

# DESTINATION MARKETING: A 2021 OUTLOOK

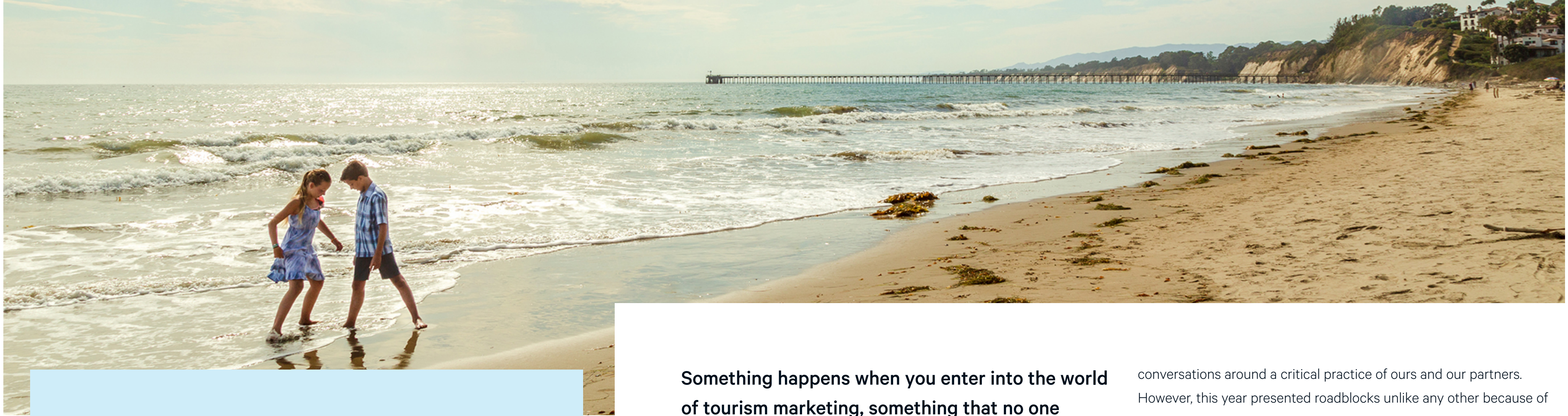


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“ Travel isn't about going to beautiful places; it's about creating bridges across cultures and building human stories. ”

— JOHNIE GALL | @dirtbagdarling

Something happens when you enter into the world of tourism marketing, something that no one necessarily tells you about. Sure, you tell great stories, you create pleasing content, and you peel back the layers of destinations and find out what really comprises their DNA. **We're outsiders who get to discover new places so we can help other outsiders find their places.**

But there's more to it than that. Beyond our service offerings, we build human-to-human relationships with the people who have given part of their soul to a physical place so that it has its own unique spirit. We come to understand that spirit and know it sparks the connection between place and people. We see the impacts that tourism has on communities, how it creates bonds, eliminates misconceptions, and overall enriches the human experience. The privilege of travel depends on the communities that create experiences worth the effort of time and cost. And we have been privileged enough to make travel part of our business. The ability to tell these stories and benefit communities around the country is something we do not take for granted.

Traditionally, we release an annual ebook examining one area of tourism marketing, travel influencers. We do this to create positive

conversations around a critical practice of ours and our partners. However, this year presented roadblocks unlike any other because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we work tirelessly to support our clients, our hearts ache for their loss. We feel a pinch of pain for every client we've ever worked with who is struggling to maintain economically as well as keep their residents and visitors safe.

Therefore, we adjusted this year's process to have direct and intimate conversations and released detailed questionnaires to select influencers, tourism partners and tourism clients. This qualitative approach presents more conversational feedback than survey analysis and allows us to think critically about the future. In these precarious times, we felt the best resource we could offer was a window to the people this pandemic is impacting the most – the influencers and the destinations themselves.

Thank you for your interest in our work. May we all work hard together toward a prosperous future for the health, safety and stability of our communities.

Sincerely,

*Abbi Whitaker*

# INTRODUCTION



# SETTING THE SCENE

We entered 2020 with high hopes. Travel was booming. According to Bloomberg, the global airline industry was projected to hit an 11th straight year of record flights performed, at 40.3 billion in 2020. Travel spending was forecast to increase by 4%, according to the U.S. Travel Forecast.

And then COVID-19 stopped us in our tracks. **Seemingly overnight we rushed to the table with Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) clients turning off media spend campaigns, halting scheduled content and press trips, and began formulating response plans.**

There was no guide or roadmap to reference – like other agencies and destinations, we collaborated under immense pressure to respond responsibly and logically. As we’ve begun to move forward, albeit, with caution, influencers have become critical partners in the present and for the future. This ebook is intended to explore the approaches that destinations and influencers have taken during this unpredicted year and offers insights on how others can shape marketing strategy and best join forces with influencers now and moving forward.



## CHANGING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMIC

If the first wave of quarantine taught us anything, it’s that going dark during these times, even as a destination, is a poor choice. Maintaining conversations with audiences is critical. A frequent partner of ours and travel industry strategist and thought leader Kiki Ander emphasized the importance of keeping in touch with audiences, both in the initial wave of lockdowns and any others moving forward.

**“We – destinations, properties, businesses in the travel and hospitality industry – owe it to our audiences to stay in touch, provide information, and look ahead, to communicate aspirational aspects of traveling.”** - Kiki Ander

Initially, crisis planning didn’t prioritize influencers. In fact, of the round table participants, every influencer spoke of immediate cancellation or postponement of their travel and hospitality relationships.

**Several specified that their existing partners directly told them they were spending less money on influencer marketing.**

**Almost all gave credit to their current DMO partners for swift and ongoing communication.**





## CHANGING RELATIONSHIP DYNAMIC

While this halt in partnerships affected influencers' upcoming plans, they are working to provide flexibility for existing and new DMO partners where they can.

Over half of the influencers surveyed expressed that their practice of flexibility comes directly from a desire to support Destination Marketing Organizations and local businesses that have hosted and supported them in the past.

Notably, flexibility wasn't defined by cost savings or latitude in timing alone. It was noted repeatedly that content quality and the freedom to present it in an organic, audience-focused way were central to the new relationship dynamic.

" I'm more eager to help brands/hotels/ destinations to get tourism going again and open to being more flexible. "

*Luxury and sustainable travel influencer*

— **ANDRE DE MELLO** | @andredemellow

" I've offered a few [perks] to help the entire industry keep the public's travel dream alive. We're all struggling through this together." "

*Photography and art-centric travel influencer*

— **JENN EXPLORES** | @jennexplores



# FLEXIBILITY

It's this flexibility that will keep many travel influencers working throughout the pending second wave of shutdowns and the looming possibility of travel restrictions. Because, as referenced by Ander, who represents a myriad of DMOs and hospitality brands throughout the West Coast, the working relationships between influencers and tourism brands are already shifting.

**“Fact is, the [influencer] market has become very saturated,” said Ander. “They absolutely will still have a place, but it’s no longer going to be a buyers market. The power will shift back to the brand side, and they will lead the structure of the relationship and conversation.”**

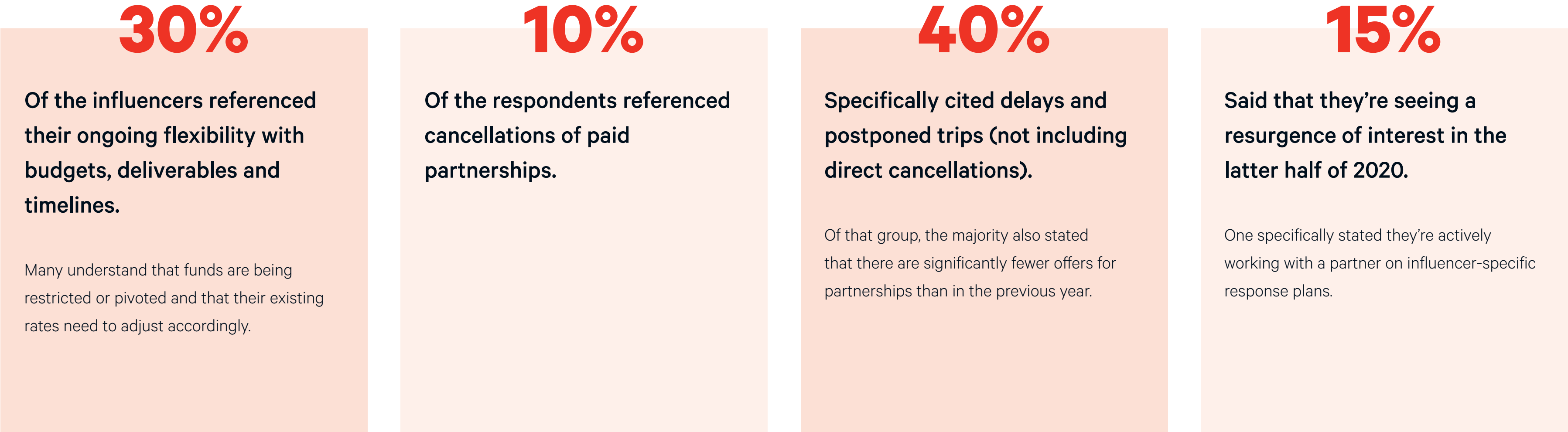
What does that mean for tourism brands and travel influencers? Ander's key takeaway was that as the public reprioritizes and reshapes their lives and points of view, they'll develop new preferences about what kind of content they want to consume. This will allow marketers to choose influencers who bring something special to the brand.



# NEW INFLUENCER DYNAMICS

At the end of the day, good influencers are ambassadors for their audience, hence why niche categories of travel influencers are so expansive. How they are an ambassador will change, and for this to be successful and safe, they have to choose to be stewards of good and both sides must take the time and energy to collaborate as closely as ever. —————>

BY THE NUMBERS





# COMMUNICATION THEMES

## FOR FUTURE CAMPAIGNS



## SAFETY

**Laura Visconti (@LauraLawsonVisconti)**, an influencer and creative agency owner, said influencers can be instrumental in breaking down the confusion of travel. They can help eliminate confusion in an encouraging and inspirational way while providing key (and often disbursed) details on openings and closures, restrictions, and safety guidelines.



## EASE

Being cooped up along with a global pandemic doesn't do a lot of favors for traveler's anxiety and fears, and rightfully so – the danger is real.

60% of the respondents specifically mentioned eliminating the “stress” and “fear” when asked how their content can attract travelers to destinations, and most of those also emphasized that they want to show fun experiences are possible even with the precautions and regulations.



## IMPACT

Perhaps most surprisingly, during the discussion of future collaborations with travel brands, half of the respondents stated there's a need to show the impact of travel on these destinations.

Weekend Getaway and Solo Travel influencer **Chelsea Pearl (@ChelseaPearl)** put it clearly - influencer's greatest advantage to DMOs and their economies is **sharing where our tourism dollars mean the most.**

Clearly, travel influencers are aware of the economic impact a lack of tourism has on their business partners, and appear to care as much about that, if not more, than their own immediate bottom line. This complements the aforementioned points about flexibility – **travel influencers understand their roles only have a lucrative future if they are long-term value adds for travel brands.**



# AUTHENTICITY & RESPONSIBILITY

In addition to the more immediate tactical efforts for responsibility promoting a destination, our conversations with travel influencers pointed to their more expansive role in the future of storytelling and content marketing post-COVID-19.

“We have to tell stories of change and pivot [promotions] to the ‘new normal’ because of our global pandemic,” said **Cacinda Maloney, owner of @PointsandTravel**. “Working with influencers is a great way for the destinations to showcase their brand to the influencer’s followers and achieve their ultimate goal, which is to inspire travel to their destination.”

One way they can do this is with content that authentically highlights businesses and properties that have exceeded safety standards and strive to adapt while finding innovative ways to reshape on-property experiences. One or two hotels or recreational businesses highlighted could make a world of difference – audiences can understand the possibilities of travel while eliminating high anxiety levels AND showing off the amenities of a destination.

**The need for niche coverage was obvious from the responses.**



“Through creating authentic content that is really focused on the special aspects/niche aspects of the destination,” explained **@aidamollenkamp**.

**Nikki and Vikki Reddy of @reddyseteat** added that through influencers with loyal niche followings, viewers can learn what’s still out there to see/explore in the world, enticing them to create their own trips around their special interests.



# SUSTAINABILITY & SAFETY MEASURES

One of the most exciting areas of response to our questions was spurred when each influencer was asked what kind of new opportunities DMOs and influencers have to work together in a post-COVID-19 world. This conversation once again unearthed influencer's desire to tell quality, authentic and responsible stories on behalf of the places they work with.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability was a key theme in this conversation. While some of the influencers involved have an eco-friendly niche, this concept was highlighted across the full spectrum of influencer profiles.

As **Johnie Gall (@DirtbagDarling)** stated, travel needs to be more mindful, both in respecting nature and local culture and consumption. Influencers and destinations need to work together to make the travel industry more sustainable.

**Adrienne Hamrah, owner of @willwanderforfood**, stated that influencers can be carriers of crucial awareness messages – sustainable topics can lead communications, and because we have the space to rethink and rebuild the travel industry, now is the time to integrate the two.

## SAFETY MEASURES

Safety measures and precautions led this conversation, with 75% of the respondents citing that as a key opportunity.

As expected by her handle, **@TrustedTravelGirl**, who has more than half a million combined followers, stated that it's most important audiences know they have a trusted source who balances beautiful imagery with valid information on the travel experience.

A connected point to this, one influencer was passionate about destinations reevaluating their influencer strategies and campaigns to streamline back to travel experts as opposed to more general lifestyle influencers.

Destination marketers agreed with this perception, with representatives from Carmel-by-the-Sea, Placer County and other regions throughout California in particular emphasizing the need for the inclusion of safety precautions and honest portrayals of what travelers should expect in their content—focusing on practical expertise and normalizing the ways we'll need to navigate this changed world over aspirational notions that might be impractical or otherwise inapplicable to the changing audiences consuming travel content.



# SIMPLIFYING THE EXPERIENCE

IN ORDER TO ENRICH IT

Placer County, California is home to 1,400 square miles of majestic alpine beauty, rich with California history, all-season recreation, and boutique winery experiences. It's exactly the kind of environment that a mostly quarantined urban-based population is craving right now, explained Robert Haswell, CEO of Placer County Visitors Bureau.

During an interview with Haswell about the state of travel influencers in the wake of COVID-19, he was forthright in the destination's need to work heavily with travel influencers in the coming years.

"People that have been quarantined inside small apartments and limited to outdoor exposure only in their neighborhoods want outdoor experiences," he explained. "Influencers have great audience segmentation, so no matter what their niche, they will play a large role marketing relevant hidden gems to people within road-trip distance."

This was echoed in conversations with destinations, travel experts, and the influencers themselves – they can provide detailed instructions and inspiration for a new kind of travel...that's really going back to travel's roots.





# TRANSFORMING TRAVEL TRENDS

## RETURN OF THE ROAD TRIP

From Kalispell, Montana to Placer County, California, industry professionals emphasized the need to market alternatives to air travel. Amy Herzog, Executive Director of Visit Carmel, suspects that as leisure travel gradually returns, it will be critical for influencers to illustrate realistic travel solutions—like safe travel by car—for their viewing audiences.

30% of the influencers mentioned that road trips are not only a great way to foster nostalgia, but they can often be less expensive and safer than air travel. They detailed opportunities to build content around road trip experiences and how to plan them, providing discount codes or specials for accommodations and experiences along the way, etc.

There was an abundance of ideas for promoting road trips, from utilizing live content for the duration to more content like checklists, car-side scavenger hunts, and specialized maps (emphasis on providing this outside of the tourism websites). Yuliana Gonzales, Executive Director of Visit Camarillo, emphasized influencers could convey great value for a brand by modeling best-practices in safety as well as illustrating the safety and comfort of destination amenities to their audiences.

## THE EMERGENCE OF UNDEREXPLORED DESTINATIONS

We purposely spoke with tourism professionals and influencers who have in the past or currently work with emergent destinations, and a prevalent theme among respondents was that high-traffic cities are going to struggle opening back up to tourists for the foreseeable future.

High-traffic, historically popular tourism destinations such as New York, Las Vegas and San Francisco are juggling reopening priorities with the risks of the pandemic. As people look to escape cities they've been isolated in, as well as weigh the risks of close-quarters transportation and events, smaller destinations with spacious outdoor offerings and lower-occupancy businesses offer ideal retreats.





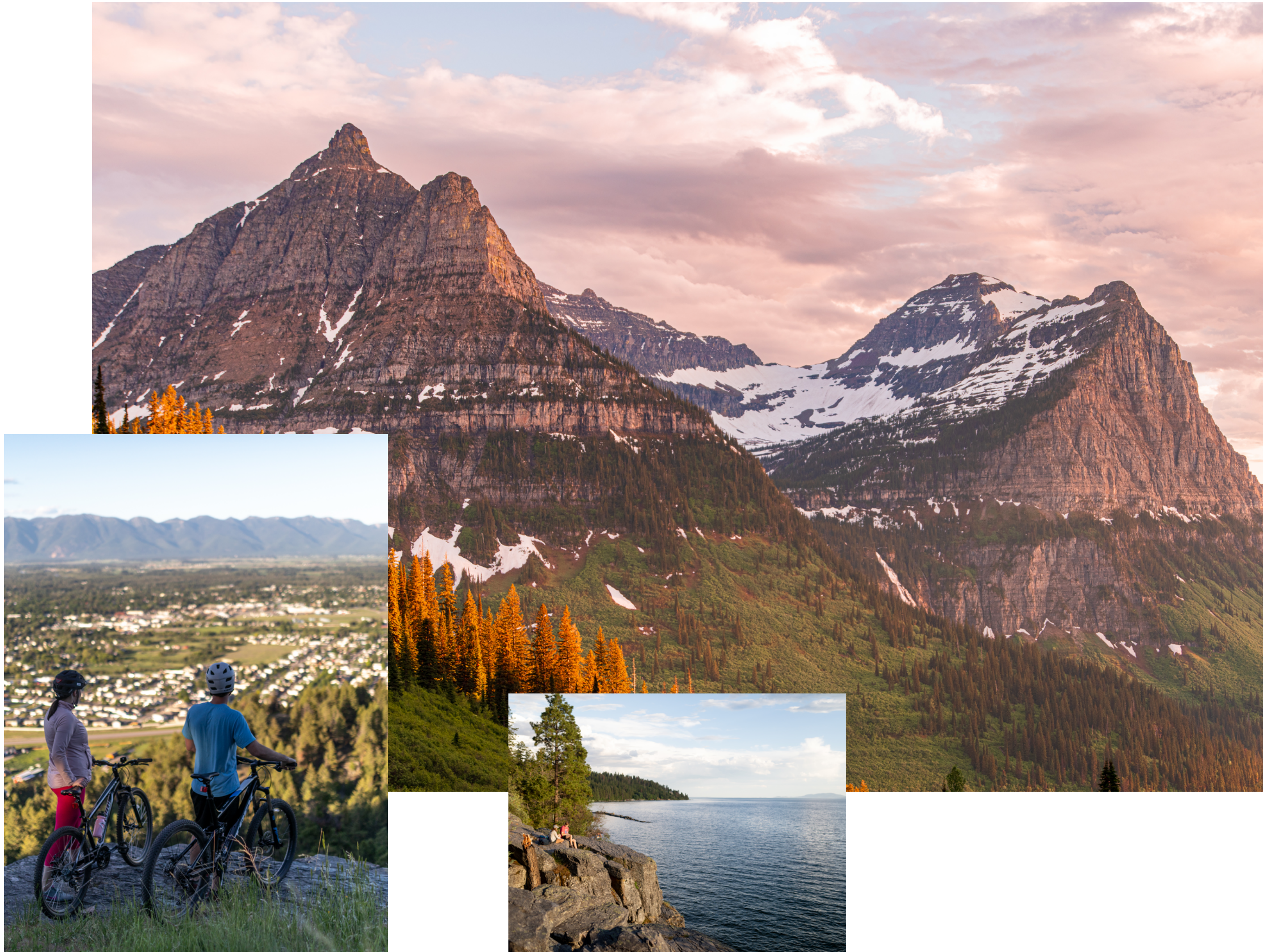
# TACTICS

Diane Medler, Executive Director of Discover Kalispell, is optimistic about the shift in traveler preferences toward new, lesser-known destinations.

**“I’m very excited about the rise of emergent destinations – places more secluded or lesser known than major areas around them – and what their place in the post-COVID outbreak might look like. I see them having something very special to offer the traveler concerned about distance and distancing, and just wanting to get back to the basics.”**

Medler’s hope is that she can work with more travel influencers in the coming months to overcome any perceived barriers to travel to a destination like theirs, and help expose the drive and fly market to their city and its access to recreation (which happens to include Glacier National Park, one of the most stunning outdoor spots in the Western United States).





# AN INFLUENCER'S PURPOSE

Medler noted that influencers can help a destination like theirs:

Understand the need for a car, and be comfortable driving to and around the destination.

Help educate newcomers to recreational activities. For instance, how to safely camp during the summer without spiking the wildfire risk.

Show off the destination's alternatives to traditionally popular tourist draws. An example would be if Yellowstone, one of the most well-known and visited National Parks in the U.S., becomes overcrowded and therefore unsafe in the coming months, Glacier National Park in Montana could be a great alternative.

**One thing is certain – influencers can be incredible marketing tools for giving lesser-known places a direct connection with traveler's desire for safe new exploration in the age of COVID-19 and beyond.**





# FINAL TAKEAWAYS

The last of our conversation with the influencer participants asked them to provide final words and pieces of advice for their industry counterparts.

Here's what they said:



## COLLABORATION

The time indoors and/or limited in travel has given influencers an opportunity to dream new ideas, and they want to collaborate with their future partners from planning to process to execution. More than one stated to “reach out and ask.” Destinations, don’t be shy. You never know the opportunities that await a few emails away.



## CLARITY

In order to effectively collaborate, several influencers stressed the importance of an overall response plan and specific messaging for them to pull from. As @aidamollenkamp put it, be focused on the message that’s best for your destination and target the influencers who can help you reach that ideal demographic.



## BUDGET MATTERS

Yes, influencers are being flexible and understand budget restraints. However, they overwhelmingly said that there still has to be a healthy budget for them to create meaningful content to show off the real experience, provide a myriad of assets, and effectively tell stories.



## INDIVIDUALLY AND CREATIVITY

Try to move away from cost-saving measures like group trips whenever possible. The most successful partnerships happen when influencers have the creative freedom to execute content they know will resonate with their audiences. This means, letting them create their own schedule to explore.



## MORE PLATFORMS FOR NICHE AUDIENCES

While Instagram posts, for instance, can lead a lot of the strategy and contract details, 80% of the influencers we spoke with detailed how the pandemic has pushed them to expand or re-engage their content and marketing offerings. From expanding newsletters and blogs (several mentioned a shift into more long-form content as part of projects), to more use of live features, and even using entirely new platforms like TikTok, there are countless ways influencers can reach new audiences and expose them to their new favorite vacation spot.





2021

# INFLUENCER FORECASTING

## OUR PERSPECTIVE

There's a lot of information to process where the rapidly evolving worlds of destination marketing and influencer engagement are concerned. Some of you might be wondering: "How can I use this data to make smart choices about my destination marketing strategy in the coming year?"

To help you out, members from The Abbi Agency's marketing, public relations, social media and research teams came together to offer some key takeaways that should help to guide your marketing strategy in 2021 and beyond.



**Working with an influencer doesn't automatically guarantee authenticity.**

When COVID's negative influence finally wanes, the traveling public will look to influencers for details and reassurance on safety, but honesty will be critical.

**The days of influencers acting as a low- or no-cost outlet are gone.**

Influencers have become very sophisticated. While it might sound self-serving coming from an agency, having an outside firm who has worked with influencers and knows how to create a win-win engagement really helps avoid headaches.

**The authentic and unique voice influencers provide can help round out a paid media plan and can spur more organic engagement with a destination.**

The entire world will focus on attracting travelers. A more intimate approach will help destinations stand out.

**The pandemic has put a strain on business travel budgets, so much that some companies have cut it completely.**

If your DMO is facing this challenge, working with an influencer provides an opportunity to gain access to owned photography. The advantage of this is twofold, your destination gets access to real-time and new content.



# 2021 FORECASTING CONTINUED

**During this time, likes, followers and engagement shouldn't be your sole benchmark for partnering with an influencer.**

Since most DMOs are focused on their drive audience, you should look at influencers who have a direct feed to those audiences. In this case, the quantitative numbers may look smaller, but overlooking these accounts may mean that you are forgoing an avenue to reach your direct audience.

**It's no secret that newsrooms are shrinking and some media outlets are even closing up shop.**

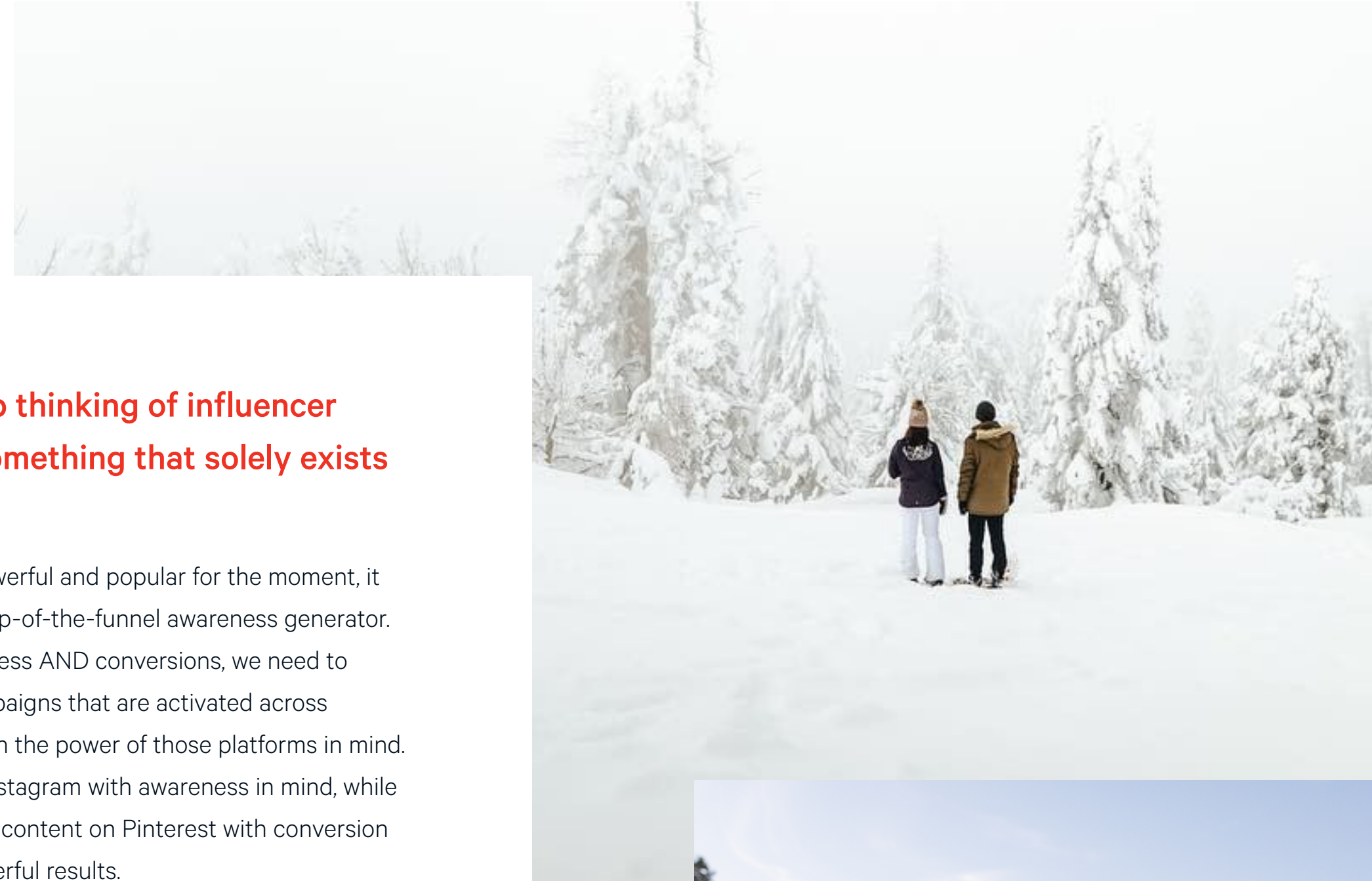
In place of traditional media, utilize influencers to tell your destination's story through their blog. This is a great way to show people what traveling to your destination right now really looks like. Make sure to share that blog across your owned channels to get more eyeballs on the content!

**We need to stop thinking of influencer marketing as something that solely exists on Instagram.**

While Instagram is powerful and popular for the moment, it exists primarily as a top-of-the-funnel awareness generator. To help create awareness AND conversions, we need to create influencer campaigns that are activated across multiple platforms, with the power of those platforms in mind. Pushing content on Instagram with awareness in mind, while pushing simultaneous content on Pinterest with conversion in mind can have powerful results.

**Guest blogging has proved to be a powerful tool in the past when it comes to working with influencers.**

As new tools, like the recently announced Instagram Guides, are released we need to think outside the box and look at how we can bring old tactics into the new year. Asking influencers to be a guest blogger on an Instagram Guide could be valuable for both parties, by providing content for the brand while also driving traffic back to the influencer.





# PLOTTING A PATH TO THE FUTURE

Ultimately, there's a significant need for destination marketing organizations and influencers to work together to move beyond selling aspirational itineraries and lodging to visitors and to instead capture the unique, topographically influenced culture of a region and convey it to new audiences in a timely, relevant, novel way.

According to Carl Ribaudo of SMG Consulting (a firm that helps destination marketing organizations to identify and create opportunities for engagement, revenue generation and strategic shifts for destination marketing organization), it's no longer sufficient to package branded experiences and hand them off to influencers with large, engaged followings in exchange for visibility.

**It is therefore incumbent upon destination marketers to work with influencers to create the experiential entertainment newsroom or documentary of the future, capturing the unique features of a region through the perspective of influencers who have an understanding of what their audiences are genuinely curious about.**

**Taking this approach will better position destinations to articulate themselves as unique, worthy points of interest—whose cultural experiences as a whole offer something richer than the sum of their parts.**

The core question that destination marketing experts should be asking themselves as they plan their 2021 strategies and beyond is greater than one of visibility. More so than awareness alone, destination marketers should be working with travel influencers first to capture the spirit of a region, and next to drive consumer behaviors that are beneficial in the short and long term for destinations and travelers alike.

Thinking longitudinally, this means understanding what a destinations needs are beyond revenue (for example, sustainability is a growing concern for consumers and destinations alike, and over-tourism will likely be a hinge-point issue in consumer decision making for the future), and creating communications programs which reflect the direction that destinations want to see their markets go—and which demonstrate an understanding of what their role in guiding market behavior actually is.



## NOTES ON

# METHODOLOGY

We hand-selected a group of travel influencers who have previously been part of our press and influencer trips. Of these 20 individuals and couples, it was our goal to have representation across ages, platforms and unique styles. **Further, in alignment with our company-wide commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, we were intentional about including a variety of racial demographics and age groups, and to practice gender parity.**

This study relied largely on ethnography to derive qualitative and quantitative insights. The influencers were given a comprehensive survey asking specific questions about how both they and the destinations they work with are managing their responsibilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They provided detailed reporting on their **activities, account metrics, historical experiences and other dimensions of inquiry—all of which was used to produce the insights that appear in this text.**

In order to ensure that both influencers and destination marketing organizations were fairly represented in this text to the benefit of the reader, we developed and distributed a range of questions for destination marketers from a variety of destination tiers—separately from the influencers mentioned above. Their responses are also featured in this ebook, and further insights shared by the individuals quoted herein will be featured in future marketing of this ebook.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The influencer's follower counts ranged from **10.3K** to more than **500K**

**45%** have been asked to post nothing or have no current requests from DMOs as of July 2020.

No influencer participant had less than **2%** engagement on an individual channel.

Only **10%** of the influencers have not worked directly with a tourism in-house employee/representative (their interactions have been exclusive to agencies and marketing firms).

The Abbi Agency team conveys its sincere gratitude to the influencers, Destination Marketing Professionals—as well as a special thanks to Carl Ribaudo of **SMG Consulting**—for their insights and other contributions to this project.

*Learn more about The Abbi Agency and our destination marketing solutions [at our website.](#)*



# WHO WE ARE

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# THANK YOU

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