

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 140: Stop Leaving Referrals to Chance: Build this System Instead

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan

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Hi friends, welcome back to the *Small But Mighty Agency podcast*.

Today we're talking about something that almost every agency owner I meet says out loud — and something I want you to think about differently heading into 2026.

We're diving into why you can't keep leaving referrals to chance, and what it actually means to design your Strategic Partnership Squad — the system that helps you grow through trust, not hustle.

Before we get into it, I want to mention this: these are the kinds of conversations we have inside *Agency Together*, the community I run for agency owners who want to build referral-ready relationships and make collaboration their growth strategy.

We're also hosting our next Strategic Partnership Mixer today, where agency owners come together to exchange insights, connect with peers, and see collaboration in action. If you'd like to check it out or join a future mixer, the link's in the show notes — I'd love to see you there.

Alright, let's get into today's episode.

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 Masters 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.

Let's start with the pattern I see over and over again.

"When I ask an agency owner how they've really grown their business, I almost always get the same answer.

They say, 'Honestly, it's all word of mouth,' or 'Most of our clients come from referrals.'

And it sounds great — because referrals feel earned. They're rooted in trust and good work.

But when I ask, 'So, what's your referral system?' ... that's when things go quiet.

Because what most people really mean is that referrals just kind of... happen and they're leaving it to chance.

And that's where the gap is. Referrals themselves aren't the problem — the problem is that most agencies rely on passive referrals, not proactive partnerships."

And if you're mapping your growth strategy for 2026, this is one piece you can't afford to leave out."

"Let me paint a picture.

You do incredible work for a client — they're thrilled.

Six months later, they send someone your way. You take the project, it's a great fit.

Then... silence.

You tell yourself, 'We grow through referrals,' but what's really happening is — you're waiting.

Waiting for a client to remember you.

Waiting for a peer to have the right project at the right time.

Waiting for someone to say your name in a meeting you're not in.

That's not a strategy. That's leaving your growth to luck"

And it's not because you're doing anything wrong — you're doing great work.

But good work alone doesn't scale unless you design the systems that carry that trust farther than one client at a time."

Here's what I want you to think about instead.

There's a difference between passive referrals and proactive partnerships.

“When referrals are left to luck, you have no control over your pipeline.

But when you *design* for referrals — when you create a structure for trust and opportunity — you turn that same word-of-mouth magic into a system that grows with you.”

“Passive referrals happen by luck.
Proactive partnerships happen by design.

Passive referrals depend on memory.
Proactive partnerships depend on systems.

Passive referrals end with one project.
Proactive partnerships create momentum.”

“You can’t grow your agency on luck.

Growth has to be built on trust — and trust has to be built by design.”

That’s what we’re talking about today — how to design for trust instead of hoping for it.

Now, let’s talk about *why* this matters so much heading into 2026.

The market has shifted.

There are things that worked even two years ago that simply don’t work the same way anymore.”

“Posting on social media? It’s noisier than ever.

Unless your goal is to build a full-on influencer strategy, it’s getting harder and harder to break through.

And cold outreach? It’s exactly what it sounds like — cold.

People are tuning it out. Inboxes are flooded with impersonal messages, automation, and noise.”

We’re in a time where trust is the new currency.

And trust doesn’t live in funnels or algorithms. It lives in relationships.

And you can’t automate relationships. You build them — intentionally.”

“That’s why a Strategic Partnership Strategy isn’t just a nice-to-have going into 2026. It’s essential.

The agencies that thrive next year are the ones who understand that trust, collaboration, and alignment *are* the new growth levers.

And a partnership strategy gives you the infrastructure to do that consistently.”

“So, if you’re planning for 2026, right now, this is the piece you can’t skip. You need to know who’s in your Strategic Partnership Squad — and how those relationships will move your business forward.”

“That’s why I teach agency owners to think in systems — and one of the most important systems you can design is your *Strategic Partnership Squad*.

It’s not about more coffee chats or collecting contacts on LinkedIn.

It’s about being intentional — building a system of relationships that supports your visibility, referrals, and collaborations for the long run.

Because when you know the roles inside your squad, you stop waiting for opportunity to knock and start creating it.

So let’s talk about what this actually looks like in practice.

“You can’t grow your agency by waiting for referrals.
Smart agencies don’t wait — they design for them.

I call it your Strategic Partnership Squad — four categories of allies that help your agency grow on purpose.”

Who are the four power players in your squad?

“The Connector opens doors through trust.

They’re the person who says, ‘*You know who’d be perfect for this?*’ and makes the warm introduction that changes everything.

It’s Warm intros. Shared values and momentum.
They don’t compete — they connect.

“One of my favorite stories inside Agency Together started exactly this way.

When this agency owner joined, she wasn’t chasing leads or trying to network.
She just wanted access — to be in a room with other agency owners who got it.
People who understood the rollercoaster of running a business and who believed in collaboration over competition.

At first, she focused on showing up — listening, sharing, asking questions. No agenda.
No pitch. Just curiosity.

And then something started to happen.

One day, a peer mentioned a project that wasn’t the right fit for their team.

Instead of letting it go, they thought about the other agency owner who always showed up curious and made the introduction. ’

That single introduction led to a \$9K project.

But the real win wasn’t the number — it was what came next.

The client became long-term.

The two agencies kept collaborating.

And she built a rhythm of referrals that now grows on its own — all from leading with generosity, not a pitch.

That’s what the Strategic Partnership Squad is all about — building trust naturally, and creating opportunities that keep working for you.”

The Amplifier is your visibility wing person.

They’re the partner who helps you *get seen* — not by shouting louder, but by showing up together in the right rooms.

Panels, podcasts, newsletters — these are your shared stages. You combine your credibility and audience to create something bigger than either of you could do alone.

Amplifiers are the people who say, *‘Hey, I’m doing a webinar on this — want to join me?’*

Or, *‘Let’s co-write that piece we’ve both been talking about.’*

They’re your ‘let’s build something together’ partners — the ones who believe collaboration multiplies impact.

And here’s what’s important: co-marketing doesn’t have to be complex.

It can be as simple as spotlighting each other’s work in your content, swapping guest spots on your podcasts, or partnering on a round-up or resource guide for your shared audience.

What matters most is alignment — that you’re speaking to similar audiences with shared values, and you both benefit from the exposure.

Because visibility doesn’t have to be loud to be powerful — it just has to be shared.

And the best Amplifiers make being seen feel authentic, not performative.

They help you grow your reach *without* losing your voice.”

“Next is your Collaborator — where strategy meets execution.

They’re the partner who helps you deliver more value *without* adding more to your plate.

They complement your services so you can deliver bigger wins and happier clients.

Think of a brand strategist partnering with a video producer...
Or a content studio joining forces with a PR agency.
Or any instance where you are creating a more seamless client experience.

This kind of collaboration creates tangible outcomes for clients

Because the truth is, as your agency grows, your clients' needs get more complex. You can't (and shouldn't) be everything to everyone.

But when you have the right Collaborators — people you trust to uphold your quality and values — you expand what's possible for your clients *and* your business.

Collaboration like this scales your capacity without scaling your overhead.

It keeps your team focused on what you do best, while still giving clients that 'full service' experience.

And that's the sweet spot for Small But Mighty agencies — where excellence doesn't mean exhaustion, and growth comes from partnership, not pressure.”

“And finally, the Visionary — your co-architect for what's next.

These are the partners who don't just see what's in front of you — they see *around the corner* with you.

They help you imagine new possibilities and turn them into shared opportunities.

A Visionary might be the partner you co-create a new offer with, or the one who invites you to build an industry report, or maybe even someone who helps you launch a joint initiative that pushes your niche forward.

It's not just collaboration — it's co-designing the future.

Visionaries bring alignment at a deeper level — shared goals, shared systems, shared values.

You build something that's not transactional; it's transformational.

Because when you have a Visionary in your corner, you're no longer reacting to the market — you're helping shape it.

“One of our Agency Together members showed me exactly what that looks like in practice.

When she first joined, she already had solid clients and steady projects — but she could feel the ceiling.

She knew the next stage of growth wouldn't come from doing *more* work; it would come from building the *right* relationships.

So she leaned into collaboration — not for a quick win, but to build a system around it.

She showed up ready to share, to listen, and to connect And that approach changed

everything.

In two short Agency Together cohort cycles, she built relationships that led to \$17K in referred work.

But the real story isn't the money — it's the momentum.

One partner referral led to a new client.

That client became long-term.

And now, that same partner has become a go-to collaborator for projects neither of them could have landed alone.

That's the ripple effect of a Strategic Partnership Squad Strategy — once you have a system for building and nurturing these relationships, it doesn't just bring one opportunity... it keeps creating new ones."

"So those are your four power players in your Strategic Partnership Squad

The Connector — your trust builder.

The Amplifier — your visibility partner.

The Collaborator — your delivery partner.

The Visionary — your growth partner.

Different roles. One strategy: build your partnership ecosystem.

Because the future of growth isn't built alone — it's built together.

When you fill these roles intentionally, you stop relying on luck and start creating leverage. You're no longer waiting for referrals — you're engineering them."

"As you plan for 2026 — your campaigns, content, and systems — make sure this piece is on the list.

Visibility and opportunity are moving from algorithms to ecosystems.

The agencies that thrive next year won't be the loudest ones — they'll be the most trusted and the most connected.

So ask yourself: Who's already in my squad? And who's missing?"

"That's exactly what we're exploring today at the **Strategic Partnership Mixer** — how to design your Strategic Partnership Squad for 2026 so growth isn't delayed another quarter.

Doors to the January cohorts close soon — and once they're set, they're set.

If you're listening after the event, this is still your invitation.

Inside *Agency Together*, our community and network we help Small But Mighty agencies turn trust into a system — building Strategic Partnership Squads that make collaboration the engine of growth.

Because you don't need louder marketing next year — you need smarter partnerships.

If that's the foundation you want for 2026, go to the link on the show notes and book a Connection Call.

Let's map your Strategic Partnership Squad together.

You're not meant to grow alone and when you build the right squad, you won't have to.”

Thanks for joining me today, and let's continue the conversation, find the links in the show notes.

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.