

[00:01.640] - Intro/Outro

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

[00:09.150] - Mark Lapidus

The producer of our show, Nthanze Kariuki, came up with a really cool idea last week. She suggested to me that we take clips from various episodes recording during 2024 and utilize them in a way that takes you, the listener, on a journey, reflecting back on the year - and hopefully it'll inspire us all to look forward to the future. As a real-life example of how much things can change in just one year, when I spoke with Julie Coker for this episode you're about to hear, she was the CEO of San Diego Tourism, and, I'm sure you probably know, now she's the CEO of New York Tourism and Conventions. In this clip, Julie describes how to excel at public relations.

[00:44.590] - Mark Lapidus

I know you might not want to give away too many trade secrets during this podcast, Julie, but if you're willing to share just a little bit, I'd love to hear how you set up your destination to be recognized so much in the press, because I think a lot of DMOs struggle with that. So what kind of tips can you give?

[00:59.440] - Julie Coker

We are primarily a leisure destination, and so that really necessitates a really strong media budget. And now with digital, just having a really robust digital program, and really a proactive PR, just to maximize our voice and having our voice at the table.

[01:17.430] - Julie Coker

But we established the destination brand with really a strong targeted message revolving around our really core pillars, is how we see it. Whether it's out outdoor activities, the arts and culture scene, culinary and entertainment... And that's entertainment in terms of attractions, events and so forth; we've got a program this year called Awesome All Year, and it really highlights the amazing events that we're going to have throughout 2024. But I think that this comprehensive approach really ensures that our messaging resonates with a diverse set of demographics and interests, and that also helps get our messaging out. And then there's community support.

[01:54.930] - Julie Coker

It really is a collaborative effort. We're fortunate to be really supported by our community, whether we're talking about, you know, IPW as one of the major global trade shows that we attend. Also to just our partners bringing us in, when there are opportunities with press and other media opportunities to showcase the entire destination and not just one part. But really, our return on the investment that we've had for the tourism marketing district has been very strong since its inception, which was back in 2008, and we're proud to say in 2023 that return on investment was 33 to 1. So for every dollar that was invested, we were able to return a 33 value, so that's also important.

[02:39.640] - Julie Coker

And then the last thing I would say is that our decisions in terms of media that we pursue, whether it be placements or earned and owned media, really is always data-driven. So everything that we do is very research-heavy, very targeted, so that we are spending the dollars that we have very wisely. And we're also holding ourselves accountable and ensuring that what we are investing is delivering an ROI, not just for the tourism marketing district, but for the community of San Diego.

[03:15.420] - Mark Lapidus

All right, let's stay on this topic for another minute and hear from Liz Bittner, CEO of Travel South. I spoke with Liz at IPW in Tampa.

[03:22.950] - Mark Lapidus

Catch us up on your latest approach to earned media around the world.

[03:26.190] - Liz Bittner

"Earned media." It's one of those words that, you know, I'd like to actually take out of our vocabulary, because there's somehow a predisposition that that's free, right? "Earned" is free.

[03:37.810] - Mark Lapidus

Right. Yeah.

[03:38.330] - Liz Bittner

And there isn't any such thing as a free media thing anymore. I've taken to calling it, on a personal level, "managed media." Right? And so, helping storytellers tell stories will always continue to be, like, one of the highest priorities. And from their viewpoint, the words and the pictures and the social media and the influencers, all of that is so important, right? But they're not going to do it for free. And the ones that do it for free, you're not necessarily going to want them to do it for free. It needs to have a wider girth, right?

[04:11.630] - Liz Bittner

In the old days, you could bring journalists in and, you know, set them up and give them free stuff and they'd go home and write nine page articles with beautiful pictures.

[04:21.120] - Mark Lapidus

And that's because their publications were paying them well, which they no longer do.

[04:24.470] - Liz Bittner

Correct, correct. So that world doesn't exist anymore. But the value of having, whether it be a print piece or a digital article or a social media post that has a direction to a great landing page, that is invaluable, because it's almost like a little bit of word of mouth, which is the most valuable part of marketing, right? It's just the hardest part. So, earned media doesn't really exist, I think it's managed media. And we're going to continue to focus on that.

[04:51.610] - Mark Lapidus

At IPW, we of course also heard from Geoff Freeman.

[04:54.920] - Mark Lapidus

I'm always glad to welcome Geoff Freeman, CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, to kick off our series of Live From IPW podcasts. Welcome back to Brand USA Talks Travel, Geoff.

[05:04.030] - Geoff Freeman

I'm thrilled to be here. I'm thrilled IPW is finally here.

[05:06.490] - Mark Lapidus

I'd love to have you as our first guest at IPW, because I feel it's important that you set the tone for the convention. So let's start with the primary issues and opportunities you're communicating to the travel industry here at IPW.

[05:17.200] - Geoff Freeman

Well, first of all, let me start with this. The show is back, and I think people are feeling that we're about 20% larger than we were last year. We have more media than we've ever had before; in total, we've got about 2,000 buyers and media. That's great to see. 5,700 people total, 70 countries represented. So the energy is fantastic, and the engagement is really, really good. We've still got work to do, obviously, when it comes to international travel. The end of last year, we welcomed 67 million visitors. The end of 2019, we welcomed 79 million visitors. We're 12 million off.

[05:49.510] - Geoff Freeman

We're only at 84% of where we once were. We've got a lot of work to do. The number that is so striking to me, going into the pandemic, we had a \$12 billion travel trade surplus. Meaning, Americans were spending less outside the country than foreign travelers were spending in the United States. At the end of 23, we had a \$50 billion travel trade deficit. Americans are spending that much more outside the country than foreign travelers are spending here. That should be a wake up call at the federal level. It's why we need engagement. It's something that U.S. Travel is heavily focused on.

[06:22.710] - Geoff Freeman

We've got a real agenda when it comes to fixing and growing international travel to the United States, that's something we'll obviously be talking about here. At the same time, here is really about promoting travel. Here is really about marketing travel. So, you know, this isn't necessarily the place to be to highlight some of the negatives, but it is the place to make sure that our tour operators around the world know that U.S. Travel is their ally in fixing any problems they might be confronting.

[06:47.240] - Mark Lapidus

In June of 2024, we caught up with Nick Hentschel, Chief Operating Officer of American Tours International. When Nick speaks, the industry listens.

[06:55.870] - Mark Lapidus

I'm sure we have a lot of destinations listening, so what opportunities are you seeing these days that DMOs can take advantage of?

[07:02.470] - Nick Hentschel

First of all, we partner very closely with many destinations across the USA. That partnership is often based on developing product, right? So accessing, whether it's a new attraction or a new boutique hotel that doesn't have the distribution that maybe a chain would, that's really important for the destinations to realize that operators like ATI that have the international distribution can be a solution for them, especially to lay in the base of business. And it's kind of back to basics when it comes to this discussion because a lot of people left the industry during the pandemic.

[07:37.080] - Nick Hentschel

And so what we really need in partnering with our destination partners is that kind of touch point with the new people who are in sales at a property, at a hotel or attraction or transportation provider, to help our team explain the value of international leisure business that books really far out, that spends more, and stays longer, in the cases of hotels. And that, combined with developing the actual destination in coordination with other destinations. Because what we're seeing is, with our international business is multi-destination trips, right? So what we often do is partner with multiple destinations that make sense together, and to inspire both the trade, right? And hopefully the end travel consumer, to pair these destinations together. So those are just two facets of how we like to work with our destination partners.

[08:30.320] - Mark Lapidus

Nick, could you share an example of a U.S. tour itinerary that's been particularly successful in appealing to multigenerational families or mixed travel groups?

[08:38.690] - Nick Hentschel

The California coast plus National Parks is one that comes to mind, where we've actually even done, like, small group tours that cater to multigenerational, to grandparents with their kids and their grandkids. And a lot of our tour product is based around including National Park destinations, obviously with a major gateway like Vegas, for instance. The other one that is always interesting is Route 66. We're entering the hundredth year anniversary soon.

[09:06.490] - Nick Hentschel

What we're really wanting to develop as a family destination for international is Hawaii. Because traditionally it has been more like honeymooners and bucket list kind of trips all the way from Europe, because it's so far. But as there is an increased value proposition - it's been an expensive destination coming out of the pandemic - but I just returned from there and we met with Hawaii Tourism Authority and with some of our key clients we're visiting as well, post-IPW. We went on a special VIP FAM, if you will. It was more than a FAM, different from a FAM, but that was a key topic: how do we get families to come to a destination like this where there are extra costs? It's already expensive. So we're working on some unique offers that cater to making it more affordable for families to visit the Hawaiian Islands.

[09:55.200] - Mark Lapidus

One of the things I noticed during 2024 is that many destinations are interested in expanding sports tourism. In this episode, David Gilbert, CEO of Destination Cleveland and the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission, shared a path to success.

[00:10:08.360] - Mark Lapidus

I'm sure that after all these years you could probably teach a course - in fact, probably a master course in sports tourism. What do you think most destinations miss?

[10:16.600] - David Gilbert

I think the basis by which we have built our whole business model was on providing more services to the events that come to town than anybody else in the country. It's why sports commissions were formed 30 plus years ago in many ways as outgrowths of traditional CVBs. Because sports were the one area of group travel that needed something very different than any other typical meeting or convention. And it's not the case every time, but I could tell you, we host, on average, let's call it 12, 14 national events a year, our sports commission.

[10:51.330] - David Gilbert

And these are events not that we know of in the community; these are events that we were responsible for attracting to town, and in one way, shape or form are involved in some form of running and managing the event. Might be a small piece, it might be the whole thing. And those rights holders, those events rights holders need partners to be successful. And oftentimes what we found is they choose Cleveland not because they love Cleveland. Cleveland has to work for them; everything about Cleveland has to work for them. But they're choosing our organization because what we bring makes them more successful in however they define success for their event. Now I will tell you, it takes a big infrastructure to do that. We're not a big organization.

[11:28.650] - Speaker 1

We have 15 full-time staff people, three or four part time, and a lot of interns on top of that - that's one of the biggest sports commissions in the country. So they're typically not big organizations. But the vast majority of people that are part of the sports commission industry tend to more be a couple of salespeople from a DMO. And while that can work in certain instances, certain events that don't need a lot, or maybe only are looking for a check, for those events that really need help to be successful, you need a full infrastructure. And while that was the heart of our business model 25 years ago when we started, it wasn't easy to do early on when you had just a couple staff people, a great board; it still is the heart of what we try to do today.

[12:12.110] - Mark Lapidus

We had a long list of exceptionally interesting people live from the Destinations International convention this year. In this podcast about retaining great talent, Destination DC CEO Elliott Ferguson and now the Chairman of the Board at Brand USA, and DI's VP of Marketing Cambria Jones, chat with me about keeping employees happy and motivated.

[12:32.850] - Mark Lapidus

Everybody that I know wants a raise and a promotion. How do you manage expectations realistically?

[12:38.670] - Cambria Jones

I think it starts with having honest conversations. I think that's the first place to start. Sometimes that can be a little awkward, but then having that transparency from the very beginning, I think is a great step.

[12:48.300] - Elliott Ferguson

Yeah, I totally agree with Cambria. And the other component of that is to make sure you know the folks that are working on your team. You know, I have over 120 people; the question is, how do I know them all? And I don't. But to that point, you know, I focus on asking key questions of the team. I connect with them every single day so that when we get to a point where they feel the infamous D word, they deserve, the question is, do you? And we're making sure that they know exactly where they are well before they get to a point whereas we perhaps can give them a promotion or a raise if they're eligible, or tell them that they're not.

[13:20.390] - Mark Lapidus

How did you learn to do that?

[13:21.860] - Elliott Ferguson

You know, trial and error. I've been working for a long time, and dealing with people, and I always joke - but not joke - the hardest part of the job is managing people. But when your organization and your only asset are your people, then you understand you should focus on them, focus on their needs and make sure that you equip them with, as Cambria said, enough information whereas they know exactly where they are, how you perceive them, and the things in which they should focus on, including, in some cases, leaving the organization.

[13:48.560] - Mark Lapidus

So you had a breakout session here at Destinations International, tell me about that. It was about retention, that's all I really know. So where do we start?

[13:55.770] - Cambria Jones

Yes, the session that we hosted here in Destinations International was based on talent attraction and retention, specifically for our emerging leaders in the community. Elliott, as you know, has been excellent in that. He even has success in the boomerang effect, as we've kind of coined it. So it was a really insightful conversation.

[14:11.950] - Elliott Ferguson

Yeah, and it was good for me to be there. It was interesting juxtaposition between Cambria and her knowledge; a 30 something year old, very young, a young lady from Ireland that is relatively new in her career, and then someone like myself that's more seasoned in terms of understanding the dynamics of retaining talent.

[14:31.010] - Mark Lapidus

What do you look for during an interview, and how quickly are you making up your mind? Like, is it within the first five minutes? In the first four minutes? In the first two minutes? What is it that really makes you pull the trigger on hiring someone?

[14:43.160] - Elliott Ferguson

For me, the key thing is, do they fit into the culture of the organization? I think that there are certain things you can teach a person once they start working for you. Clearly, if you're hiring someone that has experience, experience is relative to where they came from, but they're learning new processes.

[14:57.520] - Mark Lapidus

We're going to feature just two awards in this 2024 annual podcast recap. The first always draws a lot of attention, because the award focuses on the future of travel. It's the 30 Under 30 award from Destinations International. I spoke with winner, Brand USA's Katie Streater, and DI's Taylor Ruoff Snider.

[15:15.810] - Mark Lapidus

We're doing this entire podcast, Katie, because you were named 30 Under 30. Tell me how you felt when you heard the news.

[15:21.820] - Katie Streater

Oh, man, I was so excited. I ended up calling my mom, I think within the same minute that I opened the email. But in all seriousness, I was really honored to be included in this group, and it just makes me even more motivated to continue working for this industry.

[15:36.520] - Mark Lapidus

So I have no doubt that many people are listening to this podcast today because they want to know how 30 Under 30 works, and you're just the right person to tell us. So, Taylor, tell us some secrets: how does one become 30 Under 30?

[15:48.840] - Taylor Ruoff Snider

Maybe I'd go back a little bit to tell you about the 30 Under 30 program first. So Destinations International is extremely committed to investing and preparing the leaders of tomorrow, and the 30 Under 30 program is one of our flagship initiatives for doing so. In partnership with SearchWide Global, Fired Up! Culture, and IMEX, the 30 Under 30 program recognizes and develops future industry leaders that represent a diverse set of backgrounds and perspectives. And actually, in recent years, it's become a lot more global; we had representation in this year's class from at least four different countries, which is so exciting to see.

[16:22.350] - Mark Lapidus

Katie, how long did it take you to put together the application?

[16:25.140] - Katie Streater

The longest part for me was the video creation, and you have to come up with an idea and then you have to build a story for it and then you have to film it, which took a lot of time for me because I kept laughing in the middle of my filming sessions. And then you have to build it out. So it took longer than I thought it was going to, but it worked.

[16:44.140] - Mark Lapidus

Did you have somebody else film you or did you just do it all yourself?

[16:47.520] - Katie Streater

I recruited a ton of friends to help me film.

[16:50.810] - Mark Lapidus

How long did that take?

[16:51.950] - Katie Streater

A few weekends.

[16:53.130] - Mark Lapidus

Part of it is rehearsal, right?

[16:54.690] - Katie Streater

Yeah, it was a few rehearsals. One of the times the weather wasn't cooperating and it was so windy, you couldn't hear me speak at all, so I had to keep redoing that section.

[17:04.430] - Mark Lapidus

And did you do the editing yourself?

[17:06.230] - Katie Streater

I did. You're supposed to do the editing all on your own.

[17:09.010] - Mark Lapidus

Well, that's a pretty big clue for people that don't know how to edit. They can start practicing now.

[17:13.730] - Katie Streater

Yeah, start practicing now.

[17:15.730] - Mark Lapidus

All right, there's award one. Let's go to award two, another big one. We are revisiting the award that was presented to Mike Mangeot, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Tourism.

[17:25.200] - Mark Lapidus

In retrospect, I wish I had hired a brass band to play for you, I really do. Congratulations, Mike Mangeot, for being named State Tourism Director of the Year here at ESTO.

[17:35.900] - Mike Mangeot

Thank you so much, Mark. Very unexpected and very humbling.

[17:39.080] - Mark Lapidus

How does it feel?

[17:39.890] - Mike Mangeot

Surreal is the word I used earlier. I really don't try to draw attention to myself, which is weird in our jobs because we're so externally-focused. But, yeah, as I said earlier, I'm truly, truly humbled. I have so much respect for the people in the room of the National Council of State Tourism Directors. And I said up there, between my blubbing sobs, you know, and what I said was true in that there's so much talent in that room. I look around there sometimes, and when we have our open forums and we're able to talk about problems, and "how did you handle this?" And their perspectives, and they're so smart. It's intimidating to me, a little bit, because I think, "Oh, I really have to up my game."

[18:14.540] - Mark Lapidus

I totally understand that.

[18:15.890] - Mike Mangeot

But for me to know that I can call any one of them on an issue and say, "Hey, I saw where you were dealing with this. You talked about this in the open forum," or at ESTO or whatever it may be, and they'll help. And I have always tried to do that for them when they reach out. But it's, you know, back to your original question. I don't think it's real right now.

[18:31.730] - Mark Lapidus

You know, it's funny. I had the same conversation, of course, with Dave Lorenz exactly one year ago, and he looked about as shell shocked as you are.

[18:38.220] - Mike Mangeot

Yeah. And he cried less than me, which was shocking. No, and that really kind of made it even more special, that Dave was the one that presented it to me.

[18:45.690] - Mark Lapidus

Also at ESTO in Columbus, I spoke with mega-influencer and social media kingpin of Beautiful Destinations, Jeremy Jauncey. We talked about his success that we can all learn from.

[18:55.370] - Mark Lapidus

I heard it said that you're the king of creating FOMO. What's your secret sauce?

[19:00.040] - Jeremy Jauncey

That's a big title to live up to there, Mark. I guess it would be, we started really early on social. I mean, we started over 10 years ago. The whole idea for what became the business started life as an Instagram account, without really any understanding of DMOs, of any tourism marketing. But we were really early. The big brands weren't on social; certainly DMOs didn't have social media or content teams back then. And we just had this idea of trying to join people around the world through a community that celebrated the creation of travel content. And thankfully, we picked the right platforms, we invested in direct medium, and things sort of grew. But I'd say the main thing was starting early.

[19:36.310] - Mark Lapidus

How in the world did you get to 50 million followers?

[19:39.400] - Jeremy Jauncey

Being early was the big advantage, because we were able to build up a brand and a reputation for ourself very early on when others weren't doing it. But we did also really focus quite heavily on how to adapt this idea that people wanted to see the world through these emerging platforms, and they wanted to see it through the lens of what are now content creators and influencers and people who build digital communities.

[20:01.110] - Jeremy Jauncey

But back then, we just felt like the best storytellers in the world were finding new ways to practice their craft and show people what the world looked like from their perspective. And so we invested a lot of time and a lot of energy in building out relationships with these guys and girls all over the world who were sending us their content. And our vision was always to be this kind of central place that would celebrate the beauty of the world and celebrate travel, but do it through the lens of real people, and through a community which now has gotten to this 50 million number and continues to grow. And is this really vibrant and passionate and positive place in a time when maybe there are parts of social, and certainly parts of the Internet, that aren't so friendly and so positive. So, you know, we've been very lucky with that, and to be able to parlay it into a business, it's been a dream come true.

[20:39.840] - Mark Lapidus

So I understand your session at ESTO was very nicely attended. It was called "Crafting Your Social Presence: Strategies for Standout Content." We don't have the whole half an hour that you had at your session, but maybe you can give us two or three minutes of highlights.

[20:53.720] - Jeremy Jauncey

We talked a lot about content trends, to be honest, and this idea that the way content is changing on social is a function of, one, how consumers use social - which I think is fascinating, because there was certainly a time when people thought of it as very much kind of top of the funnel, just dreaming and inspiring content and sort of switching off and not really being a meaningful way to understand consumers and their behaviors. But now what we've seen is that search has become so prevalent on Instagram and TikTok and YouTube, and people are now going into these platforms and they're typing in, you know, we're in Columbus, "top five things to do in Columbus," "top 10 restaurants," "top places to go with my family."

[21:32.790] - Jeremy Jauncey

And they're doing it into these social networks because they want to see rich, short video of what to do. And so we talked a lot about how DMOs need to step up their content creation in video and understand the right kind of video that works on the right kind of platform. You know, I think it's estimated that as much as 90% of young travelers will turn to social media as the origin of their destination planning. And so if you're not there and you're not putting out the right kind of content, you're really missing out.

[21:58.190] - Mark Lapidus

At Brand USA's Travel Week 2024, British television presenter and disability advocate Sophie Morgan had a huge impact on attendees when she shared her inspiring journey with disability, accessibility, and inclusion.

[22:11.580] - Sophie Morgan

For non-disabled people and disabled people, our choices look somewhat different. Non-disabled people can choose where they want to stay, for example, by the cost, or the location, or whether it has air conditioning, or a pool, or a twin room, or whatever. You can choose however you want. Your filters kind of look different to the filters that I have to have, and basically, I have to tick different boxes to you guys.

[22:33.600] - Sophie Morgan

The built environment and society at large is not designed with us in mind. And so we don't have the freedom to choose. I mean, even coming in here today, I can't come in the same entrance as you guys. I have to go back round through the thing and up through the end and round by the bins and in through the food and up a goods lift. Do you know what I mean?

[22:49.740] - Sophie Morgan

I don't have the same access points as you do. And businesses can claim that it's too expensive, it's too impractical to accommodate people like me. But unfortunately, after 20 years of being paralyzed, I basically normalized this over here. I got so used to it, I was like, "Well, that's just the way it goes. As long as I can get in the room, even if I do have to go in round the back with the broken glass, through the bins and up through the goods lift, at least I'm in the room with my friends. That's enough."

[23:14.500] - Sophie Morgan

But the thing was, as I started riding across the U.S., every day I became more and more aware that that was having a detrimental impact on my mental health. And every day that I was driving more and more across the U.S., I started to realize how disabled I had become by that environment, and how less disabled I was becoming in the U.S., and how free I was becoming, and how happy I was becoming. Because every day I didn't have to stop and call ahead to see if there was access if I wanted to have lunch somewhere. I didn't have to worry if there was a toilet. I could go into a place and I could say, "Excuse me, where are the ladies?"

[23:49.080] - Sophie Morgan

Instead of saying, "Do you have a disabled toilet?" Profound difference in those two questions. I could be driving along on the bike, and I'd say, "Actually, I want to stop here tonight." And I'd just go on a website and I could find the ADA room, and I could click into it, and I could book it, and I could do that. I could go to a National Park, these massive incredible environments like Yellowstone, and I could just roll off on. I didn't have to worry about it, I didn't have to think about it. I could go with non-disabled friends or disabled friends alike. We could get into these spaces. And I have to say it was unbelievably profound. For me, the absolute highlight of the trip was just going into Jackson. Within five minutes had found an adaptive program.

[24:23.400] - Sophie Morgan

They got me on a kayak, they got me on paragliding. I was jumping off a mountain, for crying out loud, and I was just pinching myself. I have been paralyzed all these years. I've not felt this way before. It was extraordinary. These adaptive experiences that are available to people in the U.S., you just really don't get them here.

[24:39.980] - Mark Lapidus

And 2024 is the year that Brand USA proudly welcomed our new CEO, Fred Dixon. Fred delivered his first keynote address at Travel Week.

[24:48.750] - Fred Dixon

Travelers are optimistic about visiting the United States. And the numbers are painting the picture. Travel demand, of course, is driven by aspiration even more than is driven by access. It's driven by the unique, diverse, and meaningful experiences that travelers are seeking today. And the USA shows up in a very big way. And here is more good news: travelers are expanding their list of destinations they want to visit per trip. Nearly half of all future travelers surveyed plan to visit two to three cities on their next trip to the U.S. And this tells us something exciting.

Visitors aren't just sticking to the well-known iconic gateway cities and destinations; they're eager to explore beyond those sites and experiences.

[25:26.090] - Fred Dixon

And it's not just about first-time visitors; Europe continues to be a strong market for repeat visitation, no surprise with all that connectivity. Consumers are telling us that they're coming back because of the unique experiences our destinations have to offer. The desire to explore different regions and landmarks they have not visited yet. For 43% of visitors, the desire to explore new areas is driving them back, while 39% say it's the positive experiences they've had in the past. Another proof point why this region continues to be ripe with opportunity. And when it comes to activities, our State and National Parks, no surprise, are a primary driver, with nearly 50% of future travelers saying these are at the top of their list.

[26:03.660] - Fred Dixon

But so is shopping, history, and heritage attractions as key motivators, with 45 and 44% of travelers expressing interest in these experiences. Additionally, 24% of those surveyed said professional and non-professional sporting events were an activity driving their interest. And because we are hosting several of the top sporting events across the next decade, you can only expect this stat to go up. And we run the gamut in the U.S., right? From FIFA World Cup to Formula One and the PGA tournaments. And that that is a broad spectrum.

[26:32.560] - Fred Dixon

And for our target markets in Europe, the U.S. is already a bucket list destination. 40% of past visitors cited the U.S. being on their list as a key reason for their trip. So as you've heard today, people are traveling to the U.S. in record numbers, and we have every confidence that that is going to continue. Keeping the USA top of mind among global travelers has been a collective effort, and we will continue to keep that a top priority and effort. So thank you all for being here and being invested in Brand USA and the larger industry.

[27:00.730] - Fred Dixon

As you all know, this industry and its impact is incredibly special. It provides unique connections between people, places and cultures. And for many of us, it becomes our life's work. And that's certainly what happened with me. In my case, it was my family's small business, our motel - and I say that with an "m", not an "h" - in the Great Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee. That's where I learned the business from the ground up. Throughout my career, I've worked in just about every segment of this industry. It's been an incredible joy.

[27:25.690] - Fred Dixon

From lodging to attractions to an airline and now three DMOs. I've worked across multiple verticals, and so whether you're the CEO or you're the person in charge of international sales, I can honestly say I've been where you are. And the lessons I learned along the way remain with me today. So it's truly an honor to lead the inbound marketing for the United States, and I look forward to interacting with you all this week. So thank you for being here. We've got an exciting week in program ahead. We're at your service; if you need anything at all, please just reach out.

[27:52.340] - Mark Lapidus

And we wrap up our 2024 Brand USA Talks travel highlights with a few thoughts on the state of destination marketing. These come from Sojern and the Digital Tourism Think Tank. Here's Nick Hall, CEO of the Digital Tourism Think Tank, and Seth Orozco, Sales Director at Sojern.

[28:08.660] - Mark Lapidus

So how did Digital Tourism Think Tank and Sojern join up for this study?

[28:12.370] - Nick Hall

So when we came together to discuss this piece of research, it was really looking at, where are the gaps today, in the post-Covid world? What are we trying to figure out? And we could see that there were some really monumental changes that the pandemic had brought to the industry, had changed the way we work, had changed the priorities, the focus. And so if we look at marketing, marketing in itself had been completely redefined. The motivations for travelers had shifted.

[28:38.640] - Nick Hall

The way in which we collaborate and create solutions to reach those travelers had changed. And then of course you've got things like AI and data, and then first-party data, becoming really, really big conversation pieces within the industry, but also really big challenges in terms of how we tackle that. And so we thought about what we can do to get a better understanding here. And we worked together on the state of marketing as a piece of research. And principally this was a piece of research designed to capture that shift in how DMOs are working.

[29:10.360] - Nick Hall

We pulled together insights from 300 different destinations, a really, really extensive survey that helped us get to the bottom of that. We ran that over a six-month period, and I think the result of that gives us a really, really clear snapshot of what's happening in marketing, and where, perhaps, some of our assumptions can be challenged, but also reveals really interesting insights.

[29:32.450] - Mark Lapidus

So let's get a little taste of that snapshot, Nick. What did you both find surprising in this report?

[29:37.290] - Nick Hall

So we asked about where different trends were impacting tourism, and unsurprisingly, AI came out as one of the biggest shifts that we've seen today. And the vast majority of destinations said that it's really impacting the creativity and content generation element.

[29:55.750] - Mark Lapidus

Seth, what jumped out at you?

[29:57.260] - Seth Orozco

I think the most surprising for me was around co-ops. If you read the study of the data, it clearly spells out that DMOs understand the reason for them, they had a need for them. But the majority of destinations feel that they either don't do them well, or don't even have a program at all. And when you ask, if you look at the numbers, "Why don't you have a co-op program?" The three highest barriers, this is what they said. 51% said it was difficult coordinating programs and campaigns. 21% said it was unable to get private sector funding. And 16% for a lack of an awareness or know-how.

[30:27.770] - Seth Orozco

So as a marketer, we like to look at numbers, so let's flip those numbers a little bit and look at them. That means that 84% of DMOs know how to do it. That is not a barrier to entry. 79% are able to get private sector funding. So that's saying they know how to do it, they can get money for it, but yet the majority of say they don't or they don't do it well. So the conclusion here is like programs are wanted. They're a needed solution for destinations across North America and Europe.

[30:54.710] - Mark Lapidus

We would have loved to have used clips from every podcast we published during 2024, but that would have required you, dear listener, to be listening way into the new year. I didn't want to do that to you. I do suggest that if anything grabbed your attention in this episode, that you seek out the entire podcast in our feed. After all, you're on vacation, you have time. And that's a wrap for Brand USA Talks Travel for 2024. We're off until the first week of January, so as my pals in the first grade used to say, we'll see you next year. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

[31:26.730] - Intro/Outro

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. Media producer, Nthanze Kariuki, with assistance from Casey D'Ambra. Engineering, Brian Watkins, Kat Pommer, and Antonio Tyler. Art by Mimi Jung. 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!