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Speaker 1: Hi, everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of soloists and small business owners. Now, if you've ever succumbed to that little voice inside your head that says you're not good enough or fronted up to an important event and felt like a fraud, well, my next guest has something to tell you. Annette Densham is a journalist pr and sought after brand awareness specialist who knows just what it takes to silent that inner critic and put an end to imposter syndrome. She's here today to share some advice and strategies around putting that little voice to bed once and for all.

Speaker 2: Hi, Annette, welcome to the show. So great to have you with us today.

Speaker 3: Hey, Cec, it's fantastic to be here. Yay.

Speaker 2: I'm so pleased we're finally getting to chat. Now, our listeners are probably most familiar with you, uh, in terms of your PR and brand work and, um, helping businesses get recognition for their great work that they do. But you're also very passionate about something else, which is helping people recover from, um, that imposter syndrome. You, you speak, uh, quite a bit about it at the moment, and I'd be keen to hear whether it's something that you suffered from yourself.

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. I, I, I don't think that you can speak about these things unless you've been there and experienced it. And I definitely have and, and working in, in PR and in the media is that I come across a lot of the people who, because I'm now recovering imposter syndrome sufferer, think that I've always been this confident and out there, but I haven't. And you know, when I think about where it started, I was probably seven years old. I was coming home after winning the Top Dog Achievement award for whatever it was. I was a bit of a girly swat in primary school and translate into high school. I just have to say that. And I've raced home with my certificate and I've trusted in my mother's face, and she's just looked at me and gone, that's nice, Annie. Nobody likes to show off.

Speaker 1: Oh,

Speaker 3: I could. Yeah, I know. I, I just remember feeling crushed because I was so proud and so excited because I, I'd never really been acknowledged before for how hard I'd been working in grade two. Um, and it just devastated me. And I, and I can, you know, I can remember feeling that there was something really wrong with achieving and or, or telling people that you have achieved something. So for pretty much the rest of my life, I just stuck to the background and the shadows never really popped my head up because I just didn't want to get battered down. And, and, and it just continued, like the messages that you would get through school and, and particularly through social media now, is all about don't promote yourself. Don't show off, don't brag. And it's no wonder particularly women who are looking at, you know, going next level in their businesses or in their lives have this big blockage because the world's telling them that if you succeed

and you brag about succeeding, there's something wrong with that. So you can't help but feeling like you're a bit of a fraud and a fake.

Speaker 2: Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? There's that whole, um, tall poppy syndrome, which is quite common in, in Australia where we're pretty renowned for like cutting people down. But, you know, what was that old saying? Like, don't hide your light under a bushel. Why are we also frightened of going, actually, I am great at this?

Speaker 3: I think because we spend so much time worried about what other people think, and we are not focusing enough on how we think about ourselves, because you can't shine your light if you are constantly worrying about judgement and criticism and comparison. And someone said to me this morning, you know, one of the, the big problems with social media is that we are all comparing our lives to Someone's highlight reel, which is this very tiny snapshot of their life. Like, who's gonna go on there and say, oh, I've had a crappy morning. I just had a big fight with my husband. Instead, we are getting, you know, look at me with my outfit, look at me at this, and look at me at that. And you can't help but look at and think, well, there's no way that I can be that good, or there's no way that I can achieve what they're achieved because their life looks perfect. But if you dig a little bit deeper, you tend to find that we're all have very similar challenges and issues in our life if we just stop comparing ourselves to other people.

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So w what was the first step for you then in, in stopping that inner critic or those outside influencers that were going, oh, you're not good enough, and just be quiet. And it <laugh>

Speaker 3: I think it was when I lost, I don't, I know where my job is, but when, um, my role was made redundant 10 years ago, I was working as a, a comms manager for a fairly large not-for-profit organisation. And, you know, one day I went to work and that afternoon I no longer had a job, and it, it totally crushed me because I thought, gosh, I can't even hang on to a job. You know, I'm just trying to be me and being me is obviously not good enough. So I was almost forced into the small business world because at the time, you know, Queensland government had, you know, sat something like 12,000 public servants. So there was just no jobs around. And I went, oh, well, well, I've got these skills. I'll go into business myself. And I quickly learned that I, whilst I may be very good at writing, I really wasn't very good at promoting myself because I didn't know how, it wasn't a skill I was taught going back to thanks mom at seven, telling me not to show off.

Speaker 3: And here's another good naff saying is if it's to be, it's up to me. I realised after slogging away with, you know, all of the expert's opinions on how to promote your business, that the best person to promote was me. And the best way to promote what I was doing was by sharing my stories and sharing my ups and my downs. And whilst it was, it was so, so uncomfortable to start with because of that lifetime training of, you know, sit down, shut up, Annette, don't be a show off. That, it just, it kind of got easier because I realised that one, I couldn't compare myself to my competitors because they had a totally different journey to me. So I stopped following them, not because I didn't like them, but because having their success in my face was diminishing my own feelings of self worth.

- Speaker 3: So I just went, all I need to do is concentrate on what I'm doing. How am I serving the people who I wanna work with, and how can I role model the behaviour that I want my clients to embrace? Because if they wanna have the success that they're looking for, they have to learn that sometimes you just have to suck it up and pop your head out there. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So that's what I did. I just popped my head out there. I got bashed down a few times, but I kind of thought, well, they're not gonna pay my rent or my bills or put braces on my kids' teeth. So if I let them tell me what my definition of successes, then I'm never going to meet, reach their expectations, and I'm always gonna be dimming my light. So I just thought, bugger them. I'm just gonna go out there and give it my best shot, be as real and as authentic as I can be, and people will either like me or they won't, and I can't do anything about that. So as long as I meet, that's gonna serve me well.
- Speaker 2: Yeah. Is that kind of, uh, what success means to you is, is, you know, being authentic, um, serving, serving your, your clients to the, the absolute best of your abilities and you know, a no bullshit kind of attitude as well?
- Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. Uh, I mean, you know, me Cec, there, there's no bullshit about me. I'm just, what you see is what you get. If you meet me in person or you see me online, I'm exactly the same person. Oh, I probably think I'm funnier in person, <laugh>. Um, and I, and I've learned that I'm not everybody's cup of tea, and that's actually okay because I don't need to be a people pleaser. And I think that's one of the symptoms of imposter syndrome is that you're constantly trying to please other people and re meet their expectations. And you can't do that because their lives are dictated by their belief systems and by their experiences. And if you're constantly trying to stack up against what everybody else thinks, you just end up exhausted, overwhelmed, and burnt out. And the person who is damaged the most is you. And you can't keep, you know, serving people and showing up to deliver your brilliance if you're exhausted by all of that expectation.
- Speaker 2: Mm-hmm. <affirmative> so true. Um, so business owners and, um, small businesses, they come to you wanting obviously your PR and marketing expertise, but, uh, oftentimes I think, uh, what I've found with business owners is they're great, um, you know, in the business and doing all of the work, but they're not that great at self-promotion. So how do you get them to feel confident enough to be sharing their stories?
- Speaker 3: I spend a lot of time just talking to them, you know, asking lots of questions, getting them to feel comfortable about opening up. Um, you know, because my background's journalism. I'm a professional stickybeak, and it's amazing when people know that you've done that for a profession, how open they are. So I establish a, a place of trust, you know, a place of, you know, what you say to me here goes no further so that you can be yourself. And I guess just instinctively, I just help build that. And the first thing that I always do with my clients is I write their story. So, you know, I get them to share, where did you come from? Why did you wanna do this? What's your purpose? Who, you know, who do you wanna serve? And then I write them a piece about themselves. And more often than not, they come back and they'll say, are you sure this is me?

- Speaker 3: Because this person sounds amazing. And it's like, these are your words that you shared with me. I've just interpreted them and I'm feeding them back to you. And it's quite incredible seeing the light come on in their eyes when they realise that the person that they're presenting to the world is the person that people want to see. And, but they wanna see more. And I always say to them that it's, it's actually kind of selfish when we let our fears and our limiting beliefs stop us from delivering what we are really good at, that we let that hold us back. That we are not telling people how we can help them. Because the reason we go into business is because we've got a solution to someone's problem. And if you are only ever talking about the features and benefits of what you do, it's pretty dry.
- Speaker 3: And let's face it, dead set, boring. What people really wanna know, because this is what I've learned in 10 business, 10 years of business, is that people wanna do business with people. They don't wanna do business with a logo or with a NFI font or with your colours, or with a great, you know, professional photo. They wanna do business with the person that they've spoken to on the phone. They wanna know and understand what, you know, lights you up and what gets you excited about what you do, because that builds trust and it builds connection. And you can have such a far more valuable and deeper relationship with your clients and customers if they already like you to start with. But how do they do that if you don't ever tell them who you are?
- Speaker 2: Yeah, I think you're right. There's, um, for a long time there was that real disconnect between a business and the humans in the business. And now I think it's really coming to the fore where, where, as you say, people wanna do business with people. So putting the human back into the business and the human story is so important.
- Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. And, you know, I'm watching big business, multinational, multi global businesses do podcasts where they, you know, interview the c e o about, you know, different parts of the business or things that they're up to. And slowly it's trickling down to small business because, you know, what big business is doing is certainly, um, applicable and appliable to small business because even, I think even more so for small business, because we're actually dealing directly with our customers and our clients on a regular basis. And, you know, especially if there's a problem, you know, I find in my business if, you know, say we, we don't do something as well as what a client is expecting because we've already established that relationship. You know, we've chatted, we've shared personal insights and tidbits. It's far easier to come back from a mistake because they see you as a human being, not as a brand.
- Speaker 3: Because you know, you know, if you go to, let's say an airline who, we won't name them, but you know, there's plenty of examples and you've got a problem, you're really just a number. You're dealing with someone on the other end of the phone who's really not that engaged in the process cuz they're probably being treated like crap by the organisation. But when you come back to small business is that you've, you've got that, you've had that opportunity to build some rapport and you can't do that if you are just talking about, you know, the inertia of business. You, you've gotta get into the nitty gritty

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, and when we're talking brand building, as you say, small businesses are often really embedded in their local communities. So is that, um, the kind of advice that you might give to any of your clients if they're trying to build up their brand like that they should look local and look at their communities first?

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely special, especially, um, local networking events because there's such a diversity of different businesses there and you just don't know who people know. And if you show up to these events or you don't go, how's anybody ever meant to know what it is that you do because you, you're stuck behind your computer, you know, we are hiding behind our screens more and more. And those personal relationships in our community is what can be a game changer. I also say to people, reach out and connect with your local counsellor and your local state member and your local federal member because if they know what you do, they're constantly having people coming to them looking for solutions or if there's grants or awards or other opportunities, then you've built a relationship with them in the community so that they can be there to back you and support you.

Speaker 3: Um, another good thing is, you know, wherever there's an opportunity to sponsor a local sports or organisation or not-for-profit, that they're always looking for people to back them up and be their cheerleaders. And that helps you to spread the word. Because when we rely on our very narrow vertical of, you know, maybe your preferred promotional as Instagram, I mean like you can only really reach so many people. And ironically I find the less I post on Instagram, the more people follow me. I dunno if that's a message telling me to stop waffling on. But anyway, um, so when you get into your community, you're able to build those personal connections. You know, like if you think about what networking mean, it's about creating a network. And I'm a member of a few where, you know, I'm constantly being tagged in Facebook or in LinkedIn from people who know what I do because I've sat around the table and I've talked about my challenges and my wins and my losses and the things that are going wrong and clients that are annoying me. And they can, you know, something will come up and go, Hey, we're looking for an awards rider. They know me, they understand me, they've connected with me, and we, we've got a relationship. So they feel really confident about being able to recommend you to their networks. Like that's gold and it, you know, costs you lunch or a breakfast, but the return on investment can be mind blowing.

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, in terms of, um, of that kind of networking side of thing, do you think, um, and also maybe the award side of thing, do you think that people don't put themselves up for stuff because of that whole imposter syndrome and they feel like a fraud and, you know, they shouldn't be big noting themselves and putting themselves up for awards?

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. A hundred percent. I would say that 95% of the times when someone comes to me and says, you know, I wanna build my profile or I wanna enter awards, and you start talking and then, you know, you'll hear, oh, I don't think I've done enough. Um, I actually don't think I'm ready. Or, you know, like, oh, what if someone gives me a hard time because of this? And so you really have to then feed into them. And, and one of the things that I say to them is, I want you to go back through your diary. I want you to

have a look at all of the meetings that you've had. You know, go back through your emails and look at, you know, the testimonials and reviews that people have sent to you, and then I want you to come back and tell me that you're not ready because sometimes we need to hear and see it from other people before crazily we believe it ourselves

Speaker 2: With testimonials as well. Do you think that is also there's that reluctance to approach people that you maybe have done a great job for to go, oh, could you write me a recommendation? Kind of? I think sometimes people feel a bit like they're going cap in hand, whereas, you know, if you did a great job, what's the harm in saying? Can you write, write something for me?

Speaker 3: Oh, ab absolutely amusing. Absolutely a lot <laugh> because it is absolutely important in business to have that third party credibility for, and the social proof from those reviews and testimonials. And a lot of people say to me, well there's, I don't have enough time to ask. And it's like, well, it's kind of a pretty important element of your business marketing, make some time. Um, and two, I don't wanna bother people. And it's like, if you've done a great job, most people are a hundred percent in because they wanna help shine and showcase what you've done for them because one, it looks good for them, and two, they wanna support you in your business ventures. And you know, if you don't ask, you don't get. And I suggest to people that, you know, if people come back and go, oh, I'm too busy, or they don't respond quite often it's because they don't actually know what they, what you want them to say. So I say to them, go to them and ask, you know, a few questions, why did you come to me? What was your problem? What was the solution that I came up with for you? And what was the outcomes? And I said, you only need a couple of sentences for it to be a kickass testimonial review. So just make it easy for them to help you help yourself.

Speaker 2: Yeah, just a little bit of guidance and then voila, <laugh>, you've got a great, great testimonial

Speaker 3: <laugh>, because you don't know what you don't know, do you? So most of us, if you know, the thing is, is that it's really easy to give a negative review. Um, it's harder for us, I don't know why I'm not a psychologist, but somewhere in our psyche we don't praise for good service. You know, we are really quick to knock someone down when they've done something wrong. So I say to people, why not be a cheerleader of another business? And if you can help another woman or man out or another human being out in business, why would you not do that? Because it benefits everybody.

Speaker 2: Hmm. On that cheerleader side of things then, uh, would you suggest that maybe business owners have, you know, an inner circle or trust some trusted advisors that they can, um, get some sound advice from but also get encouragement from?

Speaker 3: Oh, certainly. I, I know it's been, uh, a huge benefit in my business. So I'm a member of, uh, a group on the Gold Coast called the Sisters in Business. And you know, there's only, you know, eight to nine women in the group. Um, we meet monthly, um, or hop online and we, we share openly, you know, what we're struggling with, you know, we we're

sharing our wins and they're there cheering you on. They're there to, to give you some guidance if you need it because it's such an eclectic mix of people. So if you can find people like that to be in your corner, it just helps because being in small business is a very lonely place. Um, you know, most of us work from home, you know, I've got the dog, he's really not very helpful except to lift my to at most inappropriate times.

Speaker 3: Um, and quite often your family and your friends don't understand the, the journey you're on in small business. So teaming up with other people and it doesn't have to be paid. It could just be people that you are connected with through Facebook. I've done ad hoc ones heaps of times where I've reached out to a few people and said, you know, hey, I'm feeling a bit lost. Um, can we have a chat? Maybe you can give me a different perspective or a different insight because you can't solve the problems that you've got with your own thinking because that's the reason you got into the place that you're at. So having someone else's perspective and insight is incredibly valuable. Mm-hmm.

Speaker 2: <affirmative>, um, I'd like to just circle back to the awards thing because I know it's also something you're quite vocal about on, um, social media. The number of awards that are out there that aren't actually really awards, they're just a money grab. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's, it, it's just outrageous. So how can people identify what's a legitimate award and what's not?

Speaker 3: Okay, so a legitimate AOR award will have a website where there's very clear criteria. You know, they explore what the judges are looking for, there's explanations and set categories. Um, and there's a process that goes about very clear dates, what happens at each date and each milestone through the awards process. And the not so credible awards are the ones where you get emails in your inbox that say, congratulations, Annette, you've won some obscure weird category that somehow magically fits with exactly what you are doing <laugh>. And you think, I don't remember applying for this. I actually called out a friend the other day. She was promoting this award all over the place and I private message her and said, mate, I'd remove that. And she goes, why? I said, because that's just a bullshit award. All they're after is once they've told you you're a winner and you're excited, they come and hit you with this massive marketing package, you've gotta pay for your award and you've gotta pay for the promotion of the process.

Speaker 3: Like, yes, that's not an award. That is just more money into their bank account. And in saying that, a lot of people go, well, why should I have to pay a nomination or an entry fee? And I say to them, well, you go set up an awards process and you tell me how time consuming and how expensive that is. You know, you've gotta have the backend support and the right platform to support the judging process and the entry process. So a really good way to work out if it is a legit award is that you've actually gotta do something. You don't just accept your win. You've gotta answer questions. You've gotta provide facts and data and quantitative and qualitative data that you've actually gotta put some effort into it because you know who wants to, it's like every child wins a prize, but you know, like, seriously, the kid who came last, what are you gonna learn coming last? And you get a trophy, you actually have to put some effort in and show up

rather than just be there at the end. Or as I said, click on the link and say, yay, I've won an award.

Speaker 2: <laugh> a participation prize that it <laugh>. Oh

Speaker 3: That shifts me off

Speaker 2: <laugh>. So what are some legitimate awards business owners should be thinking about entering?

Speaker 3: Oh, I abs one of my favourites is the Australian Small Business Champion Awards. It's been around for over 20 years, although longevity is fantastic. There are some new awards out that have got really robust processes. So, um, the Telstra Best of Business Awards is a fantastic one. It is very involved and very expansive in terms of the questions you ask, but oh my God, that what you learn about your business and yourself is incredible. Um, the Stevie Awards International Business Awards Women in Business Awards, again, another really robust one, which has got a very stellar judging process behind the entry process. Um, the Smart Company, SMART 50 Awards are another incredible award and there's lots of industry awards like Women in Finance, women in stem, women in digital, um, you know, a lot of state-based awards like in Queensland, Brisbane, there's award mayors business awards, there's the New South Wales Business Awards. Um, oh gosh, there's many, many awards that I think, I think there's an article on Kashi's Business Builders. I

Speaker 2: Was just gonna say, you have written US an article chorus recently on kbb.

Speaker 3: Yes. All of those awards ones that I've entered, either myself, cuz I always tested on myself first, and then there are awards that we've entered our clients into and we've made the finals or we've won for them. So they've been through our very stringent like bullshit metre. Is that, is this actually something that's going to benefit the business and help them promote what they do? Or is it really just gonna have people rolling their eyes and going, yay, participation award

Speaker 2: <laugh>. What do you think makes a great award submission?

Speaker 3: I think storytelling is an absolute must. Um, of course that's bound by the number of words that you're able to write, but certainly data and facts is really important and being able to justify your claim. So if you just write, you know, the Audacious agency grew by 30% in 2022, and you don't actually say how you grew. So the judges wanna know that you've achieved, but they wanna know how you've achieved and they wanna know the significance of that achievement. So the audacious agency grew by 30% because of, you know, the webinars that we did, the posting on social media, you know, streamlining our systems and processes, and this resulted in this many clients coming on this many wins. So you're constantly backing up those claims that you are making with things that quantify what you are saying. Um, and a lot of awards ask for support documentation as an optional, I'm doing air quotes, you can't see me doing air quotes, but I'm doing them.

Speaker 3: And we say there is no optional with support documentation is that you should make the effort to put supporting documentation in, because what it does is it also gives the judges, uh, a greater insight outside of just the answering of the questions so that they can visually see, like putting graphs of your financial growth and your client growth or your sales, you know, putting images of your products and services, you know, if you've been featured in the media, put screenshots in of the articles that you've appeared in the podcast that you've been on so that they can see that your business isn't just a one trick pony that you've actually, you know, really immersed in that business space and business environment and that you're thinking about your clients and your customers is that you are actively promoting what you are doing, that you've got great solutions to people's problems and that you are acting on those. And, and that's what, you know, I think that's part of our secret source is that we don't just rely on the entry is that we will always expand further so that the judges can make that emotional connection with who you are and what you're doing.

Speaker 2: Uh, the other thing I just wanted to touch on as well is coming back to imposter syndrome that, uh, an awards process applying for awards, although you might go, oh no, it's, it will actually bring out all of my fears that I'm not good enough. It's actually a great opportunity to reflect on all the fantastic things that you've done.

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. Let's go back to imposter syndrome. It lives in our head. The amazing thing about our head is that it can't distinguish between fact and fiction. So if you're telling yourself you're a loser and you're a failure or you're you're not worth it or you're a fraud, you're gonna believe that because that's what you keep telling yourself. Going through the awards process gets out of your head all of the things that you've done. And when you actually see it in front of you, you are looking at proof of what you've accomplished. Because let's face it as, as human beings, I think particularly in western culture, um, and in small business is we do the job, we move on to the next one, we do the job, and there's not a lot of time to reflect and absorb the journey that you've been on. And awards are just so good, even from, even if you don't win from a confidence boosting point of view to just see right in front of you everything that you've achieved in a year. Um, because you know, like I said, we often don't go back and reflect on that.

Speaker 2: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, thank you so much, Annette. It's just been a pleasure having a little chat with you today and, um, chatting about, uh, imposter syndrome and awards and all the ways that we should be believing in ourselves and putting ourselves out there. Thank you again for joining me.

Speaker 3: It's my pleasure.