

Explorable | Season Two, Episode Fourteen: Transcript of interview with Sara Emmert

Josh Loebner:

Hey, everybody. Welcome to another Explorable podcast, the podcast for destinations and accessible tourism. We welcome everybody's stories to ensure that what we're sharing is insightful from a business-to-business standpoint, no matter where you are on an inclusion journey to welcome disabled travelers and tourists to your destination or attraction. Before we get started, Toby, I just want to ask, how are you doing today?

Toby Willis:

I'm doing all right. I'm just about one year from my last trip. So, I've been in my basement here in Seattle for just about a year now. I was in London this time last year for work, and I am so eager to get out and travel. And one place I want to go visit sooner than later is my beloved New York. So, I'm really excited about the topic that we're going to be discussing today. Josh, you want to introduce our guest?

Josh Loebner:

Yeah, definitely, Toby. Today you hit the nail on the head. I think everybody always has a desire to visit New York, and today's guest is Sara Emmert, Director of Tourism, Policy, and Special Initiatives for I Love New York. Sara, welcome. We'd love to hear a little bit about your role. And then also a quick intro question. The I Love New York team had a big announcement in the summer of 2020 with the unveiling of Accessible New York. We'd love to hear you talk a little bit about that once you introduce yourself.

Sara Emmert:

Yes, of course. Thank you so much, Josh and Toby, for having myself and our platform on your podcast today. As you mentioned, I work at I Love New York, but we are a program that is situated under the state agency of New York state, which is called Empire State Development. So, the I Love New York program is really focused on building economic growth and development through tourism to the state of New York. And to answer your first question, of course, we've been working on our accessibility program for a couple of year now. this program began as an initiative to basically look at the ways that we could better market New York state as an accessible destination and extend that invitation to travelers with accessibility needs. We already knew that New York state had a wealth of accessible experiences for travelers to enjoy, and that's throughout the state, that's not just New York city. In Open Doors Organization's latest national study, New York City is actually one of the top destinations in the country for travelers with accessibility needs. So, we at I Love New York are the destination marketing organization for the entire state of New York, not just New York City. So, we wanted to make sure that travelers were aware through all of our platforms that there are accessible vacations that they can experience across New York state. Our platform showcase 11 vacation regions from Niagara Falls to the beaches of Long Island. So, we already capture a lot of data for vacation planning, but one thing that we're really lacking is accessible information on our destinations. So, we began doing research basically on how to better market New York to travelers with accessibility needs, and that meant market research, that meant working with experts in the accessible travel field and getting accurate information to consumers for trip planning. And that's really what Accessible in New York is and came to be. It's a trip planner, it's an information sharing tool, and it's a database of accessibility information on New York state destinations.

Josh Loebner:

I love, real quick, just that you shared research. I think the thing for a lot of destinations is that they don't have that data or that research. And it sounds like Accessible New York really listened and learned and made sure that you were able to bridge some pretty big gaps with this initiative.

Toby Willis:

I've heard it said the information sharing is half the battle, so that really resonated with me, Sara, with your comments around sharing what is available so travelers can make a well-informed decision. If we know what we're getting ourselves into, we can plan accordingly. I want to get to the heart in the I Love New York, if you'll pardon the pun, and I'm full of puns. What sparked this interest? You talked a little bit about the business case, but where does the passion lie? What got you all started on this disability-inclusion journey?

Sara Emmert:

As I mentioned, our accessibility information on all of the I Love New York platforms like our website and app were just really lacking. We have thousands of listings on destinations and attractions throughout the state and each listing there are amenities and features that are specific to each location. Before Accessible New York we only had one field for accessibility and that was if a location was wheelchair accessible or not. And that meant just literally a checkbox saying wheelchair accessible. We have someone on our staff at I Love New York who uses a motorized scooter. And so, we often travel for work conferences together across the state. And just from their experience traveling across New York it was clear that not only did that single amenity for wheelchair accessibility give a woefully inaccurate depiction of the experience at some of our tourism locations, but a lot of times it was inaccurate, unfortunately. So, maybe you could get physically into the building, but you couldn't use the restroom, or maybe you could get in the front door, but you couldn't visit any of the exhibits. And that's just covering mobility. That's not to mention all the other accessibility needs beyond mobility, many of which we were seeing addressed individually throughout the whole state. So, for instance, in Dutchess County, they have a program called Think Differently where they're putting a lot of work and effort behind supporting and promoting accessible parks and events and sensory friendly experiences that help those with cognitive needs. And in Rochester, New York and the Finger Lakes location, it's actually home to one of the largest deaf and hard of hearing populations in the United States. And because of the representation in this community, the city has become a lot more accessible from its everyday life to its tourism attractions. So, we knew a lot of great accessibility information was out there. We just didn't have it centralized on I Love New York. And since we have experience working and marketing to niche audiences, mostly through our LGBTQ program, we knew there was more work to do in the accessible travel market and to make that specific invitation to that audience.

Josh Loebner:

That's great.

Toby Willis:

That's great. And, yeah, we're not a monolithic group. Those of us who live with disability, we have diverse dreams and desires and wishes and travel aspirations, so it's important to take an inclusive design approach, not just trying to solve for one particular outcome. Although we appreciate moving in steps, and it is often a phased approach.

Josh Loebner:

And Sara, you brought up some great points at how you're really starting to hone in on that key information that disabled travelers are looking for when it comes to accessibility and inclusion. I know sometimes just my personal philosophy is to elevate from a disability-friendly consideration to really those disability facts. Disability-friendly could be ambiguous, but once you start bringing out those facts, it makes it a lot clearer for that individual. And again, not a monolithic representation of disability, but that person who's deaf or hard of hearing or blind or has low vision or has a mobility disability or neuro-diverse, they really can sink into those different attractions or destinations and find out more. I also love that you're really creating a network that it's not that you're trying to push accessibility, but you're finding those places that are already accessible and how to elevate those more concisely and directly with the Accessible New York initiative. But for those listeners out there, our goal is to connect with business-to-business listeners, those that might be at other destinations—and we know your team of course has a secret sauce, and we don't want to give away too much, but what would you say to those listeners who might be in your role or in a similar position at another state destination or tourism organization that maybe is just starting to consider accessible tourism? We know you guys have been doing this for a long time and that the Accessible New York project that launched this summer is just another layer of so many things that you've done previously. But what would you say to that person who might be in your shoes and doesn't know where to start? What would you suggest for them?

Sara Emmert:

In the beginning, we were really starting from scratch. We had limited accessibility data but really no way to understand what we needed to provide to travelers and how to get that information accurately. So, we began by trying to understand the potential scope and the demographics of the accessible travel market, specifically for New York state, and the perception of the state as an accessible travel destination. To do that, we knew that we needed experts, so we called in Open Doors Organization, which I think you guys are pretty familiar with, but they're a really great group known for their national studies on the accessible travel market. So, they really helped us hone in on this project. They conducted specific market research for New York state, which since we did it a couple of years ago, it was based on their 2015 study, but that study showed us that for New York state alone, there are over 1.5 million adults in the state with accessibility needs. Since a lot of our target market for the state is interstate travel, that's an estimated potential travel impact of over \$530 million a year. Understanding the potential impact was really important for us to be able to communicate to our tourism partners across the state just to get them to realize that the accessible travel market is serious business and it can bring huge economic impact to their communities. Because our next goal of the program, we needed a lot of help from them in the industry to get that accurate accessibility information to us. So, Open Doors helped us create this mechanism through a form of a fillable survey, basically to collect accessibility data from tourism destinations across the state. So that survey has been really key for us because it allows us to collect information, but it also provides a roadmap to becoming more accessible for tourism destinations that don't really know where to start. So, we're able to use that survey data to create the Accessible New York hub on our website and also amplify our accessibility amenities on each of our location listings that people use for trip planning in the state.

Toby Willis:

Thanks, Sara. I'm sure you faced some challenges along the way. Can you click down into a couple of those, other policy challenges, or attitudes? Just curious where the friction was and

maybe that would help inform someone else on their journey how to remove some of those barriers for making progress and in disability inclusion.

Sara Emmert:

I'd say one of the biggest challenges was just getting folks to understand the importance of taking the time to do the survey at first. Our survey that Open Doors created, and I helped put together, is exhaustive. It covers not just mobility, but it covers vision, hearing, and cognitive needs. So, depending on the size and the offerings at a particular location, the survey can take some time to complete. So, while it is a time commitment, once it's done, there's so much useful information to be shared with travelers that may have never been communicated any other way before. Folks who really don't know where to start, like I said, this survey offers them a roadmap to say like, "I'm going to go through my entire destination and see where there are accessible areas," that they might not be communicating on a regular basis. I think a lot of locations were also just worried about being dinged for not being accessible enough, but we wanted to make it clear to folks that this was never an audit. This was, and is always about, sharing as much accessibility information as possible to let the travelers make an informed decision about trip planning. One of my mentors once said to me, "Don't make perfection the enemy of progress." And as a recovering perfectionist, that's really stuck with me, because as humans and with anything in life, nothing is a 100% perfect, but it shouldn't get in the way of making needed progress. So, we weren't asking for perfection from the survey, just share the information that you do have and put it up for travelers to make a decision. And if the survey inspired you to take things to the next level, then that's even better.

Toby Willis:

Do you have any insight as to why tour operators and your stakeholders were reluctant to complete that survey? Did they maybe not know how important this was or how important this market is?

Sara Emmert:

I mean, I think for the most part, we had had some things in New York state, specifically just about lawsuits being brought against a lot of locations based on their website not being accessible, and that was outside of anything that we were working on. But I think anytime that word accessibility came up, it scared a lot of people because they were like, "Are there legal implications? Are we being audited? Are we going to get dinged if something's not accessible?" But that was never the approach that we were taking. This was just a survey because we had only the wheelchair accessible amenity box on our website, and we didn't really have any other forms of accessibility amenities for any of these locations. So, what we were saying is, "We're just trying to collect as much information as possible. Let us get it on the site. And it's never going to be we're going to point out all the flaws of a location." It was more, "We're going to point out what you do have in terms of accessibility." And once that was communicated, then people felt a lot more comfortable with it. For the ones that didn't complete, we have a lot of historic sites, older homes, older facilities, older museums that they just felt like they were completely inaccessible. And I feel like once we started talking more with them about, "Well, okay, maybe you can't get to the second floor, but maybe you can offer a video describing what's on the second floor." That's not going to stop people from coming to your location if they can do some of the things that are located in an attraction, but let's not close the door to that conversation completely."

Toby Willis:

Yeah. It's often seen as a punitive landscape where it's the accessibility minefield, but I think it's important for us to change that bias and that stigma. That disability is diversity, and it's important for us to be included. I mean, we, as businesses, wouldn't categorically dismiss 20% of the population and even higher in some countries. It's important call out there, the attitude, that reluctance and fear around being litigated against. And I've spoken with a plaintiff attorney who said almost all of her clients would not have pursued legal action if the defendants had just engaged and had a conversation and made some attempt. So, I think it's important for us to help providers understand, travel professionals understand, that this is a lucrative opportunity and not something to be avoided.

Josh Loebner:

So, Sara, I want to go back to the survey. You mentioned that in some cases it was pretty exhaustive with the information that you were looking to gain insights on. Can you share a little bit about what you felt like based on your learnings from the disability community, your learnings from the attractions and destinations? What was some of the key information that you wanted to share or that you are sharing through the Accessible New York initiative?

Sara Emmert:

I think one important piece, and while it seems like there's really no place to start when trying to make that invitation to travelers with accessibility needs, is it wasn't as complicated as we had imagined when we had first started. So, really the best thing that we can do is to provide information to consumers on the information that was already out there. It just wasn't collected and packaged together in a streamlined way. I think for a lot of people, there's a fear in failure. There's a fear in the unknown or deviating from familiar forms of marketing. But folks won't know about locations if they aren't talked about. If there's not representation for a community of people, why would they want to invest their time and their money in visiting a location? And I think that's a lot of wasted opportunities, especially for destination marketing organizations that are hesitant to take that next step. I think that we also have to be advocates for these communities because a lot of times, locations and destinations might not realize how simple it is to enhance the consumer experience for people with accessibility needs. So, the survey goes through, pretty methodically I'd say, to take the ADA requirements and really break it down into separate questions. So, it's not just, "Here's all of the ADA requirements. Here's a number of questions." It's not just, "Is your bathroom accessible?" It's asking you about grab bars. It's asking you about measuring the distance. It doesn't cost thousands of dollars to put a temporary bench in a roll-in shower or adjust the location of a paper towel dispenser. And I think at the end of the day, it's just a lack of knowledge or knowing that these adjustments can make a big difference in people's lives. They can make a big difference in their experience when they go visit a place. And if they have a positive experience, then we hope they return. We hope they tell people about it to come visit New York state and come visit these destinations.

Toby Willis:

So, I wanted to ask a quick question about how you measure success. Our audience is comprised largely of businesses and part of our responsibility as good stewards of our respective businesses is being able to demonstrate metrics around our effort. So, I'm wondering if you have any insight, and in this and disability inclusion and accessibility it's been historically difficult to measure. So, if you could, talk about how you all are measuring success in this space.

Sara Emmert:

It's been tough for us, right now. It's been tough for everybody, of course. Right now in the state of New York, we're not actively promoting travel. We're really encouraging folks to stay local, follow the Governor's directives on reopening and safety guidelines to keep the spread of COVID under control. So, as such, when we launched the Accessible New York initiative in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the ADA in July, we did not promote it in a way that we normally would without a pandemic. So, right now our focus has really been on building more accessibility information into the hub and expanding that information online so once the state is opened back up to travel, we'll be ready to go full steam ahead on promoting accessible locations across the state. I think for us, we have kind of seen the little bit of silver lining in the pandemic because it allowed folks more time at these tourism destinations to take the survey, complete the information to have on our website and have on their websites. The survey does take a little bit longer, especially for those locations with more amenities, but if they have the time to actually do it, we can make sure that they're doing it well and they're putting that information on their platforms, as well as our platforms. We also just rolled out a new feature over these past few months that allows folks to upload survey data right into the backend of our website. This just allows us for more real time adjustments to that data. It allows more folks to share accessibility information. And like I said, it's the silver lining of we've wanted to promote it full steam ahead, but with the pandemic it's given us some limitations, but we were able to do some backend work that I think will help the program for years to come. So, that's the way we're measuring it right now. And I think moving forward, it'll be more about our kind of traditional marketing of the program.

Toby Willis:

Yeah. Never let a good crisis go to waste. I think was that Churchill that said that? Take the time to re-tool and tool up and be ready for this surge, and it's not just people like myself who are going to be doing some revenge traveling. We also have a silver surge, 10,000 people a day are turning 65 and Boomers are aging into disability. So, I think it's really important to fix forward, if you will, because we have a wave of travelers with accessibility needs who are out there, they're wealthy, and they're traveling, and they're vaccinated. I think it's a good time for us to build these policies and programs to allow for true inclusion in the space.

Josh Loebner:

Well, and Sara, we've heard from a number of guests that this has been a time to be a little bit more introspective when it comes to accessibility initiatives and several others have noted some of the updates that they're making right now when they can, when they have just a little bit more bandwidth right before, as Toby was saying that surge may come into play, hopefully once the pandemic subsides and more tourists, whether abled or disabled start to their travel journey. One thing I do want to ask, Sara, is the business case. We know that tourism at large is a multi-billion-dollar industry. And even for the state of New York, it brings in significant revenues. If we dial it into Accessible New York, you've already shared some pretty big numbers when it comes to the people with disability who might be travelers or who have an intent to travel and they're spending. What's the business case, if you could just repeat some of those numbers you brought up earlier, or if you have some other insights you want to share about the business value of Accessible New York.

Sara Emmert:

As I mentioned before, the economic impact of the accessible travel market is huge. In New York state we market to travelers interstate and within a five-hour drive radius. So, Open Doors was able to estimate the total impact of our drive market for adults with accessibility needs and

their companions to over \$4 billion per year in economic impact. That's obviously a huge potential for us in New York state. Again, that is based on that 1.5 million adult travelers with accessibility needs, and they use that multiplier effect because a lot of people are traveling with other people, and they spend money when they travel. That is a huge opportunity for so many businesses, a huge travel segment that we should be tapping into on a regular basis. And just by providing this information, you can be tapping into that market. I've also heard anecdotally from a number of people in the accessible travel market that once travelers with accessibility needs visit a location and have a positive experience, they share that information among their circles, encouraging other people to visit. There's no doubt in our mind that travelers with accessibility needs are a strong travel segment with a high consumer loyalty and just building trust with this segment through simple steps, it'll only eventually lead to economic growth, which we hope to take full advantage of once we're able to do so again.

Toby Willis:

Thanks for sharing that, Sara. I wanted to ask you, if you wouldn't mind sharing some of your favorite accessible destinations in New York and tell us how we can learn more.

Sara Emmert:

I mean, we have so many, but recently we just discussed the Wild Center, which is located in Tupper Lake, which is considered the Adirondack region of New York state. The Wild Center is actually a natural history museum, so it details the landscape of the rugged Adirondack region. But most specifically it features universal design throughout all of its exhibits. I think one of the coolest features at the location is this tree top wild walk. So, it's suspended 30 feet in the air, and it allows visitors to feel what it's like from a bird's eye view of the Adirondacks. This is fully accessible to visitors. And I think that's really extraordinary because I think people would think a suspended bridge 30 feet in the air might not be fully accessible, but it is. And they also offer guided tours for people who are blind or have low vision. They offer closed captioning available on all their theater movies. They offer sensory friendly days. It's just an incredibly unique destination, that's family friendly, it's fun, and they've really done everything they can to go above and beyond for travelers with accessibility needs. The state, I will mention, also has a number of really wonderful state parks that are very accessible to folks from Niagara Falls to a new project we're really excited about at Letchworth State Park in the Finger lakes. Letchworth State Park is actually known as the Grand Canyon of the East. And they recently began construction on an autism nature trail, which will be the first of its kind in the country. So, this trail will be a one mile loop, which will include eight stations for engagement from everything from quieting engagement to active adventure and exploration. The trail will be open to everybody, but it's really designed to meet the sensory needs and experiences of people with autism spectrum disorder and developmental disabilities. So, we hope to see that completed and open later this year. We're super excited about it. So, something to really look forward to.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, I'm super excited about it. I had no idea. So, I'm learning a lot myself today. Where can I go to learn more?

Sara Emmert:

Yes, you can actually visit our Accessible New York hub on, Ilovenewyork.com. Right now it's live, and you can follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at I Love New York. You can also download our I Love New York app, which is available on all streaming services, and you can find me on LinkedIn. My name is Sara Emmert, and I work at Empire State Development.

Toby Willis:

That's so awesome. Thank you so much.

Josh Loebner:

Yeah. Thank you so much, Sara. This, I really want to travel now. Like Toby was saying, we've all been cooped up and everything that you've been sharing from the museums to the state parks, what can I say? I love New York. Sara Emmert.

Sara Emmert:

That's awesome.

Josh Loebner:

Director of Tourism, Policy, and Special Initiatives for I Love New York. Thanks so much. This has been an Explorable podcast.