Print
Wednesday, August 26
7:00am - 12:00pm
7:00am - 12:00pm

## Experience

- **ESTO Awards Showcase**
  Franklin Foyer
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  **Celebrating Excellence in Destination Marketing**

  **Meet the 2026 Finalists**

  Discover the innovative campaigns, impactful programs, and exceptional leaders recognized as finalists for the 2026 ESTO Awards.

- **Registration**
  Sponsored by
  Atlas Obscura
  Grand Ballroom Pre-Function, Level 5
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
- **Wellness Lounge**
  Marriott, Grand Ballroom Pre-Function, Level 5
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Take a moment to relax and recharge in the Wellness Lounge, sponsored by Granicus Destinations. Don't miss the opportunity to receive a complimentary chair massage from a professional massage therapist during the following times:

  Monday, August 24: 12:25 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.

  Tuesday, August 25: 10 a.m. - 3:45 p.m.

  Wednesday, August 26: 8:30 a.m. - 11 a.m.

8:00am - 8:45am
8:00am - 8:45am

## Networking

- **Breakfast**
  Grand Ballroom
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown

8:00am - 1:00pm

8:00am - 1:00pm

## Networking

- **The Layover Attendee Lounge**
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Take a break at The Layover, hosted by the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau and Visit Pennsylvania, in the Gallery just off the main lobby. Enjoy complimentary refreshments, reconnect with friends and shop a curated marketplace featuring local vendors. Be sure to check out the custom hat experience and personalize a baseball cap with Philadelphia-themed patches for a memorable take-home gift. Join us at The Layover Attendee Lounge hosted by the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau, located in The Gallery on the first level just off the main lobby. Enjoy complimentary refreshments, unwind and catch up with friends, and shop a curated collection of local vendors. Don’t miss the custom hat experience, where you can personalize a baseball cap with your choice of Philadelphia-themed patches, expertly heat-pressed on-site to create a unique keepsake.

  The Lounge will be open during the following times:

  Sunday, August 23: 12:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

  Monday, August 24: 8:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.

  Tuesday, August 25: 8:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.

  Wednesday, August 26: 8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

9:00am - 9:30am
9:00am - 9:30am

## Concurrent Session: Take Off Talk

- **Beyond the Algorithm: Letting Community Do the Work**
  Franklin 3-4
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  As organic reach declines and paid social grows, destinations must rethink engagement. In 2024, Visit Nebraska launched a community-first model around its Nebraska Passport program. What began as an experiment is now a statewide group with thousands of members, daily user posts and tens of thousands reached—without paid promotion. Public groups, not pages, are the future.

  Takeaways:

- Stop talking at people. Let them talk to each other. We'll show how shifting from a Page to a Group changed everything and built real connection.
- Let your community do the marketing. With simple prompts and encouragement, your audience can become your loudest, most trusted advocates.
- Protect the space so it stays positive and useful. Clear rules, light moderation, and transparency keep a government-run group safe, welcoming, and on mission.

- **How Savannah Turned Style Into Strategy**
  Franklin 11-13
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Destinations can extend their storytelling beyond traditional tourism channels by embedding themselves into culture. This session walks through how Visit Savannah partnered with LoveShackFancy and Saks Fifth Avenue to let the destination live naturally inside a luxury retail and fashion brand's world — generating earned media, cultural relevance, and measurable results without leading with tourism messaging. The takeaway isn't the partner. It's the strategic approach, and how destinations of any size can apply it.

  Takeaways:

  - Assess brand alignment and audience overlap before pursuing a cultural partnership, using the Savannah × LoveShackFancy collaboration as a real-world example.
  - Design lifestyle partnerships to prioritize cultural relevance and earned storytelling, allowing the destination to live naturally within a partner's world rather than forcing traditional tourism messaging or direct conversion.
  - Apply lessons learned from the partnership by identifying what Visit Savannah would refine next time.
- **Six Degrees of Separation: Leveraging Celebrity Connections to Drive Tourism**
  Franklin 5-7
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Every destination, no matter the size, likely has some connection to a celebrity, whether a famous author was born there, or a movie star calls the city home. During this Take-Off Talk, Sarah Townes, Chief Marketing and Innovation Officer for Experience Columbus, will share how Ohio's capital city leveraged being the hometown of legendary horror author R.L. Stine of "Goosebumps" to create a PR-led moment that had huge results and drove visitation. Attendees will gain insights into how Experience Columbus' "Get Goosebumps in Columbus" campaign came about, the incredible results and tips for how attendees can identify their own possible celebrity connections and generate creative campaigns to drive tourism.

  Takeaways:

  - Learn how to research and brainstorm what celebrity connections your destination has and create a compelling event or campaign around them.
  - Discover what goes into partnering with a celebrity, from contracts to event planning.
  - Learn marketing and communications strategies for maximizing the impact of your campaign and how to work with national media to pitch your story idea and help facilitate coverage.
- **The Agile DMO: Transitioning from Traditional Agency to High-Velocity Tech Culture**
  Franklin 9-10

Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
More Details

Stop acting like a rigid DMO and start operating like an elite tech company. This "Take-Off Talk" explores how to restructure for speed using a "Move Fast and Break Things" mindset. We'll share how we audited every task, eliminated legacy operations like traditional event services, and adopted an "Agile Tech Stack"—from Google Gemini AI to Scrum principles. Learn to remove blockers, automate the mundane, and lead a high-output team that prioritizes progress over perfection.

Takeaways

- The "Stop-Doing" Audit: How to identify and courageously eliminate legacy operations that no longer serve your mission (and how to rebuild them for modern impact).
- Implementing an AI-First Workflow: Practical ways to use tools like Google Gemini to build "Gems" (repeatable prompts) for internal HR, sales prospecting, and automated reporting.
- The Agile Meeting Rhythm: A blueprint for running daily Scrums, quarterly retrospectives, and blocker-removal sessions that replace "status updates" with actual momentum.

- **Using AI Without Losing Our Soul (or Our Traffic)**
  Franklin 1-2
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  As AI reshapes how travelers discover destinations, Visit Milwaukee chose innovation rooted in authenticity. This session shares how we launched Ask LeRoy, an AI-powered AR guide featuring Hall of Famer LeRoy Butler, while using AI to enhance partner listings and pairing it with human-led storytelling. The result: a 10% YOY increase in web traffic in 2025, bucking national trends.

  Takeaways:

  - Website Strategy: How to integrate AI into your destination website in ways that improve discovery, user experience, and performance without sacrificing control or clarity.
  - Brand Storytelling: How to pair AI innovation (like Ask LeRoy) with human-led, place-based storytelling to protect brand voice, deepen engagement, and drive measurable growth, including a 10% YOY increase in web traffic.
  - Pitfalls to Avoid: Common mistakes destinations make when adopting AI, from generic chatbot experiences to misaligned KPIs, and how to avoid undermining trust, traffic, and authenticity.

9:45am - 10:45am
9:45am - 10:45am

## Concurrent Session: Presentation and Discussion

- **Beyond the Sign on the Building: Modern Sponsorship & Naming Rights Strategies for Destinations**
  Franklin 1-2

Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
More Details

Destinations are under increasing pressure to generate non-tax revenue without compromising community trust, yet many still rely on outdated sponsorship and naming-rights models. This session reframes sponsorship as a strategic value exchange, not just logo placement. Attendees will learn how to identify and monetize both physical and non-physical assets, avoid common pitfalls, and build long-term partnerships that align revenue goals with stewardship and brand integrity.

Takeaways:

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify monetizable assets beyond traditional naming rights, including experiential, operational, and partnership-based opportunities.
- Evaluate sponsor fit to ensure alignment with destination values and community expectations.
- Structure sponsorship deals that prioritize long-term value over one-time transactions.
- Understand common pitfalls related to brand safety, public perception, and contract structure.
- Apply a repeatable framework for sponsorship strategy that destinations of all sizes can scale.

- **Rebranding With Purpose: Turning Cultural Identity Into Destination Demand**
Franklin 3-4
Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
More Details

This case study explores how forward-thinking destinations are disrupting traditional placeholder marketing by centering authentic, culturally rooted storytelling. Moving beyond generic promotion, successful destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are aligning tourism, community stakeholders, and economic development around a shared narrative that reflects local identity and lived experience.

Attendees will learn how these purpose-driven campaigns are built from the ground up, rolled out to residents first, and scaled to drive external demand. This session offers practical, actionable blueprints for destinations of any size looking to transform their local culture into their greatest competitive advantage.

Takeaways:

- Lived Culture Audits: A repeatable framework to tap into local subcultures and resident sentiment so your brand is built from the inside out, not in a vacuum.
- Economic Development Alignment: Actionable blueprints to tie your rebrand to talent recruitment and resident retention—plus the non-tourism metrics needed to win city council buy-in.
- Stakeholder Friction Management: Practical strategies for expanding your narrative beyond legacy pillars (like horse racing or generic beach imagery) without alienating traditional stakeholders.

- **Rumor Has It — Let's Align & Clear the Air**
Franklin 11-13
Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
More Details

After a seven-year absence, the format of the Great Debates are returning and not for small talk.

This is a reimagined Rumor Session built for the world we're actually living in: AI-fueled narratives, half-truths, and leaders who too often dodge reality. So let's ask the only question that matters:

What are the facts and what's real?

We're putting the industry's biggest rumors on the table and calling them what they are: fact, fiction, or somewhere uncomfortably in between. No panels hiding behind safe answers. No vague consensus. Just sharp debate, real perspective, and clarity. Debaters will provide facts, receipts and the occasional industry expert testimony to prove their points.

The goal:
To confront the rumors shaping our industry and arm every attendee with the truth, so WE ALL can go back to our destinations and cut through the noise with confidence to our stakeholders and residents.

These rumors have gone on long enough.

So we brought Ted out of "retirement" to lead the debates on what's fact and what's fiction.

Let's clear the air.

- **The Group Playbook: Marketing Destinations to Meeting Professionals**
  Franklin 9-10
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Unlike leisure buyers, meeting professionals are buying a successful meeting: safe arrivals, flawless logistics, strict adherence to budgets, and measurable business success. In this hybrid session, we'll discuss how to adapt your visuals, messaging, and unique selling proposition to capture the growing group segment.

- **The New Shape of Destination Marketing Teams: How High-Performing Organizations Are Redesigning Talent, Structure & Accountability**
  Franklin 5-7
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Destination marketing organizations are operating in an environment that demands more alignment, agility, accountability, and cross-functional collaboration than ever before. As expectations from boards, communities, partners, visitors, and internal teams continue to expand, many DMOs are rethinking how talent is organized, how roles are defined, and how accountability is shared across the organization. This session explores how leading organizations are redesigning team structures and staffing models to better meet today's demands.

  Through real-world examples, candid observations, and facilitated discussion, attendees will examine what is driving these organizational shifts, what changes some DMOs are making, where those changes are succeeding or struggling, and what lessons can be applied in their own contexts. The session is designed to spark peer exchange on how destination organizations can better align people, structure, and expectations to achieve stronger performance.

Takeaways:

- Understand the larger organizational pressures driving changes in DMO team structures.
- Examine emerging approaches to talent design, staffing models, and cross-functional accountability.
- Learn from real examples, including lessons, tradeoffs, and common mistakes.
- Compare how peers are structuring teams and identify ideas to consider within their own organizations.

Resources can be found here:
https://learntourismconference.com/esto/

11:00am - 12:00pm
11:00am - 12:00pm

## Main Stage

- **Keynote: Resilient Optimism: The Catalyst for Lasting Momentum**
  Grand Ballroom
  Philadelphia Marriott Downtown
  More Details

  Resilient optimism is a performance advantage—especially for leaders navigating constant pressure, competing priorities, and rising expectations.

  In destination marketing, where teams are balancing stakeholder demands, proving value, and adapting to rapid change, the ability to maintain clarity and momentum isn't optional—it's critical.

  In this closing keynote, Michelle will share research-backed strategies to help leaders sustain energy, think clearly under pressure, and lead with confidence.

  Drawing on Michelle's work with leading institutions and research conducted with the U.S. Travel Association, the session connects optimism directly to performance—showing how recovery, mindset, and behavior drive measurable outcomes.

  More importantly, it reinforces the role this industry plays: travel isn't just an experience—it's a driver of resilience, helping people recharge, refocus, and perform at their best.

  Takeaways:

  - Sustain energy and focus under pressure
  - Build resilient, high-performing teams
  - Turn insight into consistent forward momentum