



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Episode 120: Marketing a Location or Destination

Guest: Ed Harris

This is Prove It. A podcast for impatient business owners, overwhelmed marketers, and PR practitioners with no time for podcasts. In just 10 minutes they answer 3 questions and offer proof of what's working in marketing communications today. Here's Debbie Albert, President of Albert Communications.

Debbie Albert: This episode of "Prove It!" is about marketing a location or destination, not a product or service, which is something I bet few of us have ever thought about. Our guest today is Ed Harris, the Chief Marketing Officer of the Valley Forge Convention and Tourism Board and he has a really interesting background. He's held positions related to branding at B-to-C companies including AND1, Converse, Timberland and Under Armour. And he even served as director of marketing for eBay. In 2014, he joined the Valley Forge Convention and Tourism Board, changing direction from product marketing to location marketing. So, Ed, welcome to Prove It.

Ed Harris: Thanks for having me.

Debbie Albert: I'm excited that you're here. And as you know, our format is three questions - give or take - and then a proof point. And we do this all in 10 minutes for people like me who don't have a long attention span. So, before we jump into the first real question, I would just like to ask you to tell us a little bit about the breadth and depth of your organization because, for people from Philadelphia, when we hear Valley Forge, at least, people around here, I think we tend to think about the battlefield only and not the wider area. **So, what does your organization cover?** And then explain the name.

Ed Harris: Sure. I'd be happy to. So, our organization covers things to do and places to stay throughout Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Valley Forge National Historical Park is one of our main iconic, global assets if you will. And so, when we travel around the country looking to bring large groups to come here and fill up our hotels, they're very interested when we use and lead with Valley Forge. Valley Forge and Montgomery County are part of our brand. And the



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reason that we don't lead with Montgomery County in our branding is because there are 17 other Montgomery counties in the United States and everybody who's at least taken some history in elementary school has heard of Valley Forge and George Washington. So, it's a great international brand really.

Debbie Albert: Okay. That's great. You know what, I never knew the answer to that, so I appreciate you filling us in on that. So, let's get to the real meat and potatoes, which are the three questions I'm going to ask. So, let's start out with this one, very basic. **Can tell us how marketing a product, especially the well-known brands that you are associated with, is different from marketing a location or a destination?**

Ed Harris: In my days working as a brand manager at Under Armour, or as you mentioned, Timberland or even eBay, it's very transactional in terms of selling products, right? But when you're working a DMO or destination marketing organization, you're not necessarily selling individual products. You're selling a bigger, broader experience when you're marketing a destination or a place. So, it's not an immediate result all the time. The similarities though, are definitely there.

With basic principles of marketing, you can think about things like partnerships and at Under Armour, we may have had a partnership with someone like Tom Brady, the football player or Bryce Harper, the baseball player. Whereas in a destination, those partnerships become places that we have like Lego Land, Discovery Center over in Plymouth Meeting or the King of Prussia Mall or even the Valley Forge Park. But those partnerships help bring awareness to your overall product, just like they do in the product marketing arena.

Debbie Albert: You know it's interesting you say that because as you were talking, I was thinking about all of the “internal clients” you have. When you were at Timberland or Under Armour or Converse, everything falls under one marketing umbrella, but you have everything from, as you said, Lego Land to a mall, to a historic site. **So, you have a lot of internal customers you have to keep happy and balanced as well. How do you do that?**

Ed Harris: Yeah, that's the million-dollar question. But, we're really fortunate. The only



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difference between what I do now and what I did in the past is this is the nonprofit sector when we're talking about tourism and destination marketing. And part of our funding actually comes from member businesses. We have over 600 members that are part of our organization. So, you can imagine I'm trying to market 600 businesses is not easy, but what we do is, we invite them in to be part of our marketing. We share our things to do at these businesses through our social media channels, through our website. We've put together hotel packages where our member businesses are part of coupon books that the guest receives when they visit the area. And so, we look for creative ways to really highlight all of those partners, if you will. It's definitely not easy, but overall it makes the destination a much better place to visit.

Debbie Albert: That's great. As a lifelong resident of eastern Montgomery County, I'm happy about all you're doing. **In the five years that you've been with the bureau, how have your marketing strategies evolved?**

Ed Harris: Sure. I would say they've evolved on the technological front. Back in 2014, we were the first tourism organization to offer virtual tours of destinations within Montgomery County on a website called Montco360.net. That was one of the more innovative things the tourism board had tried up until that point. From there, we expanded that to start developing lots of unique web pages that catered to lots of different segments. You may remember this, the craze behind Pokémon Go, the app that was all the rage two summers ago.

We jumped on that and creative pokey-MONTGO and created a website and videos around that whole initiative. So, one thing that we do regularly is, we try to test the new technologies and interpret those technologies into the lens of tourism. So, whether it's an app for our beer trails or virtual tours or adding video right on our web pages, we're always looking to make sure we're on the cutting edge with the next generation of visitors that might come here.

Debbie Albert: That's great. I love the idea of the virtual tour. We might have to do another episode about that because this is a really evolving area. Anything with artificial intelligence and I'm really curious about that. Back in December, for my third question, you published a blog about the benefits of having a mascot and I just want to know, **does that work for a location as well as a team? And can you just give us a sense of how you see the benefits of a mascot?** Because I thought that was really fascinating.



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Ed Harris: Sure. I'd be happy to, so mascots whether you like the mascot or not they command a lot of attention. They usually put a smile on your face. And those things have always been true about mascots going back 50 years. What makes mascot so much more relevant in the year 2019 is social media. People love to get photographs taken with mascots at events. They like shooting videos. All of those types of things can now be added to your social media feeds. And so, as an organization, when you have a mascot, if you strategically use that mascot as an asset and use the mascot to spread your brand throughout social media, it can really make an impact. And the way we've done that is, we've been very careful with some of our strategic partnerships. For example, we have a partnership with the Phillies. We've done things with the Eagles. We've done things with the Flyers. So, you can imagine when our Monte, the Fox mascot is photographed with the Philly fanatic or Gritty

Debbie Albert: It's all about Gritty these days.

Ed Harris: It really is, or any of the university mascots. All of those organizations have a pretty widespread following. And so, when we can tap into that or tag those partners with photographs of our mascot with them, it starts to open doors to new pools of visitors that might visit here. So as fun as mascots are, to look at or interact with, they do have strategic value in this sort of new brand world of social media.

Debbie Albert: It's amazing. Walt Disney was ahead of his time, wasn't he?

Ed Harris: Yeah, he really was.

Debbie Albert: All right. We're up to the **Prove It** part. So, can you give us an example of how your marketing efforts, anything new that you've done, have led to increased visits to the area that the Valley Forge tourism encompasses?

Ed Harris: Sure. Yeah. I mean there's probably a lot of a different reason. What we've been doing recently is adding a lot of entertainment that didn't exist here before. We've already got a great destination with lots of things to do, but we've kind of added on to that. What I mean by



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that is, we've brought in shows like Cirque de Soleil last summer, which I'm happy to share, is coming back again this summer for several weeks of shows. We're bringing in Big Apple Circus, which is new for us, which has been very popular in several other cities. We're bringing in the Harlem Globe Trotters in August. And so, we're continually looking for things to add on to what we already have to make this place even that much better. We're even bringing in the LPGA women's golf symmetrical tour, which will be here in May for a huge competition with women participating from all over the world. That's the second year here for them. Last year, the winter was from Sweden.

So, we're even trying to expand our reach internationally through some of these partnerships. Obviously, Cirque de Soleil travels all over the world. And what we've found is that although we're not a big city, and we're what I like to refer to as a backyard and Philadelphia, there is an appetite from our 850,000 residents to want to do fun things in their backyard and not have to go into the big city.

Debbie Albert: So, have you seen the numbers? Can you compare the numbers of tourists rising in our area from before you brought these things into now?

Ed Harris: We can. We know that last year, on tickets alone, Cirque du Soleil sold over 80,000 tickets to their shows. We can track what our hotel occupancy looks like during the periods when we're bringing in entertainment and when we market these different entertainment options, we're always in our marketing saying, not only buy tickets, but spend the night and make it a whole weekend because there is so much to do. But yes, we definitely have seen a spike when we have these events and we get lots of great anecdotal feedback from the restaurant community, from some of the shops. So, it's really a complete economic impact that we see when we bring these large-scale events here.

Debbie Albert: It sounds to me like if I wrapped up this episode in one word, it would be *collaboration*. Because you need to collaborate with all of the organizations that are part of your bureau to bring people in and then it has residual effects, as you said, for the restaurants, for the hotels, for the shops, everything around: whether it's the event or something else that you're marketing, a virtual tour of the area.



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Ed Harris: Well said I think you're spot on. Collaboration's really important-- thinking out of the box. Trying new things as a destination is really important. There's just an appetite to try new stuff too. The great thing about our situation here is that there's lots of development going on across the county. There's a real energy you feel here. And when you add in events and entertainment, it just makes it that much more appealing as a visitor.

Debbie Albert: That's great. Well, we're out of time. I want to thank you. It's been great speaking with you, and as I said earlier, as a native of the area. I say keep up the brilliant work. It's good for all of us. I also want to thank our listeners for joining us for this episode of Prove It. Stay tuned for more, which will help you gain clarity in what's happening in marketing communications today. Thanks for listening and Ed, thanks again for being here.

Ed Harris: Thanks for having me Debbie.

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