

# Episode 2

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING WITH ERIK GENSLER

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[Updated as of 04.06.18]

Michael: Hello, Erik. Hi. Welcome to the Business for Unicorns' podcast. I'm so excited to have you today.

Erik: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to talk to you.

Michael: Yeah. I mean, we've known each other personally for a bunch of years but we've never had a chance to sit down and kind of talk shop. So, I'm super excited about it. I think my biggest challenge is going to be like keep this podcast under five hours.

Erik: \*laughs\* So, you can edit.

Michael: Yeah, we can edit. No, just I'll record half of it just for me. But first things first. Capacity Interactive is turning 10 years old today. So, congratulations!

Erik: Thank you. I can't believe it. I mean, a number of those years were just me in my kitchen.

Michael: Yeah, seriously. Oh, I should say "condragulations" for all of our fans out there of RuPaul. But let me just think. When you were starting this 10 years ago, did you really think you'd be sitting here 10 years later with a team of, I think, about over 50 people serving so many huge arts organizations? Was that part of the plan from the beginning?

Erik: You know, I always started it from the idea of just loving digital marketing and loving the arts. So, I remember I went to meet with Damian Bazadona who's the president of Situation Interactive. I think at that time, Capacity was me and maybe one or two freelancers. I said, "Oh, gosh," like the challenges, like I keep talking to all these people. As great projects come in my way, you know, what am I going to do? He was like, "Well, a great-sized business would be like you and like three professionals and maybe a couple of other people working in a more junior level. I said, "Okay, that sounds really good."

So, I sort of worked towards that goal and then just kept outgrowing that. I think the way I thought about growth and the way I still think about growth is we don't necessarily sit down and say we want to be this size of company. What we always set out to do is say if an organization that needs our help and we think we can help them comes to us, we want to be able to say yes.

That has always sort of been the ethos around our growth. You know, over the years, a number of organizations have come to us and we've been able to say yes to them. And so, that's always driven the growth. So, looking back 10 years ago, did I ever think we'd be this large? I don't think so, no.

Michael: \*laughs\* That's amazing. Well, congratulations! I mean, 10 years is a big milestone. I think whether the latest rate's, like less than 25% of New York businesses last past the first year, it's something abysmal like that.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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Erik: Oh wow!

Michael: So, congratulations! So, take me back to the beginning because we have a lot of our listeners who are kind of just starting their business or thinking about starting a business. So, talk about that moment, or I don't know if it was a long moment or a short one, when you kind of decided to take the leap, when you said, "You know, this is what I'm going to work towards full-time." What was that like?

Erik: Well, I think from the time I was very young, I had always been entrepreneurial. One of my favorite things as a kid was to have a lemonade stand. And then, when I was 12 or maybe 13, maybe 14, around that time, middle school, my friend, David, came to me and said, "There's this business called "The Bagel Times" that we should run together. It's a bagel and newspaper delivery service. So, on Sunday mornings, we did this. We delivered bagels and newspapers to peoples' houses. This was before we had drivers' licenses. So, we had a wholesale contract with the bagel store. We had a newspaper contract. We used to go to Kroger to get the juice. We had like 30 clients in our suburb where we would deliver bagels and newspapers. And so, I always have that entrepreneurial spirit. Having that business, God, did we do a lot of things wrong, we had no idea what we were doing. But like, it sort of started the, you know, making mistakes and learning from them, which I think is super important for being any business owner.

Then, as I went through my career, I always had in the back of my mind, I wanted to be in business for myself. I didn't quite know what it was. There was a moment in my late 20s where I started a side-hustle of coaching people to find their ideal jobs. I called that "Launch." I had a couple of clients. Shockingly, people, early in their careers, have no money. So, that's a very hard way to run a business or it wasn't probably the best business plan.

So, I was at New York City Opera. It was around that time that digital started to really become a thing where eyeballs were moving to devices. Facebook was starting to really have a large following outside of college campuses. Google Analytics was invented. Google AdWords was invented. And the Google grant program started. That was my focus at City Opera was to run all the digital marketing. Thomas Cott, who is now the Head of Marketing at [Alvin] Ailey was the Head of Marketing at City Opera, and he was just so supportive of trying new things and being ahead of the game. I was sort of always the spirit of City Opera being the scrappy, young, willing to try things, organization next to the more conservative Metropolitan Opera.

Gerard Mortier was coming from Paris to run the opera. I was there really when that whole organization came across financial challenges. They were never able to raise the money that Mortier needed. But during the time I was there, there was this huge influx of excitement and budget to build a new website, and start a new brand, and got you to go through all these really foundational things for an arts organization and really learn marketing and really experiment in digital.

And so, when City Opera was falling apart, I guess, through the pieces of that, I was able to turn my full-time job into a consulting job. Then Thomas Cott actually went to Alvin Ailey and hired me as a consultant because they got a million dollars in the Doris Duke Foundation to rethink digital marketing. It's like I have to do everything I did at City Opera once again. From there, I started going to conferences.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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Michael: Well, those are two great clients to start with.

Erik: Yeah, not bad.

Michael: City Opera and Alvin Ailey right off the bat. Yeah.

Erik: And so, it was really circumstantial by turning my full-time job into a consulting gig and adding another consulting gig that I was off to the races.

Michael: Yeah. That's amazing. I love that you mentioned kind of helping, in your very first, learning from those mistakes. I'm going to come back to that topic like a little bit later but that's such a great story.

So, there are two topics I really want to cover today: digital marketing, obviously and workplace culture which I know is a topic you're really passionate about and you talk a lot about on your podcast. But let's start with digital marketing. I know you primarily work with arts organizations. But when you think broadly about the topic, how do you think about digital marketing and its role in a business?

Erik: Yeah. I think what's amazing about digital marketing is its ability to bring together a disparate group of people around something that they're passionate about. So, I go back to Seth Godin's book called "Tribes" and this is actually when I was starting Capacity Interactive. I read that book and was thinking I want to start a tribe of people who geek out about digital marketing for the arts the way that I do. I want to be the leader of this tribe. So, I think digital marketing is such a fantastic, you know, there are multiple platforms, but a platform in which to do that.

So, if you're starting a business and you're really excited about that business, how do you bring that enthusiasm, that vision, to social platforms through story-telling? And how do you, you know, by showing that enthusiasm, by creating that sort of content that engages your ideal customer, what you want is for them to raise their hands and say, "Hey, I'm interested." The framework around this that we talk about at Capacity is permission.

So, as a social media marketer, you ask the question, "Who do I have that permission to talk to?" When thinking about building that permission, you think about what kind of content am I going to create that the people whose permission I want are going to raise their hand. So, as a small business, it's amazing because you can really hyper-target the kind of people you want following you and really think about the social content as drawing people into that. We talk about the 70-30 Rule which is 70% of your content needs to be about giving things that people want. And then, if you did that well, you earn the right to ask them for something.

Michael: Yeah. Amazing. I love that framework. You mentioned story-telling. Can you just talk a little bit more about the kind of importance of story-telling, and really, how do you go about creating a compelling story online?

Erik: Yeah. So, if you think about the state that most people are in when they are on social media, they can be sitting at home on the sofa scrolling, or they can be waiting for the bus, or on the subway platform. They're really looking for distraction. They're really looking for something that touches some

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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human emotion, whether it's funny, or it makes you think, or it makes you smile, or it just engages you. We call that, this is actually from an article in New York Times. We call it "creating a thumb-stopper."

So, you're really competing with a lot of noise and what can you create that's going to make someone push their thumb down and stop and engage with their content, be that a gorgeous photo or a video or the way you write. So, really thinking about crafting that thumb-stopping piece of content is absolutely critical to being successful in social media. So, story-telling is putting together a narrative of what that is.

So, in our business, what we want to do is just put out things that are going to make people who are working in the marketing department of a cultural organization say, "Hmm, this is really helpful to me. This is really useful." And we've created things like "call to action generator." So, we got sick of seeing "Buy now, donate now," so we created this sort of like slot machine where you can push all these stale calls to action, and get a better one. So, that is really creating something thumb-stopping for people who we want to be speaking to.

Michael: Yeah. I love that idea, the thumb-stopper. It's so funny because it just happened to me literally yesterday where I was like scrolling on Instagram. I saw, I've been needing some new slippers." I saw like a beautiful photo of these gorgeous slippers. I was like, "Wait, I need slippers." Literally, my thumb stopped and I scrolled back a little bit and I was like, "Maybe those." But I love that metric.

So, for listeners out there, I mean, that's something to really think on is, "Is the stuff I'm creating really kind of a thumb-stopping moment? Are people going to scroll back, and stop, and look at it because it's really compelling?" So, that's fantastic.

One of the things we hear from our listeners all the time goes something like this. They say like, "We're creating tons of content online. We're regularly posting on social media. We're spending money on some Facebook ads. And we're just not getting any traction. Like I feel like I'm just spinning my wheels and throwing stuff out there. What should we do?" Then we talked to our clients about this stuff all the time. So, if you were going to create kind of a toolkit for business leaders, what tools would you put in? What is the foundational toolkit for digital marketing they should all have at their disposal?

Erik: Yeah. The challenging thing is to do social media marketing well still requires a level of expertise particularly around the measurement piece. In order to really excel at digital marketing, you need to have metrics to understand what the KPIs are for success. Unfortunately, laying that foundation of metrics is kind of technically complicated. You need to be able to - ultimately, you're tracking. So, ask the question, "What am I trying to get people to do?" And ultimately, in most cases, it's getting them to a certain page of a website or to take an action on a website. They'd actually be providing an email address or providing a social follow or buying something or signing up for something.

So, you need to have, most likely, like a tag management platform like Google Tag Manager that can fire when someone does that action. That action then needs to be able to communicate with the platform like Facebook ads manager where you are spending your time and effort. So, once that plumbing is setup and you figure out what am I trying to get people to do, then you can be really focused on what kind of content am I putting out there that is driving that conversion activity.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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So, the question then becomes, “What kind of content am I creating?” And then, “Who am I putting in front of?” I think Facebook in particular, which is the real 800-lb. gorilla, has made it deceptively simple to spend money on the platform and not necessarily the most advantageous way. So, Facebook Ads Manager 101 is really about targeting interests. Interests are one way to target on a platform but it’s not necessarily the one that’s going to drive the most conversions. So, we encourage our clients to think about this as a marketing funnel. As someone gets more engaged with what you’re doing, they’re going further and further down the funnel.

Interest targeting is very much at the top of the funnel. It’s very rare when someone sees a Facebook post or a piece of content for the first time and then goes all the way down the funnel to engage with the conversion activity. So, when you’re thinking about your social media advertising, you have to have different goals for people who are in different places in the funnel. So, for someone who doesn’t you or know your brand or know your company, a conversion activity for them may just be watching a video. And then, you need to set up the infrastructure so that the person who then watched the video, the next time they come on Facebook, they see the next step in that funnel. Then, the goal of that next step, okay, is one step further down the funnel.

So, I think when people get frustrated on Facebook is they set up these campaigns, they’re not necessarily measuring all their conversion. Then they’re using top of funnel targeting tools to get people sort of halfway down a funnel when what they really want is a full conversion. So, you need to use tools such as remarketing or CRM targeting where you’re uploading a list of people who are already engaged. Those are the people more likely to complete the full conversion activity. Now, I hope I didn’t get too technical. But that, I hope that frames it in a way that’s understandable.

Michael: No. I think I heard two really important things. One is the technology is still a little complicated where I joke all the time with my team. Because even for Mark Fisher Fitness, I joke like, our great grandchildren are going to laugh at the technological problems we’re having today. Just like how long it takes to do the most simple things. It’s like our great grandchildren are going to be laughing their asses off about these stories. So, I think for our listeners, it’s a place where you might need help. It’s a place where using a consultant like Capacity Interactive could be a good help. It might be a place for you to read up, take some courses because the technology still is a little complicated.

But I think the other core take-away is the idea of - is thinking of your campaigns like a funnel and having options for people all throughout the funnel. So, to make that a little bit more real, can you just kind of go through your mental Rolodex of all the campaigns you guys have built? Are there any that stick out as like that was a really successful example of what I’m talking about.

Erik: Yeah. I mean, I think what we’ve done for a number of clients is, so for example, if you’re going to have a music act, an outdoor music festival. We will start a campaign maybe a month before that performance. We’ll start floating videos of that act. We’ll then serve that to interest categories of people we think that would be interested in that particular performance.

What we’re then trying to do is just get people to engage with that content. We just want people to watch this video. If they watch the video to a certain amount, we’re pixeling them and we’re saying, “Okay, once we get close to performances, we’re then going to show you ads for tickets,” which then have like a buy now message. So, I think in terms of articulating what that could look like, floating a

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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series of videos where the goal is just engagement and then thinking later of content that is more promotional further down the funnel is a good way to look at that.

Michael: Yeah. When you talk about this topic, I always think of dating. I think the process is just so similar. There was just relationship-building. I always tell people, “The things that you’re asking for when you’re first engaging with someone is like, “I’ll just get your number.” Just like text me back, just like can I get your email, or like will you friend me on Facebook? It’s like very simple stuff. And as you get further in the relationship, they asks get a little more nuanced, and a little more complicated. You’re asking more of each other. I feel like it’s very similar with these tools. If you really think of it through that framework, it might be an easy way to build a funnel where you’re really building engagement and intimacy over time.

Erik: Right.

Michael: Maybe intimacy is the wrong word. But I think you get what I’m talking about.

Erik: Yeah. I mean, one of the things to also think about and I had this woman Colleen Dilenschneider on the podcast that we released last week, and Colleen does really incredible research in the arts and with frequent arts attendees. Her company runs this massive survey. Essentially, that answers the question, “What gets people off the sofa?”

One of her metrics that I really, really love is, well, there’s a few, but one is when people say something about you, it is 13 times more impactful than what you say about yourself. So, when you’re thinking about that marketing funnel, thinking about the bottom of that funnel which is people who actually love you talking about you. So, it’s another framework. The thing about social media marketing is how do you create that content of A, people love you, and what do you say to intimacy. So, if you really do have intimate supporters, encouraging them, refining ways to get them to evangelize on your behalf is far more impactful.

Another thing that Colleen says is that media that talks with people is far more effective than media that talks at people.

Michael: Sure. I think it’s kind of the definition of engagement, right. It’s like we want to have some sort of interaction between the two of us. Yeah, we say all the time at Business for Unicorns courses that when you talk about yourself, it’s bragging or other people do, it’s marketing. It’s just a simple thing to keep in mind. Are you just talking about yourself or can you let other people who love you do it on your behalf? That’s great.

So, you mentioned Facebook being huge. I think they’re like leaps and bounds beyond other platforms like 2.1 billion users or something. But Facebook and Google seemed to be the dominant players in kind of digital marketing right now. I think in fact, just because of their sheer size and all signs kind of point to they’re going to continue to be the big players in this space. But where do you see it going in the next 10 years? Is there any new technology coming out that really excites you?

Erik: Going to conferences from Google or reading about the future, I mean, there is going to be a world in which we are not staring at screens. We’re not carrying around these bulky laptops. We’re not

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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carrying around these phones. There's going to be a better integration of technology with our physiology.

We're starting to see that now with certain cars, for example. We'll have the speed and directions superimposed on the windshield. And the Google glass and the Apple watch are other manifestations of how do we ingrain technology in a way that's physiologically easier for humans to use. They say the Google glass was a big failure, wherein I don't even think they necessarily thought it was going to be huge. It was more of the testing mindset. So, it got people used to or thinking about how do we engage with technology in a way that's not a screen.

So, there is technology out there of pills that you can swallow that will be ingrained in your body that if you're, say, having the symptoms of a heart attack, it will then tell you on your device to go check-in to the hospital. So, there's contact lenses that can help with diabetes or even superimposed images for you to see. So, I think that's exciting. We're also seeing a real rise in virtual reality. I've used a number of VR tools that are absolutely incredible in terms of taking you to a new space. So, I think that's sort of in the same category.

Now, do I think business owners need to go invest in that now? Well, maybe if you're in real estate, a virtual reality kind of applications. But I think more importantly, as a small business owner is how do you successfully tell your story in the platforms that people are using? So, you mentioned Facebook and Google. Facebook to this day is really the 800-lb. gorilla in the social space. It's where, despite how young people say it's not cool, when you look at the numbers, more young people are using Facebook regularly than they are any other platforms. So, it's for most businesses thinking about how can I connect with people on Facebook is probably a really smart move.

Then, the next biggest platform is YouTube and then Instagram. I mean, YouTube is used widely but it's not used as frequently. In terms of frequent usage, you're talking about Facebook and Instagram. And depending on your business, I think certain ones bond themselves more naturally to others. I think a mistake a lot of organizations and individuals make is spreading themselves too thinly. I'd rather you're really great at Instagram or really great at Facebook than trying to be on multiple platforms because ultimately in any business, even where we are now, we're still a small business with around 50 people.

Then the most limited resource is time. So, it's really thinking about everything you're doing as opportunity cost. A framework I like to use is, "Hell, yes or no." If it's not a hell, yes, don't do it because you have to really just guard your time so thoughtfully.

Michael: Yeah. Did you read Essentialism?

Erik: No.

Michael: No? It's this book that's all about that idea. You should totally read it. It's really great. But I love that you brought up that you think people should maybe commit to be really great one platform. Because I hear all the time people coming to us and having this super complicated social media calendars, when they're posting on which platforms. Then obviously, when you're posting on multiple platforms and your content use have changed a little bit, different cropping, different video, different

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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hash tags. So, I love that you're, all the listeners should have permission as of right now to be really good at one platform first. I think it's great advice.

Erik: Yeah. And you probably don't have the budget to really even maximize that platform.

Michael: Yeah. Yeah, that's great. Let's switch gears a little bit and talk about culture. I think it's a great topic. It's absolutely probably my favorite business topic. I know you spend a lot of time thinking about it as well. I mentioned in your introduction that Capacity Interactive was on Crain's best places to work list for two years. So, that's amazing. Congratulations.

Erik: Thank you.

Michael: So, you're doing something right. So, how do you think about culture here at Capacity Interactive?

Erik: I think whenever you have a number of people working together, that it is so important to lay the ground work for what's in bounds and what's out of bounds. So, for any team of people, I think the connective tissue of how you relate to each other is fundamental for the success of the organization. I mean, that goes for everything from work/life balance to giving feedback to conflict resolution and just laying the terms of what's okay and what's not. I think that for most organizations, that does start at the top. So, laying out those sort of values around what we value. It's amazing if you're clear and practice it yourself how people will respond in turn.

So, I think that's been, I've always had a real - it's really been important to me to have an environment for myself and for those around me where there is a work/life balance. I think this concept of working yourself to the bone and working late and sacrificing, I don't think that makes people actually productive. It doesn't make people happy. It actually erodes the work. There are some studies recently that showed even work places that shorten their hours dramatically tend to have the same or better results than ones that have these crazy, unbalanced work/life situations.

So, a number of years here, Christopher Williams who is the Vice President of Capacity, and I sat down, this is after the company had been around for a while and sort of sketched out, what are our values? What are the things that we stand for and came up with seven things. They're everywhere. They're in our performance evaluations. They're the framework through which we hire people. They are written on our walls. It's just a really great way to reference something. So, if something, if there's a challenge or if there's a conflict, it says, "Okay, how does this go with the values that we're espousing here?" And if they're not, it gives a very fair framework to have that conversation.

Michael: That's amazing. That's so great. So, I really heard two things in there. One is that when you think of culture, at least it sounded like a big kind of setting expectations kind of game. Being clear about what we stand for, who we are, what are the terms of us working together, that's amazing. It sounds like one of the big tools you use for kind of setting that standard or those standards is the values. So, can you share what your values are? I think they're written behind us on the wall.

Erik: Yeah. I mean, they're right behind us: openness, happiness, self-improvement, measurement, partnership, passion and sharing.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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Michael: It's a great list. How did you guys come up with those?

Erik: Christopher and I were on a train. We're going to speak at the Theater Management class at Yale. We're on our way to New Haven. We just sort of, I think we came up with them very quickly. They sort of listed themselves because we're sort of at a point where we knew who we were. We knew what we wanted to be. Those concepts around self-improvement and openness, passion, those were the things we wanted both with internally here but also we wanted communicated to our clients and measurement and sharing.

Sharing can mean, amongst teams here which I think we're very, very good at. We have multiple Slack channels for sharing best practices. We have our staff meeting. Each team goes around and says something that went well and something that didn't go well and they learned from. There's really a culture of sharing here. Then that also goes for the industry in terms of writing case studies and speaking at conferences, really sharing what's working well. Even our podcast and our blog is all about putting it out there and sharing. So, all of these values are not even just about what we do internally but also how we engage with the external world.

Michael: Yeah. That's great. So, Capacity is what, 50 people, strong [0:28:53]. It's a lot of people. So, I think one of the big things that help define culture is making sure you are finding the best people. When you find the best people, you're putting them kind of on the right seat on the bus. So, what's your approach there? What's your approach to finding the best people and putting them on the right seat?

Erik: Yeah. It's something I'm still really learning and refining. I think as we were growing quickly, we tended to find ourselves fishing in the same ponds. Where in New York there are a number of arts administration programs. They have people who are really passionate about the arts who have decided to dedicate their professional lives to learning about the arts administration. People who have got these programs have typically worked at a number of arts organizations, so have the experience and understand the challenges and the types of people and the software. So, we found a lot of people from these programs and they're very successful here.

As we had to grow faster or as we were scaling, one of the things, I think, that we've done that was really good was thinking about the onboarding process. I think a lot of organizations don't necessarily get that right. For years, we didn't get it right where it's like, "Okay. Here's your desk. Here's your computer. And go attend this meeting."

Our team here at a staff retreat a few years ago, we said we're going to do a number of things. One, we're going to have an onboarding training program which is called CIU, Capacity Interactive University, which is a couple of weeks just sitting in the conference room and getting taught by different people here at various things. And so, this is very much led by Christopher, our vice president and managing director, it's a new title. But he does a session on culture and then someone will come in and do sessions on tag manager and sessions on Google Analytics and sessions on content creation or Facebook, really platform-specific and really understanding all the tools and what we do here.

That's really with a cohort of people. That is a very safe place to learn and ask questions and make mistakes. We found that the longer people stay in that environment, the more ready they are when they

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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do join a team. Along with that, we've started an internship program because that even gives a longer on-ramp for learning.

So, we've committed a decent amount of budget this year which is, we've been doing the internship program for a number of years, but last summer we had seven interns. We've already hired a number of them. So, we thought, "Okay, this is an opportunity to train people on the job." We pay all of our interns which is really important. We've been doing that for a while now. It also gives a pipeline for people to join the company. But also to learn what it's like working here. For some people, they love it and it makes sense. Some people say, "Hey, this is not for me." Great, you have the experience. But for some of the people, well, we know very soon after that they're going to finish their year at school and come join us.

So, I think that has been really good for our bringing people on. I think that we've done is articulated the things we're looking for and what make people successful here. So, everyone interviewing has a list of those traits. You're supposed to ask questions that help draw out those specific traits.

Now, I think what we've learned is if you hire from the same well and you're really focused on values and culture, it's very easy to bring in a certain kind of person. I think what has become really important to me and to us as a team is really, now that we've grown to a certain size and we're not sort of running and chasing and trying to just bring new people on here, we can be much more thoughtful about this. We're really trying to think about how do we bring in a more diverse pool of people that aren't from the same schools.

Diversity here could mean a number of things from, of course, gender, race, sexual orientation which we're really good at gender and sexual orientation. Where we've not been so good is race. Another thing where we're really trying to be thoughtful of is socioeconomic background. So, if you went to an Ivy League school, that sort of, you've been afforded, not always, but you've been afforded certain opportunities in your life. We're trying to really push ourselves to go out of that comfort zone and find people who didn't get to go to schools like that. So, that's really, that's a long process and we're going through it right now. But I think our internship program is a really great way for us to flex that muscle and bring in people from different backgrounds. If they're great fits, we'd love to hire them.

Michael: Yeah. That's great. I mean, the way you talk about culture, really, it's clear to me that you think of it like a kind of a living, breathing organism. Like it's constantly changing and evolving. Even now, 10 years in and you're still challenging yourself.

There are so many great takeaways. But a few things had stood out to me were the idea of really having a clear funnel for where your people come from, either from specific places or now maybe looking at more diverse places including things like internships. So, you can take your time getting to know people.

That's really kind of the second big takeaway for our listeners is just the idea that the interview process should take a while. We're going to get to know people and take your time in to know people. Then once you've even hired them, take your time letting them get to know you a little bit more, and have a really thoughtful onboarding process. Take your time doing that. I think you even said, the longer they spend in that environment, that learning environment where they can ask questions and not feel stupid

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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and it's a safe space, the more ready they are when they joined a team. I think that's fantastic. It's been true for us as well.

Well, this is maybe a more personal question. This is a pain point for me. When you're working in a culture that is really close and really tight and you really are friends with a lot of people. In fact, many people that I work with at Mark Fisher Fitness are like lifelong family. How do you personally just kind of balance that like closeness and intimacy while still being the boss, while still being able to be objective about their performance? Any tips there?

Erik: It's really hard. I mean, we employ a framework here called radical candor made famous by Kim Scott who is a former Googler. She has this amazing podcast with this guy Russ Laraway, who's also a Silicon Valley executive. They talk about radical candor which is a framework where radical candor is a quadrant where you care personally and challenge directly. So their premise is that smart people want feedback, good or bad. As a leader or a manager, it is your responsibility to provide this feedback, not to make them feel good or feel bad but to help them be better at their jobs.

Foundational to that is this concept of caring personally, so having those relationships because you can give solid feedback. If you don't care about someone and you give them feedback, she calls that obnoxious aggression. You're just drawing feedback someone with no level of care

Michael: You're just a jerk. \*laughs\*

Erik: Yeah. That's hard. So, the radical candor quadrant is very hard. We do work very closely. We have really deep friendships here. I felt incredibly close to a lot of people here. And so, I think the most challenging thing is going back to the idea of you want to be respected more than you want to be liked. Now, I say that in theory. I have not mastered that. But I've read a number of books and blogs and literature about being a successful manager and a successful leader. It really does go back to, I think leaning into the care personal thing but you have to give the tough feedback and creating a culture where it's expected that you give tough feedback.

When our team knows that a problem emerges and it surround a specific individual, we're encouraged to play that out with each other before giving the feedback to that individual. So, if I know I have to give some type of feedback, I will bring someone else in the room and talk through it to make sure I'm being fair, to make sure that I'm delivering in a way that is useful and not necessarily, you know, we're trying to better the situation.

So, I have an executive coach, Jennifer Zaslow who is absolutely fantastic. I think for so many of these obstacles, having a coach to play this out. But she uses a framework for doing feedback which is she always starts with, "I have observed." So then, it's not saying you did this. It's I have observed this. When I observe this, this is the result. So, it's this framework of here's what I observed. Here's the result. And here is how it's negatively impactful to the business and then you sort of stop. Then you give air for response to that.

When someone is receiving feedback, they should really listen and take it in and think about it. But by having a culture that embraces radical candor where we've done multiple workshops around radical

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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candor, everyone knows it and expects it and wants it. We've done workshops on peer to peer radical candor, peer to team leader radical candor. You want to have that environment.

So giving tough feedback, it's hard. It's terrible. The radical candor, they used to have an app because they're tech people. In their podcast, they give you workshops and exercises to do. One day, I'll be like, okay, your job is to give each one of the people on your direct team three pieces of positive feedback. The next day, it's your job to give three pieces of challenging feedback. So, you just get really used to helping who will get better at their jobs by giving them feedback.

Michael: That's amazing. It's so funny. You stole one of my later questions, I was totally going to ask you about Radical Candor. It's one of my favorites. If you're already one of my listeners, if you haven't read the book, go get it. It's really fantastic. Two other books that I really love, I'm not sure if you read these yet on this topic are Crucial Conversations, which is similar kind of framework.

Erik: I know about that one, yeah.

Michael: And Crucial Accountability which kind of I think the next level. But those three combined, I think, are like my kind of holy bible, so to speak on this topic, but good for you.

Even one of my follow up questions was how do you implement this sort of thing? From what I'm hearing you say is that it takes some time. You mentioned lots of workshops at different levels. Continue to reinforce this kind of framework. It doesn't happen overnight. There are all kinds of emotional baggage we bring to getting and receiving feedback. It takes time to kind of breakthrough that and develop new habits. So, I love that you've even mentioned that. So that's fantastic.

Can you give me any examples of things that you still want to work on in your culture? What still, pain points you're having or where is the culture going? What do you want to have happen next?

Erik: That's a good one. It's interesting. As a company grows and I feel like there are new people here and there are interns that I just don't know. So, how and I'm sure every business struggles with this. Like how do even people who don't – the people who have been here a long time have a direct relationship with me. We all have direct relationships with each other. We have this culture of caring. But like it's very easy to come in here and not necessarily believe it. How do we demonstrate to newer people, now the company is bigger and like I just, there's only so much time in the day. How do you grow that? And how do you maintain that?

I think one way we're doing it is through these workshops and through, you know, we have an annual retreat that we do at Wave Hill which is this beautiful garden in The Bronx. We bring in executive coach and we have these regular workshops where we're really encouraged to be, you know. Most of the workshops we're doing are around soft skills because I think soft skills are -. The hard skills are perhaps things that are taught more often but I don't think organizations teach the soft skills or put that out in the open enough.

Michael: I'm with you. I think the hard skills, there are more resources for it seems or that happened historically, I think that's changing a little bit. They tend to be a little faster to learn. You want to get good at Excel, great. You can probably do that in a weekend.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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Erik: \*laughs\* Yeah, exactly.

Michael: You want to get good at not being reactive when someone gives you feedback, it'll take a few years.

Erik: \*laughs\* yeah, or a lifetime.

Michael: Yeah, and probably some therapy. They're just different. They're different skills.

Erik: Yeah.

Michael: But I love this because you even said you have to prove to them that you mean it. When you adopt something like radical candor, it's not something you can just try on casually like you're trying on a jacket. You have to really own it kind of from the inside out. It really has to be something that matters to you. That's hard to do with a lot of people over time.

Erik: Yeah. It's also hard like as when we first started and we were in a small room. Everyone saw every interaction that everybody had. There was just automatic trust and closeness that we all had. Once you're bigger, just thinking about how do you continue that, it's challenging.

Michael: Yeah. It's constant kind of reinforcement. You have to kind of keep the conversation going. Amazing.

Well, interest of time, I'm going to move to our final segment which is our final five. I think we have final five questions. I ask everyone kind of in the spirit of inside the Actors Studio. So, here is your final five. Number one is what is your morning routine?

Erik: I have, I'm not a natural morning person but I've forced myself to become one. I have to work out in the morning or else I don't do it. In the days that I don't do it, I just don't have the same level of energy. So, I force myself up by 7:00 AM which we start here at 10:00 which is a little later but it's very luxurious. So, I'm up. I make my mocha pot of coffee which is really a strong coffee. I'm at the gym within a half hour of being up and doing my workout. And then I live in Williamsburg so I like to take the ferry to work which is a very relaxing way to come to work. And then I walk from the East river and so I have that. My body has really moved and I'm flexible and I've exercised. While I'm walking, I'm almost always listening to some podcast trying to learn something.

Michael: Yeah, I love that. Number two, what activities give you a sense of renewal. When I say renewal, not like rest and hanging out, but renewal like they fill you up. They get your reenergized, refocused. What does that for you?

Erik: Nature. I mean, I think I realized a few years ago that as a New Yorker, we are disconnected from nature but nature is within all of us and surrounding us. So, I think it's so important on the weekends or even when you can in New York City to go to a park with a tree and breathe some air. I think that connection to the earth, to water, to trees, to land is fundamental.

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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Michael: Amazing. Number three, what one book or learning experience kind of taught you the most?

Erik: I think I have to say, and everyone who knows me will laugh at this but Seth Godin.

Michael: Literally all of his books. How do you pick one, right?

Erik: All of his books. I know. He's keynoting our conferences here.

Michael: Amazing.

Erik: It's so much I'm really excited about. But I love that Seth started out as this marketing expert. His first book that I read was Permission Marketing which really predicted I think the future of marketing, which is marketing became less about interrupting people and more about building these permission-based relationships. I thought that was a brilliant book. Then I mentioned his book, Tribes.

But he sort of evolved from this marketer and business person to almost like a spiritual guide, where he talks so much about soft skills. In fact, he says don't call them soft skills. Calling them soft undermines them. So, he did this same evolution that I found myself doing of being a real marketing practitioner to realizing you can be the best marketer in the world but if you don't have the soft skills and you don't treat yourself with care and love and the people around you with care and love, like that's ultimately what it's about. So, what I love about him is he has taught me how to think about my craft of marketing but also how to be a better leader and human being.

Michael: Great. I love it. Number four, if you could have one super power, what would it be?

Erik: I think having lots of energy without having to sleep, eat healthy, and go to the gym every day.

Michael: And less energy. \*laughs\*

Erik: Yes. \*laughs\*

Michael: Endless energy, man. I love that. It's true. That'd be a really good one. The last thing, number five is what is the last thing you think about before you fall asleep?

Erik: Oh, I really have tried to implement a bedtime ritual which I think is really important. Like I was just saying about energy, I think energy is so important. I remember when I was in my 20s and I had a job I didn't really care that much about, you'd stay up late. You drink during the week. You're not getting enough sleep. You're going to work and have a coffee. You weren't at peak performance. But I think the older I get and the more I want to be emotionally and physically present, I think it's just so important that I get that sleep and that energy.

So, I've tried to implement a bedtime ritual where I'd turn off my devices at least a half hour before bed and really try to, in an ideal world like to do something relaxing. Take a bath or do something that's just kind of like free my mind. So when I lay in bed, I just sort of drift off. Now, does that always happen?

## Episode 2: Digital Storytelling with Erik Gensler

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No, but I'm trying not to let myself spin or think about things about work because it's really easy to do. But I think that bedtime ritual really helps.

Michael: Amazing, great answer. I can stay and talk all day. But in the interest of wrapping it up, how can people keep in touch with you for my arts marketers out there listening or regular marketers just wanting to learn more about you or follow up? How can they do that?

Erik: Sure. Capacity Interactive, we take a permission marketing approach. So you can sign up for email or join us on social media. That's probably the best way. That will tell you about all the workshops and webinars and the conference that we do around digital marketing that is very focused for arts organizations. But I think there is hopefully stuff to learn for most people.

Michael: Yeah, the marketing conference is called Digital Marketing Boot Camp for the Arts. Just Google that shit. The podcast is called CI To EYE, spelled CI TO E-Y-E. Good stuff. Well, thank you so much for being my guest. This was a blast. I'm sure I'll have you back again someday.

Erik: Yeah, I'd love that. Thank you so much.

Michael: Yes, bye.

Erik: \*laughs\*

Michael: Crushed it.