

Rebranding Unsustainable Destinations: The Case Study of Miami Beach Breaking Up with Spring Break

This case study explores how the city of Miami Beach strategically leveraged emotional storytelling in its destination rebranding efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of spring break and promote sustainable-responsible tourism.

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Summary

Spring break has long been a double-edged sword for destinations, especially in Florida, United States, where cities gain economic benefits while facing significant challenges that impact the safety and sustainability of these areas. This case study examines the strategic response of Miami Beach to the negative impacts of spring break, including overcrowding, rising crime rates, and disruption to community life, which led to states of emergency in 2021, 2022, and 2023. To face these issues, the city government, in collaboration with the local destination marketing organization (DMO), crafted a strategy that included the Miami Beach Is Breaking Up With Spring Break marketing campaign. This campaign utilized a breakup metaphor to communicate the city's firm stance against unruly tourist behavior. Through rebranding, Miami Beach aimed to redefine itself as a calmer, safer, and more community-focused destination, prioritizing the well-being of both residents and visitors. The campaign effectively conveyed this message by combining emotional narratives with persuasive language, contrasting disruptive behavior with the city's core values. This case highlights the role of storytelling in destination rebranding as a tool to address tourism-related challenges, fostering long-term sustainability and community well-being.

The Value and Interest of the Case Study

The case study provides valuable insights into how destinations can address challenges associated with high-impact tourism through strategic rebranding and communication. It demonstrates the effectiveness of using storytelling and emotionally resonant narratives in marketing campaigns to reshape tourist behavior and reinforce a

destination's core values. By examining the Breakup campaign, the case highlights the potential for destination branding efforts to enhance sustainability, prioritize safety, and support a positive quality of life for both residents and visitors.

Background

Spring break, usually taking place between late February and mid-April, has become a well-established tradition in North America, attracting millions of college and high school students to warm-weather destinations (Sönmez et al., 2006). In the United States, it has developed into a major industry for various destinations, with Florida standing out as one of the most favored choices (Ribeiro, 2019). Although it generates considerable economic benefits, spring break is frequently characterized by excessive partying, involving unrestrained alcohol and drug use, along with promiscuous sexual behavior (Josiam et al., 1998; Boirot, 2023). As with other forms of uncontrolled mass tourism, spring break often brings substantial risks to the safety of host communities and creates considerable challenges for sustainable tourism, negatively affecting social, economic, and environmental conditions (Lusby, 2021).

Miami Beach has long been a renowned spring break destination, attracting young visitors for its iconic beaches, vibrant nightlife, and exciting events. However, in the period between 2021 and 2023, the city declared state of emergency to address the negative impacts of spring break, including overcrowding and increased crime and violence rates (Madani, 2023). As reported by Hudak (2024), Miami Beach encountered severe crowd control problems during the 2021 spring break season, leading to the implementation of emergency measures, such as an 8 p.m. curfew in designated areas, increased police presence, restricted beach access, and high-profile arrests. Despite these efforts, the situation worsened in 2022, when the city experienced a rise in shootings and other violent incidents, prompting another state of emergency and the enforcement of a midnight curfew during the last weekend of March. The violence resulted in widespread panic and injuries, with several incidents involving gunfire, leading to the impounding of numerous firearms. This troubling trend continued in 2023, as violent incidents—including shootings, assaults, and drug-related arrests—escalated. Despite a visible police presence, two fatal shootings occurred, further contributing to a chaotic environment. These events seriously threatened public order and safety during the spring break period.

In response to these recurring issues, a comprehensive strategy for the 2024 spring break season was developed by the city government, in collaboration with the local DMO—the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB). The strategy included key actions such as implementing curfews, restricting beach access, managing traffic and parking regulations, increasing city staffing, enforcing local laws, and banning certain activities

on public beaches and parks, such as public alcohol consumption, smoking, large gatherings, and playing loud music. Furthermore, the strategy involved the launch of the Miami Beach Is Breaking Up With Spring Break marketing campaign. This initiative aimed to communicate that unruly behavior from spring breakers would no longer be tolerated, with a strong focus on enforcing existing laws and regulations. The main goal of the campaign was to reshape tourist behavior and attract more respectful, upscale visitors. This was done by rebranding the destination as a calmer, safer place while promoting well-being for both residents and visitors. A key tool in this campaign was a public service announcement (PSA) video see this video: Miami Beach is breaking up with spring break. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz3T20EXDdo (accessed 18 September 2024). This was produced by the GMCVB's agency of record, VML, and released on the city's official website and social media platforms (Williams, 2024a). The PSA, which reached a wide audience and generated significant engagement online, featured residents delivering a breakup-style message to spring breakers, emphasizing that the destination would no longer welcome irresponsible visitors.

Destination (Re)Branding and Tourist Behavior Change

Destination branding is a specialized aspect of place branding that considers a given location from the perspective of the tourism industry (Hanna et al., 2021). It involves three primary components: identity, image, and positioning. Its goal is to create a destination brand that accurately reflects the destination's identity and creates a positive image in consumers' minds, thereby influencing their choices (Pike, 2021).

Destination brand identity refers to how a destination intends to be perceived in the market. It has an internal focus, guiding the marketing efforts of DMOs and stakeholders (Cai, 2002; Pike and Page, 2014). Given the complexity of destinations, identity creation is inherently collaborative, requiring DMOs to develop a brand identity that encapsulates the destination's multifaceted nature while representing the interests of various stakeholders, including the local community and visitors (Rodrigues et al., 2020; Pike, 2021).

In contrast, destination image reflects the perceptions that consumers have of a destination, which may not always align with the intended brand identity (Cai, 2002; Pike, 2021). Destination image has been defined as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979, p. 18), and it includes three interconnected levels: cognition, affect, and conation (Gartner, 1993). Cognition involves awareness and knowledge of a destination, affect refers to emotional responses toward the destination, and conation pertains to actions or intentions, such as deciding whether to visit. Destination image significantly influences visitor's decision making process and can impact the success of a destination (Hunt, 1975).

Destination brand positioning aims to align a destination's image with its identity. Effective positioning requires understanding the target audience and recognizing competitors, ensuring that the brand occupies a favorable and distinctive position in consumers' minds and the market (Ries and Trout, 2000). A clearly defined market position, aligned with stakeholder interests, must be communicated effectively to stand out among competing destinations. Successful positioning enables a destination to become the preferred choice for its target audience.

As market conditions, consumer preferences, and social contexts evolve, destination brands must adapt to stay competitive and relevant. This often necessitates rebranding, which involves reshaping and repositioning the destination brand to meet new objectives, counter negative perceptions, or respond to crises (Bowen and Sotomayor, 2022; Garanti et al., 2022). Rebranding builds on existing brand elements while seeking to renew and transform the brand narrative to resonate with contemporary audiences. It can enhance a destination's competitiveness (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Hanna and Rowley, 2011) and requires collaboration with stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2004; Govers and Go, 2009).

In the case of Miami Beach, rebranding served as a crucial strategy to influence tourist behavior and reshape the destination's appeal during spring break. By developing a new destination brand, the city sought to foster a shift in visitor expectations and encourage behavior that aligns with the community's values of safety, respect, and quality of life. This approach demonstrates how rebranding can effectively communicate desired behavioral standards to visitors, encouraging a respectful engagement with the destination that supports both community well-being and a positive tourist experience.

The Breakup Campaign

Miami Beach has consistently launched marketing campaigns over the years to promote responsible behavior during spring break (Fig. 1). However, in 2024, frustrated by the persistent challenges of spring break, the city government, in collaboration with the local DMO, adopted a significantly different strategy. Rather than merely promoting responsible actions or issuing warnings about legal repercussions, the Breakup campaign reframed the city's enhanced safety measures as the end of a toxic relationship. This narrative resonated broadly, especially with the younger demographic commonly associated with spring break. The 2024 campaign marked a notable shift in the city's tourism management strategy.



Fig. 1. Miami Beach spring break marketing campaigns from 2016 to 2022. Source: Williams (2024a).

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) and key performance indicators (KPIs)

To achieve the campaign's goal, an IMC approach was adopted, leveraging diverse digital platforms to maximize reach and impact. The communication strategy included organic and paid social media, paid digital ads, emails, text messages, and web and out-of-home advertising (Williams, 2024a). On March 1, 2024, a PSA was released by the city government across Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and the city's official website (Available at: www.miamibeachfl.gov/, accessed 25 November 2024). This PSA became the campaign's centerpiece, employing an emotional narrative that framed the campaign as a breakup with spring break to create a memorable connection with the target audience. This narrative was consistently reinforced through additional content simulating breakup text message exchanges (Fig. 2) and dating app scenarios (Fig. 3), which were shared on social media and displayed in public spaces around the city. This coordinated strategy aimed to engage both residents and potential visitors, particularly young spring breakers who are highly active on social media. By combining effective storytelling with emotionally resonant narratives, the campaign effectively conveyed the need for change.



Fig. 2. Breakup text conversations used in the campaign. Source: Miami Beach City Government (Available at: www.miamibeachfl.gov/, accessed 18 September 2024).

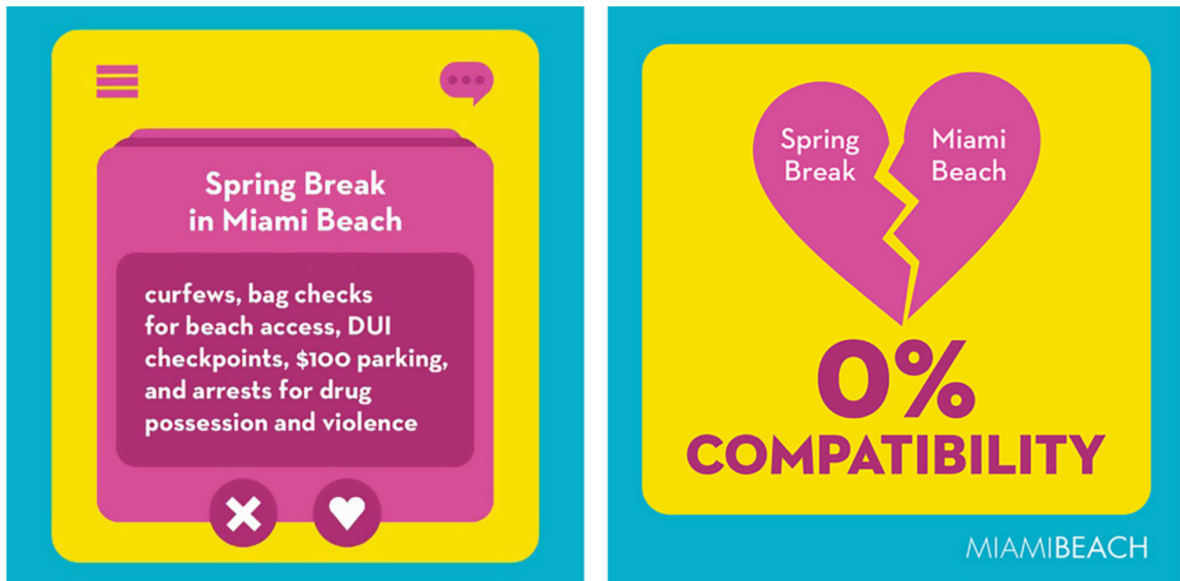


Fig. 3. Dating app scenarios featured in the campaign. Source: Miami Beach City Government (Available at: www.miamibeachfl.gov/, accessed 18 September 2024).

In May 2024, at the end of the spring break season, the city government shared the results of the campaign’s impact, measured in terms of KPIs (Williams, 2024a):

- The campaign reached a global audience, generating an estimated 19.8 billion media impressions from over 1,086 news stories across 197 media organizations. These included prominent outlets such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and Miami Herald, as well as U.S. television news networks like the Today Show, Good Morning America, CNN, and Fox News.
- Social media alone generated over 39 million impressions, resulting in 57,645 clicks to the campaign’s website. Between February 13 and March 31, 2024, 104 organic posts on the city’s social media accounts produced 6,917,635 impressions. Paid social media efforts, including 4132 posts by city accounts and VML, amassed 32,299,046 impressions and 51,539 clicks. These paid posts garnered 80,030 instances of engagement, including 65,584 likes, 11,411 comments, and 3035 shares. Overall, 35% of users interacted on desktop, while 65% did so via mobile (82% using iOS and 18% using Android). The top five countries reached were the United States, France, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Georgia, while the top cities included Miami, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington DC, and Miami Beach.
- Search Engine Marketing (SEM) generated 433,923 impressions and 96,863 clicks. The markets outside the Designated Market Areas (DMAs) that drove the most traffic included New York, Tampa, West Palm Beach, and Orlando-Daytona Beach. Popular search terms included “Spring Break Miami Beach,” “Miami spring break rules,” and “Miami spring break curfew.” Digital ads achieved 12,308,185

impressions, leading to 2,080,567 video plays of the PSA and 15,561 website clicks, reflecting a high click-through rate (CTR) of 13%.

- A total of twelve spring break-related emails were sent, including eight e-blasts focused on spring break messaging and four generic e-briefs featuring spring break content. Each email reached an average of 39,670 subscribers, with an average open rate of 47%. A total of 96.23% opened the emails on desktop, while 3.78% opened them on mobile. Thirteen text messages were sent to an average of 10,958 subscribers, covering topics like traffic, curfews, and high-impact measures, with several including links to the spring break webpage on the city government's website (Available at: www.miamibeachfl.gov/breakup/, accessed 25 November 2024). This webpage received 674,120 views from 227,941 users, leading to 1,884,041 actions, including downloads and clicks.

The rhetoric of behavioral change in the PSA

The PSA was the key tool of the campaign. It employed a breakup metaphor to effectively communicate the campaign's message, utilizing a personal and emotionally resonant tone that enhanced its persuasive power. The breakup metaphor framed Miami Beach (and its residents) as a partner in a declining relationship with spring breakers, crafting an intimate yet determined narrative that emphasized disappointment and the necessity for change. The direct and informal language, featuring utterances like "this isn't working anymore" and "we're done," mirrored typical breakup conversations, making the message relatable to the audience's own experiences. By integrating these elements, the PSA adeptly employed persuasion, utilizing various communication tactics.

The emotional impact of the breakup metaphor was crucial to the PSA's effectiveness, as it captured attention and enhanced message retention. This approach aligns with the concept of pathos, where emotional appeals aim to shape audience perceptions and behavior. The metaphor fostered empathy and urgency, stirring feelings of regret and dissatisfaction that resonated with the audience's values.

By highlighting the distinction between the city and spring breakers through terms like "us" versus "you," the PSA positioned spring breakers as the root of the conflict, thereby justifying the need for change. The direct address to spring breakers, using expressions such as "hey, we need to talk," personalized the message, fostering a sense of immediacy and relevance. This tactic drew the audience into a dialogue, increasing engagement and persuasive potential.

The statement "do you even remember what happened last March?" was strategically included to provide specific examples of problematic behavior from the previous spring break season, serving as evidence to support the city's position. By illustrating the issues stemming from spring break, the PSA justified the implementation of new measures and

prepared the audience for anticipated future consequences. This predictive tactic established clear expectations for spring breakers regarding the upcoming season, reinforcing the city's commitment to strict enforcement.

The PSA also contrasted the city's preferred activities—such as “relaxing on the beach, hitting up the spa, or checking out a new restaurant”—with the disruptive behavior associated with spring breakers, like “getting drunk in public and ignoring laws.” This juxtaposition highlighted the incompatibility between the city's aspired destination identity and the actions of spring breakers, reinforcing the narrative of conflict and the necessity for the city's response. By emphasizing these differences, the PSA appealed to both logos (i.e., rational appeal) and ethos (i.e., ethical appeal), aligning the city's values with those of responsible visitors.

Exaggerated statements, such as “we're done” and “don't try to apologize and come crawling back,” amplified the finality of the city's decisions, adding a dramatic tone that underscored the seriousness of the message. The repeated utterance “we're breaking up” reinforced the breakup theme, emphasizing the irreversible nature of the city's position. This tactic solidified the PSA's message and conveyed a sense of urgency, further emphasized by expressions like “whatever it takes” and “this March you can expect...,” which articulated the immediate need for change.

Collectively, these tactics enhanced the PSA's effectiveness, making the message clear, compelling, and memorable. By intertwining emotional appeals, direct language, concrete evidence, and contrasting imagery, the PSA communicated the destination's new identity while seeking to reshape its image and influence tourist behavior accordingly. This strategic use of rhetoric illustrates how persuasion can be leveraged to rebrand a destination and tackle complex social issues.

The effects on tourist behavior

The Breakup campaign also focused on driving home Miami Beach's new boundaries for acceptable behavior, especially following recent years marked by violence and law enforcement challenges during spring break. With humorous yet firm messaging, Miami Beach positioned itself as a destination that would no longer tolerate disorder. The campaign gained significant attention on digital platforms, further amplifying its impact among young audiences.

The campaign reflected the power dynamics between city authorities and spring breakers, addressing broader societal concerns about public safety and the challenges of high-season management. By emphasizing strict regulations and showcasing the city's commitment to enforcement, the campaign asserted the city's authority and aimed to realign tourist behavior with sustainable values. This approach reflects a growing trend

of seeking to attract visitors who positively contribute to social and environmental well-being (Giampiccoli et al., 2022).

The campaign not only tackled immediate behavioral issues but also resonated with broader ideological shifts toward safety and sustainable tourism practices. By contrasting the city's desired image of safety and tranquility with the disruptive behavior associated with spring break, the campaign implicitly critiqued the hedonistic atmosphere of spring break. This critique contributed to a larger narrative about the necessity of balancing tourism with community well-being. The campaign reflected a significant effort to rebrand Miami Beach as a destination committed to these values, signaling a transition toward a more controlled and sustainable approach to tourism management.

In the long term, the effects on tourist behavior may differ among individuals. Some spring breakers may perceive the campaign as a strong indication to change their behavior or consider other destinations. The comprehensive outline of new regulations and enforcement strategies underscored the city's serious stance, which could lead to greater adherence among visitors who prioritize a smooth and trouble-free experience. On the other hand, the firm language and promises of enforcement may incite resistance or defiance in some audience segments. Certain spring breakers may see the campaign as a challenge to confront or an invitation to demonstrate their disregard for the city's regulations. Additionally, the rhetorical focus on finality and the city's preparedness to implement new measures could generate conflict or tension, potentially escalating confrontations.

For the campaign's message to maintain its effectiveness, it is essential that the city adheres to its enforcement commitments over time. Without proper enforcement, the intended deterrent effects and desired behavioral changes may be compromised, ultimately diminishing the campaign's overall success. The credibility of the message hinges on the city's consistent implementation of the promised actions.

The campaign's success

In June 2024, the city government reported the achievement of an important milestone (Williams, 2024b): the Breakup campaign was shortlisted three times for the Cannes Lions 2024 Awards – widely considered the Oscars of the advertising industry – once in the Direct Lions and twice in the PR Lions categories.

The Direct Lions honor creativity that is targeted and action-oriented, with entries demonstrating the use of insights or data to engage specific audiences, build relationships, inspire action, and achieve measurable outcomes. In this category, the

Breakup campaign stood out as the only destination-focused entry among 2025 entries, competing with notable brands such as Netflix, McDonald's, and Heineken.

The PR Lions acknowledge excellence in strategic and creative communication. Entries must showcase original thinking, transformative insights, and strategies centered on earned media that influence opinions, drive progress, and foster cultural, societal, or business change. Effective storytelling, along with a focus on reputation and brand enhancement is, therefore, central. In this category, which received 1525 entries, the Breakup campaign was shortlisted alongside "Visit Sweden, not Switzerland."

The evaluation process at Cannes Lions is rigorous, involving multiple rounds of review by industry experts. Campaigns are assessed based on several criteria, with weight given to the idea (20%), strategy (30%), execution (20%), and impact/results (30%).

The campaign's overall success was acknowledged by Mayor Steven Meiner at the 2024 GMCVB Annual Meeting (Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2024). He noted the improved quality of life and safety for residents, businesses, and visitors during the 2024 spring break season. The Mayor also highlighted the absence of fatal incidents and emphasized the importance of collaboration among the city government, the GMCVB, and local, county, and state police.

As reported by Williams (2024a), the city government advised continuing the Breakup campaign to replicate the successful outcomes achieved in 2024 and recommended launching the next campaign by early January 2025, aligning with the timing when most spring breakers begin planning their trips. Additionally, the city government suggested involving the City's Black Affairs Advisory Committee, whose expertise in cultural linguistics and understanding of the local community's dynamics will be valuable in ensuring the messaging resonates across all segments of the population and identifying potential gaps in the marketing approach. As done in 2024, the city government also emphasized the importance of incorporating insights from a younger demographic, as this group remains a crucial target audience for the campaign.

Further considerations

The Breakup campaign presents a compelling case study in urban tourism management and image control, as the city sought to shift its appeal from typical spring break crowds to more affluent, responsible visitors. This campaign exemplifies the power of destination marketing in shaping visitor demographics and behavior. However, it also raises ethical considerations: as destination marketing becomes more targeted, there is an increased responsibility to avoid exclusionary messaging that could inadvertently marginalize certain groups.

Unlike private campaigns, this initiative was led by city officials under a “law and order” agenda, employing measures such as heightened police presence, driving under the influence (DUI) checkpoints, restricted beach access, and parking closures to curb unruly behavior. While data from the Miami Beach Police Department indicated a reduction in incidents of violence, validating the campaign’s effectiveness (Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2024), these measures were not without controversy. Many residents viewed them as “draconian,” while advocacy groups raised concerns over their disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, particularly Black people (Fischer, 2024).

This is particularly poignant given Miami Beach’s historical and ongoing challenges with Black tourism. For decades, Black communities have faced systemic exclusion from key tourist spaces, both in terms of representation and access. Therefore, the heightened policing efforts risked reinforcing long-standing racial divisions and inequalities in the city’s tourism landscape. This layered history suggests the need for tourism management strategies that prioritize inclusivity, equity, and the consideration of racial dynamics alongside behavioral controls.

Conclusions

The Breakup campaign exemplifies the intersection of destination marketing, public policy, and social responsibility. By considering the campaign’s implications within this broader social context, it becomes possible to explore how cities manage not just their destinations, but also their identities, balancing tourism benefits with community needs.

This case study also highlights the importance and effectiveness of strategic destination rebranding in the face of negative tourism impacts while balancing economic benefits with community well-being and the sustainability of the destination. The innovative approach of this marketing campaign, utilizing effective storytelling and emotional narratives, serves as a model for DMOs facing similar issues.

Managerial implications

For DMOs, this case study offers several key managerial implications. First, the integration of local community perspectives in rebranding efforts can enhance authenticity and foster a positive relationship between residents and visitors. By prioritizing local input, DMOs can ensure that marketing strategies resonate with both potential visitors and the community, ultimately leading to a more sustainable form of tourism. Second, the effectiveness of emotional and relatable messaging, as demonstrated by the breakup metaphor, indicates that DMOs should harness the power of storytelling to engage target audiences. This approach not only captures attention but

also influences tourist behavior and perceptions. Third, the case study underscores the necessity of ongoing monitoring and adaptive strategies in response to evolving tourism dynamics. DMOs should remain up-to-date and conduct research, adjusting their communication and policies as needed to maintain alignment with community goals and changing visitor expectations. This flexibility is crucial to successfully navigate the challenges associated with high-volume tourism periods.

Future perspectives

The case study offers some considerations for future research and practice. Further studies should investigate the long-term impacts of such rebranding efforts on destination image, tourist behavior, and community satisfaction to provide valuable insights into effective destination management. Moreover, exploring the role of social media in branding practices will be essential. Digital technologies, particularly social media, have transformed tourists from passive consumers into active prosumers, who both produce and consume content online (Maci, 2020). Instead of merely gathering information about destinations, they now engage in consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions, sharing their opinions online, and thereby contributing to the co-creation process of destination brands through their user-generated content (UGC) (Confetto et al., 2023). Finally, examining similar initiatives in other destinations may yield best practices and lessons that can be adapted to various contexts. By sharing knowledge and experiences, the tourism industry can collectively advance toward more responsible and sustainable tourism models. In conclusion, the Miami Beach case study exemplifies the transformative potential of destination rebranding efforts that prioritize sustainability and community welfare. Through strategic communication and stakeholder collaboration, DMOs can effectively reshape perceptions, enhance visitor experiences, and foster a tourism landscape that benefits all.

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