**Episode 62: Answering the Critical Consulting Question: To Niche or Not to Niche—with Andrea Bailey-Brown**

Deb Zahn: I want to welcome you to this episode of the Craft of Consulting Podcast. In this show, we're going to go through the nitty-gritty details that you're going to need to make a really important decision about your consulting business. And that is, should you have a very specific niche or narrow scope that you do and that you become known for within your market? And luckily, I have Andrea Bailey-Brown on this episode. She’s going to talk about her process and how she came to the decision to focus on a niche.

And this is one of the most important decisions you need to make as a consultant, and the earlier you make it the better. So she is very kind to share her process. She is someone who today consults with folks who are interested in developing franchises and helps them figure out how to maximize profits, but she has a really diverse business background. So she could have gone out to market with a whole bunch of different offerings, and instead, she chose through a very deliberate process to focus on one aspect of it. She's going to talk about how she did it and she's going to talk about why she did it.

So this should help you answer that question and is going to help you go out into your market much more successfully. So let's get started. I want to welcome to the show today Andrea Bailey-Brown. Andrea, thanks so much for joining me.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Thank you, Deb, it's great to be here.

Deb Zahn: So let's start off. Tell my listeners what you do.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Well, I am a business profit and franchise consultant. I help franchise owners increase sales and double profits so that they can really sleep well at night and not worry about their bottom line so much. And it's even more important right now, so that's what I do.

Deb Zahn: If you can help people sleep at night, that's a good thing. And how did you become a consultant?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Well, my journey to consulting has been a very long one. A very interesting journey, actually. So I started out as a teacher and then I went into being an entrepreneur. And while I was an entrepreneur, I realized that there's so much more I wanted to do. So once I'm a franchise owner, actually a multi-franchise owner as well as I'm a consultant.

So when I was working with my franchises, I'd often get lots of questions from other people saying, “How did you get into franchising? How did you start your business?” And when I made a decision to go and do my MBA. While I was there, I wanted to specialize in management consulting. And in doing so, I decided to work on a project and just had a vision that it was time to use all this knowledge I have so that I can serve other people. So that's how I really got into consulting.

Deb Zahn: That's great. I've heard that before. You do something really, really well, and then other people notice and start asking you how. And then, soon enough, you're a consultant. That's great.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yes, absolutely.

Deb Zahn: And how did you get your first client?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Well, I got my first client while I was in business school. And in business school, you have to work on an organizational management project, basically called the OMP. It was similar to a thesis. I chose my topic and area to solve, which was social media within a franchise. And so while I was working on it, I had so many ideas, so much research, and I got permission from the university to do that research on my own franchise that I'm in. And that is the [GCD 00:04:13] brand.

So I did the project. But once I was done, I realized there were so many avenues there. I went back to the corporate to present it to them and said, "I see a great opportunity here for us to incorporate some of these." And surprisingly, they said yes. And my first client was with 27 franchises creating social media for them.

Deb Zahn: Wow, as a first client, that's pretty good. That's pretty huge. I love that. So we had talked previously, and we said today we wanted to delve into something that is a really critical question for all consultants. It happens a lot at the beginning, and then I find it also happens as you start to get into consulting, which is deciding what your focus and your scope is going to be as a consultant. And I know that you have expertise beyond franchise work that you do. You have a really broad business background. So how does that question of: Do you focus? Do you narrow? Do you broaden? How does that show up for you?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: That's a really great question, Deb. And it may be one of the most important questions as you begin and as you continue to grow your consulting business. And for me, it's about doing some inner research on yourself and what you like to do and what you enjoy. And it does start out pretty broad. I would say in the beginning, and then you have to just sit down and do an inventory or not a fun word, like autopsy on yourself. On your likes and your dislikes, and who do you like to work with and what gets you excited.

And in the beginning, especially if your background say was as broad as mine, where I specialize in the franchising space. As you said, in our franchises, we grew in double profits. But you can double profits or double sales and increase profits in any industry. Everybody wants that. I have a vast background in direct sales.

And also I've done many things with, say, facilitating. So there are so many different things, and I think that's the beauty of it is that we have to own our own story and start figuring out all the places you have been and not really just push one away and say that one doesn't matter.

So I would really encourage people to sit down and I call it also a SWOT analysis. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What do you love and what really lights you up? And I believe this journey is an internal journey as well, to figure out and get to the heart of what you like to do and what you love, and then start making the decisions that way.

Deb Zahn: And what are the advantages or disadvantages of either staying broad? So, as you said, the skills that you have are applicable to so many different industries. So you could stay broad or you could narrow and say, here's what I do specifically for the franchise industry. Sort of when you do that inventory and you think about your process. How do you weigh the advantages and disadvantages of either approach?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Wow, you are great. You're on it today, Deb.

Deb Zahn: I love this stuff.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yeah, you are bringing it. So the big word right now is niching down, right? I'm finding that no matter where you are, it's about niching. And even in education, I started out as a teacher. It's like, what is going to be your major? What's going to be your minor? And helping you decide what zones to go in.

In consulting, there's no one there knocking on your door, saying, "What's your major. What's your minor? Make a decision by the end of year." So I think you have to make that decision, are you going to niche down? If you were so clear on it, and I've seen people where they're coming out of, say the oil and gas industry, so they can know exactly where they're going to go. They used to work in that industry. They have clients there. It's just a natural progression, right? It's well, let's just carry on with what I know.

So if you were clear on it and you're already working in a special niche, I say, continue on. Go for it. And when you have two more things to choose from, so let's say you've been in four industries, really love different things, and the world is telling you niche, niche, niche. You have to decide, does that feel good for your soul? And does that work well for you? Because you could niche and then you're feeling like you're missing out on something.

And I'm personally not against working with different clients, let's say in the oil and gas, and you're working with clients in the healthcare and you're working with people in franchising. And sometimes, in the end, you'll start to realize whenever you're in this one industry, it doesn't feel right. The clients are a little bit harder. You have to really build up your gumption to get going.

So in picking, then I would just say, where are you finding also, the market will tell you. Because people will be coming to you and saying, "Hey, I need help with franchising." Even though you're saying, “I'm going to work within the hospital with direct sales,” It may not be the case. I think your clients will also help you decide where to really focus, and where all the business is coming from.

Deb Zahn: What I love about your answer is it's not from a place of should, should, should. It's from a place of want and desire and both you and potential clients. Because the truth is that there are some people who are broad as consultants and they stay broad. I had one guest whose niche is people instead of an industry. And what that let her do is, anywhere there are people...I was going to say, they seem to be everywhere. That's not true today, but she can go into any industry because she works with the people side of the business, Kim Wilkinson. And I think that was a great approach because that's what she cared about.

I'm in healthcare, and when I started, healthcare is huge. It's so many different things that when you start, it can almost feel paralyzing because if you're going to go do marketing, go do business development or anything that actually gets clients in the door, how do you know where to start? And that's, I think, a big question for new consultants.

So when you first started off, given that you have this incredible wealth of experience that transcends a particular niche, how did you start to do marketing or describe yourself in such a way that it made sense to potential clients?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: I worked with a couple of different coaches that are power coaches in their industry in the beginning to help me figure this out. Because one of my gifts is knowing what I don't know and knowing when I need help. And sometimes I like to work with coaches and our consultants to help me get to where I need to get to faster. And I'm about the speed, just getting there so you can get on with the work that you're meant to do.

And so I worked with, I give credit to Lisa Larter. She's someone that has been helpful to me in putting that messaging out and working through it. So that's one of the things that I've done in the process. And so the work has to be on both sides. You can't just rely on your coach to give it all to you. You have to sit back with it and really say, “Is this right? Is this true? Does this make sense for me?” So you might get a suggestion where I might say, “Deb, healthcare is good. But your thing, you shouldn't just work with podcasting.” And you're like, “Is that really true?”  
  
So you also have to be doing the work on both sides. So that's one of the things that I've done is working with someone just to help me figure out all of my zone. I call it the zone of genius and all the things that I'm really good at. Because you also have to say, even though I know about something, say about podcasting, do I know enough to really want to teach it and help people and coach them through it? Or do I just know enough to be able to make recommendations, to say, if you want to start a podcast, I'd recommend this and this?

So sometimes I think where we get thrown off is because we know something about the area, we decide to specialize in it. And you have to really say, “Am I just a generalist where I know enough, but do I really want to get up every day and be working on these projects with my clients all the time?” So asking those internal questions.

Deb Zahn: And I like that because that takes what you want to do in your desire into the service piece of it. Which is, are you going to be of the best service to clients by doing X versus doing Y? Because I think you're exactly right. You can do a whole bunch of things, but what truly is your magic? What do you do better than anybody else? It lights you on fire. I love that expression that you use. And then that can be your niche.

So I love that you mix all of those things in because if your brand is excellence and that's the experience you want to bring to all of your clients and you pick things that you kind of sort of know about, then excellence is going to go out the window.

So what do you do if you have someone come to you and say, "OK, I know you do that whole franchise thing, but I know you're so good at this. Can you help me with this?" And it has nothing to do with the area where you're describing as your expertise. What would you do?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: There are two things I ask myself. Am I the right person to help them with this? Or do I outsource that and work with someone else on that project where you can team up and where you have...Some people call it affiliate or JV, all the different names for it. But I think you can make joint associations or agreements with other people to say, if I bring a client in, then this is how we work on it together, and someone else takes the lead on it.

So I have to also look to see, should I be the lead on that? And then the second part of it is where if you're finding a lot of people coming to you and asking you about that one thing, then you may now have to pay attention.

So for example, in my franchise business, we specialize in oil change. But we would have so many customers calling us and saying, "Hey, do you rotate tires?" And then we started to make a note, is this a one-off person or is this a consistent thing? And what we realized was it was consistent.

Every season because we are here in Canada with our winters, we get people wanting to change to winter tires, and then it would happen to get into spring. So the calls kept coming and we had to finally decide based on the number of calls and the number of interest, it was time for us to add another area for revenue. And it's been very lucrative to us because we listened to our customers, right?

So we didn't start off wanting to do that, and that's just one example. I think we can use the same thing in our consulting business to say, "Hey, people have been asking me about the specialty and maybe they're seeing something that I really wasn’t willing to focus on, but it does make sense. And if it aligns with me and I feel like, yes, I can do this too, I can help you with that. Then I'd be willing to move to that and add that to what I'm doing."

Deb Zahn: That's great. And obviously as we record this and when it airs, we're in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Has that changed your approach at all to how you're thinking about what your niche is, and the type of offerings that you make available to clients?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yeah, that's also great, Deb. I think with COVID right now, it has reinforced for me, my area of specialty, which is profitability. So many businesses are closing and people are not able to pay their rent and stay afloat. And I believe it was mainly because their businesses were not very profitable and some people were not willing to look at that. And I think because when times are good, it's easier for us to not be as good. We can make mistakes and it gets covered up.

So what I've found is once COVID started around March to where we're at now, more people are listening to my message. And I've been doing Facebook lives. I did them more often. And I was getting more messages of people that are interested, wanting to have a talk to find out what they can actually do to keep their businesses afloat.

So I feel my message have been stronger and because I can work from anywhere, I've not had to really change my messages. Maybe reinforce why we need to look at our profits. Why we need to look at sales. Why we need to have a plan for profit, and not just hope it happens because in times like this, a lot of people can be caught off guard.

Deb Zahn: That's right. And no different for consultants, right? So we could take that and that lesson could apply to consultants because I think the ones that were dealing with feast or famine cycle constantly, and ultimately, if you have a strong consulting business, there is no feast or famine. There's a steady stream. You have a lot of referred business. You have a lot of repeat business. But the folks who really hadn't built a solid business model for how they operate as consultants, I think also got thrown off guard and are now trying to figure out the profitability piece. Is there any advice that you would give other consultants who are stuck in the same cycles that you would see some of the businesses you work with?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yes, I would. I think the main one is, have a plan for profit. So there are two things that happened. When I went back to business school, I'd always done everything. I started businesses, so maybe I started five different businesses or different industries. And with business school, I really went back for the accounting piece.

And the reason is, I no longer wanted to sit in a room with my accountant at the year when we opened up the business financials. I was just sitting there acting as if I knew what he was talking about. It's like, OK, of course, I get it. And it's so official you're in these fancy boardrooms, and we were running like three businesses at that time. And, of course, everyone understands top line and bottom line, but somewhere in between you needed to understand what was really going on. What was the blood work of that business?

So that was my main motivation to go back to business school. And I just realized that people...We started to talk about terms like breakeven and how all of that comes together. Many business owners and consultants, you get up with just saying, this is what we make this month. And it happens to just without yourself, right? It's like, oh, this is what we made this month, now what?

Deb Zahn: Magical.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Magically and if make $100,000, oh great. If we only make $20, oh, great. And there's really no plan going into it to say, “What do I want to make this month? What should this business bring in this month, and what can we do to reach these targets?” Versus once the month is over, you look to say, "Oh, we brought in this, wow, isn't that great?" And then you have this feast or famine cycle.

So I think the word I'd use is intentional profit. And being more intentional about your business and setting targets, and that's where doing things like a business plan comes in. Many people don't do those anymore. You just get up, you start your business and we'll just see what happens. But saying, we would like to bring in $100,000 this year. And will that come from 10 clients paying us $10,000, or will it come from...What is the pathway to this profit and how many ways are we going to do this? So I think that's what I would say, being intentional about your profit.

Deb Zahn: That's right. And for consultants who just want to do the work because that's why they got into consulting. They forget they're also the CEO of their consulting company. Even if you're in a firm, you're a CEO of your practice. And being intentional means you're going to use your time more wisely.

So, how would you figure out who to market to, who to do outreach to, if you didn't do the math and say, "I think the path to that profitability is for engagements at this amount, this duration and all of those details. And then you're not going to go look for the $5,000 client, the $5,000, the $6,000 because then you have to have a lot of them. And I love that idea of being intentional with what you want your profit to be and not a faith-based initiative of well, let's just see how it goes.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: I like that. See what happens.

Deb Zahn: So if you're a consultant and you pick what your niche is or what your focus is going to be. And hopefully, you're going to get some input from the market. But ultimately how do you know it's the right choice, and what if it isn't?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: I really just think that I finally had to give up the whole needing to pick the right thing and just realizing that when you're in it at that moment, it can be right. And it's not a marriage where this is it, you're bound forever. And even then, you can divorce an idea that is wrong for you. So I just feel that there are times...I know that happened for me, where I was just wanting to make the right decision for the right thing. And then, that could have you not really moving forward. And I really eventually had to let it go and say, “I can't really make a wrong decision because I'm going to learn something from each path, from each customer or client that I work with, and that's going to lead me to where I actually need to be.”

And I believe it's totally OK if you want to test out three or four different things at the same time. So someone comes to you for...In my case, I'm an expert in franchising. I'm also an expert in the direct sales space because I spent about 20 years in that space. And some of these years, they overlap. And then I've spent time in education and I feel that our clients will come from different places because of our background and our network.

And so I believe it's OK to work into...If you have the bandwidth, I think master keyword, if you have the bandwidth to work in two or three different zones, and then you can say, “I'm just finding this is more where I want to spend my time. And the clients in this industry, they pay well, they respond right away. It's not too much, You're not chasing people.”

So you can ask yourself all of those things and then test it out and then finally say, "You know what? This is where I'm going to state my claim." And once you're firmly planted in that, then you will find that it makes it a lot easier for you when other things come. It doesn't mean you may not get the one-off clients. I don't think anything is totally off as long as it's in your specialty. So I just think you have to test it out and then feel free to pick one area if you're not ready to niche down.

Deb Zahn: Right. And that experimentation is different than throwing spaghetti on a wall. It truly is. And then you pay attention to the result and you adjust. And then you maybe tweak your experiment a little bit and then you adjust, so it's not a spectator sport. It is truly continually engaging with your business. So I love that approach.

And then how would you also say, if somebody thinks this is what really lights me on fire, this is what I know I'm good at. Because I have past experiences that tell me it's right. But they're not getting any traction. And they're just not getting the clients in the door. What work, whether it's internal or external work, would you encourage them to do so that they can really get a focus and a scope that is not just a fit for them, but also for their market?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yeah, we're going into the deep work, right?

Deb Zahn: Oh yeah. This is the Jedi stuff.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: It's about how soon do you pivot. Because that's the key word out there right now, which is pivot and leave what you're doing. I'm the person that I really sit with things. I think about it to make the right decision versus strictly pivoting from one place to the next. And so you have to see, how long have you been working on this side of things, or you've chosen an area you've been working on and you're not seeing anything? And telling the truth to yourself. Have I really been working on it? I mean, really focused or I try every so often and then I stop and then I start over again?

And sometimes I know we've all been kind of guilty of that when we can't really decide what to do, so you have to check to see, “How much time have I spent on it? Is my messaging clear?” Because sometimes we want to ditch something and we really haven't put all the work into it and you have to just say, “Is it the messaging? Is it me? Is it the area?” And so there's a whole list of questions that you have to really ask before you throw it away. Make sure there's no stones left unturned that you have any question about the process.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Because if it's you or if it's what you're doing and you pivot, you're still you. And you're still going to do what you do in which case you replicate that problem. But now you've pivoted.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Exactly. Yes, you're right. And sometimes people just give up too soon when they're at the one yard line. You're closer to a breakthrough. And I really think the frustration, the not being clear, the not knowing it just means you're closer to a breakthrough. It means that you're really doing something. You're working on your craft, plug for the Craft of Consulting.

Deb Zahn: Thank you very much. Duly noted!

Andrea Bailey-Brown: You're really working on that craft and you just have to look to see. And that's where working with someone that's a specialist can help you to see what you're seeing. Because the way sounds to you maybe different from the way other people see it and the way it sounds to them. And maybe just tweaking's what you need. Not throwing out the whole process.

Deb Zahn: That's right because I have given coaching to folks before who were truly experts in what they were talking about. They were actually quite good. They had a clear message, but their version of outreach was sending an email. And then if they didn't get an answer, they've made decisions about why. Like they built a whole case about why that person was repelled by them or some worst version of reality.

And then they don't do the actual follow up. And it could just be a small thing like that. People get busy. They don't notice their email. Is there another way you can reach out? That type of problem solving mixed with self reflection—that’s critical for any successful business owner and especially consultants.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yes. I think you really hit the nail on the head there, Deb, when you talked about...I think at the end of it all, is we're all marketers. You have to know how to put your product out there. And then consulting, we're not like Starbucks where you can just put your shingle up where you build a building. Put the sign and people show up. And if you're working from home or in a smaller office and you don't have that big name, then you have to figure out how to market yourself and the products that you sell. And at the end of it all, I believe everything we do, it's all about sales. We must really learn the art of selling, and that's one of the things through direct sales that I learned a lot about. It's how do we follow up with people? And the fortune is in the follow up. The outreach. And we're now playing in a different game now where it's a social media world, right? And how do we use that to our benefit?

Deb Zahn: That's wonderful. Now, if you had a professional who you knew and liked, and they said, "Hey, I'm thinking of being a consultant." What would you tell them to do first? Before they hang up their shingle, what would be the first thing you tell them to do?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: I would definitely say start figuring out the clients you're going to serve, the area you want to work in, and how do you plan to get clients? How do you plan to market yourself and your services so people know that you exist and that they know about you? So, that's the first thing I would say you should do.

Deb Zahn: That's right. And that's where to come full circle. We get to the why having a focus or a niche or having a scope that is clear and coherent helps with sales because otherwise, what are you going to do? You're going to show up and say, I know how to do stuff? It's like, yeah, you'll do that one. That's wonderful.

So let me ask you this, this last question and is obviously, this is always important, but particularly during COVID, I think even more so. How do you find that you bring balance to your life? However you define that?

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Balance for me starts off with my spiritual work. So, that's the most important thing. So I start off every day and I have a reading or a message. And I just work on with the virtue I need to practice for the days and in a way for me to show up and how do I need to serve? And I ask myself certain questions like, “Why am I here today?” “Who am I here to serve?” So those are some of the things that I actually start off by spending time with, and that I write in my gratitude journal. It's the five-minute journal, and it's just quick. Three things you're grateful for. What you expect for the day. So I'll do some sort of writing. And the one thing that I really love the most that's been changing for me is the Artist's Way.

Deb Zahn: I love that.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Yes, the morning messages and the morning jot writing. So I just feel like you have to get it all first and set an intention for your day. And of course, I also like to exercise. So it's an hour of walk or exercising in the basement. So just really start off that...Before I do anything else and start reading emails, getting on, doing all of that, I set my intention and start there first. And then when everything comes to me during the day, I feel like I've already done the most important work. So that's how I keep my balance.

Deb Zahn: Wow. You've got it figured out, I love that. Well, Andrea, thank you so much for joining me today. This has been wonderful.

Andrea Bailey-Brown: Deb, this has been a pleasure and I look forward to talking more.

Deb Zahn: Absolutely.   
  
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