

Bob Gilbert (00:00):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, 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, Eddie Alexander, who are bringing you this podcast series. I have had the privilege to have worked with iconic global brands, including Disney Choice Hotels, Yosemite and Shenandoah National Parks, Kennedy Space Center, Visitor Center, and Best Western International. Plus served on the boards of the US Travel Association, National Tour Association, and an elected commissioner for Visit California. Looking forward, I will be chatting with those that are helping shape the travel and tourism industry, all with unique tales to share that I know you will find both interesting and educational. So without further ado, let's get started.

Bob Gilbert (01:06):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales. We have been asked by a number of our listeners if we would produce a best of, and that's a really good idea. We've taken out some clips of some of our more recent guests and we're going to start with Wes Rhea. And Wes is Mr. Stockton, California. And the questions that we had asked Wes was what he felt was the relationship with his stakeholders and economic development in specific. And then the second question to Wes was what he was thinking about 2023, how bullish he was and if that was something that kept him up at night or was something that got him outta bed in the morning. So let's listen to Wes.

Wes Rhea (01:58):

I think for us it really is number one, our relationship with the city. You know, we have always tried to, not always, but probably in the last decade, really tried to show our value to our economic development department, our city manager, you know, our stakeholders. And I think that has continued to grow and I think the pandemic helped a lot of that because we really stepped up when they needed us and I think they see us as a valued partner. And I also think the conversation around economic development and tourism has also changed on the economic development side. I, you know, when you're going to economic development conferences, now they're starting to see more of the value of tourism. So for us, I think that is exciting that we are, I built that strong relationship with the city and I, I see that as a growing opportunity to have that seat at the table in a more meaningful way other than just the tourism people.

Wes Rhea (02:46):

So I think that is exciting for us. And then I think just this opportunity for data is just growing. And again, it used to not be something, a destination like Stockton could even touch. Yeah, your Austin or San Francisco data was just something normal to you. But for us, I said that's super exciting. And then again, you know, our festival, um, that is exciting for us, trying to figure out if we can make this, um, the signature festival we believe it can be. And we had great success in year one, but for me, uh, and our team we're very excited about what that means. For 2023, we proved, proved the concept, it was successful, it was safe, people had a great time. Now how do we continue that but lower our cost and increase our revenue and not have to depend on ARPA dollars, uh, beyond 2025. So for us, that's kind of my, my kind of top things there. I'm feeling pretty good about the future.

Bob Gilbert (03:35):

We asked Kristin Reynolds, who heads up Discover Long Island, and it was about the future if she was able to look into her crystal ball. What is she excited about the future of Long Island? Let's listen to what she had to say.

Kristen Reynolds (03:54):

I am really, really excited about the future of Long Island. We've been working with clarity of place on our, we're calling it not a strategic plan, but an evolutionary blueprint for Long Island. And we've got, again, the new connectivity to Grand Central, a third track. We just built the New Islanders Arena, the UBS arena, which is incredible. We've got really exciting things happening here with wind energy and a lot of natural energy resources looking to Long Island as their home base as well as, you know, the convention center, it's gonna be all hands on deck and they say a dozen years, but I think it's gonna go faster than that and I think there's a lot of political will right now and we could really see things move quickly in getting our convention center and hotel development. So it's an exciting time to be here for sure.

Bob Gilbert (04:44):

We then switched horses. We didn't interview a DMO in this particular interview. We actually interviewed Greg Takahara, who is the head of Tourism Cares, and we asked Greg about the future of not just Tourism Cares in the short term, but again, looking at the future of Tourism Cares from a more global perspective. Let's hear what Greg has to say.

Greg Takehara (05:11):

Thus far. We actually engaged with the help of MMGY to do a marketing rebrand in which we presented ourselves with a new look, a new logo, and a new story, some new taglines to really represent the future Tourism Cares. Um, helping us to kind of evolve from that legacy of volunteerism to a legacy of a, as I mentioned before, uh, a greater global positive impact for the industry with, with a much stronger focus on sustainability, a much stronger focus on local communities and, and how we can impact them. We're proud to be one of six NGOs that help to form the future of tourism coalition. I look at this, again, going back to what I said previously as a another one of the great silver linings of the pandemic, but we probably wouldn't had the, had the time to foster the kind of relationships that we did with the other NGOs to be able to form this coalition and to be able to come together in the manner that we have, if not for the pandemic. So we put together 13 guiding principles. One of our NGO founding members, partners, a travel foundation, really took a lead role in authoring the Glasgow Declaration and were certainly, you know, strong proponents and supporters of it.

Bob Gilbert (06:30):

I had the privilege of interviewing Rita McClenny, president and CEO of Virginia Tourism Corporation. And one question that she had a great answer for, what is the future from her perspective for visitation and destination marketing for Virginia? Here's what she had to say.

Rita McClenny (06:53):

I think what leads the way with the future is technology. If you talk about touchless technology, ways to make the visitor experience more in line with safety, safety will always now be a part of the

conversation. Cleanliness. So technology to achieve that, certainly workforce and I think within the workforce, such hardworking people in our industry, how can you have a lifestyle where you have flexibility and you're making the kind of salary or hourly wage that is livable for your family? And to make sure we attract new people into the industry, and not just to work necessarily frontline, but also to see a long term management career out of the, uh, sector and the fact that people can live any place to work, you know, so relocation. And one of the bigger, I think, topics that we're gonna see, and it's gonna continue cuz we're just at the precipice of it, is sustainability and what that means for travel.

Bob Gilbert ([08:03](#)):

We ask David Lawrence, the vice president of, uh, Travel Michigan, a tough question that he answered in two parts. The first was about EV technology, EV technology with electric vehicles. The second question was, what the future holds for Michigan from a tourism perspective and how the international marketplace is changing and will change in the near future. Let's hear how David responded to the questions.

David Lorenz ([08:36](#)):

We're the, the leaders in EV technology, electric vehicles. We are working, uh, with our EV tech office to help install an initiative of our governor to help to install electric charging stations all along the Lake Michigan shoreline. And we're working with the other states in a collaborative move around the lake so that people can use their ev their electric vehicles, uh, without range anxiety and go to all these wonderful places, state parks, lighthouses, restaurants, wherever these EB charging stations are located. Because we see this as not something only important to the travel industry to provide access to these places with people with EVs, but we see it as the move of the future. Michigan put America on wheels in the first place. Henry Ford virtually created the modern travel industry by making the car affordable to the average American family and putting people on the roads.

David Lorenz ([09:33](#)):

And we see this next stage as Michigan playing this really important role of getting people in EVs. So that's gotta be part of this messaging and we evolve the messaging into a sustainable travel message plus a lifestyle message. So you're gonna start to see some of that out there. We've gone up and down back and forth. We've mostly grown, but as we were going into Covid, we got in the middle of an argument between the legislature and the administration and we ended up getting zeroed out in our budget going into Covid. Very, very unfortunate, but we're getting the budget back and so we can start looking at that national message again. But, you know, it's gonna take a couple of years for that to really resonate. So we're gonna have people in state start to look for other places. We still haven't filled that China gap. Our other international audience is slowly starting to come back, but not to the levels it was. And we haven't been out there nationally for a while. So I think the next two years are gonna be big challenge and, uh, it's, we're gonna do our best to, to kind of fill in those gaps left by all the other laws, but it's gonna be a challenge.

Bob Gilbert ([10:38](#)):

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