



Episode 190 – Billy Kolber and Kenny Porpora

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]: Billy is a Yale graduate with a biology degree. What sparked your transition into the travel and hospitality industry?

Billy Kolber [0:15]: My transition had nothing to do with biology, but at Yale, I was the business manager and tour manager for the Whiffenpoofs, America's oldest collegiate a cappella singing group. The Whiffs typically go on a world tour; I was managing the world tour, living most of my life in the travel agency that issued our world tour tickets - back in the days when you had to have physical tickets - and kind of fell into a job there right after I graduated.

Mark Lapidus [0:39]: Ken, you wrote your master's thesis on professional wrestling while at Columbia University. What did you find out?

Kenny Porpora [0:44]: Professional wrestling has long been a guilty pleasure of mine, and my goal was to sort of eliminate the preconceived notions that people have. A lot of people think professional wrestling's fake; that's a very narrow and myopic view of what it is. You know, it's a little bit performance art, comedy, fashion, connecting with millions of people. There are stuntmen. There's so many different aspects of what they do that I thought were underappreciated and misunderstood, and there's so many connections between professional wrestling and drag. So I really wanted to change the way people looked at this thing, kind of erase those preconceived notions and misconceptions and share a little bit more about what these people actually do. The toll it takes on their bodies, the toll it takes on their lives - kind of, again, change that perspective and perception.

Mark Lapidus [1:27]: I'm glad to be joined by Billy Kolber, the Co-Founder of Hospitable Me. Before this role, Billy was a Co-Founder of Out & About, the first gay and lesbian travel magazine in the United States, and Man About World, one of the first mobile-only magazines. Also joining is Kenny Porpora, Co-Founder of Hospitable Me and Editor-In-Chief at Man About World magazine. Kenny is the New York Times best-selling author of The Autumn Balloon, and his work has appeared in the New York Times and many more publications. Welcome both to Brand USA Talks Travel.

Billy Kolber [1:55]: Thanks so much.

Kenny Porpora [1:56]: Thanks for having us.

Mark Lapidus [1:57]: I had the pleasure of hearing you both speak during a Brand USA staff meeting a few weeks ago, and I was really inspired by your work and wanted to share that with others. That's why you're on the podcast today. Let's begin by telling our listeners why you formed Hospitable Me and hear about your goals.

Billy Kolber [2:11]: Our goal is pretty simple. You know, we exist to make the world a more hospitable place. The travel industry was built for a very small subset of the people who are actually traveling now; there are a large number of historically excluded and underrepresented travelers who are now important market segments. And making them feel welcome, invited, safe, and included, can be a challenge. And so we formed Hospitable Me to address that challenge, helping brands and destinations provide a more inclusive, inviting welcome to historically excluded customers and guests, making the world a more hospitable place for them. And I'll let Ken tell you a little bit about how we got there.

Kenny Porpora [2:53]: Yeah, Billy and I, we actually, we've been working together for twelve years, and we started as a travel magazine, a queer travel magazine, where we would go all around the world. And through that experience, we started to realize all of the obstacles and challenges that LGBTQ+ people faced when they were traveling. Everything from the microaggressions they experienced, things like having our relationships disrespected, our identities not understood or respected, what pronouns we use were misunderstood. The things we needed when we were out in the world weren't available to us. It could be something kind of small, like just an insult or snickering behind our backs, but it could also be macroaggressions. There's still, today, 64 countries around the world that criminalize homosexuality. As we started to travel, we started to realize that there was this real need: a lot of destinations and brands didn't know how to make us feel safe, but also didn't know how to make us feel invited and welcomed. Also, as we traveled, we became more and more visible in the travel space, and we realized that destinations and brands were coming to us asking for our advice. So our magazine evolved into this agency, really out of necessity, because we thought we could use these lived experiences to provide strategy and education to destinations and brands. And what makes it really unique is that it's guest-focused. There are other trainings that do sensitivity training, diversity, and inclusion trainings that help you treat your colleagues better or treat your employees better. Very few, if any, speak directly to the guest. How to make the guest feel more welcome. And so there's a dual mission where we want to empower destinations and brands to know how to make LGBTQ+ people and really everyone feel more welcomed. But there's also this other side of it where it's guest-focused. You know, we are on the side of the guest. Everything we do is to make the guest feel more welcomed, more invited, or included.

Mark Lapidus [4:36]: Ken, who are a few of the destinations you work with, and did they find you or did you reach out to them?

Kenny Porpora [4:41]: Over the last twelve years, we've worked with a lot of destinations of all sizes. We've worked with New York City, we've worked with Destination Madison, Explore Asheville, Fort Lauderdale, Enjoy Illinois. We work with a lot of destination marketing organizations. You know, Billy and I are in a fortunate position where we're a very small agency, so we have to choose clients that we feel are a good match for us and also that we genuinely feel that we can help. And a couple right now that we're working with is Discover Puerto Rico. And theirs is a story of resilience, right? They came to us right after they endured two hurricanes. They were in a bad spot, and they wanted to figure out how can they position themselves to communicate to the world that Puerto Rico is back. And the LGBTQ+ community is also a story of resilience. We are a resilient community, and we were really aligned on that. Understanding that our community is one of the best first steps a destination can take when they are wanting to communicate that message. So we started working with Puerto Rico about five or six

years ago with the goal of making them the LGBTQ+ capital of the Caribbean. And this past November, they hosted the International Gay Lesbian Travel Association Conference, and have done a lot of extraordinary work in the LGBTQ+ space. We also work with the state of Kentucky; when they came to us, they understood that LGBTQ+, while a relatively small portion of the community, the other communities that it touches, the allies, was so incredibly big and important, and they wanted to be able to speak to everybody. So we work with them as well, and we have created this initiative that is pretty pioneering called Bourbon and Belonging that's going to be taking place in October of this year. It's sort of in the same vein of, like, a gay wine weekend. Think of, like, a restaurant week type of event. A lot of distillery-focused events going on all around the state to show how inclusive the state has become. Do we reach out to them? Do they reach out to us? I think it's a little bit complicated. You know, we, Billy and I, are very visible all around the world, and these conversations tend to evolve over time. What I think tends to happen is that we are always talking about these issues with destinations, but then there comes this moment in every destination where they realize, we need this. It might not seem urgent at first, but then suddenly it becomes very urgent, and they realize we don't know how to welcome this community. It could be something like Pride is coming, or some other major event where they realize this is a training and a strategy that we need, and they also start to realize that it's strategy and education that goes beyond our community. It really becomes empowering to welcome everyone. And so it's a little bit of both. We go out to them, but they also come to us, I think, when they're ready. And that's what's really important is for people to come when they're ready.

Mark Lapidus [7:09]: You know what's funny, Ken, is that last week, Leah Chandler was actually on this very podcast. I know she's a big fan of you guys. Tell me how you got started with Puerto Rico and what were the very first steps.

Billy Kolber [7:20]: Like all destinations, Puerto Rico has a unique circumstance, and Puerto Rico is a destination that historically had been a popular destination, particularly for gay men, but that hadn't really reached out or marketed to the segment at all in many, many years. With most destinations, we do a couple of things. To start, we do a destination audit. We look at what their own marketing material looks like for queer audiences, and we also look at what other people are saying about visiting the destination as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. We then do internal training. We start with our core curriculum, Everyone Welcome, which is a deep dive into who queer people are, how they're relevant to travel in general, how they're relevant to your organization specifically. We talk about how they've historically been excluded, mistreated, inconvenienced. And then we talk about the ways that you can be more inclusive and welcoming. And Everyone Welcome is always tailored to the specific industry and sector. For DMOs like Puerto Rico, it's filled with specific best practices and examples of work that other DMOs have done. We do that training, in addition for their constituencies; we did a three-city road tour and a hotel conference to share that training with their tourism partners on the ground. And then we built marketing campaigns for them that featured LGBTQ+ talent in front of and behind the camera. You know, there's a lot of issues around language and imagery. Exactly who are you marketing to and how the LGBTQ+ community is not like one monolith of a community; I mean, there are many, many different segments. Even when you look at lesbians and gay men, they're two very, very different audiences with different travel patterns and different demographics. So figuring out how you send a message, a broad welcome to LGBTQ+ people, that this is a safe and welcoming place, and then send a message that encourages people to travel that is much more specific to the various sub audiences within the LGBTQ+ community, is sort of the next step in marketing for a destination like Puerto Rico. They have really done all of the things that you would like to see a destination do when they engage with the LGBTQ+ community. So we've helped them engage with local stakeholders, we've set up a roundtable of local LGBTQ people, primarily in tourism, but also other kinds of community

leaders, key opinion leaders. We have helped them engage more directly with the local community. Their hosting of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association last fall really showed how a destination can work with their local community to benefit both visitors to the island and the local community and drive and build tourism.

Mark Lapidus [10:13]: This Everyone Welcome course, is it in person, online, combination of both?

Billy Kolber [10:18]: All of the above. So there are a few different versions. The shortest version of everyone welcome is a 45-55 minutes live or recorded program. Typically, when we deliver live, we do it as a 75-90 minutes program. We have a version of it that powers booking.com's Proud Hospitality Program in Travel Proud. That version has gone out to more than 72,000 hotels around the world have been certified through our curriculum in eleven different languages. But typically, Everyone Welcome is similar to what you saw at Brand USA a couple weeks ago. We do live delivery of the presentation for about 65 minutes and then do about 10-15 minutes of Q&A afterwards. You know, it's part biology, part sociology, part history, part psychology, a little Ripley's Believe It Or Not. It's a complete introduction to the community, and it's rooted in our, what we call our Team Guest Philosophy that centers the core desires of guests, customers, and co-workers to feel that others are on their side. So as part of team guests, it really has an impact not just on how you look at LGBTQ+ visitors, but really all visitors in terms of providing a welcome that is personalized, authentic, and connected to their needs and desires as travelers.

Mark Lapidus [11:39]: Ken, how has the language around identities evolved in recent years?

Kenny Porpora [11:43]: Community language is always evolving, and not just in the LGBTQ+ community, but in all communities. More and more, our work is expanding beyond LGBTQ+ to include many, many different identities. And what we learn when speaking with other communities is that there's real similarity on this topic. Whether it's in the Black community or the hispanic community or the disabled community, in the gender diverse community, language is always evolving, it's always expanding. People within the communities don't always agree on the language and how it's evolving. There is no cut and dry answer for how it evolves or why it evolves. It's just the fact that it always is. In the LGBTQ+ community, everything from the acronym we use to the terms around gender diversity and sexual orientation are always evolving. Decades ago, it used to be GLBT. That acronym evolved to LGBT, to LGBTQ, to LGBTQ+, which is the acronym we use today. Billy and I have been at world prides around the world, we've seen LGBTQIA2SNBGNCP+ . It's an enormous community, and the acronym is really designed to show that the way that we identify ourselves, the way that we talk about our sexual orientation and gender diversity is very personal. It's very intimate. It's always changing, and people don't want to be put into a box of gay or straight. It's much more complicated than that. You know, we used to incorrectly use the term 'transvestite' to talk about gender diversity, and we know now that that is not the correct word. You know, that word evolved to 'transsexual,' it evolved again years later to 'transgender,' which is the word we use today. The more that our understanding of these issues deepen and the more we can put language to it, I think it's very freeing for people to have language that can articulate the way that they identify. Anyone listening to this, the main takeaway is never to be overwhelmed or disheartened by how complicated the language gets, but just be open-minded to the idea that language is always evolving, and to be open to that idea that no one wants to be put in any one category, they want to be free to express themselves in whichever way they choose. And given that is, their personal identity, we feel that they should have the right to do that. But, yeah, it's always evolving.

Mark Lapidus [13:50]: I think it's really nice to be able to frame a conversation using data, so let's hear some stats about the LGBTQ+ travel market.

Kenny Porpora [13:56]: Sure. Yeah. I think, first, it's important to understand that we tend to incorrectly think of the LGBTQ+ market as being a relatively small percentage of our client base, maybe 3% or 5%, even 10%. But we have data that supports that more than 52% of younger generations, like Gen Z and millennials, identify as something other than 100% straight. So when certain data starts collecting information by changing the way the question is asked, "Are you gay or straight?" Versus, "Are you 100% straight?" Those stats get skewed drastically, and it changes our perspective of just how much of our clientele does represent as part of this community. When you start to think of younger generations identifying more than the majority as part of our community, it starts to change the way we prioritize that and it also adds to the urgency that LGBTQ+ people are a part of your clientele base right now. You know, younger generations like millennials and Gen Z are now in their early twenties to late thirties. We have spending power. We have money. That spending power is significant, but it's not just monetary. It's also we are an incredibly loyal community. We are an incredibly trendsetting community. There's a lot of cultural capital within this community. In terms of sheer numbers, the data that we use that we think is the most recent, the most accurate, is that the global spend for the LGBTQ+ community, within the travel industry, is about \$218 billion. When you take that number out of travel, just to consumer spend, it's about \$3.6 trillion. We spend more money on almost all retail items than our heterosexual counterparts; we travel more frequently than heterosexual people do; there's a lesser chance that we're going to have children, and so we tend to have more discretionary income for things like travel, hotel stays. You know, if LGBTQ+ people were its own country, we would have the fourth largest GDP in the world. And I think we influence a lot of travel trends and influence people on how and where to spend their money.

Mark Lapidus [15:44]: How can destinations best market themselves to this community in an authentic way?

Billy Kolber [15:48]: The best way to ensure authenticity is to really engage with the community as you are preparing to and creating marketing materials for the community. So that means experts like us, but it also means your local community. A lot of destinations that we talk to question whether they're ready, and what the welcome that they're actually going to deliver, after inviting queer people to their destination, what does that look like? And by focusing on your local community and understanding the comfort level that they have and whether they feel comfortable walking around your downtown, holding hands, is a great indicator as to whether you should be showing people walking in your downtown area holding hands. Featuring queer-owned businesses, focusing on queer people working in the tourism industry, people who are chefs or bartenders or hotel owners or managers, is a great way to truly show what a queer experience in your destination is.

Mark Lapidus [16:46]: I can't remember which one of you said this during the presentation you did at Brand USA, but one of the things I recall that you said was it's a mistake to just focus on activities for the LGBTQ+ community, that it goes far broader than that. Could you explain that a little bit?

Billy Kolber [17:00]: Sure. You know, there's a popular misconception that LGBTQ+ people, when they travel, are looking for queer experiences, and that it's important that you have those in your destination or that you're promoting those for your destination. The reality is that LGBTQ-specific things - bars, clubs, nightlife, pride events - fall fairly far down the list of travel motivators for queer people, and that the most important thing is that they feel that your destination is safe and welcoming. It's actually really

great news for all destinations, because it doesn't mean that you have to promote different things than you are promoting in your core campaigns. Queer people travel across the United States to see all of the same things that everybody else travels across the United States to see. They just want to know that when they get to your destination, that the hotel that welcomes them will not give them a problem checking into a room with two same-gendered people in a room with one bed; that still happens, it's still legal to discriminate that way in many states. In the United States, they want to know that they can go out for a romantic dinner and not feel like somebody's going to tell them not to hold hands at the table. Some of those basic things about safety and security and welcome are really the top motivator. And then it's also falsely assumed that we're exclusively urban travelers, that we go to big cities, because when you look at the early days of what we then called gay travel, those were the only places that were welcoming. Those were the only places that you could get a room for two men without worrying about being refused at the counter. So the history of gay travel was to places like San Francisco and New York and Fort Lauderdale. Those were places that reached out to queer people. Those were places that had large communities, visible communities. But now we see visible queer communities all over the country in cities and towns and villages, big and small. And so when we work with destinations, talking about the market, we start often with, well, what's the community like in your destination? What are the things that they do? Where do they go? What are the restaurants they patronize? What are the coffeeshops? And that helps us build a profile for visitors, because visitors will want to go to the same places. Visitors will want to go to the places where they know they're safe and welcome. So we see a lot more uptick in places of natural beauty. It's a high motivator for LGBTQ+ travelers, and certainly, you know, the United States has plenty of that. So when you're talking about canyons and gorges and mountains and lakes and rivers, those are all promotable to LGBTQ+ consumers. As long as they see them in a way that lets them know that queer people live in this place and they hike these mountains and paddle these rivers. That queer people own coffee shops and restaurants in your destination, and that they can frequent those. When they go to get to their hotel at the end of the day, that they're going to have a place that welcomes and respects them.

Mark Lapidus [20:02]: Billy and Ken, thanks so much for your time today. Really appreciate it. There's so much more to talk about - we could continue for another 30 minutes at least - but I think we'll leave it here today and pick it up another time. If you'd like to find out more, you can visit hospitable.me. Ken and Billy, thanks for joining me.

Billy Kolber [20:18]: Well, thank you, Mark.

Kenny Porpora [20:19]: It's always great to talk to the Brand USA audience. There's no finer, more dedicated group of marketing professionals. I think we're really honored to work with so many of them in destinations, and we're always available for a quick gut check or consultation from any U.S. destination that has a question or is thinking about the audience.

Mark Lapidus [20:40]: And that's it for Brand USA Talks Travel. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

Outro [20:44]: 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!