CTRL+CLICK CAST #87

Developing Long-Term Client Relationships with Susan Snipes

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Preview: I would love to have more long-term client so that maybe it's closer to 80%, 75 or 80%. However, I like the idea of having that spot open for a short-term project, and yes, something fresh, things change with clients or we change where we're not a good fit for them anymore.

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Lea Alcantara: From Bright Umbrella, this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today we are talking about long-term client relationships with Susan Snipes. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

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images, videos and professional texts, and the best part is you can do all on your own, so what are you waiting for?

Emily Lewis: Today we are talking about a subject dear to our hearts, client relationships, specifically long-term client relationships, and joining us is Susan Snipes who is founder and president of Q Digital Studio, a web design and development shop in Denver, Colorado. She used to do lots of design and front-end dev, but now she focuses on developing business strategies, helping her team solve problems, and of course, building client relationships.

Welcome to the show, Susan!

Susan Snipes: Thanks, it's a pleasure to be here!

Lea Alcantara: So Susan, can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Susan Snipes: I would love to. I have been in Denver since 2002 coming here from the Midwest, and I love Denver. It's the place where I was always meant to be and I plan to be here for a long time. So here in Denver, besides running the studio, I have a couple of little girls and I do a lot of the Colorado things here. I'd like to spend time outdoors when I'm not working, of course, so doing hikes. I'm also interested in taking care of my little garden when the weather is nice again, which I'm looking forward to soon, and probably the other things that I'd like to do are read science fiction and occasionally watching TV.

Emily Lewis: Oh, nice.

Susan Snipes: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I'm getting into some gardening myself this spring. We're going to try and do a vegetable garden for the first time so it's an all new experiment.

Susan Snipes: I think tomatoes work well in this climate so that's my recommendation. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Yeah. Well, if I get a lot of tomatoes, I'll be a happy person because I'd eat those for every meal.

Susan Snipes: Yes.

Emily Lewis: So how did you first get into the web?

Susan Snipes: I first got into it many, many years ago. When I was in college in the 90's, I took one single web class. At the time it was a combination of HTML and Photoshop, and I think it was like eight weeks.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: It was all that there was at the time, and I was at a school where I was around with a lot of engineers and they were really into the web. I think, I don't even remember exactly what it was called then, but was when Netscape Navigator was supposed to be coming out.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] Nice.

Susan Snipes: And so you could actually like look at stuff and everyone was like, "Oh, it's so cool." And I was like, "I guess that's kind of cool. I mean, that's kind of interesting." But I was coming in it from the art side so I like creating things.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And so after I took that first class and learned however the five or ten HTML tags that existed back then, I was one of those people that could design website.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: And we were definitely web designers back then, no front-end developers or anything like that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And when I was done with my undergraduate degree, I wasn't really interested in continuing on with what my degree was, [laughs] which was architecture and art history, and I was totally employable doing web design, and I got my first job as a web designer in 1999 and I kept doing it since then.

Emily Lewis: Wow, yeah. I'm just remembering my own first classes that I took and how limited they were in what the tools where, and it was…

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Actually, I think my first job, I was a webmaster, even though I didn't do code and things like that. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: Oh yes.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: I love those old terms. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Exactly. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Webmaster. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: We're dating ourselves. So anyway, Susan, you're now leading this company. Over the years, you probably gained a sense of what a good client relationship is. Can you share what that looks like to you as the person running and leading the company as well as the people on your team?

Susan Snipes: That is a great question, and I like to think that our client relationships at this point, now that we've been in business for a while are either good or great or excellent, so that typically looks like having a client that respects us and treats us well and is working with us and asking us our opinion so working with us and interested in our expertise. They would typically come to us with a problem rather than a solution.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And it's always nice when they pay appropriately and on time. Those are really nice clients.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: And some of the other things that we have been paying more attention to recently are that they're using more of our skills. So rather than just working with us on design or front-end development or content management systems or one of those tools, that they're using more of our skills

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Typically here at Q, our clients do work with an account manager, which is me or one other person on a team, and they also interact with our team. So having them be thoughtful and communicating with their account manager as well as the rest of the team is important.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: We have had clients, well, just one client in the past a long time ago who did not treat one of my team members well so that client did not get to stay.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So respect is probably one of the biggest ones and working strategically and together on projects is another thing that I think makes a great client.

Emily Lewis: It occurs to me that's pretty much I think how Lea and I have defined our most ideal client relationships, but they often evolve to that.

Susan Snipes: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Particularly the point I think about – well, a couple of the points, like about being strategic, like I can think about one of our clients who has gotten more strategic with her business and therefore has gotten more strategic with us, but in the beginning wasn't so much, and on like some level, it was a risk taking the relationship, but it has turned out to be one of our better relationships. How do you gauge if that's where it's going to go?

Susan Snipes: That's a great question. I think sometimes you don't know. Sometimes a client will already have gotten to that point where they are ready to think about strategy and also entrust me or you with that strategy and do that together and other clients aren't there. We certainly have clients that we would work on for a single project and they're still a great client and it's a great project, but

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that's the duration. They just don't have the capacity yet, I suppose, or they're not really there yet with their project.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Or maybe it only needs to be a short-term project. If it's a three-month event, then there's not much strategy that needs to go beyond that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Well, I definitely want to talk a little bit about the differences between projects and clients, but let's take a step back. What would you consider a long-term client, like how long would the relationship have to be?

Susan Snipes: I would probably say for me to count it as a long-term client, one year or more.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Not that we have a rule here where if we work for someone for six months, they're a short-term client, and longer than that, a long-term client.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: But the ones that I would count or consider here as long-term clients, we've worked with them for a year or more.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Or we have an agreement that we're working for that long together.

Emily Lewis: It occurs to me that on some level, I mean, I completely agree with probably that year time frame, but there have also been a couple of client relationships where even before that year

mark, for example, they already felt like a long-term client because we managed to do one project and there's really no expectation for anything beyond that, but then because needs change, kept coming to us throughout like a year, and then by the six-month point, we've done so much, it felt like a long-term engagement. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: Totally.

Emily Lewis: Even though it was like a combination of like "small projects."

Lea Alcantara: So I mean, really, would that count? Like is repeat business, just in and of itself, a long-term client?

Susan Snipes: I would say yes if it's the same client.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Susan Snipes: And also with the intention that you would like to keep working together.

Emily Lewis: Like it's like a signal that that's where it's going.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So I'm curious about the specific strategy for taking a good project relationship to a long-term client relationship, because long term is exactly that, it takes time. So how does a relationship with a client evolve for you, Susan?

Susan Snipes: So I think there are two things that happened to us or with us for prospective clients now. One is, surprisingly, a lot more clients come to us saying that they're looking for a long-term partner.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So that's easy. So that's awesome. For the ones that don't necessarily know if they are or not and specifically have the project where they're looking for someone that can do a good job and build a site for them, we would evaluate whether or not we think it's a project, which in that case, sometimes projects are a great fit for where we are and what our availability is.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Or if we think they might be good for a long-term partnership, and at that point, I kind of feel them out. I've had a lot of practice working with clients and I don't want to scare them off and say, "Well, we only work with clients that are going to commit to working with us for a year."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: I would rather do something like a small project where we can evaluate if we would like to work together.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And I typically would say the same thing to them like, "We would like to work with you long term, how about if we try a smaller project together?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Susan Snipes: This works really well for a website that we might be inheriting where they want to do upgrade or redesign or whatever it might be.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Snipes: That's a big commitment even if it's only a project where I'd like to make sure that we can truly help them and that we'd like to work with them, and I'm sure it's the same for them. If they're investing a lot of money, it's nice to try that with a small bit first and make sure it works.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I would say for Bright Umbrella when we first started taking clients, I don't know if Emily and I were strategic at all about making them into long-term clients.

Emily Lewis: No.

Lea Alcantara: It's just as long as they kept asking us to do work, we just continued doing it, but for the past couple of years, Emily and I have been trying to be intentional over maintaining this relationship and making sure everyone is pretty happy. So for us, we tend to actually have to-do lists of like post-project check-ins and creating lists of resources we can send to them that actually would help their business in some way.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So they always understand that we have their best interest in mind. Does Q have something similar in terms of process and strategy of actual actions to take that relationship to be more long term?

Susan Snipes: That's a great question. We have some things that we do and some things that we are starting to do and add into that role. For example, we have a newsletter that we send out to current and prospective clients that we try to write and share information that we think is useful for our

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clients regularly and send that out to them as well, because I know they don't always look at our website, even though they should, so we can let them know what we're working on there, what we're thinking about that would help them, and that's just from the kind of fun side of things. As far as regular updates for clients that we have worked with on a single project, we do have regular check-ins that the account manager would schedule, depending on the size of the client, whether that's every month or ever quarter if they're not doing active work.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And that is to give them a site update where we would run like a mini-assessment and let them know how their site is doing, if it needs upgrade, if they have broken links, how their SEO looks, those kinds of things.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Just to let them know we're here to help them.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And we also have taken the approach that we don't want to pressure them.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So I suppose we're still refining that where I'd love to have them be as engaged as possible, but also be realistic about what make sense for them.

Emily Lewis: I think one of the things that we found to be useful, because I think for us, we have that same concern about not being pushy or salesy or [laughs] anything like that with any of our client or even prospect relationships, but I think one of the things we've learned to sort of help us get more comfortable with it and shape how we engage after a project is we're really generous. We focus on being generous like what Lea was describing. Like we have a newsletter and our clients get signed

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up for that by virtue of signing on with us, and beyond that though, who knows if they always read them, but we do, like Lea said, reach out to them one on one with, "Oh, I saw this article, I think it might make sense for you. We're always thinking of you. This has nothing to do with our business or what we're doing or us trying to do sales. We're thinking about you and we thought this would be useful kind of thing." It's that sort of attitude and approach, but I love your idea about doing a little mini-needs assessment maybe once a year or every six months or something like as a good sales tool as well because that's generous, but it also helps further the business.

Susan Snipes: And I love that word generous. That's how I feel about the client relationships, and to give a little means a lot to them.

Lea Alcantara: So in regards to that needs assessment, is that basically you do that kind of for free, right?

Susan Snipes: We do.

Emily Lewis: I love it.

Lea Alcantara: So okay, that's interesting, interesting.

Emily Lewis: It's smart though. You already have their system. You know what they have, so it's probably comparatively easy to evaluate versus like a cold prospect.

Susan Snipes: Absolutely. And it is small and it's targeted to what they need just as you were saying, and we would call it a mini-assessment because it's not going to be like a comprehensive site audit, but it's just touching on the high-level things.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: And if some of those are ones that we already know are their pain points or things that they have on the horizon for the future, then it's really helpful to touch back on.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And also a lot of them wouldn't really know certain things they should be paying attention to.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: Like the recent Google change with the security warnings, like that stuff, people were like, "Oh, do I have to do something."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: Just to let them know whether or not they should worry about it and when they should worry about it.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. I like that. I think that's something that in a lot of ways we could consider ourselves, Lea. I think it would something that would be easy to do, but also very relevant, a nice you know.

Lea Alcantara: Little like mini assessment on…

Emily Lewis: Totally. I really love the idea, especially what, Susan, you said about, you know. Lea, it's essentially what we do for our retainer clients.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Like our retainer clients who are paying for our time, we are constantly like, "Oh, you know, this thing came out. We'd like to do this. Is that okay? Is that where you'd like us to spend

your time?" We are always proactive thinking about that in a bigger sense as part of essentially your sales/business development process.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: That's exactly right. It is like something we would do for retainer clients as well, but for the non-retainer clients.

Emily Lewis: Right, right.

Lea Alcantara: Sure, sure. So in regards to all of this, we've been talking a little bit about how to reach out to clients so that we're top of mind and that they understand we're helping us. However, with the clients that already with you, do they explain any reason why they stay with your company for so long or is it just speculative? Like what are the key reasons clients stay with the company?

Susan Snipes: I have not asked them, and I probably should.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: However, if I were to speculate, [laughs] I would say a few things that I have heard before are that they love working with us.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: And some other reasons that they love that are that we're responsive and organized and we listen to them.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: I know that sounds kind of like it should be obvious…

Emily Lewis: It's not.

Lea Alcantara: No.

Susan Snipes: But not everyone can do that.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I think that's our differentiator too. That is exactly what we hear most from our long term clients, it's because we communicate well. We're really organized, they can count on us. Like it's not, "They're the best designers and developers." I mean, we are. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Of course. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: But that's not why they're staying with us.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: That's not why they turn to us for those questions. It's the thing that you think is obvious, but I don't think it has been traditionally in our field, a very client-focused, relationship-focused kind of business.

Susan Snipes: Agreed. I think it has been missing from our field.

Lea Alcantara: And just as an aside in terms of like asking clients like, "well, why are you staying with them," it's pretty easy to ask them when you just simply ask for a testimonial after a project.

Emily Lewis: Totally.

Lea Alcantara: You just need to be very specific in your testimonial questions and basically say, "Hey, these are the types of things I want to know and perhaps you can add this in your testimonial." And in regards to that, a lot of our clients say very similar things as in these people are reliable and they seem to want to understand our needs as opposed to just stating a solution before even understanding what the question is.

Susan Snipes: Yes.

Emily Lewis: I'm curious, are all of your clients long-term or do you have just a mix of some who you've done a project with and that was sort of it?

Susan Snipes: We have a mix. They are probably more long term, I would say 60%, and then the rest are short term or that we've done a project and we may work with them again.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: But I don't know that I'd technically call them long term, even if we worked with them a year ago and they might need something again this year.

Emily Lewis: It occurs to me this isn't something I had thought of prior to this, but from a business perspective, I guess in terms of management, would it be like best to have all long-term clients so you don't even have to seek new business, or is there always sort of a need to do that?

Susan Snipes: I think there's always a need, but I think it would be less.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Susan Snipes: I would love to have more long-term clients so that maybe it's closer to 80%, 75 or 80%.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: However, I like the idea of having that open for a short-term project.

Emily Lewis: It's fresh.

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Susan Snipes: And yes, something fresh, things change with clients or we change where we're not a good fit for them anymore.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right. And I think this is a good point because sometimes clients that, especially when we were talking I think in some of our business episodes, with some clients you need to end the relationship not necessarily even because they don't respect you or something like that, but it's just that their needs are no longer something that you can do or you can't answer their needs as well as you did in the past or in regards to you yourself as a business shifting your priorities, let's say you've decided you wanted to pursue a particular sector or industry instead and theirs just don't necessarily fit that anymore, and then in regards to time management, et cetera and so forth, it just doesn't make any sense, and if all you did was focus on only long-term client relationships, you could potentially be keeping relationships that you shouldn't necessarily keep.

Susan Snipes: Yeah, agreed. I think the stimulation of having that variety is also really good.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: Because, well, technology changes quickly and it's best to be exposed to other new things people are doing instead of relying on that all internally.

Emily Lewis: So Susan, is there ever a reason not to pursue a long-term client relationship? In fact, Dan Mall on his Superfriend.ly website specifically says that they don't want to take on long-term client relationships. That's not an ideal fit for them.

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Susan Snipes: I think that's a great example pointing to whether or not it's a fit for someone's business and their core values or their mission or however they would like to define it. Because we are more interested in sustainable, long-term partnership with someone whereas project are fun and solving those kinds of creative challenges is of interest to us, but, well, I shouldn't say as I don't know what Dan Mall's mission is, but based on the kinds of work he does and projects he does and his philosophy of how he assembles teams is very different than ours, which is focused on having a core team that can work with the client.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: So I think depending on a company's goals and philosophy, maybe long-term projects are never a fit.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right. I mean, I think the perspective is, especially if let's say they're a giant corporation with an in-house team so they already have particular skill sets involved there, but they want to have an expert outside opinion with specialties to parachute in for a specific project, if that's like the type of clients that you have, yeah, it probably doesn't make sense to have a long-term client relationship because you'll never necessarily have that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Sometimes you're hired simply to teach their internal team to do the work you're doing and then you disappear.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. And then it may be obvious, but I will state it, there's also the reason to not pursue a long-term relationship with a client is if the relationship sours, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Like it's always rare, but it has happened where the project even went fine, but it just didn't gel. There was just something not right about it, and though it was like aligned with our industry goals and this that and the other, there was just something about it that we just didn't want to continue, and it ended fine because it just ended when the project ended, when the project launched or closed out, then that was kind of it. We did not pursue it. We don't send check-ins or generous resource shares to that particular relationship.

Lea Alcantara: Right. Well, I find it also tricky sometimes when there's turnover inside of a particular client relationship.

Emily Lewis: Yes, that's so true.

Lea Alcantara: So you can have like super long-term, excellent client relationships with respect in money paid on time, but if there is a leadership turnover where the values no longer align, then that might be a reason why you would have to end that particular relationship, and that's something that's not necessarily in your control.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: That it's quite common, I think, with any relationship.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Susan Snipes: I mean, this is a relationship and it's very much with your main contact or that core team.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: So if we're working with a marketing director and they move to another company, we might end up working with them at the other company.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: And the new marketing director has their own people they want to work with.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. There are no guarantees in any of it. I think you just have to. I think what we've learned is Lea and I do like to have those conversations about where we think the relationship is. Every two weeks, Lea and I check in for a couple of hours and we go through everything and it all starts with our clients, and that's we sort of talk about where we are, what we're doing, how we're feeling and if it's anything we need to shift or adjust or bring up or whatever, so we are constantly checking in on it, and I think we've gotten better that when we do start to notice that it's a problem, we don't hold onto it. We don't try and keep a relationship going just because in the past it was good.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: I think that's a really good point. I have a tendency to like to solve problems. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So if I see something is going wrong or I shouldn't say wrong, but it's not quite as fluid of a fit or there's a gap there, I would have a tendency to want to push that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And I think having a partner, and in my case we have an account manager here who I can bounce that off of and be like, "Well, let's not really invest more time here than we need to."

Lea Alcantara: Oh yeah.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Snipes: So it's great to have that counterpoint.

Lea Alcantara: Or the opposite as well because sometimes that could be a situation where you feel uncomfortable because of a particular interaction that wasn't that great.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But then if somebody else has a different perspective in regards to a more long-term view or an objective view because they weren't part of that particular interaction, then perhaps it could be another chance to have just essentially another chance to see like whether it's worth pursuing or fixing the problem. Because we've had that, too, where we're all human, so not everything happens in like this perfect everybody says the right thing at the right time and does the right thing.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Especially as web workers, and even right now, like you can't see my face, it's hard to gauge sometimes tone of voice and things like that so people could accidentally read into something that isn't even there so having someone to bounce that kind of off.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Lea Alcantara: The other thing, too, like in regards to leadership turnover and other things and sometimes you're working primarily with a marketing team, sometimes there's like an unknown unknown. So they're working to as an agency with this relationship trying to alleviate that unknown and seeing who's influencing your core team can really help because at least with one particular partner issue that we had, and they were our long-term partner and everything is great, but there were a couple of issues that we were confused over what was going on, and then once we actually got contact with a different person in the company that was influencing our main contact and we spoke to that person directly, everything was resolved, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like just immediately resolved. So it was just trying to take that little bit of extra effort to see like, "What is going on over here? And somebody else is talking to our main contact and confusing things, so let's see who that person is and let's see if we could have a civil conversation."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: In the end, there are like motivations that aren't nefarious, it's just a miscommunication.

Emily Lewis: Absolutely. And I think even more with the example you're talking about, Lea, I feel like that proactive approach on our part really our contact knew who we were and that we were reliable and a resource.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: But then an established resource for this IT department.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: So in two departments, we now are trusted and feel like they can come to us with what they need.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Which meant they spent more money with us.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly.

Susan Snipes: Excellent.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: I really like your choice of that word "proactive" and seeing those kinds of gaps or holes because most of the work that we do is also remote where we have phone calls.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: But we don't even necessarily have video shares where we see each other's faces.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: And even a phone call can go a long way to addressing those and making that connection again.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Oh yeah.

Susan Snipes: I love the idea of finding out who the other players are.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And I think for any decent client relationship, if it's not possible to intuit that, it's easy enough to ask like, who else is involved in this?

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. Who else can we add to our project management system so they get the same emails so that it's no longer playing telephone where somebody said something said something.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. So are there any other red flags that you've seen in the past, Susan, or not even a red flag, just a flag that says it may be time to let go of this long-term client relationship?

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Susan Snipes: Yes. There are the red flags. We've talked about some of those. Some of the ones we didn't talk about are maybe some obvious ones like not paying their invoices or paying them very late or causing you to wonder if something is problematic there. When communication drops off, so even when you're trying to reengage and someone is not communicating with you, something may be going on with our main contact.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: Maybe they're thinking about leaving or maybe they're thinking about hiring someone else. So those kinds of changes are probably the biggest areas for concern that something maybe changing.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Susan Snipes: And when those red flags come up, again, with that proactive conversation, I can find out or you can find out, is something going on?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And sometimes it's out of our control and there's not anything we can do about it, but it's better to know that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: I'm going to use another color like I don't' know if it's like a checkered flag or a yellow flag or some other color for like the non-red ones. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: I don't know that it's super clear, but I believe there can come a time when it's time to move on and I would say if we're not adding value to their project or their website anymore and maybe we've outgrown them or as we were talking about earlier, our focus has changed or maybe their focus has changed and it just doesn't make sense and I don't want people to invest money in something that we're not truly helping them with.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: I also think there's a finite amount of time that makes sense to work with a client, and other people say different things. One of my favorite business advisers who I don't personally know, but who I love to read his stuff, David Baker, who has the website ReCourses, he talks a lot about natural duration of a partnership being around three years.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And we have some clients that we've worked with longer than that, but I also feel like after a certain amount of time, if they're growing and we're growing and we're growing together, then we can continue to work longer than that. However, if they're staying where they are or we're staying where we are, which hopefully we're not, we always want to keep growing, but we just aren't headed in the same direction anymore.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right, it makes sense. Well, I'm curious though like if your company is heading in a different direction, but let's say you still feel like your client is still a good fit, and by that, I mean, a different direction like raising your rates or changing the services with this client that you still do believe will benefit them, how do you handle those company changes with a client and then maintain that relationship?

Susan Snipes: Oh, it's tricky. For some of the clients that we work with extremely closely where we're on like a monthly retainer-type relationship, it's a lot easier because we're in close enough synced that whatever changes, we are changing. They're fully aware of what they are. For the ones where we might not work as frequently and as often, that's trickier. In the past, we've done a few different things, and I think what I have found works the best is to offer them their like grandfathered in rate package or to offer them something that is their like special rate while still being a rate that works for us. Knowing that if we did not get to keep them as a client, it would be okay, and that has to be something where we would be okay with them not agreeing to our rate, and actually, that whole section I just said, I don't even know what I was saying. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I think it's a hard question. I think that's why.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: I think it's a problem in our industry to talk about pricing and money and raising your rates. We talked about it with Brad Weaver last year about how to price your business, but we didn't actually continue the conversation about how you have that talk with your client. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Conversation, yeah. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: But I think it's interesting. I think ultimately there is a cap at which we won't exceed. I mean, Lea is in charge of the money side of the business, so she may disagree with me.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: But in my head I do feel like it's not like we could ever charge like $900 an hour, like that just doesn't seem realistic in any way.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: But in terms of like if you're dealing with rates, we have found a couple of things that we're successful for those conversations and I think part of it was also trying to evolve a conversation beyond what our "hourly" rate was and more about like "what they could get if they did this with us" kind of thing.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Like the value that they're getting for what we're working with, but with one of our long-term clients, once Lea and I partnered, we had to increase the rates for the business because expenses increase and requirements for running the business increased, and frankly, our expertise doubled, and what we were bringing to the table was more valuable. So having those conversations, that was kind of the way we tried to talk about it was, "We haven't raised rates in these many years

and this is a natural increase, and we'd like to offer you a special discount because of whatever."
And I don't even think we called it a discount.

Lea Alcantara: We don't use the discount.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly.

Emily Lewis: It devalues our work.

Lea Alcantara: Never use the word "discount." Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But it's more like – I don't know. Lea, you talk about this.

Lea Alcantara: This is our loyalty rate.

Emily Lewis: Loyalty rate, right.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: So we just say that, "This is our loyalty rate because you've been working with us.
We charge our new clients this." So we give them the other number, which is the "real" rate for sure,
like if there is a new client, that is what we quote or estimate using.

Emily Lewis: Based off of.

Lea Alcantara: But we say, "Because you've been so loyal, this is what we plan on charging you."
The other thing we do for sales, especially with long-term clients, is to really lock them down as a
long-term client with a retainer.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So we tell them, "Hey, we're raising our rates, but if you sign with us with a retainer, you are going to get this better rate."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So I feel like when we spoke to that with our long-term clients, that framed the discussion in regards to, "Yes, we're raising the rates. Yes, you're going to be paying more, but we're still giving you preferential treatment."

Susan Snipes: We do something very similar for our long-term clients, and it comes up when we would have perhaps pitched them, "Would you like to sign a retainer for this year or this quarter or however it might be. Of course, you can still do work with us hourly. However, our hourly rate is X."

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Susan Snipes: Which is much higher than it would be if they were signing on to something, and we have set those up. It's been kind of a trial and error process, which everything is. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: That those for the retainers that we set up, we have, say, someone is buying 40 hours for a quarter, if they use more than 40 hours net, we are still at that same rate.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So that's our preference for how we do retainers. I think people do them a little bit differently, but that's one of the common ways.

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Emily Lewis: And I think a retainer is one of those things that, aside from a way to talk about potentially raising rates, I think it's a good strategy, if you will, for taking a project, like when a project is done, after the appropriate amount of time, that's natural for your established client relationship to bring up that conversation about a retainer. That it's just part of your workflow to close out that project that you bring up a retainer as an option as a conversation aside from raising rates or anything like that.

Susan Snipes: Agreed.

Emily Lewis: So, Susan, in your bio on your website, I noticed that it says that you advocate for inclusion, and I wanted to know what that meant to you, and if it plays any kind of role in how Q does marketing or sales or client relationships.

Susan Snipes: Thank you for asking about that. It's also one of those things that's challenging to talk about, but it's extremely important to me. I had previously thought that I would advocate for diversity. However, then I realized that actually it did not feel as complete and accurate as being interested in inclusion, and that this probably is a longer conversation. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: So it plays out in our marketing materials is that we are a values-focused company and so it's important for those values and some of those being our team and our thoughtfulness and sharing our knowledge and those kinds of things to be a part of who we are in our company internally and also we work with clients. So I am a female and I'm in the tech world, so it's certainly easy for me to talk about it from that side of things, but I don't want that to just be about women in tech.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: I would rather have that be about everybody in tech whatever they might be, if they feel like they've been excluded by age or race or whatever it might be.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: As far as that being in our marketing materials or attracting or having that connect with clients, it's there. It's not very in your face. However, if someone is truly interested in us and is thinking, a client is thinking about working with us long term or really getting to know who we are, they would see that and I think that would naturally attract or repel people that are interested in it or open to that.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So it hasn't been very prominent and we don't proactively seek clients that are only supportive of inclusion or diversity or women-owned businesses. Although we love working with all of those types of businesses and organizations, it is not a requirement for our work.

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Emily Lewis: Yeah, I feel like I particularly appreciate your point about if someone really wanted to get to know you, they could discover where you stand and I think it speaks a bit, Lea, to brand, and one of the things Lea and I, we feel very similar. In fact, our value seemed to align very closely in terms of like we love working with women-owned businesses. We love working with organizations that promote education. That's one of our passions, but that's not exclusively what we do and that's not the only type of work that we pursue, but we put that as our front forward in terms of all of our social media activities. It's reflected in our language on our website, and like we are certified women-owned business and we belong to a local chapter of the National Women Business Owners Association.

So it's noticeable where some of our passions lie on our website, but our website really focuses on what we do and the services we provide and how we do those services, but I do think if you were to explore further deeper into the website but then also who we are online, you can really see the causes and the things that we care about, and I think that does suggest to someone immediately

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whether they'd want to work with us. If they have very different values from us, it wouldn't be some surprise on a phone call, and I think that's important, Lea, that's what brand is, right?

Lea Alcantara: Oh, yeah, absolutely. The immediate impression people have about who you are plays a role in whether they want to continue to work with you, and I think Susan's point over whether they're attracted or repelled is kind of like a natural thing when they see all of that out there.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: That being said, at least for Bright Umbrella, we are trying to be more intentional about getting those particular clients, not overt, but just intentional.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And I think that's like a different kind of angle, which means, for example, we are part of those organizations, so that means we can meet with other like-minded business people who we can potentially do their website, right?

Emily Lewis: Or meet people that they think we might be a useful resource for, like it's sort of the long game or the seven degrees of separation game.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So speaking of resources, Susan, can you recommend to help our listeners who want to foster better client relationships some links or books in regards to helping with long-term client relationships?

Susan Snipes: That is a great question. I mentioned David Baker who has the website ReCourses. I have really learned a lot from him about client relationships, not necessarily long-term ones, and Blair Enns whose website is Win Without Pitching. That is a focus of, if you're not familiar with it, not doing RFPs and positioning yourself as an expert.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: It's a little bit less about client relationships, but it does change the dynamic of how you would engage with a client.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So those are two that I have loved working for or using and knowing for a long time. I think, well, the two of you are a great resource. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Well, thank you.

Susan Snipes: And along those lines, having a network of other business owners or business leaders is huge. As a business owner or co-owner, it's difficult. I mean, I have a team of employees and I love talking with them, but they are not the same as having people who have the same challenges that I do.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: And an event and a community that I got to be a part of, I just discovered up about a year ago, are the Bureau of Digital Events. If you're not familiar with those, they've put on Owner Summit and Owner Camp.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

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Susan Snipes: And they're super awesome and once you go to one, it's like this magical world of other people who are interested in sharing their knowledge and expertise and tons of other business owners and all kinds of web and digital everything, so great people.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. I think Owner Summit has been on our wish list for a couple of years to be able to get the timing and the budget right. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: Yeah. I highly recommend it. Well, hopefully I'll see you there next time.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, fingers crossed, next year if we can make that happen.

Susan Snipes: Oh, that would be cool.

Emily Lewis: I know this is probably going to take us a little long, but you said something when you were mentioning the resources, I just have to ask this question. So you mentioned something like not doing RFPs, does that mean you try and you don't respond to RFPs?

Susan Snipes: We very, very selectively respond to RFPs. I don't know the exact data, but I think you could find it on the Win Without Pitching site, which is if you can affect the RFP process, let's say you're interested in that, and you can disrupt it, basically change it, your likelihood of winning that project I believe is 50% higher than if you just follow along the traditional RFP process and check off all the boxes and do all the work and then don't get the project. So we very rarely would reply to an RFP. Not that we never do. It would have to be a good fit for our skills and our interests and that we could be part of altering that process. So for example, right now we got an inquiry from someone in Boulder, which is right next door to Denver, who is interested in ExpressionEngine site and we did not want to have to do an RFP process, but because they are a public university, they need to and they said, "Would you please be interested enough to do this? We really are only going to invite a couple of people."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: And so we will apply for that project.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: But it's pretty unusual. We only do it once or twice a year.

Emily Lewis: Man, I know that's like an episode in and of itself. We're going to have to do something about it and talking about that. [Laughs]

Susan Snipes: Yes. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, for sure. So, any final advice about developing and maintaining good long-term-client relationships?

Susan Snipes: Yes. Two things I would say. One is to experiment with fit and not necessarily in a bad way, but maybe in the – or I shouldn't say not necessarily in a bad way, but in an experimental way and be open to changing that. At Q Digital Studio, we've been working with clients for more than ten years so we've had a chance to practice it and refine it, and it takes time to get to know what is a good fit for us.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Snipes: So being willing to experiment and change and adapt and know that one size does not fit all clients, even if they're all long-term clients.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Snipes: And the other items would be that probably all of the listeners here already have a long-term client, whether or not they set out to have one or not, and it's a great way to look at that

relationship and see what you like about it and think about expanding that or carrying that over to other clients we really like to nurture.

Lea Alcantara: Perfect.

Emily Lewis: Or even have that guide you as you look for new work.

Susan Snipes: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: So that's all the time we have for today. But before we finish up, we've got our Rapid Fire Ten Questions, so our listeners can get to you know you a bit better. Are you ready, Susan?

Susan Snipes: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: Okay, first question, introvert or extrovert?

Susan Snipes: Introvert.

Emily Lewis: All right. The power is going to be out for the next week, what food from the fridge do you eat first?

Susan Snipes: Oh, that's a tough one. All the vegetables.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite website for fun?

Susan Snipes: Medium.com. I don't know if it's super fun, but I love it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

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Emily Lewis: What's the last thing you read?

Susan Snipes: Some trashy science fiction novel that I don't remember the name of. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: What's the best piece of professional advice you've received?

Susan Snipes: It would have to be a bunch rolled into one, but be bold and be brave.

Emily Lewis: What about the worst advice you've received professionally?

Susan Snipes: You can't do something basically.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite color?

Susan Snipes: Green.

Emily Lewis: If you could take us to one restaurant in Denver, where would we go?

Susan Snipes: Oh, good question. The first one that comes to mind is Biju's Little Curry Shop, which is authentic Indian.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Oh.

Susan Snipes: And it has an awesome interior and it's not expensive.

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Emily Lewis: Oh, perfect.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome. What's your favorite board game?

Susan Snipes: The first one that came to mind is Monopoly. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Old school, always a classic.

Susan Snipes: Oh yeah.

Emily Lewis: All right, last question, Hulu or Netflix?

Susan Snipes: Netflix.

Emily Lewis: Definitive.

Lea Alcantara: Very cool. So that's all the time we have for today. Thanks, Susan!

Susan Snipes: Thank you, this was so much fun!

Emily Lewis: Good! In case our listeners want to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

Susan Snipes: I'm on Twitter a lot @susansnipes, and my company's website is qdigitalstudio.com. I also have a personal website, susansnipes.com, which has a few other tidbits about me.

[Music starts]

Emily Lewis: Awesome. Thanks again, Susan, this was a great conversation!

Susan Snipes: Thank you, Emily. Thank you, Lea.

Lea Alcantara: CTRL+CLICK is produced by Bright Umbrella, a web services agency obsessed with happy clients. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsors! Many thanks to Foster Made and WIX!

Emily Lewis: We'd also like to thank our partners: Arcustech and Devot:ee.

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Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when Jack McDade returns to the show to talk about Statamic content workflows. Be sure to check out ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara …

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis …

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

[Music stops]

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