



# Women In Leadership

## Sharing Their Secrets to Destination Success

BY ZACH CHOUTEAU

**A**cross the nation, an impressive collection of women is reshaping the visitor economy — taking a new approach to destination storytelling, spearheading billion-dollar development initiatives and crafting brand identities that resonate globally.

The insights from some of today's most impressive CVB leaders underscore common threads: authenticity as a vital brand imperative, collaboration as a leadership foundation and mentorship as a vital pathway for the next generation. But just as importantly, each story highlights a distinctive approach — one driven by geography, personality, community need and professional evolution.

What follows is a tour of industry lessons and destination visions from seven dynamic CEOs who are not only elevating their cities, but also defining what tourism leadership looks like today.

### CASANDRA MATEJ, CDME

President & CEO  
Visit Orlando



**I**n a place globally recognized for imagination and possibility, Casandra Matej leads Visit Orlando with a combination of experience, clarity and community-minded purpose.

Her journey into tourism began early. “Right out of college, I began my career in the travel and tourism industry

in an entry-level position and have now spent nearly three decades in the tourism and hospitality industry,” she says. Her path included leadership roles across major organizations — Visit San Antonio, Visit Dallas, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide and Hyatt Hotels — each step sharpening her understanding of what it means to guide a major destination.

Matej credits her rise to a mix of determination and support. “Ultimately, staying focused, walking through doors of opportunity and strong support from my leadership propelled me into a leadership role.” Over the years, she has come to see destination leadership as far more than marketing. “A few truths I’ve learned about leading a DMO are that you’re not just marketing a place, you’re stewarding a community; leadership is collaborative, not hierarchical, and that resilience and adaptability are non-negotiable.”

That philosophy shapes how Visit Orlando tells its story. “Visit Orlando is the only organization that tells the holistic story of our entire destination,” she explains. It’s a story that extends well beyond the globally recognized theme parks. “It’s core to our work to promote our entire destination including our culinary scene, nightlife, shopping, attractions and theme parks, especially districts and unique neighborhoods that encompass the Orlando area.” Her team works to ensure planners and visitors understand the full breadth of experiences available. “While the theme parks create amazing turnkey, world-class experiences for groups, Orlando also has a robust variety of off-site and team building event options and services throughout our destination.”

A major milestone came a few years ago, when Visit Orlando entered into a partnership to unify the region’s identity. “In 2022, Visit Orlando partnered with Orlando Economic Partnership to create one singular, comprehensive and consistent brand for our region — Unbelievably Real,” she says. That brand continues to evolve through global campaigns. “Global competition

Williams-Smith's belief in community-driven tourism surfaces repeatedly in her approach. "At Visit Milwaukee, we don't just market a place; we champion a community," she says. Her perspective reflects a broader shift in the industry – toward destination stewardship and an emphasis on quality of life for residents. "Every campaign, partnership and event is rooted in one simple idea: when people experience Milwaukee, they see what makes it extraordinary. My role is to inspire our team and our partners to bring that to life every day."

The Milwaukee brand identity that she has helped cultivate leans into the city's distinct character.

"Milwaukee's brand is defined by three words – Fresh, Flavor and Forward," she says. Fresh speaks to the Great Lakes waterfront and the youthful, outdoorsy energy that permeates the city. Flavor references a cultural tapestry shaped by diversity, creativity and deep-rooted traditions. And Forward emphasizes the city's commitment to innovation and growth. "Together, these pillars celebrate a city that's confident in its identity, inclusive in its welcome, and constantly evolving."

When discussing influence, Williams-Smith is eager to shift away from hierarchy and toward modesty. "I believe influence comes from showing up, lifting others and staying curious," she says. Relationship-building in her work is not transactional, but transformational – a means of driving progress and championing inclusivity. Whether mentoring rising leaders or advocating for tourism as a tool for economic empowerment, she embodies leadership as service.

"Leadership is not about holding a title – it's about using your platform to make your community stronger," she remarks. "If I can leave Milwaukee, and this industry, a little better connected and a little more confident in its power, then I've done my job."



**TANIA  
ARMENTA**  
President & CEO  
Visit Albuquerque

In Albuquerque, NM, Tania Armenta is at the helm of one of the country's most culturally layered destinations – a place where centuries-old traditions converge with contemporary

arts and a dramatic natural landscape. That depth drives her commitment to authenticity in branding. "We are proud to be ambassadors for the Albuquerque brand, and we take our responsibility seriously for crafting a compelling and authentic image that clearly differentiates Albuquerque from competing destinations," she says.

Armenta's philosophy matches narrative richness with analytics. "We use our local expertise and data-driven strategies to make it clear to targeted travelers why Albuquerque is the right choice for their next trip or event," she explains.

The combination empowers her team to present a brand that is emotionally resonant but grounded in evidence about traveler behavior, market gaps and demand trends. In an increasingly competitive landscape – where destinations often compete on similar promises of adventure, cuisine or relaxation – Albuquerque stands apart through its sense of soul.

"In a competitive set filled with resort towns, fast-growing metros and trend-driven cities, Albuquerque stands out for its authenticity, diversity and soul," Armenta explains. With deeply rooted cultural traditions, dramatic desert backdrops and a community known for genuine hospitality, the city delivers experiences that she describes as "real, rooted and unforgettable."

Armenta is also leading Albuquerque through a critical moment of long-term planning. "We introduced Albuquerque's Destination Master Plan, which will serve as a blueprint for the city's tourism growth over the next decade," she informs. Such a plan emphasizes the increasing sophistication of destination leadership – balancing visitor attraction with resident priorities, infrastructure needs and sustainable development.

Her philosophy of leadership focuses on consistency, credibility and curiosity. "Over the years, I've worked for our team to be trusted voices in our community and industry by being present, prepared, curious, authentic, passionate and committed to a standard of excellence and striving for continuous improvement," she says.

In an industry landscape fueled by relationships and perception, Armenta's steady approach has helped position Albuquerque as both an emerging travel destination and a tightly aligned community of partners moving toward shared goals.