

Explorable | Season Two, Episode Nineteen: Transcript of interview with Staci Mellman

Josh Loebner:

Hey everyone. Welcome to Explorable. I'm Josh.

Toby Willis:

And I'm Toby. We're so excited to share with you this series of episodes that we recorded live on the road at the 2021 TravelAbility Summit in Tampa, Florida.

Josh Loebner:

Next up, Staci Mellman, chief marketing officer for Visit Florida. Hey everybody.

Welcome to the Explorable Podcast. We are live in Tampa, Florida at the TravelAbility Summit and we have an amazing guest today, Staci Mellman, chief marketing officer of Visit Florida. Staci, thanks so much for being on our show.

Staci Mellman:

Thank you for having me. I am a huge fan of this podcast, and I've just really learned so much from listening to both of you guys and the experts that you've brought onto your show. I think it's really great that you're doing this.

Toby Willis:

Well, that's great. Thanks for the listens and for helping us get the word out about all this important work that is happening around travel and inclusion. Tell us more about yourself and your role, what you do.

Staci Mellman:

So, I'm the chief marketing officer at Visit Florida and Visit Florida is a destination marketing organization that is responsible for driving travel and tourism to the state of Florida. Obviously, travel and tourism is incredibly important to the state. It's the number one economic driver for tax revenues and Florida residents. The reason why Floridians don't pay income tax is because of the tax generated by travelers. My role as CMO intersects with both the tourism industry businesses and destinations across the state and travelers. When it comes to disability inclusion and accessible travel, what that means is that promoting the value and opportunity of accessible travel to industry businesses and educating them about the best ways to reach and serve those travelers while also highlighting those experiences in cities to a larger set of travelers so they can be informed and hopefully choose Florida for their next trip.

Toby Willis:

And I think everyone's well aware of how big the traveling tourism industry is here in Florida. What's the gross value of the traveling tourism industry to Florida? I think it's like \$2 trillion globally. And I've heard that Visit Florida is one of the largest, if not the largest, DMOs in the nation, if not the world.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah. We have a huge industry here in Florida. We do an economic impact study every year. The most recent data that we have is that tourism's impact on GDP, and this is from 2019, was \$96.5 billion to the state. That's direct and indirect impact and induced. So, just a combined effort there.

Toby Willis:

Right. So, if my \$2 trillion memory serves me correctly, that's about 5 percent of the global marketplace. How much of this is your job as chief marketing officer? How much is accessibility and inclusion a part of your overall remit?

Staci Mellman:

I think it's hard to put a percentage on it. As we've talked, Florida's one of the top destinations in the world, and Visit Florida is often seen as a leader amongst our peer organizations. And that's a responsibility that we take very seriously across all of the work that we do. When it comes to our disability inclusion efforts and how we view that, we really hope that we inspire other destinations to promote and build accessible travel experiences too, which will make a better place for travelers around the world. I would say that is just a thread through what I do at Visit Florida.

Toby Willis:

Right. I think that's awesome. And I think it's really cool that you're inspiring your peers because it's not a zero-sum game. The more of us who are working in the industry could get more people traveling more often, Florida's going to benefit from that. So, creating that climate, if you will, of accessible and inclusive travel benefits all of us.

Josh Loebner:

And for Florida to be the leader, to really throw down the gauntlet and say, "We believe in disability inclusion and accessibility from a tourism standpoint," shows the industry that we believe in it so everybody else should. And Staci, I'd love to hear a little bit more

about some of those initiatives. Maybe you could even share, from your perspective, how disability inclusion first got on your radar as a chief marketing officer and what are some of the initiatives that you are super excited about when it comes to disability inclusion and accessibility for travelers and tourists connecting with Visit Florida?

Staci Mellman:

Yeah, Josh, because you're a strategist, when you see the world through a strategic framework, things often come in and out and piece it together. And I think that's my personal journey about this traveling audience. A couple of things when I was working at Visit Florida, and I've been at visit Florida for about 10 years—I've been the chief marketing officer for a little over a year and a half—so I've worked in different aspects of the marketing team. We have a gentleman who is an important stakeholder to us, who is the president and founder of SportsAbility. Years ago, he talked to us a lot about the importance of the accessible traveler and promoting the outdoors experience. I don't know if you've heard of him, David Jones. He was a really strong advocate around the 2012, 2014 time period talking about this audience. Similarly, a couple of years later, I went to Basel, Switzerland and I went to a museum, and they had an exhibit on design activism. In that exhibit, they were talking about the accessible icon project, which if you're familiar with it, is a group of designers were trying to reclaim the symbol for a person in a wheelchair and really framing it from a person upright stuck in a wheelchair to a more active motion. And I think it was those two things combined when I realized that I had an opportunity and a responsibility as a marketer for destinations to be more proactive in that space. I think that was kind of an early indication for me and the team that we needed to do a little bit more. And so, Visit Florida started our journey in 2017 to

reach this traveling audience by publishing an eight-piece accessible travel series article on visitflorida.com. And that was really the start of it. Later that year, our website was recognized by Skift, which is a publication that focuses on the travel industry as one of the best 25 websites in the world, particularly because of how we showcased services and attractions for those travelers with disabilities. And I think that's what we did, which was the right thing to do and to serve our traveling audience felt like we just produced eight articles. That's nothing, but being recognized like that felt like a greater responsibility for us to lean into that audience and do more because of who we are.

Josh Loebner:

Any other disability projects right now that-

Staci Mellman:

Oh, yes.

Josh Loebner:

... you've been working on?

Toby Willis:

Yeah, what's on the horizon? What's coming up?

Staci Mellman:

Well, after that we spent the next year and a half from 2017 to 2019 creating enough content that we could launch an accessible travel hub. We now have over 100 pieces of content related to accessible travel on visitflorida.com. We also created a first-of-its-kind

partnership with Scary Mommy, which is a digital publication geared towards moms, to create awareness around the Florida travel experiences for children on the spectrum. Recently in 2020, we shot new ad creative and had an opportunity to include a wheelchair user and a person with down syndrome in two television commercials that ran nationally.

Toby Willis:

Love those commercials.

Staci Mellman:

Thank you. I particularly love the spot that featured Chris Nikic, who is the first person with down syndrome to complete an iron man. He is also a Floridian and he's featured playing golf with his dad. And just last week, we launched a six-episodic video series called Limitless Florida, which focuses on adventure experiences.

Josh Loebner:

I watched all of those and what I loved about one of them, the gentleman was a boater and he loved—Oh, by the way, he's in a wheelchair—and he loves going out on the boat. And what I loved most about it though, was that it was a local person to that community. And it showed that you don't have to be somebody traveling from a far-flung destination to Florida, but you can have Floridians, local people with disabilities that embrace the community and the destination so much that they make it their home all year round. And the way that the creative was showcased was so authentic and so welcoming and immersive and beautiful. And for me as a marketer and somebody in branding to be

able to show that illustrative way about disability that goes beyond simple, sterile information, I just applaud you on this campaign. It's so wonderful.

Staci Mellman:

Thank you. The subjects of the videos are really incredible, and we are so proud to be able to share their stories. And these are Floridians talking about the things that they do in Florida's outdoors that give them peace.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, I think it's really amazing how you brought the community in to help spread this message. And it's obviously benefiting the community as well as tourists and travelers. It's really beautiful synergy. Do you have any other programs you want to highlight for us today? Some existing programs that have been successful and maybe you can talk about some of the results or outcomes of those programs?

Staci Mellman:

Well, we just launched a partnership with TravelAbility. We will be focusing on further educating our industry, both in Florida, and then working with people outside of the state to promote the experiences that we have in Florida beyond just what is available on visitflorida.com. We're going to be doing more research on this audience so we can create better strategies to serve them.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, yeah. More data, please.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah.

Josh Loebner:

That's awesome.

Toby Willis:

Yeah.

Staci Mellman:

I think there's a data vacuum.

Toby Willis:

There absolutely is. And I think there's several reasons for that. Not the least of which is the identity of disability. There's so many of us who benefit from accessibility and inclusion, but not all of us identify as disabled. So, I think it's important to do the education piece in conjunction with, or in parallel with that research piece so that you're helping people understand what these definitions are and what the benefits are so that we can get better, richer data in our research studies.

Staci Mellman:

Absolutely. At Visit Florida, we have very in-depth traveler behavior studies. And while it's a step in the right direction to look at the CDC for some information, that's the CDC and they're not reporting on travelers. So, we need to have a better understanding if we want to serve this population of travelers in a more meaningful way.

Josh Loebner:

So, for destinations, maybe that either at the state level, again, we know they're competition, but we also know that hopefully, all ships can rise with the tide of positive welcoming of people with disabilities. And also, for maybe some attractions and destinations here in the state that are looking to gain a little bit more traction in that path towards disability inclusion, it sounds like your team is far down that path, understanding that the journey continues. There's no finite destination of that final check of disability inclusion. It's just ongoing. But what would you say to those CMOs, chief marketing officers, or destination planners that are hearing this podcast for the first time and considering disability inclusion? Where should they start or what should they do as a next step?

Staci Mellman:

Well, I would first commend them for listening to the podcast because I think that that's a great first start. I think that it's just getting information and understanding how the accessible travel audience can fit into their strategic framework. There is a business case here. And I think that that's where I would really start is finding out what that business case is for your community. Don't think about it as the right thing to do, because while it is the right thing to do, that only goes so far for people who are looking at a finite marketing budget. Put a business case together. And I think that there's a lot of information that's out there about the spending power of this audience. Just from the Open Doors study, which is from 2018/2019, they suggested that \$58.7 billion is what about 27 million travelers spent over a two-year period. That went up 70 percent in three years. That's a huge opportunity.

Toby Willis:

And I just want to point out here that if you are not seeing disabled travelers in your community, it's not because we don't want to come. And that's why this work is so important. So, I think waiting until you see these trends means that you're behind the curb. As leaders in the industry, we want to get out in front of that and create the opportunity for people to travel more. What's your thoughts, Staci, on how to create incremental market opportunities for growing the travel spectrum, if you will, of who is traveling?

Staci Mellman:

You have to look at who your traveler base is. So, for Florida, for example, we have a huge traveling base of the boomer generation.

Toby Willis:

And we know some things about boomers, right? They're aging into disability.

Staci Mellman:

Exactly.

Toby Willis:

And that's back to my comment earlier, my grandma can't see or hear or walk as well as she could when she was younger, but she would never identify as disabled, but she would benefit from... She's 87, 88 and she still flies and travels.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah, her passion for travel hasn't waned because of that. And I think that's the important part is, as destination marketers, you've got to figure out who are your traveler set? What is the opportunity, and what are the things that you have available, and where is that gap? I would also say that we've really identified an important insight that much of the accessibility world is defined by the provider, not the disabled consumer, which means that for us, and what I would recommend for other destination marketing organizations is to just start with, who is traveling? How can you get the information from your traveling population? We have user-generated content. That's a big part of most destinations' marketing strategy. User-generated content doesn't just have to be images that are promoted with a hashtag. It could be crowdsourced.

Toby Willis:

Right. And I think UGC is a good place to get those details about accessibility and inclusion. That's very helpful. It's important for us to create a network effect where we are closing the loop on that content, such that it's in front of travelers who are dreaming and searching and deciding on where they want to go next.

Josh Loebner:

Staci, you are a transplant to Florida, right?

Staci Mellman:

I am.

Josh Loebner:

So, I would just love to hear, what made you fall in love with Florida, and why do you still love it as CMO Visit Florida?

Staci Mellman:

I live where the world vacations. I think that is the thing that really made me fall in love with the state, is the access that myself and my family have to vacation experiences is something that I don't take for granted. I live two hours from some of the best beaches in the world. I'm not going to throw shade on any other destinations, but I've been to beaches all over the world and there is nothing better than the Gulf Coast beaches of Florida and that sugar-white sand.

Toby Willis:

Oh, yeah, the sugar-white sand is just amazing.

Staci Mellman:

I think that I'm fortunate in my job to be able to be reminded of how amazing the state is and the vacation experiences that we have here.

Toby Willis:

Yeah. And you got the cultural diversity too. I think about Miami and the Keys, how different that is from the panhandle and-

Staci Mellman:

Exactly.

Toby Willis:

... Jacksonville. There's a range of cultural diversities here. Staci, what else do you want to talk about? Do you have anything you want to call out or highlight?

Staci Mellman:

I think the one thing that I would like to say, for us at Visit Florida, our brand purpose is to brighten the lives of all. And part of what we believe, and it is included in our consumer manifesto is that Florida's a place for people from anywhere on earth, no matter what you believe, whom you love or what your abilities, and that accessibility is a very important audience for us. And we have incorporated that into our annual planning process. So, it isn't something that is just an ad hoc-

Toby Willis:

Or an afterthought-

Staci Mellman:

... or an afterthought.

Toby Willis:

... like it is so many times, yeah. That is a such a wonderful mission-

Josh Loebner:

That's amazing.

Toby Willis:

... to have. Yeah. Do you have a disability story that you want to share, Staci? Do you have friends or family or someone with a disability that you support or love or do you have any experience that you want to share?

Staci Mellman:

My mom has a mobility issue that came about within the last five or six years. She had some back surgery that didn't go very well. And now she's not able to walk very far or stand up for a long time. She's had a lot of challenges like just traveling in airports. I think she does not consider herself disabled, but I think it is a very frustrating experience and some mental gymnastics that she has to do to try to reconcile with who she wants to be, but the reality of her situation. And she doesn't live in Florida, so just making the trip from Dallas to Tallahassee is a bit of a struggle sometimes.

Josh Loebner:

I have a chronic disability. I was born with a disability and my disability continues to progress more. I still have some sight, but it's going more towards no sight. But for people who more immediately move into a disability, there is that, as you said, that mental gymnastics kind of-

Toby Willis:

Acceptance is a really hard place to get to.

Josh Loebner:

Acceptance. Here's the great thing about what you offer as a destination. You offer hope. If you're showcasing those people with disabilities in a way that's not pitiful, that's

not othering, and you're showing them just an everyday life enjoying what you have to offer, it helps those people who might not be in the right mindset to see that there is that pathway of being, and it's not just this ending of something, right?

Toby Willis:

I think disability is an identity and if you don't identify as having a disability, that's okay. You could still have physical, mental, intellectual limitations. The work that we're doing, benefits everyone.

Staci Mellman:

Exactly.

Toby Willis:

It's a spectrum.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah.

Toby Willis:

I identify as disabled because the world sees me as a blind person. I'm leaning into that. If Mom doesn't, then that's okay. There's no room for judgment, but she still is going to benefit from automatic doors or lighter-weight doors that are easier to open.

Staci Mellman:

Totally.

Toby Willis:

Ramps, grab bars, perhaps. Those things are beneficial to her. It doesn't matter how she identifies.

Staci Mellman:

What can I do as CMO of one of the top travel destinations in the world better than what we're already doing? I want you to tell me.

Toby Willis:

The education piece that you talked about is hugely important. Because as a guide dog user, I don't need a lot of traditional accessibility. Brail signage is great, but educating those hoteliers that this is a need, this is a gap. They can make the physical improvements to make that a better experience. But really the big thing is attitude. When I walk in with my dog, understand and welcome me as a traveler. I just want to feel welcome, safe, and understood. And I think the education piece is really the crux of that because I truly believe—I'm an eternal optimist—I believe in people. I believe that most people want to do the right thing. They just don't know what that is. They don't know what it's like to have a disability.

Staci Mellman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Toby Willis:

So, education is huge. I think in your position influencing any kind of legislation around access, whether it be the built environment, the digital environment, again, that social

inclusion, that attitudinal barriers, if you can lobby for legislation in the state that mandates this education and training, mandates compliance and beyond, that would be helpful and sustainable.

Josh Loebner:

Oh, yeah, I would definitely second all of that. I'm going to get a little bit more granular. I love just broadly destination sharing so many things that they have to offer on their digital properties, their websites. And that's a place that, for sure, I explore and on Visit Florida's website as well. For me, as a disabled traveler, I try to really look at my entire journey and try to plan it out as best I can before I go. There are some gaps though that I feel like destinations can be able to bridge on their websites and that's the transportation to and from those states and those destinations. And so just to get even more granular, when I land at airports, I of course know how to navigate in the airport. It's that next step, it's sometimes challenging for me as a blind person with a cane. I can ask for help and people at airports are wonderful, but I'd love to be able to read information or hear videos on websites that talk about that step from the airport to whatever public transportation is available, rideshares, taxis, car pickups, so that I can be as well planned as possible to know that next step, to then get to my hotel. And so, it's that kind of gap that from my perspective needs to be bridged so that I feel confident not only in the destination but also in me getting to and from the destination. And I feel like it's super simple on your accessibility pages rather than linking off to the airport, be able to share a name narrative that gives that person, "Okay. Once you've landed at Tampa Bay International Airport or Orlando or wherever here in the state, here's your next step to getting to that amazing destination that you want to recreate an experience.

We've got this public transportation, we've got this rideshare. And if you feel uncomfortable about any of it, we've got people ready to help." Whether it's live chat or phone numbers or emails directly to some of those or links off to those other websites. But again, if you have an accessibility hub, how can that hub not only celebrate the destinations but also celebrate accessibility to arrive and depart from those destinations?

Staci Mellman:

That's a really good point. Even for travelers who are able to see able to get around with ease, airports, new cities, all of that can seem very confusing if you don't know exactly what you're looking for.

Josh Loebner:

The other consideration is the gateways from automobile travel and the visitor information centers that Florida has, what can you do to ensure that if Florida wants to be the global leader in not only travel and tourism at disability inclusion and accessibility, how can your visitor information centers be as accessible and welcoming as possible to all?

Staci Mellman:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Josh Loebner:

And whether it's through the information and content you have or the physical features of the space. So again, transportation, whether it's-

Toby Willis:

I love that call-out, Josh, on the... I never thought of it because I road trip all the time and I never feel so awkward anywhere other than a visitor center because it's so car-oriented, right?

Josh Loebner:

And I mean-

Toby Willis:

Blind people ride in cars. We may not drive them yet-

Josh Loebner:

Well, especially to Florida for sure with road trips.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah.

Josh Loebner:

So, how can you ensure that those... You don't own the airports, you don't man the airports, but you definitely do with your visitor information center. So, that would be just another thing to share potentially as a bucket list in the future. And then again, other transportation, there's a lot of light rail that's in Florida. So, how can disability inclusion and the Visit Florida team connect with the light rail? And of course, all the careers lines that are coming back right online and the ports, what can your marketing team and branding team do to connect disability to accessibility and inclusion to those as well?

So, there are so many wonderful ways to transport in Florida that they could... Those are destinations in and of themselves, right? They're part of the journey, but also part of the destination, part of the memory sharing. And it's a wonderful place to potentially consider expanding your marketing, branding, and presence.

Staci Mellman:

Yeah. I think for destinations that are getting started, you can easily see that there is a lot of opportunity here, but you made this point earlier about its incremental progress. And as we're making incremental progress, you as a whole are doing better as a destination. And I think that's really important. You can get easily overwhelmed with all of the things that are possible, but if you just bite off a little at a time, again, looking back at our journey from 2017, we've done a lot of progress in four years. What is the next four years going to bring?

Josh Loebner:

We're excited to find out.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, exactly. I'm going to stay tuned.

Staci Mellman:

Please, please. It's so great to meet you guys.

Toby Willis:

It's so great to meet you.

Josh Loebner:

Oh, that's awesome. Yeah. Awesome to meet you too, Staci.

Toby Willis:

Really happy we got to connect in person. Hey Staci, if people want to learn more about you and your work and to visit Florida and all the good that's happening here in the state around accessibility and inclusion, where can they go to find you and more information?

Staci Mellman:

Yeah, I would just start with my email. So that's S-M-E-L-L-M-A-N, @visitflorida.org.

Smellman@visitflorida.org.

Toby Willis:

Nice. I love it.

Josh Loebner:

And then for travelers with disabilities, is there a place that they can go on visit florida.com?

Staci Mellman:

Yes. Go to visitflorida.com or you can just Google Accessible Travel Florida and it should be one of the top results.

Toby Willis:

So, you have a landing page that has more-

Staci Mellman:

Oh, yeah.

Toby Willis:

... information about accessibility?

Staci Mellman:

Tons of content. Over 100 pieces of content.

Toby Willis:

It's amazing.

Josh Loebner:

That's amazing. And is it [@visitflorida.com/accessibility](https://www.visitflorida.com/accessibility) or?

Staci Mellman:

No. You have to go to things to do and under travel ideas, it's the first one that says accessible travel.

Josh Loebner:

Okay, great.

Staci Mellman:

Go to [visitflorida.com](https://www.visitflorida.com), put your mouse over things to do, and under travel ideas, you'll find accessible travel, and that will take you to our accessible landing page.

Toby Willis:

That's great. I like that. It's just integrated. It's not this thing over here on the side that's separate from everything else. It sounds like it's just part of-

Staci Mellman:

That's exactly what we're trying to do in featuring people with different abilities within our marketing campaigns.

Toby Willis:

Yeah.

Staci Mellman:

Florida is a place for anyone.

Toby Willis:

Well, that is great. And as a disabled traveler, I just want to say, thank you personally.

Josh Loebner:

Chief marketing officer of Visit Florida, Staci Mellman. Staci, thanks so much for being here on Explorable.

Staci Mellman:

Thank you, guys. Thank you.

Toby Willis:

Great. Thanks so much, Staci.