

Bob Gilbert (00:02):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales. This is a podcast series that explores with travel and tourism leaders. Their take on key issues of the day. My name is Bob Gilbert, general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander. Looking back, I've had the privilege to have worked with a number of iconic global brands. I'll be chatting with those that are helping shape the future travel and tourism industry all with their own unique tales to share.

Bob Gilbert (00:38):

Today's guest on Tourism Heads and Their Tales is Brian Wright, head of marketing for Mammoth Lake's tourism, California. We discuss why understanding the voice of the community is vital to marketing a destination. And that we as DMOs are all stewards of these special places we call home. We talk about key takeaways from the pandemic and the impact increased visitation has on marketing decisions in smaller sought after outdoor recreational destinations, the value of data driven decisions, risk taking, and much more. So very happy and delighted to have Brian Wright here with us this morning. Brian is somebody I've known for many, many years. He is a marketing whizz and an influencer. And, um, I'll let you explain a little bit more about your background, but Brian heads up, the marketing for Mammoth Lakes in California. So welcome this morning, Brian. And why don't you give our audience just a little background as to your experiences and expertise.

Brian Wright (01:42):

Ehh. Expertise is questionable, but experiences are there and valid. Um, yeah, I'll kind of start back. I'll make, this the Reader's Digest version, but you know, I kind of cut my teeth in tourisms, but my first job out of high school, it was working for Wet and Wild. So it was just that tourism is in my blood and I did a lifeguard there worked for a space camp then, uh, was a camp counselor for space camp. Got my first real job there, uh, marketing, um, marketing space camp in the Astronaut Hall of Fame down in Titusville, Florida got picked up by the Kennedy Space Center. Um, and I worked, worked there for about 10 years at the visitor complex. And that's where you and I, first met and then got to Yosemite. So DNC Parks and Resorts was the concession there. Um, and they had a position for the Director of Marketing out in Yosemite. So I took that position, was there for five years and then Visit California came calling, so worked for them for about five years. And then most recently worked for Santa Monica, um, and just did their business development there as well. So yeah, it's been a- been been a fun ride, um, and just, and loving Mammoth Lakes now just having a ball!

Bob Gilbert (02:39):

Right? I mean the different, uh, positions that you've had, you know, you've really traveled the country coast to coast. And with that, the world, one of the questions that I have for you, is the impact of tourism on the local communities. There's and especially over the last couple of years with the pandemic, there's been sensitivity to an influx of outsiders, if you will. What techniques do you use to kind of build that bridge between accepting folks from the outside, during the pandemic with the local community, the residents who, uh, are, are in the local community?

Brian Wright (03:18):

That's a tough one, especially now with overtourism being such a big buzzword, right? Um, and a place like Mammoth Lake, you know, I've only been there for about eight months, right. But the horror stories of two years ago, and last summer got even a little bit better, but folks coming in, just not knowing what

to do, um, had no idea how to recreate responsibly, right? That's the big buzz term. Yep. And would come in with their tents, go to Walmart, pick up all their kit, come to our campgrounds and be there for a week and go, this is not for me, and then just leave it. They would not pick up after their animals. Um, so it just became a very Us versus Them mentality. We don't want tourists in here and we watched other communities go through this and not address it head on.

Brian Wright (03:58):

And so we kind of took the tackle, look, we're gonna pick this head on and stop marketing, like completely stop marketing for the summer, and just start educating. So the education that that message became paramount. And the only thing we did, we, we moved from a marketing communic- marketing organization to a, to an education basically, platform. How do you- when you get here, what do you do? How do you recreate responsibly? How do you do the right things? Um, you know where to go, don't all people clump in one area get 'em spread out into different, different parts of Mammoth. So, you know, that that technique has worked well. And it, and the, the residents actually felt that. They were like, okay, you're doing so every, so the summer of 19' was hardcore. Um, I'm sorry, 20' was, was pretty bad. Then 21' last summer was, was better. It was much, much better, um, with that education piece.

Bob Gilbert (04:42):

So you, you, your marketing techniques, if you will, change, you know, based upon, you know, what's going on.

Brian Wright (04:48):

Yeah. We stopped inviting people.

Bob Gilbert (04:49):

In the world.

Bob Gilbert (04:50):

Right.

Brian Wright (04:50):

We Just said, when you come, please be nice. And we've actually stopped using the word sustainable tourism and are now saying stewardship, because sustainability can really, it's just got a vast- you know, you say it, one person, that can mean a thousand different things to that person. So sustainable, it could be that you respect the, you know, the place that you're at, if you're sustainable, it means that you're using recyclable water bottles or whatever that looks like. But stewardship, it means something stewardship, it resonates. Stewardship is like, I'm gonna take care of this place when I'm there.

Bob Gilbert (05:19):

Yeah. And I think that that is a real key word, stewardship because at the end of the day, all of us, um, I know this is a little bit high and mighty, but you know, we're living on this planet and we are stewards of this planet. Yeah. You know, while we're on it. But when did you get that sense that the issue needed to be addressed? How quickly were you able to gauge the temperature and respond? What, what was that, um, process?

Brian Wright (05:47):

It was fast because what we saw happening happen quickly. So with the folks, you know, the pandemic people left the big cities and where'd, they want to go? The mountains. They wanted go camping. They wanted to be out uh in nature. So while people were struggling, and you know, the hotels, we were, I mean, busting at the seams, people were showing up in droves because they wanted to get out of the cities and come out to, to Mammoth. So we saw that happen quickly. And when we started watching the trash build up and the poop on the side of the road, the dog, and all this stuff's happening. And we are like, what do we do now? Like, because this has to, we have to address this fast! So we started a trail host program, actually in mammoth. So we actually, we paid volunteers to come out there, stay at the beginning of trails, hand out dog bags, Hey, you know, get all like, Hey, make sure you're taking water with you.

Brian Wright (06:31):

Make sure you have the right attire on, make sure you're prepared to go out. Because people were showing up, had no idea how to be out in the outdoors. So those kinds of programs, we, we started trashy Thursday where we would go and pick up trash around mammoth, Thursday. We started a food bank. We started all these different things that really resonated with the community and we got the community involved and that's what really, we began to kind of change the tide. So, because we've seen other destinations who are still struggling with this, and the anti-tourism sentiment is real, it's palpable and it's kind of scary in some places. Um, but we were able to kind of turn that around. People understand that, you know, tourism is important to Mammoth. I mean we're a town, we're just, we're just a mountain town with a ski destination.

Brian Wright (07:09):

Then the town's kinda growing around it. We, we like to call it. Um, it's a it's nature with a town, right. It's kind of what, what mammoth is. Um, and the other kind of pivotal shift that's just happening that we're beginning to see and actually Vo- vocalize now is that you've had this it's, you know, tourism is the life boat of a community, you hear this over and over again. And if tourism went away, we would just dry up. Right? But that's not necessarily the case. What the life of Mammoth is, is the people, it's the residents. And if without them we can't have visitors, we can't have like, the town won't exist without the residents. So it's like that focus has to be on the residents first. You know, if you start building things for the residents, the people will come, but as long as residents are happy. So that's another kind of a shift that we're just kind of undertaking just recently sort of seeing that kind of, you know, shift in our, in our minds.

Bob Gilbert (07:57):

So kind of changing the conversation here over the years. What have you noticed in terms of data, understanding data, how do you use data? You know, what kind of KPIs are you using today versus what you use yesterday, as you look at building for the future? There's a sense of, I think dare I say, relief, that we all hope that the worst is now behind us. Right? That there's no new variation coming down the road, but I think we've learned and we are prepared. So, uh, what are you now utilizing in terms of data? What insights do you gather that help you become a better marketer for your destination for Mammoth Lakes?

Brian Wright (08:36):

We have doubled the amount of research just in this year's budget. We went back to the board and said, look, we don't have enough for, for our research line. Um, you know, looking at just, you know, your typical, a effect in the studies, you know, that, that sort of thing. We're also, um, we have a TBID, a tourism business improvement district, um, in town. And we're looking to, to re negotiate that again next couple years. So a lot of economic surveys, economic studies right now. Um, so those are the things we're looking at, you know, currently, as far as how your ads are doing and what you're, you know, moving the needle on stuff, that's- yesterday was a topic, you know? Right? But then we looked out for them this week. And so yesterday's one of those topics was, you know, the, the future is here, right?

Brian Wright ([09:16](#)):

The, the, all your cookies are going away and they're gone. Like, so you have to, you know, being, say yes for tracking's all gone. It's like we've reverted 20 years. Right. Kind of gone back to early 2000s. Like now I'm, you know, looking at mailers and like, what does that look like if we're going back old school? So from a tactic perspective, it's kind of fun to kind of reengage that, that old sense of what we used to do in the past is, is new again. Um, but looking at things like ad theory, like those companies that are using machine learning to really get down deep into predictive, you know, if I serve you ad, this is what you're gonna do, regardless of if I'm tracking you or not, I can kind of gauge your behavior. So it's kind of big brother creepy <laugh>. Um, but really just amazing that, that, that kind of learning and techniques are already out there.

Bob Gilbert ([09:58](#)):

Have you changed your strategy because of what, uh, Apple and Google have done in terms of evaporation of those cookies and tracking. Yeah. Um, so what, what, what are you doing now? Is that you, you say you're going back to old school?

Brian Wright ([10:14](#)):

Well, that's what it kind of feels like Right? We're looking at, um, I mean we did a mailer, we also market to the local community and we have flight service. So this is something I haven't played with in my past careers as I've been in kind of flight service. We have two airports, you know, Mammoth Airport, just outside of town, and then Bishop, um, just about 45 minutes away. And, um, United is flying in to the Bishop, Airline or Airport and we were trying to figure out how to get the word out to our locals. And I'm like, let's just do a mailbox drop... And it worked! Like it's like those, they wanted to get the paper in their hands. Everybody in Mammoth has a post off- a PO box because they don't deliver mail. So everybody has to go there. So you find those little quirks. And we did that for Mammoth. We went down to Bishop, we went to Ridgecrest, we kind of, went all over the county and then you know, we saw this huge uptake and all of a sudden, you know, people looking for local discounts and airline flight. So some of those old school tactics you can still implement today that they were working.

Bob Gilbert ([11:05](#)):

I think one of the interesting things is that you have been in this industry for a while. There are folks that have been in, in the industry for literally hours. I mean very new into the industry. So for them old school, they don't what old school is!

Brian Wright ([11:17](#)):

Whatever that means.

Bob Gilbert (11:18):

So they have to go, you know, because they haven't experienced that. It's interesting that that old school works. You know, we kind of started out from a do DMO world where the only KPI was how many, um, visitor guides you sent out, right. Uh, right. That, that was the measure. Um, and obviously we, we become much more sophisticated in terms of our KPIs.

Brian Wright (11:42):

We're looking at. So you looking at the, um, even the geographic, like, you know, things that we, we, you know, I can, I know where your IP address is. I know where you live and I can, you can figure that for the most part. Right? And I know geo geographically where you live and you're- but what we've taken really attacked at looking at is moved away from the kind of the demographics and going more to the psychographics. So I really don't care who what, where when, why you are or what you're looking at, what I do care about is that you wanna go travel and you want to come to the outdoors and it doesn't matter how old you are or what color you are, any of those things, right? Those, those kind of where you can like parse it down, I'm looking for your state of mind. And that's the kind one, one fact that we've taken is from a psychographic standpoint, who's ready to travel. It could be empty nesters. It could be whatever it could be Millennials, Gen Z, but I just wanna make sure that I'm talking to you and the way you want to hear me talk to you. Right? But, and, but you're that you just wanna be outside and you, and you wanna come in, they just be blown away by the grandeur of what, you know, Mammoth can show you.

Bob Gilbert (12:35):

Right. I think it's interesting. This one looks at the evolution of that analytical world and, and the development of cohorts personas that, you know, have really changed that the ability today compared to yesterday, yesterday was you would have a hypothetical family. Here's John and Mary, and they got two kids and they live in the city suburbs. And that was a static hypothetical situation. Whereas today there are companies that are offering dynamic personas based on a whole bunch of different measures that are really driven by what you are inferring, which, which is the emotional side, which is actionable versus, you know, the sentiment side, which is interesting, but it is not dynamic per se. Right. And, you know, tapping into that is gonna be a major benefit to destination marketers, to be able to really drill down to the folks that you really, really want, you know, wherever they are, which will overcome, I think, and offset some of that loss of privacy, what the cookies, have taken away that kind of compensates to a degree. So as you look ahead now, and this is now a new year and not just a new year, but kind of like a new year, you know, looking forward as opposed to looking back and based upon the last couple of years, what everybody has gone through, what are the biggest challenges that you see and what are you doing to try and overcome those challenges as, as we move forward,

Brian Wright (14:03):

Um, we are undergoing a brand refresh, you know, we got new director of marketing, new voodoo brand, right. <laugh> so it's like you come in here and, you know, it's out with the old and we've had a great, you know, it's, um, like I, you know, nature's Adventure Land. And so to take that to this next level, what we're looking at is it's not about inviting everybody anymore, especially in destinations, as delicate as ours, right. It's about inviting the right people. So I don't necessarily want you to come up if you're not gonna take care of my place. Like, and this is now we can, and the residents behind it, we want the right people to come up. And so that's why this pivot to stewardship because it's, it's, it's a

word that people understand and they know, and they can kind of resonate with, but when we invite you up to say our place, it's, you're coming into a place that is unreal

Brian Wright ([14:46](#)):

like it is it's, it is it's otherworldly, it's magical. It's incredible. And we wanna keep it that way. So this responsibility. So in our messaging with the overarching brand, you know, maybe something like Mammoth Lakes is unreal, but now it's the responsibility of the visitor to keep it that way. We wanna put that some of that on us back on you coming up to make sure that when, when you're here, it's incredible. It is, it is mind-blowingly, beautiful. You almost kinda pinch yourself that it's, that you're looking at something that's real, but help us keep it that way, you know, pick up after yourselves, you know, take, take care of the planet while you're here, you know, and there's all those different things then from a sustainable standpoint, you can do, you know, on your trip. So that's our, really our focus right now. And that's from a, from a town perspective as well. We wanna make sure that we're coming out with something that everybody who lives in mammoth could be super proud of. Like, it's almost like an Olympic moment, right? It's like this, you know, huge, like powerful. I wanna be so proud of what I'm seeing on the screen and what messages are coming out from my town. And so that's kind of where we're where we're headed.

Bob Gilbert ([15:44](#)):

So with the new programs that are available today, you know, you are trying to really pinpoint and drill down double down, in fact, on the kinds of folks that you wanna attract, that the ones that are responsible that are going to, to come and enjoy the destination and leave it pristine as pristine as, you know, when they leave as they came. So how do you try and identify that right fit visitor?

Brian Wright ([16:11](#)):

So that's where your advertising kind of comes into place and where you, where you choose to advertise. I think a lot of times these ad serving, uh, companies, right? Mm-hmm, <affirmative>, you've seen your ad show up in places where you didn't didn't want your ad to show up. Right. And so that we've taken to a, like a micro level, um, we're helping, you know, we work with the agency, um, using the shipyard who is, they're amazing. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and they are trying to really lay out, like, where are we gonna be? Like, what are the places you're gonna be in? Is it outside magazine? Is it, you know, is it national geographic? You know, when you're being served. So people who are reading those things, that's who we're trying to get to. So it's, it's, it's those it's really kind of focusing in on what your likes and dislikes are, where, where you are as a, as a visitor, and then trying to get them to come in, you know, and us to service you this ad at the right time and, and motivate that travel.

Bob Gilbert ([17:00](#)):

So with, with that kind of traveler, are you seeing that they have the desire to travel year round, or when you want them as a destination? I mean, we, we all want to be able to build shoulder season. We all want to be able to build off season, um, these kinds of travelers, the ones that appreciate that off season, if you will, and you know, far from the madding crowd, not the middle of summer when probably you don't need to market because they can come anyway. Right. They're on their way. Right. So

Brian Wright ([17:30](#)):

Such education, but yeah. So yeah, those folks are, you know, they tend to be now the outdoor types and the folks who really love nature, and they will figure out a way, especially with working remote, you know, these days they'll come when we, you know, Hey, listen. And the examples like even right, like on the mountain, um, you know, Mammoth mountain, on the weekends, it's busy Thursday, Friday, Saturday, you know, we've done a great job. Getting folks up here at the mountains, done an amazing job, you know, marketing down to Southern California. We're more focused on the destination. Um, you know, coming in from New York and Chicago, Boston, and, but on a Tuesday on the mountain, you can shoot a cannon up the hill and you're by yourself. And it's amazing. Like the experience is it's incredible. So that's what we're trying to push. It's like, look, come up here, come on Tuesday.

Brian Wright ([18:17](#)):

Like, it's great. And come here, you know, not during president day weekend or when it's gonna be busy anyway. But if you can manage to come up here and speak for a couple hours a day, it's not like you have to, you have burn the entire day out there. So come up with the family, do a little, you know, education or do some work at home, hop out in the lifts for a little bit, come back home. So it's just, it's those kinds of folks we're looking to to get up as far as the midweek stuff too. Cause we don't, we don't market the weekends. You know, that that's, that happens. Yeah. We're just, we're, we're pushing that midweek.

Bob Gilbert ([18:42](#)):

As lifestyles have changed over the last few years, driven by the pandemic, the ability for folks to travel, not just during high season, but to, to spread out their vacation periods has, has had an impact on tourism. So I think that folks are more, I think they're ready to build, to accept messages that say, Hey, come in the fall, when it's quieter, this is the experience that you're gonna have in the fall. This is the experience you're gonna have in the spring. I mean, I remember with, with Yosemite as an example, when I used to go visit, um, the, the times I loved were the winter <laugh> were, you know, the, the late fall, when the, the crowds weren't there, it was a much more pleasant experience, much more, better for the soul. I think the, um, we've learned a lot over the last couple of years, and we now need to, you know, make sure that we continue with the learnings and insights that we've gained to be able to help us kind of propel. Yeah. Forward. What advice would you give folks to, you know, what things have you done that maybe didn't work out so well, but, you know, I think the only way to be successful is to try different things. Some work, some don't, you know, what advice would you give to folks who are just starting out in marketing? You know, what experience, uh,

Brian Wright ([20:03](#)):

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to try something and it's, and it's, you know, new ideas because that's how you're gonna find the one thing. You may try five things that don't work. And then all of a sudden something works and you're like, right. And you figure, you figure out from that, then what can make it better the next time? I mean, I've had some massive failures in my career and they've been amazingly, you know, flaming out, um, some ad campaigns that we did that just were just, they just wrong message, wrong time, wrong audience, wrong, everything. But you take those and you kind of, you know, after you get past it, you can look back and giggle at it a little bit. Um, but you like, okay, what was, why did it fail so miserably? What was the next thing we could do? And then you kind of, you take those messages and tweak. So I think the fair, the, the fear of failure is paralyzing sometimes. And I would say, look, just find somebody, you can work, find an agency. You can work with, find a boss you can work with. Who's willing to take on those risks and say, Hey, sure. Just try something new every have a good time.

Bob Gilbert ([20:55](#)):

Well, I think that, uh, I'd like to thank you for coming here today. I wish you continued success. It's been a pleasure. Absolutely. And thank you very much. Indeed. Brian,

Brian Wright ([21:06](#)):

Thank you. It's been awesome. It's really good to see you again.

Bob Gilbert ([21:08](#)):

Likewise. Thank you very much.

Brian Wright ([21:10](#)):

Thank you.

Bob Gilbert ([21:13](#)):

We hope you enjoyed today's episode, please. Like thumbs up, subscribe and leave a review. You can also visit Eddyalexander.com to learn more about our tourism marketing and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies. Finally, if you'd like to suggest future guests or podcast discussion topics, or to sign up, to get an email alert, when we drop new episodes, please do so at eddyalexander.com/THATT.