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## Meet the Makers: Rebecca Lewis Smith

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Co-founder of Fountain (<https://www.fountainpartnership.co.uk/>), a thriving digital marketing agency based in Norwich, Rebecca Lewis Smith is the co-host of Culture Awesome (<https://www.cultureawesome.co.uk/>). A podcast discussing everything and anything about organisational culture, Rebecca sat down with us to discuss Fountain, Lockdown and why nut dispensers are the accessory every office needs.

### Tell us about Fountain. How did it start?

Fountain was founded 12 years ago by four friends who are also two couples. We are a digital marketing agency, so we specialise in generating leads for B2B and B2C businesses. Primarily, we focus on driving traffic and improving conversion rates. Our skillset is about making sure people are spending their money online wisely and identifying areas for growth. Not just that you're not wasting money, but you're focusing on the successful strategies that will drive business growth.

### Tell us about Culture Awesome. What inspired you to start it?

In 2017, We went through a growth at Fountain where in the space of a year, we'd doubled in size from a team of 12 to 38. One of the things we noticed that if we weren't really specific about maintaining our culture and double down on the things that we loved about the culture that we had, we would change beyond recognition. It would've been very easy to lose everything that we valued. We have four directors at Fountain, so we've always been really collaborative, we support each other, that kind of thing.

From that point onwards, my focus on the business has hugely been on the culture of the business. Culture Awesome has been a collaboration with a friend of mine who had a similar approach to culture in her business. She's actually been doing it a bit longer. We're close friends, both business owners and we're both parents of children of a similar age. The idea for the podcast came up as a joke when I said the playdates our sons have where the only ones where I come

away with actions to implement in my business. We'd sit and have these conversations about 'have you read this book? I'm reading that'. Eventually, we said, 'this would make a great podcast' and we thought 'actually, it really would'. It's based on the experience of me at Fountain and my friend's business.

## **What have you learned about organisational culture from doing your podcast?**

What we talk about on the podcast is based on our own experiences in our businesses. For me, the number one thing is that culture is fundamental to running a good business. Both in terms, of looking after people and delivering good services. We're in digital marketing, so our field changes all the time. We need a culture where people want to learn. The second we have someone at Fountain who says 'I know the score', they'll be out of date within weeks because our industry changes so much. We need a culture of learning, we need a culture of being ambitious, never saying 'that's good enough', saying 'this is great, but what else can we do?'. At the end of the day, you can tell people they have to do something but if you don't have a culture of behaving in a certain way, then you'll always be managing from above and dragging people along. Whereas, when you invest in culture, it rolls itself along, and this stage the culture of Fountain surprises me, it surprises and delights me. There are moments when I think 'oh gosh, we should probably do something with that' and then the team has already solved it.

## **How has lockdown affected your company?**

Lockdown had different kinds of repercussions for us. Our clients who are in events and travel, we're obviously impacted, so that effected the business in a negative way. But equally, during this time so many businesses had digital as a part of their marketing mix. It's become a huge focus for them and one of the things we're really aware of is its so easy to waste money online. By not being strategic, by just tinkering with things, by having strategies that are about activities instead of outcome. We've seen that the experts of digital marketing is really needed to stop businesses from pouring money down the drain. We've actually had a relatively good year financially because there have been enough businesses needing our services. There were moments we didn't realise it was going to be ok, but overall we've been really lucky. We're very grateful that we're in an area that hasn't been hit badly by lockdown.

At the same time, lockdown has really impacted our culture of collaboration. We had a lovely buzz in the office. Agency life is always a little bit hectic, and suddenly everyone is working from home. It's a big change to go from a lively workplace to a quiet home office. One of the challenges we've seen is that people can be really silenced. There will be a couple of people working really closely together and don't realise there are 10 people who's knowledge would be really helpful, so its so easy for that kind of communication to not happen. So, our focus has been to make sure this isn't happening much. One of my colleagues who is in charge of training and development and we're going to come out of lockdown with better training and development structures because in the past it was always possible for it to be a bit organic. In remote working it has to be so much more structured, so when we do get back to the office, we will have a stronger training and development system. It's definitely been challenging but I think we will come through it with some positives.

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## **What is your favourite office treat?**

At Fountain, we used to snack shelves and we realised it's actually not good for you and we want to focus on health and wellbeing. Now, we have nut dispensers in the kitchen, which will feed your hunger and help you in the long term. Cashew Nuts are my favourite.

It's so easy to meet those little stress moments with sugar and I definitely don't want to do that because I get a sugar crash and I regret it later in the day. It's about investing in healthy snacks because what we're selling to our clients is the capacity for our employees to perform to the best of their abilities. At that point, investing culture is a no brainer. Anything from the right physical environment to the right snacks to the flexibility to go out for a run, whatever is going to make you feel energized for the rest of the day, is what's best for our clients and in turn really good for business.

## **What have you most enjoyed doing your podcast?**

My enjoyment of Culture Awesome is hugely linked to my co-host Emily and getting to geek out about the stuff that we're really passionate about in business. That's sort of where our friendship came from as well. Being a fellow business owner and a parent, she's one of my closest friends. There was a time in my life where it split into business contacts and Mum friends and Emily was someone who was both. To also have that passion for culture, for learning, for reading. Creating the space to record the videos together, it brought out the best in me, in terms of being open to learning, looking at things we can try at Fountain and assessing how things have gone. One of the things I'm really proud of is that we were both really honest. We talked about the things that didn't work, we talked about the things we tried and failed at, as well as saying these are the things that are working really well. There's an element of honesty and openness, where we comfortably disagree. I think it would've been harder to do if it wasn't a podcast based on a friendship.

It's led on to people reaching out to us, sometimes it's a small business asking where to start and other times it's much larger businesses and it's all really interesting conversations. It's created opportunities that I've really enjoyed.

## **What are your favourite podcasts to listen to?**

I am a huge Brene Brown fan. *Unlocking Us* which is for everyone and *Dare to Lead* which is for business leaders, they have got me through this pandemic. Just in terms of having really good insight and having amazing guests, including one guest who has written about apologies and how apologies can really matter

through to interviewing leaders about how their making incredible changes to their businesses.

### **What has been your favourite things to listen to during lockdown?**

Before lockdown I would often listen to audiobooks on Audible. I have struggled to stay in that routine during lockdown because I used to do that in the car. I have listened to music in a different way. I have started listening to Bach and Springsteen on Alexa. I've learned that musically, I'm quite set in my ways and I just listen to same thing I've been listening to for years and years, so it's been good to explore music that I'm not particularly familiar with.

### **As we come out of lockdown, how do you think it will change business culture?**

We are definitely returning to the office, but in a hybrid model rather than everyone in the office model. Any business that says you have to be the office all day every day, is going to face a struggle with their employees. While our team are missing collaborating, they're also enjoying not having to commute. Two of them have replaced their commute time with running- they were never runners before and now their signing up for marathons. We know there will be some challenges with the hybrid model, I think the culture of our business will evolve rapidly. I'm excited about it because it will be in a very positive direction. The level of trust and flexibility is so high, and we can retain that and give us the opportunity to create some really fun things.

I truly believe lockdown will give us a sense of gratitude, like going for a walk with a co-worker. There's been a lot of habits we've all built up during lockdown, both good and bad, and there is some of them we'd like to keep. For example, if you want to find time to exercise, we have the flexibility to allow for this.

I think psychology is going to busy for the next few years. We've been carrying out surveys to see our employee's feelings about the world in general and safety. On a scale from I'm happy to hug a stranger to I'm using anti-bacterial on everything I see. The interesting thing is people are as conservative right now as they were in the peak of pandemic cases. A question we've added to the survey is 'how happy are you about returning to the office?' and 'how nervous are you about returning to the office?' and we have quite a few people who scored highly on both. None of us are quite prepared for how deal with any anxiety so recognising that it's going to be amazing but also a bit nerve-wracking and we'll all have our own psychological responses. Our approach at Fountain, will be to make that okay, by talking about it and making it clear it's not just you, it's most, if not all of us. We're going to behave as if all of us are worried.

On some level, it's going to be all of us coming back from maternity leave. Not quite knowing what they're coming back to, not knowing what's changed, what's going to be ok and what's not. I definitely think we've got a journey. Not everyone will want to talk about it, so the ones who do, should. As leaders, we need to say it is ok to say I'm excited and I'm scared, and that's fine.

### **What is in the future for Fountain and Culture Awesome?**

We're hoping to have season 2 of Culture Awesome sometime soon. Emily is currently studying for a psychology degree, so we're going to shift to add a psychological element. Since season 1, Fountain has grown quite a lot and we've all of lockdown to talk about. Hopefully, it will be later this year when we can record in person.

At Fountain, we're ambitious about our growth. We're very excited about the clients we're bringing in. We have an office in Canada that's growing, and our UK office is moving to a fantastic new location. We have so much to look forward to and a really exciting year ahead.

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