

Transcript

Krystal Hobbs 0:04

Welcome to Beyond the Tools, the podcast that helps contractors attract more leads, grow their business, and finally get off the tools. In each episode, you'll discover marketing tactics that work. You'll get actionable insights from other successful contractors, and connect with experts to help you grow. I'm your host Krystal Hobbs, owner of a social media agency that helps contractors attract and convert more leads. Get ready to take your business to the next level so you can finally enjoy the fruits of your hard labor. Ready, let's go!

Welcome back to another Beyond the Tools podcast. In today's episode, I talk with Jessica Bannister, also known as HVACJess. Jessica is the current president of Women in HVAC Canada and a Level 3 HVAC Apprentice at her family's company Cam Cool Refrigeration Inc. Jessica is a third-generation truck contractor, which means her father worked as an apprentice for his father in the 1970s. And our brother quickly followed in his footsteps after graduating from high school. Jessica's journey, on the other hand, was markedly different. Because the trades were never really a possibility for her, she went to university and spent ten years behind a desk in the corporate sector. In 2017, she joined her family's business. She began working at the office since, according to her, that's where the females go, but she later registered as an apprentice. So, in today's episode, we talk about her journey in the HVAC business and how she's used Instagram to really document it and utilize it as a tool to connect with more people in the field, particularly to encourage more women to consider a career in HVAC. Check out this episode if you want to learn how to develop an Instagram presence and how Jess expanded her following to over 9000 followers. We also discuss how women are an untapped market in the HR tech field because just 3% of trades are comprised of women, and there is a great opportunity for more contractors to support women in the trades. So, without further ado, let us proceed to Jessica.

I'm delighted to welcome today's guest, Jessica Bannister aka HVACJess, to the show.

Jessica Bannister 2:48

Krystal, thank you so much for inviting me.

Krystal Hobbs 2:51

Yeah, I'm extremely excited because I've been following you on Instagram for at least a

few months or a year now. And I know there's a highly involved community on Instagram, particularly the one you've created, which is great. So I know you're just shy of 9000 followers, but I believe you're close. So I'm curious about how you got started with the platform and how you've grown it to where it is now.

Jessica Bannister 3:24

So I started recording my story as a woman in HVAC or in trades on Instagram because it's not easy to discover women in the HVAC area in particular. So I decided to share my experience, my apprenticeship, my daily victories, and tribulations. And I guess it simply grew into a creative outlet for me because I don't consider myself artistic or anything. So this has really become a creative outlet for me. And I'm also using the opportunity to promote my day-to-day life as a woman in HVAC since I believe HVAC, in general, is misunderstood or not understood at all. It's a very complicated and complex subject that, if you're not in the trades, I don't think anyone really understands. I suppose a lot of the time you see dirty guys strolling through the building up into this roof access, they go up there, they do something who knows and then there's cold air coming out of the ceiling and they leave but you have no idea what's actually going on on that rooftop. There's so much going on that it's a pretty confusing subject. So I've been showing the general public my path as a woman, and I'm really loving it. I'm having fun creating the community that I'm creating. I'm nearly at 10,000 followers now, and it's such a wonderful community. Everyone I've met on Instagram has been encouraging, kind, and curious about my presence in HVAC, and I'm thoroughly enjoying the experience. It's been entertaining.

Krystal Hobbs 4:55

That's fantastic. So, how have you found the response from other tradespeople?

Jessica Bannister 5:02

It's been incredible. Everyone is really encouraging and supportive. They want to help, therefore I use it as a forum on occasion. For example, if I'm having difficulty with a job or an idea. I'm going to post it on Instagram. And I'm sure I'll get many useful, constructive responses. It's intriguing what I've discovered on Facebook is a different narrative. I find that a few people post anything on Facebook. People want to demolish you as soon as possible. They try to outdo you, to demonstrate, "Oh, I know more than you." And I don't think it's a very pleasant vibe. So, I've taken a step back from Facebook. Instagram, on the other hand, is completely another story. There is a strong sense of community and friendship. And it's fantastic.

Krystal Hobbs 5:40

That is wonderful. And I know you document a lot of your daily life, as you mentioned, so how do you go about thinking about the content and what you're putting up on Instagram?

Jessica Bannister 5:54

It sort of happens on the fly. I've seen a lot of Instagram or social media managers suggest things like, "Oh, use these content calendars." And everything I do is on the fly. If it happens today, it will be posted today or the next day. And there's no real strategy or planning behind my posting; I just kind of do it on the fly because I'm out there in these interesting areas every day, and I never know what's going to come up. So there isn't one. That's how I like it. That appeals to me. I don't follow any rules, such as, "Oh, you have to post at 6 pm or anything." I just post whenever I have time, which is generally while driving from one job to another. Or, to be honest, in the bathroom. Wherever I may find a spare moment. I'm just like, "Do it."

Krystal Hobbs 6:36

Yes, you must see some trends, such as items that generate greater responses from people over time. Have you found that some topics or types of posts seem to garner a bit more attention than others?

Jessica Bannister 6:50

Yeah, I'd say that when I publish about tools or new things that I'm testing out, I get a lot of positive feedback. And it's beneficial for the firms that provide me with items to sample, test, and demonstrate; I receive a lot of positive feedback on those. Also, I discovered that I lead the social media for women in HVAC in Canada. And the posts that do very well there are when there is a contrast. As a result, we'll have a woman dressed in her job attire and a trade uniform. And then, right next to her in the same image, we'll have her dressed up for a birthday party or some other occasion, and people love to see the juxtaposition that she can be both feminine and a girl. She may, however, be tough. And where the work is concentrated, those posts receive the greatest attention.

Krystal Hobbs 7:40

That's awesome. And have you discovered, for example, through your Instagram presence, that you are connecting with more women in the trades or women who are interested in the trades?

Jessica Bannister 7:50

Yes, I get a few random messages in my DMs from people who have either followed me for a long time and tell me that I'm inspirational, or they've just discovered me and are like, "I've just signed up to be in this trade." And they find my videos to be quite beneficial. It's also really cool. My favorite messages are from fathers who say, "Oh, my daughter adores your content." That's exactly what I'm talking about. Then I usually tell them to bring me their dress and I'll send them stickers. I just want to spread the word and get people interested, because I believe I'm just demonstrating what it's like to have this kind of job. There's an old adage that says you can't be what you can't see. And I firmly believe it. So I think - if you, as tradeswomen, have the ability and desire to put yourselves out there, let us know and we'll see what you're up to. Let's see you in action because we don't know otherwise. I had never encountered a woman in this trade before becoming an apprentice. So, when it came to choosing a career after high school, I was pushed towards university, just like the majority of others. And, I had no idea this was an option for me. And I suppose if I'd seen other women doing it, I might have thought about it. And I'm not suggesting that going back in time is for every woman because it isn't; it's clearly for a certain type of woman. But just knowing that it's a possibility is encouraging.

Krystal Hobbs 9:14

Yes, and I'm sure your road to the HVAC industry wasn't exactly linear. How did you make the move from working in an office to working in the field?

Jessica Bannister 9:27

So I worked in corporate finance for about a dozen years in downtown Vancouver, wearing all the gowns and braids and everything. I had the option to work for my family's company, but I chose to work in an office for around nine months since a) that's where my skill set was and b) that's where girls go. So I worked in the office for almost nine months. I was having trouble invoicing and repeating the lingo because it all sounded the same to me. As if I didn't know the difference between a contactor, a compressor, and a capillary tube, all these "C" words seem the same to me, and now that I know what they are, that's quite embarrassing. But I didn't realize they were just words on a piece of paper to me. Not only that, but my father and brother would come back to the office with all these fantastic stories about their travels, the industries they visited, and the people they encountered, and they'd be like, "Why am I sitting at this often behind this desk all day long?" So I asked my father, "Can I come on some jobs with you some ride alongs? I want to see what you do," and he agreed. Maybe see what a contractor is

like, put some faces to names. And I really enjoyed it. It was fantastic. "Hey, may I come out today?" I thought to myself. "Can I come out today till I'm more in the field than out?" And I had no idea how much I enjoyed working as an apprentice. And now I'm officially keeping track of all of my hours. I've gone through two levels of training. And I only wish I'd started this sooner.

Krystal Hobbs 10:52

Yes, absolutely. And when we see that, I mean, a lot of business owners I've talked to complain about how tough it is to recruit staff. And yet, we only have 3% of people working in the trades who are women; what do you believe is the key to getting more women interested in the industry?

Jessica Bannister 11:19

I believe it is due to exposure; the more you see it, the more you accept it. I believe that a career in the trades involves not only the person choosing the field but also the people pushing it. So I was never pushed to even consider trade school, let alone trade. So, I'm going to this conference this week. We also had a man speak to us yesterday who has a daughter in school who is quite scholarly. And, because he works in the building industry, he advised or pushed her to attend a construction course. And she said to him, "Dad, come on." For example, I know nothing about construction. I don't know anyone taking the course, thus I won't have any buddies in there. So let's fast forward. She's almost a week out of it now. And she claims that that was her favorite class. And if she hadn't had that opportunity, she would never have known; I genuinely believe it's exposure to actual people doing real work; the trades still have this stigma attached to them that they're second class. But if you've ever been to trade school, you know it's not the easy way out. It's challenging. And all we have to do now is to change that stigma. And I'm not sure why it's lingering so long. But what I'd like to do is get in front of many younger people, perhaps even those in high school, and simply show them that these occupations exist. There are options available to them.

Krystal Hobbs 12:35

Yes. And I anticipated that via your work with Women in HVAC, you'd be able to connect with a lot more women and help spread the word.

Jessica Bannister 12:48

Yes. And the response has been fantastic. Everyone, both men and women, has been really receptive to this concept. I believe that part of the reason for the shift in stigma is that people are beginning to accept it, and not only accept it but also want to be

involved. They want to be a part of it, and they're fascinated and captivated by it. So I believe we're on the right track, but it will take some time.

Krystal Hobbs 13:10

Yes, absolutely. And, in terms of stigmas, I have a lot of interactions with clients and people in the trades. And gender roles are sometimes deeply established. And other people may confide in me, "Well, I don't know if a woman can lift the same amount, would she be able to handle all this heavy machinery and that sort of thing?" So, what would you say to a presumably male business owner that is unwilling to hire women?

Jessica Bannister 13:49

I'd say give it a shot; you don't know what you're missing until you try it. And I honestly believe that I am a petite person, that women are vastly underrated in their physical power, and that there are moments when I do require assistance. And I believe it is critical that men and women work together, with our respective skills and flaws. So, if I need assistance with a physical aspect or something else, someone can assist me. And maybe it'll be my small fingers that aid someone else with whatever I'm truly excellent at. My tiny device can get into those tiny thermostat connections or work together with them. But I truly believe that if you give us a chance, you will be pleasantly surprised. And that's also a theme in this conference, as I've been listening to folks speak about how their one female employee has been their best, so give it a go. And if it doesn't work out, it won't work out for everyone. If it doesn't work, go on; at the very least, you tried and you knew.

Krystal Hobbs 14:48

Yes, absolutely. That's fantastic. I'd like to know what you consider to be one of the most surprising things you've discovered about yourself while working in the trades.

Jessica Bannister 15:00

Probably that I can perform difficult tasks as well as I can. And what's really amazing now is that I'm not frightened to undertake some home jobs that I wouldn't have done before. There's the obvious guy stuff, but the other day I replaced my own carburetor because now I can, and I'm not sure how I learned, but now I have the confidence in myself to know that I can handle this simple chore, and then I feel like a superhero once I've finished it.

Krystal Hobbs 15:27

It's fantastic here. Definitely, to all of your Instagram followers. That's fantastic. And I know you're branching out into new channels. So, how's it going?

Jessica Bannister 15:39

Yes, it's both exciting and terrifying. It's terrifying to put oneself out there on the internet. People aren't frightened to speak whatever they want. But it's incredibly thrilling, and how it happened. So I'm now on YouTube. And it came about because I was watching a lot of YouTube videos myself to learn more. And I saw that there were a lot of films that were extremely similar, such as 10 reasons why it's nice to be an HVAC tech or all of those. And they're all completed by men, all of them. So why can't I go make those same videos with my face and voice? And, because I am not a filmmaker, I may be able to relate to a different type of person looking for those same videos. As a result, I'm learning everything as I go. Every time I post a video, I feel like I'm getting better, but then I watch them and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I gotta learn, and it's all part of the process." Social media, in my opinion, is not polished and faultless. It's just a normal day in the life. This is the way things are. As a result, it's sort of transferring to my YouTube channel as well. This is how things are.

Krystal Hobbs 16:41

Yes. And do you prefer to create unique material for each channel you're on?

Jessica Bannister 16:47

Yeah, YouTube is unique, isn't it? So you may have longer videos and even splice them together if you like. I'm attempting to come up with different topics. It's also challenging to get footage when you're still learning the trade and attempting to execute your job properly and safely. I'll take a bit of footage when I don't have time to watch it on the move. So I won't be able to redo a tape. So when I go home, I'll download all of my videos. And I'll be like, "Wait, I totally missed this, this, and this," or "It is what it is." So, and I also try not to irritate my father. I'm filming everything we do. So I'm attempting to strike a delicate balance. However, it is still early in the game. So I'm making plans.

Krystal Hobbs 17:33

It's fantastic. Yes, you've got to keep everyone in the family business pleased.

Jessica Bannister 17:37

Especially the boss. Yes.

Krystal Hobbs 17:40

So, speaking of exposure, whether it's garnering visibility for women in the trades or wanting to increase your workforce or your brand, what's one piece of advice you'd provide to any of our listeners who are just getting started on social media?

Jessica Bannister 18:03

In my opinion, don't strive for perfection; I've noticed that a lot of individuals will sit on their first post, certain that it will be perfect. And it has to hit all the right notes, or else your first post will be a flop. And be content with that. Because it will progress and you will improve. But you have to start somewhere. And I believe that if you're waiting on that first post, you'll be waiting forever, you'll never be ready, and it'll never be perfect. So don't try to be flawless, because no one is. Yes, it's more relatable and less stressful. So aim for less-than-perfect.

Krystal Hobbs 18:38

That's exactly what I'm talking about. Especially when it comes to storytelling and the like. It naturally lends itself.

Jessica Bannister 18:44

Well. And there are stories. The best thing about stories is that they vanish after 24 hours. And I usually tell people that if they don't like my stories, they may skip them or not watch them. It's really that simple. Don't be afraid of what other people think about your material; post whatever you're passionate about. And that will be accomplished.

Krystal Hobbs 19:06

Absolutely. Awesome. So, Justice has been quite helpful, and I'm sure our listeners will want to interact with you more. So, how can people learn more about you?

Jessica Bannister 19:18

Okay, so Instagram was probably the first of my social media accounts. So, @hvacjess, you can find me on Instagram. I'm also on YouTube now. You may find me in the HVAC Diaries or by searching for HVACJess. I also have a website, www.hvacjess.com. That's all there is to it. I'm on TikTok as well, although I don't spend much time there.

Krystal Hobbs 19:40

Yes, fair enough. I was the new kid on the block.

Jessica Bannister 19:44

Exactly. But Instagram is definitely my gym.

Krystal Hobbs 19:47

Yes, absolutely. Awesome. Very, simply for being on the show, thank you so much. I sincerely appreciate it. And I know our listeners will be interested in hearing more about your tale.

Jessica Bannister 19:57

Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

Krystal Hobbs 20:05

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