

[00:00:00.250] - Sheryle Gillihan

Having agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Tune in to get an inside look at the inspiring uphill climb of business women from around the world. I'm your host Sheryle Gillihan and this Women Owned Agency.

[00:00:23.570] - Sheryle Gillihan

Hi Heather, so glad you're with me today. It's so good to see you again. I mean, virtually of course, but great to see you. It's been too long.

[00:00:32.650] - Heather Steele

Yes. Awesome to see you too, Sheryle.

[00:00:35.200] - Sheryle Gillihan

So if you would, Heather is with Blue Steele Solutions. If you would tell us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about your agency.

[00:00:43.790] - Heather Steele

Yeah, so I founded Blue Steele Solutions in 2010, which kind of seems crazy now, it's been a long time ago. I was working in house at a broker dealer helping all of these people that were going from being captive financial advisors, meaning they worked for a company and got a paycheck, to being independent, which basically made them business owners, helping them figure out how to market themselves and how to really establish their practices. And I saw that these guys were completely inundated with really bad marketing agencies and marketing companies that wanted to sell them very expensive products that would do very little for their business. And I saw them burning out, becoming very frustrated and feeling like they were failing because they couldn't put the messaging together and get it right in front of the right people to be able to sell themselves as advisors. And so over time, working with these people and seeing the difference that we could make with getting them great messaging and helping them put it in front of the right people, I decided it was time to go out on my own and do that for more than just financial advisors, for anyone that needed that.

[00:01:53.320] - Heather Steele

So that was about eleven and a half years ago and today we're still doing primarily content and websites, really doing the same thing, helping people explain the problems that they solve for their customers and why they're the best at solving those problems so that they can get more leads and more sales and grow their business.

[00:02:14.730] - Sheryle Gillihan

That's awesome. And when we first met, we actually met at a word camp in Fort Worth. And I wasn't even an owner of a business at the time, but I was stepping into the sales role, and I was just inspired by the fact that here's this woman owned agency. And I was like, this is so amazing, because we're in the tech space and there's just so many quite frankly, there's a lot of men in the room. And so it was good to sort of see another woman and have the ability to talk to you about what you were up to and what you were doing. And as the owner, you're kind of leading sales and so I felt like I was just gleaning so much from you and the conversations that we had, but that was like, gosh, I don't even know when that was. Like 2014 maybe, or something like that.

[00:03:03.260] - Heather Steele

Yeah, it's been a long time.

[00:03:05.290] - Sheryle Gillihan

Been a long time. And then a few years later, I stepped into a CEO role and then I stepped into an ownership role. So I've grown in my journey. But I've watched you over the years as well, just see how your agency has evolved and changed and it's been fun to watch. But tell me a little bit about like really you told me you're working initially with financial advisors and you were, like, wanting to go out on your own, but have you always wanted to run your own business? I mean, where did that spark kind of start?

[00:03:40.070] - Heather Steele

Yeah, I definitely always wanted to have my own business. So when I was a kid, I actually wanted to be a large animal veterinarian. And when I went to college and started out pre vet, I learned pretty quickly that I'm not very good at math and science, which is kind of like super important to go into that school. And so I ended up changing my major to technical writing, really just for convenience. I was working in the writing lab on campus and I understood that field and was just kind of good at it. And so I started working while I was still in college doing contract work for places like Computer Associates and a core international. This is about 2008 that the wheels started to come off and everyone was being let go from their jobs as technical writers. And so I just shifted myself over to marketing because it was really similar. I had to learn a lot of website design and development, obviously content writing as part of my tech writing training. And so I just kind of niched over into doing marketing. And it was always in the back of my mind that at some point I'm going to go out and I'm going to do this on my own.

[00:04:51.730] - Heather Steele

It just happened to happen very early on in my career. So I graduated from college and then worked for a couple of years in the corporate world and then started my own business.

[00:05:04.510] - Sheryle Gillihan

And it's called Blue Steele Solutions. We didn't prep for this question, but I have to ask you, does that have anything to do with Zoolander?

[00:05:13.570] - Heather Steele

So it's actually a play on words. So there is the Zoolander reference, but the process of bluing steel is to take a piece of metal and apply high heat to it to make it corrosion resistant, more beautiful, and basically make it last forever. And so the idea is that when you work with us, we apply those same principles to your business. We're going to put you through a process that may feel like some pressure and may push you outside of your comfort zone. But when we get through with your branding and creating your marketing plan and strategy, and all of your assets. You're going to have these pieces that help your business be stronger and more resistant to the corrosion of the economy in your markets and to hopefully last until you're ready to exit that business and make a lot of money off of it.

[00:06:03.590] - Sheryle Gillihan

I love it. That's awesome. And I never forgot your company's name because of the Zoolander reference. It does make it memorable. So have you had any projects that you've worked on that have been just incredibly fun and exciting or anything coming up that you're really excited about?

[00:06:25.210] - Heather Steele

Yeah, I would say our projects, we get to work with great clients, and it'd be hard to single anyone out. I think what I really love the most and what I kind of geek out on is implementing our processes and creating offerings and really kind of the more internal side of the business of making things run smoothly and being as profitable as possible, having those systems in place that allow me to work the work week that I need to, and just making sure that we have a really well functioning business that has value outside of just me. I've gotten in the last few years really involved in exit planning and working with exit planners to help our clients and their clients to have more than just a great business today, but to be building the right systems. And processes that are going to help them to either transition that business to their employees or to maybe a child or a spouse, or to sell that business and be able to really get the full value for what they've put in over the years. And so applying what I'm really interested in with profitability and processes and all that fun stuff, helping clients do that work as well in their own businesses, that's definitely what I kind of get excited about.

[00:07:49.670] - Sheryle Gillihan

That sounds fun. It's great to have that passion and knowing what's fun and what kind of work you want to accept. I was told kind of after I bought the business, after Michael and I bought it, the first question was like, what's your exit plan? I don't have an exit plan. I just bought the business. And there are people that say you should go with an exit plan in mind at the forefront when you buy it, know what your exit plan is going to be. And I'm like, I'm kind of faith driven. I'm just kind of going where I need to go. I prayed on it

and I said yes. And I took that week, and I haven't done that exit planning, and I'm a few years into it now. And I know that you're over a decade into your business now. Was your exit plan there at the beginning, or did it just kind of evolve over time?

[00:08:46.790] - Heather Steele

Yeah, definitely not there at the beginning. I don't think I really even realized that I could build something that could have value after I'm done working in it. I just kind of pictured working until I was ready to retire and then close the business down and move along. And I was really fortunate to work with some clients in that space who started to open my eyes to these possibilities of once you're done, this business doesn't have to just go away. You're building value and if you do it in the right way, then you can actually sell this business and make a lot of money from it and be able to retire on that and get that full value for all of the work you've put in over the years. And so I would say it's really been in the last four or five years that I've kind of shifted my own mindset to thinking about, well, if I build this process this way, what's that going to do for me in the long term? And it's changed the way that we approach marketing strategy with our own clients. We use what we call the Vision Value model.

[00:09:52.620] - Heather Steele

So we look at where are you going? What is it that you want to do in the next five to ten years with your business? And then we look at where do you, as the owner or the operator, derive value from your business? And that doesn't necessarily have to be a dollar amount. It could be that the value of your business is providing employment to people. It could be that the value of your business is helping nonprofits to make a difference. It could be though, and totally legitimate that you make a good paycheck. I mean, that's totally a legitimate value as well. But understanding those two things of where are you going and where do you feel value in your business allows us to put together the right plan so that we're building the right branding and the right processes that support those two things. So at the end of the day, we're not building a marketing strategy that makes you more involved in the day to day when what you really want is to be able to step out in five years, right? Or we're not building this to be a very transactional base.

[00:10:57.080] - Heather Steele

Let's just get as many leads and close them as we can. When the value is really in the close relationships that you have with your clients and that's what makes you feel good and drives you every day. We could easily build a marketing strategy that goes against those things if we're not really understanding what is your vision and where do you pull value from your own business? And then by approaching marketing in that way, we're able to really contribute to the bottom line of what is this owner going to get when they do exit and they're going to have a lot more options. So I could go on all day talking about that and it's just a piece of our business that I do because I just love it so much. But at the end of the day, it does make a huge difference in what that exit looks like, how happy they are in actually running their business. And not everyone gets to plan their exit. Not everyone gets to that point where they can sell or do whatever they

want to. Some people are forced out before that. And so we can have a hand in making it easier to handle a catastrophic event, something that happens, like a health diagnosis, that forces someone out of their business.

[00:12:10.360] - Heather Steele

If what we're doing can help them manage that transition easier, then that's just even better.

[00:12:18.910] - Sheryle Gillihan

That is even better. Absolutely. In business ownership, there's always the question of what are you going to be doing in five years? And then being in tech, people are like, where is tech going to be in five years? I honestly don't know. I don't know. It's changing so quickly. I don't know where we're going to be, what we're going to be doing. I know that we won't be exactly the same as we are now. That's the only thing that I know for certain. We weren't doing the same thing five years ago. I wasn't even the same person five years ago. I'm in a completely different role than I was five years ago, and I didn't even imagine where I am now five years ago. And so I can't think about five years from now. However, we have forced ourselves to set those goals. And what's come of that is whether it's an internal metric that we're trying to hit an internal goal or an external goal that we're trying to hit. Every time we set a five year goal, we reach it early because then it becomes like this possibility of like, okay, we can actually manifest this.

[00:13:26.960] - Sheryle Gillihan

We can make it happen. And we don't wait the five years. We put ourselves in the position to take action. I don't know where we'll be, but I know that we have to continue to set those goals so that we can continue to make that progress.

[00:13:42.310] - Heather Steele

Yeah, for sure. It is so important. And I'm a very goal based person too. And so I love having those big reach goals, like you said, that you can kind of try to hit early, or at least I think one of the best pieces of advice that I ever got was when you're setting a goal. No matter what it is, you don't wait until you reach that goal to live like the person who's reached that goal. You start living like that person today and then you reach it so much quicker. It's like if you have a fitness goal, you don't wait until you hit that goal of weight loss or looking a certain way or feeling a certain way before you start to live like the person that's hit that goal. If you start it today, you'll meet it so much faster and it's just like this completely different mindset than what I had before, of I can't feel that level of pride or that level of happiness or be that confident or be that organized and in control of what's going on in my business until I hit X. But if I start acting that way now, I'm going to hit that so much faster.

[00:14:48.250] - Sheryle Gillihan

Absolutely. Yeah. You shared with me that you love sharing your hacks and your tips and tricks for habit tracking and timeboxing. Would you share some of those with us?

[00:15:01.390] - Heather Steele

Sure. So I think the one that's kind of the biggest thing for me is because of my situation with having a special needs child who needs really two on one support when he's not in his program, when he's at home. I can only work about 25 hours a week, and so every moment of my work time really has to count and has to be meaningful. And over time that availability is just going to get smaller and smaller. So I use a time blocking method where every week, either on Friday night or sometime over the weekend, I'll start making a list of everything that I need to get done in the upcoming week. And then on Monday morning, I sit down and I plot out those things onto my calendar so that each time slot, I have my whole week broken up into 30 minutes time slot. And I plot down exactly what I'm going to do in each of those 30 minutes so that I know at a glance what I need to be doing when it really takes out that guessing game of like, what did I work on now? It's already done for me and it boxes me into every single task that I do needs to fit into a 30 minutes slot.

[00:16:16.030] - Heather Steele

And if it doesn't, then I need to make that task more broken down into several parts. I've gotten good over the years of knowing kind of what fits into that 30 minutes time slot. But it also forces me to take a task that I might have spent an hour on and just get it done in half an hour, take out all of the extra fluff of overthinking and procrastinating and all of that stuff that we do when we don't really want to get the thing done. It makes me just get rid of all of that and focus on, okay, I've got 30 minutes to get this done. So if it's a blog post, I give myself half an hour and I'm going to write that and I'm going to get it out. It may not be perfect, I might send it to my editor and have him punch it up and make it better, but that's all the time I'm going spend on it and I'm going to move on. And that just makes such a huge difference for me and being able to get so much done in such a small amount of time by just carefully planning and making sure that I'm accountable to those hours that I'm available to the business.

[00:17:21.770] - Sheryle Gillihan

I also put everything on my calendar, and part of it is because as a business owner, I wear so many hats, right. So I need to know at what time do I need to focus on accounting and taxes, and at what time do I need to focus on checking in on the projects and the status of things, what time do I need to focus on sales? We wear a lot of hats. And so you touched on it a little bit in a couple of your answers about your work. Week has changed, your availability has changed, but you still run a thriving, successful agency. And so would you be willing to share with us what that model looks like now for you?

[00:18:06.650] - Heather Steele

Yeah, so I would say the biggest change that we've implemented over the years is just in scaling back. When I first started this business, I would do anything that fell into the marketing umbrella, maybe even under the sales umbrella, maybe under operations. If you had money and you needed something done, we figure out a way to do it. And so as I grew my team, it was very easy to continue doing all these different things, because I thought, well, I have people that can do all this work. Let's just offer everything under the sun. If you need print, we'll do print. If you need branding, we'll do branding. If you need SEO, we'll get it done. But that creates this very unstable balance of a lot of people that do a lot of different things, that require a very large payroll to keep those people going. And you really need to be selling a lot of work to cover all of those things. And at the end of the day, when you're providing a lot of different services to your clients, you're not necessarily focusing in and specializing or becoming really great at any of those.

[00:19:14.880] - Heather Steele

You're sort of checking the boxes and getting them done. But it's very difficult to say we are excellent at all of these different things that we do, because there's no time to focus and become excellent at all of them at the same time. Over the years, we've narrowed and narrowed down to what is it that we're really best at, what do we need to focus on doing, and where do we need to have partnerships to deliver the other things, and what things do we need to just take off our plate completely and not even offer them? And so we've really whittled down to- for Blue Steele. It's website content, design-development. That's our bread and butter. That's what we do. And maintenance, we have a good ongoing maintenance base as well. For my exit planning side, we call that our value building marketing. It's kind of a separate entity with my partner in that where that's all we do is marketing strategy for people that are in the exit planning phase, and that's it. We don't offer anything else anymore. We don't do print design. We don't do branding. We don't do SEO. We don't do those things.

[00:20:25.960] - Heather Steele

We have some partners we can bring in and help our clients get them done when they need to, but we're not going to do that in house with our team. The other thing that we did is went from having w two employees where we had a payroll to carry and whether or not we had projects for those people, they still needed to be paid and in 2019 began to transition to 1099 so that we can work by the project, bring people in as needed. We still have a very dedicated, close team that works together, but we're project to project instead of trying to keep everyone on payroll to have them available for whatever we're able to sell and bring in the door. And it's a different approach. It's a different kind of agency. We're all remote. I'm in an office, and they're all over the country, but it works. We've got all the technology we need to have that work for us, and we're still able to put out really great products for our clients and deliver websites that are still as stellar and that I'm proud of as we were when we had an in house team.

[00:21:35.070] - Heather Steele

It's not better because the people that we're working with also have the opportunity to work with other agencies, hone their skills, and be very focused on just the thing they do. And so it's been a great transition for me from a mental health standpoint to accommodate my schedule and my availability, and just to bring the profitability of the company up, because we're paying well for the projects that we're doing, but we're not having to pay for people that we don't have projects for at the time.

[00:22:09.530] - Sheryle Gillihan

Yeah, we're also making some of those shifts with our agency as well, because services work and agency work. There are those feast and famine cycles, and we've certainly seen some transitions just since the pandemic, we've seen some transitions in the way that projects are coming in. Sometimes it comes in as a flood, and sometimes there's nothing coming in. And so, yeah, we're making similar transitions and really evaluating our team, our specialties. And as you know, we work primarily with nonprofit, purpose driven social enterprise organizations, but we also are just leaning into our agency partnerships at this point in time. So, like you like, we don't do logo design and we don't do SEO, but we have some great partners that do those. And so for the clients that come to us that need all the things, we can do a portion of those things, and then other partners can do other parts of that. So I'm learning from agency owners like you and just gleaning from that experience that you've already had in the transitions that you all have made. So it's valuable to be able to just talk with one another and grow together.

[00:23:21.550] - Sheryle Gillihan

And on that note, are there any other women owned agency that you partner with that you would like to give a shout out to today?

[00:23:29.650] - Heather Steele

Yeah, definitely. So actually, everyone that I work with right now well, except for one, our content writing folks are guys, but everyone else that I'm working with right now are women owned agencies or freelancers. So my partner in the value building marketing is Randy Skinner. She owns Rs Consulting, and she's got a really interesting business model. She is a fractional CMO, so she actually comes into organizations, and she's got a huge nonprofit background, but she fills that marketing officer role for organizations that aren't quite ready to hire for that, but they need someone to really implement and oversee their strategy. And then she's got her own team of people that help with building the assets that are needed for those organizations. Tara Clay is with TLC. She's an awesome person as well. Works mostly with education clients. She does amazing work. And we actually share a developer from time to time, so that's really fun that we can kind of have our developer learning between our different projects and bringing that expertise back and forth. So that's really fun. And then the other one I'll give a shout out to just because I talk to her just about every day is Jessie Ger with Iceberg.

[00:24:52.910] - Heather Steele

They do websites and social media. Well, I don't think they do social media, but they do SEO and content and all that fun stuff. So those are three awesome ladies that I get to chat with and work with every day.

[00:25:05.460] - Sheryle Gillihan

Thank you. Awesome. Well, I would love to meet Jessie and Randy. Tara has already been interviewed on the show, so Tara and I know each other well, too.

[00:25:16.450] - Heather Steele

She's wonderful.

[00:25:17.980] - Sheryle Gillihan

Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you for joining me today, and thank you for making the time. This was a little bit more than 30 minutes, so I appreciate some block of fun that you make. It hard to keep it short when you get talking, but thank you so much, Heather.

[00:25:34.170] - Heather Steele

Thank you. It's great to be on.