

[00:00:00.000] - 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 is is Woman Owned Agency.

[00:00:24.740] - Sheryle Gillihan

Thank you all for joining me today. I have a special interview with a Word Camp US speaker, Lee Levy of Nex Graphics. Lee, if you would introduce yourself to our audience.

[00:00:38.530] - Lee Levy

Thanks, Sheryle, for doing this. This is awesome. I was so excited to get your invite for this. I think it's amazing. So my name is Lee Levy, and I am the owner and founder of Nex Graphics. I call myself design queen because I really don't like those types of titles. And yeah, so that's it. It's been my business for 15 years now.

[00:00:58.060] - Sheryle Gillihan

That is fantastic. 15 years is a long time and the web has changed a lot in 15 years. In fact, I was just speaking with one of our other World Camp US speakers and we were just talking about how websites have evolved. What are some of the challenges and nuances that you've seen over the last 15 years?

[00:01:17.620] - Lee Levy

Wow. When is there not a challenge in technology? I just wish something would stay the way it is for at least a few years and not evolve. But I started building websites back in the day when it was just all HTML. If you didn't know HTML, you couldn't have or build a website. So yeah, it was just coding way back in the day. Then all of a sudden you started getting all these, like, Microsoft Front page. Then all of a sudden end users were able to build some website sites. And then halfway through, they'd get stuck and call people like you and I for help. And then all of a sudden we had tablets and other devices. And then Responsive became a thing. And then WordPress came into the picture. And it's just insane where it's gone to constantly evolving and constantly changing and everybody having to adapt to all these new ways. So it's crazy.

[00:02:09.890] - Sheryle Gillihan

Yes. And people ask me, where is technology going? Where is your company going to be in 10 years? I'm like, I have no idea. I could not have predicted where technology is today 10 years ago. I just couldn't have done it. And sometimes I say, well, I mean, there are things that are emerging and they're becoming more prominent. So I suspect that AI is probably going to take a lead in where technology is going. We're

already seeing that content writing can be automated through AI. There are now these new things where you can create AI generated graphics. Have you seen that?

[00:02:52.520] - Lee Levy

No, I haven't seen it yet with graphics, but I have definitely seen and experienced it with the writing.

[00:02:59.040] - Sheryle Gillihan

I think that will become more prominent. It'll be really interesting to see what our role is in our agencies when some of those things are a little bit more available and accessible to users.

[00:03:11.160] - Lee Levy

Kind of a scary thought when you think about it.

[00:03:14.920] - Sheryle Gillihan

I don't know. I think it opens the doors for different new opportunities. And I think for my personality type, that's exciting. I don't know what's next, and that's fun.

[00:03:24.530] - Lee Levy

Wow. Interesting. So yeah, we're a little bit opposites on that because I have a little bit more of a control mindset where I like to be the hands on and the one deciding and making the decisions and doing all the design work. So I don't know if I'd want a robot taking that over. But again, I'm still open to it because you can't have a closed mind if you're in the technology field at all.

[00:03:50.780] - Sheryle Gillihan

So tell me a little bit how you work with clients. Where does it start? When they first come to you, obviously they're looking for a website and they come to your website and they're reading your content or they're seeing you speak somewhere and they're interested in reaching out to you. What are the things that you're able to offer to them and what does that look like?

[00:04:12.270] - Lee Levy

Well, it all starts with an initial interview, which they love because I have two types of clients. Half of them come to me and they have no clue and they're just lost. They have no clue what they want, what they should be looking at, where they want to go with this, or even what they're trying to do on their website. And then I have the other client who comes to me with spreadsheets and papers and everything already in the graphics and all zipped up in a folder and three websites that they love, which is great. I mean, the more information, obviously, that client can give us, the better we know how to design it. And we can have

an image in our mind, but it's also important that we're on the same page with what it is that they're looking for. So I like to do a very extensive interview, and I do try to meet with people face to face because here in Los Angeles, most people do everything over the golf course or over a coffee or lunch. So anyway, I always meet with my clients face to face. Sometimes I go to their office if it's important to them that I see the branding and everything they have going on.

[00:05:11.620] - Lee Levy

And yeah, we sit and we talk for about an hour to two hours about... I have a big checklist of what I need to talk to about. What are you trying to do? What are you trying to accomplish? Where do you see this going in the next five years? Are you selling on the website? Are you products or your services? There's a huge checklist. And then we look at some websites they like and they hate, and I want to find out why. What are their color schemes and all that good stuff? And by the end of the meeting, they feel very confident that we're on the same page. Then hopefully, once they hire me, I send them a big checklist of what I need from them based on our talk, and we start the project.

[00:05:56.850] - Sheryle Gillihan

Wonderful. Well, you mentioned your Word Camp US talk is more focused on engagement. So it's after you've actually, or maybe not after, it's while you're building that site, understanding what the user experience really is and continuing to enhance and refine that as you understand who's visiting the site. So could you tell us a little bit about your talk? You don't have to share the talk here, but could we get a sneak peek of some of the highlights?

[00:06:27.200] - Lee Levy

You want the secret sauce.

[00:06:29.920] - Sheryle Gillihan

You don't have to share the secrets.

[00:06:31.780] - Lee Levy

None of what I'm talking about is a secret, honestly. And I'm going to actually joke about this at the conference too, because some of the stuff I'm going to be talking about, it's like some of these things will resonate with people. Some of them are like, Wow, why didn't I think of that? Some people are like, Duh, why didn't I think of that? And some people are like, I know I should be doing that. So there's a lot of things I'm going to be discussing, but it's really important to get clients to engage on the website. So the more interesting you make it, it's all about proper ratio. And I know I'm preaching to the choir here because you know all this, too, but I'm going to be speaking a lot about call to actions, and I'm going to be speaking a lot about proper color ratios, proper font usage. I can't believe how many times people have so many fonts that are not readable. That's a bad user experience right there. If someone can't read

what's on your website, boom, right off your website. If people can't figure out what you do in four seconds or less, they're off your website.

[00:07:31.920] - Lee Levy

Your website loads slowly, another bad experience. So a lot of these tips are just really things that should be done properly from the get go. But if not, or if somebody designed their own website and had no knowledge of these things. A lot of what I'll be talking about is just little things they can do to improve the user experience on the website because a lot of times we see very large bounce rates off of people's websites and they don't know why. So it's like hit or miss. You have to go try one thing, try another thing. And all of a sudden you start to see that people do engage and stay on your website because the content is interesting, the flow is interesting. Sometimes their menu bars are horrible. Drop downs, left, right. People don't know where to go. That's another thing. They get so frustrated and they're like, I can't figure out what I'm doing here. Boom, I'm off this website. So a lot of my talk is really about designing properly for keeping people on your website.

[00:08:27.220] - Sheryle Gillihan

Oh, my. And I know you're preaching to the choir, but there are things that we know. I'm like, Yeah, we should be doing that. However, on our own website, we don't necessarily do that because when do we have time to do that? So this is why even as a web agency, we sometimes hire other web agencies. And a client may know, Oh, I know like, Oh, I know HTML. I know CSS. I know how to do that. I know that I need to change those fonts. But it's finding the time amongst all of the other things that we're doing within our business to actually actually go and focus on those things. Like, Oh, it's not top of my priority list right now. I need to go fill out this IRS form, not go change the fonts on my website.

[00:09:12.030] - Lee Levy

You're so right. I know the reason I laughed right now is because what I've been working on in the last few days, the week before the conference is I know obviously people are going to after the conference, they're going to either check out our work or want to talk with us or whatever. And I just realized that I'm so busy designing so many websites that I haven't even updated my own portfolio in the last six months. So I've been taking all the websites that I've done in the last six months and adding them now to my portfolio because you're right, we barely touch our own. It's just hard.

[00:09:46.140] - Sheryle Gillihan

It's hard amidst all the other things that we're trying to do. The other thing I heard is that you primarily work locally, right? So you've got LA based clients, but are those clients working nationally globally? Do they have an expanded reach or is their reach more local as well?

[00:10:08.470] - Lee Levy

I do all sorts of... I mean, my god, my client range is so broad that some of them are international, some of them are national. I work with a couple of trading companies that have locations all over the world. I work with even a small spa or a small grocery store in the local area. So I have a huge range of clients. I won't say no to anybody. I can do any a website as long as I understand the nature of the business. And again, that's what the initial meeting is about, because I really want to find out about my clients. It's like I've come across even social media people, sometimes that they just don't learn enough about the client and then they make a post and the client themselves is like, I don't do that. And I've actually seen that happen several times. So there's nothing more embarrassing than working with a client and you really don't understand what they do. So that is absolutely key in a successful relationship. I think in any business, not just web design.

[00:11:08.120] - Sheryle Gillihan

I love that you use the word relationship. I mean, we view it as a relationship as well. I mean, it's definitely a partnership in making sure that we understand and can be good stewards of those funds and actually deliver what we've promised to deliver. I've worked with some international clients, and it's been really interesting that design patterns are different when you're talking about different regions of the world. When we were working with a client in Africa, I remember some of the example designs that we sent over to them and they were like, That's not going to work. That's too much white space. Everything's too simple, too plain. It needs to be busier. It needs to have text all over the place. It needs to have the mega menus. Oh, my God. The regional culture there was like, they expected to be like just in your face information all over the place. And I was like, that's such information overload, but if that's the expectation, and that's the audience that they're serving, and it needs to be brightly colored. And it's just interesting that I had a perspective of what I thought good design was. And then you switch regions and good design means something very different.

[00:12:29.140] - Sheryle Gillihan

So good is this relative word that depends on who you're speaking to.

[00:12:34.580] - Lee Levy

That's so true. And honestly, I always like to say that there's really not ever a right and a wrong, but unfortunately, some of the technology changes and expectations have made it that way. So honestly, I'm going to be honest as a web designer, and I shouldn't be saying this, but I will because it's me and I say what I have to say. I don't mind using my fingers on a phone to enlarge the text if I have to. Big deal. To me, it was not something that, oh, my God. Honestly, the websites just don't look attractive on responsive anymore because they're all going like this. You know what I mean? So to me, I was like, What's the big deal? So you enlarged it a little bit. None of that stuff, to me personally, was a big deal. But it's the nature of the beast, and now are the times and you have to make everything responsive. And then the word responsive exploded everywhere. And everybody was like, It's going to be responsive, right? It has to be

responsive. And then there were clients that are like, What means responsive? And I'm like, What else was it called?

[00:13:34.330] - Lee Levy

Mobile ready.

[00:13:36.540] - Sheryle Gillihan

Mobile first.

[00:13:37.880] - Lee Levy

Yeah, it had so many different names to it that I had to like, I didn't know what to call it more meaning. Everything resizes and goes this way on your cell phone and they're like, oh, really? And then all of a sudden, if you don't have a responsive website, it's not okay. So now it's not okay. You know what I'm saying? So technology has made things right and wrong, which I don't like that. But again, we got to go with the flow.

[00:14:05.720] - Sheryle Gillihan

Yeah. And to speak a little bit to that, it's not even the technology of where you're building the websites and the frameworks themselves. It's the search engines. When Google said if your site is not responsive, your SEO is not going to be as strong and you're not going to come up on search results as high. And so it's the powers that be that determine whether or not your website is going to be seen. Obviously, if your business is word of mouth and you've already got a strong audience and a strong following, then maybe that's not going to be quite as important because people aren't finding you through organic search. But if that is how you're reaching your audience, or if you're running ads or something like that, then some of those things become a lot more critical in evaluating how you're going to spend your dollars on your website.

[00:14:55.220] - Lee Levy

Absolutely. And they did the same thing with the SSL certificates, too. Everybody all of a sudden freaked out by X amount. I think they gave a date, but then they changed it and then they changed it again. So if your website does not have an SSL certificate on it, you will be off the search engines and everybody freaked out. That was an interesting year.

[00:15:16.740] - Sheryle Gillihan

Thankfully, some of the hosting companies have made that a little bit easier for WordPress websites.

[00:15:21.970] - Lee Levy

Absolutely.

[00:15:22.720] - Sheryle Gillihan

So I want to learn a little bit more about you personally. So you've been in business for 25 years, and that is a really long time. But when did this journey begin? Did you know when you were younger that you were going to be a business owner, that you were going to be an entrepreneur? Did you have that model in your family, and you just knew that you wanted to work for yourself?

[00:15:46.200] - Lee Levy

I'm really happy that you asked that question. And the reason I'm smiling is because I wish this one teacher was alive to see this interview because I was told that I will never be in the technology space. And if I can just sum up that story in 30 seconds or less. I was born to parents who always ran their own business and I always helped. So I always had that mindset that it was just really cool to run your own business. However, when I was in high school, I was very much into sewing, fashion, design, but more not on a technology level, just on a make it with your own hands a level, sew it or anything like that. And I was forced by my parents to take a computer class, a computer programming class, which I hated. I hated it. I was the only female in the class at the time because it was only men in that space. And I just didn't want to be there. And I remember walking in and they were like, "Oh, cooking class is down the hall. I think you're in the wrong place." They literally said that to me when I walked in.

[00:16:49.010] - Lee Levy

The teacher didn't like me. No one wanted me there, and I hated it. So long story short, I didn't do well throughout the entire year. And then when the final project came, we had to code an entire... Back in the day where the screens were black and the digital color was only orange or green, we had to design a program about a skier going down a hill. And it took thousands of lines of code, by the way, to just make a skier do this back in the day. And when we presented the final project, no one had a computer in their home. We had to use a computer lab. Everyone's skier went down the hill. My skier went up the hill, and I failed the final project. And I remember my teacher telling me, "Don't ever get into technology." I'm repeating that line, "Don't ever get into technology." So I just remember going home and getting upset and crying and being like, "Oh, I can't do this." And in my head, I will never be in technology. So did I envision myself doing something entrepreneurial? Yes, but never in a million years, web design, coding, or anything like that.

[00:17:53.640] - Lee Levy

So no, I did not. But I did know that I wanted to have some a business.

[00:18:00.000] - Sheryle Gillihan

Sometimes those traumatic experiences actually shape us and give us the drive to do something better. So that's really interesting just that you remember that story, maybe has been a little push of like, I could do this. And especially when technology started to evolve and change. You were describing what you were doing in that class, and I was like, Oh, I bet that was in Basic, or something like that.

[00:18:29.430] - Lee Levy

That is absolutely the class I took. It was Basic. Oh, wow. You're pretty... That was an excellent guess. You could have picked at least four or five others. That was my first

[00:18:39.180] - Sheryle Gillihan

program experience as well was Basic, and it was so challenging for me. And I just thought this is not the direction that I want to go. But when HTML... I think it was actually Geocities. When Geocities came out and you could actually mess with the HTML and break the page, because this is how I learn. When you could break something and then fix it and put it back together, or when you could look at somebody else's code and say, I want it to be that color. How did they make it that color? Let me pull that code over here. And so when I could do the exploration with the code and be artistic with it, which I tell people now, coding is an art. It is a language and it is an art, and it is a beautiful thing if you can wield it well. Yes. It's not just bits and bytes. It's not just ones and zeros. I mean, it is at its core, but it does so much. And I think that if you are even and slightly creative. And if you are a maker, which it sounds like working with your hands and being a maker as you were growing up, once technology evolved, it actually opened the door for a world of makers to step in and be in this field.

[00:20:02.210] - Lee Levy

Absolutely. That's exactly how it is. And I was never very technical. I was definitely more creative. So to add something that technical into my life, it was a shake up for me. I just was told I wasn't good at it. And when you're told so many times that, you know what I mean? Especially by the opposite sex, you start to believe you're not good at something. And then that actually resonates with how I got into this because many years ago, we were trying to open a business and it was just- it cost way too much back in the day to hire a web designer. You're at the beginning stages and you're budgeting. And then I was told, Well, didn't you take a coding class in high school? And immediately I started sweating and shaking. And again, I just started thinking about that incident again. And I knew where this was going. And you can build the website. And I said, No, I can't. I can't do that. I tried. I failed. I can't do it. And I kept telling myself in my head, And then something just switched and I happened to be in a bookstore at the time.

[00:21:05.310] - Lee Levy

Do those even still exist? And I passed by a whole shelf and I saw all these HTML books. And I said, "nah". And I walked by it. And I did a couple of these things. And then I finally said, let me just look at it, opened up the book. It happened to be one of those early, early, not those dummy books, but it happened

to be like, it was actually a very beautifully written graphical full of pictures and HTML. And I looked through it and I said, Wow, that is a lot easier than basic. Maybe I actually can do this. And I swear to God, I took the book home and I played around with it. And I swear, I made a little page out of it. I was so excited. I almost wished I had a video or someone recording me jumping and screaming when I made something move on a page because that really opened up the door to I had designed my first website for our business, which we had run for many, many years, and I was maintaining it. And then a client saw me doing this at the office and said, Oh, do you design websites?

[00:22:10.950] - Lee Levy

Can you build mine? And I'm telling you, I got into this by accident. We were running other businesses, and web design was the last thing on my mind. It was just something I did. And then it evolved. And then all of a sudden, when we moved out here to California, it's like, Wow, I can actually do this now. And that's when I opened Nex Graphics because so many people had me building websites. Yes, and a lot of them were free. It was friends and family. But that's how I really got my experience. And all the people that remember my story was like, "You see? You have somebody telling you can't do something and look at you today. They said, Don't get into technology. Look at you today. You have a technology business."

[00:22:54.040] - Sheryle Gillihan

We all start somewhere. I did my share of free projects as well. But we need that experience to be able to say, Okay, now I need to charge you and you need to pay me because I invested the time in learning how to do this and I know how to do it now and I'm an expert at this or that now.

[00:23:11.540] - Sheryle Gillihan

Absolutely. And speaking to that, what are the things that are your specialty? What are you expert at? And you could do it in your sleep with your eyes closed.

[00:23:21.810] - Lee Levy

I'm not going to say really anything specific, but this is so geek of me. I can actually dream about a website. I just love designing. So in all honesty, I can design anything, whether it's a logo or whether it's a website or whether it's an email campaign for a client. I sometimes go to bed thinking about how I'm going to design something, and I know that's just so pathetic, but that's how much I love it. And so in all honesty, I will envision myself sometimes with my eyes closed or sleeping or trying to sleep, what something is going to look like. And sometimes I wake up in the morning and I'm like, Oh, God, that's it. So it's just honestly, anything designed for me. It's not really one specific thing.

[00:24:07.320] - Sheryle Gillihan

Spoken like a true artist. You spoke a little bit about your clients. Are there any special client stories? I hate to use the word favorite because we don't want to pick out one specific client, especially when we've

had hundreds or thousands of clients. But are there any stories that stand out for you that were really special and something that you would be willing to share with our audience?

[00:24:33.520] - Lee Levy

Again, it's hard to word this properly because I love all my clients and I really do have relationships with all my clients to the point where we go out for lunch, we go out to parties, each other's parties and stuff like that. But I am definitely a little bit more partial to some of the mom and pop shops because I came from there. Everybody starts a business and I absolutely love to watch a business grow from scratch. And especially when they're like, you were right there with me and you helped me accomplish this. And there is one spot in particular. First of all, I love spas and restaurants and anything where there's beauty involved because food is beautiful and spa products and skin products and those websites just get to be automatically beautiful, hair products and things like that. Then when you're dealing with obviously lawyers, doctors, I can make their websites beautiful too, but in a different way. So I did have this one spa client, and she had a really horrible story in her past, and I just really wanted to be there for her. So I did a lot of above and beyond because her story resonated with me in her past and some trauma she had had.

[00:25:47.710] - Lee Levy

And then I just helped her even with business decisions, didn't charge her for it just because I had my stories to share. And she's just doing so well today, and I'm really happy with it. This one lady just loves me so much because of what we shared and everything we had in common. So I see her very often and we meet very often for lunch, for dinner. We became actually friends from this encounter. So it's funny because now when I have to charge her, I feel really bad because we're more like friends. But yeah, I mean, again, I get back to the word relationships, and I absolutely love having relationships with my clients. So that story probably resonates with me the most, but I definitely am partial to the startup business owners.

[00:26:38.360] - Sheryle Gillihan

I'm going to ask a really hard question and one that wasn't on our prep list. But you've been in business 25 years. You've had Nex Graphics 15 years. And what I'm hearing in some of your answers are, I was told I couldn't do this. In this field, it's mostly men. I feel bad charging for this. I will do it for free. And I feel like this is something that I resonate with a lot. Being a woman in this industry, and this is one of the reasons that I wanted to do this woman owned agency podcast is because there are a lot of women owned agencies, and I want people to know that there are. And I wanted to feature and highlight that there is this stigma and trauma and pain and struggle and things that I'm not a great feminist. I don't like to get up on the soapbox and say it needs to be better for women. But yet we share some of these things, we share some of these feelings, or societal feelings, maybe, and maybe are in our head at this day and age. However, I still hear them in your answers, and I sometimes hear them in my own answers.

[00:27:59.320] - Sheryle Gillihan

And so this hard question that I'm going to ask is, what are you doing to get over some of that shame or pain or fear?

[00:28:10.720] - Lee Levy

I definitely would take the word fear out of it because I definitely don't have a fear anymore and definitely not shame. But yes, I do encounter that with certain clients, especially now I'm going to say it because I spell my name Lee, so they think I'm a guy. And then when they see that I'm a female. And I have to tell you, most of my male clients actually have told me in these exact words, I would rather hire a female because you guys just do something with design that men can't. I literally have heard that statement over and over and over again, really does make me feel good, obviously. I don't know how a man would feel to hear that, but I have encountered it a couple of times. And look, the way that I, in my mind, go past this is do things like speaking at the WordPress conference and putting myself out there. And I learned that people are always going to try to take you down. And you can do one of two things. You can either go down with it like I did in the past and say, I will never be able to do this because that's what I've been told.

[00:29:19.400] - Lee Levy

Or there's this little stubborn side to me that says, you know what? I am going to prove to everybody that I can do this, and I'm going to do it better than they can. A little competitive streak in there. And that's how I really got over all of this. I started putting myself out there. I go to networking groups, which actually are really mostly men. And when you show that you're knowledgeable about something and when you show that you care and that you have your heart and everything, I don't care who it is. They can say whatever they want. That's it.

[00:29:51.640] - Sheryle Gillihan

I love it. I love it. And I think that is something that's necessary as an entrepreneur to roll with the punches and to get it back up when you get knocked down, to be resilient and to get over challenges, whether that's business challenges or personal challenges. Being an entrepreneur, it's all wrapped into one. There's no separate containers for business and personal. We're about at the end of our time and I just want to learn from you, are there any other women owned agencies that you partner with, that you collaborate with, or that maybe you would love to collaborate with and you haven't had a chance yet? Any shout outs?

[00:30:35.200] - Lee Levy

Yeah, absolutely. Not in specific, but I am always looking to partner. Well, this comes into power partners or gold partners, whatever you want to call it. But obviously, the people that I work best with are social media and marketing people, as well as on the other side, business consultants, and any of those business people that help take people higher in their business. So anybody on those two ends I love to collaborate with because a lot of times when I am working on something, they need either business help

after I'm done or social media or any marketing help. And I don't do that. So always love to partner with people who do anything in that realm. If it's a fellow female agency, absolutely, I love collaboration on all sides. Collaboration with good partners is what makes your client stronger, and it makes your network stronger for building such a great network of people. There's nothing better than you saying to your client, I've got the perfect person for you.

[00:31:38.860] - Sheryle Gillihan

The rising tide lifts all boats for sure. Yeah. Well, Lee, thank you so much for your time today. I am really looking forward to your WordCamp Talk. You are first on stage, so everybody gets to open up their day with you. We are so excited. So thank you for this time today and thank you for giving back to the community and putting yourself out there and sharing what you're willing to share.

[00:32:04.180] - Lee Levy

My pleasure. Thank you so much, Sheryle.