

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 125: What Makes Small Agencies Easy to Refer (and Hard to Forget)

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan

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Let's talk about referrals—not as a bonus, but as a *strategy*.

If you've been growing your agency through great work and word of mouth, but you're starting to realize that *waiting* for referrals isn't the same as *designing* for them... this episode is for you.

Because the most successful Small But Mighty agencies don't leave referrals to chance. They build referral-ready relationships and strategic partnerships—on purpose.

Today, I'm breaking down what trust really looks like in action—and how certain behaviors, often overlooked, are what turn casual connections into consistent opportunities.

It's not just a mindset—it's a method. These habits make you easy to refer, easy to collaborate with, and easy to trust.

And I'll share real examples from inside *Agency Together* where agency owners are doing exactly this—building a system for generosity, connection, and strategic growth.

Let's dive in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you want to grow an agency to seven figures and beyond without working more hours in your business, you're in the right place. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan. I know what it takes to build an agency, including supporting an agency owner in selling and exiting. I also have a master's degree in communications, specializing in organizational development. My team and I have worked behind the scenes of multiple seven figure agencies and have coached and consulted with over 150 agency owners. All this to say, when you join us on the small but mighty agency podcast, you get real world experience and practical tips that help you work less, earn more, and lead with integrity. So let's go.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey friends, welcome back to the podcast! Today we're diving into something that comes up in almost every conversation I have with agency owners—referrals.

More specifically: how to stop relying on referrals to magically show up, and instead, start designing a strategy that makes them consistent, aligned, and rooted in real relationships.

Because we all know referrals *can* be a great growth engine—but if they feel unpredictable or random, there's probably a missing piece. That piece is trust. Not the fuzzy kind—but the kind that makes people remember you, recommend you, and confidently open doors on your behalf.

Let's get into it.

If you want consistent referrals and high-value partnerships, you need trust. Not just trust in your skills—but trust in your character, your clarity, and your follow-through.

And here's the hard part: trust doesn't build itself. Even when you do great work, referrals can still feel inconsistent.

Why? Because being *good* at what you do isn't the same as being *easy* to refer. And being connected to a big network isn't the same as being surrounded by people who know exactly when—and how—to recommend you.

If you want to build a steady stream of referrals and strategic partnerships, you can't leave trust to chance. You have to build it on purpose.

So what does trust look like in those relationships—not just in theory, but in practice? Let's break it down. These are the real behaviors of people who build referral-ready relationships—and the habits that make them magnets for opportunity.

I see this every day inside Agency Together. Our network for agency owners to collaborate, connect, partner and refer. And it's become even more clear: ****Small But Mighty Agencies** don't grow alone. The future belongs to —agencies that are specialized, agile, and collaborative. And here's the part people overlook: when you specialize, you don't shrink your opportunities—you multiply them. Specializing makes it easier for the right people to find you, and it opens doors to more strategic partnerships, collaborations, and referrals.

The agencies that consistently land referrals and partnerships? They aren't trying to be everything to everyone. They know that being a small agency doesn't mean doing it all—it means doing what you do best, with depth and clarity. Full service can work for big teams, but for Small But Mighty agencies, focus is the superpower. And that focus makes it easier to build trust—because people know exactly when and why to turn to you.

Here's the deeper truth I want to name: Most agency owners don't just worry about slow growth. They're concerned about irrelevance—of being drowned in a sea of sameness, where it feels like your voice, your work, and your value don't stand out.

They're showing up, doing the work, putting themselves out there—yet still feel like they're being overlooked.

But here's what I want you to remember: being remembered, referred, and trusted doesn't come from quantity, it comes from having quality partners in your corner. It comes from being intentional, generous, and clear about what you do—and who you do it for.

That's what makes people trust you. And that's what makes you relevant in the ways that actually matter.

Let's talk about what referral-ready and partnership-ready agencies lean into:

1. They're Not Afraid to Claim Their Specialization They're either crystal clear on who they serve and what they do—or they've committed to the search for that clarity. What sets them apart is the willingness to get specific.

They know that being vague doesn't create opportunity—focus does. When someone says your name in a room, the goal is for someone else to be able to follow it with a sentence like: "Oh yes! she's the one who does marketing for non-profits, branding for healthcare, PR for authors – you get it – they're able to fill in your specialty."

Specialization doesn't limit your growth. It multiplies your visibility. It makes you repeatable—and repeatable is what makes you referable.

And it works: You're easier to introduce and position when people know exactly what to say about you.

2. They Listen and Follow Up Intentionally and Strategically Referral-ready people don't leave connections dangling—and they don't just follow up to check a box. They're intentional. They listen closely in conversations and use follow-ups to explore what's possible—not just to keep in touch, but to unlock collaboration.

Most agency owners hear "strategic partnerships" and think, "Oh, that just means referrals."

But inside *Agency Together*, I watched something unfold that completely reframed that idea for one of our members.

She had just come across this niche grant opportunity that would fund a very specific type of marketing for her nonprofit clients. Amazing, right?

Except... her agency didn't offer that kind of service.

Now here's where it gets interesting:

During one of our cohort sessions, she connected with another member whose agency *did* offer that exact solution.

That sparked something:

What if she could be the bridge? Help her clients access the grant—and then partner with that agency to actually deliver the work?

And that's exactly what she did.

The result?

- A brand new revenue stream for her
- Strategic value for her clients
- And meaningful growth for her partner

And the best part? No cold outreach. No pitching. No convincing.

Just a smart, timely connection—and intentional follow-up to turn it into something real.

That's what follow-up can do. It's not just about scheduling a first call. It's about learning about someone, listening for opportunities, and staying present enough to see what might surface—and then following up with care and commitment to bring that potential to life.

It's not about having a perfect CRM or a color-coded follow-up system. It's about being present in the relationship—remembering what matters to the other person and showing up with relevance, not routine.

Why it works: Most people don't ask engaging questions and really listen. They tune out once they think there is nothing in it for them. Doing it well—and with intention—creates opportunities

3. Referral-Ready Agencies are Generous With Their Network—and Beyond They make introductions freely—with intention, not obligation. They say things like, “You two should meet,” not because they expect something in return, but because they genuinely believe in connecting good people.

But generosity isn't just about who you introduce. It shows up in other ways too.

It looks like celebrating someone's win without needing one of your own. Sharing tools and insights without holding back. Volunteering to brainstorm or review something just to be helpful. Showing up in a way that says, “I see you and I care,” without needing anything in return.

They're not transactional. They trust that creating value for others, without keeping score, lays the foundation for stronger relationships and future opportunities.

Sometimes those introductions—or moments of generosity—lead to collaborations, new clients, or cross-promotion. Other times, they simply strengthen the fabric of the network. Either way, it keeps giving back

Why it works: Generosity signals trust, creates goodwill, and builds the kind of network that grows deeper—not just wider.

4. They Build Platforms to Elevate Others They create projects and spaces where others can shine. Sometimes that's a podcast or a panel, but it could just as easily be a collaborative guide, a joint webinar, a shared blog series, or even a casual roundtable they host for peers.

The format doesn't matter as much as the intention: they're not just creating content—they're creating platforms that elevate others.

But more importantly, they know how to give others the spotlight without fear that it takes away from them. They trust that amplifying someone else's voice doesn't make them less visible—it makes the entire ecosystem stronger.

They don't just post content to be seen. They build platforms where other people can be seen, too. And in doing so, they become known for their generosity, leadership, and ability to create space for collaboration.

Why it works: When you create opportunities for others to shine, people gravitate toward you. AND That kind of trust and visibility is magnetic.

5. They Stay Curious and Ask Great Questions They're not the ones trying to dominate the conversation or squeeze their pitch into every intro call. Instead, they lead with genuine curiosity. They'll ask something like, "What are you working on these days?" or "What's been on your mind lately?"—and they really mean it.

The goal isn't to redirect the conversation toward themselves. It's to understand. To create a moment of connection. And to stay open to where the conversation might go.

They're not listening just for opportunities to plug their offer. They're listening for what matters to the other person. And sometimes that leads to ideas or opportunities neither person could have planned for.

This kind of curiosity can't be scripted. It has to be real. And that's what makes it so powerful.

It also ties directly into how they follow up. When you're genuinely curious, you notice things others miss. You remember that someone mentioned a challenge, or an idea, or a goal—and that's what you follow up on. That's where collaboration starts.

You don't need a playbook. You just need to care.

Why it works: Connection is built through curiosity, not performance. And curiosity, when practiced well, becomes your most powerful growth tool.

6. They Scan for Shared Audiences

They don't see other agencies or consultants as competition—they see them as collaborators. Instead of asking, "How do I stand out from them?" they ask, "Who else serves the same client in a different way?"

This shift is powerful. It lets them see overlap as opportunity—not threat. Maybe someone else serves the same industry, but with a different niche. Or maybe they handle a different part of the solution for the same kind of client.

These agency owners are always scanning for synergy. They co-market, co-host, co-create. They pull together bundles, joint webinars, or even shared projects—anything that helps them grow *together* without exhausting themselves.

They understand that differentiation is what makes collaboration possible. Your focus doesn't compete—it complements.

Why it works: Shared audiences lead to shared momentum. When you stop seeing peers as competition and start seeing them as partners, trust compounds—and so does your growth.

7. They Show Up Consistently Not just when the pipeline is dry. Not just when they're launching something new. They show up regularly—with value and presence.

But let's be real. This isn't always easy. When you're running an agency, the default is to focus on what feels most urgent—client work. And hey, you're great at it and that makes it an easy default.

But the hard truth? It's easy to stay heads down until the leads slow down. Until you realize the pipeline is quieter than you'd like. And by then, it's harder to rebuild momentum.

Consistency takes effort. It means carving out time to build relationships, even when things are busy. It means making space for collaboration and visibility when no one's demanding it.

That's why creating a space for agency owners to show up consistently—to work *on* the business instead of just *in* it—is so valuable. It's why Agency Together - our network for Agency Owners to build referral-ready relationships exists. If you're curious the link is in the show notes. It's where strategic partnerships, collaborations, and referral-ready relationships aren't left to chance—they're part of the system. Showing up becomes easier when you're not doing it alone.

Why it works: Trust is built through repetition and presence, not a one-time chat. And showing up consistently is what turns connections into opportunities

8. Pro Tip: They Know Their Relationship Archetypes Think about your friend group. You've got the extrovert who always knows how to lift your mood, the deep listener who shows up when things are tough, and maybe the one who's great at throwing a party and pulling everyone together.

You don't expect the same thing from all your friends—you appreciate them for who they are and what they bring. Your professional network works the same way.

In your business relationships, you've got different types of people who play different roles. Some are amplifiers—they cheer you on, share your wins, and make sure people see your brilliance. Others are collaborators, people you can co-create with or build joint offers alongside. Then you have referral partners, advisors, and affiliates—each brings something different to the table.

Referral-ready agency owners don't try to force every relationship into one category. They don't assume that every new contact should lead to a sale. Instead, they're thoughtful about people's gifts—and they nurture those relationships accordingly.

Why it works: When you stop expecting one relationship to do it all, everything starts to flow more naturally. You make space for deeper, more aligned partnerships—and that's when the magic happens.

These behaviors might sound simple—but they're powerful because they're repeatable. They create patterns of trust, not just moments of connection. It's how you stand out and stay relevant without having to be everywhere. And they're how Small But Mighty agencies stay visible in a noisy industry. They're how you stay relevant—not by being everywhere, but by building trust equity,

And that's what we're building—and applying—inside Agency Together. It's a space where the habits of collaboration, and strategic follow-up don't sit on your to-do list—they become how you grow.

If you want to build these types of strategic, generous relationships in real time, check out Agency Together (link is in the show notes) or join us at the next Agency Together Strategic Partnership Mixer.

It's a facilitated space designed for collaboration, trust-building, and referral-ready connection.

Small But Mighty Agencies don't grow alone.
They grow through trust.
And trust is built here.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey, 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 on the next one.