

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. Today's guest on tourism heads and their tails, we welcome Wendy Kheel. Wendy is universally regarded as a research analyst guru. Why? Because she has the ability to turn research into fun. Her experiences include LA tourism, Universal Studios Hollywood, as well as Disney. Today, she works with tourism economics, marketing intelligence platform, "Symphony." We chat with Wendy and explore her personal points of view into what data DMO should be looking for post pandemic.

Bob Gilbert (01:09):

What's trending in the research base, such as a cookieless world, KPI shifts, demographic changes, visitor behavior changes and much more. Wendy, Um, it's a pleasure to welcome you here today. And we've, I think first met when we were at the visit California conference in San Diego a couple of years ago. I think that was the first time you and I met and it was in the research session, in fact. So we've known each other ever since then. And at that moment in time, Wendy headed up all of the research for Los Angeles tourism and now, well, why don't you tell us now what you're up to? And I know that if anybody wants to gather data and under and get insights, the first person they contact is Wendy <laugh>. So, uh, give, give us, um, an update on, on what you're up to.

Wendy Kheel (02:04):

Well, you're, you're very kind, um, yes, for the last year, a little bit more than a year, I've been working with tourism economics, and hopefully most people are familiar with tourism economics, uh, focusing on symphony. And that symphony is a data of intelligence platform that, um, tourism economics recognized a couple years ago as others did. There's a need to be able to compile and consolidate all this data that DMO have access to now. And it's, it's, there's just so much data out there. That's the good news. The bad news is there's so much data out there, hard to work with, hard to pull it all together, to see what it says, and what the implications are. So why, what I like to think about what, uh, Symphony is. I mean, when we visualize all the data, we pull it all in, but it creates all the pieces of the puzzle, you know, so that you, as you're putting all your data together to see the big picture, and sometimes you don't need all of the pieces in order to see the big picture of what's going on in your organization and the, and the answers, but you need enough of those pieces to see.

Wendy Kheel (03:12):

And so that's what, uh, Symphony is able to visualize and pull together gives you all those pieces of your data, saves you a lot of time, too,

Bob Gilbert (03:20):

Right? he, the, the amount of data or the overload data overload, uh, is a challenge. And I think that unless you've been to MIT, it's, it's, it can be challenging for a DMO to, you know, truly understand, you know, what to look for. And I was always told, only measure what counts-

Wendy Kheel (03:43):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Bob Gilbert (03:44):

and easier said than done. So, so from your perspective, and, and with your experience, what are the main KPIs? Where should DMO start looking for insight? And there's a second part to that question. And that is what has changed over the last couple of years.

Wendy Kheel (04:08):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Bob Gilbert (04:09):

um, with the world turning upside down, um, has the, has what one looks for from a KPI has that changed and should DMOs be looking at things a little differently today? So two parts to the question.

Wendy Kheel (04:23):

Okay. Well, that's a big question, um, from the KPIs or whatever metrics you're measuring, I always recommended what I did turn at LA tourism is that it depends on your stakeholders, and you also have both the external and the internal stakeholders. So start with your external stakeholders. If it's your hotel community, if you're reporting to the government, you know, you're funded by, by the state or you're funded by the city, whatever they have a set of metrics that they have an expectation it's typically around economic impact. They wanna know how many jobs are you creating, you know, how much money are you bringing into the community? How many businesses are you supporting as a result of what your efforts are? Those are the kind of KPIs that they're looking for, for the most part, but there are some different if you're a DMO that's involved in destination management.

Wendy Kheel (05:16):

So they're gonna wanna know what kind of efforts are you putting behind that as well. So there's those KPIs that are your external, of course, your hotel years are gonna be looking for, what are you driving to our hotels? What are the meaning and conventions that you're helping us drive? What are the tourists? And so on that you're driving to our hotels for. So tho- that's what they want to look at for the most part. Now, internally, you're looking at, of course, your marketing KPIs, you know, in terms of what, what I'm looking at, my campaigns and so on, what has been successful and what are those KPIs? Every division of your marketing department is gonna have a different KPI. So your brand marketing people are gonna be looking for actually, maybe visitations, you know, um, but you're digital, you know, they may be looking for engagement and impressions.

Wendy Kheel (06:02):

And how many people did you drive to our website? And so on from the campaign, your communications, people are gonna be looking for, you know, how many stories did you place and what news media, how many FAM trips did you bring in and so on, what was your contribution to it? So your travel industry that very hard to do their KPIs on that, because a lot of it is they're working with travel agents, they're working on, on going to trade shows and so on. So it's hard to really measure their impact, but you can, to some extent in terms of what your travel agents, how much contact did you have, and some of them, you can actually, um, get data onto what did drive to your market from your different travel agents, receptive to our operators and so on. So you just have to set your KPIs and according to what your organization is trying to do, what is your mission?

Wendy Kheel (06:55):

And then what is the, the measures that are gonna show whether you're successful or not. And also on the marketing side too, you're gonna have to, you're gonna wanna try to do some research of your effectiveness of your content. That's always, and did it resonate or not, and who did it resonate with and did it actually drive intent to visitation or visitation? If you can get that, did it actually, attribution is really hard to, because people have so many different touch points of where they get their information. It's hard to, to say anyone did it.

Bob Gilbert (07:27):

So Who's, who's who does the best job in attribution management?

Wendy Kheel (07:32):

I, you know, there's, I don't know if I could say anybody's the best

Bob Gilbert (07:34):

And I'm not trying to, this is an advertisement for any particular organization, but, um, it is the holy grow, I think, from, um,

Wendy Kheel (07:42):

It is, and it's not an easy one and it's not perfect. Let me also say there is no perfect source of data, right. You know, there just isn't in our industry, we just don't have that kind of data, you know, and they talk about big data. We have little data because we don't have a lot of transactional data. You know, we don't really sell anything that would give us that transactional data. So it's very difficult for an enter. Do attribution is really difficult. Um, you do have companies like Arrivalist and so on. And, and those that do- are able to track from somebody who saw your advertisement, you know, when they were searching on the internet and so on. And did they actually go to a hotel or did they actually book a flight to your destination? And they can track that, yes, that's attribution.

Wendy Kheel (08:27):

Now they saw a couple other things as well, you know, can you take complete credit for that? And what we have on Symphony too, is, is all pulling in all this data, because you can't have just one source. And that was just one tool. They're all different tools. So then you have to look at it together, because there maybe one that doesn't look quite right. You know, and you have to figure out, is that the right one or is there something wrong with that one in terms of, of the data and there can be, you know,

Bob Gilbert (08:53):

So how many sources do you pull from aggregate all of this data and uh, turn it into something, get the sausage, the other end?

Wendy Kheel (09:02):

Yeah. Yeah. Well what we do is Symphony because we try to take a 360 degree, look at a DMO because that's what tourism, economics is a data company. We work, we work with data, we provide data, we create data. So in most DMO, what we would be looking at is, you know, if they have their STR data, which most do that's their hotel data, you know, and that's, that is really important data to have because that is truly data. You know, that's one of the very sources we have that is yes, the hotels are reporting their occupancy and it's a fact

Bob Gilbert (09:35):

It's consumed,

Wendy Kheel (09:36):

It's consumed. It's a fact, that's probably one of the transactional, transactional data we have on it. So that's you need your STR data. And if you are a, um, short term rental market, whether it be key data or transparent or air DNA, because that is a growing source of lodging, you know, if there was any winner in the, in COVID, in the pandemic, it was Airbnb and VRBO you know, they big winners in terms of the number of rooms that they were selling and the kind of rates they were getting for it. So you would need that. You need, um, all your Google analytics and that's free, you know, it's all your Google analytics so you know, your impressions and your engagements and what's being driven to your website, any of your social media. So your, your Facebook, your Instagram, your, if you're using any of those platforms, you need to have some kind of way to track, you know, what, how is it performing on that?

Wendy Kheel (10:33):

Um, and then any economic data which we provide as well, jobs, consumer confidence, um, things like that. And then if you can add to it, say geolocation data, if you are, you have a CRM system, you know, whether it be Simpleview or attempt test or something, you know, so that you can track what you're doing on the sales side and meetings and conventions, but you also may be using your CRM system to track your membership or track your, uh, newsletters, you know, so, you know, your open rates and so on on that, so that you wanna know how effective are your news rates, because in any DMO you're marketing and your sales, it's a bunch of different touch points that you're using. And you wanna try to be able to track or measure in some way, how effective are all those different touch points.

Bob Gilbert (11:21):

And as you said earlier, the key is to ensure that you're pulling the right data or at least have the source of the data that then you can then put a reader's digest version. For if, well, depending upon who you're talking with. Because you, do you supply raw data as well, or is it more, it's just the compiled aggregated data

Wendy Kheel (11:42):

We pull in raw data. Mm-hmm, <affirmative> even STR data. If you're working with hotel data, it comes in like five or six spreadsheets every week, you know, and you're spending a lot of time just pulling that in together into some kind of communicable form. So we do that, you know, we'll get it directly from STR with your permission. So we're the ones doing all of that, so that we create this nice visualization of your, your hotel performers there. So we're pulling in all of the data, raw data and we're not providing any raw data for the most part, unless, you know, if you're doing new contract with us for economic impact study, we have a lot of services that we provide as tourism economics, which we can also pull into tourism to Symphony. But what Symphony mostly is, is taking the data that you already subscribe to and taking the burden off the back of whoever your research person or anybody in your organization who has to compile this data because it comes in in all different formats, all different timing and frequencies and so, we'll do all of that and now make it in some kind of format where you can communicate it and see what it's saying. You know, now you can spend your time looking at what those implications are. What's it telling us what it, when we could put that jigsaw puzzle together to give us the big picture and I'm not spending All my, my time.

Bob Gilbert ([12:58](#)):

So, so you are the conductor managing that symphony to, to make sure that you've got that sweet sound and-

Wendy Kheel ([13:06](#)):

Exactly Right. Right.

Bob Gilbert ([13:07](#)):

Which is, I'm sure the Genesis of the yeah. Of the brand of Joe Symphony,

Wendy Kheel ([13:14](#)):

The Symph- Well, if Adam Sachs, our, our president is a frustrated rockstar, you know, and sometimes has been known to sing forecasts and so on, but he, he,

Bob Gilbert ([13:22](#)):

I didn't know that!

Wendy Kheel ([13:23](#)):

He does. He, will, sing the, he did a, I think it was at destination international a couple years, right. At the beginning of the, uh, COVID when we really wasn't as bad as it turned out to be, he wrote a parody of the song. Um, we'll be back, I'll be back from Hamilton, but he wrote it they'll be back <laugh>, you know, and it was all, he all rewrote it about tourists. They'll be back, they'll be back. And it was wonderful. It was very clever.

Bob Gilbert ([13:48](#)):

That's creative!

Wendy Kheel ([13:51](#)):

So he wanted what we're doing in terms of a market intelligence platform to have that musical metaphor and that the, the whole idea taking the cacophony and noise out of the data. Yeah. And make it sing.

Bob Gilbert ([14:03](#)):

That's, that's beautiful. I, I, I, so as, as we now emerge from COVID and its impact and it's changes that it's had on travel and us as travelers, there's gonna be some profound changes, some things that will change and stay with us forever of things that will, will go back to the way it used to be, which means from the, uh, psychographic let's look at it as a persona. So those personas have changed. And the old way of, you know, building a persona hypothetical persona, you know, the, the Fred and Mary two kids, you know, just maybe

Wendy Kheel ([14:46](#)):

Soccer mom, you right, right.

Bob Gilbert ([14:48](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean that, those, those static personas have to be now, you know, they they're gone. I mean that, that they're, that's the stone age and the new dynamic personas that can be created that can really focus, um, specifically on particular traits that are particular destination needs or wants. Have you any opinions on the evolution of those cohorts, you know, those personas and how we are moving into a different age and new age of, um, right of more dynamic personas.

Wendy Kheel (15:26):

Sure. They've always been very, you know, sort of demographically oriented, you know, by age and income. And so we're moving much more into the emotional, you know, travelers, they travel for an emotional connection and it may be different kinds of emotions, destinations satisfy different emotions. And not every trip, you know, some, one trip maybe because I just wanna relax, you know, and I just wanna be on a beach and reconnect with myself and my family and others are like, no, I want to explore and be cultural and enrich myself by experiencing what a, a different culture might have and so on. So it's, you're looking more at what are the emotional connections? What are the rewards? It may not be dependent on age group at all. Everybody at some point wants to just lay on a beach and read a book, you know? So you're trying to find out for those people, what, what does that look like in terms of a relaxation or a reconnection or rejuvenation, a wellness, what does that look like? And does our destination provide that? You know, and then how do we find these people? You know, where are they that we can then communicate to them and try to get them to come to look at our destination as a choice. Right?

Bob Gilbert (16:37):

So with, with that, there's a technology piece that has evolved with the changing tools available to understand the different groups, the different cohorts personas, uh, I guess last year, about a year ago, um, we became familiar with the big resignation, the big quit people looking for new lifestyles or different lifestyles than the ones that they had. And wealth wasn't necessarily the Nirvana that it once had been which again, it's a result of COVID the pandemic and the economy mm-hmm, <affirmative> changing people's perspectives on lifestyles that has to, again, impact those personas and cohorts mm-hmm <affirmative> dramatically. So that puts even more emphasis on making sure that number one, whatever you had on your piece of paper that had your demographic group, you have to throw it away.

Wendy Kheel (17:35):

I think throw it away.

Bob Gilbert (17:35):

Away and start over. Is that something you would suggest?

Wendy Kheel (17:38):

Absolutely. You know, and I would suggest, again, looking at your destination, if you're looking at it more from an emotional or some kind of reward, what are people looking for in that context? Just like, well, what do you provide? You may just be a destination that is just all, it's just a beach, you know, that's, that's what you do. And that's fine, you know? So now you have to write, find out what is it is about your destination that provides this emotional and then find those people that are looking for that.

Bob Gilbert (18:06):

So- So, with the huge numbers that came from cities to escape the cities,

Wendy Kheel (18:12):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Bob Gilbert (18:12):

during the pandemic to find places, you know, the one I know very well, Eureka, uh, Mammoth, um, parts of Montana.

Wendy Kheel (18:21):

Sure.

Bob Gilbert (18:21):

These wide open recreational areas, do you think once we get back to, I'm not gonna use the word back to normal, but you know, back, tho- those folks that have found those areas will continue to go back and revisit.

Wendy Kheel (18:37):

I don't know if they'll go back to revisit. I, you know, you can't say, but what I think the positive is those destinations have now learned what they can provide. And if they're not leveraging that now we'll then shame on them to say, I finally got people to come to my destination. I've always been, uh, a business destination. All of a sudden I'm getting leisure people. And if you haven't found out what it is about your destination, that has appealed to those people and to leverage that and keep working that well, then shame on you. You know, you should be able to now learn more about your destination than you even knew before, because you were so focused on a business traveler or a meeting in a convention traveler, you've got a whole new sector that you just never thought you could appeal to. And suddenly you did. So learn from that and see if you can continue to attract those people.

Bob Gilbert (19:29):

I think that's, um, a great place to pause the conversation. And, and I think that, you know, the takeaway there is really what we've all gone through over the last couple of years, had better be a really good learning experience for all of us,

Wendy Kheel (19:47):

For all of us.

Bob Gilbert (19:48):

and shame on us. If we don't learn.

Wendy Kheel (19:50):

Shame on us, because you hear about the trends created by COVID and the change in the traveler. I don't think any of that's true, a disruptor, accelerates trends. And if you look at any of the trends we're talking about, they were already there. We just, as an industry, weren't responding to them because we're a little slow to do that. And we weren't responding to what people were already telling us they wanted and what they were looking for. But now it really accelerated that. So I don't think I, this is not a demand side change. This is a supply side. This is us. It's the industry that's changing, not the traveler. It's the traveler always wanted a seamless experience. Always wanted a clean room, a clean airplane, a

healthy trip, you know, always wanted that. The, when you looked at meetings and conventions, they were already demanding that it have more value and already saying, give me more reason to go.

Wendy Kheel ([20:53](#)):

And don't just lock me up into a ballroom for three days. Give me something different about this convention. Those trends were already, there were already in place, you know, outdoor, uh, being able to connect with locals. Any of these things that we say are the result of COVID. I don't think so. You know, when I look at trends, I always looked at trends and used to do about top 10 trends. What everybody's telling me, I don't see anything different. I just got accelerated and we're now finally responding to it, you know, to say, make it a seamless experience from top to bottom, make it easy, you know, for me make the, the research and the booking easy and efficient and so on, who didn't want that everybody did <laugh>, you know, we just weren't responding to it as, as an industry.

Bob Gilbert ([21:44](#)):

So we are, we are now catching up.

Wendy Kheel ([21:46](#)):

We're now catching up.

Bob Gilbert ([21:46](#)):

And, and so it's been really great to catch up with you, Wendy. And thank you so much sure. For your time with us today.

Wendy Kheel ([21:53](#)):

Oh my pleasure.

Bob Gilbert ([21:55](#)):

We hope you enjoyed today's episode, please. Like thumbs up, subscribe and leave a review. You can also visit [Eddyalexander.com](http://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](http://eddyalexander.com/THATT).