



Visit SLO CAL Marketing Committee Meeting
Tuesday, March 17, 2026
8:30 am – 5:00 pm
Swanson Center of Effort Conference Hall
JUSTIN & J. Lohr Center for Wine & Viticulture, Cal Poly
Mt. Bishop Road, San Luis Obispo, CA

1. CALL TO ORDER

PRESENT: Ashlee Akers, Jim Allen, Terrie Banish, Jessica Blanchfield, Sheridan Bohlken, Jacqui Clark-Charlesworth, Cheryl Cuming, Gordon Jackson, Stacie Jacob, Lori Keller, Courtney Pene, Lindsey Roberts, Linda Sanpei, Lynette Sonne, John Sorgenfrei, Jill Tweedie, Michael Wambolt

STAFF PRESENT: Cathy Cartier, Molly Cano, Lisa Marie Belsanti, Kristen Carlson, Matt Halvorson, Mayla Lohnes, Alyssa Manno, Brooke Weisbecker, Lauren Miller, Megan Leininger

AGENCIES PRESENT: Harry Balfour (Pensara), Veronica Casados (Turner PR), Morelle Ellison (Shipyard), Nick Evans (Pensara), Rachel Haik (Shipyard), Tammy Haughey (Shipyard), John Risser (Shipyard), Beth Shaini (Shipyard), Maureen Thielen (Pensara), Brooke Wieck (Mostly Brilliant)

PUBLIC: Laura Fiedler (City of San Luis Obispo), Jamie Smith (Foreward Brand Marketing), Krista Smith (PRWCA)

Call to order at 8:46 am

2. PUBLIC COMMENT (On Non-Agenda Items)

Public Comment – None.

Committee Comment – None.

CONSENT AGENDA – <i>motion required</i>
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3. Approval of January 13, 2026 Marketing Committee Minutes

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

ACTION: Moved by Banish/Sanpei to approve the January 13, 2026 Marketing Committee Minutes.

Motion carried: 15-0-1

Wambolt arrived after vote. Tweedie abstained.

4. Visit SLO CAL CMO Report

Cano reviewed the two marketing committee seats up for renewal, provided a Visit SLO CAL (VSC) staffing update and congratulated Sensorio and Solterra Strategies on their Poppy Award. Cano shared Visit California's Highway 1 short film trailer and announced that TIME listed Highway 1 as one of the World's Greatest Places of 2026.

Cano discussed Pensara's new series with Visit CA "Extra Time." The goal of the series is to promote extended travel around FIFA World Cup. SLO CAL is the only "rural" and the only Central Coast destination featured in this series. The committee watched the trailer of the episode that featured SLO CAL.

Cano provided the committee with the date and location of the SLO CAL Summit 2026. Tickets will go on sale this summer.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

BUSINESS ITEMS

M. Cano

5. Introductions & Discussion Overview

Cano reviewed the agenda for the day and the retreat theme: driving demand. Everyone in the room introduced themselves.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

6. Rearview Mirror: Success + Lessons Learned

Cano presented key VSC accomplishments for FY 26 to date. Cano also highlighted 10 years of the TMD which resulted in 86% TOT growth, a 20% increase in overnight stays since 2016 and played the "10 Years of Tourism in SLO CAL" video.

Risser provided a recap of 'The Land of' campaign, including performance stats for the entirety of the campaign. Risser shared the brand evolution with 'Turns Well Taken' (TWT), played the TWT campaign video and provided an overview of paid media highlights so far.

Evans gave the committee an update on the "Tapped Into SLO CAL" campaign with Firestone Walker Brewing Company. This five part video series will include a paid media component, as well as, cross-promoted on

Firestone Walker's platforms. Tapped Into SLO CAL will launch on National Beer Day (April 7th) with the beer being released at the Firestone Walker Invitational in Paso Robles. The committee watched the first episode.

Evans provided a brief update on another upcoming campaign: "Where the Music Takes You." The goal of this campaign is to show a new side of SLO CAL through live music.

Shaini reviewed responsive co-ops around the World Cup Games and an extension of the current Sojern co-op with the focus on targeting of placements. Shaini also presented the highlights of the paid media performance for the first half of FY 26.

Casados highlighted earned media by the numbers including a focus on nomenclature (17.2k share of voice mentions).

Evans shared social media performance for the first half of the fiscal year, showing performance up across the board and over benchmarks. Although Instagram is the top performing platform for VSC, Facebook has a key share that is in-line with VSC's target audience and is very engaged.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

7. The Road Ahead

Haughey kicked off the conversation around travel trends with a focus on spontaneity and how it is the answer to many of the trends. Travel trends have been bucketed into three themes: spontaneity, culinary and personalized/purpose-driven travel. All these trends align well with the SLO CAL brand and position. Haik presented culinary trends focusing on farm-to-table and intentional drinking/evolving wine culture. In personalized travel trends, identity-driven travel and events are strong travel catalysts.

Shaini shared the paid media trends. Fragmentation continues to exist. Subscription OTT time grows as time spent on socials plateaus. Time spent with audio continues to increase, especially in the podcast space. CTV (connected TV) leads digital over other video channels. Netflix and Spotify edge out YouTube for time spent, and AI is reshaping discoverability, while most AI tools do not currently support paid ads.

Evans presented social media trends. Some highlights include competition shifts in the algorithm favoring engagement over brand—great for organic social reach. The algorithm is increasingly favoring the importance of shares and saves which is changing how content is being crafted. Keywording continues to be important as it is feeding LLMs. Generative AI is increasing the amount of content being produced, but travel and tourism is well positioned to tell an authentic story. There is an increase importance of audio as more are consuming with the sound on and favoring longer form content (moving to ~30 seconds). Instagram launched interactive reels which allows the user to stay longer with one brand in their ecosystem.

Haughey went over meeting and groups trends with a focus on the meeting types that are growing the fastest such as product launches, internal team meeting and conferences without trade shows. Haughey shared the recent Audi launch in SLO CAL an example of how the region can benefit from these opportunities. Return on experience is now the key metric that meeting planners are looking for and audiences want active involvement. Blended travel, blending meetings with leisure continues to trend. There is a growth in

multigenerational attendees at meetings which is driving planners to create micro-communities tailoring experiences by audience demo. Sustainability is not determining decisions but is an added value.

Casados reviewed earned media trends with an emphasis on first-person storytelling, next generation of press releases, freelance and digital first mentality. Authenticity and trust remain important. Press releases can now be used as a multi-media hub for content. There continues to be an increase in freelance journalists that diversify and have their own platforms, offering content creation outside of the articles themselves.

Cartier gave the committee an update on the budget planning for next fiscal year before sending the group on break. Key takeaways were seeing relatively flat TOT across the county and VSC plans to work more with freelancers next fiscal.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – Jacob asked about the use of Substack in the tourism space. Evans replied that there is an opportunity if you have the ability to invest in it and keep a strong brand voice. Evans explained that Substack is the new blog and it would be beneficial to cross-pollinate content like Instagram and TikTok. Jacob wondered about producing a podcast since consumers are spending more time there. Evans replied that the difficulty is podcast is single sensory, but it is one of the most authentic platforms. Items to consider are what is the purpose behind the podcast, ensure it doesn't feel like an advertisement and understand it is a huge investment to get an audience in that space. Haughey shared the evolution of California Now podcast with a new host and video. Jacob added that there is a role for a podcast as a road trip destination. Haughey said there is an opportunity to discuss more about the resources/assets that already exist in the destination/region. Cartier added that if multiple communities are involved it opens the door for VSC to provide support. Haughey added that the content should be repackaged and shared across platforms.

8. Break

9. Breakout Session #1: Earned Media Trends in Action

Cano introduced the first breakout session—taking earned media and travel trends to brainstorm characters behind the trends in each community and what makes them unique. Casados added that groups should focus on long form storytelling opportunities which need the story to include something interesting or niche. The committee broke into small groups by geographic regions to brainstorm characters around the trends previously presented.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – Each breakout group reported out on their characters.

10. Social Strategy 2.0

Evans explained the evolution of the Visit SLO CAL social strategy. The approach will continue to be video first, focusing on creating purposeful content at the speed of consumption. Evans reviewed the social media north star: meaningfully harness social media to make SLO CAL unmistakable while driving responsible visitation.

Evans presented the seven main objectives. The evolved messaging matrix and content pillars have been revised to align more closely with the overall brand messaging.

Evans reviewed the content approach which maximizes assets will layering brand content, campaign content, social series and always-on content. Evens shared examples of how the brand 'Turns Well Taken' will be implemented on socials and how always-on content will be evolving towards longer form, hook & payoff, voiced over, real people and A/B tested. Evens also explained ways in which AI supports the strategy. Using a distilling audience approach, Evans shared four key target audiences: experience seekers, detoxers, detourists and localists. The social team is also building the groundwork for formal social partnerships.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

11. Lunch

12. Business Challenge: Driving Demand

Cano shared the estimated room growth by year, and a forecast of supply, demand and occupancy based on that data. Demand is growing, but supply will outpace current growth. Cano highlighted that VSC operates in a shared demand ecosystem and shared committee questionnaire results on the different roles in driving demand between VSC, partners and shared opportunities. Cano also shared the results for top demand factors across SLO CAL based on committee responses.

Haughey briefly went over the travel landscape in 2026, highlighting the k-shaped economy in the U.S. Haughey shared that the definition of luxury is changing and instead being driven by curiosity, craft and culture. The good news is that travel intent remains in the U.S. despite uncertainty with an emphasis on value, flexibility and meaningful experiences—travelers are becoming more deliberate with onsideration before booking. California remains one of the strongest travel economies in the U.S., but visitation success depends on delivering compelling experiences to justify the trip.

Haughey reviewed the visitor profile study highlighting that nearly four in five SLO CAL visitors are repeat visitors, spotlighting that market development, especially in air travel, is key and sharing opportunity audiences. All this information is important to consider when looking to drive demand.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – Fiedler asked where boomers are traveling. Haughey replied that most are traveling internationally, as that is often a better value for the eastern U.S. than to travel to California. Jacob asked about the impact of the changing film industry. Cuming requested clarity on what is included in the “rest of California” data. Haughey confirmed that VSC can share that specific data.

13. Breakout Session #2: SLO CAL Demand Labs

Cano provided an overview of four real world business challenges that the groups will be assigned for the breakout session. The committee broke into small groups to work on the demand lab activity.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – Each group presented their strategy around the assigned business challenge.

14. Break

15. Demand in Action

Cano and Haughey presented three take aways that were presented during the demand lab activity that VSC could implement. These take aways include an end-to-end market activation, a blended travel landing page with a last-minute itinerary builder and culinary-focused printed content, to drive demand.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

16. FY 27 Co-Op Partnership Opportunities

Cano presented the questionnaire results around co-ops, shared the co-ops that will be continuing for FY 27 and presented potential new co-ops, asking the committee to submit their interest via a form.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – Cuming asked about the possibility of participating in the Sojern co-op without House of Brand assets. Cano replied that it is possible but shared that content costs would be passed along to the co-op partner in that case.

17. Wrap Up and Next Steps

Cano thanked Wambolt, who is moving out of state, for his time and work in SLO CAL. Cano reminded the committee about the next meeting and released everyone for a hosted reception.

Public Comment – None.

Committee Discussion – None.

Next Meeting: May 27, 2026

ADJOURN: 4:29 PM