

2024 Women's Entrepreneurship Day Interview Series

Interviewee: Sharon Lee Thony, SLT Consulting

Donald Jones: Good afternoon. Sharon. It's a pleasure to meet you. We really appreciate you taking the time. Before I let you introduce yourself, I would love to just give a little bit of context for why we're talking today.

We've been sitting with entrepreneurs over the last few months, really trying to explore the topic of identity as an asset. So often we talk about the challenges that we know various entrepreneurs face being a small business, being a business owned by a person of color, by a woman, etc., but we also know that there's another side to that story. We really want to use this time to explore that story just a little bit more.

So with that, I would love for you to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your business.

Sharon Lee Thony: Thank you, Donald. It's great to be here with you. I'm Sharon Lee Thony. I'm the founder and CEO of SLT Consulting. We're a boutique digital marketing agency, and we've been around for about six years. Even though it feels like I just started it yesterday!

We're about 50 people strong all around the world. We're a virtual team and we work with amazing clients. Some of our clients have been Peloton, SweetGreen, Facebook. Most of our clients, though, are small and medium sized businesses, and they typically come to us when they're ready for their next stage of growth. So that could be wanting a new website or maybe exploring TikTok advertising for the first time, or maybe needing a new email marketing campaign. My team and I get to really support small and medium sized businesses, and we really love seeing how marketing can help them to succeed in the world.

My own background is in marketing - I've worked in marketing for over 20 years. Maybe it doesn't look like it, but you know, it's been it's been a quite a while.

What I've loved about my own career and then becoming an entrepreneur was the trajectory that it took. Like I, I didn't start off knowing that I wanted to be a business owner, and I think that's a really common thing that I hear from other entrepreneurs, especially female entrepreneurs. And so I started off my career just working at big agencies, working in corporate, and decided one day that I wanted to branch off on my own and see if I could do it by myself and to kind of just do it alone, as if I was just freelancing or consulting.

That's why it's called SLT Consulting, because it was just me, Sharon Lee Thony, consulting as an independent person. And then slowly things just really started to work really well, so I needed more people to help me to deliver more services. And with that, the team organically grew into a bona fide agency.

What was even more amazing in my journey was that two years into us being established it was 2020. You guys remember 2020 - a lot of things happened that year, Covid and other things. But what was interesting at that time was a lot of businesses needed digital marketing because everybody was staying at home and businesses needed to find a way to engage with their customers at the time. So, my little baby business ended up exploding quite a bit and scaling really, really quite dramatically. And a big company called Fiverr - a big public company that many of you guys have heard - crossed paths with me.

It's a much longer story, but they noticed what I was doing, and they came and they offered to acquire and buy my company. So as an entrepreneur, that was also a really keystone moment for me, and I mention that

because like I said, I, I never saw myself as a business owner, but I certainly didn't think that when I was starting this business that I would be able to scale it to be so valuable that a bigger business would want to buy it.

So that's what happened. It's been four years and I still run the company. I love it. Our team has continued to grow. And technically I work at Fiverr, as now Fiverr is our parent company, but through that we've been able to really scale our operations, too.

DJ: That's really exciting. I didn't give you this background when we first started the conversation, but the original inspiration for this topic – identity as an asset - was the recognition that there's so many entrepreneurs that are out there that probably don't identify as entrepreneurs or business owners because it's really the passion, the interest in what they're doing, their craft that propels them to start something, some sort of enterprise. So often they wouldn't call themselves an entrepreneur.

How powerful would it be if you had that orientation or identity going in. Maybe you'd know how powerful that could be on the journey. I'm curious to hear a little bit more about other ways that you have leveraged your identity as an asset in your journey. And then also, if you can talk a little bit about how that's going to show up in some of your upcoming plans for your business.

SLT: I never identified as being a business owner or an entrepreneur, and it was always something that I thought was kind of scary. I've always identified as a female, though, and always identified as a Chinese American woman. And growing up with two very Chinese parents, they wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer when I was a kid. And when I had quit my 9 to 5 to start my own business, I was actually kind of nervous to tell them because for them, first of all, I never became a doctor, a lawyer. So that's number one. I've already failed from their expectations. Defective.

Then I end up getting a job in corporate doing really well. And then for me to go back to them and say “hey, Mom and Dad, I quit my job, I'm going to do my own thing,” I just thought that they would completely flip their lid and be like, okay, what are you doing?

And at this point, and mind you, I was well into my 30s. So, I'm not like, you know, 16 and telling Mom and Dad, I'm a grown woman with children of my own, afraid to tell my parents that I've taken this leap. And what was so fascinating was I told them about it and they were both like, “that's great, good luck. We hope you do well.” They weren't like “yay, we're so proud of you” because again, that's stereotypically not the way that they'd respond culturally. But that alone was like them showing me that they were supportive of this decision. And that actually made me take a step back and wonder, how did that happen?

It's not like I told them I was going to try to enroll in law school at this age, I wasn't trying to get a degree to be a doctor. And I wasn't on that path that they had really hoped that I would pursue. But I realized my parents owned their own business. They own an insurance agency, and I never saw them as entrepreneurs. But they are. And then I start to think about their parents. My grandparents who immigrated here, my grandfather started a restaurant, but I saw him always as a cook. He worked in a restaurant, or he was a waiter in a restaurant, but he actually was a partner in that restaurant, too.

And I realized that I was already surrounded by entrepreneurs.

It's just that they didn't appear the way that, as the typical tech entrepreneur - nobody was wearing black turtlenecks all the time and going IPO all of the time. They were just working, working really hard to pay the bills and provide for their family.

Then I also realized that being in an immigrant community, so many people in my network were also entrepreneurs growing up in Chinatown, New York, whether that was owning restaurants or owning a laundromat or owning a corner store, every single one of those business owners is an entrepreneur. And it gave me this confidence. I think that I didn't see myself as an entrepreneur because in our minds, we think of usually it is like the Elon Musk, the Steve Jobs, right? The Bill Gates. It's white male entrepreneurs, usually in tech because they're the ones that are on the cover of Forbes. And meanwhile, that person that's super proud of the Etsy store that she's built, or someone who's crocheting because she really loves that, and she's selling the mittens that she's crocheting, or even your babysitter, right? someone who's just working for her own money in that way is their own entrepreneur.

What's helped me to understand about my own business was that I already had the tools and the network around me. They just didn't look the way I thought they would look, but also that so many of us have that experience because so many of us have babysat before, or we have sold lemonade before, or we have mowed the lawn before and anything else to make our own money.

We've done those things even as young, young people. And that in itself is you being your own business owner because you're setting your rates, you're getting your own clients, you're marketing your services, you're managing your budget. Maybe you're even outsourcing, like if you had your little sister help you to babysit, that's like hiring support.

So it's just been that shift. I think that shift alone was connecting more to my identity and connecting more to my roots, and it's also helped me to connect more to what entrepreneurship looks like for me, but also what entrepreneurship looks like for others who might not look like the typical entrepreneur that we think of here in the United States.

DJ: That mindset set shift and how it expands what's possible is really incredible. Thank you for sharing that.

Now, we are connected to you and your company in a few different ways, but one of the ways we are connected is through the WE NYC program, which Next Street continues to run after we started the WE Master Leadership program. I would love for you to just share a bit about what you see as the value of that program based on how you are connected to it.

SLT: I think what's great about the WE NYC program is that it's a network of women who have their own businesses or who are thinking about starting their own businesses and who are really passionate about learning more, skilling up, expanding their networks and helping to grow their businesses.

I've done a number of things with WE NYC. Some of them have been things like keynote speeches about AI and how to use AI to help build your businesses, then a couple things about growth marketing workshops. My involvement has been to provide the content that the women are using to help grow their businesses.

As a result, a lot of times they come to me and we'll have follow-up discussions about some of the challenges that they're facing and how either marketing, AI, or technology can help them to fuel and scale. And I think

that, more than just the content, it's the value of those connections that can really help these businesses to grow.

I know that as I was growing my business (and continue to, because we're not we're not done yet), I felt really lonely sometimes. I just didn't know where to go to get the answers. It's not like you can find the answers in a textbook all of the time, or your one unique issue might not be something that you can quickly Google, and to meet someone who is either in a similar stage of business as you or approaches business the same as you do, is really gratifying.

And, I think it's really about supporting in a way that's beyond just a transactional relationship. A lot of women, most women, are leading their businesses emotionally first, right? We're building wealth for ourselves. But many of the women entrepreneurs that I've met are also very passionate about creating impact and opportunities for others. And so, as we're doing that, we care about the teams that we're hiring.

We want to make sure that our businesses are growing, not just so that we can pay our bills, but so that the other people on our team, female or otherwise, are also able to pay their bills and pay it forward. And, when those types of decisions are being made, the way that you decide to run your business sometimes might be different than if you were just thinking about profits first all of the time.

And I think having a way to bounce ideas off of each other, having a way to help each other through challenges, those are all things that WE NYC provides. It's also that a lot of times we just need to see someone else do it. Someone that looks like ourselves, you know, and I think having a mentor or finding somebody who's already been through it, who has already walked down that path and can really guide you and lead you forward, are other really great benefits of a community like WE NYC.

DJ: Thank you. The power of community. It's that education and knowledge that I think often brings women to that program. But, the community is really the valuable takeaway, from what we hear. So, thank you for that. Is there anything that you wanted to share in this conversation that you didn't get a chance to share?

SLT: I would just love for every woman to keep going. A lot of us have dreams of maybe running our own thing one day or maybe starting that second. Maybe you have one business now, but you want to start up another thing. Maybe you have one location and you want to expand to five. Set those big goals because you just never know what will happen. You know, the year that my company got acquired, we were doing well, we were always profitable. But that year I had said, "I want to make \$5 million."

We weren't close to \$5 million at all in revenue whatsoever. But I was like, "we're going to make \$5 million." I didn't know how. I had no idea what would actually get me there. And then all of a sudden, this big company came and said, we're going to buy your business. And I was like, "that's how I can make \$5 million."

Setting those milestones for yourself, even if it seems like the dream is just way too big, is really important because you don't know what you can achieve until you actually go for it. And I would just encourage every woman to go for it.

DJ: I love that. It's a perfect way to end. And thank you so much, Sharon. We really appreciate it.

SLT: Of course. Thanks for this time.

