

We ain't no first world wannabe: Making our mark as a developing city

 By [Leigh Dawber](#)

14 Jan 2019

Last year, for me, was all about travel - literally and figuratively. Between attending Destinations International, the Digital Tourism Think Tank, World Travel Market, City Nation Place, and two overseas whistle-stop holidays, I travelled between three continents and became one with my economy class seat.



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I was surprised that despite countries being disparate in their cultures and offerings, we were all largely going through the same challenges, and that's almost the superglue that keeps Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) together.

And even more surprisingly, I found that far from being a small city trailing behind as some first world-wannabe, Cape Town is setting the standard for the ways in which we address challenges faced in tourism. I also found that being a developing city actually works IN our favour: our large potential for growth means we can see results when we do something effective; our multi-culturalism means that we can truly be inclusive; our somewhat blurred rules means that we can test boundaries and try new things; and being the underdog means that people are generous, they root for us and want to help.

Here are my top five insights on how we are making our mark on the global stage.

Make the right friends

Our NBF is NYC & Company, the DMO for New York City. I take my hat off to our CEO, who, after not being able to secure a meeting with NYC & Company, in true African style hung around their stand at a trade show and hustled his way in by taking the place of a no-show. This got us a foot in the door and solidified an enjoyable and genuine relationship between our two CEOs. At our City Twinning Signing Ceremony, you can see the generosity between a global giant and developing city punching above her weight:

We are now in our second year of partnership and planning our second campaign together to promote tourism between our two cities and have been recognised for our collaborative approach at the City Nation Place Awards this year.

It's not me, it's you

One of the challenges that DMOs all seem to be facing is how to get communities on-board to drive the tourism agenda from the inside out. Practically, this means that communities need to understand how tourism can directly benefit them, how they directly influence the visitor experience, and how to proactively drive tourism within their neighbourhoods.

Through piloting a number of seemingly disconnected initiatives, we developed a model with a multi-pronged approach and were invited to share it as best practice at both Destinations International and the Digital Tourism Think Tank this year. Our model is based on 4 key pillars: 1) Buy-in and involvement from communities; 2) Cultural inclusivity; 3) Product development and area- based marketing; and 4) Opportunities for the younger generation.

Put together, these key pillars equips communities with the right attitude, information and skills to grow sustainable tourism, where hand-in-hand we create jobs and promote visitor spend in the less affluent areas that really need it.

Put on your goggles and hold-on for the ride

Whenever I think I've kind of got a handle on the digital landscape and developments in technology, things change or something new gets launched, and my seven-year-old seems to know about it before me. I follow the industry leaders like a hawk, and what seems to make a global event is featuring the 'big boys' and their new developments on the main stage. I'm talking about the likes of Google, Airbnb, Facebook and LinkedIn. However, I find its the smaller start-ups, the entrepreneurial mavericks, to be where the magic happens and the most useful in what can be achieved with little money and strong partnerships.

In 2017 we launched the first mobile-first destination website in Africa and was singled out by Skift.com as one of the 25 Best Websites in the World, as well as how we were setting the pace for Tourism Website Trends Highlighting User

Experience and Design. This being said, a year ago is a long time in the digital world – what's next...?

Keep it real

Take a challenge like authenticity – bringing a city to life through emotional connection: our #lovecapetown brand does just that, uniting us all with a heartfelt touch. In a country with a rainbow of colours and cultures, we will always have an inclusive attitude. Who else could promote tourism to the LGBT and the Muslim traveler? We can. Inclusivity IS authenticity.

Look mom, I failed!

As the world changes and the way people travel changes, we need to evolve. I find being brave easy but learning to fail has been a hard lesson, including the resilience to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and give it another go (or not). And even though this sentiment is across DMOs globally, it is interesting how the business model hasn't changed to support this – how does this get articulated in KPAs and performance-based bonuses?

We need to be willing to take risks, be open and vulnerable with our stakeholders and staff, and be committed to the process of change, but also realise that we can't control everything. We need to do this to be a part of the future of travel, and not just a bystander trying to keep up.

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