

# Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

## Episode 45: Lessons learned from her first 5 hires while transitioning from solopreneur to agency.

### Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Afton Brazzoni

#### **Audrey Joy Kwan** 00:00

If your business is not growing consistently, it might be that you're still too much in the day to day working in the business, rather than on growing the business. So, what's stopping you from getting more help? You might be thinking it seems like a risk to make another hire. It's the age-old chicken or egg question, what comes first? Is it getting a new hire or the new clients? Well, every scenario has different considerations on who to hire and in what capacity. One thing holds. Don't wait till you're overwhelmed to hire, tune into this episode of the small but mighty agency and hear how this business owner went from a side hustle to an agency during the pandemic by making the right hires.

#### **Audrey Joy Kwan** 00:51

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 works. And equally as important, what didn't work to get these business owners to where they are today.

#### **Audrey Joy Kwan** 01:51

Hi, Afton. It's so good to have you on the Small but Mighty Agency podcast. Why don't we start by having you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your agency?

#### **Afton Brazzoni** 02:01

Yeah, thanks so much for having me on Audrey. I'm really excited to be here. So, my name is Afton Brazzoni. I am based just outside of Calgary, Alberta. And my company is called Scribe National. We are a content marketing studio, we primarily focus on B2B tech companies as our

clients and we do serve business owners as well. And everything we do is focused on content writing primarily long form content. We love storytelling, so we just find that, you know, that's one of the best mediums to really tell a great story. And so yeah, that's what we're all about.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 02:35**

How did you start your agency?

**Afton Brazzoni 02:37**

it really came from a love of writing. So, I had been working in various related fields, we'll say. So, I went from journalism to public relations to marketing over a period of about 10 years. And in 2019, I was just finding that that sort of call, you know, to write more often was really calling me back. And so, I decided that initially, it was just going to be picking up some freelance work on the side, I really didn't have any grand plans to start an agency or anything like that. I just wanted to practice my craft more frequently. And so about six months into that it had gotten busy enough, you know, it was taking off, it was doing really well. And I was at the point where I knew I was going to have to decide whether I would either, you know, just keep it the way it was, which really wasn't very manageable, or take it full time. And that's what I really wanted to do. Although the company I was working for, you know, they were a fantastic team. So, it was kind of, you know, it was a hard decision to leave. But what actually happened was that, obviously, March 2020, we all know what happened, COVID kind of came about and really made the decision for me, because the company I was working for laid off 75% of staff. And so at that point, I just thought, you know, let's take this full time. And it was really the best thing that could have happened.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 04:03**

I really resonate with how you started your business. I was 12 years into career, working in agencies. And then client side when I started to do consulting for people who are building agencies, and I realized that I wanted to take it full time. And most people I work with today have a skill set they were good at and started as solopreneurs they bump up against capacity, can't do the service delivery on their own. And to grow we have to figure out the business model and the team structure.

**Afton Brazzoni 04:31**

Yeah, what you just described really resonates and that's absolutely what happened. So, I had been working full time in the business for about four months. So fast forward from March of 2020 to the summer. At that point, you know, I was really fortunate. It had been really successful things were going great. But it was absolutely that moment where it was like, I can't support all of this service delivery on my own. And I knew that if I didn't want to be working the early mornings, late evenings and weekends that I was working through that summer that I absolutely needed to get support. And so that was when I did that. So that was summer of

2020. And I had two writers come in to support on a few projects. And it was really like just jumping in. Because I think a lot of agency owners wait until and this was certainly the case of me, I waited until I already really needed the support. And so, we all really had to like hit the ground running together. And you know, everything worked out well, which was great and fortunate. But I think that in hindsight, it could have gone a different way. And it's kind of really a good idea to sort of try to plan for that support. But in reality, I think a lot of times, we just get so overwhelmed that we're like, okay, we need someone now.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 05:52**

I'd love to explore what you learned, in hindsight, you mentioned that you waited till you were overwhelmed. What did that look like for you? And how would you approach it differently now?

**Afton Brazzoni 06:03**

I just think that for anyone listening, who's sort of in this position, and it is hard, because it's a chicken and egg situation. But if you can try to anticipate and do that a little bit sooner than you won't be scrambling. Because when you hire, you know, when you build a team at a time that you're already really busy, it can sometimes be hard to actually properly evaluate the best person to work with you. And sometimes what can happen is like you just start working with the first person who's available. And that isn't always yeah, right. Like, it sounds, yeah, you're like I've heard this. And it isn't always what's best for you or your clients or you know, even for that person, maybe you're not a fit. So I just think that the sooner you could do it, like I definitely could have done it sooner. And I would have gotten back those early mornings, late evenings and all those summer weekends that I spent working that you know, I really didn't have to if I'd had the help.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 06:57**

A tough place to be is building a team when you desperately need one, like you said, you end up making quick choices that can cost time and money like losing clients, having a more objective process in place saves a lot of heartache and headache. As a solopreneur building a service delivery team there are different phases. In our work with clients, we call it the stages of building a Mighty pod model, the end goal is to get client communication project management strategy into the hands of your team. But when you're a solopreneur, you might start with just one of those. Tell me more about who you hired your team structure and what's working well.

**Afton Brazzoni 07:33**

Yeah, that's a great question. So, the first person is a close friend of mine, who I had already worked with in previous roles, but she's a strategic communicator, somebody that I knew would have the skills that I could rely on, obviously, not everyone's going to be in that position. But I was fortunate to have someone that I just knew would be the perfect person. And so, in terms

of onboarding, and things like that, you mentioned kind of the level of communication with the clients. And so yeah, definitely in the beginning, I had more communication with the clients, I actually still do, like I serve as the project manager and the editor for Scribe National. And so even though now we've got six writers working on things, that is definitely still something that I do, but less so and the writers definitely have their own communication with clients at this point, for sure. So yeah, that was the first person. In terms of what worked out well, I would say, I mean, like I said, I knew that the skills were there, her level of care toward client work, and just the level of excellence of the work I knew was going to be there. But I have been fortunate because everyone that I've brought on is actually still with me, and I think really just trying to build an open culture, I guess, like just open communication. I also work with folks who are actually freelance, like business owners themselves, right? So my whole team, even though we work together on a daily basis, multiple hours a week, multiple clients that they're working on, they really have that entrepreneurial mindset where, you know, they take, you know, they really take initiative with it. And so, I think that those are some of the things that have worked out well. Now, I will say that in the beginning, there weren't as many processes and systems in place for things and that is something that over time I've implemented, and that has made a huge difference just in terms of my own time and, like time savings spent on things that before really could have been systematized but that I was just doing over and over from scratch for some reason. So that has you know, that has probably been one of the biggest learnings but yeah, it's funny because I think for a lot of people until you bring on someone to help you with things you almost or at least for me, like I couldn't imagine...it seems like such a risk and now, you know six team members later, it's I don't know, it's just you do it right. And then you do it again. And then you do it again and you become more comfortable with it each time.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 10:09**

I'm thrilled that you mentioned the power of systems and processes, processes support productizing, a service and a productized service makes it easier to scale your team for delivery. Tell me about a process in your business has made the ultimate difference.

**Afton Brazzoni 10:24**

I think a big thing is like, again, back to communication and just sort of communicating expectations and how something is going to play out. And so from the very beginning, when I bring someone on, I have an onboarding guide that I send them that kind of explains like, here's how we work with clients, we have very detailed processes from the time a client signs on, because the onboarding, like as an agency, most of the legwork is going to be when you first bring a client on, and it's so important to do it right, because it really sets the tone for your whole relationship with the client. And so everyone that's involved in that, which includes the writer, really needs to understand like what's going to happen and how it's going to play out. And so, with that process, you know, there's the whole onboarding, there is getting as much

information as possible. Obviously, we're a content studio, so we need to really sit down with that client, and we need to understand their brand voice, their goals, their customer, we need to understand all of those things to set us up for success going forward. Because if we're going to be writing content for them on a monthly basis, which most of our clients are monthly over, you know, a period of six or 12 months, if we were to skip that process and sort of not follow the system that we have, even though it is a bit of heavy lifting up front, you know, that would just make for such a painful and you know, time wasting kind of experience down the line. So, I think that that client onboarding, and the understanding of like, getting what we need for content creation has been a game changer. And we do it the exact same way. Like obviously, every client is different. But we follow that process to a tee to get the information that we need. And we don't stray from it because you know, if we, if you do like starting to cut corners, that's where problems arise down the road.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 12:15**

Absolutely 100% agree that onboarding sets the tone for the client relationship. And like you mentioned, it's the opportunity to pull the team together and get the team on the same page. Another benefit is that when the onboarding is done, right, it's easier for you, the business owner to hand off the project and let go of the steering wheel to focus on other things. Speaking of handing off something to team, one of the challenges I know of creatives and consultants is this fear of managing people, for someone who is telling themselves I'm not made to manage people, or managing others is not for me, what would you say to that?

**Afton Brazzoni 12:52**

Ooh yeah, I definitely would say that that's why not rushing through choosing the right people to support you is so important. And that's why if you can anticipate in advance, you know, what you need, the type of person that you're really looking for, that increases your chances of really getting someone that you know, they're a great fit, you work well together, you trust them, like that's obviously huge. It needs to be aligned with your company values, right. And so, for us, one of our company values is excellence. And that's something that like, I know that the writers on my team are going to deliver excellence in their projects. And, and it's gotten to the point where for me, the editing process has become so minimal, because you know, we've gotten in such a groove, they are committed to excellence. And so I think, if you're someone that doesn't want to like spend your whole life managing people, it's just choosing someone that you know you can trust to understand what you're looking for, and to execute on it well, so that you're not spending all your time in the weeds, managing what they need to be doing.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 13:59**

Having the right fit people is important. And I don't think anybody is born to be a manager, I do think, to grow a business, especially as a solopreneur you go through the stage of doer to manager, and then leader. That's the personal growth journey that solopreneurs experienced

when scaling a business. That trajectory is also connected to revenue. The more money you make, the more resources you can bring in to help you have the organizational structure that works for you. Not to get off topic and circling back to personal growth, if you're looking at building a team as the personal growth journey, what have you learned about yourself?

**Afton Brazzoni 14:33**

No, of course, there are certainly things like my personality is such that I need to work on you know, things like I don't even the word assertiveness I don't even know if it's the right word, but I definitely struggle with like, you know, not wanting to be seen as anything but really nice and just those things that sometimes. I mean, it's certainly not all women feel this way, but some do. And I'm definitely one of them. And so, I won't you know I won't say that like every aspect of it is a breeze or anything like that. But yeah, I mean, by and large, I just think that like you can get further with others than you can. And it depends, right? If that's your goal for your business, if people want to be a solopreneur, and just knowing that there is going to be a ceiling to that. And then if you know that you want to grow, then what comes along with that is that you're going to have to bring people on to support you. And even if it's scary or uncertain, there's nothing that can't be navigated, right. So, if you can do it.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 15:32**

Thank you for being so transparent about the challenge of not wanting to be seen as not nice or a fear of being perceived, as mean, it's a common challenge when business owners want to communicate with team members about what they want to see and what they don't want to see. And part of leadership is knowing how to communicate better. Tell us more about how you're navigating this.

**Afton Brazzoni 15:52**

Yeah, I think I'm so glad that you say that you've heard this from others. And I suspected that it you know, I'm not the only one, but it's like it, you know, it's it is a struggle, right? It's something you have to try to learn. And I think I'm a words person, right. So, I'll go back to language. And I think it's just understanding that, you know, there's nothing wrong with clear, assertive language, as long as it's respectful. And like someone can't deliver successfully if you're not being clear about what you want. And I would include concise too right, like, we're always telling our clients be clear and concise in your marketing. Well, I think that that goes beyond your marketing, like it goes into your internal communications within your company, you know, whether you've got a team of five or 500. And so I think that the best thing you can do is just to, again, to be clear about the outcome that you're looking for, and that person's role in supporting the outcome. And then I think, like always offering it's not just a one way street, right? So, like offering opportunities, where it's asking, like, do you have any questions or concerns about this? How can I support you? You know, like, I've asked those questions before and so. So yeah, like, I definitely struggle with letting go of control of things in my

business. And those are just some of the ways, like just knowing that there that there can be open communication, I think, is really what it comes down to. And having like regular check ins as well can be helpful. This is especially useful for people who work in remote settings, which I know a lot of us do. Like there's not that face-to-face aspect. And I actually love remote work, so I'm fine with it. But I think then you have to make the time, right, you have to make the time, whether it's we've gotten down to every two months, but we used to do like monthly with every team member, and just kind of getting to know them as a person, right? So that if in the future, there does need to be a conversation that you feel is difficult, or you think that they might feel as difficult that you have that like foundation of a relationship. So, it's not just always, I don't know, like about work, for example, like I am always asking, how was your weekend, right? And that might seem like a small thing. But it's about building the relationship so that you can overcome obstacles if they come up because if you don't have that interpersonal relationship, especially when you're working remotely, I think it's a lot harder to like see the humanity in each other and to navigate things with grace.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 18:25**

Did you know that I have a coaching program called the Mighty Pod Model? In the high touch program, we help our clients go from solopreneur to an agency owner, so they can gain more freedom by having a service business, where client work isn't dependent on them to scale. Maybe you started as a solopreneur with zero people in your business. Eventually you bring in an assistant and contractors, but you continue to hold on to the strategy in direct communication with your clients. Before you know it, you're at capacity. So, what happens if you want to grow bigger? Meet the Mighty Pod Model. The Mighty Pod Model isn't just a business model. It's a high touch coaching program that helps you go from solopreneur to agency owner with a profitable streamlined and strategic roadmap. If you're feeling like the bottleneck in your business, download our free Mighty Pod Model cheatsheet, go to [audreyjoykwan.com/free](http://audreyjoykwan.com/free) resources that's [audreyjoykwan.com/freeresources](http://audreyjoykwan.com/freeresources), or click the link in the show notes right there in your podcast app to get the free Mighty Pod Model cheat sheet. Back to the show.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 19:35**

Now that you have a team to support your service delivery and you can let go of more control what are you doing more and less of now?

**Afton Brazzoni 19:42**

Oh, man. So, like I said, editing is one of the biggest things that I'm doing less of. I would say that the two biggest things that have helped me let go of control in the editing process are number one, the fact that the writers you know they've been working with these clients for a while so naturally, that process is gonna get smoother, and their skills are top notch. So that's, you know, that's a huge thing. The second thing I would say is on my part, and it's the trust,

and you have to develop that because otherwise, like, I could be spending hours editing a piece that someone has already crafted to a really high level. And that's just completely unnecessary, you know, so at this point, it's really me just doing a review of their work. But I know that the quality of their work is there, and I can trust in that. So that's something you know, I'm definitely doing less of the editing, I would say other things related to not client work, but to my own business. I have someone help with the social media marketing for Scribe National, I have someone help with our blog posts. I have other one-off projects that I bring in help for, like, I'm not trying to do everything myself. And I think that identifying, you know, is there someone that can help me with this? And is this the best use of my time? Or should I bring in someone to help me with this is a really important question that you've got to be asking yourself as a business owner, because we could sit and try to do everything ourselves. But that's not always the best way to do it.

**Audrey Joy Kwan** 21:07

100%, if you desire to grow a business that gives you freedom, you can't be the one trying to do it all, if anything you have to do less. And that means getting clear on the processes, developing quality checks and growing your communication skills. These are just some of the tools to help you let go. Afton, before we wrap up here, what keeps you inspired and at your best?

**Afton Brazzoni** 21:28

Oh, I love that question. Really, you know it's the craft of writing and the ability to tell stories for our clients that make a difference in their business. I have literally I've been a writer since childhood, and it is my biggest passion in life. And so, I think just, yeah, bringing their stories to life through the written word, and the fact that we get to do that every day. It's truly something that I've said it before. I feel blessed to get to do it. And I think, you know, that's, that's the biggest thing that inspires me. Another thing that I think is great about the agency environment, because you do work with a variety of clients. And so it's, you know, it keeps it interesting, right? Like, there's different challenges, different things that they're trying to accomplish in their business. And obviously, just working with a wide variety of people like in the past three years, we've served over 50 clients now. And so you know that those have been a lot of different experiences and different exposure to industries, people's businesses. And I think that that's something that just naturally keeps it really exciting.

**Audrey Joy Kwan** 22:36

What do you see for your business in the next few years?

**Afton Brazzoni** 22:37

So, one thing that I've done that's probably going to become more prominent in my business in the next few years, is a program I've created called Brand for Demand. And this is, you know,



kind of a another side to our business. Because as I mentioned, we focus heavily on content writing, but part of that is also having really strong brand messaging and content strategy. And that's something that I kind of saw a need for business owners, really to get an understanding of it themselves, because then if they do hire a content writer down the road, or even if they write their own marketing content, it's it just becomes so much more manageable, and they have such a higher level of confidence. So that program, Brand for Demand is something that is definitely going to become more prominent in my business over the years. And I think one thing that I would definitely encourage all business owners to do that I'm trying to do for myself is like, remind yourself that this is supposed to be fun, right? Like, there are so many ups and downs. And there are so many moments where, especially if we are in need of support, where things can be stressful, but we get to decide the trajectory of our business. And we get to really remember and sometimes we need the reminders to have fun doing this, right? Because we created this business. It's something that, you know, we get to do what we love every day. So yeah, I think that's a big one. And I do have to remind myself, just have fun.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 24:04**

Thank you afterward, where can people find you online?

**Afton Brazzoni 24:08**

So, you can find me on Instagram at Afton Brazzoni. I'm also on LinkedIn as Afton Brazzoni as well. And then our website is scribe national.ca. So, you can find everything that we're doing on there.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 24:20**

It's such a pleasure having you here. Thank you.

**Afton Brazzoni 24:22**

Thank you so much, Audrey.

**Audrey Joy Kwan 24:24**

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.