



Shannon Gaither: Systems Give You Freedom
Brand + Design Scoop ep. 021
Podcast Transcript

[Angela Kelly Smith]: Welcome to Brand + Design Scoop, where I share practical, relatable tips on branding, design, and building a business for freelancers and entrepreneurs who want to build the business of their dreams and live life on their own terms.

I'm Kelly, a brand and marketing strategist and Squarespace website designer. Today I'm interviewing Shannon Gaither on using systems to create a thriving business.

Shannon is a digital-systems coach living on Boston's North Shore. Shannon ditched her comfy executive marketing job in pursuit of lifestyle freedom. Now she helps entrepreneurs create systems and organize their online business through personal coaching and her signature course "Systems for Success." She's on a mission to help entrepreneurs design a thriving online business so they can live life on their own terms.

Welcome, Shannon!

[Shannon Gaither]: Thank you for having me!

[Kelly]: Oh, I'm so excited you're here! You've got some great stuff to share with listeners.

So, first I just have to say I love what you have written at the top of your blog: "I'll show you how to work your business without it working you."

So, you know part of my business mission is to set up freelancers and entrepreneurs with a website and marketing strategy plan so they can really focus on the work that their business is meant to do—you know, the work that they love doing. And I feel like, ultimately, what we're doing is really aligned with each other. So, I just love that!

[Shannon]: I do, too. I think that we're very aligned in that way. I definitely want to give back freedom and time. I think that that is very much in alignment.

[Kelly]: It's just so important. Again, what you say about working in your business, that all of these things: working on the website, doing the bookkeeping, figuring out marketing... It's just a lot. Especially for new entrepreneurs to figure out – isn't it?

[Shannon]: Yes, yes, and it does feel often like our business is working us and we don't have much freedom. And that's the whole reason we got into this business in the first place.

[Kelly]: Right! Absolutely.

So can you tell me a little bit about your background?

[Shannon]: Well, I've been in the digital marketing space for fifteen-plus years. I did lead generation for a while. Web design. I did do some tech for a long time, and then I went into web marketing and kind of never left because I really love the marketing space. But I haven't really stayed in that same digital advertising and digital marketing space always. I kind of always need to grow and move... to challenge myself.

So, most recently before my current business, I ran an online publication with a blog for parents covering the North Shore of Boston, and that was a really fun experience. And I just pivoted in the last few years from that.

[Kelly]: Wow. So what made you go into helping entrepreneurs create systems for their business from all of that, and particularly from a parenting blog?

[Shannon]: So, when I was running that blog, I was responsible for everything – as many of us other business owners can relate to. I had to do the graphics... writing all the content... I had a local calendar of events to keep up with and a weekly newsletter, and in order to generate revenue, I sold advertising on the site and sponsored articles and posts, and I was burning out super fast.

And there was this one January, where I sat down and took a really hard look at all the things that I was doing and realized I really had to figure out some systems and automations in order to not burn out and just completely leave that business – because I was really close.

So that year, I just made a concerted effort to automate and create systems to give myself back the time, to give myself back my sanity, and at the end of that year – when I look back – I had made more money and worked less hours than I had ever before.

[Kelly]: Wow!

[Shannon]: So, it worked, and it really made me want to get the word out and help people love their business again.

[Kelly]: That's amazing, to at first be in one business – or in your case several, before this – but end up pivoting to this business, simply because you got good at something. That really skyrocketed your other business.

[Shannon]: Yes.

[Kelly]: And now becoming sort of evangelical about systems in this process.

[Shannon]: Absolutely.

[Kelly]: That's really awesome.

So, backing up a tiny bit, why did you leave corporate to do your own thing?

[Shannon]: Well, interesting backstory to why I left corporate. I actually really loved what I was doing. But I was on maternity leave with my twins, and the company I was working for at the time sold the business. And the company who purchased it only wanted the name. So they laid everyone off, including me, and at the time I wasn't very happy about it, but it ended up being a blessing in disguise. Because I was working super-long hours and I had no flexibility. I think I had two weeks off a year, and I don't know how I was going to do that with twins at home, you know?

So it really worked beautifully because then it kind of forced me to say, “Well, what do I want?” And what I really wanted was lifetime. Lifestyle freedom, and also, financial freedom.

I used to say I was making the rich richer, and I decided I wanted to make me rich, not the big corporate conglomerate that I worked for.

So, that's kind of how I ended up: I started in consulting initially and then it just kind of flowed. You find your way.

[Kelly]: That's interesting. So, in consulting, were you doing essentially what you were doing at the company?

[Shannon]: Similar. At my company, I always had a CRM system. You know, a sales force for that company. Salesforce was that particular one, but I always worked with multiple different kinds of CRMs over the years. So I was consulting with different companies, helping them set up CRMs, or move to different CRM systems. I worked so much with the sales and marketing team, being that liaison piece between them, so I did a lot of consulting in that arena too.

So, it was very much what I had been doing, but it was just a piece of it. But it kind of gave me just enough for me to realize what I wanted, and what I didn't want. And that's super important when you're trying to pivot, when you're changing.

[Kelly]: It seems like so many women will leave corporate to start their own businesses because they want that lifestyle freedom. I like how you phrase that. And they want to stop feeling unappreciated or under-appreciated.

[Shannon]: Yes, especially those of us who have hit that glass ceiling one too many times. You're ready to kick that ceiling. To shatter it.

[Kelly]: There's like no ceiling when you work for yourself.

[Shannon]: That's right.

[Kelly]: Or, you know... self-imposed, but you can get rid of that.

[Shannon]: Yes, I do think that when you come from corporate, you definitely start with a self-imposed ceiling and you have to work through that. That's a mindset that you have to continuously work through – because we still go back to it at times.

[Kelly]: You do some work around mindset don't you?

[Shannon]: Absolutely. So much of working for yourself comes with self-doubt and impostor syndrome, and dealing with the overwhelm of being the one person who does all these pieces, or is ultimately responsible for all of the business. And it can be overwhelming. It can be a lot. And I think that we're all going to be dealing. Anybody who works in their own business is going to be working on the mindset 24/7, You know, it's just an ongoing process.

[Kelly]: Yeah, yeah. It's just so different from working for someone. You're having that constant responsibility, even if you're a freelancer doing it all for yourself. You know, being responsible only to yourself, and you're also responsible to your clients. So, that's a lot.

[Shannon]: I also feel like there's a piece that when you go, when you're in corporate, and there's this... so you hide a lot of your emotions and your feelings, and you you're just all business all the time. And then you go to work for yourself, and that arena is different. That arena is very different, where people express themselves openly, and you're encouraged to—in fact, you should—show your personality

That's something we were trying to work out of us, you know? So, I think that that is also a complicated piece from going from corporate to working for yourself. trying to find your comfort level and cadence with your own, with showing the side of you that you've been keeping to yourself.

[Kelly]: That's true. Yeah, even if your business isn't you, you know, if you sell products or something like that, you're right—you still need to show part of yourself. You still have to be

authentically you, and it it rubs off on your business. Yeah, everything you do is part of your brand you're sharing your messaging in everything you do.

[Shannon]: And that's a weird thing to come from. Like, when you're in a department and you're a marketing department, you don't worry about any of that. You're not the face of the company. and you kind of get comfortable in that. And then suddenly you have to accept that, "Oh, not only am I going to run my business, but I have to be the face of the business," or "I have to stand for something." And that can be a little bit complicated to navigate initially.

[Kelly]: Yeah, a little bit less of a private life in some ways.

[Shannon]: Yes, yes, and those of us with kids, sometimes that can be complicated, too, because some folks like to really share so much of their private life, and I don't know. Initially, I was fine with that for a while. I did open up my a lot of my private life. But now my kids are in age where they are like, "Don't share this mom. Don't you dare share these pictures of me sleeping anymore." You know, like. Oh, why not?

[Kelly]: Yep, true. And even when we have a personal Instagram account, for example, and a professional one, people find you.

[Shannon]: People find you. Yes, and I do have that. Actually.

[Kelly]: Me, too.

[Shannon]: It literally says, "If you're looking for my professional, go here, if you're looking for my personal, go here."

[Kelly]: Yep, though, you know, I guess we could make our our personal ones private.

[Shannon]: Yeah, I think that it comes with a certain amount of openness that you have to accept and know what you are. It's better to to accept it because it's honestly a lot easier to maintain from a maintenance point of view because it's a lot to try to keep everything separate. Also, it's just like a full disclosure, you know?

I think one of the differences between coming from corporate and working your own businesses, you let people into your world, and you share so much that you were previously uncomfortable with, you know, especially when you've worked in super-corporate environments which I did.

[Kelly]: Yeah, you have to start speaking your mind. Working for yourself, you have to be personal and let things out.

[Shannon]: Yeah, And your strong personality is what makes you different, whereas your strong person corporate is what gets you fired

[Kelly]: Right, especially as a woman.

[Shannon]: Especially as a woman.

[Kelly]: Prevents you from getting a promotion. Can outright get you fired. Yep.

[Shannon]: Or labeled as 'the B'.

[Kelly]: And, in entrepreneurship, it's what gets you noticed. It's what gets you more clients. It's what makes you a successful business.

[Shannon]: Yeah, and I think navigating that and getting it is freedom. It's freeing to be yourself. But it's weird at first.

[Kelly]: Very true. Well, good conversation! Not about systems, but thank you for. going there! That's awesome!

Okay, so, your business helps small-business owners streamline, systematize, and automate their business. So, what exactly does that mean?

[Shannon]: So, it can mean a lot of things. It can be as simple as setting boundaries and creating theme days for your work, So, say you have a creative piece to your work. You need to have that concentrated time to focus on that piece of your work without being constantly interrupted or or having to pivot into a meeting or checking email or whatever.

You need to have systems in place so that you can know when you're going to accomplish everything. And I'm telling you, like knowing when you're going to accomplish everything. That sounds easy, but it's not. And when you get a rhythm to it, why, there's so much freedom in that because you don't feel stressed all the time. Like, I have so much on my plate, how am I going to get it all done? Well, you know how you are because you're going to get this done on Tuesdays, you're going to get that done on Wednesdays. you know? And that kind of system is one of the simple systems to put in place. And so there's simple systems, and then there's the more complex ones. But systems can run the gamut.

[Kelly]: So, I should not spend a couple of hours writing my blog when I feel like it and then make updates to my website on same day and then jump into editing a podcast, mixed in with working on a client website?

[Shannon]: Yeah, absolutely. Have you ever heard of this term, "context switching"?

[Kelly]: No.

[Shannon]: So, context switching was originally a computer term, and it meant the time it takes for the computer to switch from one context to another. Well, the human brain takes 23 minutes on average to switch from one topic to another.

So, if you're doing what your example was, where you're going from one thing to another thing to another thing all day long, you're really getting a lot less done than you think you are because you're spending a great deal of time trying to refocus and get back into trying to get into the zone. It's not always easy, you know, trying to get in that head space. And you're not always in the head space to write and edit. And you kind of have to figure out your own personal energy, you know. I'm not even good in the morning for writing.

[Kelly]: I am then. I'm actually really good in the morning. I just did a blog post within the past couple of weeks about getting into flow and what it is, the science behind it and some tips about getting into it - because there are things we can do. No guarantee, but we can set ourselves up to get into flow. Wow, I may have to go in and add that bit in there about context switching you said.

Wow, 23 minutes.

[Shannon]: Yes, 23 minutes. So, if you think about your phone notifications and you think, sometimes people love to check email. I used to be, when I was in corporate, I was a big email checker. Like, you didn't go an hour. I mean, unless you're in a meeting or something or doing some sort of concentrated work, you are checking your email. And it's really better to set one or two times a day to do that, and that's it. Yeah, and it's freeing. You'll find so much time in your day when you're not all over the place, so just these days alone can really change your business.

[Kelly]: I've always known that we should do that. It's just, like you said a minute ago, we don't always feel like writing, for example. And so I've, up to now—let me use that phrasing, “up to now”—I haven't been great about scheduling time to write, sitting down and getting into that flow, necessarily.

Now, recently I've been better about that because I do so much writing - a blog a week, preparing for a podcast, which I write if it's a solo podcast or certainly a lengthy outline. But, okay, I think you've convinced me. It's gonna take some doing because this is foreign. I haven't done this before. I have days scheduled and parts of days scheduled for “discovery sessions.” They're my “Let's Pick a Niche” session. They don't necessarily lead to selling a service. They are to help people pick a niche. But that's all I have structured right now.

[Shannon]: So, do you work well when there's a tight deadline?

[Kelly]: Yes.

[Shannon]: So, then maybe the Pomodoro technique. Or there's a great app called "Focus Keeper." It gives you like 20-, 25-minute increments to work on things. And that works really well for people who need that deadline because, if you give yourself all day, you'll take all day.

[Kelly]: True. Twenty minutes isn't enough for me. I'm good at focusing but....

[Shannon]: Yeah, it's not meant to be 20 minutes in total, but it's 20 minutes to take a small break. Twenty minutes to take a small break because your brain can stay energized that way. So, even if you have the standing desk, or something like that, or you just stand up and walk, go get yourself some water or something, coming back, you're fresher than you would be if you sat there and continued on.

[Kelly]: That makes sense. Thank you! I was not looking for any coaching here, but good example for listeners to see us in action! I really appreciate that.

So, when clients come to you, would-be clients come to you, what do they say their main problem is? You know, do they come and say, "I really need a system," or do they say it's something else?

[Shannon]: Usually when I start working with a client, somebody comes to me, they're really feeling overwhelmed and burnt out. They often list various components of their business that they're personally responsible for. And you can just see the obvious exhaustion. They don't always think systems are going to be the solution. They just know something's got to give.

So I think systems get a bad rap. I think that they sound like more admin work. You know, just the word system sounds like, kind of...

[Kelly]: Lack of freedom.

[Shannon]: Lack of freedom. But it's actually the opposite. Systems equal freedom. Once systems are set up in your business, and people commit to using them, they actually get more freedom, and they have more bandwidth, and they have more creative time — because they know when they're going to get everything done. They have that set time. If you're able to automate pieces of your business, then even better because then large chunks of your business that you used to manually do are just not even an issue. That's big.

[Kelly]: The part I definitely have experience with, we were talking about, you and I were talking before the podcast about a system that we both use for proposals and invoicing and contracts and contact forms, at least in my case, and it is so helpful. I have a template for my contracts and invoices, and I don't have to write those anymore. There are blanks that I fill in, and that's it. I'm not rewriting it. And then hit send. You put all the client information. It's my

client tracking system, as well. Just fill in the blanks and send and boop. And same thing with the invoice sending, and boop. It just saves so much time. That is definitely freedom.

[Shannon]: Yes, I think the system we were specifically talking about was Honeybook, but there's other options out there. But you know, even people who think that they have to customize every proposal. they don't really have to customize 100 percent of that proposal. They customize the 20 percent. I like to call it an 80-20 percent rule, where some systems are just going to get you 80 percent done right away so you can just tweak that last 20 percent, and that's big timesaver. That's a huge timesaver.

[Kelly]: Definitely, yeah. So many things like that. And you're right, setting them up originally is going to take time, even if it's like a social media platform that will send out all of your posts for you. Of course you have to go in there and put the posts in, but you're not going to each platform on the day that you want to post them. And, okay, Facebook. Okay, Twitter. Okay, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, whatever. You put it all in one spot, and you schedule it. And you can schedule it days, weeks in advance, and the system does it. So, lots of things like that.

[Shannon]: Talk about something people dread – there is a lot of dread around social media. If there's a lot of feelings of obligation and dread, so just creating a system around that can be very freeing.

[Kelly]: And even if you do it by hand, like you said, scheduling a day where you do it.... Before I used a platform to do it for me, and even now, I do have it in my calendar. I have a reminder for what day and time to go in and schedule those posts every week. And, before that when I was doing it manually, it's like, okay, Tuesday my blog went live. So, at this time go post. Friday my podcast went live. Go in and schedule the post. And then, you know, a few others during the week.

[Shannon]: Yeah, so you have a system currently that you're not giving yourself credit for.

[Kelly]: I guess! But this one that you suggested about the blocks of time on certain days....

[Shannon]: Yeah, time blocking is a great productivity technique, too, Time blocking, offset times for certain types of work, even if you do it in short amounts. Like, you sit down and you say, "I'm going to work on my blog, but from this time to this time, when I work on this topic." Just that self-limiting, you know, sort of deadline that you're creating makes you work faster.

And it also, I don't know. There's some psychological piece to it that I wish, I should look up the science on that because it's kind of fascinating to me that we can feel more in the zone quicker. And by that pressure, you know. It's kind of funny. It must be the, I don't know, something to do with how we all went to school or college, and we all had to get our stuff done in limited time and we just got it done.

[Kelly]: You're right, and, as entrepreneurs, small-business owners, freelancers, unless we impose that time, it's like.... If we're well established in our businesses, then I think we know, okay, we have to get this done. And I think when you're just starting out, it's easier to be like, "Oh, I can do this whenever i want. That's freedom."

[Shannon]: That's freedom. Yeah, and the busier you get, and the more clients you get, and you know, the more you, when you first start a business or you first start a new position, your inbox is empty all the time, and you're, like, "This is fabulous." And then two years in your inbox is full all the time, and you have to change the rules for yourself.

[Kelly]: You're so right. And that idea of scheduling time twice a day to focus on email really makes sense because there are times that I find myself checking email, and then I will drag emails into an a box, an inbox, called "To Do" instead of acting on it right then and there. And it would be more efficient to go ahead and have scheduled time where I can act on the emails then, wouldn't it be?

[Shannon]: Yes, and if you, if you've got that scheduled time, and you're in your inbox delaying, consider that every time you delay something, it is adding to your to-do list. It's adding to your mental load. and that mental load is part of what really exhausts us as entrepreneurs.

So, sometimes systems, largely systems are about time freedom. But it's also about mental. That's why mindset is such an important piece of my business. Because that mental exhaustion is very real, and it leads to us burning out and walking away from our businesses that we love or did love.

[Kelly]: Wow, all right, that makes a lot of sense — systems to prevent burnout and...

[Shannon]: Yeah, systems equal freedom.

[Kelly]: ...keep you actually in your business. Yeah, loving this!

Okay, do you have, so you've already given me some tips here, really great ones. Do you have any other specific tips that you want to share with listeners?

[Shannon]: sure, yeah. If people are new to systems, they can start by looking at what's consuming the bulk of their time. Is it prospecting or working with clients? Or, even working with a ton of different types of business can be very time-consuming because, sometimes you need to just limit your offerings a little bit so that you can focus on your business on those particular pieces of your business in a better, more efficient way.

Or is it sometimes the back and forth from clients, clients asking like, "When's this going to be done? Can I have an extension?" You know. All the different back and forth questions you get from clients can be super time consuming, as well. So, for a service provider, I feel like it's very

important for them to set expectations up front. Like, send a welcome package. If you send a welcome package to new clients that includes all your business hours, your preferred form of method of communication, a timeline for all, when all the services will take place, a timeline for when all their deliverables need to happen, and you'll eliminate all the back-and-forth communication. That's super time consuming, and you'll have the added benefit of your clients being super-impressed with your process. You know, I mean, when you settle that up front they are, there's this huge sigh of relief on their end, as well as yours.

Yeah, so that's that's one way. There's a lot of different ways you can get started with systems. It can be as simple as like we talked about. Do a time audit on yourself, or an energy audit on yourself. You can do either. If your problem is that you struggle to get the work done that you need to get done when you've allotted it, then you're probably not working within the right energy time.

So, say, if you're a morning person, like you described, then you need to do things that you, if you're morning person, you need to do your your creative work and your thought-provoking, the work that you need your real brain for, you need to use that time. And then later in the afternoon. that can be when you do your emailing back, or your prospecting or various pieces of the business that don't take as much concentration. We really need to schedule our theme days and our work blocks or time blocks around our energy.

[Kelly]: Awesome, that makes sense, too. Very cool.

[Shannon]: Otherwise we turn our wheels, right? We've all done it.

[Kelly]: Yes, very true.

[Shannon]: Another quick tip I just thought of that's a good thing to share is allowing meetings to be something that take place every day or multiple days in a week can really be draining. Meetings take sometimes a lot out of us. So, pick the days that you are at your best for meetings. There's some science behind meetings being towards the end of the week, being more, people being more energetic on Thursdays and Fridays. So, those are great meeting days or recording days.

[Kelly]: Awesome! That's good to know. I had not looked up anything about that before. I know what days are good for sharing social, what days and times are supposedly good for sharing social media posts and sending emails, email blasts — but not having meetings. I didn't know that there was info on that. Very cool. That's awesome!

[Shannon]: Yeah, so even those small, those are small systems you can set up right away. Those are things you can just ask yourself, like, “When am my at my best?” I know at the end of the day, towards dinner time, if I'm writing, I will suddenly realize it is taking me forever to write the sentence, when other times in the day, I'm just, I've got it done.

So those are simple, simple systems that you can set up. But then there are like more, larger systems that you can set up that are, they really give back a lot more of your time. And those are the things that will take a little bit more of your initial set-up time. And those are the not-so-fun parts to set up. But keep in mind that they do lead to more freedom. Like you discuss, the proposals, the sending proposals, sending contracts back and forth.

[Kelly]: That's great! Thank you! Is there anything else, not tips, but anything else you want to share about yourself or your business? Anything you wish I had asked?

[Shannon]: Well, what's coming up for me this year is I am launching, I just launched a course to a group of founding members, and it's running right now. It's "Systems for Success," you mentioned earlier. And it's a six-week course, and it's a live course that has live components like Q&A and real support involved. Because when you're putting systems in place, you need your questions answered in real time. So, that is going to launch again at the end of April. So, that's something that I like to share.

[Kelly]: Oh, that's great!

[Shannon]: I'm really excited about that because I feel like it's an opportunity to really help larger groups of people.

[Kelly]: Yeah, and they'll be able to support each other.

[Shannon]: Yes, there's absolutely community component.

[Kelly]: Very cool! Awesome! Thank you so much for being here and sharing. All of this this is so generous of you and especially the little tips that, not-so-little, the awesome tips that I got in talking to you today. So, thank you!

[Shannon]: Thank you so much for having me. It was my pleasure.

[Kelly]: Absolutely! So, Shannon also has a quiz on her website that you can take to learn the one thing you should focus on to grow your business. You can find the quiz at Shannon Gaither com forward-slash quiz. I will have the link in the show notes and on this episode's page on my website, so go check it out. There are also links to her website and to her Instagram profile.

So, that's it for today. You can leave comments on this episode's page on my website: [Angela Kelly Smith dot com](http://AngelaKellySmith.com). I'll see you next time on Brand + Design Scoop. Thanks for being here today! Bye bye!

Links mentioned in the episode:

[Shannon Gaither website](#)

[Shannon's Quiz](#)

[Shannon on Instagram](#)

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Angela Kelly Smith is a marketing strategist and Squarespace website designer for freelancers and entrepreneurs who want to create the successful business of their dreams and live life on their own terms. She makes marketing simpler and more fun and helps clients establish themselves as authorities in their field, attract more of their ideal clients, and convert would-be clients into paying clients. Check out her [website design + marketing strategy service](#).