

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 80: 5 Pillars that Anchored Business Growth in 2023

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan

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What 5 pillars anchored business growth this year?

Welcome to our year-end review. I'll share what worked and didn't in 2023 and drill down to the lessons that will help us grow in the new year.

You'll hear how the 5 pillars mattered in the growth of my business and the growth of the agencies I coach, consult and support.

So, let's unwrap the year and grow better together.

Tune in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you're a marketer or consultant, or a creative on a journey of growth from solopreneur to agency owner, follow along because I pull back the curtains on the realities of growing and running a scalable, service-based business and building lean team. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I know what it takes to build an agency, whether it's from solo to three, five or twenty. I've done it, including supporting an agency owner to sell and exit. I've coached and consulted over 120 marketers, creatives, and consultants. And I've been behind the scenes of seven figure businesses. I also have a master's degree in communications specializing in organizational development. All this to say, I know what it takes to grow lead and operate a multiple six, and seven figure small but mighty agency. And here on this podcast is where we'll dive right in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey friends, welcome back to the podcast! It's our last episode for the year before I see you in 2024. It's our year-in-review episode where I share what worked (and didn't) and drill down to a few lessons to carry into the new year.

I'm always excited for this episode because I love doing the work of reviewing and distilling insights so that we can grow together.

Now, it's easy to get caught up in trends and marketing hype of what other people say you have to do in your business, and that's not the purpose of this episode.

I get excited about taking the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that took place this year and crunching them down to learnings. Analyzing what happened inside our business isn't a trend or marketing hype; it's the work that helps us grow.

I'm excited to share with you the five thoughts and actions that mattered in the health of my business and the agencies I coach, consult and support to grow.

I define health as both revenue-generating and time-savings.

Let's see if any of these resonate with you.

First

Purpose matters, but more so when things are unpredictable.

I love being an entrepreneur because I get to create something out of nothing, but to make it, you have to put in the work, which takes years. I have to admit, when I started my business ten years ago – yah, ten years – I knew it would be a challenge, but I didn't know what type of challenge it would be. And this is true about entrepreneurship – anything that takes years requires something more profound than just making money.

Business is a rollercoaster; we can start with a purpose fueling us, and along the way, the purpose fades into being practical, and the original fuel dims. It doesn't disappear, it just dims.

When things are unpredictable and plans are not going as planned, purpose matters more than anything else.

This year, I lost my grandma to diabetes. I'm seeing cancer drain my uncle, and my dad is aging; he's 80 and unable to do things that were once easy for him. All of this is to say that our most valuable commodity in business isn't money; it's your time. You can always make more money — but you can not make more time.

Losing my mom to cancer was why I started this business. This year, I was hit in the face with lessons of loss. And it reminded me of my purpose and made it even more apparent: my business is a mission to end the burnout epidemic with great leadership, and that is what we do at the core of business: we help agency leaders thrive.

It's purpose that keeps us moving forward when things are outside our control. As small business owners, we live in an economy that is outside of our control, but thriving starts from the inside out, and if your purpose is firm, then your foundation is solid and hard to shake.

Second

Retention is not an afterthought.

In the desire to grow a business and make more impact, of course, we want to get more clients, but if your retention is low, all the work you do to get new clients isn't efficient because you have a leaky bucket.

Imagine trying to put water in a bucket that has holes in it. The bigger the hole, the bigger the problem. We have to plug the holes.

That's why retention is not an afterthought in your strategy. Retention is a strategy, and paying close attention to retention rates mattered a lot this year. In an economy where there is money to spend, but people hold onto it longer because of the word "recession," your retention strategy is not something to sleep on.

And whether you see the impact of the recession on your business or not, retention matters because it demonstrates your future cash flow.

The value of your business doesn't come from just acquiring new clients. Retention also grows a business and provides more certainty in predicting your cash flow.

Retention is about understanding why clients leave your business and solving for that gap. So do the exit interviews (don't make it personal) and apply the feedback to your business.

I have a high retention rate; my ideal client stays with me for at least two years by choice, and I have clients who have been with me for much longer, but that doesn't mean I take it for granted. I keep my pulse on what is wanted, and I keep adding value.

It isn't about padding offers or making busy work for people; it's about the intersection between servicing clients well and supporting them to get better results.

Third

Don't undervalue small changes.

There's a golf analogy from Tony Robbins about the impact of a 2-millimeter shift.

It's not two centimetres but two millimetres; it's a tiny micro-shift in a golf swing that can lead to a hole-in-one, and that microshift analogy applies to your business, too.

The challenge is when you're close to something, it makes it hard to see what is right in front of you, or in other words, the ability to see the 2-millimetre shift.

But investing in looking for and testing 2-millimetre shifts makes it less likely that you will eliminate something good and of value in your business when trying to get rid of something unwanted.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not against making changes; I'm for assessing the options before making changes, and when we do the diligence of finding micro shifts, sometimes the 2-millimetre change is the very definition of working smarter, not harder.

Fourth

Leadership is not nice to have; it's required to thrive.

One thing is certain: change. And we're going to see it happen at a faster pace in the next few years.

Across the last three years, we saw a mass exit from working in offices to remote working. This year, we saw the introduction of AI and ChatGPT impact our work. And a new concept called quiet quitting started trending.

When change is constant, you need great leadership skills to move your business forward. Leaders unite team members, inspire and motivate through uncertainty and establish a positive environment where people can thrive.

Leadership is not something people are born with; leadership is learned. Here's the thing – running and leading a business are different. Running is operations, and leading is about developing people. You need both, but they aren't the same thing.

Whether you have a small business with contractors, need to lead a cross-functional team or have a business with a leadership team – the health of any business requires knowing how to lead others.

I see agency owners coming out on top when they embrace leadership by either getting themselves support to lead better or equipping their teams with coaching and training to lead better. It means less burnout and more high performance.

Fifth

Don't sleep on events. Be IRL, in other words, In Real Life.

We saw a massive return of business events this year. Some of us celebrated the opportunity to get back to real-life events and meet others, while others pulled up our adulting pants and gave our introverted selves a gentle nudge (which is me).

Business is forever and always about relationships; no matter how accessible video conferencing is, it can't replace real life. There's something special about sharing belly laughs and eating a meal together in real life – you can't replicate it online; it connects you.

Some might cringe at thinking about networking to get new clients, and sure, networking has that function. But from my experience, the highest value of attending in-person events – whether a conference or retreat- are the doors it can open for you.

Meeting in real life is about making genuine connections, which can open doors to rooms you didn't know existed. In the rooms are people who will inspire and collaborate with you.

I was surprised this year how one event opened the doors to two groups I would not have been able to access had I not made some new real-life friends at a conference.

As an introvert, I know that carving out time to attend conferences or retreats isn't always the first thing an introvert wants to do, but I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it and the ripple effect it has had on my business.

In Summary – embracing the unknown with open arms has been an overarching theme this year. The loss of family only reinforced my commitment to our mission, reminding me that genuine drive comes from a place more profound than just financial success. It comes from purpose.

This year, we homed in on small yet impactful changes, and as a result, we worked smarter, not harder. And focusing on retention meant stable revenue and deeper relationships. Our clients who did the same grew and prospered this year.

In the unpredictable landscape of remote work, new AI technology, and new workplace dynamics, an emphasis on leadership helped our clients build resilient teams.

Lastly, the return of in-person events was the gateway to more meaningful relationships and unforeseen collaborations. It reminded me of the human aspect of business, which transcends digital interactions.

That's a wrap for 2023. Thank you for taking the time to hang out with me on the podcast this year. Here's to a new year of purpose, growth, meaningful connections, and the surprises and opportunities that await us in 2024. I'll see you in the new year.

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 and I'll see you in the next one.