

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.

Bob Gilbert (01:05):

Welcome to another freshly brewed edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales. Brought to you by the award-winning agency, Eddy Alexander. I am more than delighted to introduce today's guest, Claudia Vecchio, President, CEO of Sonoma County Tourism. Claudia has, also served on the executive committee of the US Travel Association and on the National Boards for the Public Relations Society of America, PRSA and the Travel and Tourism Research Association, TTRA. I guess one thing our industry is not short of is acronyms. Claudia. So welcome and please share with our audience a little about yourself, your background and your career journey so far.

Claudia Vecchio (01:56):

Sure thing. And first of all, thanks for having me. It's a delight for me to be here. So certainly, look forward to our conversation. It hasn't been a single road, I can tell you that I've been in travel and tourism in some way, shape, or form for about 30 years. Actually, you know, really coming out of college, and a direction that I didn't end up taking, which was organizational development and really understanding how organizations change and evolve and reduce obsolescent and that sort of thing. And once I started to do that, I said, gosh, you know, this is sort of an interesting subject matter, but it really wasn't me. There just wasn't the creativity and the opportunity to really have both my technical and my passions really come to the forefront. Then I started on the PR side, and I worked for a big public relations agency in New York and my clients started to be more along the consumer brand and travel and tourism sectors, and, really enjoyed that.

Claudia Vecchio (02:53):

Enjoyed brand launches, enjoyed getting to know destinations from the eye of a public relations professional. And so, my very first DMO job was with the Branson Lakes Chamber and Visitors Bureau way back in really the early nineties. And at that point it was a super interesting time in Branson because, you know, Branson just exploded onto the tourism scene following a 60-minute story and went through an enormous growth period. And then at that point they were sort of saying, okay, what's next? How do we rethink this destination? How do we rebrand it and how do we meet the needs of an evolving traveler? So that was really my role as VP of communications and from time to time, VP of marketing as well, to look at that destination and figure out how we evolve it both from a messaging standpoint and a product delivery standpoint. That was a really interesting time and a really interesting opportunity for me to get my feet wet in tourism. We had a number of crises that happened during that time, the gas shortage. Other things, I'm really dating myself on this one, but not only did we really lean into the branding and marketing side of things, but also, I kind of got my first taste of what crisis management was like right at a destination.

Bob Gilbert (04:11):

And of course, the gas crisis for Branson was significant because it was primarily a drive market, right?

Claudia Vecchio (04:18):

Exactly. Right. It was very much primarily a drive market. So, we did promotions like bring in your gas receipt and get coupons and value discounts and that sort of thing. So, we really did meet our customers where they needed us to. I think successfully navigated our way through that. I then went on to the state of Ohio where I was tourism director for this wonderful state of Ohio, and at that point really came to understand what it is to drive and lead a destination organization from a state standpoint. And it was a challenging time for the state of Ohio. There was some governmental issues that I stepped into and another sort of crisis and reputation management piece that we needed to work through. But we did that fairly quickly and really leaned in at that point to experiential marketing and helping the industry.

Claudia Vecchio (05:10):

And Ohio has a remarkable family appeal through the theme parks and beautiful state parks and national parks. But it really was the experiential marketing and through that whole, the book, *The Experience Economy* and other kinds of things, we really helped the industry understand and appreciate and value experiential marketing. So, from then I went back into the PR agency world and worked for another big PR agency, but eventually I worked my way to Nevada where I was fortunate to serve as the first director of the Nevada Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs. Just what a remarkable state Nevada is. And I mean it's wonderful and it has all kinds of wonderful assets, but again, when we talk about experiential marketing and putting the assets sort of on the back burner and talking about these, the spirit of Nevada, I loved that job. It was an amazing opportunity and really then became much more aware of politics with the capital P.

Claudia Vecchio (06:10):

Because I was on the governor's cabinet and building that whole department. Right. Then I came over to Sonoma County and we've had a heck of a six years since I've been here. I accepted my job before the 2017 fires just weeks before and watched the fires unfold here in Sonoma County and then started, they started on October 8th. I started my job November 1st. So, what I thought I was going to get into was very different from what actually happened, and we really went through very significant crisis management situation in that year. And then subsequent years we have had fires and floods, and of course then the pandemic and now we sit trying to figure ourselves out of all of that. Sonoma County's an extraordinary place too. I've been very lucky to work in amazing destinations, but each of them has their idiosyncrasies and challenges and opportunities and all of that. And so here we are, Sonoma County with an enormous future ahead of us, but also some significant things we have to deal with.

Bob Gilbert (07:13):

Right. Certainly, nobody can say that you haven't had your more than fair share of crisis management, but that helps you. Right. I mean, it helps you understand because there are many that are, you know, newer if you will, to the DMO world that have not had to face anything such as the pandemic or other crises such as what you've had. And I do recall, I remember you moving to Sonoma from Nevada, and I saw the fires. I thought, oh my God, that's a literally a baptism of fire and to manage the, and I think part of the, the challenge with crisis management is the reality of the crisis and the perception of the crisis. And I think that's probably not too dissimilar with the pandemic. And you know, as we look at the pandemic and the results of it, there were some destinations that did well during it, others that did not.

Bob Gilbert (08:19):

And I think that, you know, as I look at 2023, I see a mixed bag. I see it on a regional basis that some markets that did really well as a result of the pandemic because they were in beautiful places that people wanted to go to, the consumer focus has shifted to a degree. And so, you know, many destinations that benefited, you know, now see a slowdown in 23. And it, as I said, I do see it as regional, but as you look at the future and Sonoma County Tourism, what are your overarching goals, and could you provide an overview of Sonoma County's tourism economy? You know, is there a snapshot that you'd like to share with Sonoma County? So, it's a question of your overarching goals and what does the overview of Sonoma County look like at this moment in time?

Claudia Vecchio (09:22):

Yeah, that's a gigantic question. So that's

Bob Gilbert (09:24):

A huge question. But we'll take it. You know, as they say, there's only one way to eat an elephant. You know, it's one bite at a time. So, walk us through,

Claudia Vecchio (09:35):

Let's go to the overarching goals and I'll come back to 2023. Sonoma County Tourism during 2022 and 23 did two things. We did a biannual strategic plan, which we've done since I got here. And our overarching organizational priorities have changed a little bit over the past six years. So, our goals are aligned with our organizational priorities. We have four organizational priorities, and first is to drive the economy. And certainly, even as a destination stewardship organization, which Sonoma County Tourism is tourism, we've taken off marketing, we didn't like management. So, we are an official destination stewardship organization. And as such, we really look at the precepts around the people planet prosperity, triple bottom line of sustainable travel. So, people look at us from time to time, even our partners, and say, well, you're leaning into sustainability and stewardship. You're moving away from economic development. And I say, no way, because we have those three very intentionally. So that triple bottom line of sustainability. So, our first organizational priority is to drive the economy. And it's not about numbers. We really will no longer publicize the numbers, although we get them because we just kind of want to know. But it's about driving the economy. It's about driving the economy, not only the overarching revenue into the county, but the revenue that goes to our partners and our capacity to drive people into the doors of our small businesses. Because they rely on us to really to market their business.

Bob Gilbert (11:10):

So, what kind of metrics do you have in place?

Claudia Vecchio (11:14):

Yeah, so we do the overarching economy that we do through Dean Runyon and our partnership with Visit California. And so, we look at that, we look at jobs, but we also look at how we are able to move people through our website onto our partners and other kinds of attributes. I'm still looking for and waiting for research company to help us better understand the impact of responsible travel. We're not there yet, but we use the same metrics I think probably everybody uses, but kind of frame it I think in a little different way.

Bob Gilbert (11:53):

You mentioned a really key point and the question of the ability to truly measure sustainable travel. And I think many DMOs that I speak with, you know, high up in their hit list is sustainable tourism and the ability to try and reach out to visitors who will benefit in a sustainable manner. Because I know during the pandemic, and I'm sure this happened in your destination as well, many visitors came because they wanted to get away far from the madding crowd, but they had no idea what Leave No Trace was, which left a bad taste in, in the mouths of many residents. But it's interesting that you are also looking for that measurement tool to be able to track sustainable. So, we shall see, we, we'll see.

Claudia Vecchio (12:49):

Yeah. We also look, we do have a partnership with Leave No Trace, speaking of Leave No Trace. With the national organization. And we do measure trash and the amount of trash and the reduction in trash and that sort of thing. But it yet to really bubble up to a point where I think it's a significant metric. You know?

Claudia Vecchio (13:10):

So, the second is to create a resilient organization. There's no doubt that Sonoma County, is a fragile environment. I mean, we've been shown that time and time again here. So, resiliency and ensuring that our industry and our county is prepared for natural cultural kinds of disasters. And so that's really important and that is very much where part of our sustainability comes in. But we also talk about making sure that Sonoma County tourism is resilient and that we have the budget that's required for us to be able to both proactively look forward and then reactively manage crisis as they happen. We're looking at a number of ways to diversify our budget. As I know a lot of people are. It's a hot topic in the industry right now. And so that's the whole idea around resiliency.

Bob Gilbert (14:00):

How are you funded from a budget standpoint? What funds your budget?

Claudia Vecchio (14:06):

We have two primary funding sources. The first is through transient occupancy tax. And then the second is through a Business Improvement Area that we have mostly in countywide and Sonoma County. We have a couple of communities that don't participate in that. So, it's through TOT and the BIA I like that it's performance-based budget, you know, when the industry does well. So too does Sonoma County tourism. And we did exceedingly well, honestly, through the pandemic. And then coming out of the pandemic, we went into the pandemic with the budget of somewhere around 8 million and we came out with 12, 13 million. That is not the case this year by any stretch of the imagination. But we did, we did do pretty well. So that's kind of our budget story. Yeah.

Bob Gilbert (14:51):

And you're not alone with that story. Interestingly. I do hear that. And it's kind of, you know, you are set up because you had this great fund that, you know, was there as, as almost an anomaly and, you know, almost as an anon anomaly for 2019, which has got that big asterisk by, but they're different asterisk. And you're right, I look at last year as the windfall. And this year is, you know, maybe more predictable, but it's getting used to that. And I'm not going to use the word normalization. That's a word that is going to become obsolescent as we move forward. Every year is new, every year is different as the consumer behaviors shift. But yes. Just know that you're not alone.

Claudia Vecchio (15:37):

Well, that's good to know. And you know, I've always said that tourism continues to evolve so quickly that just because we've done something in the past doesn't mean it's good for us to do now or into the future. But never did I see the change happening at this velocity, quite honestly. So it's a heck of a time. Super exciting time to be in tourism, but it's a, it's a tough one, especially for people who don't love change.

Bob Gilbert (16:01):

No. Well that's interesting. And I was taken with your quote that you use in your master plan, and we'll talk about that a little later. But it was the Albert Einstein quote, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Right. And that's a great statement. You know, it's a great opening statement, but you're right. I think people tend, or within our industry, look at the pandemic and say, well, we are suffering because of that. This is what's happening as a result of that. But there were things shifting before the pandemic, and I think that it acted as an accelerator in many areas. And it's still shifting fast as you say it. We need to really look at research and follow up on research that we can validate that the research organizations can validate and help us, you know, move forward and make those data-driven decisions.

Claudia Vecchio (17:03):

You're a hundred percent right about everything you just said. And I would just caution that we look not only at tourism research but look at the research that really is helping to guide consumer products at all of discretionary spending. We do look at how consumers are purchasing what I would call our competitors, which are not just tourism destinations, but it's consumer electronics, it's sporting goods, it's everything that people spend this amount of money on they would spend on a trip. So let's be sure we're looking at how consumers are buying those things too, because that can be really illuminating for us as a tourism destination's, a consumer brand. So how people are buying our brands. So anyway, the next thing we have on our priority list is to engage the community. And this was new for this year. So like a lot of destinations out there, Sonoma County really embraced our residents and our community.

Claudia Vecchio (17:56):

We started a community engagement team here at Sonoma County Tourism about three years ago. And it's super important to ensure that our residents at least understand what we're doing, if not aligned with what we're doing. But that engagement of the community is incredibly important. And especially in Sonoma County where we have a significant amount of nimbyism, I have to say, people move up here and, you know, they've had successful careers, or they've been even a multi-generational Sonoma County family. They don't want it to change. They've moved into something, and they want to keep it just as it is. So, we have a big job ahead of us to engage the community and help the community understand the value of what we do. And I know that's a song that's sung throughout the industry.

Bob Gilbert (18:42):

Yeah, it's, it's interesting. I mean that nimbyism you refer to is in those areas of natural beauty that people have moved there and, you know, they bought a home or homes. And they moved there because they love the area, but that's it. They don't want anybody else to move there. And it's interesting the research and approach of understanding and educating on the visitor economy and how that impacts and benefits the community, but nevertheless, it's still a hard slog to have folks who are

resolute in, you know, not in my backyard thinking to overcome that. Was there a resistance to visitors coming into Sonoma County during the pandemic?

Claudia Vecchio (19:36):

Enormous. There has been resistance to visitors coming into Sonoma County for seven or eight years. It really got to be very loud. And I mean, the drum was beating at a pretty high rate. And so when I came to Sonoma County in 2017, that was supposed to be the key part of my job, was to help build this community engagement piece, the organization had done a "Let's Talk Tourism" listening sessions throughout the county at 10 municipalities. And we really got that input from visitors back then, and we integrated that into the first plan we did. And we've integrated it ever since. But during the pandemic, people were very afraid of anybody coming into Sonoma County. And because Sonoma County is not exclusively, but the demographic is a fairly older group. So, there was a lot of fear of people coming from other destinations where they couldn't control that health issue and, and such. And so, there was a lot of fear to the point where I believe there was some confrontation between residents and visitors. So, it, it was a, it was definitely an issue during that time.

Bob Gilbert (20:50):

Yep. And how has that evolved over time now that we're at the, almost in 2024?

Claudia Vecchio (20:58):

Yeah, I know, unbelievable. Where did 2023 go?

Bob Gilbert (21:01):

I know, I know you're not wrong.

Claudia Vecchio (21:04):

It's back to sort of normalized in terms of their general anxiety about tourism, and visitors coming to Sonoma County. But the issues are now more about traffic and other things. Although I will tell you in 2023, our small businesses and others that our residents know, they know we're hurting. So, it's very definitely lessened. It's always interesting when tourism goes away, how people recognize the value of tourism all of a sudden. But yeah, they're sort of back to the regular murmur. And then the fourth priority is to solidify our commitment to destination stewardship. So, this really is part and parcel to that whole stewardship of Sonoma County. And when we became a destination stewardship organization, it was about taking that broad based view of Sonoma County, incorporating the triple bottom line of sustainability, but really to be much more part of conversations about the long-term health, the long-term viability and sustainability of Sonoma County, not only in its natural resources, but as we protect our citizens and our workers and all of that piece of this too. So that's really where the master plan comes in. But that's the fourth priority. And then we have goals up that ladder, up to each of those priorities and within each of our groups. So, marketing has goals toward most of those sales has goals toward most of those. Community engagement has goals toward most of those. And so, you know, that's kind of how our plan is structured. And those are the things that as an organization, our KPIs are designed around and those things, then we report back on success.

Bob Gilbert (22:47):

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](http://eddyalexander.com) to learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies.