

Speaker 1 ([00:08](#)):

Welcome to Tourism Heads on Their Tales, a podcast series that invites traveling, tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on industry issues. My name is Bob Gilbert and I'm the general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander. My career spans over three decades in the travel and tourism industry where I've had the privilege of working with iconic brands and so many amazing colleagues who in their own ways are pushing the industry forward and using tourism to increase understanding, access and quality of life. For those who work in travel, those that love to travel, and the communities that benefit from travel, I'll be bringing you into the conversation with top professionals who are shaping the industry, all with their unique tales and perspectives that they're ready to share with you. Welcome to a freshly brewed edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Today I am more than delighted to be joined by a recognized traveling tourism industry leader, current state tourism director of the year, and representing the Tarheel State as its Vice President Tourism and marketing for the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina and executive director of Visit North Carolina. Welcome, Whit Tatel.

Speaker 2 ([01:31](#)):

Thanks Bob. Thanks for having me.

Speaker 1 ([01:33](#)):

Our pleasure. Thank you. Let's start, if you could share with our audience a little about yourself, your background, your career journey, uh, so far.

Speaker 2 ([01:42](#)):

Sure. So I grew up in Florida, outside Orlando, was a journalist for a little while, A reporter for newspaper. Got laid off when the newspaper was closed probably 20 years before. It was cool for that to happen. The early nineties. Went back to my hometown, was fortunate enough to get a job with the Orlando c d b doing pr and that really was my introduction into formal tourism marketing. Growing up in Orlando, you're always surrounded by tourism and I'd worked in it throughout my life, but this was the first time I really got into tourism marketing. Worked with Orlando C B B Universal Studios, went over to the St. Pete Clearwater, C B B, and then about 16 years ago came up to North Carolina with my family and have been here ever since. Essentially now I'm the, uh, state tourism director for North Carolina.

Speaker 1 ([02:25](#)):

So I saw and mentioned in the intro that you are also responsible as its vice president for the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. How does that role in economic development as well as tourism, how do those roles intersect in building long-term value for North Carolina?

Speaker 2 ([02:47](#)):

Yeah, well I think it's very important. We used to be a part of state government about eight years ago we were privatized as this economic development partnership. So they essentially took five of the departments from the Department of Commerce and pulled them out and created an own private nonprofit. And the idea there is we're trying to enhance the economy of the state, the livelihood of North Carolinians. So great thing for us is that it gave tourism, I think that position that people, a lot of people don't think of tourism as economic development, uh, when it really is, you know, tourism's a huge part of, of economies for states and communities. And so this allowed us to be part of that. And so the way we work at the business marketing side has its own marketing team and they do business

marketing. We do tourism marketing, but we try and align them whenever we can. Whether it's talent recruitment or just showcasing a sense of place. I think those things are important not just to promote tourism, but they also help promote economic development, business development, business recruitment, all those other aspects. So we try and do 'em as jointly as possible. Although I will say the marketing is really highly targeted. So there really are separate campaigns, but we try and have 'em connect, uh, and work together to maximize the value of both.

Speaker 1 (04:01):

So at the end of the day, the left hand knows what the right hand is doing.

Speaker 2 (04:05):

Exactly. And they fit together too. Um, but a lot of times if we're looking in the same markets will piggyback on each other to help save cost and make it more efficient and have more of an impact.

Speaker 1 (04:16):

You know, it's interesting that relationship between economic development and tourism is not the same across the country. <laugh>, I mean, there are some destinations when they seem to compete with each other, they seem to be a loggerheads and you know, maybe folks haven't visited the Mera Gas quote of which I'm sure you're very familiar with. But you know, if you build a place people wanna visit you build a place where people wanna live. If you build a place where people want to live, you'll build a place where people want to work. And I It's very true. So, and I think you are a great example of of that.

Speaker 2 (04:53):

Well, thanks. Yeah, and I agree and I do think it's often competitive and ours was very competitive. And usually the competition is over limited resources and funds. We were fortunate when the partnership was created that tourism money is walled off and is provided by the legislature every year. So there's no competition for funding. They each, they are separate streams. And that's really allowed us to work together more because it isn't about mine or yours. It's really the two of us working together.

Speaker 1 (05:25):

Yeah, that, that was one of my questions is how are you funded? So we have an allocation out of the, uh, general

Speaker 2 (05:32):

Fund. Yeah. It's not the, it's not not the best system in the world, <laugh>. We, we are funded by the state legislature every year we have to go and receive our appropriation. So we go to them now, we do as a economic development partnership, we do private fundraising as well. So there are many businesses across the state that contribute to us, but the vast majority of our funding is legislative and it comes from the general fund. There is no state occupancy tax in North Carolina and there really isn't a desire to create one. So the challenge there is our base budget comes to us every year and we try and grow that every year by additional appropriation. But it is, it is a challenge.

Speaker 1 (06:13):

So I think true leadership is one that you show leadership during adverse conditions. And I think clearly what we've all come through over the past few years with the pandemic really put pressure on

leadership. I think that, you know, you have been recognized with, I know that the US Travel Associations, in addition to the ESTO and, and congratulations to, to your, uh, nomination and award as the state travel director for the US or the tourism director of the year. I guess I put it correctly, but also other programs that you got recognized for. I mentioned the US Travel Association's Mercury Award, which was in 2021, which was right in the heat of the Pandemic battle. And I think you had two campaigns I'd like you to talk about. One was that Mercury Award, which was for advocacy and grassroots. And then the other, which I think is I term more as a promotional campaign, which was get back to a Better Place, which has some amazing ROI. Could you talk about those and how you came up with those campaigns when things, when people weren't traveling or they weren't comfortable in traveling in 2021?

Speaker 2 (07:28):

Sure. Yeah, it was, you know, I've, I've come from Florida, so I'm used to natural disasters and crisis communications. It's been part of my work since I got into the tourism industry in the early nineties. But we'd never seen anything like this. It was so immediate, it was so devastating. It was so broad, you know, everything shut down. And so I'm, I'm big on communications. Coming from a PR background, one of the first things we did was that I had my staff call every local tourism office across the state just to get a gauge on how they were, you know, how were they doing? How was the community doing? Were they gonna have to lay off their staff? Were they okay, did they have a reserve fund? What was their status? And it's interesting cause I have a lot of young staffers and they immediately emailed people and said, well, they're not getting back to me on emails.

Speaker 2 (08:14):

And I said, no, no, no, no, no. Look, this is, this is the level we haven't seen before. We need to actually talk to these people. I want you to call them on the phone. I want human interaction with our partners. And we heard that a lot of them were in trouble. They, their funding sources was essentially dried up. There were potentially massive staff layoffs, no advertising. So we went to our legislature to some of our legislative leaders and said, look, we need to do something to help these people as quickly as possible. We were quickly able to get some funds. We typically don't administer any grants to partners across the state. That's just not something we do in North Carolina. But we created two different grant programs that would help people get through the pandemic and to allow them to have a presence. And what we did was, uh, you know, North Carolina is a split government.

Speaker 2 (09:05):

Our governors a Democrat and our legislature is run by Republicans. And so it was a real delicate balance for us, but we were able to convince everyone that we needed to have a message out there. And what we saw from our research was that people were concerned about safety. So they, they wanted to get out, they wanted to, you know, be able to enjoy the outdoors to still get out, but they wanted to do it in a safe way. And we wanted them to do that way as well. Cuz what we really didn't want to have was everybody flocked to say the outer banks or Asheville and then have a big breakout of covid, which would, would, you know, could endanger people's health. So we actually went and worked with our Department of Health and Human Services to come up with a safety campaign, but that's also a health campaign and had a component of education that partners would get to make sure they were following best practices.

Speaker 2 (09:55):

And we called it Count on Menc. And the idea was that people that had taken this, these extra steps to make sure they knew how to keep people healthy, you could count on them. And so you could count on us to do the right thing. And so we had more than 5,000 people sign up for the program businesses across the state, uh, you know, mainly restaurants, hotels. We had, uh, our NC State University Extension Service created the programming along with our hotel, restaurant and lodging association. And so we had these people took these classes, they became certified for count on me n d and we promoted the people who had joined the program. It allowed some of our local, uh, tourism offices to have some marketing out there and get some exposure at a time when they wouldn't have had anything out there. And it, I think, showed people that we wanted to have people have those experiences, but we wanted 'em to do it in a faith way.

Speaker 1 ([10:45](#)):

So did you face any local resident resentment of visitors coming to some of the more, less crowded spaces, whether it be not that Asheville is, but certainly, you know, the barrier island beaches and, you know, the quieter towns on and off the sand. Yeah. Was, did you face any resentment, and if so, how did you counter that?

Speaker 2 ([11:09](#)):

Well, that was one of the things we saw almost immediately was resentment, fear. People were worried about having these visitors come to their communities and, you know, we're known for our hospitality in North Carolina. We didn't want anyone to feel like they weren't welcome. So that was one of the keys to count on Menc program was that we, we reached out to not just visitors, but also the residents to encourage them to do the right thing. Because this was not just about, there were two forms of it was one is how you serve people correctly. The other part of it was how to behave correctly. You know, don't go out if you have a fever, wash your hands, keep your distance, wear a mask. All those type of health and safety benefits for the residents as well as the visitors. And we tracked through research, uh, on a monthly basis resident as well as visitor sentiment to make sure we weren't getting those hotspots where people were feeling overcrowded. And we actually did get some of those feelings where, where people were overcrowded. And so we had to come up with an additional campaign called Outdoor NC to help deal with that.

Speaker 1 ([12:13](#)):

So was that targeted to visitors from a sustainable tourism perspective, also known as Leave No Trace was, you know, respect exactly the more rural areas, which is difficult. I mean, if you grow up in Greensboro or Raleigh, you might not be familiar with Leave No Trace.

Speaker 2 ([12:33](#)):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And so what we saw was that everybody wanted to get outside to be, you know, alone. Right. But they all went to the same place at the same time, <laugh> Right. To be alone. So they were outside, but they most definitely weren't alone. And we saw it in both the coast and the mountains of North Carolina. We had places where the first time we were really experiencing over tourism. The other issue is we had a lot of people who were not familiar with the outdoors or how to behave safely or, you know, in a way that protects the outdoors. We had a lot of those kind of behaviors that we don't wanna encourage. And so we partnered with Lead No Trace to create what we called Outdoor nc, which is a program primarily designed for visitors, but in our partners were able to market it.

Speaker 2 (13:18):

That was really about the proper way to enjoy the outdoors. And part of that was spreading people out across the state because we have so many areas, both on the coast and the mountains where people could go and get away and be outdoors and enjoy those things. We didn't want 'em just go into one or two places and have everyone there, uh, over overcrowding essentially. So that grew out of this research and, and what we had seen in Covid Covid for the mountains in the coast of North Carolina was, was a tourism boom. Uh, we saw numbers that were never seen before as far as visitation.

Speaker 1 (13:54):

So when did the get back to a better Place campaign start?

Speaker 2 (14:00):

Yeah, so we kept gauging visitors throughout every month to see what their mindset was. And as long as it was really about health and safety was primary concern, we we wanted to stay with Count on C. Now, when we saw that visitors started to, you know, to want to get back out, they were more comfortable. As vaccines came along, people were more comfortable with travel. We initially did a little bridge campaign called Drive Through Vacations, where we basically said, okay, if, if you want to go out, but you're still not very comfortable, here are a bunch of places in North Carolina where you can basically just drive up and see 'em and yet hardly have to get outta your car. So we did that, wanted to see how visitor mindset was gonna be where people's heads were. And as we saw more and more comfort with getting out, then we kicked off the big campaign, which is our first real campaign coming back from Covid.

Speaker 2 (14:54):

That was a strictly a inspirational campaign, and that was get back to a better place. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, what we realized is that people, you know, felt like they had been hibernating for a year and a half. They wanted to get back to a better physical place, but they also wanted to get back to a better mental place. You know, they just wanted to, to get out and enjoy travel like they, like they had before. So we actually used a used a Bear and the hibernation model and people coming out of hibernation, uh, in our commercials, Uhhuh <affirmative>, um, to emphasize that this was about getting back to a better physical place, but also getting back to a better head space too for all of us.

Speaker 1 (15:32):

So the results that have been documented, you know, show something like it was over 30 to one return in state and local taxes generated per dollar of your investment. How do you measure that? How does, I guess two questions there. You know, how do you measure your R O I or r o A S and how did you measure that phenomenal result for the campaign?

Speaker 2 (16:00):

Yeah, so measurement is huge for us because we have to go back every year. We're spending taxpayer dollars and we have to show that we're good stewards of those dollars. We're using 'em wisely and it's actually benefiting the state. So we've contracted over the last few years with a group called Sari Insights. Yeah. And it's a

Speaker 1 (16:20):

Research fund familiar with them. Yeah.

Speaker 2 (16:22):

And they do, uh, an advertising awareness and an ROI study for us. And so we do one of those after every campaign. It's a three wave study. We find out the, the awareness in the target markets where we hit, we find out the, the visitation people who've seen the ads, people who then came and visited. And what I think is really interesting about Sari is they'll go in and they'll basically find, say the market for us is Philadelphia. They'll look at those that are aware of the campaign, who visited, they'll look at those who are not aware of the campaign, they haven't seen the campaign, but who visited the state. And they take out of our ROI of the exact amount of people. So say 15% of the people in Philadelphia were not aware of the campaign, uh, and they visited North Carolina and say 20% of the people from Philadelphia were available of the campaign and they visited North Carolina.

Speaker 2 (17:14):

We'll only get credit for that additional 5% because one of the biggest things I get when I go to speak to legislators, politicians, and a lot of them don't believe tourism numbers because, you know, some of us use different research firms and sometimes the numbers don't match. And, and you know, they're all essentially educated estimates based on survey research. So there's a lot of, I think, disbelief in tourism numbers and, and ROI numbers and figures like that. So if I can go, and, and a lot of the reason of that is, oh, people would come anyway, you know, they, they would come anyway, <laugh>, I can go to our legislature and say, Hey, I agree. People would come anyway. In fact, if you look at this market, Philadelphia, 15% of those people come anyway. So I'm not taking credit for any of those people. I'm taking credit for the additional amount of people who came who saw our advertised. And I think that's really helped us as far as credibility and the ability to, uh, to show that when we spend per every tax dollar they gave us, within six months, we brought the state back \$30 and tax revenue. That's a great investment. I wish my stocks were doing that. I'd be

Speaker 1 (18:26):

<laugh> <laugh> from a research perspective. I mean, as we look at the, the different state offices, some of you know, you, you've got Fred up in New York City, uh, Carolyn Beeda over in the state of California. I mean, they, they pre pandemic had pretty large staff to do research. Do you carry out research? Do you have research analysts on staff? Or do you outsource those particular? It's

Speaker 2 (18:55):

A little of both. So our, our model has always been, we're, we're pretty low on staff. We have a small staff and we contract out a lot. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But what I try and do is I try and get that, that one expert that's really good and, and I hold onto them for the staff and then they can lead the re the contractors and help interpret.

Speaker 1 (19:16):

So that's the, so you, you have that orchestra leader. Exactly.

Speaker 2 (19:19):

And

Speaker 1 (19:19):

Exactly the new outsource, the, uh, the, the different parts of the orchestra.

Speaker 2 (19:23):

Exactly. We can't afford to hire all the amazing musicians, but we can afford to get that, that, you know, maestro that can make them all sing together. And our, our research person's fantastic. Marlis Taylor, she's been with us for I think 17 years.

Speaker 1 (19:38):

Um, oh wow. She used

Speaker 2 (19:38):

To run as a c db, which is really, really smart. Does a great job with both spending and visitation research, but also marketing, advertising effectiveness, roi.

Speaker 1 (19:50):

I hope you enjoyed part one of our episode. Please lights a bribe and leave a review. You can also visit [ed.alexander.com](http://ed.alexander.com) to learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies.