



**GE 233: How Jen Young Embraced
Failure and Built a Thriving RV
Marketplace with 100K+ Users & 10K+
Vehicles [podcast]**

Growth Everywhere Podcast Transcript

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Okay everyone, today we have Jen Young who is the co-founder and CMO of Outdoorsy, which lets you rent local RVs so you can go on memorable adventures.

Jen, how's it going?

Jen Young: It's going so well, thank you very much for having me Eric. How are you?

Eric Siu: I'm doing well, thanks for being here. So Jen, why don't you tell the audience a little bit about who you are, and what you do?

Jen Young: Cool, well thanks for the really good introduction. Outdoorsy is a tech startup. We're a peer to peer marketplace that also has a B2B enterprise software product, and basically we dominate the whole outdoor recreational travel [inaudible 00:01:32].

It's a marketplace that services the 13 million RVs in the United States that do not get used for about 350 days a year. So they're literally only being used for two weeks out of the year, and it allows those owners to make money, and earn dollars, pretty good dollars, potentially \$50,000 a year, renting out their RV when they're not using it. On the renter side, for the 30 million Americans that love spending time at national parks and outdoor travel, they can pick up and use these things on demand, as they want.

So we set up this business a couple years ago, and I've been there from the beginning and responsible for marketing; so literally everything from the ground up, word of mouth, AdWords, Facebook, all of our growth channels, and brand community, the whole stack.

Eric Siu: Awesome. So if I go to your website, then I just need to look for an RV that I like, and then it can be like any other kind of marketplace out there, I just put in my credit card, and then I can just go and do an exchange to get the RV?

Jen Young: Yeah, I mean that's generally the concept, but one of the things that makes Outdoorsy a

little bit more full service than some of the general marketplaces is we've really worked hard on the backend to build in a lot of additional products. So we negotiated full \$1,000,000 liability insurance, \$250,000 comp and collision insurance. We also integrated pay as you go, or on demand road side assistance.

So normally that's a subscription model, where if you're renting something you've got to have an annual subscription for roadside assistance, but if you check out on Outdoorsy, literally you're just "hey I'm hitting the Grand Canyon for four days, I'll take four days of emergency road side assistance, package it in with my insurance." I'll put all the cool stuff that outdoor people and RVer's have in their garage, paddle boards, life jackets, bikes, barbecues, all that stuff. You can pick those things in, and a lot of our renters will even fill up their refrigerators with 24 cans of beer for you too.

So there's a lot more you can do, but definitely the payments and the review system and all those nuts and bolts of marketplaces are part of Outdoorsy.

Eric Siu: Awesome, and you have this incredible story about how you ended up starting the business, so can you go into that a little bit, about how this thing all just began?

Jen Young: Yeah, totally. Looking back, honestly, I think it is crazy that I did that and I can't even believe we did. But when you're at the beginning of it ... and I bet you've got a bunch of entrepreneurs listening into your podcast right now, they'll probably nod their heads as I tell this story ... but when we knew that there was unused recreational vehicles, travel trailers, camper vans, motor homes, all shapes and sizes, when we found that there were 13 million of these things sitting around the states not being used for almost the whole year, so 350 days times 13 million available units is over a billion available rental days, we knew we had a market.

So we're like, damn, we've gotta figure this out, all the stakeholders. We've got to interview the owners. We've got to interview the renters. We've got to interview the RV park owners. We've got to interview international travelers. We've got to really figure out what people are looking for in terms of price and selection and services, and what does it mean especially cause it's an on-the-road motorized product so that brings in a bunch of layers of complexity.

So we decided to walk the walk and talk the talk. We sold our houses, liquidated all the furniture and all the clothes, and the stuff that we had. We bought a Denali, and an Airstream Eddie Bauer, and we moved into a trailer. Quite seriously, we were living in North Beach, San Francisco and we drove up the trailer and the truck and we packed ourselves into it, downsized, got covered on some local newspapers which was awesome.

We hit the road and we lived in this thing for eight months, and we interviewed through that process hundreds of people. Every single person in every park that I walked past or without being too rude could go up and approach, I did. And that's where all of the insights for what was the interface, what was the software, what were the number of touchpoints, what timing was important too, how long was trip planning. All of the touchpoints that go into building a really great product and great marketing and user

experience, we got that by living on the road, and traveling for eight months in this thing.

Eric Siu: And what kind of questions were you asking? You were doing customer development, a lot of it, so what kind of questions were you asking some of these people? Were you just approaching them cold in a campground? What were you doing?

Jen Young: Yeah, totally, so, approached everybody cold. So it started off with obviously some really easy rapport building questions around, "hey, cool rig, and what a great trip you guys are on, why are you here?" So, that's one beautiful thing about working in the recreational travel space is everybody wants to talk about their trips, right? Everybody wants to talk about places to go and things to see and do.

So, we started by talking about why are they here, and how did they get that particular RV. A lot of them were the rentals from the traditional rental markets, which were pretty crappy RVs. And a lot of them were owners that were saying, "yeah this is it man, I'm out here, this is my one vacation. Getting away from the grind and loving that". So we started talking about that, and then we had to validate that we had product market fit, validate that we had something here. We knew we had the market with the number of idle assets and the number of available rental days, but then we started off with, "hey, how would you feel if you could rent this thing out to us? We rented it from ... we bought our own, but we're gonna get rid of it. What if we wanted to rent your trailer? Would you feel comfortable renting it to us? What would make you feel comfortable? Ratings and reviews?" We did all the check mark stuff. "Do you feel safe? Booking and paying and receiving cash deposits and security deposits online?"

So we did all of that for both renters and owners, and then once ... for the people ... it was kind of interesting. The people that were not interested, those were the ones where we got really, really great insights on how we were gonna be able to overcome the objections. What were the things that would make it and I think a lot of the feedback there was scale. If everybody was doing it, then they probably would feel more comfortable. Then there were some outliers that were just like, "no way man, this is my house and my baby". The large portion of people were so open, and I think Airbnbs, Ubers, and a lot of the other marketplaces out there really paved the way making peer-to-peer purchases and sales commonplace.

So, that was the general get to know why they're up there, what they're doing, what makes a trip great in an RV, to qualify to make sure that we had product market fit, would they do it, if they would, if they wouldn't, why? Then we went into, "hey if you could just imagine the most amazing experience, what would it be like for pick up and drop off?"

That's where we got some cool ideas that we haven't even launched in our product yet, Eric, but we're going to next year. Things like yeah I'd love a marketplace where not only could I rent out mine but what if I wanted to do a swap with somebody else's?"

[inaudible 00:08:26] Or what if I outgrew my RV and it was time to actually buy a cooler one, or we've got kids and we needed to buy a bigger one? I'd love to buy it directly from somebody that I knew and trusted and try it out for a bit and then do it, and sort of

circumvent the traditional used car sales RV sales process. Lots of amazing, inspirational ideas too.

Eric Siu: Love it, so you're taking people through the entire process now where if people rented from someone before, they could just actually buy from them or negotiate some terms down the road? And this is all coming from more customer feedback I'm assuming?

Jen Young: Yeah, absolutely. And now that we actually have a thriving marketplace with hundreds of thousands of users, and tens of thousands of vehicles, and a really robust community going, now we're actually getting a ton of inbound recommendations and requests. There's definitely no gaps in the product room now. We're actually in an enviable position figuring out what our priorities are, and how does that align to revenue and scale and user experience as opposed to can we do everything on the wishlist, which is another big thing for your audience or people listening today if they're in a similar situation. Saying no to the shiny objects is really important to build a culture around.

Eric Siu: Got it. So building a marketplace kind of business, what are some struggles you faced doing this that you can speak to? Cause it's not easy right, cause you have the chicken and the egg problem.

Jen Young: Yeah, it was so hard at the beginning because again we were tackling everything, right. Building a marketplace that needed to be national but having to start in city neighborhoods, counties, states, then matching up. First getting the supply, then having to match the supply to demand in that same city, town, county, state, plus build awareness and all the rest of it was pretty challenging.

So I'd say some of the things that really stand out, and maybe this is for me in particular because I didn't really come from tech start-up worlds before, so I came from an environment where you did all of your pre-planning, your work and your time, and then you launched something that you knew was gonna be gorgeous and perfect and connect with your customers. But in this world and this environment it was quite the opposite. So I think one of the biggest things that I learned is embracing a culture of failure, and I know that sounds weird because failure's got a bad rap as far as words go, but embracing a culture of failure is the name of the game. Put out stuff that is half-finished, to try as many things as you possibly can. Just get any kind of feedback and then turn that feedback into your next iteration and try and do that three times a week. And get into that mojo where you're like hey, it's ugly but this is more important than spending too much time and money to build something that looks great and then find out it fails.

Eric Siu: Great.

Jen Young: And then also, the other thing, Eric, I'd say, is that good old basic meat and potato channels too. Getting on the phone, literally. Tons of cold calls, tons of word of mouth, that can't be discounted.

Eric Siu: Yeah, it seems counterintuitive to people to just pick up the phone nowadays, sometimes I need to push people, this thing can just be solved on a quick phone call for one minute, but duh. Sometimes the things, the old school stuff, people tend to just

discard them.

So, in terms of ... you talked about you have lots of users, lots of people using the platform. What other numbers can you reveal around the business today?

Jen Young: We've got about a million interactions within our marketplace in terms of conversations and payments and completed bookings, which is pretty great given that 2017 is our first full calendar year in market. So, first January then December that we've had a cycle around for economics, which is great.

A million interactions, we've done about a quarter of a million booking days booked, which is so cool. To be able to sit here now ... you know looking back from, "hey we've got a great idea, sure building software marketplaces is so easy" to then figuring out it isn't so easy, and then living in the trailer and grinding it out [inaudible 00:12:36] We look back and say a quarter of a million awesome vacation holiday days and road trips have been booked and paid for and processed and completed on Outdoorsy is such a cool feeling.

I know everybody is always thinking about the volume game, but also for us I would say some of the great stories that have come out of the transactions on the platform are the things that make me most proud and excited. Families reconnecting, teenage kids having to do road trips with the parents and getting their relationship back on track without digital devices and TVs and all that sort of stuff. A few marriage proposals, a woman got pregnant and they're having their first child on one of their road trips. Grandparents connecting with one another, I'll try not to be too sappy there, Eric.

Eric Siu: No, I love it.

Jen Young: I think for innovators and entrepreneurs and people that are trying to break molds and do new stuff, I don't want to discount the value of what we're doing and why we're doing it. Because it's the stories and it's the new ways of thinking and it's the new ways of people experiencing products and services and collaborating together that I think is pretty cool too.

Eric Siu: I think people tend to forget about that, especially people in the digital world. Everyone thinks about, it's all about the numbers, it's all about growth, growth, growth, but it's the stories that connect you with people and that's what gets people to eventually love a brand, and I think you as a company have done that so well.

Speaking of growth, what's working for you in terms of customer acquisition today since you come from a big marketing background?

Jen Young: Yeah, absolutely. So we're probably similar to a lot of digital business and channels for customer acquisition. Our meat and potatoes are AdWords and Facebook and content. Those are the channels that work the hardest for us on the supply side, the owner side. Facebook is the place where we can naturally insert ourselves with a lot of highly engaged community groups around RVing and outdoor and vehicle enthusiasts. And because it's a pretty compelling proposition, really great creative in video and strong

visuals capturing, showing them what it feels like talking about the dollars that we can drive is really hike in bringing channels for us. And then of course we've got a pretty tried and true, now tested nurture flow through email and it uses a bunch of different supporting documents and touchpoints through our travel journal or through downloads or through invitations to closed communities and conversation.

Eric Siu: I really recommend everyone go to the Outdoorsy website and just check out all the stories. First one, you can go to the blog, there's a lot of stuff that's going on, and then if you want to learn how to take things ... Jen just mentioned that 2017 is their first calendar year, but if you look at all the stuff they've done from a branding perspective and a marketing perspective, it's pretty enviable so good job on that.

Jen Young: Thank you for that, maybe just another little punctuation mark around that right. It's like, when you're building product and you've got that entrepreneurial mindset you're thinking, "hey, let's just drive the highest converting conversion channels", but I'm telling you a really cool looking photo and some thought around the emotion and a headline and a cool story angle it's amazing how far that can go, because a lot of people want to naturally pick up and share interesting stories. So we invested in building that content straight up. We went on road trips ourselves, we shot a bunch of great photos, we shot our team and we tried to build some cool assets and that's what we pushed out there for other content providers and writers to write about and it's worked for us, aside from the strain of acquisition ad approach.

Eric Siu: People tend to forget about, and this is something I stress to any entrepreneurs or marketers out there, people are forgetting about the lost art of copywriting and what a good headline really means, and I think you've done that really well so go to the Outdoorsy site, learn more about it, even Google the word copywrite, because it's not just all about throwing ads up on Facebook or Google. It's much more than that, right?

Jen Young: A hundred percent. Everybody ... I'm sure there's people that know a lot more about this than I do that are listening in but even if you think about AdWords, which everybody generally associates around targeting and ad groups and bidding and spend, cutting through costs and cutting through the overall ad groups really happens at the headline. This is where ...there's just so much 'me too' advertising out there that if you can inject personality and try your different power words and really find something that stands apart from all of the me too competitive ads at the top of page, you'd be amazed at how many clicks you'll get being in sixth position if you've got a really interesting headline.

Eric Siu: There you go. Great, a couple more rapid fire questions for you Jen. What's one new tool that you've added in the last year that's added a lot of value? For example, Evernote.

Jen Young: Evernote, God, I wish that Evernote worked really well for me. I'm a little more meat and potatoes on my to-do's there but I'd say ... I know that Slack is ... everybody's talking about Slack, and I don't know that it's a massive tool, but Slack has definitely changed things for me, and so has Quip.

But going back to the point, Eric, about where Outdoorsy is right now and how we drive so much traffic and interest around our story, we're doing a lot of writing. So Quip's been a really great tool for us because we are still heavy-up and focused on the quality of our content and the storytelling. So it's an awesome tool where I can collaborate in the live fashion with all my partners. My bloggers, writers, social influencers, my team members, I can CC, I can tag, I can give permissions for access to some files and folders and not. It's got a little bit of Slack, it's got a little bit of word processing, and it's got a little bit of G-Drive in it too. So, that's been a tool for us that's worked really well this year, but I would say tools for us are changing about as quickly as you can imagine.

Eric Siu: Got it, okay. And how about for you personally? How are you getting better every day? How are you learning? How are you just improving?

Jen Young: I work on it. Every day I wrap up the end of my day, and every morning I start off my day with pretty tight summaries of what were my big pillars that mattered for the business and I refine them just slightly. What are the ... I work on themes and my content calendars and then my big major documents and then I look into my to-dos and my tasks and I just build a really strong system internally about what are the priorities. What am I going to drop, do, or delay? And I just do that every single morning, and it does get me to be a lot more effective, and also say no.

Eric Siu: Got it, and does that come from the ... it sounds like the getting things done methodology, is that what you follow?

Jen Young: One hundred percent. I also do power through probably two or three times as much as any other person in [inaudible 00:19:39] world as me. All of my friends in other jobs, I just do more. And I think that that is also another requirement if you're in the start-up world.

Eric Siu: Love it. Alright, well Jen this has been great. What's the best way for people to find you online?

Jen Young: Best way for people to find me online is any social channel, but personally if you want to connect with me either on Facebook or direct through email, Jen@outdoorsy.com. Love touching base and talking with people. I've shut down my personal Instagram because we're running Outdoorsy Instagram there but that's probably the best way to get a feeling and a vibe for the brand, and I always love talking to as many people as I can.

Eric Siu: Awesome, great. Jen, thanks so much for doing this.

Jen Young: Absolutely. Have a great day, Eric. Absolutely love what you guys are up to.

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