

Bob Gilbert (00:00):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, brought to you by the award-winning agency, Eddy Alexander. Today's guest is Melissa Reeves, CDME, president, and CEO of Destination Marketing Association of the West, otherwise known as DMA West. She is no stranger to traveling tourism. In fact, her parents owned a small travel agency and she served as CEO for Visit Vacaville, a small DMO in Northern California for 16 years. So, no stranger at all. So, welcome Melissa,

Melyssa Reeves (00:38):

And thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Bob Gilbert (00:41):

Well, thank you. So let's jump straight in. In November of 23, you took the helm of DMA West as their first president and CEO. If you would please explain to our audience what DMA West is, what it does, and what changes will we be seeing?

Melyssa Reeves (01:08):

Most definitely. Well, so yes, November 1st, I started in this new adventure, and I honestly had been a member of DMA West during my whole career as a DMO leader and loved the association really, was kind of the go-to place for education and for building relationships with my colleagues and kind of a built-in support system. I came to DMA West, it was my very first event that I attended as a DMO leader and met some of my very best friends and colleagues, and they have served as my go-to people in the industry my entire career. It's just always been a special association for me. And to be able to be its first leader, it's pretty exciting. The organization's been around for over 40 years and it's just time, it was time for us to do something different. It's been managed by an association management company for its entire existence, and they did an amazing job, but I think it was just time for us to take the association and take it to the next level. And so that's kind of where we are now.

Bob Gilbert (02:25):

So, explain what DMA West is, membership organization, what are the, the guiding principles, if you will, of DMA West?

Melyssa Reeves (02:36):

Sure. It is a membership association, obviously being Destination Marketing Association of the West. Although the West is a pretty vast region, we actually cover from California out to the Dakotas and down through Texas. We've got nearly half the country. Our real goal is to bring education to our members. So, we do that through three summits that we host a year. We have a tourism technology summit that happens in the spring. We have a leadership summit that is for our CEOs that we host in the summer and in the fall we host an education summit that has got, educational tracks for pretty much your entire team. There's a marketing track, a sales track, and then there's also education for c-suite level as well.

Bob Gilbert (03:22):

Right. Understood. Now you have also been part of Destination International. I know you've served or you probably still do serve on their board. And do you were, if I'm not mistaken, a founding member of

their small DMO task force? So what is it that you bring to the table for your members that membership of Destination International does not?

Melyssa Reeves (03:50):

I think again, we're, we are very focused on small and mid-sized DMOs, that is a majority of our membership. I am a huge fan of Destinations International, as you said. I am still a board member of DI and we'll always have a very soft spot in my heart for, for Destinations International. And being able to found that small DMO task force, it's kind of always been my passion to serve other small DMO. Mine was less than a million dollars in Vacaville, so I very much came from a very small DMO but being able now to serve and understand the needs of a small to mid-sized DMO, most of our, our members are under \$5 million. We do have some much larger DMOs as well, but the majority is under five. And so being able to bring education and, research opportunities to them and at affordable price, just because their budget limitations, they deserve to have the best opportunities to learn and to get the best research as well, even though they do have budget limitations.

Bob Gilbert (04:52):

Right now. I'm sure you learned a lot, whilst in visit, Vacaville and for those who, we, our broadcast goes around the world, so, and across the us so you may be in the East coast, Vacaville is located not specifically halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco, but kind of and close to Napa and Sonoma. So you've got some bigger DMO there that, are vying for the visitations. You and the majority of your members, as you say, smaller DMO, have needs that are different from a San Francisco or a Los Angeles.

Melyssa Reeves (05:35):

Most definitely, yes.

Bob Gilbert (05:36):

So what would you say, talking on behalf of your members, what are the key issues facing smaller to midsize destination organizations? And are you, this is kind of a two-part question. But historically we have referred, or traditionally we have referred to destination organizations as DMOs. And I've seen, this kind of trend moving to remove the "M" from DMOs and more destination organizations because destinations don't just address marketing. So that's kind of, the question is what are those key issues, facing smaller to mid-size destination organizations today?

Melyssa Reeves (06:29):

I don't really think that they're different issues. They are very similar issues. I think just the way that we're able to tackle them is a lot different. There aren't funds to throw at issues. It's really about getting involved in relationships within their communities. I think some of the changes that we've seen in the industry over the last number of years, a lot more focus on community shared value. If we're talking DI and the amazing Jack Johnson, I think our smaller DMO and mid-sized have really lived that community shared value ideal for years. That's kind of how they've all operated. The only way to get things done was to have relationships in our communities and to be good community partners and stewards of our destination. And that's kind of the only way that our smaller DMO partners have been able to be very successful in their communities.

Melyssa Reeves (07:20):

So this was not really a new concept for smaller DMOs. So I don't think that necessarily the topics and challenges are different. It's just the way that we have dealt with them and that our members have dealt with them and that, I think they've had a leg up to be quite honest, because for years we have been building relationships. Our members have been building relationships with their communities and have been much more involved in our destinations and in actual community events and community leadership where, we have probably not spent as much on international tourism and those kind of things. So there's just been, many, many years of building those kind of relationships that when issues do arise, we've been pretty lucky to have really strong relationships within our communities to help move the needle where we can.

Bob Gilbert (08:12):

Yeah, no, I think that's a really good point. Community shared values is something that, smaller destinations have had, from day one. And because you're in a smaller community, you are more involved by just definition. And when you see that larger trend roll out from DI and it's more challenging for large destinations than it is for, for smaller because everybody.

Melyssa Reeves (08:45):

Absolutely. It was a much bigger pivot, I think for larger destinations to become more community focused when the small to mid-size, that's kind of been our sweet spot always. It was kind of nice, nice to be ahead of the curve a little for something.

Bob Gilbert (08:59):

Right. So if we were to look at some of the trends facing destinations today, sustainability, advocacy, visitor economy, and the KPIs that show the value of the visitor economy, resilience post COVID, if you were to prioritize those, I know you can't say everything is community shared values at the top of the list and then you start looking at these other topics that, that may present themselves in some degree of importance.

Melyssa Reeves (09:34):

Personally, I would think so. I think everything starts with the relationship. And so having those relationships within your community, I think that just puts and quite honestly, COVID put us in a position where we were building relationships with organizations that we probably would've never worked with had it not been for a pandemic. And our kind of relationship and our, I guess our value in our, in our respective communities became much greater. And I think that our communities understand our value and our place and why A DMO matters to our communities and what we can do to support. And I think just putting us in DMOs in general in that position where they really do feel valued in their communities. I mean, I've got members now, again, all the way across the country, and clearly all of the challenges that they're facing in their destinations vary from state to state and city to city. But starting with those relationships and having those connections within our communities is, I think the first step to, to solving any challenge.

Bob Gilbert (10:38):

I guess that includes transparency from a local level, but how does one express value to the community, whether it's the business community, the chambers of commerce, the city council, the key stakeholders, what are the best practices from your members?

Melyssa Reeves (11:04):

Sure. Well, I've definitely seen some really extraordinary things come out of our members. And up until just a few short months ago, I was still a DMO trying to do good things in my destination as well. And those things that we were doing for our communities were so different and we were so focused on different things than, we would've just a few short years ago. We are seeing a lot of our members involved in arts and culture, doing art programs in their communities, events, large scale events. I've got a number of members that are hosting large festivals for so many years. I think people really didn't understand. We have a visitors bureau. We're in a small destination. Why we're not San Francisco, we're not Los Angeles, we're not any of these larger, larger cities.

Melyssa Reeves (11:50):

Why do we need a visitors' bureau that's so silly? And most of our work, quite frankly, was done outside of the destination. People, our residents did not see what we did. So really the understanding of why we existed and what we did was, next to zilch in our own destinations. So now to have that shift where we really are more focused on, building our destinations through, building our communities is been amazing. It's been amazing to see some of just the amazing work that some of our destination partners have done. But, again, creating these large festivals and events and, getting involved. There's a number of our destinations that are getting involved in accessibility programs. Again, things that just DMO weren't touching over the last number of years. That's kind of been a new shift. And I think it's, it brings value to our cities and our residents and again, I think just increases the value of the organizations overall.

Bob Gilbert (12:51):

One of the areas that is frequently discussed on our podcast is the relationship with the economic development folks. And I would imagine that the relationships with economic development within a small to mid-sized destination, um, are a lot stronger and a lot closer than they may be for a huge city. Is that the case? Is that, is there a closer bond and understanding of that strong relationship between, tourism and economic development?

Melyssa Reeves (13:35):

Really on that side, speaking just from my own destination and being there for so many years, we were very blessed in Vacaville with our relationship with our economic development team. We were really considered part of that team. When they had companies that were coming in to, to look at Vacaville as a potential home for their companies, we were part of the team to help sell our city. We really were the ones that sold quality of life and why they would want to relocate or open a business in our city, what the value was for their employees and living here. And we felt very valued by economic development and that they really understood what we brought to the table and how we were definitely a piece of that, of that team in trying to bring new business to our community.

Melyssa Reeves (14:24):

But I'm constantly hearing from my colleagues and partners that their relationships are very much the same, that that relationship has grown over the last number of years as I think there's just a better understanding of our place in the community as DMOs and what we bring to the table and how our voice is so important. They are great at selling facilities and land and buildings, and we're really great at being able to share what the amazing opportunities are in our communities, things for our children,

schools, all of those kind of things that bring value to, to their workers and, people that would possibly be relocating.

Bob Gilbert (15:05):

Right. As I am often reminded, it all starts with a visit.

Melyssa Reeves (15:09):

Absolutely.

Bob Gilbert (15:10):

And if there's a economic development initiative, the first thing that any company that's thinking of relocating or opening a new business is they go to the DMO website. To go and try and find out and learn a lot more about the things to see and do in those particular destinations. Which leads us to the next question. I mean, at the end of the day, from a destination organization driving visitation and trying to increase that length of stay based upon the fact that the majority, not all, but the majority of destinations are funded by TOT, by hotels, lodging, tax, it is this understanding that it's that experience that is the trigger for people to go visit somewhere. Whether it's they want to go tour this or there's an attraction or there's an activity or an experience that they're looking for, which ties back to technology, and I know you, you do have a, a technology conference.

Bob Gilbert (16:24):

Is that connected world or that the connection between the things to see and do and a destination is, is that something that you focus on or is that a topic, maybe not focus, it's a strong word, but that relationship between understanding why people come visit, it isn't to stay for three or four nights in a hotel, it's to go out and see and experience, the local community. But it all is the book ability, if you will, of those particular things to see and do. Is that something that you discuss?

Melyssa Reeves (17:01):

It is something we discuss. We've got so many partners that are involved in the, in our tech summit and that come as vendors and partners that have so many, I mean, the technology every year obviously it changes and is amazing. And we've just got all these new partners that are doing such amazing things that bring I think, so much value to especially smaller destinations that really have to work pretty hard at trying to tell the story about, what there is to see and do in the community and just, connectivity, getting visitors to understand, for us it's very rarely just about our own destination, especially in Vacaville. We were not a destination where people were most likely going to come and spend a week. We were happy if they came and stayed in Vacaville but spent a day in Napa or spent a day in Sacramento or Davis or Fairfield.

Melyssa Reeves (17:54):

We had to work collectively with all of them. And I think just understanding what there is to do in even just an area, I think benefits all of us. I think we see that a lot with smaller and midsize DMOs that I think we're much more willing to work together to benefit all versus being very territorial and some of the technology really helps us do that. There's been a lot of partnerships between DMOs that have created tours and things for visitors to do. Again, visitors aren't seeing the, the city limits sign. They don't care. They just want to know it's five minutes to get to something. So, some of that technology has really helped connect us and as long as the room nights were in my destination, I was fine.

Bob Gilbert (18:38):

Right, right. And I mean, on the technology side and I look at the makeup, how many, well, first of all, how many members do you have? Is it 150 or.

Melyssa Reeves (18:48):

We're upwards of 200 now. We actually yeah. We now have partner members as well, and we have had partners support us in a very great way, so we're very grateful.

Bob Gilbert (18:58):

You have folks who truly, from a destination standpoint, give back and are very creative in their own Right. I know we interviewed several months back, Wes Ray.

Melyssa Reeves (19:10):

Oh. who?

Bob Gilbert (19:12):

Wes

Melyssa Reeves (19:12):

Just kidding.

Bob Gilbert (19:13):

Oh, you were just.

Melyssa Reeves (19:14):

I know Wes. Wes has been my best friend for about 20 years, so I know Wes well, and love him dearly and actually came off of a call with him about five minutes before I joined you, so we know.

Bob Gilbert (19:26):

He's somebody who gives back, he's very creative, has great ideas and, and initiatives and, and willing to share, and that's a great kind of attribute for a destination leader to have. I don't know where he finds the time, but I guess it's something he learned being a tank commander. Right?

Melyssa Reeves (19:46):

That's right. No, Wes, he's a great example of that. He does amazing things in a destination. All of us have challenges. He's definitely got some challenges in his destination. But Wes has just created some, I mean, through the events and festivals that they've created in Stockton and, his podcast and just the things that they're doing as a fairly small DMO, he's got an amazing team and, and he does give back and he's just a, such a supporter of the industry. But he's just one example of, I really feel that DMA West is a family of people like Wes. We just recently were actually, this is not out for everyone yet, but we are rebranding. We will have a new name in March. DMA West will Change. But one of the things as we were doing research for this rebranding was, what do you value about DMA West and, and what do you love and why do you come back?

Melyssa Reeves (20:45):

And what we heard over and over and over again from our members was about the fact that it felt like family. And that's really special to me. That's something, that's the one thing I never want to change about DMA West. And the reason that it feels that way is because of people and leaders like Wes that continually give back and continually support. And that happens not just on the DMO member side, but we're seeing that from our vendor partners as well, that they've stepped up for our association in a really major way. It's exciting to see it's, such a different adventure for me to be on this side after being a DMO person for 20 plus years, but it's really, really exciting to see how people are stepping up for the association and supporting the association and realizing that we've got a lot of really, really special members. Those relationships transcend the business and work, and they all become legitimate friends. And I think we're really, really lucky. We're an industry of just a really amazing people. I think it's why I could never do anything else and leave the industry, but I think DMA West is such a beautiful example of that. We are a little bit smaller association, so it's very accessible. People really get time to spend time with each other and build these friendships. And again, I think that the colleagues kind of transcend colleagues and become really close friends.

Bob Gilbert (22:12):

Yeah, it is very true. I met my wife in this industry. We've been married for 27 years, and she's a DMO, which is kind of interesting. We have very boring conversations over dinner, but it is true that, we spoke about Wes and I know when I've met him at a DI function or when we interviewed the relationship with the community, which is real, it's not manufactured, it's real, because that's where he came from. He came from the community. And there's a trust factor and I think that that adds value. And I think that is what you bring to the table with DMA West or whatever the rebranding is going to be down the road. I mean, you've only been there about a hundred or so days. So that relationship, the value proposition is key.

Bob Gilbert (23:10):

And I think that you have that, that network, that community, within the now over 200 members and growing, there's the value there and the sharing between the members. I was going to say destinations, but it isn't just destinations. So I just want to wish you success. You've got a lot to do, and I'm very confident that you're going to make, make a difference and add value to the organization. And you're certainly added value to our podcast today, Melyssa. So, I'm not sure if you have any closing words. This isn't necessarily a membership drive, but, if you have any closing thoughts, I'd love to hear them.

Melyssa Reeves (23:51):

Sure. No, thank you so much for the opportunity today. It's really exciting time for DMA West because it's been under a management association and for so many years. The fact that we've kind of taken it under our own wing and it's, it's ours now means that we get to create kind of a whole new thing. And I'm very excited about the opportunities to grow it and to be a lot more inclusive with the membership and increase the value that our members are getting from the association. I think, as you said, there's a lot of work to do. There is still a lot of transition happening, but I'm really, really excited about the future of the association and it feels like a big honor to be the one to get to take it to the next level.

Bob Gilbert (24:34):

Fantastic. Well, Melyssa, thank you again for being on Tourism Heads and Their Tales and again, I wish all the success and hopefully, we'll get involved and see you at one of your events.

Melyssa Reeves (24:46):

We would love that.

Bob Gilbert (24:48):

Thank you again.

Melyssa Reeves (24:50):

Thank you very much.