



Episode 212 – Live from ESTO: Joshua Albrecht, Pamela Knowles & Claudia Murtha

Intro: Recorded live at ESTO in Columbus, Ohio, this is Brand USA Talks Travel. Get ready to take mental notes from the top minds and creative thinkers who are driving innovation in destination marketing, content, research, public relations, policy, and more. Now, here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:19]: Mumford and Sons festivals. You have 15 seconds.

Joshua Albrecht [0:22]: Yeah, it's an amazing experience to be in front of 40,000 screaming fans at a rock concert. My pleasure was, I always got to be the one who decided where it would happen. So I was a site finder, site selector for cities, working with local cities.

Mark Lapidus [0:34]: Wow!

Joshua Albrecht [0:34]: Finding the big field to turn into a concert venue was amazing.

Mark Lapidus [0:37]: How much time do you spend on social media researching content ideas and analyzing performance, or do you mainly just scroll endlessly like the rest of us?

Pamela Knowles [0:45]: I definitely love to scroll and scroll, and I get a lot of inspiration from that, but we do look at the analytics. But I'd say it's a heavy scroll.

Mark Lapidus [0:54]: Okay, my third question then, to my third guest, is: what's it like to be a YouTube influencer?

Claudia Murtha [0:59]: You know, I really wouldn't count myself as famous or anything like that, but the weird thing is people don't recognize my face as much, but locally they'll hear my voice. So I'll be out somewhere and start talking to a friend or anything like that, I've gotten people tap on my shoulder and go, "Hey, are you that Visit Bucks girl?"

Mark Lapidus [1:16]: That's great. My guests are Joshua Albrecht, Chief Marketing Officer of the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau; Pamela Knowles, Director of Brand & Content Strategy for Visit Savannah; and Claudia Murtha, content creator at Visit Bucks County, where, by the way, my daughter's father-in-law lives. So I am familiar with Bucks County.

Claudia Murtha [1:33]: That's exciting.

Mark Lapidus [1:34]: Yeah. Welcome to Brand USA Talks Travel, all three of you. So how's the convention been so far? Anything pop out that you've learned?

Pamela Knowles [1:40]: I really enjoyed the keynote with the Wendy's Global Director for Social Media. I've been such a fan of their social channels, so to see like a peek behind the curtain of the thought and hands off approach with her team that she takes is really, really cool.

Mark Lapidus [1:56]: What do you mean by hands off?

Pamela Knowles [1:57]: I love how she trusts her team to tell her how each channel is best optimized, and she lets them roll with it and test it, and it's been really, really great for them.

Mark Lapidus [2:06]: Claudia?

Claudia Murtha [2:07]: So before we actually got to speak, we heard the keynote, and he was a spoken word poet, Sekou, and he was talking about bringing this spark to everything that we did, and it kind of pumped me up before we spoke. And then I also just had a wellness shot, which was a little different, and I feel like that's pumping me up and bringing that spark into this podcast conversation.

Mark Lapidus [2:26]: I can hear it. I can hear it.

Joshua Albrecht [2:27]: For me, it's been a great opportunity, as always, to talk with colleagues from around the country. The keynotes, the presentations are always fantastic, but the more conversations have with your colleagues, hearing them tell stories about their destinations, the issues, the problems that they're trying to solve, how you can help them, and they can help you in those regards. So just sitting at lunch, sitting at breakfast, those are always the most magical moments for me.

Mark Lapidus [2:47]: I love it when strangers introduce themselves to me here. It's great when people just walk up and they say, "I'm blah blah blah from blah blah blah." It is so much fun.

Joshua Albrecht [2:55]: And you only know people from their destination.

Mark Lapidus [2:57]: Of course.

Joshua Albrecht [2:57]: Yeah. I won't remember any of you other than the place you're from.

Mark Lapidus [3:00]: Joshua is the Chief Marketing Officer of Visit Milwaukee. How have you seen the importance of short-form content evolve?

Joshua Albrecht [3:09]: Yeah, we've talked a lot about this in our presentation. And of course, you know, short-form content continues to evolve, because the platforms themselves continue to evolve; how consumers consume, the videos on the platforms evolve. So we have to be changing with the times. So it's a lot of a-b testing, even in social media. Trying things out, experimenting, trying to find new ways to enhance the content. One of the things we talked about in our, in our session was, how do you use content in at least five different ways? That's my philosophy. At least five ways. When you create it, use it five ways over cross-platforms, extend it to your website, find ways to maximize the input you're putting in for the output you're putting out.

Mark Lapidus [3:44]: That was impressive, you got all five of them. The session was actually titled "The three second rule." Pamela, you want to explain that?

Pamela Knowles [3:50]: Yeah. So short-form video is all about grabbing people's attention, and getting them to take a moment to watch your content and absorb it. So we wanted to touch on, you know, why is that becoming more and more important in marketing strategies? It's not just for brand awareness; you can make great conversions, there's great ROI available for short-form video content. And so we just wanted to talk to people here at ESTO about why it's important and how they can apply it to their destinations.

Mark Lapidus [4:17]: So talk to me about content frequency.

Pamela Knowles [4:19]: For Visit Savannah, content frequency is just how often that we're posting. We want to make sure that we are not putting all of our eggs in one basket. So we are making sure that we're touching all of our platforms as frequently as possible. For us, we're posting every day, multiple times a day, but we have the staff to support that. And I understand so many people here are teams of one. So it's really about quality over quantity, and it's a balance with the algorithm. The algorithm wants you to post as many times as possible. But if that content is not there, that quality not there, you're not managing the conversation on your post, you're not finishing that strong.

Mark Lapidus [4:52]: And how do you feel about weekends when people aren't working?

Pamela Knowles [4:55]: We don't want to leave our social posts unattended for any more than 24 hours, so we have weekend support that comes in and we can take a break, my team can take a break, and not worry about things sitting there across the weekend and then coming in Monday morning and - Monday is stressful enough. So we have a brand manager that helps cover that over the weekend for us.

Mark Lapidus [5:16]: Do all three of you use agencies, or do this work internally?

Pamela Knowles [5:19]: For Visit Savannah it's internally.

Claudia Murtha [5:21]: We work internally.

Joshua Albrecht [5:22]: Yeah, Visit Milwaukee is all internal for social media.

Mark Lapidus [5:24]: So how big are these staffs?

Joshua Albrecht [5:26]: For social media specifically, we have a social media manager, and then we have interns who help create content for them. But everybody on our marketing team, and in fact, sometimes even our entire staff, is tasked with being content creators, or content gatherers, if you will. So we've trained our team, we trained our whole staff. We've encouraged them to take video if they're out for lunch with a client or they're going to an event such as a conference like this. We showed them sort of the basics of doing that, so that they can supplement our social media manager and what she's doing every day, because it is a lot, there's a lot of stress, a lot of burnouts within the platforms, because you're managing 15 to 20 different platforms and accounts, maybe even more, depending on which destinations you're from. So there's a lot to manage, and it's probably something that's, over the next five to ten years, you're going to see more and more social media managers and content creators, and

probably even less, maybe marketing-specific, because there's so much going in to social media right now.

Mark Lapidus [6:15]: Pamela, same question.

Pamela Knowles [6:16]: So we're really lucky, we have a strong marketing team of about 13 people. We have one person dedicated to the Business Savannah social media brand. We also oversee Visit Tybee Island, and we have one person for that as well. But they work jointly, so it's a tag team effort. We also have a videographer on staff that steps in and helps out. So we have a strong team. Strong but- small but mighty is what I'm trying to say.

Mark Lapidus [6:39]: Claudia?

Claudia Murtha [6:39]: Yeah, we're actually lucky that recently we just hired on two other people. So we're a marketing team of total of six people now. When I started, it was only four. For our short-form content specifically, it's a team of one - so it's me. But we kind of split it up uniquely where we all wear different hats. The girl that's in charge of PR and our influencer outreach is also in charge of the LinkedIn account. Someone that we just hired on recently to help support me is now in charge of more like the Twitter and threads, and then also supports me with Instagram and other things like that. And then someone else who does data is more Facebook-driven. We kind of all are in the social platform, which I think does help with burnout to kind of stretch that across the platforms in general.

Mark Lapidus [7:20]: Hopefully all three of you realize that Brand USA's mission is international. You all know that, right? They're smiling at me, so I assume they know that. Not everybody does, so I don't take it for granted. Do you have the domestic versus international conversation when it comes to social, or do you find yourselves specifically focused on domestic audiences?

Joshua Albrecht [7:39]: We find ourselves mainly focused on the domestic traveler, for sure. I mean, that's hands-down our number one market, just in general for travelers, especially in Milwaukee. But we've seen a rise in cruise ship through the Great Lakes, so we're seeing a lot more international travelers come through cruise ships; and we're seeing more Spanish language travelers, particularly from Mexico. But that's a growing market for us right now, so our focus still is on the domestic traveler, but we're going to start tiptoeing into Spanish language in the near future, and then making sure some of our content speaks to other demographics throughout the world. So it's a big step. Many platforms, limited budgets, limited teams. So you have to focus on your core travelers first. But we see that as something that's a growing market in the next five years.

Mark Lapidus [8:16]: Claudia, Philadelphia / Bucks County gets a lot of international visitors. Do you think about it?

Claudia Murtha [8:21]: We focus mainly on domestic travel, not international, because it's a weekend getaway, usually focusing on getting those people out from New York City and getting to the county for a nice weekend out of the city. We do see some of that international travel when we're working with Philadelphia, but mainly we're focusing on a destination right outside of Philly. But now with America 250 coming up, there's been that larger conversation, with the World Cup coming, how do we support Philly? But it's going to be more of that, they'll let us know how they're engaging that international travel and going from there.

Mark Lapidus [8:55]: Pamela?

Pamela Knowles [8:55]: I would say now, a few years post-Covid, international is back on the table for us to really take a hard look at. I've had several conversations with Visit Wexford, which is in Ireland. There's strong Irish ties to Savannah and Wexford. So we're starting to have those conversations, looking at social, how we can build partnership and make sure that we're touching both audiences, and how both destinations would make a great place to visit. But as far as our analytics are concerned, it's primarily domestic. That is absorbing what we're putting out there, but it doesn't mean it's off the table.

Mark Lapidus [9:28]: During the panel, did you guys talk about KPIs?

Pamela Knowles [9:31]: We showed KPIs on our viral videos and sort of what we were looking at, the metrics, what we considered viral, what was really important to us.

Mark Lapidus [9:40]: Don't you hate it when someone says, "Make me a viral video?"

Pamela Knowles [9:42]: Yeah, you know, some restaurant, "I'd love a viral video, please." You're like, "Coming up, right away!" For most people, those viral hits are just, like, one in a million-something hit, right? You can put all the strategy behind it, but it's all about how the algorithm is gonna boost your content. I personally love seeing non-followers' views on our videos. So we look at that. One of our higher performing videos had 35% of non-followers; that means people who don't follow the brand were viewing it and watching it. Also, likes and saves. That's becoming more and more important. That's how people are trip planning now, using social media, liking and saving that content, and then sharing within their own trip planning people.

Mark Lapidus [10:20]: What simple best practices did you talk about in there?

Joshua Albrecht [10:23]: I think a lot of the best practices for any DMO is just being present on the platforms and making sure that they're putting out consistent content that travelers can rely on, that locals can rely on, too. We talked a lot about that, that our audience isn't just the traveler, it's also locals. So being consistent with certain listicles or calendar of events-type postings on social media is really crucial, because people can rely on it then. Otherwise, you're just throwing stuff out all the time. There's some consistency and reliability that builds trust and access into the platforms.

Mark Lapidus [10:52]: Claudia?

Claudia Murtha [10:52]: Yeah, some best practices that I like to follow are, if we're using voiceover, making sure to use those engaging words right from the beginning.

Mark Lapidus [11:00]: Well, you have 3 seconds.

Claudia Murtha [11:01]: Hey, you only got 3 seconds. So, "check this out," "tag a friend," "have you heard" - those types of keywords can really drive someone to continue watching that video. Also, since we're a county outside of Philadelphia, at first we didn't really have a lot of content creators or people showcasing that type of thing on our social platforms. So when I started working there, that's what we wanted to show, so really showcasing those hidden gems that people wouldn't know to see or that locals love to see. Like, "Oh, we love going to Shady Brook Farm. Did you know that's Bucks County?" Just getting the people coming out of the city, staying there, maybe staying for a night and then doing

different things like our Ale Trail, or visiting Sesame Place. That's Bucks County, too. So just really getting the brand out there, and showcasing people things that maybe they didn't know before.

Mark Lapidus [11:48]: Pamela?

Pamela Knowles [11:49]: Best practices for us, it's definitely "consistency is key." Just like Josh talked about. Making sure that we're posting short-form videos as frequently as we can, given the bandwidth that we have. And also community management on those posts, we want to make sure we're commenting back, liking, responding to any questions on all of our posts all the time. It's a heavy lift on the team, but it pays off.

Mark Lapidus [12:13]: I just noticed that she gets to call you Josh.

Pamela Knowles [12:15]: Joshua. Sorry.

Joshua Albrecht [12:17]: You can do Josh.

Pamela Knowles [12:18]: Okay.

Mark Lapidus [12:19]: Do some people call you Josh?

Joshua Albrecht [12:20]: Every single person's different. Some people Josh, some Joshua. My dad calls me Juice. It's cool.

Mark Lapidus [12:25]: Juice. I like that. I like that.

Claudia Murtha [12:27]: Juiceman.

Mark Lapidus [12:27]: The reason I'm actually asking this question is, did the three of you know each other before you did this panel, or...?

Pamela Knowles [12:33]: No.

Mark Lapidus [12:33]: You were strangers, right?

Pamela Knowles [12:34]: Strangers.

Mark Lapidus [12:35]: So after this is over, are you now friendly enough to be in touch with each other?

Pamela Knowles [12:40]: Absolutely. Everyone - these two especially - they're resources, they're friends, they're within the industry. Making these connections are so important to when something pops up I don't know how to handle within my role, or if I need some more ideas around something that I'm struggling with. These are the connections that are worthwhile.

Claudia Murtha [12:58]: Yeah, for sure. I've already learned so much just talking to, not only these two individuals, but everyone at this tourism conference. This is actually my first ESTO, so it's super exciting to be here.

Mark Lapidus [13:08]: No wonder you have a sore throat and a horse voice!

Claudia Murtha [13:10]: Oh, I know. I love talking, and I love making connections to people and learning those little things that people enjoy to do. And I think that's why I love showcasing all the unique things in Bucks County. It's not only for the fact that I like promoting the businesses; I love hearing back that it made their small business have a bunch of customers and everything like that, and why they started, and hearing those things. So I think learning from professionals that have been in the industry way longer is so beneficial, because they get it. They understand that social media is a unique space, and it's even more unique when you're trying to promote a whole entire destination while doing it.

Joshua Albrecht [13:45]: For me, any conference, anytime you travel, it's about growth and understanding new perspectives. And so that's why it's amazing to be on panels like the one that we hosted, getting it to network, doing the coffee hours, lunches, whatever it might be. You have to understand other people's perspectives to grow. You can't expect to grow professionally if you're not listening to other people, listening to other stories from other destinations, seeing how they're handling difficulties, how they're celebrating wins, and then just getting that fresh perspective, and sometimes stepping outside your own, like, comfort zone of, "This is how I do my social media, so I'm obviously right." You're not obviously right. You can grow and you can learn, and you can shape and grow for the future. And so that's what every conference - ESTO in particular - but any conference is so beautiful in that way.

Mark Lapidus [14:22]: I love that line of thinking and perspective. And because it's so positive, I think we're going to leave it right there. Thank you so much for the three of you joining me here today.

Joshua Albrecht [14:30]: Yeah, thank you.

Pamela Knowles [14:31]: Thank you for having us.

Claudia Murtha [14:32]: Thank you so much.

Mark Lapidus [14:33]: And that's Brand USA Talks Travel live from Columbus, Ohio at ESTO 2024. I'm Mark Lapidus, more episodes to follow, thanks for listening.

Outro [14:42]: If you enjoyed this Live From ESTO episode, please share it with your friends in the travel industry. Production and music by Asher Meerovich. Media producer, Nthanze Kariuki, with assistance from Casey D'Ambra. Engineering, Brian Watkins, Kat Pommer, and Antonio Tyler. Art by Mimi Jung. Special thanks to Alexis Adelson, Phil Dickieson, Peter Dodge, and Colleen Mangone. More Live From ESTO episodes coming soon. Safe travels!