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Developing a Strategy for Your Freelance Business
Brand + Design Scoop ep. 015
Podcast Transcript

Welcome to Brand + Design Scoop, where I share practical, relatable tips on branding, design, and building a business for do-it-yourselfers who want to stop doing everything themselves.

I'm Kelly, a brand strategist and Squarespace website designer and founder of AKS Design Studio.

Today I'm going to discuss how to create a business strategy when you're starting out as a freelancer.

I've been freelancing for more than 20 years—variously as a marketing consultant, a graphic designer, an editor (books and film), a business and life coach, and now a website designer. Throughout this time, I've also been a professional artist. I created my first business strategy after I had my first two marketing consulting clients. So, not right away. When I was a coach, I started coach training and got my practice clients before creating a strategy. That was a mistake.

Why? Because I underpriced myself, and I wasn't strategic in picking my first clients. While these were supposed practice clients, some of them stuck with me for years. And they recommended me to friends and colleagues. If they weren't actually the right fit for me—which some of them weren't—then I'd be working with the wrong clients for years, and they'd be recommending me to potentially other wrong clients.

Why do you need a strategy? Without a strategy, you don't have defined goals. You don't know who your ideal client is. That means you'll work with just anyone — and some of those people will be the wrong-for-you clients. What a headache!

You won't have a defined niche. That means you'll be throwing out this wide net, thinking that, "Oh, my services are good for everyone." Nope! Not a strategy!

And really important, without a strategy, you won't know how to achieve whatever random goals you may have in mind.

I could go on. Like, how are you going to measure success? How are you going to find your clients? How are you going to brand yourself?

Yes, a business strategy helps you do all of this.

Whether you're starting your freelancing business as a full-time job or on the side while continuing to work in a current job, you need a business strategy. Having a business strategy shows that you take your business seriously and that you're really focused on making it a success.

Creating a business strategy will require some time and effort upfront. But it's totally worth it. Then you won't be scrambling to figure out your prices. You won't be wondering if you should dump bad clients. And you won't be trying to decide how to talk about what you do in a way that gets people to hire you.

Yeah, it's easy to say, "I'm a freelance writer." But that's not going to get someone to hire you, is it? What exactly do you write? And who do you write it for? That's what people want to know. Otherwise, they won't know if they need to hire you or if they know someone else who could use your services.

So, I'm going to tell you the 10 steps first. Then I'll go into each one in more depths.

1. Identify your goals
2. Create metrics for measuring your goals
3. Define your niche

4. Set your prices
5. Develop your elevator pitch
6. Create your brand identity
7. Build an awesome website
8. Create a portfolio on your website
9. Strategically choose your first clients
10. Create a marketing strategy—figure out how you're going to market yourself (content creation, Google ads, networking, social media, testimonials, word of mouth) [next week]

Let's start with...

1. Identify your goals

Your business goals need to be S.M.A.R.T. I'm sure you've heard that before. That is specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-based.

So, "to be the best-known freelance writer in Pittsburgh" isn't a SMART goal. How would you measure that? Is it realistic? In what time period?

"To be on page 2 of Google for 'Pittsburgh freelance writers'" is specific. It's measurable—you just count what page you're on. It's attainable since it's not page 1 where you're competing against domain authorities who have been there a long time. Though, once you've made it to page 2, then you can shoot for page 1! And you should set a time by which you want to make it to page 2. What's realistic? If you're just starting out, give it nine months to a year. And it really depends on what industry and what market you're in.

In this example, Pittsburgh freelance writers, nine months to get on page 2 is probably doable. In New York City? Nope. That's going to take longer unless you really ace your marketing.

So, come up with three to five SMART goals to write down. These can be fairly long-term. As in, a year or even five years. I wouldn't make them all five years, though, since that can feel really daunting. I'd make several of them one-year goals. Such as to make X amount of income per month by the end of year 1.

Next we have...

2. Create metrics for measuring your goals

Once you've created SMART goals, coming up with metrics to measure them isn't too difficult. You already created goals that are measurable. So, now you just need to figure out *how* to measure them.

If you have a goal of making X amount of income per month by the end of year 1, then that one's obvious. You're tracking your monthly income.

If a goal is to be on page 2 of Google, then you're tracking your Google ranking.

If your goal is to have X amount of followers on social media, then you're tracking the number of followers.

If your goal is have X number of visitors to your website, then you're tracking the number of unique visitors to your website.

All of these are pretty obvious.

How often should you track your goals?

I track weekly, monthly, and yearly. I keep a spreadsheet that has a different page for each month. I track everything I just listed here. I also track newsletter signups and RSS feed numbers for both my blog and my podcast.

Next up is...

3. Define your niche

Your niche is the very specific area within which you do business. It's a subsection of your bigger industry that includes specifically who you work with (your ideal client), what you do for them (the problem you solve), and how you solve their problem.

I have a podcast all about this called "How to Pick a Niche for Your Business"—link in the show notes. I have another podcast called "How to Identify and Attract Your Ideal Client"—link in the

show notes. They both have transcripts you can download. And they both go into more detail than I'll go into here.

But let's definitely get into *some* detail about ideal clients and niching.

Your ideal client is exactly whom you want to work with. No, your services aren't good for everyone! If you try to appeal to everyone, you'll end up appealing to no one—or you'll attract the wrong-for-you clients. Your website and your copy will be generic, and you won't stand out from the competition.

Same thing with a niche. Without a niche, you'll be competing in a big sea with nothing that sets you apart.

I'll use myself as an example for a moment. Website design is a massive field. So, I'm a *Squarespace* website designer. This is still a huge field. It's really tough to compete here, especially since there are so many domain authorities that occupy the first three pages of Google. It would take me forever to make it to page 1. And it will take a long time even to get to page 3.

So, my niche is Squarespace website design for freelancers who want to stop doing everything for themselves so they can focus on the work that they really love doing. I also work with do-it-yourselfers who decide that it would be quicker and easier for me to build their website than for them to try to do it on their own.

Normally, you'd have just one ideal client. But these really overlap since so many freelancers are do-it-yourselfers. I could call them DIY freelancers. And this is a really specific niche. I write out "freelancers" and "do-it-yourselfers" throughout my website. And I mention them when I tell people what I do. Most other Squarespace website designers I see online list entrepreneurs and small-business owners as their ideal clients. This is no longer a tight niche since that's what everyone is doing.

I recommend first identifying your ideal client. Who is that one person you want to work with? How old are they? What is their income range? Where do they live? What are their interests, hobbies, and attitudes? What industry are they in?

Really importantly, what problem do they want you to solve?

So, that leads into your niche.

Let's say you're a writer. And you've decided that you want to write for business blogs. Their problem is coming up with enough content and writing high-quality posts. That's a pretty good niche. You could narrow it down even more by coming up with specific types of businesses to write for. Maybe they're law firms. Maybe they're biotech companies. Think about your past experiences and your educational background to see what kind of writing you can do and what kind of connections you may have to get those first clients.

Once you have your niche squared away, you can write it out in the form of an elevator pitch.

"I write articles and blog posts for biotech companies that outsource their writing to freelancers."

That tells people exactly what you do and for whom.

So, the next step is...

4. Set your prices

Oh, the dreaded pricing. When you're starting out as a service provider, it's so tough to figure out where to price your services.

You think, "Well, I'm new. So, I need to start out low."

But you likely wouldn't be doing this if you didn't have experience and talent. And discounting your services is probably not how you want to be know. But then you worry if people will hire you if your prices are too high. Ugh!

If you've never done freelancing or contract work before, my best advice is to look at your "competition" and see what they're charging. Google it, too. See what the going price range is.

If you have lots of experience and a strong portfolio, and you feel really confident, there's no reason you shouldn't price your services on the high end.

If you're really new and don't have a big portfolio, then you may want to start out on the lower to middle end—until you get a bigger portfolio. As soon as you have more samples to show and some good testimonials to put on your website, then raise your fees.

Again, most of the time, you don't want to be known as being a discount service provider. And it's really tough to make a good income if you discount your work as a sole proprietor.

Next up is…

5. Develop your elevator pitch

Now, you likely already did this when you created your niche. But, if it didn't really flow from there, let's do it now.

Entrepreneur guru Steve Blank has this model for creating a value proposition that works really well for creating an elevator pitch. It goes like this:

"I help X do Y by doing Z."

So, "X" is your ideal client. "Y" is the benefit you provide. And "Z" is how you help them. It's all very clear and tells people exactly what you do so they'll know if you're the right fit for them.

For me, that could look like, "I help freelancers focus more on the work of their business by taking care of their website needs."

For the writer example I gave before, it could look like, "I help biotech companies create high-quality content by writing their articles and blog posts for them"—or whatever benefit your writing serves them.

The "do Y" part of the formula is the benefit you provide them.

If you're a health coach, it could be, "I help midlife women take charge of aging by giving them skills to manage perimenopause and beyond."

You get the idea.

You can use your elevator pitch in person, on your website, in the footer of your website, and in the footer of your emails. It's effective to use as a constant reminder so people don't just think, "Oh, she's a website designer." Or, "she's a writer." Or, "she's a health coach." That's not it. It's much more specific than that.

Next up...

6. Create your brand identity

I think in most lists you see for how to create a business strategy, you're not going to see "create a brand identity." But, as a branding strategist, I can tell you that this is a really important step.

Your brand identity isn't just your brand name, your colors, and your logo. It's your values, your vision, and your mission. It's your brand personality and your brand voice.

That is, your brand identity is how you present your business to the world. It's how you elicit feelings in your ideal client. And this is key because people remember us less for what we do and say and more for how we make them feel.

Nike's brand inspires you to take action. Coca-Cola's brand makes you thirsty. Adobe's brand makes you want to create.

What does *your* brand make people feel? What action does it make people want to take?

Creating a brand identity is really essential for any business, even freelancers. Just like coming up with a niche, it makes sure you that have unique qualities that help you stand out from the competition.

I have a podcast that goes into lots of details about creating a brand identity. It's called "How to Create a Brand Identity"—link in the show notes. The transcript is particularly helpful since it has everything in lists and bullet points.

For here, I'll tell you what the steps are, then you can refer to that podcast for all the details.

1. Uncover your brand heart: Values, vision, mission, and goals
2. Pick a brand name

3. Identify your brand essence: Brand personality and brand voice
4. Define your brand messaging: Tagline, value proposition, and messaging pillars
5. Research your target audience
6. Research your competition
7. Choose your color palette
8. Choose your typography (your fonts)
9. Design your logo
10. Design additional visual elements

It looks like a lot. But, again, it's so important. Once you've done it, you compile everything into one document that's your brand bible—a brand style guide. You'll refer to it when planning your website, using your logo, creating social media posts, and creating documents—like the transcript that goes along with the podcast. I use my brand fonts in this transcript. Got to maintain that consistency!

So, do make this step part of your business strategy.

And you'll see that it's really important for this next step…

7. Build an awesome website

So, you know you need a website. And you know it needs to look good. But it can't just look good, it also has to be designed well.

Let's look at some statistics from SWEOR dot com to back this up. Link in the show notes.

- It takes visitors about 0.05 seconds to form an opinion about your website
- 57 percent of internet users won't recommend a business with a website that's not designed well for mobile devices
- 38 percent of visitors leave a website if the content or layout is unattractive
- 39 percent of visitors leave if images take too long to load
- 47 percent of visitors expect a maximum load time of 2 seconds
- 75 percent of visitors admit to making a judgment about a business's credibility based on website design

These seem like pretty dire statistics. That first one—0.05 seconds to form a first impression—that's wild! That means that as soon as your website loads, visitors make an instant first impression. Even before that, they're forming a negative opinion if your page is taking too long to load: More than 2 seconds.

I think that statistic on credibility is really important: That 75 percent of people make a judgement about a business's credibility based on website design. Wow!

But it makes sense, doesn't it? Don't you do that? I do, even though it may be unfair. To me it at least implies that the business doesn't care enough about its brand to update its website. Yes, maybe the business is so focused on its clients that it doesn't have time to update its website. But, knowing this statistic about credibility and that 57 percent of people won't recommend a business with an unattractive website, I think we need to take this information to heart. These statistics signal that freelancers need an awesome website.

So, what makes an awesome website?

One of the most important parts of a good website is to put information where your visitors can find it—exactly where they expect it to be. Then you want to guide them to other information you want them to see. Don't leave them hanging there wondering what to do after they've found what they were originally looking for.

I have a blog post called "What Makes a Good Website"—link in the show notes—that discusses what goes into good website design. I'll briefly go over those nine features here.

1. Simplicity: This means keeping your website simple and not getting too fancy. Yes, fancy websites can be really cool. But sometimes they can be too fancy—at the expense of user experience. You want to keep user experience at the forefront.
2. Visual hierarchy: This means having a natural flow to the information on your site. You'll use headers appropriately, with h1 (the largest headers) being used only for page titles. You're putting the most important information at the top of every page and following up with supporting evidence. You're not writing a suspense novel with your website. Make everything really clear in an order that makes sense.
3. Navigability: This has to do with putting everything where visitors can find it. You need the most important pages in the main navigation menu. You should also put them in the footer

menu. Please have a footer menu! Use a sidebar on your blog and podcast pages—or create a template with key information, such as your bio and important links.

4. Consistency: You want consistency from page to page. All the page titles should be in h1—the biggest header. They should be placed in the same position—most commonly in the center, though you could choose left or right. Just make it the same on every page.

5. Responsivity: The means that your site needs to work on mobile as well as or better than it does on a desktop. More than 60 percent of people visit websites on their phones. If your site doesn't look good there—and isn't fully-functional—people will leave.

6. Accessibility: This means making your site easy for people with various impairments to access your site. For example, when you upload an image, you need to write something descriptive about the image in the image alt text line. This allows digital readers to tell a person with a sight impairment what the image is about. You may want to include subtitles in your videos for people with a hearing impairment. And you may want to write in clear, simple language for people with cognitive impairments.

7. Conventionality: This means following some basic expectations about website design. I know, you want your website to be unique. But you've got to have a top navigation menu, for example. You can't just have a footer menu. (Side note: It's okay for certain special pages not to have headers or footers, such as landing pages or long-form sales pages.)

8. Credibility: This means putting your credentials on your website. Have a brief bio on your homepage, and have a long bio on an about page. It can also mean listing your prices. So many service providers, particularly in certain industries, don't list their fees. They do this because they want people to reach out to them first. They think—and are often taught—that if they list their prices, people won't contact them. So, they don't list their prices and they tell people to contact them first for a discovery session. In that session, they discuss the client's needs, how the provider can help, the client's pain point, and what it's worth to the client to solve their problem. This process can work, and I applaud you if it's working for you. I never liked it for myself when I was coaching. I prefer being really transparent about my fees. And, when I listed my fees as a coach, I immediately got more clients.

9. User-centricity: This means really keeping the visitor in mind when designing your website. How the website functions is just as important as how it looks. Make images small enough to load quickly—but still large enough to look good on the page. Have a search bar so they can search for what they want and not have to dig around. Put links in the footer menu so they don't have to scroll back up to the top to navigate to a new page.

Okay, so the next step…

8. Create a portfolio on your website

After you have your website, you'll want an area to show off your portfolio.

Start a new page. Call it "Portfolio" or "Samples." If your work is visual, you could set up the page as a gallery. If you're a writer, you could include downloadable PDFs.

You'll want this page in the main navigation bar and put a link to it on your services page.

Next up...

9. Strategically choose your first clients

To be fair, you've probably already gotten a few clients. If you're like most freelancers, then having a few random clients is what made you decide to go off on your own. That's what got me into website design. I've been making my own websites for more than 20 years. Along the way, I've made them for marketing consulting clients and for some coaching clients. But I never advertised myself as doing websites. Some people just asked me to do them.

I decided to do it professionally after redoing the website of the pop-culture podcast I co-host at Geek Girl Soup. That led to a gig doing a podcast website for a former Pittsburgh Steelers football player. Then another connection asked me to do a site for her salon. Those are still in progress as they're both moving slowly.

But, after getting those sort-of random gigs just from word of mouth, I decided to make it official. So, I created a business strategy and a brand identity and put myself out there.

Since the Steelers player needs a site to host a podcast, and I had just created such a site for Geek Girl Soup, I thought maybe that would be a good niche. But I didn't want to turn down the salon. What they both had in common was they had tried to do their websites on their own, and they realized that they wanted to focus on their other work, not on their websites.

So, it's been important to me to find clients who really value that. They value the fact that I'm saving them time and frustration.

My first few clients right after officially launching my business were in the same position. They were frustrated trying to do their own sites. That's more important to me than what industry my clients are in.

What is it that you most want in your first clients? What do you want them to value you for?

And, honestly, how can you benefit from them?

It might be of benefit to have a bunch of clients from the same industry so that you can show a high level of expertise in one area. Or, like me, you may want to show a breadth of experience. Think about which one would most help your portfolio.

And try to pick first clients who will give you glowing testimonials. No guarantee, of course. But it's great to put testimonials on your website.

Notice that I said "*pick*" your first clients. Yes, *you* get to pick them. You don't have to take just anyone who comes along and asks to hire you. Interview them first. Make sure that they are an ideal client. It's just dreadful to work with someone who's not an ideal client. I mean, if they're paying you a ton, the money helps to make up for it. But it's still a huge headache.

So, be strategic about whom you work with—whom you can help and who can help you. And pick clients with whom you'd really like to work.

Okay, last step...

10. Create a marketing strategy plan

All right, this is actually a whole other thing that I'll do in a separate podcast. I'm planning to do it in a couple of weeks. I won't go over all the steps now. I'll just give a preview.

A marketing strategy plan is going to guide how you put yourself out there to attract your ideal clients and to "make the sale," if you will. In creating a marketing strategy plan, you'll be figuring out how you're going to market yourself. That is, how you're going to get your name out there.

A big part of a marketing strategy plan is working with the 5 Ps. These are

- Product
- Price
- People
- Place
- Promotion

So, first, you'll work on your product—in our case, since we're freelancers, we'll work on our services. That means putting together a package—or more than one—that has clear benefits and solves a definitive need.

Then pricing your service you've already done.

People refers to your ideal client, which you've already done. In the case of a marketing strategy plan, it means really making sure that you've geared your services toward your ideal client. Make your services exactly what they want and what they need. Speaking of which, they know what they want. They don't always know what they need.

Place refers to where you are going put yourself out there. So, will you take out Google ads? Will you get a Google Business account? Will you do in-person networking? Will you be on social media?

And promotion means how you will get the word out in those places. For example, will you write a blog or do a podcast on your own website? Will you write articles for other people's blogs or publications? What kind of content will you share on social media? What will the content of your Google ad be?

While a marketing strategy plan is a separate document from your business strategy plan, I view it as a natural follow-up piece. To me, they form one larger document, along with your brand style guide. Your brand style guide is known as your brand bible. You can call all three documents together your business bible.

If you're itching to get those first clients and just don't feel up to tackling the marketing strategy plan yet, okay. Go get those clients.

But you'll really want to get to that marketing strategy plan before you randomly start blogging or posting on social media. It really helps you plan out what you're doing and why. It helps you

organize and decide what avenues are really best for your business. You don't have to be everywhere! So, you'll want to make the most of where you do decide to put yourself.

That's it for today. I'd love to read your thoughts on this episode. You can leave comments on this episode's post on my website. Link in the show notes.

I'll be back next week with more branding, design, and business tips.

See you next time on Brand + Design Scoop!

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Links mentioned in the episode:

"27 Eye-Opening Website Statistics: Is Your Website Costing You Clients?"—SWEOR

"How to Create a Brand Identity"

"How to Identify and Attract Your Ideal Client"

"How to Pick a Niche for Your Business"

"What Makes a Good Website"

Link to this episode

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Angela Kelly Smith provides custom Squarespace websites, branding strategy, and marketing instruction so freelancers and entrepreneurs can run a successful business while spending more time focusing on the work they really love doing. Check out her website design + marketing strategy services.