

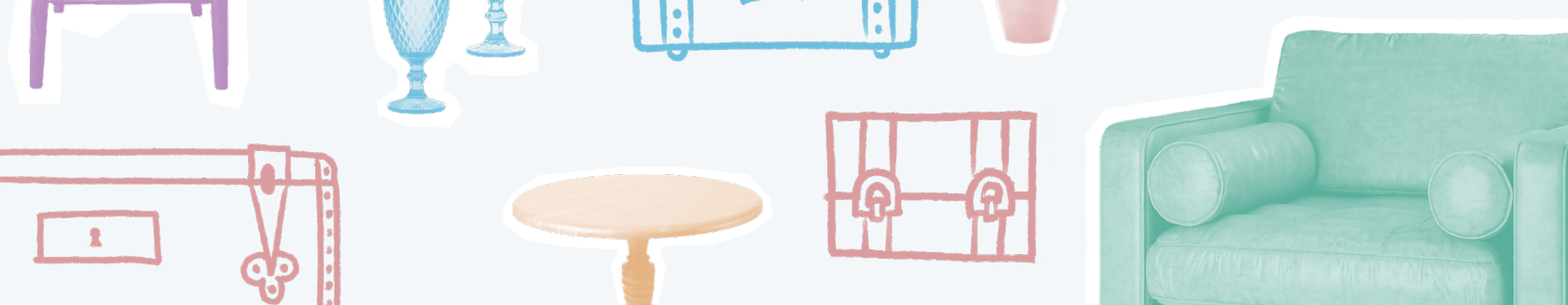
The **TRUNK SHOW**

With RW ELEPHANT

SEASON 4 EPISODE 4



**"INNOVATION, TRENDS, AND
STRATEGIC CURATION WITH TAMMY
NOEL, FOUNDER OF TABLEMADE**



WELCOME BACK TO THE TRUNK SHOW,

hosted by Allison Howell and brought to you by RW Elephant. We're kicking off our 4th episode of Season 4 with **Tammy Noel of TableMade**, who shares her experience in the event production market.



Tammy Noel is the founder and creative director of TableMade, a modern tabletop rental company redefining event design in the Southeast. With a background in corporate retail merchandising, Tammy brings a sharp eye for trend forecasting and product development to the event industry.



What's in this episode

The Transition from Corporate to Creative
Data-Driven Decision Making
Leading vs. Following Trends
Operational Innovation
Maintaining Brand Standards
The Power of Community



QUOTES:

"In the beginning... I just took **a lot of trust in my own tastes** because... I had no historical data to rely back on, but luckily it worked out." — Tammy Noel

"I'd much rather be **setting the trend** versus following it." — Tammy Noel

"When they want something **unique, unexpected, unusual**, those are the kind of validating words. I'm like, okay, we're doing it the right way." — Tammy Noel

"If you have a piece that has really high time utilization, it's going out all the time, but it's not making you very much money, then you can say, oh, **my rates are too low**." — Allison Howell

"There's honestly **no amount of money that I can spend** to put out a product we're not proud of." — Tammy Noel

"**If I had ego**, TableMade would not be the business it is today." — Tammy Noel

"**People first, style always**... that is our mantra." — Tammy Noel

"I realized we are only going to get out of our **community what we pour into it**." — Tammy Noel

"It's not so much just about the pictures or where is this getting published. It's really about that opportunity for people... to see what it's like to place an order with you, see what it's like to collaborate, see what it's like for you to deliver. **It's like a rehearsal**." — Allison Howell

"You can always find out, okay, how much did I pay for it? How much has it brought me in the last 12 months? How much is it going out in the future? So you can do that math on your own, but **having that information can be so powerful** in making those strategic decisions moving forward." — Allison Howell

Episode Transcription

Intro: Hi there, welcome back to the Trunk Show brought to you by RW Elephant, mighty inventory management software designed to help you conquer the chaos in your event rental business and reclaim your creativity because the world needs more of the beautiful events and environments you create. I'm your host Allison Howell. Our guest today uses her background in product development to think creatively about her rental collection. We'll talk about innovation and the risks it brings, the importance of community and maintaining a brand identity that you can be proud of.

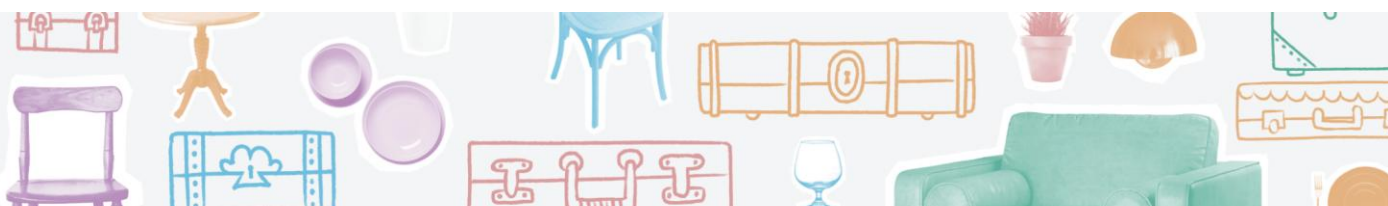
Tammy: My name is Tammy Noel. I am the founder and lead curator of TableMade and our focus is specialty tabletop rentals. We are located right outside of Atlanta. So we primarily service the southeast, but we've been as far north as New Jersey and as far west as Colorado.

Allison: Wow, so you've got quite the sphere that you are influencing there with your collection. Well, tell me a little bit about your challenges. You've been in business for quite a few years, but I know early on it was difficult to do sales forecasting. You didn't have that historical data or demand trends. So, you really didn't know what to expect or predict. How did you overcome those barriers to avoid over-ordering or missed opportunities early on?

Tammy: So, in the beginning, I relied so heavily in my corporate background experience. So, prior to starting TableMade I actually worked in product development for the Home Depot. So amazing experience, just getting that corporate visibility. That's really where I learned what exactly is product sourcing and merchandising. So that is like my background. That's what I'm so passionate about. So when it came to starting TableMade... The biggest fear was just not knowing if people would actually buy into it, not necessarily sourcing the product. So I just took a lot of trust in my own tastes because like you mentioned, I had no historical data to rely back on, but luckily it worked out.

Allison: So, now that you have that historical data, how do you use it? What kind of numbers are you looking at and how does that influence your purchasing or sort of your decision making moving forward?

Tammy: So really relying on one return rate. In our case of return rate, how much do we rent out the product? And then we stack that up against how much we invested the product. And how much the not only how many like how much sales dollars the product is bringing in, but also how much are we return how much Are we renting it out? So those are kind of like the four key metrics that I look at to then say, okay, let's say we have. Any one of these actually, so let's say we have that one of these glasses right here, the B glass, we have it in green, the first color we brought in was green. At the time, it was just me trusting my gut saying, okay, green is going to be a hot color. Even if we're a little bit ahead of the trend, that's okay with me too. Like I'd much rather be studying the trend versus following it. That it started renting out crazy. I mean, there was



at one point we it was literally going out for eight weeks at a time. I was like, well, that means that the shape is good. People like the style. Let's bring in a different color. So now we're up to four colors. So that is how we're using the data to kind of dictate how we grow assortment. And it's worked out really well for us doing it that way.

Allison: Yeah, so those numbers that you're talking about, I call dollar utilization and time utilization. And so I'm always looking at the intersection of those to see, is this item something that has high dollar utilization, and high time utilization, or high and low, or low and low? Because if you can look at your pieces on a graph and see where your collection falls in those quadrants. Then it really can give you insight into what you should do, right? Because if you have a piece that has really high time utilization, it's going out all the time, but it's not making you very much money, then you can say, oh, my rates are too low.

Tammy: Correct.

Allison: Right, I should raise the price. It's got a lot of demand, but it not making me enough money, right. Whereas if you a piece that's really going out of the time and it's making you a lot money, you can say, oh. That's got high time utilization and high dollar utilization, I should buy more of that, right? So that gives you that kind of insight. Whereas if it's not going out and it's not making you money, you can say, this probably is something I should liquidate. I should use that cash and I should buy something else. Whereas if its got high dollar utilization but low time utilization, so it's not going out very much. But when it does go out, it's making me money. Maybe if I lowered the price, it would go out more. And people would rent it more, and it would make me more money overall, right? So those kind of metrics really give you that insight into those purchasing strategies, but also your pricing strategies.

Tammy: Absolutely.

Allison: And that can really give you that kind of information to grow your business over time that you don't have when you're first starting out. You're really just making guesses, right.

Tammy: Exactly, yeah.

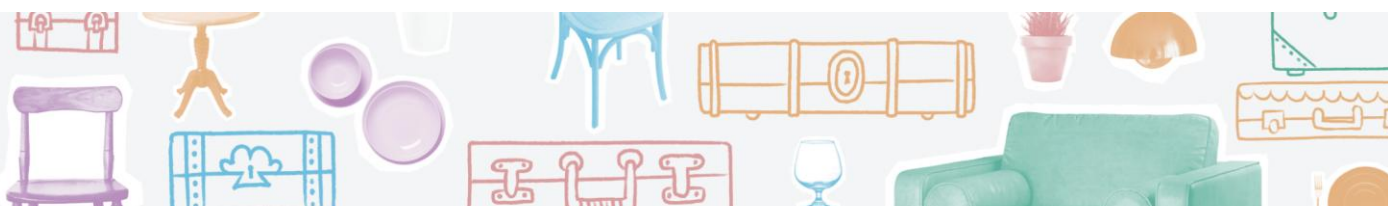
Allison: Yeah. And for RW Elephant users, we have that in a graph in the metrics section of RW. But otherwise, you can always calculate that on your own. You can always do that math. You can always find out, okay, how much did I pay for it? How much has it brought me in the last 12 months? How much is it going out in the future? So you can do that math on your own, but having that information can be so powerful in making those strategic decisions moving forward. Imagine you've sort of seen the, the highs and lows of that, right? Like you look at those, that data and you make a decision and it totally works. And sometimes you look the data and make a decision and you think, wow, that was, that was odd, right.

Allison: You mentioned that you would rather be in front of the trend, but how long do you wait to know? Oh, okay, we were in front the trend and we just had to wait, or okay, it was a dud. How long do give things?

I honestly did not know why. Cause I thought I was like on it. I was, like, oh, this is hot. Like this is it. Never rented, Allison, to the point where I took it off the site. Luckily, I did not buy massive quantities. We had probably like 30 at the time just for shoots and things of that nature. But took it off the site, because I just assumed, okay, Georgia doesn't like it. It's not the Southern girl does not appreciate it. And literally now we rent it all the time. It's, it's counterintuitive. Cause I feel like rental, like education courses and stuff like that. They always preach well. If it's not making you money, you get rid of it. It's not making you money. You get rid of it. That's just not the nature of our client. They are very fashion forward. And it's just like a trend in a product where you have the early adopters and then, you know what I mean, that bell curve. The same thing happens with clients.

Tammy: Exactly.

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you that insight and recognize like, okay, that trend is coming. I'm gonna use my cash for that in a year and a half, but I'm also going to sprinkle it in here and there so people know I get that this trend is happening.

Tammy: Exactly. Yes. And it feels so satisfying. It feels so good. When a client comes to me and they say, yeah, we have this client, they're looking for like a modern or contemporary look. So something different. That's why we came to you. Allison It's like nothing more satisfying because that feels to me it's just an indication that we're doing the right things. When they want something unique, unexpected, unusual, like those are kind of like validating like words. I'm like, okay, we're doing it the right way, even though it might sit in our shelf for a year and a half before anyone touches it. That's okay.

Allison: Well, especially if you haven't spent an arm and a leg on it, that you have to wait a year and a half to get that return.

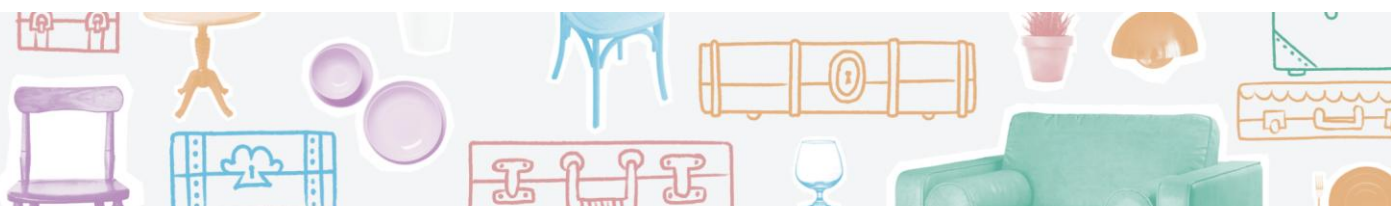
Tammy: Exactly, right.

Allison: So you're making that decision strategically. Well, OK, so as a creative entrepreneur, I know that you have new ideas all the time. And like you said, sometimes it takes a while for the market to catch up with you, or it takes more than you thought. More time, more energy, more money, more resources to get that idea to market. Maybe because it takes. It's more difficult to execute than you imagined, or it is more costly, or whatever. Tell us about an innovative concept for a new collection or service that you've had that maybe took more time than you anticipated, or was more difficult than you thought it would be.

Tammy: Oh, yes. Do you want a good news story or a bad news story? Because I have both.

Allison: Let's do both.

Tammy: Okay. So good news. Ship TableMade has officially launched. We launched fall of last year. And the idea was for me, I was like, how can we reach more people? How can we reach more people? We want to work with more people. We want to work more designers outside of the southeast. So I was like, Okay, I think anyone would then say, Oh, you we have to figure out how to ship it. Like One is too expensive to freight from both just a label perspective and actual like physical freighting perspective. So shipping is easy. And what are the easiest things to ship? Flatware. So definitely not the first to come up with that concept, right? There's lots of tabletop companies that they'll do place setting looks in a box and stuff like that. That's just not our business model, right. Our designers really want to come up with something unique for every single one of their events. So we just knew we just have to make the goods accessible. People will make their own packages in their own settings, but if we make, uh, charger mats, linens, flatware, and decor accessories, easily accessible via mail, it should catch on. Now just starting back with like the top level view, and then you kind of start peeling back in saying like, okay, what does that actually mean? That means we have to figure out how



to make some kind of specialized container. That means we have to make sure it is- Transportable in a way where like a client can easily unwrap, use, and then pack, return. So really took kind of like breaking that down. I knew what I wanted to do. I had to figure out how to do it. And then I once I kind of came up with, okay, no problem. We just got to make our own custom packaging to ship it out.

Allison: Oh, that's no problem!

Tammy: No problem! So easy!

Allison: I've done that before, right?

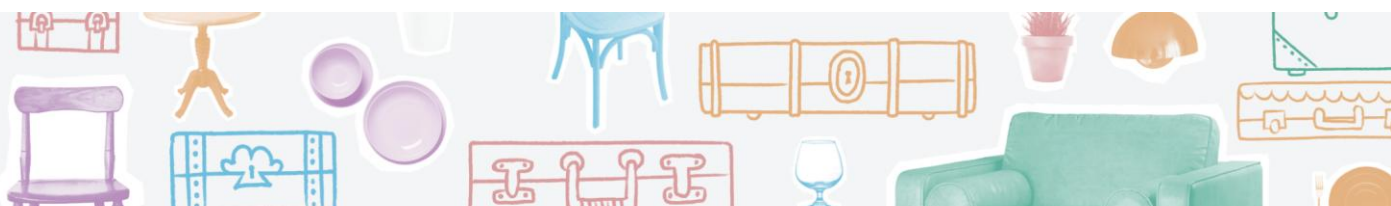
Tammy: It literally took a while, probably a good seven months of different prototypes working with the supplier to come up with this custom packaging. And even that in itself, explaining to that supplier on the initial conversation, I want to make this box. Oh yeah, a corrugated cardboard box, no, it has to be washable. Like we have to be able to dishwasher it because we, number one, we want to be sustainable, right? Like I'm not throwing away every single box that comes back. We want to be able to get lots of uses out of it. And it needs to be branded. It needs to be waterproof. Like all of these things, which, I mean, the first prototype, Allison, was horrendous. And I was like, there's no way this could be the final. But where we finally got to, great. We were able to figure it out. And it's just, I think if anything, it gave me the confidence that we, as entrepreneurs, can literally do whatever we want, especially when there's a need. And I kind of skipped over that part. I wish I could say, oh, I'm such a genius. I just thought of this up, but it was literally after we had probably told like 10 or 12 designers in the past, no, we don't ship tableware. And so I was like, well, how can we get that to a yes? I know we're far off from shipping glass, got it. But like, we can ship flatware, we just got to do it in a way that feels branded and elevated, you know, in a way that we would want to do.

Allison: Well, and you had to be willing to put in the time and the capital to get from here to there, right? Because that seven months is seven months you could have spent on other projects, and the money you put into the prototypes of the shipping boxes is money you could've spent on buying new inventory or spending on other things, right. And so you had commit, right, and so have you seen the fruit of the labor yet?

Tammy: I have. Can I show you something?

Allison: Oh, absolutely. Super pretty. We'll have to put some pictures of this on the show notes.

Tammy: Yes please. We actually need to also get like more official documentation just so because even to this day we talk about it and we probably don't push it as hard as we should. But people are still they can't visualize it and then when we show them the container they're like, oh, okay, they get it. But yeah, I'm very proud of her.



Allison: Okay, well that's fantastic. Okay, so then tell us a story about something that didn't go quite that well.

Tammy: Custom. Custom Dinnerware. So again, was like, you know, how can, there were so many ideas that I have just still in my head and I'm like, there's not, it's not yet in the market. Just based on what I've seen, I love interior residential design, just for a hobby. So I really catch a lot of our inspiration from that. And there's just lots of like patterns and stuff like that, that I wish that we had in dinnerware that we don't currently have today. So I figured we'll make it, it's fine.

Allison: Why not?

Tammy: Allison literally this journey is not done. We are still trying to figure it out. And my first sample, so I worked with this amazing designer to come up with the designs. It was not me, you know, like hand drawing them, but I essentially dumped, mentally like, you know did a data dump and from my brain to her fingers and she came up with this, amazing designs. We were both so excited about it. And I was like, okay, great. We're send it to the factory for prototypes, got to the first set of samples bawling. At that point, we've spent money, right? So just seeing it in person and knowing that I wasn't happy with it was so disappointing. And showing the girls in the showroom, in the studio, like, just being so disappointed. And them walking by, like Tam, it's not that bad. You said it's not that bad, you didn't say you loved it.

Allison: That's a very different thing from, wow, this is amazing.

Tammy: Correct. I was like, no one's excited about it, we're not putting it out. Like I'm not. And literally that's where we, so that started maybe a year and a half ago. And I have not yet, you know, kind of picked up that ball yet. I needed a little time, a little separation. But it's okay. I think that is something that we still need to go after. But it was definitely a much harder lift than I thought. Much harder.

Allison: So how do you evaluate a situation like that? How do you decide when's it time to stop throwing good money after bad? Or when do you say, OK, this is done? Or, hey, I've got to pivot. How do kind of make those decisions? Is it a budget? Or is it an energy level thing? Is it gut? Or what's the measuring stick?

Tammy: Great question. Number one, budget. There was a certain number that I knew that I could spend to play, essentially. And then when that tapped, I had to take a step back. Cause you could have said, well, Tam, you could've easily ordered another sample. But that's all, it's just a cash register in my mind. That all would have been additional dollars spent on something I was not, I just did not feel like it was a priority at that point to spend those dollars. Now, like I said, it's definitely not something that we are never going to revisit again, but I literally think of it kind of like if you're like a teenager and you're saving up for a car. Like, you know, I saved and I spent, so now I just got to start saving again. And then we'll revisit that in a couple months, hopefully.

Allison: Right, well, because it seems like there's something that is really essential in the process, is holding on to that brand and your standard of quality. Because you could get to the end of that and say, well it's not that bad, or it's good enough, right? Because you're thinking about all the sunk cost, right, all the time spent, all the money spent. All the design, all the energy, all the creative juices you've poured into this. And you can say, well, I mean, we just got to keep moving forward, right?

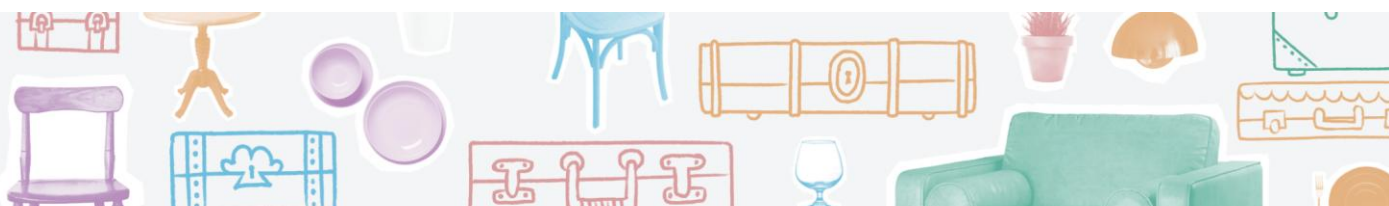
Allison: But you have to be able to take a deep breath and forget all the sunk cost at that moment and look at the thing in front of you and say, would I buy this today? If I hadn't already done all the work, if I hadn't already spent all the money, would I be proud of this? Would I want my client to see this? Would I put my name on it? And that's really hard to do. It's hard to divorce yourself from those, all the blood, sweat and tears you've already put into it in order to evaluate it and say, is this acceptable for my brand, right? Is this at the standard I need it to be? And that's a really brave step to be able to say that. So bravo.

Tammy: Well, now I appreciate it. I will say, like you said, it's, the brand means so much to me. There's honestly no amount of money that I can spend to put out a product we're not proud of. I think I'm just really lucky in the way that I think in that way, fortunately. And I'll share this with you. If I had ego, TableMade would not be business, the business it is today. Because when I started the business, I genuinely, and I did not come from the events industry. I honestly, every day I learn something new. When I first started this, I only thought, oh, people will only rent 20 to 30. And people will just rent estate tables, right? That's literally what I thought. So my first buy for my own wedding, I literally did three different flatware sets, 30 of each. Um, cause I was like, Oh, this is the most anyone would want to ever rent. Cause you know, at the time I, I thought I was my client, but as I continue in business, I realized I'm very not my client. Um, as far as like budget is concerned. Um, but had my first inquiry before we even launched was for 150 people. So imagine the missed opportunity if I told them, Oh no, we only do 30 or less.

Tammy: So it's like I am very fortunate where there is no ego in my decisions. Does it work for the brand? Does it work for the client? Those are the two questions and if it's a no for either one, we don't do it.

Allison: Yeah. Have you found that there are things that the clients ask for that, or that the brand is sort of requiring of you that maybe personally you wouldn't go for? Obviously, you're like, oh, well, I learned something here. But is there anything that you're like, ugh, I don't like that, but clients ask for it? And you're, like, OK, I guess we'll do it. Or do you sort of like draw a line and say like, oh, I'll never do, you know, polka dots or I'll ever do chartreuse or you know, whatever it is.

Tammy: I'm gonna probably embarrass myself a little bit. Yes, yes, those things have happened. I'll give you one very honest, open example. I have always said we will never have a beaded charger plate. It will literally be another person's business before we have a beaded charger plate.



Allison: Over my dead body

Tammy: Literally. Yes simply because that's just not our aesthetic. I will say I just mentioned ego. But there are things that I'm very firm on because I don't want to confuse anyone I want people to like think of TableMade in a way. So to me that style doesn't really feel like Table Made Um, but after having so many clients whom I really trust like my it's a working relationship It's just, not me buying things and putting it out into the you know into the atmosphere. It requires lots of collaboration with some amazing people we work with to where it was like, well, guess what? We now have a beaded charger plate. It's not the beaded charger plate, like, you know, it's not what you're thinking. It is not the-.

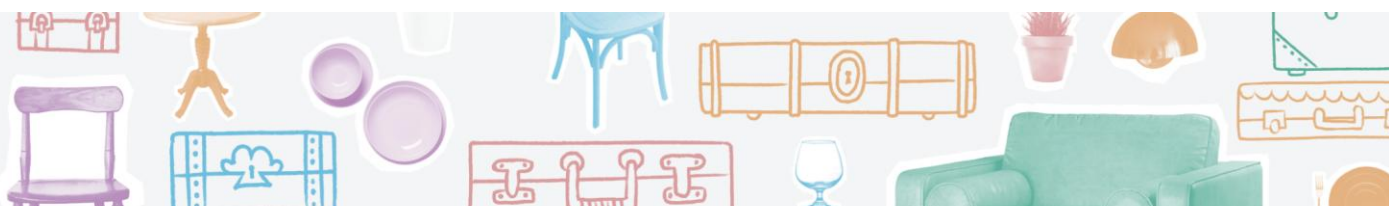
Allison: Not your momma's beaded charger plate, right?

Tammy: Correct. Yeah. But finding the style that resonates with us, finding- I always say if it's not what you want, I'm going to get something similar but in the TableMade way. So the one we have is for Italy, and it's beautiful. And I literally bite my words because now we have a beaded to charger plate.

Allison: You know, we have a client who has a similar kind of story with a particular kind of chair that she swore she would never buy because it just wasn't her taste. And then she realized her clients were renting her tables every weekend with someone else's chairs. And she thought, why am I leaving the money on the table? So she finally bought the chairs. And they've paid for all the things in her collection that she's ever wanted to buy with the profit from those chairs. You know? At some point, you realize. OK, if I can get over that thing that's whatever my hangup is while still staying true to the brand and not compromising in these other really essential ways, I can make this business decision that actually is good for the business, even if that was a personal thing, you know. So there's some real wisdom there for sure. So I know you've faced something that almost everyone in this industry and almost every business has faced a few years into their growth. At first, you grew pretty organically, right? You had a lot of word of mouth, a lot of referral business. And then you kind of doubled your revenue or tripled your revenue year over year. And then at some point, that growth rate kind of hits a plateau. You start kind of stalling that growth rate. And without a really dedicated marketing strategy or a sales strategy, you just don't see those same kinds of results. So I'm wondering what you did when you encountered that plateau at TableMade.

Tammy: That's something we're still sorting out. And I'll say that before, I mean, it's not funny. It kind of is but it's not. Going back and looking back, if you look at our Instagram in 2022, my husband made a joke. He was like, oh, you only post once a month. Congrats. He said it very sarcastically. But it was true. We grew so much by word of mouth. There really wasn't much I personally was doing to try to grow the business otherwise.

Allison: Because you didn't need to.

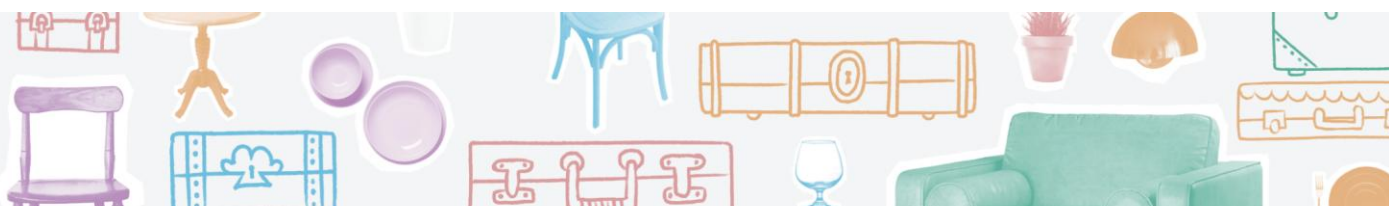


Allison: Yeah, you know, I think sometimes people feel intimidated by going to networking events like ILEA or NACE or you know WIPA or other kinds of organizations. But I have found that throughout the years, there is nothing that compares to those kinds of events where you get to meet people when there's nothing at stake, right? Like on the one hand, you feel like, oh, maybe you feel nervous to meet people. But it's really just an opportunity to connect with people and then you have a warm lead. You can email them the next day. So great to meet you. I'd love to invite you to the showroom. It's a totally different thing than randomly cold calling or emailing somebody you've never met before, right?

Allison: It's like, it's a huge door opener. And so I think it's such a wise move to spend time. Networking at those kind of events. And it doesn't have to feel smarmy. It doesn't have to feel like, oh, I'm walking around handing out my card. It really is about connecting with people. And like you said, developing long-term relationships. So I think that's very wise of you to pursue those kinds of avenues as you're pushing past the plateau of that initial organic growth. Let's talk about some more triumphs. We've talked a lot about data and how you use that insight you've gained along the way in your business to inform your next decisions. And I want to talk a little bit more about how you apply that fund of knowledge to curating your collection. A lot of people in this industry get into rentals because it gives them a reason or maybe an excuse to buy pretty things. And that road can be... the strength in your business or it can be the death of your business if you just buy, buy, buy all the time. So tell us what goes into merchandising and the product development of your collection. What are the factors you're considering?

Tammy: Number one, what are our gaps? For instance, personally, I love black. I love blacks and browns. I'm very neutral, very, very neutral. Which, you know, kind of bleeds into the identity and the branding of TableMade. But that, if we only had neutrals in our collection, if we only had blacks and browns, how limiting would that be for the client? So I try to look at our collection seasonally and I think what are the gaps? Like, what are we missing? One example for instance, which I feel like still we might be a little bit ahead of the trend there, but we're currently looking at like tomato reds. Those are the colors that are missing in our assortment that we wanna bring in. If not for fall, then for spring of next year. And that's literally where I'm starting. Cause I hate, well, I like to say that I hate if our client would have to go somewhere else for that. Like, if it's new to the market, I want us to be the ones that have it. Cause again, we wanna be leading the trend and we don't wanna be following it. And I've made a few mistakes, with that frame of thinking. But first identifying the gap. Secondly, what is like the, obviously the investment costs, the lead time. Can we style it and present it in a way that makes sense to the client? There's some things that we've brought on where I'm like, this is a no-brainer, it's gonna sell. We don't even have to pre-order it. Like, and then we bring in and people still don't really understand it, like knife rest or salt cellars.

Allison: I was gonna say salt cellars, people don't know what to do with those, right?



girl through and through, but the people are the reason why we're here and we'll continue to be here as long as they'll have us.

Allison: Yay, well, fantastic. Thank you so much, Tammy. I am so grateful for this time together.

Tammy: No problem, thank you for having me.

Outro: It was lovely to hear about Tammy's event rental journey. With her background in product development, it's no wonder she's been so innovative in the tabletop rental industry. Be sure to check out some photos of TableMade's genius flatware shipping container in our show notes. I'm so grateful for Tammy's honesty in sharing both her triumphs and the barriers she's faced as she's grown. I've been encouraged this season to consider how challenges shape us on our business journeys and Tammy's story is a great example of that. Thanks for listening, happy renting!

RESOURCES:

The [RW Elephant mailing list](#) features more event industry resources and happenings—including announcements about new Trunk Show episodes!

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AND OUR GUEST:

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