focus group with some friends who didn't yet have kids, just in my apartment when I thought of this idea, it wasn't a scientific focus group, just some opinions from girlfriends; I called it the Aunt Farm. So, I've been into this for awhile.

In terms of the PANKs, would the uncles be PUNKs? No, you're the PUNKles.

**Matthew:** Melanie, thank you so much for joining us today. This was really great. I wish you ever more success with Savvy Auntie.

**Melanie:** Thank you so very much. If any of your listeners have questions, please just find me on Twitter @[SavvyAuntie](#) and hopefully I'll be able to respond pretty quickly.

**Matthew:** Perfect. Thank you, listener, for listening here to the very end. This has been the Marketing Smarts podcast and I'm your host Matthew Grant. I'll talk to you next week.