



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Nine Cities, One Oasis: Building a Tourism TEAM of Champions

Destination, Country: Greater Palm Springs, California, USA

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Mayor Oscar Ortiz addressing TEAM Champions to share the rich cultural history and bright economic future of his hometown, the City of Indio. Indio is one of nine cities that make up Greater Palm Springs.



Summary:

Uniting the tourism and hospitality workforce to promote equity, inclusion, and regional collaboration: Greater Palm Springs is a desert region in Southern California and is home to nine distinct cities running west to east along the Coachella Valley. The destination’s geography has resulted in disparities in opportunities and services available to residents and visitors.

Tourism has lent commonality to the region as its top economic activity, generating [\\$8.7 billion](#) for the local economy and supporting 1 in 4 jobs. Our nine cities hold a shared goal of sustainably growing tourism in the region; however, the workforce remains fragmented – we needed a way to unite our tourism workforce and create an equitable environment for all to participate in this growth.

To address this disparity, Visit Greater Palm Springs devised TEAM GPS, a program to connect these cities and provide the workforce with knowledge and skills needed to excel in their careers, while empowering them to shape and support a sustainable tourism industry.





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Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Long sought-after by travelers for its inspiring scenery and lure of adventure, Greater Palm Springs is Southern California's most storied desert oasis. Our regional destination is comprised of nine linearly interconnected cities along the Coachella Valley running from west to east: Palm Springs, Desert Hot Springs, Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Indio and Coachella — each offering its own blend of experiences.

Spanning approximately 45 miles (72.4 km) along the San Jacinto, Santa Rosa, and San Bernardino Mountain ranges, the valley boasts an array of natural and geographical features that make it a true haven. Greater Palm Springs' towering mountains, signature windmills, iconic palm fronds, desert blooms, and natural mineral hot springs are just a few of the destination's plethora of tourism resources. The region celebrates its thriving LGBTQ+ community and welcomes all to explore its Native American roots, experience its Hispanic and Latino cultural heritage through food and music, and witness its vibrant local art scene, mid century modern architecture.

Greater Palm Springs' residents also contribute to the diversity of offerings; each city possesses unique characteristics, including varying levels of infrastructure, economic development, and community resources. Yet, despite this diversity and the strength of the visitor economy in the region, access to economic mobility for some of its 370,000 residents remains a challenge due in part to the geography of the Valley.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

Our region faces the challenge of an uneven sharing of resources and wealth, complicated by the layout of the valley. The variation and disparities in socioeconomic status in the region means that less-affluent populations were working and living in a world-renowned resort destination without ever having experienced the joys and frustrations of travel and tourism for themselves. Issues relating to socio-economic barriers, race, inclusion, equity, and diversity have stigmatized underrepresented groups. Further isolation, compounded by COVID's dissolution of a community feel amongst hospitality and service industry workers has further fragmented the workforce.

In short, there is a lack of unification amongst the nine cities that make up Greater Palm Springs – some residents have described their communities as "worlds apart."

To illustrate:

According to [the most recent U.S. Census](#), Coachella, a foodie haven rich in Hispanic heritage on the eastern side of the Coachella Valley, has a median household income of \$33,999 and a median age of 36.4. Coachella is 96.6% Hispanic or Latino, with only 4.3% of the population holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Meanwhile, Palm Springs, the most well-known city in our region renowned for its mid century modern architecture and trendy downtown area, has a median household income of \$57,916 and median age of 56.1. Palm Springs is only 24.4% Latino or Hispanic, with 43% of residents holding a tertiary degree. Rancho Mirage, home to luxury resorts and historic estates, while more centrally located has an even higher degree of difference to Coachella with an average household income of over \$95,000 in 2020, 44.3% of residents holding a tertiary degree, with only 12.9% of residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino (over 84% identify as white). These stark differences in development and demographics contribute to the unique tapestry that is Greater Palm Springs but can also create tension in the form of an "up-valley vs. down-valley" dynamic.

These historic inequities have also contributed to, in a tourism context, uneven distribution of destination knowledge throughout our nine cities. Much of our local tourism and hospitality workforce did not possess the relevant industry knowledge and hospitality skills that could help them advance their careers and help visitors make the most of their time in our destination. Simply put, portions of our workforce lacked the customer service awareness and know-how to help visitors experience the destination's many assets and attractions responsibly.

With the onset of COVID, its inequitable impacts and a resulting need for connection, we asked ourselves: How could we create a more equitable environment for our local hospitality workforce to experience their own destination and excel in their careers — and in the process dispel the up-valley, down-valley tensions that hamper our organization’s efforts to implement high-quality, sustainable tourism practices valley-wide, which keep visitors returning?

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Outline of the Project

Together with our stakeholders, we realized that if we share a common goal, we could start by thinking of ourselves as a team: Team Greater Palm Springs. The word TEAM is also used as an acronym for Teach, Engage, Advise, and Motivate. The mnemonic reminds and empowers TEAM Champions to use firsthand knowledge of the destination to inform visitors of our unique history and experiences; be the first to say “hello” and make a visitor feel welcome; offer suggestions, directions, and itinerary ideas to help visitors plan their stay; and inspire visitors to make the most of their time here.

Thus, under the umbrella moniker of TEAM GPS, we built a network of destination “Champions” who are truly enthusiastic about the region. The program gives TEAM Champions not only access to networking and educational opportunities but also sneak previews of new attractions and exclusive tours of our cities.

TEAM GPS has become a multifaceted program that begins with an in-depth three-hour course about Greater Palm Springs that builds knowledge, pride, and passion for the destination while combating long-held stigmas concerning race, privilege, and class of populations of cities in the region that are in different stages of development. We also wanted to provide an opportunity for hospitality workers to feel that they are part of a community where they are valued and where they belong.

Today, the TEAM GPS Program consists of:

- A three-hour in-person or online course that includes videos, presentations, and assessments resulting in the award of a TEAM GPS Champions Certificate, and the title of TEAM Champion
- Upon completion of the course, TEAM Champions become part of a network that includes:
 - A digital pass of offerings (discounts, tickets, experiences) made available through an online platform, [Bandwango](#).
 - A monthly newsletter highlighting opportunities to connect
 - Invitations to:
 - Mixers - providing opportunities to network and connect with other TEAM Champions and experience the offerings of local hospitality businesses
 - City Tours – showcasing the diversity and richness of each of the Coachella Valley’s nine cities
 - TEAM Huddles – a quarterly virtual meeting that includes updates from a member of the community and economic development departments from each of the nine cities
 - Autism Sensitivity and Awareness Training Course provided by [IBCCES](#). As a destination, we are committed to being welcoming to families and people who are on the neurodiversity spectrum by partnering with IBCCES to become a Certified Autism Destination.

Timeline:

- **March 2020:** COVID-19 drastically alters Greater Palm Springs’ workforce as the hospitality industry experiences an immense worker shortage and overwhelming challenges worldwide. The pandemic, however, became the catalyst for the creation of an original Visit Greater Palm Springs initiative to build back our workforce and create a more sustainable and inclusive future for tourism in the region.

- **April 2020 – January 2021:** The team at Visitor Greater Palm Springs, while simultaneously finding ways to support a struggling industry, works on developing the TEAM GPS program.
- **February 2021:** Visit GPS completes in-house development of curriculum. Visit GPS also partners with College of the Desert’s PaCE program to create an umbrella of online courses to provide hospitality workers with knowledge and skills so they can better navigate a post-pandemic tourism industry (e.g., COVID-19 Precautions Training)
- **March 2021:** First effort to unite TEAM Champions virtually in the format of a TEAM Huddle over Zoom.
- **June 2022:** First post-pandemic Mixer held at the Children’s Discovery Museum of the Desert
- **June 2023:** Over 750 TEAM Champions have completed the program.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

Our relationship with the College of the Desert PaCE program gave TEAM GPS further reach and credibility. By partnering with a recognized higher education institution, we were able to provide a certification, which further incentivized participation in the course.

Feedback from our vendors and partners during the COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the need to target and uplift the tourism workforce; their input has been crucial to ensure the longevity and uptake of the TEAM GPS program.

Importantly, the support and buy-in of industry stakeholders has been fundamental to the success of the program. Visit Greater Palm Springs’ Board of Directors – which includes industry executives as well as elected officials from each of our nine cities – made a commitment to the unification of the Coachella Valley; thus, our organization was able to invest the time and financial resources necessary to fully realize this program. The inclusion of city mayors in this program has made it very special for our participants, helping them recognize the value that they bring to tourism, and the value that tourism brings to our region.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

Through the many challenges and opportunities along the journey to create and develop this program, we learned that:

- Creating an entirely new program and course requires a significant investment of resources. Moreover, considerable time is needed to identify and build a relationship with a partner that can provide the pedagogical underpinning for both in-person and online course experiences.
- It is okay to course correct: the uncertainties of COVID-19 drastically impacted the trajectory of the course. It encouraged the creation of an online course while the delivery of an in-person course remained uncertain for a long time.
- It will take a long time to overcome stigmas across the Coachella Valley. Understanding the best ways to engage the different municipalities is just the first step.
- Sharing the value of this course to employers and employees requires a significant amount of time and resources in liaising and engaging with industry stakeholders. It is important to factor this into the development of any future community and workforce engagement programs.
- Engaging alumni of the course remains a challenge. We are consistently thinking through ways to consider barriers to engagement – are certain hours and days of the week better than others? Is childcare a factor? Do we have to redesign our marketing materials or consider alternate channels?

- While TEAM Champions are encouraged to experience Greater Palm Springs on their own time through the Champions Pass, lack of free time and overall cost remain barriers to full participation in the program.
- Many of our partners (attractions) are still experiencing COVID-19's residual effects and some are still reluctant to offer experiences to TEAM Champions. We are actively trying to find ways to showcase each city, its gems, and highlights to our Champions so that they can authentically share recommendations and experiences with visitors.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Quantitative Results:

Number of TEAM Champions: 750

Number of events (including Mixers, City Tours, and Huddles): 25 +

Number of classes delivered: 25 + (750 participants have completed the course)

Highlights:

- *City of La Quinta Tour guided by Mayor Linda Evans – 50 attendees*
- *First TEAM GPS Mixer Post Pandemic at Children’s Discovery Museum of the Desert – 60 to 70 attendees*
- *Tour of City of Desert Hot Springs planned in September 2023 led by Mayor Gary Gardner; Tour of City of Palm Springs planned for November 2023 led by Mayor Grace Garner*

Qualitative Results:

Feedback from TEAM Champions bolsters the goals and confirms the aspirations of this program. Champions have shared that their knowledge of other cities has increased, and previously held assumptions about other cities – including negative stigmas have been dispelled. Because of the inter-city conversations and interactions we facilitate through the program, people are more willing to see each other as individuals rather than stereotypes. The program has helped many within our industry recognize and acknowledge their bias, by giving participants a chance to have open dialogue with and learn from each other.

We have heard from some Champions that they feel a sense of pride and community after understanding their role in the tourism and hospitality ecosystem. One of our TEAM Champions was a first-generation college student who grew up working alongside his mother in the agricultural fields of Coachella. He had never been west of Indio because he did not feel comfortable – he did not feel like he, as a Latino youth, was welcome or that he belonged in the primarily white, affluent neighborhoods of the western Coachella Valley. The exposure the program provided allowed this TEAM Champion to learn that through hospitality, he could be part of a community where he is always welcome. The knowledge he gained through the TEAM GPS program gave him the confidence and perspective to experience the beauty of the entire destination.

We recognize that there have been long-held assumptions of both the hospitality industry and the cities of our region depending on where a Champion was raised. Our impact occurs incrementally, person by person, team by team, organization by organization.

TEAM GPS has been successful in that it is an important part of a solution to grow hospitality leaders locally. It is not a panacea; it is a component of a broader strategy and systematic approach needed to center our community, uplift our workforce, and sustain hospitality jobs with locally grown leaders.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

In regions such as the Coachella Valley, where tourism is the largest economic driver, it is essential to engage and center the local workforce and community for this is where the greatest sustainability impact



can be. That requires expanding our work as a DMO beyond destination marketing and truly prioritizing the human resources that are most precious to our industry.

By uplifting the tourism and hospitality workforce through professional development and experiences that focus on our community, DMOs can help build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic and create a more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive tourism industry.

Essentially, an initiative like TEAM GPS, which could be easily replicated and tailored to other regions, teaches us to not only love our destination, but it also promotes an understanding of the values of sustainability and inclusion among our stakeholders and partners and underscores the power of collective impact.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

<https://www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com/foundation/initiatives/team-gps/>

<https://www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com/partnerportal/research-reports/>

