

## Scaling Up Services

Episode 221 - Erin Fults

<https://www.scalingupservices.com/podcast/221-erin-fults>

Erin Fults, Founder & CEO, Acorn Studio

Erin Fults is a strategist, coach, implementer, and the founder of Acorn Studio, a business coaching and marketing consultancy. Erin passionately believes that healthy, sustainable small businesses can change the world, and she helps owners implement simple frameworks that maximize revenue and productivity so they can confidently grow the business they love.

Erin is a Storybrand Certified Guide and a Business Made Simple Certified Coach. The results for her clients are consistent leads, clear marketing strategies, and confident business owners. A right-and-left brainer, Erin's background includes more than a decade of experience growing a professional photography studio and five years organizing and co-hosting an annual conference that attracted small business owners from around the world.

When she isn't obsessing over her clients' success, Erin and her husband, Jon, along with their three children, love hosting friends and family at their home in Mississippi. Most afternoons there are as many as 12 neighbor kids playing in her yard after school. When she can catch a few moments to herself, Erin enjoys cycling and reading. The verdict is still out on whether or not consuming stacks of marketing and business strategy books actually constitutes a hobby.

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## EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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### 0:02

You're listening to Scaling Up Services where we speak with entrepreneurs, authors, business experts and thought leaders to give you the knowledge and insights you need to scale your service based business faster and easier. And now here is your host business coach Bruce Eckfeldt.

### 0:22

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### 0:55

Welcome every one this is Scaling Up Services. I'm Bruce Eckfeldt, I'm your host.our guest today is Erin Fults. She is founder and CEO at ACORN studio, we're going to talk to her about marketing and what companies can do to scale their businesses effectively, smartly, using good marketing strategies, good marketing tactics. It's an area that I think so many companies struggle with, they kind of reach a point of kind of word of mouth, kind of the hustle. And then they kind of tap out and you have to get marketing, right, if you're really going to generate qualified leads, and you're really going to grow the business. So excited for this conversation. I'm excited to hear Erin's approach, she has a pretty interesting and unique way of really tackling marketing for companies in this growth mode. So I'm sure we're gonna learn a lot with that. Erin, welcome to the program. Thanks, Bruce.

### 1:00

I'm happy to be here.

### 1:03

It's a pleasure to have you. So before we kind of dig into marketing, and what's good, what you can do to kind of scale your business, let's learn a little bit about you and your background. How did you get into this space? How do you get into marketing? Give us a little backstory? Sure. Yeah.

### 1:56

So I actually started a completely different business back in 2008. I ran a photography studio for about 12 years. And as I was running that business got in a year or two into that kind of a classic. Like, I had a skill set photography and had people coming to me asking me to take photos, that sort of thing and thought, you know, this looks like this could turn into a business. So I started a business and very quickly realize, as I'm sure many of your listeners have, as well, that having the skill set is one thing running a business is a totally different thing. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. So thankfully, as I got in, really discovered that I loved business, and photography just became this tool for me to be in business. And so like any business owner, starting a starting, a company had to figure out all the pieces marketing included. And I really came to love marketing, I was introduced to a

framework called the story brand framework that really opened my eyes and I thought, okay, all of these things that I had been doing intuitively to market, this photography business, it gave me handles to do that in a more methodical, repeatable way that really made a huge difference in that company. And so fast forward a bit. And as I got further in with my photography studio, I ended up serving a lot of small businesses on the visual side of helping them develop, you know, custom stock photography, some brand images, those sorts of things. And it became evident really quickly that helping them with the visual side, the photos, the graphics, that kind of thing was only this tiny piece of the much larger marketing puzzle, and many of them really had no clue how to leverage the images alongside strategy, and words with their marketing to really make it work well for them and to see results. So I found myself kind of thrown into adding services and going oh, well, I can actually help you not just with the images part, I can help you with these other pieces, the strategy that you know, what's the message you're using in your marketing. And so that snowballed into me doing what I do today. So no more photography at all. And now I entirely do brand message development, marketing strategy, helping service based businesses develop a marketing sales funnel so they can really grow and scale their businesses.

#### **4:21**

Yeah, I love these stories of pivots. Right? When when you're in kind of one business, and you realize that the need shifts are bigger, you see a bigger opportunity, a bigger need that you could solve even better. How what was that? Like? Like when what was the moment that you realize that oh, my gosh, like, I need to shift the focus of this business, like, how did that transpire for you? Yeah, it's

#### **4:41**

a great question. And I'll be really candid that, you know, the further I got into into photography, I loved it. I loved the medium. There was a lot that I liked about it, but I realized about eight or nine years in that I needed an exit strategy. It was not something that I could do long term, not to keep it to the size that I was not interested in growing and scaling a huge team in that particular business. And so it's very physical, you know, schlepping cryptography gear around that kind of thing. And I thought, I need an exit strategy. And so that was part of it, that that led me to looking for other opportunities and looking for ways that I could transition out of that. And so doing this marketing work, in some ways, kind of found me, I mean, as silly as that sounds, kind of fell in my lap. And after I started applying the marketing strategies and principles that I was learning in my own business and seeing results, and then same with these other businesses that were coming to me, and began to just see that it was solving such a larger problem for them. And the photography was how it was really fun, candidly, to be able to see the results and to see just to see them begin to thrive and feel like they were finally had solved for a problem they've been struggling with for so long, and something that I really enjoyed doing. And so, and it was something that I could see from a long term perspective, in my own career, I could see a path where I could take that a lot further and a lot longer than the work that I had been doing.

#### **6:17**

Yeah, yeah, I think it's it's a it's a story that I hear a lot, you know, of businesses, individuals that start out kind of in one business and then realize, and you know, they need to pivot and find something else. And I would say, in some respects, it's a story I don't hear I hear enough of people, people kind of get stuck in, you know, they get attached, right, they get attached to the thing that they do kind of their egos attached to the kind of the expertise they have, you know, even if they there's a bigger opportunity, it's hard for them to kind of let go of that. Has there been any regret remorse about not not doing photography anymore? How has that played out for you?

**6:48**

Yeah, no regret at all. Yeah, there are challenges with it, though, when you've been known for a particular service for such a long time. Like, I still have people who go, so you know, locally, friends and things like that, who who go, Hey, how's business going? And I'm like, Well, I'm actually not doing photography anymore. And they go, Oh, really, you know. And so that takes a little while, it takes a little while to transition fully. I mean, internally, I've been transitioned for a long time, externally, there are challenges that come with that kind of transition. And so still navigating those some today even but yeah, no regret, no regret.

**7:25**

No, yeah, I started as an architect and got into tech, and then was an entrepreneur and then sold my company I've been advising and I still my grandmother for many years kept asking me how architecture was going. And I just, I just gave up, I just called her, it's great. To explain what happened. I love it. That's funny. So tell me like, as you kind of saw the opportunity to make the pivot, like, how did you go about doing that? What was the kind of the steps that you took to kind of shift your focus and start building the other business? All us a little bit about that journey?

**7:52**

Yeah. So I mentioned earlier that when I was trying to figure out my own marketing, with my photography studio, I was introduced to the story brand framework, hopefully six or seven years ago is right as that there's a book called Building a story brand by Donald Miller, if you've heard of that, I was introduced to that really before the book even came out. And all of a sudden, these light bulbs went off for me where it really made so much sense this framework of is really, if your listeners are not familiar with Story, the Story brand framework, all it is is a messaging framework, it's basically a filter you can use to develop a brand message marketing message. So you know that you're really clear. And you are inviting your customers clients into a story where they are the hero and you are coming alongside them as a guide and learning that framework and applying it to my other business to my photography business. And seeing results from that. That was the beginning in a lot of ways. But I found myself going, I need to tell all these other small businesses that I was working with in a different capacity, they need to know about this. And so I started sharing that resource with them and seeing that they were excited about it, but they really needed help figuring out how to implement it. So I ended up going and getting certified as a story brand guide, and went through extensive training on that to be certified and trained to help companies implement that particular framework. And so those were the practical steps that I took in terms of just honing and growing my own skill set and going out and getting the education I mean, we live in this world that we can go get whatever education we need to get to fill in the gaps, which is so incredible, and I think it's under utilized in a lot of ways. But that was that was the path I took and haven't looked back.

**9:37**

Yeah, and I'm always curious in these kind of transition stories like what did you have to let go of like what did you have to stop doing or kind of give up in order to successfully really go all in on this new business?

**9:48**

Yeah, so I certainly began to transit transition away in the photography business saying no to a lots of different types of shoots and work and really began to hone in and focus my work that I was working just with businesses, I was no longer doing kind of the the buffet of Family Services and so forth with photography. And so I began to let go of a lot of that years prior actually, it was the transition happened over several years. But really, it became this tipping point where I go, the work coming in was far more on the marketing side. And you get to the point, I got to the point where I said, I've got to say no to and just start referring out everything on the

photography side and go all in. And that's what I did. And so quickly, it you know, the scale tipped completely, and everything I was doing was marketing related, and was not photography at all anymore. And the, you know, the results of that have been had been really fantastic.

**10:55**

Yeah. So tell me a little bit about how you kind of the overall process you use, give us some details around kind of the strategy that you use. So we've got a little understanding of the kind of the framework.

**11:06**

Yeah, so as I mentioned, the framework that I use, really is a foundational framework is called the story brain framework. And so when I'm working with clients, the very first thing we do is one figure out, hey, what's working, what has not worked in your marketing so far? You know, what, what are you doing currently to market your business? And the results are the answers I get they're really vary by client in terms of where they're coming to me from. And from there, we always start with brand message development, because even if a company's been around for a while, even if they're clear about you know, what they offer and what they do, I have yet to work with a company that does not have gaps to close in clearly communicating what they offer what they do in a way that connects with their ideal client or customer. And so we first do some foundational brand message development work to go how let's, let's figure out what's the story you're telling in your marketing, the story you're actually inviting your clients and customers into. So that's the very first thing that we do is is brand message development. And then from there, we develop their marketing plan. And that's going to look different depending on the company. And really, depending on the business they're trying to grow. I find that in the world that we live in with marketing gurus, and you know, there's constantly new tactics and new platforms and things coming out. And it's really easy to get distracted by shiny object syndrome. And, you know, I often see and even work with clients who come to me going, should I be on this platform, and I should be doing this, and what should we be doing here, and they're all over the map, as it comes to these tactics. They're there thinking through and trying to decide if they should be doing with their marketing, but they've not slowed down long enough to go, what's the business you're actually trying to build? And then what are those goals? And let's develop a marketing plan that serves those specific goals, not just what everybody online says that you need to be doing. So those are the first couple of things that I always start with, when I'm working with a new client.

**13:05**

Yeah. And how do you tackle some of those kind of different sort of tactical choices, right? I mean, like, everyone's like, on Instagram, you should be doing SEO, you should, you know, do events like, these seems like they're still different strategies and ways out there, you know, writing books doing podcasts, right? What are the things that you really kind of focus on? Or what's the, what's the kind of the set of choices? And then how do you make the choice?

**13:28**

Yeah, so it again, depending on it, so you're, you know, scaling up services, your your audience is all about scaling. And so, not all of the companies that I work with are trying to scale at the level that your audience necessarily is, some are, and some have, and are, you know, well on their way to that, but if it's a smaller business, who says, you know, I'm not looking to I'm just a regional, I want to serve a local demographic, whatever their version of local, however large or small, that is, their marketing strategy, and their tactics are going to look really different than a company that wants to be known nationally or globally. Right. You know, so those local, more of a local regionally based, especially professional service, I work a lot with like Home

Services, businesses, so H back companies, realtors, landscape architects, folks that are serving a local demographic, well, they don't necessarily unless they are trying to build a brand that is known nationally, and they're trying to build kind of a subset of a personal brand, the owner within that they don't need to they don't need to go be on podcast necessarily. They don't need to be seeking out speaking engagements, but their local SEO needs to be really strong and then they need to make sure that you know from a local, the ads that they're running and the way that they're showing up in local networking circles, things like that, that strategy is, you know, really different than so somebody who does want to grow and scale a nationally or a global brand. And so those are some of the questions that I asked and we try to figure out and go, Okay, well, what's the next step to get there? At core? Every single client that I work with we they need a marketing sales funnel? And all that is is they need a way to go okay, how are we getting customers in the door? Like how are we getting leads in the door? How are they finding out about us? So that could be website traffic, it could be guesting on podcast or writing a blog. And they're you know, getting inbound traffic that you know, those are tactics, but you know, how are they getting traffic? How are they capturing those leads? Is it capturing email addresses and then using a automated email sales sequence or something like that, on the back end of that, to nurture those people into the sale? What is their sales process look like? You know, if it's getting on a call first versus like a buy now situation, which I'm guessing with many of your, your listeners, that's the case, because if you're service based, it's a you know, there's some human connection or human one to one interaction needed. And so, you know, we're going to pay what how do we? How do we get them to show up on your website? Once they get on your website? How are you capturing their information? And then how are you nurturing them to get them to the next thing you need them to do to move down the pipeline of doing business with you?

#### **16:20**

Yeah. What are the big challenges for service companies in this process? Is there any common hurdles, obstacles, you know, challenges in terms of decision making? What have you noticed about folks in the service sector when they go to kind of really implement a smart marketing strategy?

#### **16:36**

Yeah, I think the first place and I mentioned this is the first place I start with with all of my clients, but is developing a clear brand message, I think service companies often take for granted, especially if they're super obvious. So like, I have a client, that's a landscape lawn care company. And that's a very obvious service, right? I mean, you can land on somebody's website. And surely they would know that that's what that company, that's what the service that they offer. However, I have found that, especially when you have very obvious services like that, or say, an H fat company, I have another client, that's an H back in plumbing company, it's easy to go, oh, well, it's really obvious what we do. Like, nobody should be confused about that. But as a result, they don't take the time to develop a brand message story that really helps set them apart from everybody else in their market. And that invites their customers clients into a story. And so when they skip that, they've skipped the opportunity to invite people into a story that they really engage with at more than just a Oh, you provide plumbing services, or you provide lawn care services, or whatever it is. And instead, they could be really tapping into empathy and the problem that they're solving for their customer, if they're smart in in developing a really clear brand message story to invite people into. So that's the thing that I see most people skip, and as a result when you get into the tactics, so what are the words on your website? What does your social media posts say? Or what are the ads, they're disjointed, they're all over the place. And there's not a common consistent marketing message. So that's the first place that I see mistakes made often is just skipping the foundational step on the path to go and we just need people in the door, we need to run ads, we need to,

you know, whatever the tactic is in skipping the foundational work that's really going to make the biggest difference long term.

**18:35**

You know, one of the things I always find a challenge with the companies I work with, on the server side is service companies love to chase revenue, right? And just kind of do anything for anyone, how do you help companies really kind of zero in on, you know, a core customer a core product service? Like, what is that kind of? How does that process work for you when you're when you're working with folks?

**18:55**

Yeah, so some of its going, okay, where has the majority of your revenue come from already, and identifying that, and even just looking to go, unfortunately, a lot of times, companies don't take the time to look at those numbers and go, Yeah, you could make generate revenue in 15 different areas. But where's the core of that coming from? And what is the main? What's the main service that's getting somebody in the door first and really focusing on that from a marketing perspective of if you have a series of services that it could be that they hinge on each other? So most identifying why do most people come to you to begin with marketing and messaging for that, and then once they're in the door, it's far easier to you know, upsell them or add additional service offerings on but if you spread your message too thin in you know, we solve 15 problems instead of being known for one, you really start to see problems when it comes to your marketing being effective. And so helping them figure out okay, what is the primary reason people are coming to you and and then from there, what's the customer journey you want somebody to take if they purchase this particular service? You know, let's say it's a lawn care company. Okay, well, they're just needing you to mow their yard. Well, that's one thing once you get there, where what are the other services that you could add on top of that, or offer to them, that they are in a maybe in a headspace to then consider that they weren't when they were just trying to get the initial problem solved? Does that make sense?

**20:29**

Yeah, no, absolutely. And I love that idea of, you know, looking at your current customer base, and like, where do you where do you make profit? Right? A lot of times, you can just focus on the revenue, but what's what are your real profitable and pleasurable customers? And then let's figure out how to how to find more of those like we can, I always joke that, you know, we want to we want to scale success, not problems. A bunch of customers that are a pain in the ass, and you don't make money on but let's not find more of those. Let's pull those out of the mix. Absolutely. Yeah. In terms of, you know, once you've got a good pipeline for developing qualified leads, like how do you help them with that kind of sales process or making sure that they've got a good sales process? Actually close on those leads?

**21:08**

Yeah, so I, I'm actually working with a H fac plumbing company right now. And so most people who come in the door for a company like that they're coming because they have a really acute problem, your air is not working, I live in the south. So if this is summer, in your ears, networking, big problem, right? And so getting people to, like, they know, they're problem aware, when they get there, they know what they need, I need my air to work. But once they've fixed that initial problem, and got in the door, now it's like, okay, well, how do you maximise on that revenue, and that's, you know, upselling, to a maintenance service that's, you know, subscription based, that kind of thing. They also serve a lot of commercial clients as well. And so one of the things that we're looking at and working on right now is like, Okay, getting the leads, like you said, in the door is one thing, but then closing that sale. So we're working on everything from not just your external marketing message to get

people say to your website, or to call you and then nurturing them to be ready to buy initially. Now it's what does your proposal for your commercial maintenance plans look like? When you're going out to try to find those commercial clients and convert those into long term recurring maintenance clients? What's your what is your proposal look like? Is it you know, a Word doc that, you know, just has a price on it? And, you know, bullet points? Or are you also leveraging your marketing message in the context of something like a proposal, as well. So you know, we're doing everything from developing a proposal template for them to use. So that is also consistent with their marketing message every touchpoint their potential customers have with them is consistent from the very first interaction all the way to closing, closing that sale. And then beyond, you know, what is what is your follow up process look like? What does your what is your customer appreciation process look like? You know, people often stop when, when money has been exchanged, when really you want to go from not just the making an initial sale, but turning them into raving, raving clients and customers that send you referrals. That's where the gold is. And so we look at each part of that process, just methodically going through once we got one piece of the puzzle working. Okay, how can we move on to the next piece of the puzzle? So we're optimizing all the way through that entire funnel?

**23:24**

Yeah. And what are some of the more kind of interesting or different types of businesses that you've worked with? Give us some examples of some of the companies you've helped?

**23:32**

Yeah, so So I mentioned, you know, home service businesses, lawn care, landscape architect, or designer, ah, vatten plumbing companies. I've also worked with several nonprofits, which, which is sort of a departure from that a bit. And that that can be fun. I've worked with a handful of like a combination software and service company where they do both there have a software component, but they also have very personalized training that they do. So it's this combo, you know, scaled software, as well as service component of what they're doing. And that's geared toward banks and credit unions is their particular client. And so have really worked with a broad a broad range of companies that do all all kinds of things.

**24:19**

Yeah. And how do you generate your leads? Yet it's your system for getting fulfilling your funnel. Yeah, so

**24:28**

So everything from being on podcasts like this one, as well as I do a lot of local speaking at local groups. And so if you are in any kind of service based business that there is some sort of education that you can provide for your in the context of where your ideal clients are. That's a fantastic way to generate leads and that's been a great way for me has been local networking groups speaking engagements, helped just sharing The framework that I use with with potential clients for them to see the power of how you can use story to invite someone into, into doing business with you in a way that's, that's really powerful and is really clear. And that's been the primary couple of ways that I've brought leads in.

**25:17**

So excellent. And so for, for folks listening here that are kind of thinking about their marketing strategy, how they can grow and scale the business, how to enjoy leads, where do you start? What questions would you give them to kind of think about mull over to really start figuring out their next steps?



**25:32**

Yeah, so So first, first place to start is what is do you have a clear marketing message? Are you clear on the problem you solve for your customers, clients? And are you communicating that really clearly on your website, in your emails and your other other marketing collateral? So that's the first first piece? Are you communicating that problem? Clearly? Are you communicating clearly how you make your customers life better? So it's not just about being clear about the product or service that you offer? But it's also going okay, but how does that make your customers life better? So I can say, Yes, I offer brand message development in and marketing consulting. But if I don't connect the dots and go, No, I'm really helping folks that feel like they, you know, are just marketing by the seat of their pants have just never really figured out a marketing system and helping you finally figure that out and get a system that works for the first time. That speaks differently. So you need to do the same for for your company is figure out, you know, how, how are you communicating how you make your customers life better. And then are you showing empathy, that that's a huge piece in a marketing message is showing empathy, that you understand the problem your customers clients are up against, and you can help them overcome that. So they can, they can get the thing that they want, if they do business with you. And then giving a really clear plan for the next steps somebody needs to take to do business with you, and then calling them into clear action. So all of your marketing material, your website being the first place, I would start. So many times I see customer or clients that are there on active on social, and they're just not getting the results that they want, because they may be driving traffic to their website from social media. But if somebody gets to their website and has no clue what they do, or is not clear how to move forward and doing business with them, it's like sending somebody to a kitchen strainer, you pour the water in and all the leads are just falling out the bottom. And so looking at your website and going is that optimized, because all of your your external, other efforts, whether it's social, or ads, or speaking engagements, or whatever the tactic you're taking, or the form of media, it's taking all of it should ultimately be sending people back to your website. And if your website's not optimized to capture leads, and then convert those leads, you're really missing out on opportunity. And so I have yet to work with a client who did not have a lot of headroom to optimize their website. So that's the first place that I would start for anybody. And then from there going, Hey, are you are you engaging your your potential customers leads? Are you engaging them through email? Like, are you are you building an email list, that email is not dead. And it's more powerful than social in many ways. And so I'm looking at email marketing as as a strategy to use would be really, really wise, because you own that list. And you can continue to to speak to your customers straight into their inbox if you use something like email. So those are the first kind of three things that I would look at for any business is, you know, are those three things, optimize? Well, your message, your website, and then some sort of email strategy to regularly engage, engage your customers clients

**28:46**

are in this amount of pleasure. If people want to find out more about you about the work that you do, what's the best way to get that information?

**28:51**

Yeah, so they can find me My website is the th e acorn team.com. And if you go to the acorn team comm forward slash su s, I'll have some resources for your audience there, Bruce, just to questions that they can ask to begin the process of developing a really clear message as well as a checklist of things you want to make sure that your website includes so it's optimized to convert browsers into buyers. And then you can find me on LinkedIn or Instagram at Erin Fults in Fults within s,

**29:23**

right? They'll make sure that all the links and everything are on the show notes and people can click through get that take advantage of that offer. I greatly appreciate that. Erin this has been a pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time today.

**29:32**

Thanks, Bruce. It's been a pleasure to be here.

**29:35**

Thank you for tuning in to today's episode. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app, so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

**29:45**

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