

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 58: 4 strategic activities that doubled her revenue and increased client retention

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Erica Jo Norris

Audrey Joy Kwan

If you want to double your revenue and increase client retention, there's much more to consider than just getting more clients. You want the business to be sustainable, and your efforts to have a lasting impact instead of being a roller coaster, and that requires looking at more than the marketing and sales activities. Doubling your revenue and increasing client retention requires strategic considerations of the overall impact on your business and refining critical areas to sustain your business, including how your team operates and delivers your services. Today's episode explores four strategic activities that help this agency owner double your revenue and increase client retention in a year, tune in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency podcast. If you're a creative consultant, or agency owner, who wants to know what the roller coaster ride really looks like to grow your business from one to many who in the right place, my guests and I pull back the curtains on the realities of growing and running agencies of different sizes, and what it takes to build a team. And if you're anything like me, you want more than the highlight reel. You want to learn from the mistakes of others so that you can stop short of making the same mistakes. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I spend my days as a coach and consultants and multiple six and seven figure agency owners. For the last seven years. I've been behind the scenes, helping people grow, lead and operate small but mighty agencies Here at the Small But Mighty Agency podcast will uncover what works. And equally as important what didn't work to get these business owners to where they are today.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hello, friends. I'm glad you decided to join us today on the Small But Mighty Agency podcast. We have Erica Jo Norris with us today. We're sharing how she doubled her revenue and increase client retention in her business. Over the past year, we'll dive into four things Erica has done and continues to do in her social media marketing agency to make that happen. Before we do that, I want to introduce you to Erica, whose agency also won a 2022 Best in Show Addie at the American Advertising Awards. Let's get into it, Erica, what led you on the path to starting your agency?

Erica Norris

Yeah, of course. So, I'm the owner and creative director at a company called Talk Fast Social. We have been around for six years. And my path was, I don't know if it's typical or not, I was really unhappy at my current job. I was already the Creative Director at 25 at a traditional ad agency and the leadership there,

we didn't mesh. And so, I just quit, I quit my job with nothing else to back it up. And in one week of hustling and going out and getting clients, I was a lot happier. And I was already making more money than I was at that previous job.

Audrey Joy Kwan

You were making more money than your job in one week. Tell us more about that. What were you doing that helped you make more money than your full-time job in such a short time?

Erica Norris

Well, first of all, I believed in social media, I think traditional ad agencies, oftentimes, they were under selling, they were under evaluating the importance of social media marketing, and I had learned very early on the power of it. So, I believed in it a lot more, which meant I sold it for a lot more than they were selling it for. So, they didn't pay me a lot because they weren't, you know, charging their clients enough for it. I was always just like a freebie that they would throw in, hey, if you buy ad spend, you know, for traditional media, we'll throw in social media. So, they weren't paying me a ton, which is common for a job a couple of years out of college, but I was able to get a couple of clients and I wasn't even charging those clients very much. But within a very short amount of time, I was able to get like three or four clients at \$500 apiece. And I was able to make more than I was making at that job.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Your agency, of course, looks different today than it did six years ago. Six years ago, it was about replacing your salary and a strong belief in what you sold help you to do it quickly. Today, it's about building a sustainable, profitable and scalable business. There are two things right now that you're focusing on in your business, the first is doubling your revenue. And the second is client retention. The approach to this isn't simply go out and get more clients, but to look at what's happening internally to make it all possible. What are you doing to make that happen?

Erica Norris

The first thing I did for client retention, and overall, just increasing my prices, was getting the clients a better understanding of their goal. Oftentimes, a client would come to us and say, Oh, we want to grow followers, or oh, we want to reach, you know, 100,000 people. But at the end of the day, if we even if we had accomplished those goals, we would be we'd get fired because there wasn't an increase in sales or, you know, whatever the reason was, and so I realized that the client thinks that they have an understanding of what they want, but I always push them farther and farther farther, you know, why do you want those followers what's that going to accomplish for you, so that we can get to the real goal and having a better agreement on that helped me be able to not only price that so I could make those goals happen, but also gave the client a better understanding of what we were doing. If it was working, like we agreed what we were deciding on as the success point. And that really helped so that I wasn't setting us both up to fail.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When you help clients get concise on their goals, it makes measuring that much easier. What small business owner hasn't heard a client be generic about their goals. For example, the standard answer to what you want to achieve is to get more clients. But the path to getting more clients or more sales is nuanced. The more transparent we are about that nuance, the more capable we are of showing success. So, what do you consider a good goal and a bad goal?

Erica Norris

A good goal is something that is trackable, we can show that we can prove that we were able to accomplish that goal for them. So, for example, actual calls that they want to get or actual leads that they want something that is attainable. I'd say a bad goal is again, something that has a lot of hidden hopes behind it. So, if you want more followers, you have that's a that's a great goal, if you're looking for brand awareness and to be able to build an online community. But if you want more followers, because you think that's going to help your business succeed, that's a bad goal. You have too many hopes and not one goal.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If a client comes to you with a goal that has hidden hopes, by the way, I love the term hidden hopes, what do you do to help them drill down? Let's use the get more followers example.

Erica Norris

So, I you know, I asked them, Okay, what are you? If we get you more followers, what are you hoping to accomplish by that? And oftentimes, the answer is, well, if you know, the bigger we are, the more sales we're going to have. And that's where I kind of push them. Or oftentimes they'll say, Okay, if you work with us, and we grow your following by 10,000, but your sales haven't increased at all, will you still be happy? And they'll oftentimes say no, and I'll say, then you're not looking for more followers, you're looking for more sales. Now there are these awesome brands, you know, that we do get clients sometimes where their sales don't matter at all, they're killing it. And they really do want more brand, you know, more brand awareness so that if there were ever a dip in their sales, that fan base is built for them, that's great. But that's a rarity in the in the industry that I'm in. So, it's separating the difference between this goal and that goal.

Audrey Joy Kwan

This is such a meaningful conversation, our ability as strategist and communicators, to help clients get clear on the goals means asking better questions, and then educating them on what success looks like. And that ultimately leads to client retention.

Erica Norris

Yes, because so many times that would happen, where we would accomplish the goal that we initially agreed upon when we wrote up their proposal, and then they'd be unhappy with us. But we didn't know why. And they didn't know why. And then that was just bad for the relationship overall. Exactly. So, we've been able to develop questions and a way of creating relationships, honestly, with our clients that

we all agree what the actual goal is. So even if they get a ton of followers, that we know, that's not really what they want, then that's gonna make a big difference.

Audrey Joy Kwan

That leads nicely into another key point of activities, that double revenue and increase client retention, let's talk about establishing your agency as a partner to your client, versus being a vendor, as a partner, you collaborate. But as a vendor, you're an order taker, what are some things you and your team do to set your agency up as a partner to clients?

Erica Norris

Relationships are very important to me. And so that is something that I think separates us from others is that we do have an account manager to make sure all their work goals are needed. But we also just sometimes have vent sessions with the clients and I make sure to be there for them. I'm also really vulnerable with my clients. So, I share, I'm trying to be as open and honest with them as I can be. There's obviously a balance in that, that like walks that professional line, you know, my daughter did just have a seizure, she's a baby and I wasn't ashamed or afraid to share that with people. Because I feel like, Hey, if you don't know this about me, then my work might not be great that day, and you're going to understand why. And so, I realized too in being vulnerable with my clients and treating them like people and not something I have to keep selling to once we're working together, there's a trust that comes over that, that we've built that I build over time with them, that is I'm gonna keep doing my best work for you. And at the same time, I hope we can almost build a friendship, because the more comfortable we are with each other, the more vulnerable we're both going to be, which is going to actually lead me to see better creative options for you. Because the more I get to know them, the more I see, oh, you're willing to get out of your box and dance a little bit. Let's do a TikTok on that, you know, TikTok on that. So, I try to just be vulnerable and be myself and, and I realized that if I'm the first person to do that, how quickly they are also willing to do that.

Audrey Joy Kwan

That speaks to the fact that business isn't about being buttoned up suits anymore. Vulnerability matters. Okay, we've identified two key things you're doing to improve your client retainment. What about doubling your revenue? What are you focusing on?

Erica Norris

Yeah, I would say internal structure has been a big thing for us, I started the company, you know, I immediately just started to hit, hit the ground running. And for the first year, it was just me wearing a million hats, right. And then thankfully, as we built clients and built revenue, I was able to take off a hat and give it you know, one at a time to somebody else. And so, like our graphic designer has been with us for geez, four or five years now. So, she was one of our very first hires. And so, the thing is, is though we've always been running. And so, over the last couple of years with our revenue, really, honestly, doubling and our team doubling, we've been realizing we need more structure. So that's been something we've been really working on this last year. And it's a big 2023 goal for us, we're actually going to take a retreat, the beginning of March, the whole team, we're going to go up to a, one of our clients actually has a beach house up on Whidbey Island. And we're going to sit down and spend the

weekend bonding and creating structure, we want to, I want to make sure that my team also has their own personal goals that I'm aware of so I can help out with those. And they all have business goals for themselves as well. So, creating just that safe place, again, for my team, to be able to be vulnerable and talk about the things that they need from me and from the business is really helpful too.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When business owners are asked what they're doing to double the revenue, that natural place is to talk about marketing and sales. And what lights me up is your approach to the question. You see serving the team better as the way forward. How are you doing that?

Erica Norris

I always do this at least like once a quarter, I sit down with my team and I say okay, here's what I believe you're currently in charge of. What else do you feel like you've taken on that I'm not aware of? And do we have any disagreements in that? And if you have taken this on, thank you. And here's a raise or what do you feel like you deserve in order to keep taking that on? Because like I said, I was wearing so many hats that it was clear. Okay, I'm taking off my designer hat. I'm taking off my copywriting hat. But there's a lot of little hats that I wasn't aware of that I had that as the company's grown I feel like I like my team takes - someone does the coffee runs now. Right. And I wasn't aware that I took that off until it happened. So. So yeah, I think it's just checking in with individual or my individual team. And then the team as a whole and making sure we all agree with what we want to present Talk Fast as like, we're also going to design merch for our team internal merch, I feel like that's really important. So, making sure that they feel like they have things to be proud of and to sport, we are always trying like new T shirts and new stuff out. So, we're going to design a spring and summer merch line for the team, not for anybody else. But for us. And for our clients.

Audrey Joy Kwan

You're intensely focused on team building and supporting your people as a path towards doubling revenue. What inspires this thinking and action?

Erica Norris

Yeah, that's a great question. So, my very first hire ever was a friend, I hired a friend who was really miserable at their job. And so, I brought them on, and I had never really managed another person before. So very quickly, I realized that I had people pleaser tendencies, and that I really was quick to put their needs before mine and before the business, and I let that person stay a lot longer than I should have. We actually lost clients because my focus was so because I had had really bad leadership at the last ad agency. And I've been treated pretty poorly. And so that it was, it's always been really important to me to be a good boss. And so what I've had to do over the last six years is, is learn the balance of okay, being a good boss doesn't always mean letting someone walk all over you or being a good boss means that when you have a bad person on the team, or someone that doesn't match the team, letting them go quickly, so they don't affect the rest of the team is what a good boss is, you know, there's a lot of balance there. And like I said, I actually never planned on owning a business. I have no background in leadership or skills like that. So it's been the last few years as the team has doubled or even almost tripled at this point. It's been checking in with myself making sure I'm educating myself, but

also doing that by hearing what the team wants but letting go of bad hires is a huge thing. I don't even know how to like bring it up casually other than just firing people like right away when you just know they're not a good fit, instead of hoping you can like squeeze the good out of them. Like the energy you spend on doing that. It takes away from the team that wants to be there or is the right fit.

Audrey Joy Kwan

What's the longest time you've hung on to a bad hire?

Erica Norris

I would say like a year, year and a half, which is way too long. That was my first hire. And then I also just actually had a person that we let go of that it was pretty mutual at that point that it was hard. I probably should have let her go like six months ago because she didn't want to be here and she was really clear with that, she realized marketing wasn't for her, but I knew her as a person and I felt like bad letting her go before she had something else, which, again, I'm still learning. And it's a lot of checking in with like, why can't I put the business first sometimes, you know, and sometimes though, you just you believe that with coaching and time, they can get better or that they can be happier or whatever.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If you create a complex business that makes you feel trapped, you will never want to grow your business, you'll do little or big things to self-sabotage growth, because nobody wants to scale overwhelm, not you, not me, I've been there. I learned this lesson as a second in command of an agency, I could not turn off my brain relax, because I would worry about what was and wasn't being done. It wasn't until I looked at the business from a productized service perspective, it gave us more bandwidth to double the revenue and sell and exit the business. Since then, I've been behind the scenes of multiple six and seven figure service-based businesses helping consultants and marketers who are at capacity, get out of being stuck in service delivery and growing. It all starts by looking through the lens of a productized service, download the free Productized Your Service roadmap, go to audreyjoykwan.com/roadmap or, click the link directly in your show notes.

Audrey Joy Kwan

On the topic of taking too long to let go of a bad hire, a ton of different excuses or inner dialogue goes through the mind of a business owner before they let someone go. And those excuses lead to procrastination. It's more common than not. So I want to give some light on it. Can you share some of the things you were telling yourself that led you to hang on to someone who wasn't the right fit?

Erica Norris

Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, I think I think most business owners have gone through this, right? Because we're human. So, for example, when the employee starts showing signs, red flags, my first instinct is okay, what are they going through in their personal life that could be leading to this because we all have bad times. And I've never would want to let go of a really great hire, because their grandma died or something like that. You know. So that's the first thing I always do. And I check in with them, Hey, I've noticed that this is happening. And usually there is everybody's got something they could kind of say,

Okay, this has been what's making me have a hard time. So, you know, the personal life thing is always that and also, I always I have a lot of empathy. I think empathy is a great trait, but I think too much of it can be really toxic. And I have a lot of empathy that I battle. And so, it's putting myself in their shoes, and but I have to remember, one of the things my inner dialogue goes back and forth is if I would never put myself in that situation, because I like to work or I'm good at what I do, or I have a hustle that they might not have. So reminding myself that just because I can feel what it might feel like it doesn't mean that that person is is me, and that they had the same reactions as me. So yeah, I make up a ton of excuses, maybe they're having a bad time. Maybe they're maybe, maybe I'm the reason maybe I wasn't a good enough leader in the way I described that. Maybe I didn't give her enough tools to succeed. Maybe I'm not listening enough, I take a lot of the blame, you know. And then eventually, what's happened, sadly, is they get to a point where they just show me so much of themselves. And I eventually can't take on anymore. And I snap out of it kind of and then once I see it, I'm really good at just ending it. It just takes me a while to get there.

Audrey Joy Kwan

To close the loop here. Why do you believe that focusing on the team first, before all the marketing and sales, doubled your revenue?

Erica Norris

Being able to have a team means more minds, it means more thought process. And I think with all of that, just it's been better work for the clients. And also, when you're one person wearing 25 hats, you can only do 50% or 10% for each hat or whatever, you can't give 100 to anything. So, when I have somebody who gets to wear one or two hats, and they get to give 100% obviously, the workload, the work has just gotten better, which has led to happier clients, which has led to more revenue. We're just really well known now. And we are number one, if you Google in our town, social media, we come up first, and we have the most reviews. And it's just been incredible to see that happen. But I couldn't do any of it now without the team that we have.

Audrey Joy Kwan

So, our friends listening know the city you're in. It's Spokane, Washington. And the four things we've talked about today, setting better goals with your clients, positioning your agency as a partner instead of a vendor, adding team structure and letting go of bad hires quickly have led to doubling your revenue and increasing client retention. Plus, it plays a factor to your agency being number one in your city. Is there anything else? What about the personal side?

Erica Norris

My would be checking it yourself on why you got started to begin with. So, the last few years on social media has been really hard since COVID. I mean, hopefully, mentally, it's just been a really hard place to be sometimes, it can be really negative. You can lose friends on there. We just see bad stuff. It's all the time right so social media can really be draining for me, I think what keeps me really inspired and really good at my job is just reminding myself of why I wanted to do this in the first place, and like what I love about social media. And so, as any business owner, like, I don't care if you like, oh, like sell shoes, like ask yourself, why you sell shoes, and like what the point of that is for you, and how you got there to begin

with. Because if you don't believe in the shoes that you're selling, you're like, you can't sell them. And like, that's how I always feel about social media, like I can always tell when I'm, I need to recheck and readjust like my relationship with social media. If the company is like if we haven't gotten a new client on in a few weeks, or a couple months, or whatever, because that means that we're always getting proposals coming in, we're always getting word of mouth and sales. If some of those aren't clicking that means that I'm not doing my job sharing the power of this of this product, which I believe in so heavenly, also, hugely in because it changed my life so drastically that I would never have gotten this here. If I hadn't. I believed in social media from the very beginning.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Yes, rechecking myself means reconnecting to why I do what I do. Without passion for our business we have a hard time going. What's your take on when someone needs to do a recheck?

Erica Norris

When my job starts to feel like work, I need to recheck myself which sounds so like, like a bold statement, but like, I love what I do. When I go into a sales meeting, I love it cuz I love talking about it, because I believe in it. So, when I get a bunch of like proposals or calls on my calendar, and I'm like, Oh, I really don't want to take that call. I don't want to talk about social media. That's a huge red flag for me. Okay, you need to go and like, sit there and watch the Ellen video that got you on social media, or like, remind yourself like all the incredible things you've been able to do, because of this one tool. I could have done none of it without social media. So that's the big red flag for me is when I don't when I feel like it's work. When it feels harder than the regular days, then I feel like I need to recheck and reset like why I'm here. And I believe too honestly, this might not be the best advice for entrepreneurs. But I think if you're constantly rechecking and you can't get back, maybe it's not your dream, or it's not your goal or something has shifted and you need to sit with that. I think that's like taboo in entrepreneurial, like the world is to just like give not to give up but to shift your goals and to change. But I don't think you can actually do the best work possible if you if you can't get back to why you started. And you can't really believe it.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If you're constantly rechecking and can't get back. Change has to happen. It can be a significant change, or a pivot can make the difference. Erica, you strongly believe in your work because of your origin story. You mentioned Ellen DeGeneres. I don't want to leave the listeners wondering what that is all about.

Erica Norris

I had graduated from WSU in 2012. Recession was still happening from 20-2008. Hard to get a job and I was interning at an ad agency. And I had got like I said a Hail Mary thought that maybe I could try to get a job working for Ellen DeGeneres. And I wrote a song in the shower, and I filmed this really janky horrible video on my iPhone. The next day, I had a friend hold it, edited it all on like iMovie. And I brought it to the ad agency. And I was like you guys check this out. And the videographer there, his name is Treven Spencer, we still do business together today. He said, Erica, this is so so bad. But he said but I love the idea. And I love the song. He said write another song, and I will produce this music video for you. So, I did I went back to my desk and then I wrote a song in one hour. And we over a month we

shot it, produced it, went to a recording studio. It was crazy. And then we had this amazing video, but we didn't know we're going to do with it. So, we used YouTube. I have a YouTube account at that time. And we use Twitter. And I just asked everyone I knew I shared on my personal Facebook page, which is really embarrassing. If I was ever gonna go back to my 10 year reunion and didn't work. It would have been mortifying. And yeah. And within two weeks, I got a call from the show. And they said, Hey, we saw your video, we'd love for you to come down and just like meet the producers and maybe watch a show and who knows what will happen. We'll so I got down there. And then the show started. And right away, Ellen started playing my video. And she actually hired me on live TV and it was the craziest out of body experience. But before I got hired, there was this moment when I was the show started. And Ellen does this thing or she used to do this thing where she would dance throughout the crowd. And I'm standing there, and Ellen DeGeneres is dancing by me. And I just think this is social like social media like Twitter got me here. Holy Geez, this is going to change the world. Because back then Facebook was just college kids. It wasn't our parents weren't on it. And I just in that moment, I knew I will. That is my check in moment is Ellen DeGeneres dancing by me and me thinking I use the internet to get here. And I use vulnerability and being weird and my personality, but I wasn't afraid to share that stuff on the internet. And yeah, I went and got to work for Ellen for an entire season. And I learned a ton about social media when I was down there. So, I've always been really lucky with my timing, too. So that's my origin story.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I have goosebumps, I can feel your passion come from your origin story. And I can see how that passion has helped you build your agency to where it is today. Before we wrap up, what inspires and motivates you right now?

Erica Norris

I mean, it's probably cheesy, and probably all parents say this, but my family and my kids, I just feel like everything I do right now, I do through different eyes, I do through what my son thinks I'm doing or like, what they're gonna think someday when they're talking to their friends and, and I also want them to believe in themselves enough to be the most vulnerable, raw selves, because I feel like there's something so valuable in that and if you can not be afraid what other people think about you, at least long enough to get it done. That really, it's just gonna change your whole world. And so, what inspires me right now is reminding myself to be that person for them, even when it gets hard and embarrassing and kind of scary.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you, Erica. Erica, where can people find you?

Erica Norris

Yeah, you can head over to our website, www.talkfastsocial.com Or we're on Instagram or anywhere on there.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you so much.

Erica Norris

Thank you.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey there. Thanks for hanging out with me at the Small But Mighty Agency podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean the world to me if you hit the follow or subscribe button in your podcast app and share it with a friend. I'll see you in the next one.