

## Cast a Wider Net: How to Grow with Strategic Partnerships and Alliances with Pamela Slim

SEASON 2, EPISODE 6 (June 2025)

Announcer: Why do some companies stand out while others seem to merely show up? That's what we'll explore with leaders across multiple industries to hear how they're creating better experiences by design. And now your host, Susan Quinn.

Susan Quinn: Today I'm joined by Pamela Slim—author of *The Widest Net* and a brilliant voice in business strategy and ecosystem thinking. We dive into how to grow your business by building genuine partnerships, codifying your unique methods, and shifting from this empire-based mindset to a more community-driven growth mindset. And if you enjoy this episode, please rate, follow or share it with a colleague—it helps us grow our Best in Class community that cares about better experiences by design. Let's get started.

Welcome to the podcast, I'm so delighted to have you as our guest.

Pamela Slim: I'm so happy to be here.

Susan Quinn: You have an impressive resume, and I wanted to give our listeners a little bit about your background and how it led to your most recent book, *The Widest Net*.

Pamela Slim: Yes. Well, I have been in business 29 years this year, so just about three decades. I have had a couple different phases in my career. I was a management consultant in Silicon Valley starting in 1996. And then I did lots of change management and executive coaching and team building. It was such a fun decade of just peeking inside all kinds of different companies, small, medium and large. In about 2004, I began to notice that many people who I was working with in large companies were unsatisfied and they were kind of fascinated by my own journey of working independently. And so, I started the *Escape from Cubicle Nation* blog, which was initially written for people who wanted to leave corporate to start a business. I found that there was a bit of a disconnect in startup literature and information about the unique experience of corporate people who had grown up in corporate—when they were looking to make a shift, there were factors that were a little bit different than maybe somebody who grew up in an entrepreneurial family or somebody who never took a corporate path. So, I spent about 10 years working with early-stage startups, helping people transition. My first book, *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, came out with Penguin Random House in 2009.

And so, a couple of years ago, I started an agency where we do work with thought leaders who have really solid IP to help them productize their service business and often scale through very well-designed programs and licensing and certification. Through that work and working with a lot of clients, of course, the question is, how do I find my right clients? And that's where I leaned on

many years of doing work in more of an ecosystem, community-based way in which I was building partnerships and connections. Believe it or not, my degree in college was community development. And so that's where *The Widest Net*, the book we'll talk about today came about, is really noticing that there are very different ways that you can build a business. One is what I call the empire culture, where you're just centering yourself as that main person, and you're really trying to shine a spotlight on your own personal brand.

I saw an alternative in an ecosystem model where we really center our clients who we want to serve, and we identify the people around those clients who are providing highly complementary services like we do. So that has been really fun to bring that model to life. It feels like it integrates a lot of different parts of my experience.

Susan Quinn: There were a couple of things that stand out to me. Being deliberate of what you want to build, which is such a great start for any business. So, let's go back to how do we even know what we want to build and how do we really determine what that right client is? You get into that in your book. So, is that a good starting point?

Pamela Slim: I think it's a great starting point. There's the journey of the founder often, where you can have a vision about a certain kind of impact or change that you want to make in the world that is usually tied to expertise that you have or maybe something that you're passionate about building. So, your skills, your strength, your experience, sometimes your scars, the things you learn that maybe you don't want anybody else to suffer, and so you get very passionate about teaching a different way. So, that founder vision is often something that's an important driver, and it's never enough to have a viable business, because how many of us have had brilliant ideas that we brought out to the world and nobody cared? We have to have the market fit so that what we deem to be something that's missing is also deemed by our ideal clients to be something that is valuable, that is worth spending money on, that is clearly expressed and communicated in a way in which they're excited to take out their credit card or cut a PO. For me, in *The Widest Net*, it's really smart people with amazing IP who can make such an amazing impact in the world, but they need a very scaled and efficient way that lays the foundation for then finding other people who are on the same quest, but maybe just providing a complimentary service to help that same client achieve their goal.

Susan Quinn: You mentioned earlier the empire culture versus the ecosystem thinking. In your experience, is that the mistake that a lot of firms make is they've got that empire culture, we want to show the world we're the best. What do you see as the flaw in that approach and then the magic of the ecosystem thinking approach.

Pamela Slim: I actually see it as they are grounded in a different set of values. And so, for me, I don't have the view that everybody should always do the things the way that I see it, or they should be grounded in my same values. It's when that model is grounded upon a certain set of values that people might have, it can be effective. It's often the way in which we are taught to market our business, the way we think about competition. And some people are excited by that model. It resonates with them. We can see in business culture, and sometimes there are certain industries that operate that way. And so, to me, those aren't my set of values, but I would never say it's an incorrect set. It's more that for many people I work with, that particular perspective is not one that feels comfortable.

So, from a values perspective, I think you can have a more precise, strategic, and effective

marketing strategy one to many for reaching more people more cost-effectively through an ecosystem model rather than an empire. And what I mean by that is if you do have an empire model, there is a lot of investment in your brand, in really building up a big audience and sometimes ads and you know really generating a machine where you have the direct communication with your ideal clients and customers. You're the one who's driving all of the incoming leads, often called, you know, fans or followers. And so, from that perspective, I think in an ecosystem model, as an example, as we look at maybe a shared client, what's a favorite client of yours? Can you describe like who you love to work with?

Susan Quinn: They are in professional services for the most part. They have a growth mindset, and they also believe in partnerships, that together we are better. They are grounded in really strong core values that are clear. They are articulated internally. It's what they hire for and ultimately would fire for because it goes against the brand. They remain curious and they know that they don't have all the answers and that we are in partnership. We're not a vendor to them. And so those are our sweet spot clients.

You talk about investing in the brand and there's a lot in that. I feel like you have to. I mean, foundationally, that brand does need to be built. But I think you get into in your book, and you expand so beautifully on what we talk about are the steps around building that ecosystem. So, a lot of it is that brand beginning of your mission, your values, identifying who you are and where you're going. But the watering holes where they gather, which is one of the magic formula that you give out. How do you start to think about that?

Pamela Slim: This directly springs from the example. And I swear we have the exact same description of ideal clients [laughs].

Susan Quinn: [Laughter].

Pamela Slim: So, I was like, yes, yes, yes, as you were describing it, so what I love about your description is you have both kind of demographic information, people being in service-based businesses, as well as some affective characteristics of values that they share, approaches they have to doing work, expectations they might have of how they work. And so, when we think about that, they are probably, in addition to working with you, and I 1000% agree with you that branding is necessary for everybody. It's so important to have harmonious branding that's really reflecting the strengths of who you are. That is most effective, I think, where you do understand the other players in the ecosystem surrounding your ideal clients.

Events are probably the biggest watering hole of all because you have ideal clients that are the attendees participating in the event. If you are a speaker, which I always recommend, if you're going to be in a watering hole, try to get yourself on stage. But your fellow speakers are what I call peanut butter and jelly partners, PB&J partners, people with highly complementary but non-competitive services to what you provide. I often ask my clients, if you were only given the chance to go to one event this year, then what would that event be and why? Sometimes you start to notice people are saying, oh, wow, well, this is one I never miss, whether it's Salesforce or TED or whatever the event would be. And that could give you an indication that that's a good watering hole for you to be, because it is a place where somebody else wonderful, the event organizer has assembled all of these different ideal clients, great partners, and sponsors who could be people that you could be connecting with to expand your audience.

One of the great things about products and services, a lot of the large companies like Salesforce that I mentioned, you know, with Dreamforce, they often have really large conferences that they're sponsoring. If you find that a lot of your customers use that software, that is a fantastic place for you to be as an expert. So that's part of the strategic analysis is for you to look around that ecosystem and find the places in person and online where other people have already gathered your ideal clients so that when you show up, if you're doing your job right of really communicating your message effectively and branding it appropriately, they say, oh my gosh, where have you been all my life? You know, like this is such a perfect fit. But for you, all you had to do is show up and be brilliant, and that's really effective use of your time and energy.

Susan Quinn: How do you encourage your clients to find that unique offer that others can't refuse?

Pamela Slim: We have a method in the agency, we call the thumbprint method, which is made of three components. There's the market fit, will it sell? The method, will it work? And the model, will it stick? So, any effective service or product really has to be designed according to those three pieces. And all of us have probably had the experience where let's say somebody is exceptional at market fit. They have amazing branding where they've done a really good job at you know showcasing their expertise. They are great copywriters. They're really good at sales and marketing. And so, they can get people excited about purchasing. And then sometimes when that's their main focus of just selling to customers, they were a little bit disappointed in the way that it was delivered. Or, you have often the most genius people in the world. I feel like these are so many of my clients who are amazing at the method, they can have a hard time actually connecting and communicating with their audience because their strength is not market fit, and that's when they need help with folks like you to be able to really synthesize in a way that is meaningful for the market they wanna serve, why they are an amazing provider, why this method is something that's really gonna solve people's problems.

The model part of thumbprint is really, when I say, will it stick? It is a way in which you're designing your method so that it is easy for people to remember to keep doing it and it's easy to refer and spread. So that to me is kind of the sweet spot of what it is that you have to work with people to find because it's not only about market fit. You ideally want to be designing something that people will never forget that they just integrate into the way that they do things because it's been so impactful to them.

When those parts are done right, then it makes your job so much easier, right? When you're doing that positioning because you know exactly how to be highlighting it. The more time that goes on, I'm like, you can never ignore branding. Never, ever, ever. It is the thing that wraps everything together, and when you have a great way to articulate it as well as a very visually appealing, effective way, it helps to communicate an underlying value.

Susan Quinn: I'd love if we could go back to the instructional designer. You're helping people take their IP and turn it into products. Am I saying that correctly?

Pamela Slim: It is. One of the ways to think about it is I often use the metaphor of magic. Those of us that have been service providers for a long time, whether you're a coach or a consultant or an accountant, you know very often you can show up with your own magic, your experience, and in that moment with your client, you just know how to make things happen, whether it's facilitating a session or solving a problem. Very often people who are really highly competent, who are running

their professional services firm, just get used to relying upon everything that's in their head and their experience to know specifically how to address problems with clients. That is always the starting point where you have that market fit, making sure you can help people consistently, that you know how to get clients coming in the door and paying you well, and that's a really important piece. Over time, think about it more as documenting your core methods, your approach, your process that is unique to the way that you run your business so that operationally, you're really codifying your specific approach and you're building out that methodology so that people other than you can deliver that same magic as you without you having to be in the room.

We call it productizing your service business. It is a choice that business owners can make. I have known plenty of very happy, well compensated, you know, professional service businesses that never move to that place because it's not a priority. Maybe they just really love to have people showing up and using their magic and not going through that documentation. But for us, the difference is for people who want to go more on that journey of centering their methodology and really building out a more structured, organized approach to business is it does allow them first to scale in a very different way. Not just with adding more people to come in but really being more effective at how you're delivering it. And then it also provides the foundation for certifying or licensing others to use the IP. But really what happens in the productized service journey is your method becomes more the main character. So, it's not, Susan's amazing and incredible to work with, and every time we come together, magic happens in the room, all which is true [laughs], but it becomes more this method I will never forget. I'm always teaching other people about it. I can't wait to share it with everybody in our firm. So that as a matter of course, every new person that comes into our company is going to be going through this process. And that's where you don't have to personally be in the room. And that to me is really something that leads to scale. And then also eventually to sale, because as we start to work backwards, the things that will make a really strong business are often things like protected IP methods, models, of course, large customer segments, clearly articulated and operationalized profitable delivery of services that have been really well thought through and streamlined, and the ability to eventually move the founder out, which is usually the desire of both the founder and the acquiring company, so that the method is really doing the work.

Susan Quinn: Well, I was listening intently because it's not only a problem for... I think many firms that we do work for, I would venture to say for our own firm. You niche out, you do certain things well, but you mentioned the word scalable and where the method becomes the main character so that the founders aren't always in the room. In your experience, could everyone, if this is a desire to find the IP, you can uncover the magic of that methodology or codifying your approach can be found everywhere in your experience?

Pamela Slim: 100 percent. It is really that genesis of paying so much attention over the decades, like working with just thousands of people, you know, and noticing that when you are delivering a particular service, you know, when you're the one who's doing it, you do not notice all the things that you do in order to set it up. That's often that first piece is where you do begin to understand, you know, what is unique about your approach? What is the particular problem that it's solving? How do you go through it?

For people that are interested in that journey, then there's often just that assessment of where are you in your business, and the readiness, you know, do you already have parts of things documented and not others? You know, have you, been working on a model or a method that you know is pretty

good, but it needs to be tightened? Or are you somebody who's just never really thought about it, where you need to start from the beginning to document what that process is.

Susan Quinn: I love the whole thumbprint notion. Will it sell? Will it work? Will it stick? Is there a formula that after a couple of months, if this isn't happening, go back to the drawing board? What is your guidance there?

Pamela Slim: It is. We have a couple of different ways. We have a cohort-based class that often we work with people in the early stages to begin to iterate in each of these different areas. They're sharpening and honing their methodology. They're working with visual depictions of their model to make it easier to communicate, and they're also working on copy and getting their client definitions right. What they do then is they take it out and they put it in proposals, and they share it with people when they're in client conversations. That is, to me, the only real way in which you can test if something is actually going to sell, is if you can sell it. The market fit and the value proposition and the way that you're positioning it is really all based on what it is that you're designing. Because it is, we tend to work with a little bit more mature businesses—you know, it's not just people who are starting out, it's people who've been doing this work for a long time—there often is a lot more strength in the method and the model. It's often shaping, taking out extraneous pieces, tightening things up, simplifying it, making it more clear to how it is that it works. Then you're working on the market fit. And that's where an iterative approach is so important, where you just have to keep coming back to the drawing board.

Susan Quinn: Well, you mentioned in that discussion there so many of the traits that show up in the highest performing companies globally. And I think that whole simplification aspect, that's where a lot of people fumble because it's, you may be the best, but if you can't succinctly say it or in a simple way, be able to move that notion forward, will it work and will it stick? I think sometimes we don't spend enough time mastering the cadence of that. And you know, this isn't a complaining session, but we want it to all happen quickly and, you know, do the strategy session and then why is it working?

Pamela Slim: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: And, you know, we'll have people come back. Well, you know, we just had the strategy session and what we're not seeing the needle moving. Well, it just doesn't happen overnight. And it is a long-term approach. We want wins, certainly, but I think what you've given us is so many different ways to look at your business. And as we're kind of wrapping up here, for someone who maybe has had a little bit of a silo thinking more of the empire approach.

Pamela Slim: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: What advice would you give them if they want to have more scale and they want to grow their business? What would you suggest that they start doing maybe beyond reading your book?

Pamela Slim: Yeah, I think one of the best places to start is to slowly begin to identify people who have some highly complementary but non-competitive services to you. And so, this is that area where at first, the metaphor I use a lot for people who follow DC Comics is the Justice League, for people who follow Marvel is the Avengers, but were you to imagine that you had this group

of superheroes that were surrounding your ideal clients? So they're people you really respect. They're aligned with your values. Maybe they're companies that you love, you use their products, your clients use their products, and you just feel really solid about them. And maybe you've just never thought of approaching them to do a collaboration, or you've never thought about going to the conference that they have, realizing that, oh, wait a minute, you know, I love their product, my clients do. So probably more people like us are going to be showing up at that event.

I often as a very tactical part of this strategy, is just encourage people to set up a 15 minute conversation where you could say something like, you know, maybe it's somebody you already are kind of aware of, or, you know, they've referred business to you or vice versa. And you can say, you know, I would love to spend 15 or 20 minutes in a really focused way, understanding specifically, like, who is your ideal client right now? What are the specific things that you're selling? Because I know that you provide such great services and I think we share like the same kind of client, and so I'd love to hear more specifically so that I can be clear about referring, and then also I can share what I'm working on. And often starting from this, it could be as simple as that, where you could just have that 15 or 20 minute conversation, which either will reinforce for you that, Ooh, this could be somebody over time that if you're thinking strategically about it, could be more rigorously like referring each other's services or maybe you could do a joint webinar. You know, you have somebody who provides legal services and somebody who does financial services and they could do a joint webinar showing where sometimes those things come together. That would mean expanding both people's audiences.

I will say there's a reason why people can be reticent. Some people have been down the road where they've done specific partnerships that didn't work out. I call it, let's put on a show. You know, let's say you and I meet at a conference. We're like, oh my gosh, we serve the same client. Let's put on a show. And before we know it, we're like writing a book together or producing an event. And then this wouldn't happen with us, but right. Let's say as we get into it, we realize that we really have different values, and we're not aligned in how we work. And then sometimes you're already in the middle of it and it's really hard to back out. So, I actually advocate for little, small ways over time that you can just get to know each other, you know, have small, low risk experiences of working together. Maybe you're both, you know, speaking at a conference and you can, you know, hang out and talk, or you could introduce one to the other to somebody else and slowly really work with people over time to see if there is that natural organic connection.

Susan Quinn: You just reinforce the power of when you have your core values, your purpose, what you stand for, and if you find wherever it is, your ecosystem, your ideal client, that's when magic happens.

Pamela Slim: Yes.

Susan Quinn: And I'm just thinking through of where something didn't quite work. And usually it was, there was a misalignment of those core values. As we're wrapping up, let me ask you this. I end each session with what do you do, Pamela, to keep bettering your best, to sharpening your pencils so that you remain at the top of your game and that you are delivering uniquely valuable things for your clients? What does that look like?

Pamela Slim: It's so fresh in my mind because there are two key pieces of it. And one is having excellent team members that are able to share as we do in my own company, really honest, clear,

helpful feedback to each other that sometimes is not the easiest feedback, but where we're really, we call it, you know, kind of a healthy debate, sometimes founders who have strong opinions, which is definitely me, I can be carried away by my own narrative. And if left alone, I could think, you know, I'm the one who has all the best answers. That is not true at all. I have really, really strong expertise and I'm very proud of myself in the areas where I shine. I have developed an awareness because I have excellent team members of the areas that really, they are much better equipped to handle. Everything works better when they're involved in it.

The other thing is having really great clients. And I just had an experience, I was just telling my client where I did a meeting this morning, And, we had been in a conversation and I kind of had an offhanded, you know, comment that I was sharing with a team member that I really should have been sharing, you know, with the client. And they very clear and kindly and directly gave me feedback after, you know, of like, you really should have addressed that issue with me in the other meeting. And, you know, besides my moments of mortification of like never wanting to do anything to upset the client, we had the experience of really going through addressing an issue, talking about it, repairing it. And they were saying, I shared that because I care about maintaining the relationship. And I feel like that was just sharpening every part of my awareness and my skill as a leader for making sure that I am just as impeccable as I can be in my communication. I feel like every day that happens because of the people that we're working with who are brilliant, they have very high standards, they have very high ethics. And I feel like I must every day, rise to that challenge.

Susan Quinn: Well, if you want to up your game, then make sure you're upping everything in that community. If we stay satisfied, then we know that that's where a lot of issues can happen because someone's going to come in and pluck you out if you think you're the best at whatever. You have so much wisdom and grateful for your time sharing it today. Where can listeners get your book?

Pamela Slim: Anywhere books are sold. You can just Google *The Widest Net* and you can find it.

Susan Quinn: Highly encourage it. It's a great read; it's a great resource to come back to time and time again. It's not you read it, and you put it on your bookshelf. You read it and you keep it next to you so that you can bring it into the next meeting. But Pamela, thank you so much for all that you shared today. And we will continue to spread the wisdom of how everyone can cast a wider net and create better experiences by design and growing their company, growing their team in a smarter way. Thank you.

Pamela Slim: I appreciate it. Thank you.

Announcer: Thank you for being part of our best in class community. And until next time, keep battering your best.

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