

Jon Bernstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak, the Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, regional president of PNC Bank in New England, here with my co-host, Carolyn Jones market president and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Jon. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge-sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently.

Jon Bernstein:

Our guest today is Martha Sheridan, president and CEO of Meet Boston. Martha, welcome to PNC C-Speak.

Martha Sheridan:

Thank you. It's great to be here with you both.

Jon Bernstein:

Great to have you Join us today. Look forward to learning more about your leadership journey and the mission of Meet Boston. And Meet Boston is a new name for your organization. Can you talk about the work and the genesis of the name change?

Martha Sheridan:

Sure, absolutely. So our organization was formerly known as the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau. If we shortened it was GBCVB. Neither of them are easy and roll off the tongue, and really they sounded too bureaucratic, too governmental. And we're not a government agency, we're a 501(c)(6) charged with marketing and selling this incredible city and the surrounding areas as a premier destination for meetings, conventions, and leisure visitations. So we set about with a new funding model a couple of years ago, determining a new image for our organization and really a new value proposition. And we worked with a committee of our incredible colleagues in the industry alongside an agency, Allen & Gerritsen locally here in Boston, and really thought about what is it that we want to do? What do we want to be? What would make it easier for people to know who we are?

And we went through about a six-month process to determine what the new name for the organization would be, alongside of developing an entirely new ad campaign for the destination. And we really came to the conclusion that we wanted this sort of softer image, this image of you think you know Boston, but you really don't, and we're going to help you meet the new Boston. So it's kind of a double entendre because we are responsible for generating meetings business in the community, but we're also responsible for introducing people to Boston. And we felt like the name worked really well and it's been a huge success. So we're very happy with the change.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, it's a great concept and it really has been a great campaign and your role in it. But let's switch a little bit to you. So your career has been quite interesting, you came here, I think from Providence. So talk to us a little bit about your journey. What led you to the CEO role at Meet Boston?

Martha Sheridan:

Well, I've been in the travel industry since I graduated college in one way or another. And back then they didn't have a lot of college programs for hospitality and tourism. So I majored in liberal arts, psychology and English literature, but became fixated on this industry because I was a tour guide at The Breakers mansion in Newport. So I took that opportunity to launch into a full-fledged career in tourism. I became a tour director and traveled all over the US and Canada for three full years on motor coaches. And that is one heck of a way to grow up. And then started in my destination marketing career in my late 20s at a small entity in Southern Rhode Island. And then just progressed in different positions in Rhode Island in this industry. I served as CEO in Providence, at the Convention and Visitors Bureau there for 13 years.

And as timing would have it, Pat, my predecessor here, was retiring and my son was about to graduate college so it worked out beautifully that I could pursue this incredible opportunity. And I really had always thought, I know this may sound kind of corny, that the only job I would really want to travel or uproot for, which this isn't really a huge uproot from Rhode Island to Boston, but would be the Boston job because I love the city, I love what it stands for. And as my mom used to say, "Everything happens for a reason." And it just worked out perfectly. And here I am five years later.

Jon Bernstein:

Martha, would you go into some of the stats on both the size of your organization Meets Boston? And what are you seeing in terms of the numbers of people coming through here in the city of Austin?

Martha Sheridan:

Sure. My organization, we developed a new funding model three years ago. So we've gone from a budget of about just below 10 million to now 48 million. And with that change, we've obviously had to grow the staff so we are now about 60 full-time employees. We have a Visitor Center at the Common, that's another 15 or so employees. And then as far as the industry goes, we haven't really tracked number of visitors, but we do look at hotel occupancy stats and overall hotel revenue stats. And we are really trending in the right direction there. Over the last year, we've seen a 16% growth in hotel revenue, which is a function of both occupancy and average daily rate. So we're going in the right direction. And really Boston's tourism economy is on fire and it's growing year over year consistently, and we couldn't be happier.

Jon Bernstein:

And as you built the team out, diversity, equity, inclusion are so important in our lives and our work. And you were part of the team that developed the All Inclusive Boston promotional campaign, great campaign. What was the goal and what do you feel was the outcome of that program?

Martha Sheridan:

Sure. Well, that campaign was developed at the height of COVID and following the murder of George Floyd, it was very much a reaction to both of those extraordinary circumstances. And we worked alongside Mayor Walsh at the time, who a request for proposal for a firm or firms to develop a campaign that really showed a different side of Boston, something that wasn't the traditional Fenway Park to Faneuil Hall footprint, but really dug deep into the neighborhoods and the diverse businesses in the neighborhood.

So we partnered with Carolyn's good friend, Colette Phillips, and then of course Daren Bascome from Proverb, who's also a great friend, and developed a two phase campaign that really focused on the uniqueness and the diversity of this community from both the resident's perspective, but also trying to generate more diverse visitors to the community. And it was a really successful campaign, we really feel like we were able to get our message across and really showcase some of the hidden gems in Boston in places like Roxbury, Dorchester, East Boston that most people don't think about as traditional visitor destinations, but they are. And we have continued as Meet Boston with that line of work as far as

promoting more of our diverse assets every single day. And we've got a very diverse membership, we have 900 partners here at Meet Boston, and we have really diversified the type of businesses that we are working with now. So it's been a really incredible journey.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, I was going to just add onto that. Do you feel Martha, that you going through that process, developing the All Inclusive with Daren and with Colette, did that also help you as a leader to find new things that you want to point out to people coming to Boston or people here already in Boston? Did you learn more about some of the riches here that are not quite perhaps the obvious?

Martha Sheridan:

100%. I was relatively new to the area to begin with, but focusing on neighborhoods was something I had started doing when I was in Providence. So it wasn't a new priority for me, it's something I've always felt very strongly about, but I didn't know the city all that well. And we've met some incredible partners that we work with now. Collin Knight, Live Like A Local Tours in Roxbury, has been an extraordinary partner. We work with him very frequently, he tours around our visiting travel journalists, he's been featured on a lot of shows, so he's one of the hidden gems that I've been able to get to know through this journey. But just great restaurants that are black owned, Nia Grace is a good friend of mine, and of course she's got extraordinary outlets that we are so excited to have in our portfolio here in Boston. There's so many gems and we're so thrilled that we were able to showcase them to the visitor community and locals.

Carolyn Jones:

So Martha, workforce development is a phrase that I know we at the BBJ hear all the time from business leaders about the importance of it, the challenges of it. Can you talk a little bit about how that pertains to the work you're doing at Meet Boston and what you're hearing and doing?

Martha Sheridan:

Yes. So led by our EVP, Hilina Ajakaiye, we are very committed to assisting businesses in the hospitality sector with sourcing and finding talented help and retaining that help. So we have a variety of initiatives underway, an apprenticeship program or internship program that we're working on. We've just launched and it'll be activated throughout the year. And then we also have a career fair that will take place, it's our third annual on April 30th. And we will connect businesses that have opportunities available to them with employees that are looking for just the right place to land. So my goal is to get people passionate about the hospitality industry because a great industry, a great way to start a career, to make a career of it if you want to. We're working really hard towards that end.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, that's excellent. So let's talk a little bit about you as an employer and what you're seeing from some of the companies that you work with. So many of us as employers are grappling with the changing workforce. You mentioned coming on board during COVID or prior to that, but changing trends that happened since COVID, the generational differences in the workplace and kind of some of the new needs of employees. So what do you see in your industry as a whole, perhaps the community as a whole, and how that changes how you work with your team?

Martha Sheridan:

Sure. Well, whenever I get together with my counterparts from across the country, and there are many of us by the way that do what I do in cities, large and small across the US, inevitably the question comes up, how are you handling the work from home versus in office situation? What are you offering to your

employees to keep them engaged and keep them in your employee? And I think we have a pretty good secret sauce here, we do have a hybrid work situation, three days in the office, two days out. And we do that because we are in the people business, we are in the face-to-face business. And if we're not present, if we're not showing up, how do we ask others to come to Boston and meet and be face-to-face? So it's really important for us to walk the walk. But for us, we've moved to a new office space, we're in downtown now at 99 High. And we've built out a space that I think is appealing and engaging in something that our team really wants to be here, so that's worked out really well.

And really just offering flexibility, understanding... I always say there's no such thing as work-life balance because I raised three kids working full-time my entire career. But work-life integration, you could say, right? How do we make sure that employees feel comfortable being parents, being family members, being spouses or partners, but also being engaged in the work that we do. And it's worked out very well for us.

Jon Bernstein:

What else are you doing when you bring your teams into the office to have fun?

Martha Sheridan:

That's really funny you say that. So I have been adamant that we develop, and I hate the term team building, it just sounds so cliché, but we develop fun and engaging activities for the team to engage in. We just started a book club and did our first book, which was great, and it was fun. And then this week we are doing an Oscars competition, Guess the Oscars. We'll do lunches for Women's History Month, we are doing work with charities. So right now we're collecting items for Rosie's Place. And again, that's an honor of Women's History Month. We've done name the baby picture. We'll be starting yoga classes. My goal is to get Mei Mei Dumplings in here to teach everyone how to make dumplings. So anything that's fun and engaging. And as I said, we work for a fun industry so we are naturally built in and baked into what we do, are going out to activities and events across the city collectively. So that helps us to get connected with each other and the industry at large. So it's been working out really, really well.

Jon Bernstein:

That was my next question, which is how often do you get your team out into events in the city?

Martha Sheridan:

Every night. So we just went to the Boston Food & Wine Festival, women's dinner on Friday night. Several of us did. We actually have an open house every month where we draw about 200 partners at venues throughout the city and our entire team goes to that, which is really, really fun. We showcase a lot of venues to visitors and to meeting planners. So we have the benefit of our partners inviting us to see their venue, we do that very often as a collective. There are some nights, honestly, Jon, when I really just want to be home, sitting on my couch eating a burger, to be honest with you. But at the end of the day, we really do get out and about, and I think people are really starting to know who Meet Boston is from the inside out.

Carolyn Jones:

Martha, it's funny you said that because I feel like since you and I have met, every time I meet with you, you're coming from somewhere like Las Vegas or Texas or you're all over the country, and then talking about your team and you, I feel like I see you all the time. So how do you as a leader, I mean, number one, how do you balance that? As you said, you don't have balance, but how do you manage and cope with that personally, but also about your staff so that they don't get burnout? And sometimes sounds like fun, but then going out every night loses its luster after a while. So talk a little bit about how that fits into your leadership.

Martha Sheridan:

Well, we absolutely encourage open dialogue on how you're feeling. If you are feeling overwhelmed, you need to tell us. And it happens, it literally just happened last week in my sales team. One of the team members who has an extraordinarily high paced position said uncle, right? And so that's when we have to start figuring out, okay, where do we offload some of those tasks to other people to unburden? But for me personally, it's not as easy as it sounds, Carolyn. I am the type of person that really... I feel strongly that I want to be in rooms. And the guilt is big when you say you're going to go somewhere and then you're like, "I can't do it. I have to disconnect." So for me, I have to prioritize and I have to rely on my team to represent me where it's important.

And the travel to me is extremely important, we are on a journey here to really position Boston as one of the premier destinations in the world. And you can't do that sitting behind a desk at 99 High Street. So I do travel. My next trip will be to DC. I'll go to DC twice in a month, then I'll head to London, and then I'll head to Texas. And none of those is a maybe, it's all in for me because it's places that I need to be as the CEO. And as much as I travel, there are members of my team that are traveling twice as much as me, particularly globally.

So we try and balance it, adding bodies is going to help. We'll continue to grow our team, but if we want to position ourselves as that global leader, we got to be everywhere. We like to call ourselves the wizard behind the curtain. Everybody thinks people just come to Boston, we don't need to promote it. And it's like, "No, that isn't how it works. We have to invite people here." Particularly because people think they know Boston because they did the Freedom Trail, they went to a Red Sox game, they had an ice cream at Faneuil Hall and some chowder, and they're done. And we need to tell them, you do not know Boston, and if we don't invite them, they're not going to come back so our work is incredibly valuable.

Jon Bernstein:

So Martha, let's take that global travel and let's talk about our region. From your perspective and our perspective, of course, Massachusetts is a great place to live, to work, to lead a business. But tell us about that and also what do you think needs work and attention?

Martha Sheridan:

Hah. So I am biased, but I think that this city and this region is extraordinary. And I've seen a lot of places, and in my travels I get to see a lot of different cities. And I feel like right now we are, as I said, we're on fire. We are very much the envy of a lot of other destinations. And I have 200 of my colleagues coming here in a month, and I had several hundred here last summer. And the comments verify exactly what I said, like Boston is extraordinary. I think the things that we need to work on are the things that you all already know about, you've probably already done podcasts on them, but public transit is still a problem. We encourage people to come to Boston, take a short ride from the airport and not have to use a car. But if the system isn't working properly for visitors, we have a gap there.

And of course, the traffic is a problem, and I know we're all grappling with the traffic as it relates to bike lanes versus bus lanes. And it's a controversial topic in my business, I'll be honest with you. The owner of Boston Duck Tours or Old Town Trolley, they can't work in a city if the traffic is unbearable and they can't move their vehicles around. So we have a lot of challenges in that regard and I think more collective thinking around impacts might be a good approach to how we tackle the issue of traffic and shifting lanes. But I'd say those are the two biggest challenges that we face. And for us, the cost of a hotel room is high so we do deal with that. We are surgical in how we approach business and when we invite people to come so that they don't get sticker shock, but they can be a challenge for us for sure.

Jon Bernstein:

Don't come on graduation weekends, right? That's the plan.

Martha Sheridan:

Absolutely. Forget May. Forget May, unless it's Mother's Day weekend, then we would love to have you. Those are the rules. We have a whole list of them of when you can come. But I'll tell you, some of those gaps are being filled in. It used to be July was a fairly quiet month in the city, and that's not the case anymore. So July is very popular for visitation to Boston, even for people to hold meetings here. So our goal is to fill in the gaps. Of course, anybody can come January, February, and March, bring it on. But those are the challenges that we work with. Nothing insurmountable though.

Jon Bernstein:

As you walk through the Boston history, what are some of your favorite spots?

Martha Sheridan:

Oh wow, so many. Well, we just celebrated the 250th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum, and I'm looking at it right now as we speak out my window, and we may take that spot for granted, but visitors absolutely love the experience there, they think it's incredible. The USS Constitution and the Charlestown Navy Yard are great spots. I think Charleston is really, really coming into its own as a visitor destination. There's a lot happening there, a lot of new developments so I would point to Charlestown. Just in general, one of my favorite places to spend time is the Commonwealth Mall on Comm Ave. And just looking at all of the incredible memorials and statues that shine a light on Boston's history, women's history, and just so many different incredible leaders that are showcased there. And then I absolutely love the embrace and I think our visitor center happens to be in front of it. But having that monument to Martin Luther King in such a prominent place is a huge asset for us.

And I know that's recent history, but I think it's a piece of history that people never associate with Boston. So I think having that there and telling that piece of history and Imari Paris Jeffries, is an extraordinary human, I love everything he does. And we will see people out there from across the world taking their pictures in front of that monument, it's a huge asset for us. So you go from the old to the relatively recent history, it all blends together and tells a really great story at Shaw Memorial too, by the way. Love the Shaw Memorial.

Carolyn Jones:

So let's just a little bit more about you and kind of introspection. We always like to hear reflections, your insights from leaders. So if you could share one piece of advice with your younger self or just one piece of advice in general, what would that be?

Martha Sheridan:

I get asked this question a lot. In my world, I do a lot of women's leadership talks. And I always say, and I gave you my mom's anecdote, this is my dad's, "Which is just never burn a bridge." Disappointments happen in life, and I've had many in my career, and I firmly believe that they happen for a reason. But you got to take it and move on and not look back with anger and over who may have you perceived has wronged you. So I really believe if you burn a bridge, you can never go back over it. And that served me really well. I try and keep my head high and approach every disappointment with grace and take it as a learning moment as opposed to being bitter or finding retribution, I don't think it's helpful at all. And that's the advice I usually give even to my children.

Carolyn Jones:

That's excellent advice. I love it.

Jon Bernstein:

Sometimes hard to follow though.

Martha Sheridan:

It is. It is. I hear you. But there just are so many times in life where you have to go back to that person that maybe wasn't your best friend at the time, and you may need them for something right. And you can't go knocking on that door if you've treated them in a way that they're not going to want to open the door. So I think it's important, and I think having grace in how you move forward is just such an important piece of advice.

Jon Bernstein:

It's a skill to develop. We like to close with some rapid fire questions. So Martha, are you ready? Off the top of your head.

Martha Sheridan:

I am so ready. So ready.

Jon Bernstein:

What are you currently reading or watching?

Martha Sheridan:

I'm reading Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver. It's a remake of David Copperfield, but it's set in Appalachia. And it's a fabulous read. I just watched Anatomy of a Fall this weekend, an extraordinary movie. I told you we're making Oscar nomination predictions, and I predict that's going to get best film.

Jon Bernstein:

Who's a Boston leader or organization to watch.

Martha Sheridan:

Nia Grace. I think she's extraordinary. She's one of the first people I met when I came to Boston. I think she has a model and a secret sauce that is, she's taking it outside of the state now to Foxwoods as we know. But what she's done with Grace by Nia in Boston and now at Foxwoods, and then her soon to be reimagined Darryl's is amazing, live music and good food are a perfect combination as far as I'm concerned.

Jon Bernstein:

And what's your favorite spot in Boston?

Martha Sheridan:

South End. I live in the South End, I love the South End. I live across from Heaters Park. Yesterday, Spring was starting to show its colors, and that park was alive with so many people, so much diversity, basketball, pickleball, tennis, playground, it's all there. I love the South End.

Jon Bernstein:

And what's the most overlooked spot in Boston?

Martha Sheridan:

Oh, boy. I think Charlestown. I think there's a lot happening there. I'd say Charlestown and maybe even East Boston now. East Boston has the best view of the skyline of anywhere in the city, and some incredible restaurants are opening up over there to support some of the others that have been there traditionally. So I'd say East Boston.

Jon Bernstein:

If you could have any other job in our city, what would it be?

Martha Sheridan:

So this is going to seem odd to you, but I have always been fascinated by supply chain. So I would love to work with support on supply chain issues and how that works. I don't know why I'm fixated on it, but I am. And I think it would be really interesting. And of course it has something to do with travel, right?

Carolyn Jones:

Absolutely.

Jon Bernstein:

Yes. And finally, what's a wish you have for Boston?

Martha Sheridan:

Just keep getting better. Just keep getting better because it makes my job easier. I want Bostonians to appreciate what they have here because I think sometimes we think the grass is always greener, but in this case, Boston's grass is very green right now, so let's embrace it.

Jon Bernstein:

And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Martha, and for sharing your insights.

Martha Sheridan:

It's been a pleasure to be with you both. As you can see, I am passionate about this city and this area, and I love every opportunity I can take to talk about it. So thanks for having me.

Jon Bernstein:

Your passion clearly came through today. Thank you for sharing that. I'm Jon Bernstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Martha Sheridan, president and CEO of Meet Boston.

Jon Bernstein:

You can find PNC C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston, or in any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.