

Part 1:

Bob Gilbert (00:00):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tails, a podcast series that invites travel and tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on key 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 another freshly brewed edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Brought to you by the multi-award winning agency, Eddy Alexander. Today's podcast is a first. We are featuring a Caribbean Island tourism office and it's the first we've had on our show, and I'm delighted to welcome Leah Chandler, CDME, Chief Marketing Officer for the Puerto Rico Destination Marketing Organization, Discover Puerto Rico. Leah, welcome.

Leah Chandler (00:29):

Thank you so much for the introduction and that's really exciting news. I didn't realize we were going to be the first Caribbean Island, so it's an honor.

Bob Gilbert (00:36):

Well thank you. It's our honor. So, we're delighted. So here you are. I'm presuming that you're in San Juan this morning.

Leah Chandler (00:43):

I am.

Bob Gilbert (00:44):

Excellent. I love Puerto Rico. I've been there many times with my old hotel hat on and traveled the entire island, east to west, north to south. But rather than my journeys in Puerto Rico. Please share your career journey with our audience. How did you arrive at Puerto Rico?

Leah Chandler (01:00):

Well, it's an interesting story. If I go all the way back, travel has been an interest and a passion of mine since I was very small. I grew up in the Midwest, didn't go on a lot of big vacations, mostly kind of road trips with my family. But I was really captivated by how different places could be from where I grew up and seeing different cultures and meeting different people, it was pretty easy to impress me back then. I remember the biggest trip I took actually was a cruise to the Caribbean. It wasn't Puerto Rico, but I think we visited The Bahamas, and I was just so intrigued by the experiences stemming from different cultures and this really like warm hospitality and the beaches and the food, everything was so new. And my mom reminds me that I actually cried at the airport because I did want to go back home.

Leah Chandler (01:48):

I guess I thought you could just stay on vacation indefinitely. And as much as I grew to love travel, though I hadn't really considered it as a career, my path was paid mostly by marketing and public relations. That's what I went to college for. I worked at agencies for the first part of my career, but in those agencies, I actually worked on destination clients. So in my second agency in Indianapolis at the time, I started working on the Indiana Office of Tourism Development, so the state office for Indiana Tourism. And was a wonderful experience and I really fell in love with being able to promote a destination that I was passionate about. That's where I grew up and I knew and loved the state. From there, I got recruited to an agency in St. Louis where I ran the Missouri Division of Tourism accounts as their agency of record and then had an opportunity after about five years there in St.

Leah Chandler (02:39):

Louis to be considered for the CMO role in Branson, Missouri. So that was a big moment for me to go from agency to client side and I was thrilled. I mean really, really thrilled to be able to see the other side of it and be a part of developing this strategy, not just sort of making recommendations, although that's really important and we rely very heavily on our agency experts. But being able to really drive the strategy and the direction for the marketing of a destination was huge. And stayed in Branson for five years and the opportunity came up for Puerto Rico. It was a really, really big opportunity because there wasn't a DMO in Puerto Rico at the time. We were to be the first ever destination marketing organization for the island of Puerto Rico. For many years, tourism marketing has been under the government of Puerto Rico, but that has presented a lot of challenges because it's very hard to develop consistent messaging, a consistent brand continuity with objectives, et cetera.

Leah Chandler (03:44):

So like every four years there's a new regime, a new administration, there's a new tourism director, there's new logos, and you kind of see how this plays out. And I know states can sometimes have similar issues where it's changing so much, consumers don't really get a feel for what the brand really is and who the destination is. And Puerto Rico was struggling with that significantly. So in 2017, bipartisan legislation was created to start a DMO, a privatized organization that would manage all off island sales and marketing for Puerto Rico. So I was the second employee who was hired and, and now we've got a team of up to 65 staff who are really driving tourism for the destination and generating that demand. So that's a long answer to a very short question, but it's been a journey and wouldn't trade it for the world.

Bob Gilbert (04:36):

No, it's a very interesting and intriguing journey and I think you know, what kind of resonates is that you come from a data-driven background. You know, as a DMO you're driven by insights and that's what drives your marketing. I have worked with a number of Caribbean islands way back, I had an office in Jamaica, believe it or not, but it was not too sophisticated. And sometimes some of the things that we were trying to focus on was a lot of education at the startup. Was that the same with you as you were there and then prior, you know, it was a government run agency that doesn't necessarily have all of the necessary skill sets to be able to compete on a world stage?

Leah Chandler (05:16):

Sure, absolutely. It's an education process and after five years it still is. I think there's always opportunity to continue learning and growing for our stakeholders and our partners here on the island. And we're still learning and growing as a DMO as well. But research, especially primary research is not something

that was being used in Puerto Rico before the DMO. You know, I think there were some things like skiff white papers and trends, reports from folks like Expedia and, and there were a lot of macro trends in in data that was being pulled in. But no primary research in terms of what consumers thought about Puerto Rico. What was the perception of the island? What were some of the barriers to entry, what was our unique selling proposition? Those questions were just not being answered. So that was the first step that I took when I started, aside from the very basic things like buying a URL and deciding what the name of our organization was going to be, we're really starting from the grounds up ground from ground.

Leah Chandler (06:15):

We got into brand perception testing right away to understand what consumers thought about Puerto Rico. And it was really interesting results because we expected we were going to have a lot of negative feedback. We had just come off of two major hurricanes in September of 2017, actually six years ago this month. And we expected that people were going to say, oh, you know, the island's devastated, we don't want to go visit, they're not ready for tourism. But what we really found was a neutral sentiment. People were saying, eh, I don't know. I never really thought about Puerto Rico, don't know much about it, don't know what is there, not sure what makes it different from other Caribbean islands. So in many ways this was a blank slate. It was just a white piece of paper sitting in front of us to decide where to take the positioning of the brand.

Leah Chandler (07:03):

And as we got into discussions with locals, with stakeholders and with consumers, we learned that what truly differentiates Puerto Rico from what we call the sea of sameness in the Caribbean, is the culture. It's the food, it's the people, it's the architecture, it's the history, it's the music, it's the dance, it's the cocktails. Yes, some Caribbean islands may have one or two of those, but in Puerto Rico, the fabric that really defines the island is generated by this mix of Taino Indian, African, and Spanish heritage that you're just not going to find anywhere else. So do we have beaches? Absolutely. We have over 300 beaches and they're some of the most acclaimed beaches in the world Flamenco Beach in Culebra is one of the top 10 beaches of the world every year.

Bob Gilbert (07:49):

I do remember, hopefully I'll get this right, Luquillo Beach. With these beautiful palm trees that were kind of bent over almost kissing the sea. And there were these food trucks in the road by the beach. I don't remember what it was called, but it was like ground meat in banana. I have no idea what it was called.

Leah Chandler (08:08):

It may be alcapurria,

Bob Gilbert (08:10):

It was delicious. I can say that.

Leah Chandler (08:12):

I was in Luquillo Beach about two weeks ago when my mom and my sister visited here. It's one of my favorite areas of Puerto Rico. But that was sort of the process. It's really understanding from consumers

what the potential was for Puerto Rico and where we could start to separate Puerto Rico from the other islands in the Caribbean and create something that was really unique from a brand position standpoint.

Bob Gilbert (08:33):

Right. So from an administrative perspective, not going to get into the political status and et cetera, but you are termed as an incorporated territory. So you're neither a nation nor a US state. But does that hamper some of the grant programs or is that not a factor? You know, a lot of states applied for post Covid grants to help rebuild.

Leah Chandler (08:57):

Exactly. And we did the same and we're very successful. And I have to credit our internal communications team along with our CEO Brad Dean and our finance team who really worked very hard and very close with our local government here in Puerto Rico as well as federal government to ensure that we had the funds necessary to help us not just recover, but recover quickly. And so we have been able through those programs to activate funds from the American Rescue Plan as well as Caress Act, and even CDBGDR dating back to the 2017 hurricanes. It took a while, but we did get funds through the CDBGDR program to also help with the recovery post hurricane. So we have been the recipient of various federal funding sources. Obviously, that's not sustainable, but it is important in those times of need. And as we are trying to jump start tourism post, you know, whether it's a natural disaster or a global pandemic, it's been critical to our recovery and our current success.

Bob Gilbert (09:56):

So from a competitive standpoint, who are your head-to-head competitors? Every other island in the Caribbean?

Leah Chandler (10:03):

I wouldn't say every other island. We look closely at a number of factors when we consider competitors. Air services is one of them, product is another. We see South Florida as a competitor, it's easy access, especially for those folks in the eastern seaboard and in the southeast, they're able to drive to Florida. Right, right. It is oftentimes a cost comparison when it comes to looking at our competitive set. So South Florida is one that has always been in the competitive set, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, the Keys, et cetera. The Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, those destinations that have that all-inclusive product. It's not something that Puerto Rico has, but it is something that a lot of consumers are looking for. They're looking for what we call those fly and flop destinations that they arrive at a destination, they go to the resort, they don't leave it for seven days and they can get that type of experience for a really affordable, all-inclusive cost.

Leah Chandler (11:04):

That's just not who Puerto Rico is. The product has never worked here. And honestly the island itself is not really built for that because we are a US territory. Puerto Rico enjoys a lot of similar infrastructure to the US mainland. The safety here is something that's really important to the destination. You can rent a car at the airport, you can drive around the entire island and feel safe. You can feel like you're going to be able to get places easily. So we see ourselves as being built for a customer that really is looking for kind of an adventure and wants to get out and really connect with local people and local community. So the product is very different, but we understand that lots of people are looking for that all-inclusive

product. And so we do go head to head with some of those folks like the Dominican Republic, the USVI has a similar unique selling proposition to Puerto Rico.

Leah Chandler (11:55):

And the fact that you don't need a passport to get to Puerto Rico, you also don't need a passport to get to the USVI. So product is very different in what they're offering is very different in terms of visitor experience. But because they have that same unique selling proposition, especially at a time when we're seeing massive backlogs and people being able to get passports or renew passports, that is something we consider competitive too. So we reserve the right to change who we see as competitors, you know, just based on environmental factors like that. But that's kind of gives you an idea though,

Bob Gilbert (12:30):

Really interesting. And as I look at the evolution of all-inclusive and I was in that market in that space many years ago and it was predominantly super clubs that started it then sandals that refined it and then a lot of Spanish companies came in and they developed in places like Jamaica, Cuba, et cetera. But it's a very different cohort, that individual that they don't really want to explore per se other than whatever the confines are of where they're staying. So what are the kinds of demographics, the kind of target groups that you go after? And I think you raised a very good point as well in terms of how you compete with, let's say South Florida, the keys. You know, you are an island, you are in the Caribbean, and you do not need a passport. And I think that's a key plus. That's a key bonus.

Leah Chandler (13:18):

Exactly. In terms of who we reach out to target audiences, you're probably going to find similar psychographic kind of behavioral targets in Puerto Rico as other Caribbean islands. We're looking for beach goers, adventurers, foodies, couples, LGBTQ+ is an important audience for us. But I think those all kind of fall under the umbrella of what is the most important qualifier, which is a conscientious traveler. And this was an effort that we really started in the midst of the pandemic. Puerto Rico had very strict regulations and guidelines in terms of arriving to the island and requiring negative Covid test results or vaccinations, et cetera. And we thought, how can we help the island really focus in, we knew we didn't want tourism necessarily to stop because that would impact so many jobs and so many lives on the island. But we needed to do our part to ensure that the people coming to the island were being responsible in their travel planning.

Leah Chandler (14:18):

We started to target what we called at the time the responsible traveler people who we knew were going to respect the island and the precautions that we were taking here to protect locals. And so there's different ways to do that through media targeting, et cetera. And we were very successful. We were able to, you know, not sustain what we had been pre pandemic in terms of you know, visitation numbers. But we also didn't completely fall off of the map. And we were able to do it in a really responsible way. As the pandemic started to recede a little bit, what we evolved into is what we call the conscientious traveler. So it wasn't so much about Covid and vaccinations anymore, but it was about how do we continue to search for those visitors who are going to care about the destination they're visiting. It's not just that fly and flop visitor, it's someone who wants to connect with locals and local communities, respects the culture of the island and is going to leave it better than they found it. And not necessarily in sort of an ecotourism green tourism sort of way, but in a cultural sustainability sense. And I think we see that becoming more important in tourism marketing today. And so when we talk about

attracting foodies or we talked about attracting families, et cetera, we're doing that under this conscientious travel umbrella, which is looking for those people who are seeking more meaning in their travel.

Bob Gilbert (15:45):

So it's that evolution or revolution because it has been pretty fast from a DMO perspective, from heads in beds to more stewardship.

Leah Chandler (15:54):

Exactly. And I think that's part of our role moving forward, as you've mentioned, hasn't always been that way in the past, but it's an opportunity that we have as destination marketers moving into the future. You know, we have the opportunity to influence strategy and decisions that can really drive these important initiatives forward in marketing leadership positions. We can influence opinions to generate revenue, yes. To put more heads in beds, but more importantly we can influence opinions to generate change. And I think that's what's really special about our roles. You know, we can sit here and collect the tax receipts and generate more and more revenue, but if we have the opportunity to do something even more important, shouldn't we?

Bob Gilbert (16:41):

Yeah. Do you work with Tourism Cares, or have you worked with that organization because you seem to be aligned in terms of goals and objectives?

Leah Chandler (16:53):

We have connected with them in the past and are familiar with their initiatives and have collaborated previously.

Bob Gilbert (17:00):

Right. And you are very involved with Destinations International as well.

Leah Chandler (17:06):

Absolutely.

Bob Gilbert (17:06):

And I think that's such a great organization to be tapped into and the thought sharing among that organization is unique. Are there any committees that you serve on or any areas that interest you more than others? As obviously every destination has its own personality and characteristics. What do you get out of DI?

Leah Chandler (17:26):

Sure. As an organization, we're involved in a number of tourism associations from Destinations International to US travel. You know, we're very active with MPI, with SYDA, the Student Youth Travel Association with ASTA. We have strategic partnerships with a number of tourism associations and groups, many of which our team sits on boards and advisory councils. And I think that's something that's been a game changer for Puerto Rico is being able to connect with our counterparts in the US mainland. It wasn't necessarily happening before the DMO, we weren't involved in those groups. We weren't

participating with Brand USA to leverage their dollars internationally. And now Puerto Rico has been brought to the table. You know, now we have a seat with these folks to not only share our experiences here, but be able to learn from what other destinations are doing and collectively help to move the industry forward.

Bob Gilbert (18:24):

So you mentioned earlier that some successes post pandemic. What would you say are those couple of wins that you were able to celebrate post pandemic?

Leah Chandler (18:35):

Sure. I think one was winning three Emmys, which not something that we initially set out to do, but a result of a content series that we developed during the pandemic to connect people with local culture virtually. And we did a series called, Sounds Like Puerto Rico, where we talked about the sounds of the island. And we connected those sounds to local lingo and had two of our staff serve as hosts and take people to different regions on the island to give people a taste of the destination while maybe everyone wasn't able to travel during that time. So winning three Emmys was, was incredible. We were named to Fast Company's, Most Innovative Companies list in tourism and hospitality, the first DMO ever to be included on that list for Fast Company. So that was another surreal moment for the destination to be recognized, not just within our tourism industry, but outside by a company like Fast Company who's able to see the change making that was taking place here in Puerto Rico, specifically with our latest campaigns and our initiatives around cultural sustainability and being recognized for that.

Leah Chandler (19:42):

We've had three years of record breaking results. I mean I think that speaks for itself in terms of the work that's been done post pandemic to, as I mentioned earlier, not just recover, but recover more quickly than other destinations in the US Mainland's and the Caribbean. And a very cool marketing activation that has been in place now for about a year and a half. It was called Sunshine to Spare. And we began working on that at the beginning of 2022, working with a local climatologist at the University of Puerto Rico who helped identify the actual color of sunshine in Puerto Rico. And then we worked with the Pantone Institute to identify and formalize Puerto Rico sunshine. So we now have our own Pantone color for the destination that then rolled out into a number of different initiatives from, you know, having a world renowned fashion designer like Christian Cowan, who was able to design a special dress that a Puerto Rican model wore during New York Fashion Week to local businesses who took that color and really ran with it, designing everything from jewelry to sandals to footwear. And now we actually market that and people are able to purchase that in our Sunshine Shop on the website. So had a lot of legs, got a lot of really great publicity and still activating against it. Right now we just most recently launched the Sunshine Route. So it's actually a map of, locations that you can hit across the island to catch the best sunsets and sunrises actually see murals that have been developed by local artists connected to the Pantone color. So we've been busy.

Bob Gilbert (21:24):

That's so many fun initiatives. You know, I love the creativity innovation. It kind of talks to my inner marketing person,

Leah Chandler (21:24):

Bob Gilbert (21:34):

I just love that creativity. You know, it, it isn't necessarily about how much money you throw at something, it's about being creative and making a difference and capturing that captivation.

Leah Chandler (21:46):

Exactly.

Bob Gilbert (21:48):

Now from a lift, from an air standpoint, how many nonstops do you have? And I think you also have a nonstop from Madrid, Spain, I think. But what is the current status of lift into Puerto Rico?

Leah Chandler (22:01):

So the consistent growth in visitor volume and spending that happened in 2022 has led to an increased demand for airline capacity. So we see airlines really excited to come into the market and grow their presence in the market. As a result of that, the total capacity in 2023 is expected to grow by 16% compared to the previous year. So we're thrilled with that. The 2023 domestic seat capacity has increased by 13% and that really is a result of new access from places like Cleveland and a Denver route was just announced that's going to start at the end of October. It's going to be our first ever direct route from Denver into SJU, Detroit, Austin has come back in the mix. And then we've had additional flights from some of our existing markets like Dallas and Raleigh. So we're thrilled to see the market space continue to grow and airlines eager to partner with Puerto Rico.

Leah Chandler (22:59):

I think they're seeing a lot of demand. The headlines around the success we're having from a tourism standpoint on the island, and they want to be a part of that, they want to add more seats. It's not an easy task and it's something that we work very closely with our government counterparts at the Puerto Rico Tourism Company to achieve. We all know that the airline industry has been churning a lot over the last few years. And so to get those additional seats and get that commitment from airlines to not only grow into SJU, our international airport in San Juan, but also into our regional airports in Aguadilla on the west coast and in Ponce on the south coast. So we're really excited to see the activity happening in the airline space.

Bob Gilbert (23:44):

So are there nonstops into the regional airports or are they via SJU San Juan?

Leah Chandler (23:50):

There are direct flights into those regional airports. We've got a lot of connectivity around our Florida markets, New York markets where we see a big concentration of diaspora Puerto Ricans who live in the mainland's. They're flying from Tampa, they're flying from Orlando, et cetera, and coming directly into those regional airports. So we do have connectivity there that is direct.

Bob Gilbert (24:00)

Thanks for listening to part one of this episode. Tune in next time for part two. Please like, 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.

Part 2:

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that invites travel and tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on key 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. So, let's rejoin. Leah Chandler, CDME, Chief Marketing Officer for the Puerto Rico Destination Marketing Organization, Discover Puerto Rico, Part Two on Tourism Heads and Their Tales. So, there's a connectivity between the travel agency community and you mentioned before that you have a relationship with the American Society of Travel Agencies, ASTA.

Leah Chandler (01:27):

Yes.

Bob Gilbert (01:27):

Although I'm not sure if they said American Society of Travel Advisors,

Leah Chandler (01:32):

Advisors. I believe,

Bob Gilbert (01:33):

I know sometimes the name changes, but we know the market we're talking about how do you engage with them?

Leah Chandler (01:40):

Yeah, the travel advisors are a very important market for us. When the DMO started, one of the first things we wanted to get under our belt was really educating travel advisors about what Puerto Rico has to offer their clients. And similar to our consumer research, we found out that they just didn't have a lot of information about the different regions, about the type of experiences in Puerto Rico, about the air access, et cetera. So, we started Puerto Rico Travel expert program, PRTE as we call it. I think we have now onboarded about 25 to 30,000 travel advisors over the past five years, providing them with courses and incentives to educate themselves on what Puerto Rico has to offer. And we have seen significant increases in engagement with the travel advisor community. We do have a department within Discover Puerto Rico, our leisure sales team that heads that up and they have made tremendous headway in just five years in getting those folks really not just educated, but really excited about the destination and sharing everything that we have to offer, which in many cases is new news to that group.

Bob Gilbert (02:53):

Yeah, it's interesting. The perception is that travel agents have disappeared. Everything now is OTA, which is really not the case because people need to know the right way of booking travel, where the deals are, if you will, and if you have a problem whose throat to choke. Right.

Leah Chandler (03:12):

Exactly.

Bob Gilbert (03:14):

But there's much more value I think from travel advisors than people see, and they are definitely coming back related, the cruise industry, they suffered pretty dramatically during Covid. What is the status of the cruise lines coming into Puerto Rico these days?

Leah Chandler (03:32):

So the cruise passenger arrivals is not back to the pre-pandemic. It's one area of the industry here in Puerto Rico and in fact throughout the entire Caribbean that has not fully recovered from the pandemic. It was obviously the most affected by the pandemic and it is much slower to return. I think the cruise industry as a whole has been taking a hard look at a lot of their onboard processes to understand how they can better serve consumers who are getting on board and looking for things that they weren't looking for pre pandemic, you know, the cleanliness of the ships and how they're engaging with other people who are on the boats, et cetera. So, I think, you know, we've seen a lot of change in the cruise line industry over the last few years and I think that's going continue to evolve.

Leah Chandler (04:17):

You've got a lot of cruise lines who are taking possession of new ships. So, we're seeing kind of a dance happen in the, the cruise industry right now. In 2022, the Port of San Juan received over 700,000 cruise passengers. So that is below what we typically see on an annual basis. But there are new ships that are starting to come into the market, especially this fall and this winter when we see the cruise season really get into full swing and we're working on opportunities within the DMO where we can connect with these cruise lines and think through how we can have bigger impacts with those visitors. So, can we get them to come earlier before the cruise? Can we get them to stay later when their cruise returns for those folks who are home porting out of San Juan? So that pre and post activity where we can have a bigger economic impact with those cruisers on the island versus just the stopovers, you know, people getting off the ship and spending a couple hours in Old San Juan. We think there's potential to grow the market that way. So, like many of our consumer segments, you know, it's an education process. If people have taken cruises and stopped in Puerto Rico before, they maybe have a very limited knowledge of what the product is. But how can we get them outside of the metro area to experience a cafe hacienda to experience El Yunque Rainforest? We see a lot of potential in the cruise market and are excited to see the number of cruises start to pick up as we get into high season.

Bob Gilbert (05:50):

So, with the growth of different market segments, which of those segments do you see trending faster than others? And a related question, as a data-driven marketer, how do you measure success? What KPIs do you value the most?

Leah Chandler (06:07):

Sure. We just started doing about a year and a half ago visitor profile studies. So, visitor profile studies had never been done in Puerto Rico, um, prior to the beginning of 2022. So, we are learning so much so quickly about the folks who are coming to Puerto Rico and in a couple years from now we're going to have even a stronger assessment of the profile of the folks who are coming to the island right now where we're seeing growth. Certainly couples, we are seeing growth in LGBTQ+ market, we're seeing growth in families, which has been interesting for Puerto Rico because we haven't historically been a market for families to travel to. But back to the conversation we had earlier around conscientious travel and people who are really seeking a destination where they're going to get more meaning from that travel families are a part of that.

Leah Chandler (06:56):

A lot of its multi-gen families that they're wanting to bring, you know, the mom, the dad, the kids, the grandparents and have an immersive experience on the island. So, a lot of that is the way we're marketing the destination as well. You know, we're starting to show more in our advertising how families can experience the island and how easy it is again to rent a car, to travel around the island. Um, highlighting our LGBTQ+ owned businesses and helping people understand the welcome for the LGBTQ+ market. In fact, in October we're hosting IGLTA, the International Gay Lesbian Travel Association's 40th annual conference here in Puerto Rico for a region of the world that is not necessarily known for being welcome to the LGBTQ+ community. Puerto Rico really stands out and its hospitality to this audience and we're really excited to welcome them here the first week of October. Those are growth areas. I think the luxury travel market is another one where we're seeing as our product grows and as our luxury product expands, there's going to be a higher demand for those folks coming into the market and experiencing a site of Puerto Rico that a lot of people don't know about. As far as measuring success, we have about 70 to 75 metrics on an ongoing basis that we use.

Bob Gilbert (08:16):

Whoa.

Leah Chandler (08:16):

Yeah, it's a lot. There's so many components to try to understand and digest and really pull out our mind what is important and what we can apply to our marketing and strategies moving forward. If there were just a few KPIs that I had to say were most critical in terms of how we are determining the success of the overall program of the DMO, one would be awareness. Two, would be familiarity and three would be likelihood to visit. So, do people know about the destination? Are we even on people's radar in terms of awareness? And what we found out in 2018 was we weren't back then, you know, we were not being included in the consideration set when people were thinking about a Caribbean vacation or were thinking about a tropical vacation. We just weren't on the radar. And then once we get on people's radar, how much do they know that's familiarity.

Leah Chandler (09:13):

What do they know about the destination? Sure, everybody's seen good pictures of beautiful Old San Juan. We're a Caribbean Island, of course we have beaches, but what else do people know about the destination? Do they understand how rich the culture is in Puerto Rico? Do they understand this versioning astronomy scene? Have they heard about the rainforest? Do they know that there's only five bioluminescent bays in the world and we have three of them in Puerto Rico. Once we make sure they're aware, then it's what is that depth of knowledge of the destination? That's the familiarity. And then how

likely are they to travel? So, you know about us, you know what we have to offer and what kind of experiences you can have in Puerto Rico. Now how likely are you to book a trip and what is the competitive set around us that is also being considered? And of course, beyond those three measurements, we have a lot of micro measurements. You know, we're looking at website visitation, we're looking at referrals is a really important number for us. Those folks who are coming into the DiscoverPuertoRico.com website, but then they are linking off to visit our partners because that's saying to us, you know, we're up at the top of the funnel, we're generating that awareness, we're pushing them down and now they're interested in X, Y, Z restaurant. They're interested in this kayaking experience.

Bob Gilbert (10:32):

Right. Getting closer to conversion.

Leah Chandler (10:35):

Exactly. Social media is huge. We make a significant investment in the content for our social media channel. So, we're constantly measuring that engagement. And earned media for Puerto Rico has been a major pillar of our efforts since the inception of the DMO. You know, coming off of two hurricanes and moving into political unrest, earthquakes, global pandemics, et cetera. You know, we have been very heavily focused heavily in monitoring sentiment about the destination. So as these things take place, earned media is helping drive a lot of that narrative and help change a lot of that narrative. It was so critical after the hurricanes that we launched a major public relations initiative to tell people about the progress that was happening. And similar with the earthquakes, as soon as the earthquakes hit in January of 2020, we came out with a map almost immediately to say, here's the areas that have been impacted, but the other 80% of the island hasn't been impacted. And yes, we need to care for those people who are in the impacted areas, but we don't want to lose the momentum the rest of the island is having from a travel and tourism standpoint. Earned media did that for us. And so, we're constantly looking at earned media value tonality. Is that coverage that we're getting positive? Is it negative? What's our share of voice? So compared to our competitive set, how much of the coverage is going to Puerto Rico versus a Dominican Republic or a Bahamas?

Leah Chandler (12:10):

So earned media measurement is also something that's really critical to us.

Bob Gilbert (12:15):

So how important are the rising segment of influencers and how do you evaluate influencers? Because I'm sure there are plenty out there who would just love to be invited to Puerto Rico.

Leah Chandler (12:27):

We do invite many influencers to Puerto Rico. We have a very extensive program both for journalists and also for influencers. In fact, in the past year we've hosted 58 FAM trips. And so, in destinations I've worked at in the past, if you did three FAM trips a year, that was pretty much like maxing out. So, for us to do, 58 FAM trips in a year is pretty incredible.

Bob Gilbert (12:55):

Yep.

Leah Chandler (12:56):

I've got to really give it up to our team. What's exciting about that is that the interest is there. So, when we talk to journalists, when we talk to influencers, they're excited about Puerto Rico. Many of them have not been here before. So, there's definitely an opportunity to educate them and nothing does that better than getting them on the ground and having them be able to experience this firsthand.

Leah Chandler (13:19):

So, we do have a pretty robust set of criteria when it comes to determining influencers. And you're right, we absolutely see them growing significantly in terms of the influence that they can have. We're not seeing a slowdown at all in the way that they're able to reach out to their audiences and connect with them in a meaningful way and make recommendations. Obviously when it comes to criteria, we look at the number of followers that someone has. We do a little bit of micro influencers, but for the most part we're looking at influencers who have a broader reach. We usually look for followers of about 250,000 or more. The engagement rate is important. The audience demographic.

Leah Chandler (14:03):

So, we want to make sure about 60% of that demographic is from the US, international is important to us, but it is a much smaller piece of the pie in terms of how many folks are coming to the destination from international markets. The follower growth is something that we consider. We take a 90-day snapshot to see how many followers the influencer has gained or lost. Are they buying followers? And so, we're seeing a, you know, a sudden surge, which is something we don't like or is something happened, there's been a sudden drop off in followers.

Leah Chandler (14:36):

That's usually indicative of something we need to dig into a little bit more.

Bob Gilbert (14:41):

Right? Yeah. That follower number, it can be cagey to me, more important is the engagement, but you can buy followers. I'm not suggesting that influencers do that. But we know it can be done. It is that engagement unless they're, you know, A-listers and they're pretty well recognized. But I'm just blown away with the number of trips. I mean over 50, it's mind boggling.

Leah Chandler (15:07):

Even to me it is. Yeah.

Bob Gilbert (15:11):

Yeah. That's a huge, huge number. I don't if there's anybody out there that I have spoken to that gets anywhere close to that. We touched on international, and I know you mentioned earlier on in our conversation about Brand USA. How is your international market visitation recovering?

Leah Chandler (15:29):

So international arrivals are projected to see a rise in 2023. We're actually projecting an increase of about 42% in 2023 compared to 2022. A lot of that is a credit to additional flights. As we were talking about earlier, that growth and lift is so critical and we are seeing additional flights from Spain, additional flights from Columbia, we even have new flights from Mexico. So, while we've lost a little bit, in fact we

lost in the past year, year and a half, our Germany directs. We are seeing some of our other important markets pick up steam again, just like the domestic carriers, they're seeing that demands grow and they're adding flights accordingly. The UK is an opportunity market for us. We don't have any direct flights right now from the UK, but we think that's a market that has significant potential for us. So we have been seeding that market for several years, doing activations, doing earned media, doing press trips, et cetera, and really engaging with that UK audience.

Leah Chandler (16:36):

We're getting ready to do a big influencer FAM from the UK actually, and it is producing results for us. You know, we are getting very strong interest in strong coverage from the market and most recently JetBlue has launched flights, as I'm sure you're aware, from the UK direct into Boston and JFK. So those are tremendous gateways for us. We have lots of pickup through those markets on JetBlue and so we're starting to see those through numbers increase where people are saying, "Hey, I can get to Puerto Rico in just a couple hours after I land in JFK or Boston." So that's been a big opportunity for us that we're paying attention to right now.

Bob Gilbert (17:16):

Yeah, that's interesting. I happen to agree with you. I think that the UK market is prime for you. It isn't all, all inclusive. There is a fair amount of that from the UK market, but you know, the market has changed and there are folks that want to do a lot more and I think you have that perfect destination to be able to offer that and the kinds of experiences that UK travelers are looking for now.

Leah Chandler (17:41):

Well, I think you're right and that's something that in media meetings we hear often is that a few years ago when we started going into UK, everybody was talking about how much the UK travelers loved Cuba and part of what they loved about it was that it was so off the beaten path, and it was somewhat undiscovered. And so, they liked that idea of Puerto Rico being sort of this hidden gem that not many people in the UK had heard of. Certainly, had not ever been. And they were sort of portraying Puerto Rico as like, you know, kind of the next best kept secret. So, as we continue to educate them and start to expose a lot of journalists and influencers from the UK market to Puerto Rico, I think we see tremendous potential there.

Bob Gilbert (18:26):

Yep. I think you're right. And not that I'm biased, but I am when it comes to soccer. But that's, that's about it. What keeps you awake at night? What is it that concerns you from a tourism perspective?

Leah Chandler (18:41):

Sure. I mean, I think it's about what's next. You know, if I had to say there's one thing that keeps me awake at night, it's thinking about what's next. We have come very far, very fast as a destination for an entity that's only five years old and is still in many ways in startup mode. To post the types of results and performance that we've posted in five years is nothing short of a miracle. We have had the support of the local government; we've had the support of our private industry. We have built an incredible team. We've won Emmy's, we've been named the top destination by New York Times and Most Innovative by Fast Company. What's next? You know, when I say to my team, it's easy to get on top, it's hard to stay on top. And so, I think that is what we're asking ourselves.

Leah Chandler (19:32):

You know, how do we continue to innovate? How do we continue to develop the narrative to generate interest in visiting? I think a big focus for us in the future and something that we're pretty deep into right now is marketing no passport. There's a very big moment, you know, that's happening with people's passports being delayed and also an education process. You might be surprised to know there's a significant amount of people in US mainland's who don't realize, or they've forgotten you don't need a passport to travel to Puerto Rico. So that's an education process and something we see as a significant opportunity area. We think cruise is a significant opportunity area for us. And our campaign that launched last year Live Boricua is probably the crown jewel in our marketing toolkit right now, which is, you know, really focusing on the people more than the places you know, the people who make Puerto Rico so unique.

Leah Chandler (20:29):

The culture of this island is really what sets us apart and leveraging that in a way that has meaning to the travelers, but also meaning to the people locally is something that we think is going to continue to set us on a path for significant growth moving forward. We've seen a lot of positive reaction to it. I'm sure you're talking to the destinations a lot these days that are focusing on that local sentiment. And we are doing local sentiment surveys about every four months here to ensure that we're staying in lockstep, promoting the destination in a way that locals want us to be promoting the destination, ensuring that our marketing is not getting too far ahead of how locals feel about tourism and the way locals want to be presented to the world. And I think that's going to be increasingly important for all destination marketers. You know, we've seen destinations where those areas have been out of alignment and there can be significant backlash to that. And I think as we look at ourselves as destination stewards, we talked earlier about the importance and the significance of the roles that we have and how we can enact change. Campaigns like Live Boricua that really are leaning into local culture have to be aligned with local sentiment in order for them to be successful. So those are some of the things that I do think about before going to sleep most nights and ensuring that we're having those important conversations.

Bob Gilbert (21:56):

And they're important conversations to have, especially with your community. I've so enjoyed chatting with you today, Leah. I have one last question.

Leah Chandler (22:06):

Sure.

Bob Gilbert (22:07):

And you are familiar, I'm hoping with Zoltar, who was the fortune telling machine out of Tom Hanks' Big movie. So, if you were to put a quarter into Zoltar, what would you like him to tell you about the future of tourism for Puerto Rico?

Leah Chandler (22:26):

Oh gosh.

Bob Gilbert (22:28):

What would that perfect scenario look like for Puerto Rico? The future of Puerto Rican tourism to be,

Leah Chandler (22:36):

I would like to know, you know, how a destination that has shown tremendous growth and success can stay on that trajectory. I think that would be the most important question that I would ask. Or information I'd like to understand.

Bob Gilbert (22:50):

Yeah, he's your unpaid fortune telling

Leah Chandler (22:53):

Consultant,

Bob Gilbert (22:54):

Consultant right.

Leah Chandler (22:57):

If anybody has a crystal ball and can assist with that. But I think we're seeing what's working over the last five years and being able to take those learnings and really evolve our strategy to ensure that we are future proofing for the destination and not just future proofing what's to come, but also safeguarding what we've already done. Because a lot of what we've done has worked very well. A lot of destinations may look at it and think that's marketing 101, but we needed that in Puerto Rico. We really needed to build that foundation of a destination marketing program, reposition the brand, build out a sustainable campaign, and really be able to plant our stake in the ground in terms of who we are as a destination. And I think if we continue to do that, really focusing heavily on the research and data and listening to our consumers and locals, it's going to be a recipe for success for us moving forward.

Bob Gilbert (23:55):

Fantastic. Well listen, again, I've so much enjoyed chatting with you. I wish you and the community in Puerto Rico continued success and thank you so much.

Leah Chandler (24:06):

Thank you. It's been wonderful, I appreciate it.

Bob Gilbert (24:09):

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.