

DEMOLISHING STEREOTYPES, BRANDING A FUTURE

DIY
MOM





By John Allaire

Higgs' music career had taken her to Toronto in search of opportunities in the vibrant big-city music scene. Once in Canada's largest metropolis, the recording artist gave birth to a daughter, and eventually became a single mother by age 31.

Along the way, Higgs had picked up some work here and there with friends in the film industry, foreshadowing greater things to come down the road.

"I was involved in art directing, set decorating, wardrobe, hair and make-up, things like that. I've always had a flair for visual elements, design and styling. Even when I was younger in college, my friends used to call me the 'trailer park Martha Stewart' because I would take sheets and turn them into a pair of curtains... always trying to make spaces beautiful."

The strains and constraints of the big-city life, including high rents and competition for work, had Higgs thinking of a better life back in the familiar surroundings of her East Coast home. Putting out feelers in Nova Scotia, she landed an associate producer role at the now-defunct Egg Films, where her interest in advertising, film and television was fuelled.

"I was working for Egg when they decided to close their doors. This forced all of their employees to get creative, including me. I had been renovating this small house that

We all know the stereotype. Around the house, there are "blue" jobs and "pink" jobs. And the job jar gets divided up into these archaic colour-coded tasks, ne'er the line to be crossed.

But what if there is no longer a "blue" figure in the picture? Does "pink" merely hang out on the sidelines, waiting in limbo until another blue comes along? Rebekah Higgs doesn't think so. And she's taking a sledgehammer to those stereotypes and throwing the pieces into the dumpster.

As her website explains, Higgs has completed 10 episodes of her Bell TV and web series *DIY Mom* — a series that takes viewers through the step-by-step process of tackling the daunting task of renovating her 1938 colonial style home in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The former singer-songwriter has reinvented herself as a producer and host of the inspirational, educational and entertaining home improvement series with the hopes of proving that taking the circular saw by the handle beats waiting on the sidelines any day.

Spotlight on Business spoke with Rebekah Higgs about leaving Toronto, returning back home to the East Coast with her infant daughter, and pushing forward to create an engaging DIY series and a successful production company.



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my dad had let me live in while I got back on my feet. My daughter and I lived there rent-free in exchange for fixing it up. I thought, why not film a tutorial on what we’re doing here, as an exercise to teach myself how to use a camera and edit content.”

Higgs’ emerging skills as a self-producer and editor got her thinking about the 30-second advertisements she had worked on with Egg, and how she would like to explore developing longer “branded content” for herself and possibly for future clients. Simply put, branded content is the practice of marketing via the creation of content that is funded or outright produced by an advertiser.

Higgs explains, “Branded content became a passion of mine. I researched it and studied it. And it turned out that the advertising industry was heading in the ‘branded content’ direction, where people were so much more likely to organically cling to a product or a brand based on a referral from someone they trusted.”

The DIY Mom series was conceived from her new-found

interest in branded content in the style of popular DIY shows on the reality networks. She points out, "People connect with a brand through knowledge or emotion. So you have to hit them in the brain or in the heart... I wanted DIY Mom to bridge the gap between YouTube tutorials and HGTV. Not so much the drama in between, but you see what they use and how they do the renovations, and if it is done well, it will stick with you."

The idea resonated with executives at Bell TV in 2017 who offered to sign Higgs up for 10 episodes of DIY Mom for their subscriber's network (the episodes remain available on Bell TV On Demand as well as on YouTube). The show was distributed nationally in Canada across the Bell network, giving Higgs the exposure she needed to cultivate a client base for her newly-minted TV, film and commercial company, Matriarch Productions.

Fundamental to the branded-content concept lies the development of key partnerships with suppliers and businesses, destined to be highlighted during episodes of the 'edu-tainment' episodes. In a show like DIY Mom, one can just imagine that the opportunity for partnerships with material suppliers would be abundant. Motivated by single motherhood, and thus the need to be profitable in the video series, Higgs became adept at attracting partners.

"I'm a single mom, so I couldn't just do this for fun. It had to make money. At the time I wasn't really aware of social media influencers. My desire was to take it to a high-end video level because I want to produce and make great video content — something I am passionate about."

Suppliers such as Wacky's Flooring and Kent Building Supplies jumped onboard in the production's early stages, demonstrating to Higgs that meaningful partnerships with businesses in the community were indeed a possibility. "I approached them and basically said that I was doing this web series about renovating a 1931 colonial-style home. And I said that I'd pay for the videographer if they gave me the supplies for the renovation."

And so it began. The demolition, the rebuilding, the wall-papering... ten 12-minute episodes in all. DIY Mom was a large motivator in eventually starting Matriarch Productions, but Higgs explains that expanding her client base was always in the career plan. "I started picking up other clients and doing videos for them. All with the same branded-content idea behind them. Giving people a reason to watch the videos."

For example, a recent Matriarch client is producing a podcast called "Use Your Voice." It's a monthly video podcast (vodcast) with motivational speaker and Spin/Co Halifax studio owner Taye Landry. The website explains that the podcast focuses on "empowering individuals to speak their truth and use their voice."

Instilling belief, confidence, courage and bravery. Helping individuals realize their worth while becoming aware of



their purpose." Higgs is sure to point out that Matriarch Productions is thrilled to be a part of such inspiring young voices. "Taye is really something. It's hard not to be moved by her work."

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High praise indeed from one who, herself, inspires single moms to get out there and install floor tiles and ceiling fans! And the feedback has been positive for DIY Mom and the long list of other Matriarch Productions. "Many people on social media say that they love the show and admire the patience it takes to dive into the projects we do on the show. I receive many positive comments from people who respond to the before and after images saying they can't believe they are looking at the same house."

A quick scan of Matriarch's Instagram feed demonstrates that clients and sponsors alike enjoy the experience of



working with Higgs and her cast of freelancers.

Examples like the following from client, "Quinpool Road" are heartfelt endorsements of Matriarch's success. "Working with Matriarch was an amazing experience we will never forget! Rebekah and her team helped us feel proud about our brands, our products, and the place we love to call home."

Social media partnerships have been a success too! Recently Wood Wick Designed expressed their gratitude to working with DIY Mom on a product giveaway by saying "Rebekah handed my product/brand to an attentive and relevant audience. In less than one week she netted my business a 33% increase in overall Followers. I immediately see a marked increase in sales activity, without question generated by her influence."

"Branded content became a passion of mine."

But does she ever get negative feedback? After all, these productions are on the internet—the final frontier for the over-opinionated! "Oh sure. Some people don't like colour choices or some of the materials and furniture I use. But many of these things are given to me, hand-me-downs. I have to remind people that I am a single mom and without a ton of disposable income, I have to make old things work with the new."

While branded content seems to be the communications and marketing wave of the future, Higgs stresses that Matriarch Productions is a multi-dimensional creative services provider. From familiar 30-second advertisements to documentary-style information videos, she is ready to take on the challenge and complete the task, on message and on budget.

Talking to Higgs, one can sense that she takes particular pride in the projects that are about helping people. Obviously, DIY Mom plays a large role in that regard. But her work with various charities earns a prominent place in our conversation.

"Matriarch has done public service announcement-type videos, — linking

brands to charities. We filmed a Kids Know Breakfast video supporting the kids' breakfast initiative across Canada. It's a program that attempts to ensure that no child goes to school hungry. We also did an interactive video called Mr. Lahey Votes, with the late John Dunsworth to engage young people in the Canadian election and increase voter turnout. These things matter. They're important."

Be it art directing, styling, writing, producing, or pretty much anything else that requires creative flair, Higgs is the go-to person for many larger production companies in Halifax. It's a talent that comes naturally to Higgs, not necessarily through formal training.

She explains, "I have an English and Theatre University degree, so I did acting in university. But I haven't really used the degree for much except possibly that I understand the psychology behind connecting with people through a camera lens... I have a performance education, but most of

my accomplishments come through trial and error."

The road ahead for Higgs and Matriarch Productions holds a second season of DIY Mom an expanded YouTube channel, and a busy video content production schedule.

She is currently looking for another home to renovate and flip. No doubt Higgs will also be putting her partnering and funding skills to the test once again as she reaches out to potential suppliers and other stakeholders for a second run. Higgs closes the conversation with the assurance that leaving the big-city life behind for greener pastures on the East Coast was the best thing she could have done for her and her daughter's future. "We have a fantastic quality of life here.

More attainable than what we could have sustained in Toronto. Every day I hustle to work hard and be self-sufficient, but a high quality of life is achievable for a single mom out here in Nova Scotia. And that feels good." ●

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