



SEASON 3

EPISODE 10

[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]

[0:00:43.7] BOK: Hello and welcome back to Happy Porch Radio season three. This week’s guest has a cool story as to why she’s running a socially impact focused design studio. Both her and her cofounder arrived in the US as refugees. She describes being very aware of how lucky they were and how not everyone else has the same luck.

As being a key factor in their motivation, Julia and her cofounder, started Hyperakt 16 years ago. They described Hyperakt as a New York social impact design studio that partners with visionary organizations to tell their stories. In this conversation, Julia shares her story with us.

From how challenging the early years were and how that changed as the agency matured and how alongside that growth, they have become clearer and clearer on their mission, let’s meet Julia.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:39.4] JZ: Hi, my name is Julia Zeltser. I'm a creative director, principal and cofounder of Hyperakt and Hyperakt is a social impact agency we are located in Brooklyn New York and we have been doing this thing, this Hyperakt thing since 2001 which means that we've been in business for 16 years and it's always hard to mention that I've been saying something like this.

[0:02:06.4] BOK: Yeah, that's really amazing.

[0:02:07.6] JZ: There you have it.

[0:02:09.1] BOK: Hyperakt is – or how would you describe Hyperakt to it as in terms of your mission and the purpose for the agency?

[0:02:15.1] JZ: Sure, I think it might be good to start a little bit with our story to help shed some light as to how we came to the mission we have. Hyperakt has been founded by myself and my business partner in the United States where we received the A status of refugees back in our countries and moved here. I'm from Ukraine and my business partner is from Cuba.

And, as refugees and immigrants to this country, we've been giving it an amazing opportunity to live in this country, to study in this country and frankly speaking, you know, one would call it a lucky chance and or a fewer chance. We went to an amazing arts school, we felt like our backgrounds, kind of immigrant family backgrounds, had a very similar work ethic.

Frankly speaking, you know, together started chipping away at this American dream and you know, Hyperakt was born out of that. This belief that we got a fair chance and realization that some people don't have that fair chance and never will have that fair chance because there are things placed, structures placed in front of them that don't allow them to get that fair chance.

This whole idea of Hyperakt in part was born from an idea that we believe that in a world of inclusion and where the biases are confronted, and everyone has a fair chance. We started this agency without this plan frankly speaking, we were so very young when we started Hyperakt, we were kids, we were fresh out of college with very few years of experience, any work experience, behind our belt.

We wanted to try something of our own, we try to pay our bills through agency work, while we were polishing our craft, working in different ad agencies, we were really just watching how is our skills, just going – the talent was going to waste, the endless commercials for car companies to church and hair products.

You had to ask yourself a question: “I’m getting good paycheck here but my heart is not in it” and to make sure that our heart was in it, we started doing a bit of volunteering work for small, tiny activist groups here locally in Brooklyn, tiny nonprofits and our talent went to producing something for someone who didn’t have something good.

They were impacting people on the ground with their work and that felt very good. We started doing more and more of that and about five years in, we started to ask ourselves a question. Look, working for a nonprofit or kind of mission driven companies, values driven companies was exciting for us but how do we figure out how to balance that and run as a Hyperakt as a sustainable business with smaller nonprofits that usually don’t have budgets?

It took many years to figure it out but finally we kind of I would say about eight-year mark, we said, this is now our full mission and there were variations of that mission for the majority of it, it was towards the direction of social impact that we will only concentrate on that.

We’ve been doing that kind of work ever since.

[0:05:47.0] BOK: What was that journey like because you say you’re reaching that five year mark and you’re making this decision to kind of transition or really focus on that, was that a challenging process? Like you described the process of the financial challenges I guess or unsuccessful agency. Was that a challenging process that period when you were in that transition period?

[0:06:04.1] JZ: It was, in retrospect, I could say that but that, when we were doing this, you know, keep in mind we are in somewhere from 22 to 25, age range. We are inexperienced, we haven’t tasted anything but you know, the work we’re doing.

We don't know what we're missing out on or perhaps what we are gaining from it, we are just doing what we see a few steps ahead of us. The challenges were in financially, you know, now I could say absolutely, we meet so very little money in our first year.

We supported ourselves – I could say now in kind of risky way of some credit card debt to make sure that we stay afloat for three or four years just to make sure that we could push this business forward. I paid off my student loan fairly quickly, you know, again, from the story of how as a refugee, I've got a fair chance, a lot of my loans, a lot of my tuition was covered by student grants and scholarship and I didn't have a whole lot of loans to pay.

That was wonderful and I was able to save up money a little bit after I graduated. I ended up living on some of that money. There was a great support from now my husband but he was a believer in this and he said, "Whatever needs to get done," you know, "I'm here to support you."

I was able to kind of wiggle my way through the financial hardship at that time with the hope and a promise that something will be better. That's the financial aspect of it. In that time, we also knew nothing about business, how to run, we were – it's important to say that both Deroy and I started illustration at Parson's School of Design and what we didn't study at all is business.

Contract signing, we knew some bare minimum. We didn't know how to price, we didn't know how to organize, we didn't know some basic client etiquette. That came with a hard price of stumbling and getting hard knocks for the first five years but I honestly can't imagine doing it any other way, we did it our way and our way was clumsy and maybe not as fast but it was our way and we did it together in that time.

It formed a really strong friendship, a strong partnership, we knew we could depend on each other. Then we started thinking about how to grow the business. About five years, we were figuring things out still. I would say about seven year mark, someone had suggested that we speak to a business consultant and we were in position where look, we need to because something is not working for us, structurally, financially, we know that things can improve, how do we get there?

A friend of ours introduced us to a business consultant, Emily Coehn here in New York and she opened our eyes to what it means to run a creative business. She started working with us on how to properly write proposals, how to estimate, how to plan, how to hire properly, she did an analysis on our team, where our gaps were, whom we should hire to fill in certain responsibilities and how we should delegate.

She really held our hand and we were in a position where – look, we’ve tried it for so many years our way and our way kind of – you know, we exhausted our way, we need different way. We believe that if we follow her steps, we can get to a better place and we did it and it was a lifesaving experience for us.

[0:09:59.6] BOK: That’s really interesting about bringing in a sort of the third party or the consultant and coach. It’s something that – in happy porch radio and over the last few seasons, it’s a bit of a recurring theme, how big an impact that can have in your – it’s interesting you use the word lifesaving there.

How big an impact that was. Do you think that if you hadn’t brought in somebody that the business would be like it is today?

[0:10:19.4] JZ: Hard to say. I think that we would figure things out in a different way, it would still have the social impact, it would take us longer to get there, we would bring in different people. I think we’re in a position where we needed help and we recognize we needed help, we just didn’t know whom to turn to for that help and I believe stars align when Emily came to us because she specialized in supporting creative businesses.

There are so many other consultants out there that support other business. What sold us on her specifically was because she catered to the creative industry and she’s been doing it for at that point. She said, 25 years and now it’s way more than that.

That really just said, you know, we just need to know how we’re doing comparison to other creative design studios. That gave us a sense of comfort, a sense of confidence and a plan really to how to solve for some of our problems.

[0:11:17.7] BOK: How different do you think that journey would have been if you hadn't focused on the social impact, the mission driven type of work?

[0:11:26.6] JZ: I think it would be completely different, I think our process would be different, conversations we would have would be different. I think people, employees would be significantly – everything would be so very different.

Running a social impact firm comes with a specific set of expectation, what the business is doing, who works there, how we talk, how we walk, everything is defined by that value and that stems from the founders, the big vision of where the company's heading and that really trickles out to how we speak to your staff, how you speak to your clients, how you hire, it is inherit –

Kind of the values that you define internally need to somehow become company values and everyone on staff needs to start thinking about those values through a lot of different ways, our business operates.

We have for our own new business team, we always discuss this, this is a client where you want to take on? Do we believe in their mission, vision? Do we believe in their work? Are we in line with their work?

Those questions are hard to ask often times when you know, you need to meet a specific quota for the year. You must ask them and you could build excuses here and there and you could kind of paint the picture you want to paint because you're blinded by certain points, you might be very taken by the client or they might be very big brand in the social impact world.

But you always ask yourself, do our values align with the clients?

[0:13:04.2] BOK: Do you have a very clear proof of that decision making process you're talking in your business process there? Do you have like a clear – this is our values and almost like a checklist or is it more case by case and what their team currently feels?

[0:13:20.2] JZ: For years, it's been kind of a feeling that you get from working at Hyperakt but as the new staff came in, younger staff came in, you really needed to help them understand

what the structure is and why these values. It's not until recently that we started codifying our values. We just now came from a session working with another consultancy that help us tease out some of the values that really is now starting to become pillars.

I think we have a long way to go to still internalize them and still a build culture around them. It is there, it was developed together with the team, it wasn't just myself and my business partner dictating them. We had collectively – at this point, everyone's been at the company for extended period of time and they knew what we are made out of and together collectively, we build them out.

[0:14:16.4] BOK: I think that's really interesting that you're getting to that point where you're codifying and kind of clarifying those things. Do you think you needed that time together with the team and the maturity within the business before you were able to codify that or is it something that hypothetically you could have done years ago, earlier in the process?

[0:14:34.1] JZ: I think we could have done this way earlier in the business because all these place, all these items were in place long ago. They were hidden or masked and later unmasked in the process but they were always there and I think we could have teased them out earlier, they were just kind of stuck in our heads, it was a form of a feeling or discussion.

It was never concretely codified. I think the reason why we started to ask ourselves this question is because one of our team members who is a very incredibly talented strategist, she started asking the question:

“Well, you know, if we're planning this for our new business or we're planning to integrate strategy into all of our work, how do we do this, what are our values, how do we say this is our own bold strategy work?” In asking this question, it started trickling down to everything else, it was like a big sweater, you pull on one thread and like another one gets undone ever so slightly.

We really needed to sit down and say, look, there's a culture here and we could design this culture. There are tools that we could create to sell to our clients and we have to codify them. There's so many structures that we need to develop how to move this business forward but we need fundamental structures and they can't be just a thought, a discussion.

We need to come together collectively and agree on them, so we all have a full understanding of it and we did it. So much work ahead of us but this was a first step. Yes, this has been – it took 16 years to get here but we're here.

[0:16:12.4] BOK: Yeah, that's totally amazing and the journey you're describing there is really interesting. You talked a little bit about building the culture there and you mentioned the culture a few minutes ago as well. Can you give me an example of the kind of thing that you're doing within the team or the team we're doing to codifying concrete and to build this culture?

[0:16:28.7] JZ: Sure, I should mention that our team fluctuates from about 15 people to 10. On the average, we're probably somewhere in that size. With every addition of a new team members, something changes, there's the tapestry changes ever so slightly.

What was important for us is to have a fundamental structure. Whoever steps in it, whoever we hire fits into the structure because sometimes, what you uncover is that if something is not structured, you might hire someone who is not quite fitting for the role.

For example, in the social impact world, you're working with clients who are incredibly – they have a complex content, they have a lot of it and they always try to squeeze everything on the page and it's a huge challenge and to be able to work with that challenge of constantly dealing with content, understanding that content.

Working very closely with a client, understanding their end goals and end needs, yields to higher people who can work in that environment. Not every designer can do well under such pressure or with such work load. We had to change how we approach our hiring as well, what are the best staff members to come work with us and what we have found is that they have to care for social impact.

It has to be part of their life somehow, not just vaguely "I care for doing this work," but you need to really passionately believe in it because in the long term the kind of work that you're going to be doing is just going to be either exciting to you or not exciting to you. So that was one of the ways of changing who comes into the studio. We try to do a lot of collective work and of course,

there is so much to improve. I think it would not be fair to say that everything is working out smoothly. We need to do more of a team building exercises.

When the strategy was introduced, a heavy strategy was introduced into our work it really somehow separated design from strategy and they become silos and figuring out how to merge them and have them think together as one unit and not have strategies lead one thing and then pass on the information to the designers and we've been having to solve for this conundrum of how strategy overlaps with design for let's say over three years now.

And it still has points of tension and we're trying to think about how to integrate and how to provide both teams with opportunities for significant overlap. I think we also do Monday morning meetings where we try to do something fun and exciting, something that allows us to do something else not work related. We'll do ice breakers, sometimes they're brainy exercises and sometimes they're more like physical exercises.

We'll do communal lunches and we'll do communal Monday morning breakfast, we'll try to go out for drinks together. It's the idea of bringing our community, our team together. I believe strongly that you know I spent so much time at work that I have to build an environment where I want to come to work and I want to make sure that my staff wants to come to work. Every day they come through the door and want to make sure they have a smile in their face.

In part, it is about compensation, it's about the package, the benefits, about the space and the people and the kind of work and when all of that comes together in this one package it's a happy team and it's a team that works effectively together.

[0:20:08.4] BOK: Yeah, that's incredible. There's so much going on there and you mentioned the hiring process and I happen to notice at the time that we're recording it on your site there's an advertisement for your recruitment team. What I really like about that is in your job description it lists who you are, there's your proven track record and proven design skills and experience but there's one of those bullet points, "Is you have a passion for doing good in the world."

And I thought that was really interesting that it was kind of you weren't putting it front and center above these other things and you weren't talking about it as a P.S. at the bottom but it's in the same level of the criteria. You need the skills to do this job and you need to care about the things that we care about which fits quite well with what you're describing there and I am wondering if that is a challenge? Not just in recruitment but within the team.

Is there a challenge to kind of balance the skills and the technical ability and the strategy or output of the work and the social value part of the challenge or the mission driven part of the company?

[0:21:00.8] JZ: Yes, it is always challenging and I think just to remember, being a do-gooder is one of the pillars for Hyperakt, one of the values and excellence is another value and what you are describing in this job description is essentially that we are highlighting the values that we find very important to us which you still have to have these skills and we still hold you responsible to getting the job done but it cannot be separated from the social impact.

As I mentioned, if you get someone who is just not passionate about this, they will get tired. I think they sometimes something glitzier that contains greater features in advertising world is by far more possible than in a non-profit world. Clients tend to be, they might be dealing with very progressive issues but they are very conservative often times. Conservative in their own designing of design, on their understanding of technology, so it takes a while to educate them.

And if you are after the latest greatest feature and the latest coolest design then this is not the right place for us to work together. Essentially you will get the person who would join us in such capacity would become bored very quickly and that would be obvious within the first year. It has happened for us before and now, we strongly recognize that the people who succeed at Hyperakt must care for social impact and must – they will learn the skillset, belief, if you come in with critical thinking.

And the social kind of “be do-gooder” and have that element in you, that you will pick up on skills very quickly. I found that to be true for a lot of our staff members who have might have come in with skillsets that are not as fully developed and if you grow them, if you work with them

and you sculpt them as designers or strategists, they are able with this great content that we have generated by our clients, we can really build something amazing.

[0:23:05.1] BOK: Okay, so just very slightly changing tack, there is another cool thing that I see that Hyperakt does the Hyperakt Labs. Can you tell me a little bit about what that is?

[0:23:14.6] JZ: Sure, Hyperakt Labs is our playground. We try to experiment with topics, ideas, tools that allow us to do things that are different from our everyday work and as I mentioned, some of our clients, they have certain things that they have to do – they have to develop – they are either a new organization, they need branding and they need a website and maybe they need some print material and that maybe it but for a business that is trying to push ideas of experience, design and thinking about building, designing not just items.

But also communities, products, processes, teams – it becomes something else for us. So Hyperakt Labs is essentially something that we use to experiment with. Behind our belt, we have so many different labs and some have been very successful and some not so much and we let that pretty much go. If the project has legs and grows, wonderful, we'll support it. If it doesn't, it was a nice try and this is open to the whole team.

They could do whatever they feel is in line with Hyperakt's mission and vision. So, a lot of these experiments need to fold back into the structure that we created Hyperakt for but some example of that are lunch talks and lunch talks are – it's a series of conversations. Once a month we open our doors to our community. We bring a speaker, someone on the topic of design and social impact or experimental design and we bring them through our doors.

We invite our community about 60 or 80 people, open our doors, we provide food, we have a beer sponsor and we just have a conversation. That happens once a month on a Friday. Usually it takes a format for our presentation 20 to 30 minutes and then question and answer followed after that and then we have more like mingling time with people and we are located in this industrial part of town which is very much off the beaten path.

And I am amazed every month to see how many people come through our doors and make it out to this area and we've been doing it now since 2010. So a significant number of years too so

that's one project. We also have a project that is doing really well. It's called On The Grid and On The Grid is a collection of over 500 neighborhood's guides that were curated by local creatives and about hundred cities around the world and more of that community is growing and growing and growing.

And that idea came from when we moved to our industrial part of town in Gowanus in Brooklyn, we knew nothing about the neighborhood. It felt deserted and seemed like there is nothing much happening but at another closer look, we noticed there are cool coffee shops, small restaurants and you wouldn't think much of them but they were amazing and they are fun and we wanted to document it for ourselves, for our friends.

Well we did one guide and then we did another one and we asked another studio to do their neighborhood and somehow it gotten picked up and people were interested in curating their neighborhoods. It was a real passion for a lot of people and again, another example of how a community now not physical, not the one that comes through our doors but a community across the globe that's participating in this and willingly donating their time to documenting their neighborhood.

So there is some sort of – there must be pride of their own spots and they want to share this and I put it to test when for the first time I visited London and I ended up, I think there was a studio called Hyper Kit, not to be confused with Hyperakt, that curated a neighborhood and I followed their lead on all of these cool spots and I couldn't believe there were so weird and unusual. I don't think I would have ever come across them had I just been a regular tourist.

I would have picked up some lonely planet guide book and stuck to that but their choices were fantastic and very much in lined with my taste. So that was exciting to experience and we've launched a product called Their Neighbor Woods which is a physical product. This was just an exercise and seeing if we could do anything with our development of physical products and figuring out how to deal with customers.

So, it was entirely different platform and these are various hand lettered neighborhoods etched in cedar wood and sometimes it's almost like a poster size art, sometimes these are coasters, key chains and we figured out that we build a product. Some are popular, some are not but

bottom line is that this business is doing well and we had to split it off from Hyperakt because it was covering its own expenses, so it is generating profit and it only made sense for it to kind of be on its own, on its own legs.

So that's another success but listen, in between all of those successes there were plenty of failures, plenty of experiments that are just so small and so simple. They were good for the time and they were essentially would led us to some of the major bigger projects.

[0:28:56.7] BOK: I think that's brilliant and is there a challenge if you're doing this kind of work that is internal and driven by the team, driven by you? Is there a conflict between basically the paying client work, how do you fit it in?

[0:29:09.0] JZ: It's hard. If we decide that there is a project we want to support, we develop a very similar project timeline as we would do for a client. We would create internal meetings to make sure that we are chipping away. I think a lot of what we found is that most of our employees do really well with client work and it is not unless – usually my business partner, Deroy that champions for a lot of our lab projects, unless there is one champion that pushes this forward, projects don't take off.

And there was a couple of year ago when my business partner said, "You know I am going to take a step back from some of our client work and I am only going to concentrate on lab projects," it wasn't really the case. He wasn't constrained on all of the lab projects but he was doing much already of lab projects work. And my god, we produced so much work in that year and it was fascinating to see how even though we were producing a lot of lab projects, we were still doing so well from the paying projects.

And that was the balance, you need the outlet of experimentation if you can't get that with your client work and we tried to take these ideas not that we have developed in our labs and say, "Let's find ways to collaborate with our clients or find ways to partner with someone else that uses this platform, uses this process." I have to say that it is only now that we are trying. In the past few years we were able to make the full loop in that.

We developed an idea, now we are trying to bring that idea to a client and the client is sold in that idea and buys into it and now we have a partnership with one of our clients to develop what I called after the election here in the United States, we were all so crushed and we had come up with this idea that as creatives we could publish posts, just political posters or any posters, that stand up for our values on this platform and we could open it to the masses.

And this will be available for anyone to download and we proposed this idea to ACLU and now together with ACLU, we are building design-based systems and partnership and that is amazing. When you have this idea, start up the idea, you don't know whether it will succeed, it's kind of throwing a dart and hoping that it lands smack in the center but you know, who knows where it's going to go and then it land and it lands smack in the center for a client to be excited and willing to spend the money and invest into it as well as much as you do.

[0:31:56.3] BOK: Yeah, that is a brilliant story. So looking forward to the future of Hyperakt, do you have a vision for where you want the agency to go?

[0:32:06.1] JZ: Yeah, I think our work today, I would say our work is still in the somewhat traditional sphere. We develop a brand strategy and brand identities and we apply them into the chill environments and what we see more and more of is that you are starting to collaborate and co-create with clients and sometimes, when you are in the position of co-creation, you need to walk into the room and not be prescribing solutions.

So, a lot of our work starts now slowly, starts now with asking the why, what is the problem and trying to help client ID it long before they arrive to a conclusion of what the final product must be. That is an exciting place for us because the end product could easily be a conference. It could be an experience, a digital experience. It could be a video, we don't know what the final end product would be and we are slightly shifting in how we are thinking about the outputs we will be producing.

We want to become more of a thought partners and ID for our clients and be producers of some of that work internally and some of the ideas that might come out of it might not be something that we can produce ourselves but we will have to find a network of creative talent to execute on this vision that the client sets forward and that is exciting. It is scary, it is exciting and then I feel

like it's the next chapter for us as a business where we are thought partners and creators together.

[0:33:49.0] BOK: And does that reflect – do you think in terms of your mission and the core of the social mission of your business? Does that reflect to any changes in the mission as you make this kind of business change?

[0:33:59.9] JZ: I think the mission stays pretty the same. The mission doesn't change. We are still doing the work we want to be doing for the kind of clients we want to be doing. The beliefs are not changing. We still believe that everyone deserves a fair chance and we will support organizations that continue working with people to address that equitability in the world. So none of this will change. I think the outputs that we will produce will change ever so slightly.

We will still be doing the branding aspect of it. We'll still be doing the digital because that is not going away. That is a necessary item that must have be across the board for everyone but in addition to that, there will be opportunities to experiment in other ways.

[0:34:46.2] BOK: Wow, yeah. Well this sounds really wonderful. It sounds like a really great both looking back and looking forward. It sounds like there is so much amazing stuff there.

[0:34:54.6] JZ: Thank you.

[0:34:55.9] BOK: And unfortunately we are running out of time, so I just wanted to ask one final question, for people who want to find out a little bit more about Hyperakt and the work that you do and the clients you work with a little bit more where should we point them?

[0:35:05.9] JZ: Oh sure, come to our website. It's Hyperakt.com, it's spelled with a K. So I'll spell it, HYPERAKT, Hyperakt.com.

[0:35:15.8] BOK: Thank you so much Julia, I really appreciate your time today.

[0:35:17.7] JZ: Thank you so much Barry.



[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:35:25.3] 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]