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KIS Cubed Events – With A Multicultural Team, the Connections and the Experience to Bring Sophisticated, Luxury, One-of-a-Kind Experiences to Clients Worldwide



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"I am a firm believer in holding my head down, focusing on doing my job, being amazing at my craft and being obsessed with it, rather than looking around and trying to hear the rest of the noise out there." Nirjary Desai

CEOCFO: *Ms. Desai, I must tell you I like your title of Chief Experience Officer, because it sounds like what you do?*

Ms. Desai: Yes it is! We are curating one-of-a-kind experiences for our clients.

CEOCFO: *You were born in Zambia, raised in South Carolina and educated in London, so you have a polycultural upbringing. On a personal note, how did your life experiences lead you to becoming an event planner?*

Ms. Desai: From growing up in so many different parts of the world, experiencing so many different cultures, cuisines and celebrations, and being exposed to people from so many walks of life, I knew that I wanted to be or do something in the service industry. Originally, I was on track for med school. Because I speak multiple languages, I also wanted to work in foreign relations. I was interviewing for a job in New York and ended up landing a job in Atlanta.

I grew up in South Carolina and visited Atlanta often. My family is in the convenience store, hotel industry and wine distribution business. Therefore, I went to many unique places for sourcing and meeting people from around the world from a young age and growing up all over. I knew that being in the service industry was in my blood.

After seeing the level of hospitality from my culture, watching my parents maintain relationships all over the world, and having people come to our home, I knew that was important to me regardless of whatever career path I chose. Nowadays, in every career, we are very

exposed to service and being of service. That is where the event side comes in.

CEO CFO: *How did you actually get into event planning? Was it through education, did you get a job out of college with an event planner and work your way into the career or said, "Hey, I can do this," after sitting at a friend's wedding?*

Ms. Desai: In college, I was constantly pulled into helping organize events. I served on the board for the Indian Student Exchange and other Indian organizations where we would organize and plan a lot of unique events. Once I earned my MBA and moved back to the states, a lot of my friends started getting married. Working for a large brand, Starwood, now part of Marriott Bonvoy®, a lot of my friends were getting married and started pulling me in to help. I was on the corporate brand side. Through that job, I was exposed to corporate culture, corporate clients, and corporate clients' needs on a multicultural level.

People in my networks were starting to throw larger celebrations and wanted my help. From there, it was not something I signed up for and said that I really wanted to be a planner or a web designer, I really fell into it. As my network started getting married and throwing events, they would contact me. My business started from a grassroots effort.

CEO CFO: *What were some of the challenges in getting into the industry?*

Ms. Desai: Getting into the industry was really one-sided. I have been in the business for over 18 years. My parents are from India, and I was born in Africa, and my South Asian descent is extremely important to how I am. At that time in my community, the term of event planner was not always there. People through your community, churches, and relatives would help organize these events. It was never looked at as a career path. My biggest challenge was the competition from aunts and uncles who were doing this pro bono because that is the norm for these people.

One of my biggest challenges was that people looked at event designers as planners, which was not the case. An event planner's exact job was such unknown territory in the community and in the market. I explained that I was like a general contractor when they built a home. My job is to set expectations and a budget. The biggest challenge was for people to understand the goal. We are not just managing at the event, we were managing things and bringing this whole experience to life and essentially constructing their events. I think there is more of a challenge in the industry now because there are no barriers to entry.

I do have a degree in hospitality, management and business. I trained in the industry to a certain extent; however, my goal was very different before I got into it. Now, the challenge is that every bride who goes through the process thinks they can become an event planner, but they do not know the ins and outs of daily nuances. We have to explain ourselves from that perspective.

CEO CFO: *What were some of the challenges in putting the resources together?*

Ms. Desai: At the time, the biggest challenge was being able to find the right resources at the same level of service and excellence as we were providing. When you go into other countries and other destinations, the biggest thing is also understanding their culture and how they operate from a business standpoint. If I am trying to plan a site visit in a Muslim country during Ramadan, I am not going to get much attention and response because this is an important time in that culture. I know that I need to be respectful when I plan my trip. We work in Mexico all the time, and I think Mexico is so used to Americans hosting events there. Also, there is an understanding of the holidays in Mexico.

Being able to speak the language is a great benefit. If you are planning to host events on an international level, you need to be able to communicate with the common man serving you. That is important and how you get further. It is about understanding how to do business and how to connect with local service providers.

CEOFCO: *What are the languages that you speak?*

Ms. Desai: I speak English and Spanish. I speak Hindi, Gujarati, which are two Indian languages. I also speak a dialect of Hindi called Urdu, which is only spoken in Pakistan, Qatar, and the Middle East. I also speak a little bit of Swahili dialect.

CEOFCO: *Your business is Atlanta-based. Where do most of your events take place; in the US, Atlanta specifically or internationally?*

Ms. Desai: Pre-pandemic we were 90% outside of Atlanta. Obviously, our entire industry sat still for two years as we all figured out how to re-engage, reconnect and collaborate with everybody. Now, our business is probably 50% in town and 50% at a destination. A lot of places are still getting it back together now. Even though they are open for business, there are challenges on the ground for these different countries. The same challenges are here in the US with the lack of workforce and the high cost of raw material goods.

CEOFCO: *How is business these days? We had a big shutdown of live events in 2020 due to COVID restrictions. It must have taken a lot of fortitude on your behalf to get through such a time. How has the industry fared and are you seeing a push towards normalcy?*

Ms. Desai: During 2020 and the pandemic, I focused my energy on educating the industry to build a better business and to help put protocols in place. That led to a lot of opportunities and speaking engagements where I was looked at as more of an expert and authority figure on thought leadership. Now, there are different opportunities where I am utilizing all of my experiences to continue educating due to the current influx of events. However, there is not an influx of vendors, as a lot of people went out of business or a lot of people chose to provide bad service. As a result, many companies and organizations decided to backtrack and limit their partners.

Getting to the forefront to work with these brands and companies was important to me because at the end of the day, I was too far into my career to change course or path. Now, I am still in it but focusing on the

education side by teaching hotel brands and individual DMCs in different countries that want to get both US and multicultural business, like South Asian business. I am doing a lot of training about contract negotiations, culinary, and execution. We are arming hotel corporations and venues in different countries to really think outside of the box and provide the best service in-house versus having to rely on an outside contractor or vendor that may not deliver the same level of excellence.

CEOCFO: *How quickly can you put together an event?*

Ms. Desai: We just got a call for an event for next week for the Masters Tournament. We have done events within days, months, and up to a year. We have been doing this for a long time. I can do this in my sleep, and my team knows that I operate quickly. No lead time is too long or too less. It just comes down to how quickly you can think on your feet.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about your team and their work and life experiences that allow them to be successful at event planning?*

Ms. Desai: I have a diverse team of men and women. Everybody speaks an additional language or come from a multicultural background. That is important because my clients are very diverse. It is important that my team is diverse and the people I work with are able to fulfill that need. In selecting my team, I want my client to see themselves represented. When I am picking anyone to work with or purchasing things, I want to see myself represented, not only by my ethnicity and my race, but also as a multicultural woman.

CEOCFO: *You planned the first South Asian Experience event at the Sundance film festival. Would you tell us about that and what are some of the other events you have planned; weddings, corporate events, social events? Can you tell us some of your clients, some of the entertainment you have arranged?*

Ms. Desai: The Sundance Film Festival event kind of came out of the blue. The event happened in Park City, Utah. On January 3, I was contacted by the nonprofit that was putting on the first-ever South Asian Lodge at the Sundance Film Festival. For a second, I thought this could not be real since it was only two weeks away. There is a lot that goes into events, and Utah is an interesting state to work in. I did an event for a wealthy billionaire client in Utah for his daughter's wedding in 2014. I know all the rules and operations in Utah. I replied to the email and found out that they found us from a Google search. We were literally the only brown event planner of South Asian descent that ever worked in Utah, so they wanted to work with us. We helped plan, produce and design the whole experience, and it was such a great feeling for me personally. I finally felt like I belonged.

Creating a space for people of your background in your culture and finally feeling heard and seen is an amazing feeling. The conversations and the goal of what business is going to turn into and what people are seeing themselves wanting were amazing, like meeting amazing creators and creatives, such as the amazing poet and writer Rupi Kaur. Then, there was Nina Davuluri, the first Miss America of South Asian descent and other major trailblazer women of South Asian descent.

Having a platform at the Sundance Film Festival where the entire world of creativity comes to connect and collaborate was very invigorating. It was the first time that it beyond being an event producer. It was also about culture, what we bring to the table, and where we come together with others of other backgrounds and share a piece of us while they share a piece of them. Overall that experience has opened up a lot of doors for us in the entertainment world to be able to produce events for people in the entertainment industry.

CEO CFO: *Do you personally oversee each event?*

Ms. Desai: Yes, I am very involved in my business and with all of my clients. We are a boutique agency, and I believe in a luxury, elevated experience. I want to make sure we are giving the highest level of service with the highest level of ourselves. That is important to me. I have a team that manages events as well as projects. Depending on the size and budget of the project, I am also involved in every conversation with every client it is important for my brand and my company.

CEO CFO: *As a multi-cultured woman of do you put a lot of emphasis and devote much time to championing the causes for women and people of color and if so, can you share some of those activities?*

Ms. Desai: I am a big champion for women, empowering them and inspiring them while helping them create a space for themselves. One of the biggest things I saw pre-pandemic was that women were really looking for space to connect with each other. As a woman, I have also been burned by other women, and I wanted to create a space where people feel safe and can come together and collaborate.

I have been working on an initiative called, Leave Her Mark, which is for anyone and everyone that identifies as a woman and wants to focus on leaving their mark. We are working on a retreat series, podcast and an in-person live conference to start next year. What I practice is what I preach. I want to make sure I teach that too. For me, that is extremely important and why I surround myself with my team of all different ethnicities and backgrounds. A lot of them are women since it is important to give them the chance to learn and grow. I want to see them succeed.

CEO CFO: *What is the significance of the company name KIS Cubed? Where did it come from?*

Ms. Desai: One of my marketing professors in MBA school used to always say that anything and everything in marketing requires the KIS principle: Keep it Simple Stupid. That always stuck with me. I remember sitting down one day and thinking I need a brand name for my business. It was always KIS (Keep it Simple). In our approach with our clientele, we keep it simple. We try not to use such large jargon and propaganda to try to sign our clients on and why we keep that communication very simple. Our clients are very sophisticated and want a wow factor. They also want a level of service, integrity and mission for their event. The word 'sophisticated' comes into play. Each client, brand, and person have their own unique style and want to showcase that. That is why I came up with Simply Sophisticated with Style. It is KIS raised to the third power.

CEOCFO: *In closing, what sets KIS Cubed Events apart from other event planners?*

Ms. Desai: I am not one of those people to sit here and talk about what makes me better. I just know what we do, what our protocol is and why we do the things we do. It is important that we are very authentic and transparent in how we charge and communicate and how we manage the day-to-day of our clients' relationships. That is what is important to me. Sure, we are a five-star rated company on Google, and that is a lot of hard work. That comes with clients and their experiences to make sure they feel this way about us. Obviously, we are doing something right. I am a firm believer in holding my head down, focusing on doing my job, being amazing at my craft and being obsessed with it, rather than looking around and trying to hear the rest of the noise out there.

