Episode 134:

We recently attended the 2019 NYS Tourism Conference in Buffalo, New York and interviewed presenters, conference attendees, and Tourism Excellence Award winners. My interviews focused on the conference themes of inclusion, fostering community engagement, and “tourism is everybody’s business”, as well as key takeaways from the conference. I hope you find these conversations informative and inspiring.

In this episode, I share my conversations with:

- Brian Stratton, Director of the New York State Canal Corporation
- Danny Liedka, President and CEO of Visit Syracuse
- Jessica Bacher, President and CEO of the Yates County Chamber of Commerce
- Karen Kuhl, Executive Director of the Cayuga County Office of Tourism
- Ross Levi, Executive Director of Tourism at Empire State Development and the “I LOVE NY” tourism program
- Steve Williams, Chief Experience Champion at Experience Champions
- Dionne Williamson, National Sales Director of Visit Buffalo Niagara
- Valerie Knoblauch, President of Finger Lakes Visitors Connection

What You Will Learn in This Episode:

- How the New York canal system is bringing a tremendous economic impact to the entire state as well as to New York, and how the New York State Canal Corporation is working to improve accessibility to the canal trails
- Why messaging is important for Visit Syracuse, and how they are working to engage the community and demonstrate that tourism is a significant economic driver for the area
- How a recent $10 million downtown revitalization grant from the state has helped the Yates County Chamber of Commerce promote significant community engagement and feedback
- How the Cayuga County Office of Tourism is developing critical strategic partnerships with other organizations throughout the region to share a single, unified message about tourism
• How the iconic I LOVE NY tourism program is working to promote inclusivity through programs like their LGBT initiative to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of Stonewall and World Pride
• How working in a diverse and welcoming tourism destination shaped the views of Steve Williams at Experience Champions and opened his eyes to the opportunities the tourism industry has to become more inclusive
• Why Visit Buffalo Niagara believes that the key to successfully promoting inclusivity lies in ensuring that marketing and partnerships reflect diverse types of people
• How Valerie Knoblauch at Finger Lakes Visitors Connection found energy and timeliness in the topics that were discussed at the conference that she plans on taking home with her and integrating into her own work

New York State Canal Corporation

Brian Stratton from New York State Canal Corporation describes the 524 mile-long New York State Canal System that touches seven of the state’s ten economic regions. He shares the importance of creating accessibility to promote inclusion throughout the canal trail. He shares why physical access isn’t the only concern and that he has learned the importance of creating accessibility on the organization’s website as well. He describes upcoming events his organization will be participating in to promote accessibility. He discusses the state of New York’s commitment to promoting the tourism industry and the many organizations and businesses across the state that work within the industry. He describes the remarkable economic impact the canal system brings to the state. He shares the international tourism opportunities that the canal system is bringing to the state and even to Canada.

Visit Syracuse

Danny Liedka of Visit Syracuse discusses why tourism is a major economic engine for the community, keeping property taxes stable, creates jobs, and helps the community grow. He discusses why it is important to share the message that the tourism industry is an integral part of the community. He discusses his hopes to learn new strategies and ideas at the conference that he can bring back to his own work.

Yates County Chamber of Commerce

Jessica Bacher of the Yates County Chamber of Commerce shares how Yates County recently received a $10 million downtown revitalization grant from the state of New York, and she discusses the impact that grant has made for the small community and how it has helped dramatically promote community engagement. She shares how this is her first time attending the conference, and how she has learned a great deal about ADA compliance and inclusion initiatives from the conference and its panels and discussions.
Cayuga County Office of Tourism

Karen Kuhl from the Cayuga County Office of Tourism discusses the many aspects of inclusivity and shares why addressing the issue of inclusivity from the strategic planning front is vital. She shares why reaching out and establishing strategic alliances with region-wide partners for a unified message is the key to fostering stronger community engagement. She talks about the important conference takeaway of promoting ADA compliance in the physical tourism structure and on organization websites. She also shares why marketing materials need to be fully inclusive of many different communities.

Empire State Development & I LOVE NY

Ross Levi from Empire State Development discusses why it is important to be sensitive to the wants and needs of all kinds of travelers. He shares inclusivity initiatives at I LOVE NY, including their LGBT initiative which is helping to promote the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. He shares excitement over World Pride being hosted in New York for the first time in its history. He discusses new initiatives around senior tours and accessibility tours, as well as collaborative cultural sensitivity workshops. He shares why frequent, open, collaborative communication between partners is important, and he provides examples of partnerships his organization has made and work they are doing with local-level partners. He shares hopes that attendees will get a sense of how well I LOVE NY’s partnerships are working to promote the industry. He shares the significant figure that the travel industry in New York is responsible for one in ten jobs in the state.

Experience Champions

Steve Williams from Experience Champions shares how his company works with and provides workshops and trainings for small and medium-sized tourism businesses to improve their success. He shares why the people-focused tourism industry has a wonderful opportunity to promote welcoming and inclusive travel as well as to be inclusive employers. He shares his own experiences as a gay man and how working at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, Australia in a welcoming, inclusive and accepting environment was a transformative experience for him. He shares how the zoo participated in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and how the zoo promoted legalizing same-sex marriage in Australia. He discusses how tourism leaders have the opportunity to embrace and promote diversity, and he provides an example from the Taronga Zoo and creating a partnership with Autism Australia to help staff better understand the needs of people on the autism spectrum. He shares his hopes that attendees will leave the conference with a better sense of the diversity within their communities and ideas of how to capture diverse markets.
Visit Buffalo Niagara

Dionne Williamson from Visit Buffalo Niagara discusses how tourism leaders can make an impact in diversity and inclusion within the industry both through inclusive marketing efforts as well as in diverse hiring practices. She shares how she was the Multicultural Sales Manager at Visit Buffalo Niagara before becoming the National Sales Director at the organization, and she shares her personal experiences with diverse clients. She discusses the importance of engaging with clients and with the larger community. She shares why she believes community engagement, in particular, is important, and she shares why diversity and inclusion training within the hospitality and tourism community should be ongoing. She shares why she hopes attendees of the convention will see the importance of diverse marketing and partnerships as an opportunity to expand their reach.

Finger Lakes Visitors Connection

Valerie Knoblauch from Finger Lakes Visitors Connection shares why there has been powerful energy at the conference that can be applied to industry leaders’ workplaces. She shares why community leaders need to get involved in the community to create connectivity and better foster community engagement. She shares how the tourism industry is interconnected with many other industries to the mutual benefit of everyone involved. She explains how the topics covered at the conference are timely and helpful, and she discusses examples displayed at the conference that she can take home with her.

Overview

Each of the industry leaders I spoke with represents different aspects of the travel and tourism industry from all across New York, but they all share the same belief that inclusivity is the key to welcoming new audiences and bringing in new visitors from all over the world and that the travel industry should reflect the diversity of the communities it serves. As these organizations show us, inclusivity involves developing partnerships, ongoing training, and sensitivity to and understanding of all kinds of people from every background. I hope you have enjoyed hearing these leaders speak on inclusivity and engagement and that you have a better understanding of why tourism truly is everybody’s business.

Resources:

- New York State Canal Corporation website: [www.canals.ny.gov](http://www.canals.ny.gov)
- Visit Syracuse website: [www.visitsyracuse.com](http://www.visitsyracuse.com)
- Yates County Chamber of Commerce website: [www.yatesny.com](http://www.yatesny.com)
- Cayuga County Office of Tourism website: [www.fingerlakes.org/services/cayuga-county-office-tourism](http://www.fingerlakes.org/services/cayuga-county-office-tourism)
- Empire State Development website: [https://esd.ny.gov/](https://esd.ny.gov/)
- Experience Champions website: [www.experiencechampions.com](http://www.experiencechampions.com)
• Visit Buffalo Niagara website: www.visitbuffaloniagara.com
• Finger Lakes Visitors Connection website: www.visitfingerlakes.com

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