

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 53: How cultural intelligence makes her agency innovative

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Jennifer Taback

Audrey Joy Kwan

One of the most significant advantages of a small agency is the ability to stay in its lane and go deep into a niche. Today we're talking to an agency owner about her niche in cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is not just a hot topic, but a much needed one. Authentic representation matters because it empowers. I'm speaking from my own experience as an Asian Canadian, who grew up seeing very few, if at all, Asians represented as business owners, except for the stereotypical laundromat or corner store owner. Cultural intelligence supports responsible brands, in learning the difference between authentic and inauthentic ways to have diverse representation. I'm all for the authentic I hope you are too, if that's you tune into your cultural intelligence and Indigenous communities connects this agency owner to big brands.

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, you're in the right place. My guest 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 consultant to 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 words and equally as important what didn't work to get these business owners to where they are today.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey, friends, we have Jen with us today. And I'm excited to share the unique things she is doing in her niche and explore how her agency is serving the indigenous community. Jen, I'll let you take it away. Tell us about your agency.

Jennifer Taback

Hi there. My name is Jennifer Taback and I'm a partner here at Design de Plume Inc. We are an Indigenously owned women led design studio that focuses on organizations creating social impact by serving underrepresented communities. We're based in Sudbury, Ontario, but do work all across Canada and the US.

Audrey Joy Kwan

In our in our offline conversations we've discussed working with Indigenous communities and how cultural understanding is vital, you have an experience of the culture and have Indigenous upbringing, may I ask you to share your experience.

Jennifer Taback

It's been amazing, bringing the knowledge that we have as communicators and I always call ourselves as designers and even comms people now I'm recognizing as translators. So it's always when we're working with the First Nation, Inuit, or Métis organizations, they have a message to say it's really been the same message for a very, very long time. And it's been a really interesting journey to try to recognize where we can make connections that just did not exist before. Sometimes it's as foundational as building trust, you know, getting an organization to trust us to understand that we're coming with good intentions, we want to support them, because we recognize the challenges they've had, whether it's dealing with other design agencies who aren't listening, who don't recognize, you know, maybe capacity challenges. If your marketing team, if you're in a remote community, and you have, you know, a comms person who just is only on a contract for six months, that's a much different plan than, you know, a well established organization with a 50 year history. So we've really done a lot of learning about seeing what challenges those organizations have themselves. And now we're at the point where we take those challenges and tell, you know, like the Government of Canada, or big national banks, we say, Okay, here's what is happening on the ground, let us guide you into that conversation. And it's, you know, it's, it's not I think we're very good at it. But there is still so much learning left to do.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Here in North America, how we do business is Westernized, and we follow Western cultural norms that other cultures might not resonate with, what are the key things he knows, in your experience working with Indigenous cultures?

Jennifer Taback

Yeah, one of the biggest things is most designers and a lot of people, especially when they're in school, or receiving their education are trained in design in a very Western way. It's, you know, I was very pro minimalism, and these ideas of what a good design should look like, what a good website should look

like, what a good logo looks like. And very early on, I recognize that, okay, that was not gaining traction, you know, and I tried to take a look at why. And in a lot of cultures and Indigenous cultures and a lot of Asian cultures, you know, it's not really about the minimalism, it's not about forcing one message through in a very simple way. It's about creating these elaborate, beautiful stories through colors, through symbols, which really do puts the work on the viewer, you know, we're not a huge brand that's trying to tell you buy our product. We're a smaller organization or, you know, trying to tell these very diverse stories. And it's been a beautiful journey to kind of recognize that because it also really helps automatically include, think about diversity, inclusion, and equity and accessibility. It's kind of built in when you start acknowledging all these layers and complexity. Those things just naturally fit in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

You bring up a great point about design aesthetics, and how traditions are essential considerations. Not just when it's trendy, we put cultural meaning to things when we work with clients, how do we rethink some of the things we consider norms?

Jennifer Taback

I think the biggest challenge for us to kind of do like and we run an agency so you know, we have project managers, we have timelines, clients will have them themselves. Indigenous are not funding deadlines, things just have to get done. But one of the biggest learnings that we've done and that we've tried to create processes around is creating space for thought, for discussion. And then creating time to walk away from a project for a couple of days, in some cases a month, in some cases, it's hunting season, or, you know, summer camps, that kind of thing. And so respecting that, not everyone feels comfortable giving an opinion immediately, on sometimes very important work that's taken a very long time to get there, which is always at odds, which with that creative planning, because we're like, Okay, we're gonna give you a logo in a week, you need to kind of give us feedback, you know, someone's gonna spend that full week thinking right about that, no, they have a life, they have things to do. And that's been a really interesting process. And some of our best work has come when both the client, whether they're Indigenous or not, giving space for that. It's also been interesting, because in the last one of the last projects, we did, we had Elders from across Canada, and, you know, what we scheduled we have busy time, you know, I scheduled my day, probably to the, you know, minute. So it's often sometimes waiting in a meeting for people to arrive, you know, and that's, you know, been 30 minutes, 45 minutes, and then trying to plan for people's own internal schedules, you know, what I might perceive as being late to a meeting, you know, is someone finally finding the space where they feel okay to arrive and talk about that topic. And, you know, in a business sense, it's sometimes at odds to trying to get, if we have a corporate client, to respect that and to let you know, Indigenous people lead that work and lead the conversations that they want to be a part of.

Audrey Joy Kwan

And that's a great example, how we interpret lateness in a meeting, as a sign of disrespect isn't necessarily the case when working with Indigenous communities. How do you manage that, in your business, knowing is not a sign of disrespect?

Jennifer Taback

Yeah. And yeah, that's a great question. In that project, specifically, what we had was two project managers, one on our team who was really, you know, really knew how much flexibility we had, and then a project manager on the client side, who understood, you know, it's really my place to wait for that Elder to show up, it's my sign of respect, I'm asking them for their time, you know, within a certain reasonable circumstance. And I think having everyone understand that, even though you know, we're the hired team to come in, were the ones who are doing this work, trying to stay on budget on time, that the best work is going to come from understanding that it's not someone disrespecting me, it's giving me a place to respect the peoples whose opinions and often doing the work, you know, voluntarily as well, or definitely not being compensated as much as I think they should be compensated. So it's interesting to kind of focus on that humility, as a designer, as a speaker, as like person who really focuses on getting things done. But it is also cultural training for staff, you know, there is a way to acknowledge to have these conversations, people who do you know, run businesses of that to recognize that you're in a culture that's different isn't, you shouldn't be Westernized, you know. And as much as I might have thought differently, and 10 years ago, to be like, Hey, we have to get this done. It will come together and having trust in that process as well. It's been a huge shift from a top down, right? How do I talk to my staff about that encourage them to plan a little bit longer to be on the client, on their project manager, but it's a mind shift, mindset shift. Really,

Audrey Joy Kwan

I know, you understand the culture and have an Indigenous upbringing in that Indigenous communities are diverse. I think of my cultural background, I'm Chinese, and there are different dialects and norms. Growing your cultural intelligence is investing in training, which has led to new opportunities for your business. Tell me more about staying in your lane, going deep into the cultural intelligence of Indigenous communities, and the opportunities that come from your niche.

Jennifer Taback

Yeah, and I think the idea of, you know, as you said, of staying in our lane, and I was I was thinking about the topic and like, being authentic to what I love to do, and to myself and celebrating that in a way that hey, it makes me money. It supports a team and it does great work like you know, it's such a beautiful combination. And there was a point where, you know, when we started the agency, we were really aimless. You know our training, it's like, okay, you should work for a corporation. You know, your logo should look like this if you want to be successful, and I just didn't feel I didn't want to be everything to everyone, you know, and I can see this problem with, you know, we're working with band offices and non for profits. And they were just struggling. And I thought, there's so many of them that could use

specific help. So that was probably about eight years ago, we said, Okay, we're specifically going to focus on this problem. And then I could just really see things start to fall into place. And like you said, my understanding of cultural you know, of cultural norms for me, it's also noticing how different that is, right? Like, I'm urban Indigenous, there's so many communities we work that are completely remote. So it's always culture shock to me, as well as how different we are, even in communities that are close together. So I think that's been a really important factor in recognizing that by staying in our lane, we've really seen how big it is, and how many opportunities are there, not just in design, but consultation, one of our partner works on accessibility and accessibility has been deeply rooted in Indigenous philosophy for a very long time. And trying to now it is just trying to really stay to what is true, true to our mission, because that lane gets bigger every every day. And it's hard to stay focused sometimes.

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 and relax because I would worry about what was and wasn't being done. It wasn't until I looked at the business 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 part as a service roadmap, go to audreyjoykwan.com/roadmap or click the link directly in your show notes.

Audrey Joy Kwan

It's been 13 years of owning and operating your business. In the first five years, you were serving everybody. And in the last eight years, you've claimed your niche and built deep expertise working with Indigenous communities. How did you go from being a generalist to a specialist?

Jennifer Taback

That is a great question. And I think in the first five years, it was really having confidence in that, you know, I'm like, I think there's a, there is a problem here. I knew that, you know, I was very confident there was a problem. But what I wasn't confident of was that you know, a graphic designer, that's what I started here as a graphic designer, programmer, do I have the skill sets that could really make a change? And then I think around, you know, the time we're at maybe in the last two years, I've really seen that, as I've stepped away a little bit to look at the problem from a top down perspective, you know, that design is not is one piece of the solution. But it is a little bit about the whole picture. So, it took me about five years to recognize, okay, I need to step away from making the logos to talk a little bit about the systemic problems, how do they inform design work? How can my team do better start to give that responsibility to amazing designers, and I'm always encouraging more Indigenous youth or

underrepresented youth to be in the comms communication, creative industries, because they need those voices. And I'm hoping like, I really feel like at the end of that season, I love to put that, you know, at the end of that kind of thing. It was a recognition of how much opportunity there was and taking the knowledge that we learned at a very grassroots hands on level. And now applying it to processes, policies, hiring practices, it's been a complete, like looking down from the ground to looking up and very forward to what the next 10 years looks like, which is daunting. So, I'm definitely at the start of the season. Because, you know, I don't know what the cliffhanger is gonna look like I don't know what the ending is going to look like. But I'm very excited about kind of the new playing field and the new organizations, not new organizations, but new to us organizations who are having the conversations that we started a few years ago. And they're still like shocked and awed by they're like, Wow, I need that. You know, this articulates a problem and provides a solution and you know, getting to practice those skills. And that insight at a at a bigger level, national, international level is very, very exciting. Right now.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Yeah, once you found your lane, it became easier to build your thought leadership. And it sounds like by stepping out of day-to-day operations, it gave you space to tap into the powerful message you have inside you. It's that work of stepping into the message has helped you carve a reputation for your agency. I know from our chats that you were at a conference recently and met Fortune 500 companies that want to explore ways to be more inclusive and diverse. Some of these companies you talk to what do you think attracts them to your agency, your small agency, your 15 people, what do you think gets them knocking at your door?

Jennifer Taback

Yeah, and that's, you know, that's one of the things that has been surprising and both solidifying you know that, that I feel like we are in the right role. Our first like, you know, the first big calling we're working with John Hopkins University asked us to do a rebrand, and eventually a rename of their Center for Indigenous Health. And I thought, what an amazing opportunity, why is there no one in the States doing this work, you know, is the conversation that behind, is there just not enough, you know, Indigenous youth in that comms creative design field. And, you know, kind of set off another light bulb in my head. Okay, if we're in Canada, and we're quite, you know, we're very happy with our workload, there is still lots of opportunities. And it's always nice as a business owner, to start to realize that you're the light that you don't have to accept everything. You know, that's, I think, a huge moment where you're like, I don't really want this work, and I don't need it. So, I can focus on my passion and the things that really excite me, so that I really had to take another step back and say, Okay, what made a client like that see the value in what we're saying, when we weren't? We weren't in the US, particularly right now. Thankfully, as design, it's very easy to apply that expertise, you know, globally, which I hope to do someday, even beyond the States. And then, you know, yeah, the conference. So, we did go for the Gulf of the Greens conference in Florida. And it was our first chance to say, Okay, what does this market look like, we got to talk to UPS, we got to talk to Moffitt Cancer Center, and Nike and Disney, and we sat down and have a conversation with their procurement. You know, it's a very basic entry level process. And some of the other staff and, you know, members of the corporations there, but you could really see

as even as they were on panels, I think there were companies that stood out as being far superior, thinking about what communities they serve, Nike having, specifically Indigenous and Native programming, which has been really exciting to watch how a private organization, you know, can try to build leadership for the next level, they can use products, you know, they can generate those funds, but then invest in those communities in what I think is a really good way. But it's hard to find support to continue those programs, like it's great to have the idea. And even someone, you know, even like UPS, they have very, they have campaigns where they'll put Indigenous art on boxes, which is great, I think, to normalize it to show that it is kind of an everyday celebration, but then to see how much support that they still require, you know, do they have those internal programs and support staff to get into leadership positions. And I was really surprised, you know, there's still such a high, high need for that in the US. And for very, very large international companies, they struggle with the same problems that governments face, local grassroots organizations. And that's you talked about, like exponential growth, how do we service that, you know, how do we make sure that we have the processes in place that we can apply the knowledge from a grassroots, you know, all the way out?

Audrey Joy Kwan

Jen, what do you think are the first steps for organizations?

Jennifer Taback

Organizations that have identified the problem internally, that's the first great step to say we don't, we don't even know how to approach getting representation or showing or encouraging, you know, leadership in a corporation of that size, or, you know, attracting that audience a bit more. And at the conference, one of the speakers said, you can't be it, if you can't see it. And that really resonated with me, because, you know, I wouldn't have considered being a business owner. But, you know, when I was in college, we actually had a small business owner come in, and she was a young woman, she wasn't much older than me. And I thought, well, now I can definitely do that. Because I had seen it, you know, and it does take an upfront investment by corporations, by organizations to sink money and resources in developing that talent. So that, you know, Indigenous youth can be part of management teams, can be part of leadership, can become CEOs of their own, you know, multinational kind of companies. And that's just what we need. And it's the whole, you know, and it's, you know, very big picture thinking, the whole system capitalism, you know, it's set up to keep a lot of these people out, they don't see the opportunities. If you're not, you know, in a city and you're in a remote community, how are you going to do an unpaid internship? How are you going to, you know, work for that company in a city completely unsupported. So it does require, you know, a whole another community to kind of come together and support people and encourage them into these jobs, or even taking away how important to meet design programming technology is to almost any path that they have in life. Is it a clear, you know, kind of a clear process? No, but I know that corporations, you know, are one of the first places that can really support it with those resources.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When you think about working with these organizations, where do you see your agency having an impact?

Jennifer Taback

Yeah, that's a great question. Because as designers, you know, and as you kind of step away a little bit from the process of design, it's really interesting to see how early you should get in the door. And we have been doing more consultation to talk about, you know, if you're starting a campaign, who should be the writers who should be directing it, who should you know, you know, what kind of photographer should you have actually taking it and one of our big components has been, you know, there's no stock photos, well pay to get your own stock photos don't rely on, you know, people who are not experienced, you know, don't have cultural literacy in those communities and Indigenous communities or understand the history, to try to grab them to sell them for \$2. Like, invest that money into that.

Audrey Joy Kwan

it sounds like you see a gap and you want to fill it, I hear the passion for education and consulting on Indigenous cultures and communities. Is that the next phase for your agency?

Jennifer Taback

Yeah. And that's definitely like, you know, as much as we have a tangible service, we've been working with larger organizations who have an in house design team, you know, so like, you know, the government's they have their own design teams, Nike, they will have their own. And so that's been also an interesting thing to say, not even you're going to use our team, you're going to use all our expertise, and our designers, and we're going to create, you know, strategies, we're going to provide the education because there isn't a system set up to do that, especially for communications and design teams to talk about that cultural literacy. And it's, it's always interesting, because I feel like it's so innate to us, you know, we just make these considerations. And it's, it's odd to be like, that's teachable.

Audrey Joy Kwan

It's your lane. It's the result of choosing your lane and becoming experts and working with Indigenous communities.

Jennifer Taback

Yeah!

Audrey Joy Kwan

You see gaps and can now educate and consult other brands.

Jennifer Taback

Yeah!

Audrey Joy Kwan

It's what corporations need to do innovative in good work in this world.

Jennifer Taback

Yeah, exactly. And I think it's that, you know, as a business owner, it's recognizing those opportunities, and it might be okay, you might have done programming of a website. But now you understand the process, really, from top to bottom from tip to tail, like I like to say is looking at things, and that those skills are transferable, and you can't grow exponentially as one person, you know, and you need to start having teams, you need to start educating people in, in your processes and how you approach the work and philosophy, you know, and it grows very organically on its own. But then when it kind of catches, you know, and it's like, we're almost at the point where I really have to do one more like, are we in our lane? What is outside of it? What is in it? You know, how do I keep very quickly going in the direction that I want to head and keep our clients really educated on the philosophies that we can provide to them.

Audrey Joy Kwan

And that's the exciting thing about owning a business. We get to evaluate our strengths, year after year, make strategic decisions to navigate the business direction, and choose the things we're passionate about. And on that note, Jen, what keeps you inspired and motivated?

Jennifer Taback

It is those opportunities right now it is to decide, you know, how much technically do we want to, technological pursuits do we want to the whole idea of augmented reality pursuing our work clients have had conversations about, you know, sacredness? How do we put sacredness and digital space and represent, you know, and honor Indigenous protocol when we work with museums, such as the Royal Ontario Museum, you know, we talk about ancestral objects, how should those be treated, or if an Elder gives us a story, it needs to be respected. And that gets me excited. Every morning, I wake up, and I think, oh, my gosh, I learned so much yesterday. How do I implement that into things that you know that where, I know that solutions are being provided by clients? Oftentimes, they have the knowledge, but how do I, you know, get them articulating their goals and their missions and getting them to move towards that? But also, what can I extrapolate for other communities? That gets me excited. And seeing

that that potential, you know, in the US, it's still very much the same. And the conversation is, is, you know, people told me 12 years behind where the, you know, Canada and other countries are so I'm always wondering, how do all these tools, how do all these connections, what other connections can I make to get a spark?

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you, Jen, for being here. Where can people find you online?

Jennifer Taback

We have our website, www.deplume.ca, we're on LinkedIn, and Facebook and Instagram, we're really trying to put my hope is in the next little bit, put a few a bit more like professional processes stuff onto LinkedIn for other people who are working in this space and trying to connect there. But I do want to point out, we still do a lot of Facebook because a lot of our Indigenous organizations are on there. And we love to share their materials and highlight things for that. So, you know, while maybe not at the forefront of, you know, TikTok and the dances it's still very important.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Our conversation has been so inspiring. It's been an honor to have you here. Thank you.

Jennifer Taback

Thank you so much for having me.

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.