



SEASON 3

EPISODE 14

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. The podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals. Season 3 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]

[0:00:44.0] BOK: Welcome back to Season 3, this season has been a real personal journey for me. In my own agency, we’re struggling with many of the challenges described by amazing guests, it is so cool to feel a real connection when I hear their stories and their insights. It is both inspiring and encouraging to see what these folks are doing in our industry.

My guest this week is another amazing example of this, Ben is a cofounder of Munfort.io who are a digital communication social media and content marketing agency for people who change the world for good, based in London. Ben shares their story from freelancing to agency and how important their values were, not just in terms of the clients they focus on but also to ensuring the quality of the work itself.

At the end of our conversation, he also describes his vision for the future of Montfort and I really resonated personally with what he says. This season, we’ve hired from so many different types and sizes of agencies, each with their own story and vision for the future. I’d love to hear which of these resonated most with you. Please do reach out on twitter or by our

happyporchradio.com. I'm really keen to hear your questions and your feedback. But now, let's meet Ben.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:02:01.7] BM: Hello, I'm Ben Matthews, I am a digital marketing consultants, specializing in charities, not for profits, tech for good, healthcare, sustainability, anything basically that gives a positive change to the world and I run an agency called Montfort. Montfort setup four years ago when our team of seven, we do work for the likes of Amnesty International, Global Witness, The Green Party, Wildlife Trust, UN Refugee Agency, quite varied clients but all specialise in the charity setup.

[0:02:32.6] BOK: Very cool, thank you so much for joining me for Season 3 of the podcast. I wanted to start to talk a little bit about where Montfort came from and why you've sort of specialised or why you chose this as your focus.

[0:02:45.8] BM: Sure, there's two of us who run it, it is my wife and I and actually my wife is Jaz Cummins and we both started our freelances. So after doing agency world in London quite a bit, we decided to go it alone. Jaz has worked her way from PR agencies, through to big media agencies like Mindshare and eventually she landed a job at Amnesty, so she built her experience in agency but went across to an in-house charity role.

She's seen both sides of the coin and then, now as freelance and picked up UNHCR , UN Refugee Agencies, one of her first clients and she'd been working with them ever since which has been great. Same for me, I was freelance but doing a bit more varied work. So I'd work for a lot of tech PR agencies and digital agencies and then went freelance on my first client was London 2012 Olympics which was really good, brand have the portfolio.

From there, we both started specializing more and more in charities and then we got increasingly busy. People liked our work, we weren't having trouble keeping up with demands and we kept getting some really nice projects come our way but had to turn them away because we were too busy and it came to a straw about four years ago where we were getting these lovely clients approach us and we just decided, we're not going to turn anymore away.

We're going to start building I guess, from my freelancer bases into a more of a small agency, more of a studio I guess. We tried out a few contractors and had them working for us, just an individual and have them working for us, as an individual projects and we actually found that when you work with contractors, they are great at delivering that work but you don't get the continuity you perhaps need and it's a very kind of delivery based relationship. You know, you don't build a relationship or a team as such.

What we eventually started doing was hiring so we made offer as hire two years ago and we've made a hire every six months since then, and we have a nice team that we work with across multiple projects in a traditional agency manner and have a great culture, a great clients and we're very happy being a small boutique studio.

[0:04:53.0] BOK: Yeah, that's really awesome. One of the things that I find interesting about it is this sort of agency kind of happened but the focus on charities and however you define the good part, that happened first, was that a very conscious decision as you said, you sort of started to do work more and more with those clients and both of your freelance careers or is that something that just kind of happened and then that you kind of went with as it happened?

[0:05:16.2] BF: I think it was a bit of both but mainly plan for. I think both Jaz and I really like working with charities or not for profits or even for profit companies a that have some social impact built into them. We find that aligning our personal values with the values of our clients means that we can actually deliver higher quality work. The times where we have worked with purely profit based companies we find that we're not as motivated, perhaps the quality of the work is not as good and we generally are not as interested in the other projects.

When you run an agency or are a freelancer, the work is such a big part of your life that we feel that working with companies that align with your values is a lot better, I mean, you're going to enjoy your work a lot more. And in the long run, that's going to be later a much more happier business, much more sustainable business and I think that shows in the work we do. I think we do better work for our clients because of that as well.

[0:06:10.7] BOK: That's definitely a cool experience and that's a theme that keeps coming up in the conversations I'm having in the season, it's really interesting. Do you have a clear definition of like criteria for the people and the projects who you work on as a sort of follow up to that, are you saying no to other things?

[0:06:25.5] BF: Yeah, this is interesting. I mean, I'm not sure a lot of the other people you've spoken to said the same but when you first start out, you say, yes, a lot more things say no. You look at that monthly revenue and you need clients coming through the door in order to make that work. You tend to do take on projects that maybe aren't 100% in the way you'd like to be.

They do serve a purpose and that they give you revenue, give you experience, give you studies for example, they're worth taking on, as time's gone on for us more and more, we have a set list criteria where clients have to fit, otherwise we won't take one and it becomes a lot easier to say no when you have nice portfolio clients working with you month in, month out, and taking on extra projects is not a luxury but you know, you can take it or leave it, you can feel confident, saying, "No, this won't work for us."

That's also basically on the experience as well, for instance, we work with a few startups and entrepreneurs and they are sometimes difficult to work with, mainly because they don't have lots of budget which is an issue first of all because they can't afford much of your time but then their expectations are high as well. You know, these startup entrepreneurs are making amazing things happen on extremely limited resources, it's the whole definition of a startup. So when they come to you, you pay for an agency's time who are perhaps more expensive than the way they're used to before and also they expect a lot more out of an agency than sometimes an agency can deliver on the budget that you've been given.

We find that working with startups and entrepreneur is a bit more difficult so tend to shy away from those. That also becomes a time when you kind of do realize you need a minimum budget for a project in order for it to work. You know, if the budget's too low, then essentially, you gone put time into it or prioritise it enough and the client might not value enough either or see the value out of the expect. We set a minimum criteria for budget as well and then generally.

The person that we're going to be working with, you know, you might be a great time on this with a big name that we really want to work for but if the person sitting opposite the table and person to work with isn't nice or isn't great to work with then we can quite easily say no to that as well. You generally get that sense from them as you start having those initial calls.

I think they are our main criteria and we form them over the years just based on experience and now we're in a really good place where we can start to strictly enforce that and means again, we're taking on great clients, doing great work and our team's really happy.

[0:08:56.6] BOK: You touched on a couple of things which I think are fundamental, actually, I'm sort of, understanding the budget and understanding the type of client, how different is that decision making process for you when you're also trying to – as you described, align your values.

[0:09:09.7] BM: I think you take it on a case by case basis. Depending on what project comes forward, we look at it and sometimes it's immediately obvious it's not the right fit, sometimes it's the wrong fit and then the other times, you generally try and get on the call with the client, talk thorough the brief, talk through what they're trying to get out of the projects and then just by literally connecting on the human level, just speaking to them, you can't get a better understanding about what it's going to be like and I think when we get those situations where we're not sure.

We'll definitely just have to make a call on a case by case basis. It's worked so far and generally, the feeling you get at the start of the project is generally right that kind of gut filled. It's good to trust that.

[0:09:51.1] BOK: One of the other things that I think that's segues neatly into, one of the other things that I've been asking, most of the guests in the season is how often are – in the early days, even, did you see a conflict between a sort of values much in part and the impact part and needing to be commercially, as you described, paying the bills that month and having sustained bills, maybe for it?

[0:10:11.5] BM: Yeah, because we're an agency and we do digital marketing for people the impact is normally on the client side, that will be demonstrating the impact to funders and supporters. For us, we can demonstrate impact in a normal digital marketing sense so traffic conversions, leads, whatever, or donations, whatever the client wants. But in terms of demonstrating social impacts because we're a bit removed from that, we don't really look into ourselves. I guess less of an issue for us.

Yeah, in terms of the early days of aligning our values and paying the bills, you know, we didn't have pure nonprofit or total impact based clients, we did have some commercial, for profit clients, who are great to work with and we did good work for them. We put a lot into it because we like those companies but I wouldn't say that we would always take those on from now on.

Now we're in the more comfortable position. We're looking much more out the kind of purpose led organisations. And you know for other people just starting out, I would not expect or say, don't expect to just take on those dream clients straight away. This is not going to happen. You know, you're not established. You might have to do some work that you don't always agree with or the clients that you're not 100% happy with but that's a great urgency to learn to check what works and you can try new stuff out and then when you do get those dream clients come your way, or you're better prepared, you know what your strengths are, you know how to deliver projects better, you generally are in a much more strong position to deliver excellent work to those clients that you really like.

Then it snowballs from there, you keep getting good projects through the door.

[0:11:46.1] BOK: Has your own definition of the dream client changed over that time period as the agency has matured?

[0:11:52.0] BM: Yeah, Jaz is my co-director, is great established in a list of dream clients. I think she's very clear about who she likes to work for and what she wants. I'm less clear, I was more happy to just see what comes our way really and see what comes in. But I am well aware that having a list of clients that you'd love to work for is a really strong motivator and gives you focus and even makes you kind of think about how to reach out to that client.

How to build a relationship, how to initiate that project with them. Myself, I need to think more about my personal criteria, what other kind of projects I love, what do I – who do I want to work for and I think, that's a bit of a luxury position to be in if you can work those people but it really help a list of dream clients, maybe after this recording, I'll go away and I'm up for that dream list.

[0:12:41.5] BOK: Just going back a little bit to the journey you described there so you started to build up momentum with the freelance stuff and you've realized that you would like to do more work than you have the capacity to do. The decision then to setup an agency or did you decide to setup an agency and was a very sort of switch decision like that, was it a gradual process, with the contracting thing where you're trying a different model, what was that part of the journey like?

[0:13:05.3] BM: It's definitely been organic growth, it hasn't been designed as a formal agency from the start. When we realized we were too busy as free lancers but wanted to keep on this projects, we took one person initially, they took a lot of the overflow work that we had on, maybe a bit more of the past where you need less experience and that helps us understand best with contractors or other freelancers, how best to manage a small team and that went really well because obviously we hired again.

About six months later, we got a second team member and again, then, the dynamic changed a bit more. Rather than just Jaz and I briefing in this one freelancer, working with her, we then had a place where we were working different project teams, you know, two of us might be working on this projects and the other two will be working on other projects, we didn't cross. Then you get into things like this client activity going on that you're not aware of, things like knowledge sharing comes into play, how do you make the most efficient use of processes across each projects, even though you're not necessarily working on that.

I guess building a bit of a culture, a bit of team building culture for the agency as it were. Who are Montfort, what do we stand for, what are our values, what our processes and what do we look for in the people we work with. That all started to have to find as well. I imagine if we formally started out an agency and have that in mind from the beginning, you might well have this, all these kind of things nailed down as you go or at least you're well aware that you need

them. For us growing organically, we've realized that we need to kind of solidify those aspects of our company.

Now we're up to six, seven people, whenever we hire someone, we just hired someone a couple of weeks ago, we onboard in a much stronger way, we know a lot more about what we stand for. We know a lot more about what we want from our employees and once they're onboarded, we can get them up to speed a little quicker, get them to want to do client accounts and cancel a lot quicker and generally create a much more stronger work in environment that if people who work with us.

[0:15:09.9] BOK: What was the toughest part for that process of going from freelance to building the team structure?

[0:15:15.1] BM: For me, I can't speak to Jaz but for me, it's remembering that your work doesn't always come first, you know, we have to make sure that our teams knew what they were doing, have enough to do and we're clear on the kind of quality and process that we wanted.

It's making sure that the accounts are running well that all tasks are noted down. We use Asana for our task management and just making sure that all kinds of project briefs and tasks go into there. Yeah, and just generally making sure that the people we're bringing on, kind of, understands what Jaz and I see or what we envisioned for the agency and making sure that their work meets that as well and that they align with what we want as well.

I think we just interviewed recently as I said and the people who stood out, we could really see aligned with who we are and the way we work and it got a lot easier to hire people then. When you have a solid understanding of who you are and it gets a lot easier to move higher and actually do for clients.

[0:16:14.4] BOK: How important for that hiring process is the social value like a match about our values?

[0:16:19.7] BM: I think it's quite natural, well, quite easy for people to say that they like charities and there's a bit more nuance in that though, so you can say that you like charities but not

necessarily understand how digital works or anything outside of charities. You know, you could be just focused on fund raising but a lot of work we do is around, kind of stake holder engagement, influence in change at high level, especially in the sustainability area. It's not enough just to say you like charities and you've done a fun run, there's a lot more to it and our clients demand that as well.

You know, one of our recent client testimonies that they got, they said, they just love the way we understood the issues that their sector was facing. You know, it's not just liking charities, you need to understand a lot more wider than that about how impact is created.

[0:17:06.3] BOK: Yeah, I can see how that is incredibly powerful and during that interviewing or the selection process when you're, as you've said, you've done it six or seven times now at least, do you have a particular process or way that you find that identify and select and choose these people?

[0:17:19.7] BM: Yeah well we quite traditionally just ask for a CV and a covering letter and in there, we normally ask for one or two questions that help them stand out a bit. So for example, we ask them why you want to work with us, quite simply, if they show passion and show interest or have actually bothered to read our website if it comes immediately obvious. And then we are soon to point out a few other organisations is that they like their marketing, in terms of why and give you some examples and that shows us that they're aware of the industry, what's going on what is kind of best in class work and that initial stage actually filters out a lot of the candidates.

Because you'll be amazed at how many people have cover letters or don't customise them to the agency that they are applying for or when we have somebody who wants to work with us it's, "I love charities, I want the job." And that's not enough to stand out these days and immediately if you come across as generic or not really interested in what we do then you're gone straight away. From there, we move to Skype calls. So Skype is just a great way and we do it on video as well because we find that a lot of our course we've done with clients some video conferencing. We find that you can get a really good grasp of someone's manner, professionalism, friendliness by having a video call with them because that's one of the main ways we communicate with clients. It is important for us to see that, how they communicate

there. Then once we got down to the final two, we'll go for coffee, meet them face to face. They can ask any questions they want and then make a decision about hiring.

So it's a fairly straight forward process I think, running a small agency so we need to keep that relatively streamlined. And I think we got a good process. So the last time we did it from the close to the application deadline to making the offer and hiring someone I think was two weeks. It might have been a bit quicker than that. So you know we're good at getting that done now and I think it's important for an agency where just small and every team member has a great impact on the agency. You know they are delivering a lot of the work and really helping us shape what we do. It is important to get that right and I think so far we have.

[0:19:20.3] BOK: I was laughing when you were talking about how few people or how many people fall on that first hurdle with the terrible cover letter or generic statement of that.

[0:19:28.5] BM: Oh it's terrible, it's so bad. I mean everyone must have said to you, customise it and it's amazing how many people don't still.

[0:19:37.1] BOK: It's just mind blowing. Whole other conversation there I think.

One of the other things that I want to talk about because I'm looking at your site, there's some really cool clients you've worked with and projects you've worked on. I wanted to get you to maybe chose one or two of your favorites and just talk a little bit about what was it like working on that and especially earlier what you said about, because you're kind of these things you care about and the area of your values, I am really interested to see how that if you can talk a little bit about how that sort of comes out with a specific example.

[0:20:05.2] BM: Yeah, one project we finished this whole Christmas and we were working again with them this year is called The Great Get Together and it's an event ran by the Jo Cox Foundation. So Jo Cox is the labor MP, who was murdered back in 2016 and out of that tragedy a foundation was created to continue the work that she believed in. So The Great Get Together is one of those initiatives and basically it started as a series of street parties across the UK. Where communities could come together and basically have a day of fun, eating, drinking, sharing meals, stories, meeting their neighbours.

And over nine million people took part last year and we weren't actually involved in that campaign but we got involved in the Christmas campaign which was designed to be a way of keeping the energy going between the summer events. So they are running another one this year and it's a summer event but they wanted to do a Christmas campaign as well.

So we got involved back in September 2017 and we're basically looking at the whole digital aspect of the campaign from the website, through the email marketing, social media and video. And that was a fantastic campaign to be involved in. Both with the cause they had a lot of learnings from the summer campaign but the Christmas one was the first time they would do this and there are lots of other challenges there.

So for example in the summer one, you had nice weather. You had a bit of momentum from people feeling energised by this being the first one and obviously great uptake on it. Nine million people is amazing in the UK. So Christmas being a lot colder, darker and obviously a lot noisier with other activities going on around Christmas, it was obviously going to be a lot more difficult and not match the same scale but we came up with a nice campaign called Minced Pie Moments.

Which is the idea of sharing of minced pies with your neighbours and creating shared moments through that which was a lovely way to kind of bring people together over the Christmas period. So we updated the website, re-skinned it, redesigned it for the Christmas campaign. We created the email marketing program. We were sending out regular emails for them. Social media, we came up with lots of different activities, Facebook Lives, also Twitter chats and things like that. To make sure that social media was well used.

And then as we came down towards the Christmas weekend could we find out how to focus point across Christmas itself and the photos and videos and stories of people across the UK, taking part in Minced Pie Moments by the site came flooding in. So we were really pleased of both the interest and the energy and I guess the impact that we made over this Christmas Get Together and working with the client was brilliant as well.

And so, I think the reason I pick this one out is because it's quite recent but also it was an end to end campaign for us. You know it's four months of starting from scratch, from the very beginning, coming up with the idea, coming out with concepts, planning the four month campaign, delivering in on our areas where it's strong and then it all came together nicely at Christmas with lots of people across the UK taking part.

And then we just published the case of it in our website. We had a great wrap up meeting with the client and we are going to be working with them again for the summer campaign this year. And I think The Great Get Together [inaudible] encapsulates all we've been working towards and we had a great team, a great client, really believed in the work that they were doing, really happy for the work we did for them. And it shows both in the results we've got and that the client wants to carry on working with us.

[0:23:30.0] BOK: And as you say something that is sort of not just a story of a successful campaign but something that you are obviously are interested in and passionate and care about as well, some kind of closing the full circle.

So what about the future? What's next for you and for Montfort?

[0:23:45.6] BM: We are at a stage now where we are very happy with the work that we're doing and the team that we've got and I've been talking to Jaz a lot about this and I think we are happy at the stage we are.

I think a lot of agencies are pressured when they start to see success that they want to keep growing and replicate that success but I think we both feel that when you try to force growth as an agency, things change. You are less involved, less in control and I think people, perhaps see it more as a job rather than something that's intricate to their lives and that they value.

So I think what we are going to do is stay as we are now. We got a great team, we're doing good work. I don't think we want that pressure of growing it and having the pressure of having lots of employees to make sure that we are give them enough work to bringing in enough work in for.

So I think what we are going to see is maybe a better improvement on our processes, maybe documentation and kind of knowledge sharing will improve. We can do more internal training and generally just improve, make sure the work that we do for our clients is improving all the time and continue delivering good work. And I think as long as we keep doing that, there will always be work for us and there's no need to keep growing to deliver profits.

Just not what we are interested in, we want to have a nice life and earn enough for that but yeah, not have that pressure to grow. I think that is a good decision for us and I think we'll look back and we'll be glad that we didn't force ourselves to grow into a medium size agency.

[0:25:10.6] BOK: Do you think a part of that decision to stay at this size is driven by that personal, "That this is what I want, this is the size of the team I'm comfortable and everything." or is it also connected to could it be a challenge to growing the agency but keeping the values aspect, the purpose of that aspect?

[0:25:27.3] BM: Yeah, absolutely and I think the more you grow the more pressure you have to keep those new clients coming in and I think you would be forced to take on clients that are outside of what you believe in and what those values are. I won't say that is a bad thing for other agencies as well. I would say for us, we deliver the best work we do when we believe in the client's work as well and for that to happen, we need to make sure that who we're comfortable with or the size we are and we're comfortable with the projects we're taking on.

So you know, I don't think we are going to regret it. I don't think we're going to look back in five years, 10 years' time and go, "I really wish we worked twice as hard as we're doing now to bringing in those new projects." Because we get to finish at 6:00, we get to have our weekends and we get to enjoy the work we do. I think that is a privilege, you know we work hard to get to this position. So I understand that not everyone has that. Yeah, why not keep it going for as long as you can?

[0:26:17.9] BOK: It also sounds like saying personally connectives is what you meant at the start about the high quality of the work as well. Not wanting to just turn things out or factor things up?

[0:26:27.1] BM: Yeah and then I realize when agencies grow, the founder owner is the rock, obviously quite involved in the agency work from the beginning. As you grow, you're meant to delegate a bit more and delegate to more junior people I guess and you turn into a kind of manager at the business and a new business person. I still enjoy the work and adjust and enjoys the work. We still enjoy working with client's day in and day out.

We still enjoy learning new tools now, like digital marketing has changed all the time. We still enjoy it so we are happy to get involved and keep involved. You know, we run the business as well. We got our finances in order and employees are paid well and we've got HR and finance and all the rest of the sorted. So it's not like because we're owner, founder-owners that not everything is set up correctly, it is. So it means we can get involved with the work and enjoy it and not worry about driving as much profit as possible.

[0:27:16.6] BOK: Brilliant, well unfortunately we're running out of time. So I really just wanted to say a huge thank you that I really appreciate sharing, coming on the show and sharing all of that.

[0:27:25.3] BM: Thank you Barry that was great. It's nice to speak about ourselves a bit, so busy doing the client work. It's nice to take a step back and look back at what we've achieved and you know, it's nice. Thanks.

[0:27:33.9] BOK: And just to finish this off, for our listeners who want to find out a little bit more about yourself and about Montfort work where can we direct them?

[0:27:38.8] BM: So we're at montfort.io. That's our website, it's the same on Twitter. We're @montfort.io and you can email me if you want. I'm ben@montefort.io.

[0:27:52.0] BOK: Brilliant, thanks again Ben.

[0:27:53.2] BM: Cool, thanks Barry. Cheers.

[END OF INTERVIEW]



[0:28:01.0] 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]