



SEASON 3

EPISODE 08

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. The podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals. Season three is focused on the growing number of agencies who are making the world a better place.

We explore what this even means, why is it different from any other agency and how can it be reconciled with the real-world challenges of running a profitable agency? Join your host, Barry O’Kane as he speaks to leaders of agencies who are driven by their values to positively impact the world around them.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:43.8] BOK: In this week’s episode, we revisit an agency from earlier in the season. In episode three, I spoke to one of the founders of Radish Lab Alana. This week, I am delighted to be speaking to her partner, Edward. Edward started in the interactive and web development world as a teen in the 90’s and built a career doing the work he loved.

Despite that, he came to the realization that in his words, he couldn’t stand behind all the products and companies that he was working for. Then he and his colleague Alana met working for a nonprofit on climate change and his dream of forming an agency morphed into an agency that also created positive impact.

Edward shares this story and his take on the amazing agency we heard about from Alana. It was a real honor to be able to speak to Edward and I hope you enjoy this conversation as much as I did.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:41.1] EW: My name is Edward Wisniewski and I'm currently a partner, an interactive director at Radish Lab. I actually come from a very long career in interactive and web development and I started actually as a teenager in the 90's sort of tinkering around with websites, viewing source, teaching myself html.

Back in those days, there was no web designer, the guy who actually did all of the graphics, all the design but then also coded it himself. I sort of got my start there and that sort of sprinted me into a career of working mostly for brands and corporations and bigger agencies and doing sort of the work that I loved. What I found after 10 to 15 years of doing this is that I loved the work but I didn't necessarily, I couldn't really stand behind all of the products and all of the companies that I was working for.

This sort of led me to – I think it was the spring of 2012, a former colleague of mine, Alana Range had decided that she was starting an agency. I sort of joined on in those early days. I think it was something I had wanted to do for a really long time, I think sort of in the back of your mind, everyone has these dreams.

Mine was to start an agency but when we started talking about the kind of agency it was, the discussions quickly went towards going behind organizations that were doing greater good in the world. That's how Radish started, it was this idea that we could do the work that we loved for the organizations and for the people we loved.

Sort of in those early days, we were very much bootstrapping it, taking any client that we can get but sort of as we created this framework for the agency, the client started coming. More nonprofits, more science organizations, more academic organizations. Started building out our client base and what we found is that we had built an agency that we can truly be passionate about.

[0:03:24.1] BOK: Yeah, do you think that original dream as you described of starting an agency, do you think that was separate to this idea of greater good or were they – have they always been kind of in the same ballpark for you?

[0:03:37.4] EW: Actually, that's a great question, they actually were separate originally. I think being at the forefront of creativity an agency gives you this idea, this like ability to always be solving new problems and that was always something that I found extremely interesting.

It wasn't until I actually met Alana originally, three or four years before we started the agency, working for a nonprofit that was focused on climate change. The work that we did there was some of the best problems that I've ever solved and in sort of framing this idea for me that there's more to the work than just selling a product.

You know, selling a pair of sneakers or sort of helping a company's financial bottom line. The dream sort of morphed into something more where I can not only be doing this creative work but also just getting a lot of enjoyment and a lot of creating impact in the world which is something that, it almost took me I guess 15 years of building websites to even realize that that was something that I wanted to do.

[0:04:31.0] BOK: I think that's something I see in my past self and another environment as well like not really connecting the two until something catalyst sort of joins it together.

[0:04:40.4] EW: Yeah. In this field, I almost feel like you're taught from an early age that you want to build up your portfolio and you want to have big brand names in there. You want to have projects that people can recognize and the people who actually could use your work the most are often not what our industry sort of focuses on.

[0:04:59.3] BOK: In those early days or even as you were having that planning, that sort of the genesis of the idea, were you concerned about that conflicting with having a sustainable, successful, for-profit agency?

[0:05:12.2] EW: That's a great question. I mean, I should have been. I think there was something in those early days where we weren't really thinking about the financial bottom line and maybe had we been, maybe Radish Lab would have never even existed. I think we were lucky enough to have a few signs, clients and they also sort of helped in those early days.

Honestly, it wasn't our first thought but I'd say, you tune into it. It was something that we're thinking about every day.

[0:05:39.0] BOK: As you started the agency and going through those early stages, the early days, months, years. What are the kinds of challenges in that space in terms of building successful agency while still trying to stay true to your values? What are kind of the challenges that you encountered?

[0:05:52.6] EW: I think the hardest one for us, even though there was a lot of challenges was not only being true to our clients but being true to our staff. In those early day, we really didn't have the sort of revenue to have all W2 employees.

Our first team was a team of contractors and there's always this idea that you should be providing for your employees and it was very hard for us when we first started. Things like healthcare and benefits came later but when you don't have the revenue coming in, it's sometimes is even hard even to pay what the salary is for a given week or the commitments that you made to your employees.

[0:06:28.6] BOK: Yeah. What was the journey like to getting to the point where that is less of an issue. Was that something that involved big decisions, compromises. Because now, Radish, it's a successful established and been running for a long time. What was the journey like to get from those early days and those kinds of concerns to where you are now?

[0:06:46.0] EW: The journey was long. I think it was definitely a process of learning from our mistakes. I think anyone who starts a business, if they're not making a few wrong decisions, they're probably doing something wrong or just lucky enough.

I had a great network of people, we sort of built this brand for ourselves and slowly but surely, we started getting more and more clients. We also had a really strong proposal and pitch process, we sort of helped bolster things.

I think there was a lot of times that we also wanted to give up and I think if you add in a lot of the luck that we had as far as those projects that we want in those early days, the fact that we kept doing it is what sort of led us to sort of this agency we are today.

[0:07:25.7] BOK: That's really refreshingly honest to hear you say there are some days it was so hard that you almost wanted to give up. Do you feel that working with a partner and what were the kinds of things that carried you through those tough periods?

[0:07:38.3] EW: Yeah, I mean, I'd say a lot of my coworkers, especially Alana, I consider them friends you know? That definitely, when you're building something with a friend, I think there's – it definitely makes it a lot easier to get through some of those hard days. I also think, a big part of it was this dream that we have at Radish Lab and to really be a part of projects and work with organizations that are creating change in our world and doing great things and I think that end result is what 's kept us going.

Financially, things are obviously a bit better but you know, it's sort of those hard times that sort of gave us perspective in what we're really doing.

[0:08:15.1] BOK: You also mentioned having a really strong pitch and proposal process. Was that something that came from you as in the team that you started with the past experience, was it a conscious decision to have that in place?

[0:08:25.8] EW: You know, it actually, I think it's very much the team that you start with in the early days. Alana has a background in writing. You know, so much of pitching and proposing is sort of the writing that goes into it. Paired with some of the ideas that I had for some of these projects.

Having that strong writing presence in the beginning really made that the best way to first bring in business. There's a lot of different ways but we focused on that just because that was the strength that we had in the early days.

[0:08:52.8] BOK: I guess that you've really answered my next question but that is how you won your early business and brought in the business and built the success of the agency in the early days by going out and pitching for stuff?

[0:09:02.8] EW: Yeah, I mean, actually, the more people I meet in this industry that other people that I own, it actually isn't as common as we thought it was, it just made the most sense for us. Since then pivoted to some more passive marketing approaches but the proposal process and actually going and pitching for these projects is really sort of the core of our business development strategy.

[0:09:23.2] BOK: Again, especially thinking about the early days, how did you match up this broader vision as you described this dream for Radish Lab or the values. How did you match up with those with the types of projects and clients that you were pitching for?

[0:09:36.1] EW: Again, I think a lot of the key part of this was luck. I mean, we were looking for nonprofits to work for. Even in some cases, government organizations and those are exactly the type of people who are required to put out proposals. The proposals that are sort of – the low-lying fruit that exist on the internet are actually for nonprofits.

I mean, if you want to get to some of the bigger proposals, you're going to have to build networks and know sort of certain areas to find those but those proposals were there for us and it was actually very much cataclysmic that we were able to find them so easily.

[0:10:10.0] BOK: I know I asked Alana this question as well but do you think that being values focused or however you want to phrase it but do you think that contributed or was part of the pitch in the big process?

[0:10:22.4] EW: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that's one of the things that we take a lot of pride in and it definitely shines through our work but also shines into how we talk about ourselves. I would say that our client base also really resonates with that because that sort of gets them up in the day. Gets them up in the morning as well.

[0:10:40.3] BOK: How much of an impact does that have to you even today to winning the kinds of projects and the projects you want to do, the fact that you only – you're focused on that kind of work.

[0:10:52.9] EW: I think your values can take you only so far. I mean, I think it definitely still has a strong impact but I think are experienced today and is also what is helping us. I mean, we have sort of a track record and working for these type of organizations and I think that also has a lot of merit and a lot of strength in our proposal process.

We take a lot of pride in our values but it's a combination of a lot of things these days.

[0:11:17.4] BOK: to go back to that question we asked you about challenges in the early days. Now that you're in a different stage of the business, what would you say are the things that are most challenging for you and within the agency right now?

[0:11:29.7] EW: I mean, I think we're very much trying to build the agency into something that will be sustainable past us. Anyone who owns an agency and anyone who runs an agency knows that here is for the lifeblood of the agency and we're trying to find and build a Radish Lab that will exist past our involvement in it.

I think personally the longer you do this, the emotional investment while still strong these priorities that your personal life gets in the way and there's a lot of things that make you think about if this is a commitment that you want to do for the rest of your life.

I mean, that being said, I mean, we've gotten better projects, we've gotten better at the way that we run the business and I think the challenges that we faced today while new, it's all good stuff.

[0:12:15.2] BOK: that's really interesting what you say about – I might be paraphrasing but the values and the why of what you're doing, it's also something that's changing and morphing as you and the business changes.

Do you think that, if I phrase it like this, if somebody had come to you in day one of the agency and said, “In this many years, you’ll have Radish Lab and it will look like this.” Do you think at the time, you’d have said “Yeah, I’ll take that.”

[0:12:39.2] EW: That’s a good question. I think in hindsight it was 20/20. In the early days of Radish Lab, I think it was a dream, was very big in our minds. I think if we were to go back and someone would have released Radish Lab today, I would absolutely go full forward into it.

However, the Radish Lab that exists today was a long road to get there and I even wonder sometimes if I would have taken that commitment of that long journey. We’re so proud of what we do today and I’m so excited for what the future is going to be but starting something, starting an agency, starting a business is a huge commitment.

It’s a huge commitment on anyone. Getting it right is even harder.

[0:13:20.5] BOK: Let’s focus on some positives, what are the things that you described, you used that absolutely you’re taking now, you’re very proud of those stuff you do now, what are those things that you feel most proud of?

[0:13:30.7] EW: I mean, the work that we’re doing today is really on a global scale, you know, working for nonprofits and organizations that are in every country and are solving not only the nation’s problems but the world’s problems is just amazing.

I really love our team. I mean, the creatives that we work with, even from a strategist to our developments, everyone is so focused on the work and so driven by the same things that drive us, it’s just amazing that I go to Radish Lab every day and I work with such positive people.

I think the sort of the next thing, I still have very much the dream in the back of my mind and even though I love Radish Lab today, I’m so excited to see what it’s going to be in another five years or maybe even another 10 years.

[0:14:12.0] BOK: Is that vision very clear in your mind?

[0:14:14.0] EW: Yeah, I mean, you know, Alana likes to joke that I'm always thinking towards the future and seeing what's going to happen tomorrow is something that I like to think about but obviously you know, there's a lot of things that are going to happen between then and now. Radish Lab, I don't see it as an organization getting too big but the problems that we solve, I see us solving bigger problems. Working with bigger clients and really having an impact in our world.

[0:14:36.1] BOK: Actually, to just slightly segway and you're talking about impact. How do you look at or measure the impact of your work at the moment?

[0:14:43.1] EW: There's actually two ways, one, for our clients, I think reach is definitely a big aspect of it. Every project has a specific goal, sometimes our clients are looking to bring in donations, sometimes they're looking just to get exposure about a particular message and so we work very closely with our clients to sort of come up with what those goals are for the project early on.

That's sort of how we measure for them what the impact of our work is. I think for us, we're sort of measuring just the size of the actual scope of these projects, not necessarily the amount of time that we put into it or the budget but what new problem are we solving?

What new aspect of the business are we exploring. Every time we bring in a project that is sort of challenging us and challenging the way that we work and our ability to complete it is something that we always mark as a win.

[0:15:32.7] BOK: Tell me a little bit about the B-corp certification?

[0:15:35.5] EW: That's still an ongoing process. I think B-corp has been something that we've always wanted to do. We focused pretty heavily on getting it done and then there's always clients are always our priority, you know?

We are very close to becoming a big work and are excited to sort of be part of that community. I think internally for almost a few years now have been sort of operating, sort of with this greater good mindset and we are absolutely excited to sort of finally get the certification complete.

[0:16:06.2] BOK: Is that the motivation for the B-corp to be able to – as a certification as like to say, you know, this is our shouting to the world, this is our values? Or did you decide to go down this route for – does it bring some other benefits?

[0:16:19.4] EW: Well, I think the certification in itself doesn't really give us that shining on our values. I think we've always been sort of focused on that. I think this certification though is sort of an emblem these days.

An emblem of not only how our organization fits but how it fits within all of the other B-corps that exist and then I think it's for us at least is joining this community, of businesses from every industry, you know, from every avenue who have decided to make their for-profit organization have a mission in itself. I think that's what excites us is being part of other businesses that are just like ours.

[0:16:52.9] BOK: You're obviously right in the middle or just towards the end of the process of going through that certification. How onerous is that process to go through?

[0:17:02.3] EW: That is not a question for me. We have a very talented staff member who is sort of managing that process but I think for us, it's definitely been a longer road but all well worth it.

[0:17:13.6] BOK: What about from a more sort of personal point of view or maybe that is the same question I asked before about looking forward to the future and you're describing the dreams and stuff. Is that something you were describing from the agency point of view or from your own personal point of view or the two very closely intertwined?

[0:17:29.3] EW: There's definitely some overlap but I think for me personally. Actually, I'm a father of three wonderful girls and I think what motivates me from that perspective is the world that they're going to exist in. I think Radish Lab sort of gives me a platform to make sure that I can not only be someone who will be part of this future that they're going to exist in but also gives me sort of that peace of mind.

Outside of that I think you know, my family is a huge part that motivates me. Being part of a solution is how I've sort of envisioned what my life is going to be like.

[0:18:07.2] BOK: Now that to me is really interesting. I don't have children, so I can't comment. But what I have heard some other people say is that you know, the process who are having a family changes their focus to be more on a need to have basically.

To have the money coming in, to feed them and clothe them. It's incredibly inspiring, you're talking about the world that they're going to inherit, that they're going to live in. But do you see a conflict again between the – or is there or for any of us, a conflict between that in all sustainable income and finances and that broader goal?

[0:18:42.1] EW: Sure, I mean, today, I don't see that the conflict as much as we did in the early days but I think sort of – you have to weigh both sides of the scale could I be doing something a bit more lucrative, absolutely but then, would I have the time to spend with them, would I be sort of – align my sort of parental role with my values?

I think for me, the future, it seems very bright. I don't want to say it was necessarily a gamble but it definitely – I looked at all the other things that I would gain, ability to be sort of a very involved in my children's lives, the flexibility. Also, just enjoying the work that I was able to do and I think the combination of that definitely made it sort of the right decision.

[0:19:24.7] BOK: Would there be a line twitch you would be uncomfortable about?

[0:19:31.4] EW: Yeah, sure. I mean, I definitely have to feed, I have to take care of my children financially and that's a huge part of any parent's role. Is there a line? Yes. But it's not something I've had really had to struggle with yet.

[0:19:45.5] BOK: Awesome. Okay, the other topic that I wanted to touch on a little bit was – and you've mentioned a couple of times already is the team and have you talked with pride about the team and so on. Has that process of building and looking after and well both in building and recruitment but also in an ongoing basis, looking after that team. Can you talk a little bit about how you do that and how you approach that?

[0:20:09.2] EW: I mean, I think there's a few different things that we do as far as the hiring process go. Obviously, as a creative agency, we're always looking for people that are incredibly focused and sort of have just strong creative talents.

We sort of add in additional layer, to make sure that there's definitely some element of value alignment. We are very fortunate to be based in Brooklyn which sort of those two communities, sort of work hand in hand. I mean, as far as once they actually become part of the team, I think it's always an ongoing job of the company to nurture their creativity to nurture them as designers or as developers or strategists.

It's almost like the company itself is a family, you always want to let them – each of the staff members reach their full potential.

[0:20:53.9] BOK: How does that live out, do you have processes within the team, how does a team communicate, do you think there's anything that you could point to that says, "Here's a concrete example of what you've just described?"

[0:21:04.2] EW: Yeah, I mean, one of the things that we like to do at Radish is – especially in the design department is bring talented creators as part of an internship and almost every case, that sort of early in their career design intern will sort of grow within Radish and there's definitely been examples of that.

I think the success as when they're sort of ready to – they come in as an intern but then they leave as a mid-level or senior level designer who has a lot of projects and a lot of successes that that took place at their time at Radish Lab.

[0:21:35.3] BOK: Yeah, cool. Do you find that the type of work you do and the focus as you said on this broader impact and you described not just national but global impact. Do you find that is a motivator for the team as well?

[0:21:51.9] EW: Absolutely. I think the type of designer that works at Radish Lab is also somebody who wants to see their work have impact. I think because of the work that we do, it draws in that type of person.

[0:22:06.3] BOK: Changing topic very slightly, do you have any thoughts or pieces of advice or gems of wisdom and based on your experience that you might give somebody who is either in the early stage of creating an agency or who is wanting to focus the type of work they do more into this broader purpose good space.

[0:22:25.1] EW: Absolutely. I mean, I think that the number one advice I would give someone is not to give up. The road is definitely going to be long but it's worth it. I mean, the work that I do today is by far some of the best work that I've done in my entire career and it was because we kept going because we didn't give up and because we sort of kept looking towards the future that we were able to get to where we are today.

I think this is advice for anyone who is starting a business, but you need to be ready for that journey before you start it.

[0:22:55.0] BOK: How deep do you think the connection to the values you're describing goes in order to carry through and sort of keep going through the tough periods and so on?

[0:23:04.7] EW: I would say that if you're trying to build values focused agency, you definitely need to be focused on the clients that you're working for and the type of projects that you're going to take on. I think that in itself is probably not enough to bring you all the way through but it needs to be sort of front and center in your decision making process and definitely in the day to day and the aspects of it that are going to motivate you to succeed.

[0:23:31.3] BOK: Final couple of questions, I wanted to ask a little bit about – I guess, or as has there been clients or work or situations where you've either said yes, when you think you should have said no, or the other way around. Not because you know, because of the values based part of what you're trying to do.

[0:23:50.1] EW: Yeah, that's definitely one of my biggest problems. I get so involved in the sort of the work that we're doing that I don't always sort of think how it's all going to play out. I sort of love to be successful for our clients but it's definitely something you need to think about is, does the math of the work that you're doing, plus sort of the scope of the project, does it really amount to the end result that you're trying to achieve?

I think in the early days, there was a few projects that we took on that we did it completely because we loved the client's mission but at the end of the day, it actually hurt the agency from a financial perspective.

[0:24:27.0] BOK: How do you avoid getting into that same situation again now?

[0:24:30.4] EW: It's just years of experience. I think it's a lot easier to make the right decisions when you've made a lot of the wrong ones. The experience that we had going into those projects that were completely focused on just sort of helping the client while I have no regrets about doing those, it definitely gave us some perspective on.

That gave me the ability to sort of make better decisions these days. That being said, I'm always a sucker for a good mission.

[0:24:56.0] BOK: I can sympathize with that too. I guess, that takes me back to the question previously about this. I keep using the word conflict but I'm not sure that's the right word but between this being focused on this financial sustainability of the agency and also having a genuine desire to work with people that are purpose driven groups or organizations that you feel passionate about.

I guess that's what that question was really coming from. I don't know if there's any particular insights or any thoughts you have on that, this sort of conflict between the two.

[0:25:26.4] EW: Yeah, I always see it as like a math equation really. You always have to think about sort of starting at the end, what's the end result, what's the goal of your client and then obviously as an agency, the time and effort that you put in is what your sort of cost is, you know?

You got to sort of figure out what that middle ground is, what can I give the client that helps their goal but doesn't sort of go over their budget? It's sort of figuring that out and walking that line.

Sometimes a client will come to you with not enough money to do what they want but you always have to sort of pivot the conversation with, "Well here's what we can do?" And you're still helping the client, you're still being true to your cause but then you're sort of balancing the equation of the mission versus sort of the investment.

[0:26:11.9] BOK: Yeah, that's a really inside answer actually. Thank you. Okay, I think unfortunately we're running out of time, final question for you, for anybody listening who wants to find out a little bit more about yourself or about your Radish Lab, where can we point them?

[0:26:25.4] EW: You can find radish lab on the web at radishlab.com We're on Twitter and Instagram at @radishlab. If you're looking to reach out to me, you can find me on Twitter @edwerd and yeah, feel free to send us an email.

[0:26:41.0] BOK: Awesome, thank you so much, I really appreciate your time today.

[0:26:43.5] EW: Thank you Barry.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:26:45.5] BOK: You can get all the links and notes from this episode on happyporchradio.com where you can also find out how to send us questions, feedback and get involved in the conversation about this series. If you enjoy the show, please share with anyone else who might enjoy it too. Thanks for listening.

[END]