



Episode 187 – Leah Chandler

Intro: This is Brand USA Talks Travel, elevating the conversation about international travel to the United States. Here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:09]: I am intrigued by the term 'disruptive storytelling,' but to tell you the truth, I'm not certain what it precisely means.

Leah Chandler [0:16]: Disruptive storytelling is really about cutting through the clutter. We know in the destination space, sometimes a lot of our messaging can look and sound the same as other destinations who are similar to ours. So when we think about disruptive storytelling, it's about how we get into the hearts and the minds of consumers, and make them think differently about our destination compared to other destinations who a potential visitor might be considering for a trip, and make sure that what we're talking about truly resonates and sets us apart.

Mark Lapidus [0:46]: I am so thrilled to be joined today by Leah Chandler, Chief Marketing Officer at Discover Puerto Rico. I only met Leah very briefly in Puerto Rico once for five minutes. Remember, it was about a year and a half ago, I think. Brand USA was doing a board meeting there, and there was also US Travel Summit, and I really enjoyed hearing you speak. You're really a great speaker, you do great presentations.

Leah Chandler [1:06]: Oh, gosh, thank you.

Mark Lapidus [1:07]: Prior to joining Discover Puerto Rico, Leah was the Chief Marketing Officer at Branson Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. Welcome to Brand USA Talks Travel.

Leah Chandler [1:14]: Thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be here. I really appreciate the invitation.

Mark Lapidus [1:18]: Let's stay with the disruptive storytelling topic for a second. How do you strike the right balance, Leah, between pushing creative boundaries while remaining authentic?

Leah Chandler [1:26]: Well, in my opinion, it doesn't have to be either/or. Some destinations are going to have disruptive content, and others focus on disruptive channels. For Discover Puerto Rico, the disruptive part of our storytelling was the way we were telling the story. Our campaign platform itself was disruptive. In 2022, when we launched Live Boricua, which is our current creative campaign, we were one of the first destinations leading with values-based marketing. Post-pandemic, visitors weren't just looking for what we call the fly-and-flop experiences, where they fly to the island and they lay on the beach for seven days. They really wanted to have meaning in their travel. We understood this meant we were no longer focusing on the product experience; we were really pivoting to the people experience. Visitors wanted to get connected to local communities. They wanted to live like locals. Yes, they still wanted to visit the beach and drink a Piña Colada - which, by the way, Puerto Rico invented the Piña Colada, it was invented here. But that wasn't all they wanted to do. In our case, the platform for our campaign was disruptive, but the content was the authentic piece, through and through.

Leah Chandler [2:40]: Every story we tell is very deeply rooted in the authentic experiences and the super rich culture of the island. We ensure that our creativity enhances, rather than overshadows, the genuine spirit of Puerto Rico, and this approach really allows us to captivate our audience while maintaining authenticity. The Live Boricua campaign truly celebrates the local culture of Puerto Rico. It emphasizes the diversity of the people here in Puerto Rico. Our recent extension of the campaign involves a Puerto Rican photographer, an award-winning Puerto Rican director, all the way down to an all-Puerto Rican talent and crew, emphasizing that local involvement at every turn. In our case, again, and it's not the same for everyone, but the way we were telling the story was disruptive, the story itself was authentic. You see how we blended those two elements together to create a really compelling story for Puerto Rico.

Mark Lapidus [3:38]: As I always say, creative work is messy. How do you know when to trust your gut and when to do more research?

Leah Chandler [3:44]: I'm a big fan of research. I think I learned when I was taking CBME classes, years and years ago, I remember with Destinations International, I think they counseled us that about 10% of your budget should go into research, and I've always had that in the back of my mind. But it's a balance, you know, it's really a combination of intuition and also data. As a CMO, trusting your gut is a part of the process, it's crucial, especially if you are someone who has a very deep understanding of your brand and audience. Research really provides the insights that are needed to back up those instincts.

Mark Lapidus [4:18]: Yeah, it tells you when you're wrong. I can't tell you how many times I thought something so strongly, and then I realized that's not what people think.

Leah Chandler [4:25]: Absolutely. And our Live Boricua campaign is a testament to that. When we built the campaign, we knew in our gut we had to create something truly special that would captivate the spirit of the islands, but we were committed to creating a campaign that not only felt right to us, but was reinforced through surveys and focus groups. We did those with visitors.

We focus grouped the campaign with residents and even with the Puerto Rican diaspora. The performance post-launch revealed that our gut feeling was right, so that the research really reinforced our intuition.

Mark Lapidus [4:57]: It's nice when that happens.

Leah Chandler [4:59]: A hundred percent.

Mark Lapidus [5:01]: Because you really never know. I saw some good news for you regarding the Shorty Awards - I saw that your work with AFAR and United Voices is a finalist. Tell me about that. Tell me about the campaign and the inspiration behind it.

Leah Chandler [5:12]: Absolutely. We love AFAR, they've been a great partner for us. They're always bringing really creative concepts to the table for us to keep evolving our partnership with them. United Voices was a unique one, and I think it's going to be something that we continue to build on. It was, again, inspired by the diverse and vibrant voices of Puerto Rico. The goal was to really showcase the island's culture through the eyes of the people who live here, and highlight their stories and traditions and unique perspectives. United Voices was the first ever on-island content creator and editor summit, if you will, that showcase the power of that deeper, more meaningful travel, which I spoke to earlier. It really told Puerto Rico travel stories by the people who knew it best, and those are the people who live here. The program paired emerging writers, a photographer, and a video director from Puerto Rico with AFAR editors. Then together, they experienced Puerto Rico's diversity in the culture. We looked at eco-friendly attractions, and they worked side by side, really learning from each other to highlight the stunning hidden gems of Puerto Rico through articles and photos and videos and things that were then amplified across AFAR's channels.

Leah Chandler [6:26]: It's part content collaboration and part immersive experience, but really champions new voices to reveal what makes Puerto Rico really unique, which is the people.

Mark Lapidus [6:37]: How did you find the locals?

Leah Chandler [6:38]: We actually did an application process. I think we ended up with about 50 people who applied, which we were thrilled with. We thought maybe 10 or 15 people would apply, but it really showed the level of interest in our local content creators to learn from experts outside of the island and collaborate together to tell a unique story. I think they were incentivized the opportunity for their content to be shared outside of the island in a publication with a reputation like AFAR. It was a win-win.

Mark Lapidus [7:08]: For our listeners, anybody interested in AFAR should check out the podcast I did with Bryan Kinkade. He was on the podcast, I think from ESTO last year, so just look in the archive and you'll find it. Now, to be a highly successful Chief Marketing Officer, you got to get along with your Chief Executive Officer. Tell me how you and Brad built your

connection together, and how you maintain it. It's almost like It's a marriage. Don't tell your husband or wife I said that.

Leah Chandler [7:33]: That is so true, that's so true. Most of us probably spend more time with the people we work with than our families. Talking about Brad is one of my favorite subjects; he is just simply one of the best humans I know. He is, without a doubt, someone I owe a great debt to. He's just utterly selfless, intentional, very thoughtful. He's just a brilliant leader, someone who I would define as a servant leader. It's not often in our career we get a chance to work with someone like Brad. Working alongside him has really been an honor. When people ask me questions about Brad, I always think back to the very first time I spoke with him, and it was during an initial phone interview when they were recruiting for this position. As you may know, Brad was the first employee hired when the Puerto Rico DMO was being built, and I was the second employee hired. We've really been in it since literally day one. It was back in early 2018, and he asked me the most important question that a supervisor or a would-be supervisor had ever asked, which is, "What do you need from a CEO?"

Leah Chandler [8:38]: In most interviews, they're trying to get out of you, what can you do for me? And he was asking, "What can I do for you?" And it caught me off guard, and so I answered in probably the most honest and truthful way possible, because I was just responding with my gut. And I said, "I need someone to take the bullets." Meaning that I needed a CEO who would not only lead, but who could manage a really diverse set of stakeholders, from politicians to board members and private business owners, so that I could focus on my responsibilities, which at the time was building and positioning a brand, building a best-in-class DMO team, and really revolutionizing the way people thought about Puerto Rico as a destination. I could not have done that without Brad doing what he does so well. I wholeheartedly believe that any strong CMO who is excelling has a CEO behind her, him, them, who is trusting and confident, and courageous, and who has taken a hell of a lot of bullets. Brad and I built our relationship on a lot of mutual respect and a shared vision. I remember him saying to me, again, in that first phone call, "You're not signing up to work a job."

Leah Chandler [9:55]: You are signing up for a mission." To this day, I think about that, and I that with my team. It's been a lot of fun working for Brad.

Mark Lapidus [10:03]: You brought up two really interesting points there, Leah. The first is that it's so vital at work that somebody has your back, and you know that they have your back. I found when I've worked for people that don't, it always is disappointing, and it's uncomfortable, and it gives you anxiety, because you're not sure whether or not what you're about to step in is so controversial or so against somebody who might be in an important position, like a board member or something like that. You don't know, and you have to make a decision. So you make the decision, and you wonder whether or not it's going to catch up with you, or whether or not your boss actually will take care of you. So I think that's really important. The other cool thing that you said is lifestyle. I think it's true for a lot of people that work in creative and do marketing for DMOs, that it's not just a job, it's something that you live. Because even when you're not working, in a way you're working. And I'll tell you a funny thing, I'm sure you're not going to remember this, but we went out to dinner, I remember, in Puerto Rico after the conference where I saw you spoke.

Mark Lapidus [11:01]: And you were actually sitting in the bar with a bunch of friends, and they weren't travel friends, they were just your friends in Puerto Rico. But I could tell that they were still immersed in the environment around them. Even though you weren't technically working, you never really stopped.

Leah Chandler [11:17]: It's true, it's true. Working for a destination, you're always selling it, and people are always asking you about it. I can't tell you the number of emails I get, "Hey, we're coming to Puerto Rico. Can you give us a recommendation?" I mean, I know it happens to everybody who works in the destination space. We all have a side hustle as travel advisors, even though we didn't necessarily sign up for that - or get a paycheck.

Mark Lapidus [11:38]: As I've mentioned a couple of times now, you do a lot of public speaking. How did you learn the craft, and what advice do you have for those just starting on the travel industry that are invited to speak in conferences?

Leah Chandler [11:48]: It's actually probably a little-known fact, but I strongly dislike public speaking.

Mark Lapidus [11:53]: You're a good actress.

Leah Chandler [11:54]: Oh, gosh, thank you so much. It's just not an area I've ever felt strong in, but it's a requirement that comes with the territory of what we do. It's a skill, I guess, you develop over time through a lot of practice and preparation. I have learned a lot from Brad in this space. He's a super passionate and brilliant speaker and has an incredible way of blending facts with feelings. You're learning something every time you hear him speak, but it's not dry or boring. It's wrapped in this really interesting story or a funny anecdote. I always hate having to follow him as a speaker. I'm like, "Jeez, now, what am I going to say?" In fact, when I sat down with Brad early on, when we were starting the DMO together, I asked him how he had developed such an expertise in such a distinct style in speaking. He gave me a few pointers, but he also mentioned the Buckley School for Public Speaking. I said, "Hey, can I do that?" It was a place that myself and now several of our staff continue to get trained there every year. It's in South Carolina, and it's a really immersive experience.

Leah Chandler [13:00]: One of one of the most terrifying experiences of my life, but probably one of the most rewarding, because I got so much out of it. They will videotape you giving speeches and then play that back. Again, it's horrifying and terrible, but it's amazing. That is something very tactical that if someone's looking to really elevate their game in public speaking, that's a great experience. But practice is crucial. Rehearsing is really, really important. You have to be authentic, too, and passionate about what you're talking about. Your audience will be able to tell if you're just scripting it out and hitting a few bullet points, versus whether or not you really care about the subject matter. And because Puerto Rico, like I stated earlier, is a mission, is a passion, it's not just a job, it's really easy to speak about. I'm fortunate that it's a pretty easy product to sell.

Mark Lapidus [13:47]: Well, you really nailed that one. I was a talent coach, both in television and radio, worked with a lot of on-air talent. The hardest part for people entering the industry, really, is going over what we used to call tape, of course. Now, it's no longer really tape, even though people always say they're recording a record to tape. In the beginning, I think it's very difficult for people to hear or see themselves, and then figure out exactly how to improve that. But it's essential to the process, because if you don't, then you don't really see what other people are seeing or hearing.

Leah Chandler [14:17]: It's the worst. People still today will send me a link of somewhere they saw me speak or something they heard, and I usually delete it. I don't watch it very often, but it is something that every time you do watch it, you learn something from.

Mark Lapidus [14:29]: Give me a few details about your recent global summit, and let me know whether or not you think that's something a lot of destinations could do themselves.

Leah Chandler [14:37]: Sure. I love this concept, it was something that was brought forward to us by our international agency of record, which is Hills Balfour. It's a reverse mission, we were calling it, because as opposed to our team going to our key international markets and doing your traditional media roadshow and trade roadshow and setting up appointments, which we do still, this was an opportunity to bring of those folks to Puerto Rico. We're not only immersing them in content and talking about really important subject matter, but we're also conducting pre- and post-FAMs, both on the trade and the media side, so they're also getting immersed in the product and getting to better understand the destination. It was really a remarkable gathering of international industry leaders, stakeholders, trade, media, even influencers, flying them all into Puerto Rico from all over the world, and then really focusing on discussions around the latest trends in tourism and sharing innovative strategies and highlighting what is unique to Puerto Rico. We hosted six panel discussions. We had global powerhouses here like JetBlue, Rolling Stone in Español, Condé Nast Traveler, National Geographic, World's 50 Best. It was really an incredible makeup of industry leaders.

Leah Chandler [15:52]: Then we had local partners here, who also were sharing observations and predictions and talking about the status of the travel industry, and specifically how it's going to impact Puerto Rico, now and in the future, and talking about the partnerships that we've had with some of those entities here at Discover Puerto Rico. A lot of cool topics. We talked about the evolution of luxury travel, we talked about storytelling, what's happening in the air and cruise industry. Sustainability was, probably no surprise, but was obviously a really big focal point of the summit. Something that was really cool was that we had the opportunity there to unveil Discover Puerto Rico's recent collaboration with Skift Advisory on an island-wide sustainability audit. Skift Advisory is a research arm of Skift, and they helped us come to the island, audit our product in terms of sustainability, and then share details with our industry about that collaboration, and how we plan to promote sustainable development and really empower local communities, and also how we can highlight those low-impact travel experience experiences for visitors. We all know this is a super meaty topic right now. A lot of destinations are trying to figure out how to navigate this space.

Leah Chandler [17:11]: For us, this audit really unveiled grassroots innovations, things that are happening at a local level and innovation that's happening in our communities that we maybe didn't necessarily know about, that now we can surface and bring to light in our marketing effort. That was a really, really cool add on to the global summit, to be able to share this with the industry and get them rallied around how we're going to move forward in the sustainability space.

Mark Lapidus [17:39]: I'm guessing it's not that difficult to convince people to come in to Puerto Rico for a conference.

Leah Chandler [17:43]: We are very fortunate in that way.

Mark Lapidus [17:47]: What do you do if you're at a destination other than Puerto Rico and you want to pull this off? What advice do you have for somebody that doesn't have the palm trees and the beaches?

Leah Chandler [17:55]: I think every destination has something unique. I was born and raised in Indiana, and I actually worked for Indiana Tourism for about five years. And growing up, all through high school in Indiana, every teenager is like, "Oh, there's nothing to do here." When I then went on to work at an ad agency and managed Indiana Tourism, you're traveling all around the destination, eating the world's biggest pork tenderloins and seeing the dunes in Northern Indiana. It's like, "Oh, wow, we really do have some cool stuff here." I came from Branson prior to Puerto Rico, and again, super interesting, off-the-beaten-path experiences that you can't get anywhere else, and so I think every destination has something to offer. It's the way you package it, and it's the way you define what is ownable for your destination. When you're able to go out to the trade, and you're able to go out to the media and say, "We're the only destination who has this. We are promoting our destination in this way that's unlike anyone else in our competitive set." It really starts to pique interest. People say, "That's something I want to be a part of."

Mark Lapidus [18:57]: You know, the thread in what you just said, Leah, is passion. You got to have passion for your destination, and then if you can communicate it to other people, it's infectious.

Leah Chandler [19:05]: Absolutely.

Mark Lapidus [19:06]: Before you go, I'm curious about your initial arrival on the island, because you've talked about it a little bit. When you joined Discover Puerto Rico in 2018, after you were on the island, what surprised you the most?

Leah Chandler [19:16]: The people. I mean, it's a cliché thing to say; I think everybody thinks that we have warm, hospitable people, but truly the people of Puerto Rico is what makes this island so unique. Yes, we have world-class beaches, we have an incredible gastronomy scene, we have the only rainforest in the U.S. forest system. I mean, we have incredible product. But the people here are unmatched. They love to share their island, they love to share their culture.

They are some of the warmest, friendliest people you will ever meet. Speaking to the passion thread, you cannot find more passionate people in the world than here in Puerto Rico. They really embrace who they are. They embrace what the island is, and they want to share it. That is what makes us an easy destination to sell, because people want to be a part of that now more than ever. They want to understand cultures that are different than theirs, they want to connect with local communities, they want to try new foods, they want to visit the places that locals visit. And Puerto Ricans are ready to share those things with people who are visiting here. So that's probably what surprised me the most.

Leah Chandler [20:19]: In addition to that, understanding how easy it is to access Puerto Rico. It's U.S. currency; if you need to get a prescription filled, there's a Walgreens. So I think understanding that you have some of those conveniences that people may be used to in the U.S. mainlands, but you've got this incredible rich fabric of the Puerto Rican culture that you just can't get anywhere else. It makes it a very, very awesome point of differentiation for the destination.

Mark Lapidus [20:45]: I heard you say in another interview that Puerto Rico has over 4,000 restaurants. How many have you eaten in?

Leah Chandler [20:51]: Gosh. Based on the scale over the last two years, too many. The food here is really unbelievable. I know every destination marketer has to say that, but man, it's unmatched. It's a scene that is growing, and you're going to see us continue to lean into the space in some really, really unique ways. In fact, we're going to be launching a partnership in July for National Piña Colada Day. Be on the lookout for that. It's an incredible food scene, from that roadside kiosk where you're getting a Bacalaito - which is big fritter that is fried cod - and having a local beer, or a high-end dining experience at one of our resorts. It's unmatched. I've eaten at a lot of them, let's say.

Mark Lapidus [21:36]: Leah, this has been such a pleasure. We're out of time. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Leah Chandler [21:40]: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Mark Lapidus [21:42]: And that's it for Brand USA Talks Travel. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

Outro [21:46]: Your feedback is welcome! Email us at podcast@thebrandusa.com or call 202-793-6256. Brand USA Talks Travel is produced by Asher Meerovich, who also composes music and sound. Engineering by Brian Watkins. With extra help from Bernie Lucas, Nthanze Kariuki, and Casey D'Ambra. Please share this podcast with your friends in the travel industry. You may also enjoy many of our archived episodes, which you can find on your favorite podcast platform. Safe travels!