

Scaling Up Services

Episode 240 - Ken Jacobs

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Ken Jacobs, Principal, Jacobs Consulting & Executive Coaching

Ken Jacobs is the principal of Jacobs Consulting & Executive Coaching, which helps empower public relations and communications agency owners, CEOs, and senior leaders achieve and surpass their organizational, career, and personal goals by becoming more inspiring, inspired, and effective leaders. It does so via leadership coaching.

His company also helps PR, integrated communications, marketing and advertising agencies grow business, manage for profitability, improve client service, and enhance team performance, communications and leadership skills. It does so via training and consulting.

Prior to launching his companies, Jacobs spent 25 years in management and leadership positions with a number of PR agencies, including Ogilvy & Mather PR, Maloney & Fox (a division of WE), Lippe Taylor, and Marina Maher Communications (MMC), where he founded the agency's training program, "MMC Masters," which was cited for excellence by The Holmes Report.

While at each firm Jacobs served on the agency senior leadership group, responsible for such critical areas as client service, professional development, business development, and agency marketing.

Jacobs shares his insights via "Taking the Lead," the quarterly leadership column in PRSA's Strategies & Tactics and the similarly named video podcast on his website, where he discusses leadership with some of the industry's most respected leaders:

<https://www.jacobscomm.com/taking-the-lead/>

Jacobs also writes about leadership for Ragan's PR Daily and the O'Dwyer's PR Newsletter.

He presents regularly on leadership, new business, and client service at PRSA Counselors Academy Spring Conference and various PRSA chapters, and has presented on leadership for agency and corporate senior leaders at the Florida PR Association (FPRA), The Public Relations Global Network (PRGN), Taan Worldwide (the global network of independent communications agencies), and IABC NJ and Philadelphia

Jacobs sits on the board of PRSA Tri-State District and served on the board of PRSA NJ from 2013 to 2022, where he led the Senior Professionals Group. Previously, he served on the board of the

International Coach Federation (ICF) of New Jersey.

Jacobs, who launched his training, consulting, and coaching business in 2007, holds Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credentials from the International Coach Federation (ICF), and is accredited as a Certified Professional Coach, Energy Leadership Index Master Practitioner and a COR.E Leadership Dynamics Specialist by the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (iPEC).

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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's your host business coach Bruce Eckfeldt.

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Welcome everyone. This is Scaling up Services, I'm Bruce Eckfeldt. I'm your host. Our guest today is Ken Jacobs. He is Principal at Jacobs Consulting and Executive coaching. We're going to talk to the world about business we're going to talk more about executive performance leadership particularly kind of this economy and world we're in and uncertainty particularly around PR communications advertising marketing is Ken's particular area of focus. And there's a lot of flux happening in this world, a lot of companies that are trying to find their footing thing, trying to figure out their next step their strategy, right Ken has been working with many of these folks and has some really interesting insights and ideas. And really kind of helping leaders navigate these somewhat trying times, or at least turbulent times and help them figure out where they're gonna go, then how they're gonna get there and what they need to do to be successful. So excited for this conversation. Ken has been on the program before several years ago. And I'm excited to have him back and kind of get an update and hear what he's doing today. So with all that, Ken, welcome to the program. Thank you. It is so nice to be back. I appreciate it. Bruce, thanks for coming back. Before we dig into everything that's going on today,

give us a little update that what is what has happened for you over the last couple of years? How have you kind of navigated things, what have you noticed, and the illustration and we'll kind of talk about what's going on today with some of your clients and what you're seeing. And this this particular part? Well, fortunately, you know, a lot of agencies once they stumbled through 2020 21 and 22 are very good years for many, many agencies. And overall for the agency business, depending of course, the category you were in, you know, in June of 2020. If your client stable was brick and mortar retail and Luxe travel, not a good space to be in in June of 2020. But for those in internal comms for those and technology for those in healthcare, gangbusters gangbusters. So a lot of agencies have had really stellar years. But they you know, we're definitely seeing a slowdown. And I would say my, my business often reflects what's going on in the agency world. Well, I wouldn't say I work exclusively with PR marketing comms and exclusively with agencies, it is mostly in that space and leaders from that space. So 21 and 22. Were great for my clients, they were great for me, q1 and q2 of this year, were great. We beat goal, I'm approaching the rest of the year with some caution, because of what I'm hearing from clients. So we just have to be mindful, you know, and I'll and a lot of it is the layoffs on the tech side. And there were many of them, starting q2, maybe starting q1 This year, then the agencies that served those industries, they had been cutting back as well. In fact, early this year, a lot of agencies were reporting, we got approved for higher rates. But whereas we used to get annualized approval, now we only got approval for half the year. And now a lot of agencies, a lot of clients are only approving on a quarter by quarter basis. So I think that's a big change from 21 and 22. It is absolutely quarter by quarter. And there's you know, there's there's definitely a I call it, you know, a feeling an era of uncertainty. And I think I think we've been in an era of uncertainty. You know, since the lockdown since spring of 2020. Than over the years the uncertainty has changed. If you look at Russia, Ukraine, which obviously is ongoing, the supply side issue, the Y side issues, I should say inflation so it's it's all been uncertain. And the and what's driving the uncertainty has changed for a while. It wasn't as intense as bring in summer of 20. But yeah, it's there again, which is understandable. I mean, do you feel this is the

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is really unique? Or is this just I mean, these, you know, industries go through cycles, economies go through cycles, right like things get tight things going on certain things resolve you have high points and low points, I mean this, is this just another cycle or do you feel like this is fundamentally different than, you know, other economic cycles or other industry cycles that you've seen? Particularly? Yes, sir. To me, it feels different. I mean, there have always been the ups and the downs, there was, you know, the gung ho years and then we know 2002 That one, we're not good. And there were some good times, then we had 2008, nine, and then things were really good for a while, I think things have been, again, this is just in this space, when the one and 22 were so great, so big. And it's a very big readjustment. And if you look at the tech industry, I mean, it could not continue that way. So yes, I think, in a way, it's a readjustment. But it's, it's hard to remember, you know, how things have been things are that good, you, I think you do expect them to continue forever, even though history proves that's not the case. So readjustments are never fun. And I think because of the fear of inflation that we're seeing out there. I think there is concern Well, how long if this if it becomes recession? How long will it last? How long will this downturn last? That's what I'm sensing in the field? Is that what's driving this kind of shorter approval timeframes? I mean, it seems like we're moving to these now 90 Day approval cycles. And it's just because people don't want to lock themselves in to situations for as long they want to be able to adjust every 90 days, they don't want to be over committed. So they're being very, very cautious. And I think I mean, my God, they're not going month by month, I don't think you can do, you really can't do PR marketing month by month. But I think there's just a feeling of caution out there. Let's see what happens. I do wish that the marketers, so those are my clients, clients, I also wish they were would remember, and maybe they will remember, I hope they'll remember. And there's research behind it. Those firms that sure they marketing spigot

a bit in oh eight or oh nine, but they didn't shut it completely. They were very mindful about their cutbacks, but they kept it going to some degree. And there's evidence that those companies rebounded in a much more robust way. And much earlier than, than other companies. I just hope that's remembered, I guess, and why? Why did they rebound just because they had, they still had some things going so that when things actually turned around, they could quickly capitalize on it and kind of hit hit the upside quickly, as opposed to having to rebuild things? Well, I think it's partly that I think also within, let's say, PR, I'm not sure if this is true in marketing, but in PR, you know, you get a certain momentum, you get relationships going with media, nowadays, you're getting it with, you know, influencers and what have you. And so when you lose that there is often some ramp up time, right to get on people's radars, again, to rebuild, what your brand is about, et cetera, et cetera. So by keeping the spigot open as it were, by having at least some basic work out there, I think that allows for a quicker return. And we have the evidence of it. So I hope, you know, I think every marketer out there, and I understand, you know, there, there is concern, but Google, you know, Google something to the effect of marketing companies that got through the turndown of 2009, you know, and people who are smarter than me, you know, would probably know how to do that search, probably a little bit more effectively. But but if you do Google something like that, you will get some wisdom, about you know, how quickly the bounce back is, if you think about it, right. It's not just about the economy is bad. Conflict, consumer confidence is bad. Let's slow it down. I think, you know, wise marketers, and wise business, people are thinking yes, but we will come out of it, and how, how can I come out of it more quickly? How can I come out of it ahead of my competition, right? Not to focus just on it's down? Oh, my god, stop everything. But you know, what's going to lead to my rebound? So you got to, you've got to look at it, you got to look at the short term play the medium play and the long term play, I think, yeah. What did you feel that meant? As much as this is really kind of putting pressure and make it difficult for agencies to do kind of planning and really kind of develop longer strategies with clients? If you're on this kind of 90 day cycle? Are there opportunities within here to actually differentiate or to create to kind of respond to this strategically and change the way people are doing services or, you know, basically, kind of work with the restriction in a way that helps companies actually be more competitive? Yeah, absolutely. I know of some agencies that are avoiding the

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dialogue with clients right now that's the worst thing you could do, you've got to find out what's going on for them is their fear is their concern, what is the buzz at the client, you've got to know what it is. Because if they are going to maybe cut back, the sooner you find out, that's even a possibility, the sooner you can accommodate on your end, or do what you need to do. But be i being all over your clients right now is what I'd recommend to any agency leaders and any agency folks out there. Also, I would say, look at the work you're doing for them. And rather than just have the client cut back, take the lead, which is my brand, right? Take the lead and say, in this kind of environment, these things that we're doing are essential. Let's do everything we can to save them. And these are the things on which we can cut back a bit, we can either stop doing it or Richard like, because, you know, nothing against clients. But I think agencies know or should know, what's really the most effective. And so you've got to take the initiative and share. If we need to cut back, here's what we'll cut back on. And here's the degree and will it be enough? And don't worry, you know, no clients gonna say, Oh, I wasn't even thinking of cutting back. But now that you suggested, I mean, that's just right, that's just never going to happen. You know, and we avoid conversations, because we're afraid, we'll be suggesting something, all your clients are thinking about it now. So I think getting in there and showing that you're there with them. good times and bad, giving ideas that are not just about PR and communications, but are about marketing and are about business, you know, what are the initiatives you're doing right now? That will help them weather the storm? And then sometimes it's about here's some things we should do in lieu of what we have planned. But do not wait. And your client is going to collaborate with you on it, right? It's not like they're

going to have their own planner, they won't listen to yours. It's going to be collaborative, you start the dialogue, critical. What are some strategies for actually doing that? Like? How have you seen the clients successfully, sort of work with their clients in terms of really kind of having the conversations, understand what the driving forces are for them in their businesses right now, what their concerns are worries, and then how to kind of present to clients to their end clients, you know, reflecting back to them these things, and then actually give them options, strategies for dealing with their business situation in a smart cost strategic way? Well, I think one part is having the metrics, having the knowledge, know what worked last quarter, know what worked, you want to know what really, really is working, acknowledge what's not working, you can't wait for the client to ask, you should always know that. And you should always be opening with that. Right? Discuss, you know, I would say know what's working, discuss that frequently know what's not working? And do you recommend holding it for a bit? Or do you recommend modifying it in light of the environment that we're in. And then I would be giving thought to, if we are in this age of uncertainty or recession, you know, marketing agencies and ad agencies and PR agencies need to understand what kind of messaging and what kind of initiative, we'll keep the dialogue with consumers going and what you know what those messages should be. Because I think in times of uncertainty, we look to brands that make us feel more confident, that make us feel better, that make us feel listened to. So more emphasis there Stokes, though, it's truly understanding. And it's cliché, I wish there was a non cliché way to ask it, but knowing what keeps your client up at night, knowing what's keeping their boss and their boss's boss up at night, depending on where your relationships are in the organization, and constantly bringing truly strategic ideas that will have an impact on the business. You know, I think clients expect that of agencies or they should, yeah, how have you seen your clients, the agencies that you work with? How have they had to kind of innovate themselves, right in terms of either the work that they do, how they do it, their organizational strategies, you know, countless strategies like what are there any kind of big shifts that you've seen that gone on over the last couple of years and kind of response to all this? Yeah, well, not last couple of years because remember, last couple of years it was you know, glory days.

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But I say in the last month or two, you know I depth Well, a there are either cutbacks, though I've seen. I've seen more of that on the tech side. I've also seen cutbacks at very senior levels, very senior levels. If

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Though organizations that I'm seeing there, they're looking for maybe some flatter structure, and getting away a bit from those pyramids, I've definitely seen that. The other thing I'm seeing is certainly hiring freezes. Definitely seeing some of that out there. And I haven't heard of it. I'm guessing there are also salary freezes, you know that that's just some of the things I'm seeing. The two other things I'm seeing are obviously, the way the ER industry is an example. But I assume the marketing and ad side are understanding a AI and embracing AI, and helping their clients understand AI. So we're seeing a lot of that. The other thing I'm seeing is the confluence, and I've seen and this started happening, you know, back to the pandemic, but on the, in the PR side, the confluence of external communications and internal communications, and understanding the interplay of both. And that means, you know, your organization really needs expertise in it, right? Because let's say, you offer internal comms, you focused on internal comms, your competition does external comms, thin client, but now, your competition is offering both internal and external, that's not a good business strategy for you, right? So the you've got to be mindful of, as I look to the future, how can I bring both together through alliances, mergers, purchases, whatever whatever the case may be? Because I think if you look at a time of tightening, or a time of uncertainty, which I think might lead to tightening, I think that many clients might look for efficiencies of one agency that can do it all. I all. Yeah, and I just gonna say I also think when we've had these turn downs before, quite often, it creates a very good environment for agile, flexible midsize firms. Because

right or wrong bytes at a certain level may believe, and I'm not saying they're right, they may believe that large agencies have a big price tag have a higher rate, have a bigger and have bigger administrative fees. So I think they will be looking for this nappy, flexible, midsize agency, maybe with some personnel who used to work at the large agencies, I think that it might be a good environment for them. Yeah, I've even noticed. I mean, I, I just find that there's kind of these cycles of in kind of services and kind of agency specifically of kind of this cycle of sort of slicing things up and specializing and creating niches, and really kind of focusing your services to then swinging back to being kind of more full service and like finding end to end solutions, like, where are we are, I guess? How do you see the cycles of kind of what agencies focus on? And who's going to specialize and develop a niche versus who's going to be a generalist? What has been your observations on that? Yeah, I'm sort of in between on that, because, and the firm, you know, I to be very honest, on a consulting basis, I'm working more with small boutique and medium and large, right? The large they want to work with McKinsey and PCW, and all those Okay, that's right. I think I can help them. But you know, what's the likelihood.

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But I've always advised my agency clients, know your niche. And you can have more than one, but have three or four Max, that you are truly expert in, that you know more than your clients, that you truly are experts and you've got the case studies, you've got the numbers. You've got raving clients who will stand by that. Now, some clients will say to me, Lou, I don't want to be too niched, I may miss some opportunities. I'm like, well, we don't call it your niche, call it your, your expertise area, because clients high, you know, they buy expertise, right. And if you're claiming that you're you can do anything for everyone. Unless you're a big firm in the PR space, you know, like a catch him like in Edelman, like a Weber Shandwick, like a Fleischman. You know, we know all those names. You're not going to win the day your clients hire you for expertise for your belief that you know the landscape better than they do. So so, you know, it's a matter of maybe what are the three or four practice areas in which we have expertise and we will emphasize, especially in our business development, and maybe what are the three or four industries that we served best and know better than anyone else? And we can we can back that up. So it might mean looking at if we've done external communications, and we've dabbled in internal comms. How do we bring internal comms on again? Is it through a series of hires? Is it through an ally?

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hence, is it through a purchase. So I never say be everything to everyone. But I would say, when you look at the growing importance of internal comms, and that that's not going to change during uncertain times, I would propose that will become more important, right? Because if you're, if your team's been a 10, or 10,000, are are feeling the uncertainty? How are they focusing on achieving the enterprise's objectives? They're not? They're worried, you know, what is the next shoe gonna drop? Yeah. Yeah. So I wish I could say Ken Jacobs coma author.

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I'm not at that. We're doing baby steps. But we have been publishing over a few years leadership ebooks, and we try to keep it really tight, very focused, very practical actions you can take. So I really just sat down and thought about, you know, what, am I telling my clients? What am I doing in my training, you know, what am I doing in my webinars about uncertainty, because, again, you know, for me, the Era of Uncertainty has, has been robust in giving me ideas and giving me issues that I can address and help people with. So we just put together nine, I like to think very practical steps on, you know, how to lead and evolve your leadership style. So your teams and you know, it's your teams, it's your peers can even be your boss be certainly your clients, through uncertainty, whatever the uncertainty is because I think there are truisms of leadership, leadership

skills that we always want to bring in and hone, but some rise to the top during uncertain times. So that's really what it's about. And if I may, I think it would serve anyone who's leading client side agency site marketing, you know, it is it is sort of I like to think industry agnostic, right, because the true isms of of leading teams, the truisms of having followers, you know, that again, that's, that's, I believe, industry, agnostic. So So Summit, really, for me, risen to the top, as far as what's what's really important and where you want to focus. And, and, you know, wherever this may lead, you know, maybe we avoid the recession may be Russia, Ukraine gets worse, maybe China, US gets worse, right? So there are so many things that could happen. And if you're leading from the strengths, you will do better. And this is really important today, in addition to living in the Era of Uncertainty, I believe we're living and the evidence is out there, they're not making it up. We're living in an era of employee disengagement. That is not good. That is not good. You've, you've got to do everything you can for your teams to be as engaged as possible to achieve what you need to achieve. And what are some of the kind of the truisms that you're finding? Or that you cover? In your book? Give us a couple of examples of what you talked about? Sure. So number one, and maybe the most important, is dialing up your emotional intelligence, you know, people talk about it a lot. What does that really mean? And so if ever there was a time to take the emotional intelligence assessment, now is it. And you know, we talk a bit in the eBook about the definitions of emotional intelligence, and we could all kind of define it somewhat differently. But I think, you know, that ability to be aware and recognize emotions itself, and in others, the ability to perceive your own and others emotions, especially those you lead to understand signals that emotion send. And, you know, and I don't, you know, one of the definitions is to manage others emotions. To me, that's a slippery slope. I don't think we should try to manage others emotions. Some say we should. I don't believe that. And I think it's enough work to manage your own. And if you're the leader of an organization or a department or a division of a group, you know, if you're bringing a heightened emotional intelligence, that's going to have a big impact. Should I share my semi humorous emotional intelligence story? My anecdote? Okay. So I had a client who was stuck. A coaching client couldn't unstick them. I went to my mentor, coach, all good coaches have coaches, I believe and have mentor coaches. I went to my mentor, what can I do to unstick them? Have you done any emotional intelligence work? No, I'm not certified. He said, Don't worry about being certified or not, by the book, take the assessment. Let him take these center. And I said, Oh, and his name is Bernie. And I said, which goes with his speaking style, right? You know, they did take the assessment. So I said actually burning it's been on my shelf for years. He goes, Oh, what does that tell us? Who's been avoiding doing the

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work. So, okay, so I go and take the assessment, and I'm looking at the assessment and the work that I do, which is energy Leadership and Energy leadership index, it's much more in depth, it takes 25 minutes for the client to take, and we do assessments, and then we do phone work, right? This one I go in, and it takes me five minutes to take, oh, and by the way, and I have no relationship with the authors, but it's in you know, emotional intelligence to.oh by greaves, and I'm looking for his Bradbury and greets, excuse me. So when you buy the book, you get a code in the back. So you can take the assessment. So I go and take it five minutes, and I'm not a cynical guy, you can probably sense I'm not a cynical guy. But I get very cynical about how fast it is. So okay, I'm In for a penny in for a pound, I take it, I hit submit it, I get my personalized report in two minutes. So now I'm doubling down on cynicism. Right. And that I read the saying, and I'm telling you, it was like they had, you know, a blueprint, not of my brain, but of my heart, and my emotions, my God, there I was in one page, and your scores come out in four quadrants, social awareness, relationship management, self management, self awareness, and social awareness, I can join to by accident. And man, they had me figure it out. And they saw, you know, what my issues were. But the good news, and I'm very big on practical, I give me the idea behind it, give me the strategy, but give me practical, and they were very practical steps that I could take. And I'm happy to say I have taken to increase my emotional intelligence. So I know that it works. You know, that's one of

them. The other one, I would say that's let's just for today, the two E's of leadership, emotional intelligence, and empathy. And again, really understanding empathy. It's not Oh, I know what you're going through. Well, that like, never say that to anyone. We never know what anyone else is going through. But really understanding there are three types of empathy, and understanding what it takes to become a more empathetic leader. It really does take some work. And it can have a profound impact on your relationships with your team, again, your ears, your boss, your clients. So that's another one. I really recommend people take and people consider. I'll give you one more, I'm not going to give you all nine. Because I want people to download it reload, I'm not going to give it all away. Right? Right. We'll even with one more. You know, it's it's the hardest thing to do. But it's one of the most impactful, just be learned to be good with uncertainty. And that's not baked into all of us. But learn to be good with uncertainty. It's almost beyond when life gives you lemons make lemonade, it's when something happens that you don't expect. Take the punch and say knock yourself you know, you would have to pick yourself up, not beat yourself up, knock yourself out, dust yourself off, and start all over again. That's either, Hoagy Carmichael or Johnny Mercer or someone I should know better. But, but the ability to say Ha, didn't see that coming. And what do I want to do about that now do because it is about action. Let's not overthink this thing. What do I want to do? I am the leader right now, in this moment, not overthinking, taking action now. And I think when you can get into that kind of low, for lack of a better word. We expect the unexpected. And we build our resilience of very important leadership trait for today. Don't expect the unanticipated Expect the unexpected, and learn how to do what we just described. It will serve you really well, no matter what the uncertainty is, you know, becomes less about what the uncertainty is, and more about how do I respond in a way that inspires my team. Excellent. Ken, this has been a pleasure if people want to find out more about you more about the work that you do more about the book, what's the best way to get that information? Go? Well, either email me ke n at Jac OBS cown.com Or just go to my website, J www Of course, J AC OBS cown.com. And I think the author of the book should be the first thing you see. And you just do a really fast form like in seconds, and it will be on its way to you and I hope people will download it. I hope they'll connect online

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denne, give me some comments and thoughts about it would be lovely. And if you're looking for me on LinkedIn, if I may, there are many Ken Jacobs as you can imagine. But I'm the one with, I think I'm the only one with initials after my name, like ECC, which is Certified Coach, and a few other initials.

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Awesome. I'll make sure that the links and everything are on the show notes so people can get that dreaded write up.

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That would be lovely.

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This has been a pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time today. It's always a pleasure. I thank you for the invite. And, you know, as I if I may end by saying, as I say, at the end of my podcast, just keep on taking the lead. Yeah, I like it. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you for tuning into today's episode. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app, so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

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