

District Marketing Mojo: Kristin Withrow

CSDA Communications Specialist

February 2024

Editor's note: In this blog series, District Marketing Mojo, Verdin President and CEO Mary Verdin interviews a leader in the world of marketing and communications for special districts and business improvement districts each month. Check back here regularly for new interviews.

Advocating for California's Special Districts: A Spotlight on Communications Specialist Kristin Withrow

Throughout California, there are more than 3,000 special districts operating in communities large and small to bring services, programs and a higher quality of life to their residents. Special districts are the unsung heroes that work alongside many cities and counties, ensuring fire service, clean water, and parks and recreation facilities and activities, among other basic services and programs.

The [California Special Districts Association](#) (CSDA) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to advocate and educate on behalf of special districts. The CSDA offers education, training, networking and legislative support to these localized government agencies that provide public infrastructure and essential services, but are often under the radar in their communities.

Kristin Withrow is a communications specialist at CSDA, a role that she describes as being the storyteller for the association and its members. She crafts compelling narratives, uncovering the success stories behind CSDA members and their services, and sharing them with the world. Through e-newsletters, the bimonthly [Special Districts Magazine](#), and CSDA's social media pages, Kristin paints a vivid picture of why special districts offer these services and how they positively impact their communities.

Kristin's journey with CSDA began in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and she has worked as the communications specialist for the past three years. Kristin's passion for storytelling and communication made her the perfect fit for the CSDA role, and she has since immersed herself in the unique world of special districts.

The Road Ahead

Kristin and the rest of the CSDA team are constantly working to bridge the gap of understanding between the public and special districts. They aim to make people aware that many vital services in their communities are provided by these districts, not by their city or county governments. Always responding to the needs of its members, CSDA will soon have the convenience of an app that will give members easy access to CSDA resources on the go and from any device.

However, there are challenges to overcome in awareness and community support. Kristin took the lead on a public awareness campaign, "[Districts Make the Difference](#)," that is now run in partnership with the National Special

Districts Coalition and can be seen across the U.S. The campaign is currently live through various social media platforms and aims to educate the public about the crucial role special districts play.

Another major goal of CSDA communications is ensuring legislators and the public understand the distinction between city/county services and special districts. Bringing understanding to the distinction is pivotal to ensuring special districts are included in funding when new laws are created.

Major Influences

Kristin's work at CSDA reflects her belief in finding common ground and emphasizing unity over division. She strives to bring together the diverse world of special districts under one umbrella, advocating for their common interests. This is illustrated by her choices when asked who she would have dinner with, anyone dead or alive. She envisions a dinner table with Eleanor Roosevelt for her pioneering spirit and opening doors for women; her grandmother Helen Sponable, a strong leader and courageous volunteer, working as a Lady in White (a precursor to EMTs) to learn more about her perspective on life and leadership; and Malcolm Gladwell, for his inspirational approach to storytelling and how he helps his audience see many sides of human behavior.

As Kristin continues to tell the stories of our unsung special districts, she invites everyone to join the conversation and discover the essential services provided by special districts in their communities.

If you're interested in learning more, CSDA will be hosting a webinar on communications planning for special districts in March. Follow them on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#) to be informed and stay tuned for more details!

BREAKOUT

CSDA's Unique Offerings

One of the standout features of CSDA is its commitment to exceptional member service. With just under 1,400 members, the association prides itself on being highly responsive to its members' needs. They offer an extensive array of professional development, educational and networking opportunities throughout the year.

CSDA also boasts a formidable advocacy and public awareness team that tirelessly represents the interests of special districts at the capitol. Additionally, a team of public affairs field coordinators scattered across the state ensures that CSDA remains in touch with the challenges faced by its members, staying current in training offerings and responsive to local issues.

Find out more at [CSDA.net](#).

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Meta Title:

District Marketing Mojo | CSDA's Kristin Withrow

Meta Description:

Learn the goals of Kristin Withrow, a communications and marketing specialist for the California Special Districts Association. Read our latest blog post.

Questions:

Tell me about CSDA and your role at the organization, how long you've been there, etc.

· The California Special Districts Association advocates on behalf of special districts throughout California. Special Districts are a layer of local government that provides essential services to communities that are not provided by the city or county. Examples are some water districts, fire districts, or even healthcare districts and cemetery districts – there are many, many types of districts! I am a Communications Specialist focused on new content for our eNews, magazine and social media. I'm essentially the storyteller for the association. My favorite part of the role is to learn about a successful program or service offering and tell the story of why the district offers that service and how it helps their community.

How long have you been there? Started during COVID - 2020. Three years at CSDA.

Born in Folsom CA.. .lived in midwest then back here

What did you do prior to CSDA?

When she came to CSDA she didn't know anything about special districts.

What is your favorite part of the job?

Creating the stories to tell people about their district. She is an optimist - sees the bright side of things and brings

Just under 1400 members.

Currently having a photo contest to increase - through social and through open forum....so a drawing to win if you submit something. Will be over by time blog runs.

Members submitting stories will have portal to submit stories. Will launch an app to interact more with CSDA.

- What is one thing that your organization offers that is a surprise or brings a "wow" factor to your members?
 - CSDA offers exceptional member service and is highly responsive to our members' needs. We also offer a tremendous list of professional development educational and networking opportunities all year. And there's no better voice from the capitol than our advocacy and public awareness team that represents the interests of special districts – and by extension, their communities – at the capitol. We also have a team of public affairs field coordinators that are spread across the state to ensure we stay apprised of the challenges faced by our members so CSDA can ensure we are current in our training offerings and responsive to issues happening that may affect a particular area.

How many CSDA members are there? (Will get back to me) 1400 ish

- If you could have a billboard with anything on it, what would it be and why?
 - Find common ground – there is more that unites us than that which divides us.
- If you had \$1 million to spend to support California districts with no red tape, how would you spend it?
 - That question is well beyond my pay grade, but I would entrust our CEO and Board of Directors to squeeze every cent out of it to ensure special districts got the biggest bang for the buck!

- If I could remove all barriers and constraints what would you do and would you want to accomplish?
 - One of our most fundamental platforms that we are addressing in conjunction with our partnership with the National Special Districts Coalition is to have a formal definition of special districts adopted at the federal level. That would allow the census to properly identify special districts, which would in turn allow legislators to ensure funding bills flow fully to the local level where special districts can apply for grants or benefit from funds that are granted.

Is there a “formal definition” in CA? What is it?

No... CA has a lot of districts but some other states have more. Not one consistent definition in writing federal legislation. Trying to get one agreed-upon definition to trickle down to the states.

If legislators better understand it all better, the funding can open up so, e.g., healthcare district could benefit from funding that comes for healthcare (if not specifically noted, can't apply)

So many types of districts.... Similar but also really different.

Federal definition proposed: (will email)

- What is the best compliment CSDA has ever received?
 - Our members express their enthusiasm for our teamwork and comprehensive services often. We have devoted members who truly appreciate the work we do and tell us it has an impact on the governance of their district and on them professionally. It is gratifying to hear firsthand about the impact of our work on individuals and districts all over California.

How do you get members?

2000 total special districts in the state... some very rural and very small, but still need that same guidance. Word of mouth - only SD assn that is for all types of districts. In touch with other assns with those niche markets... outreach and being the authority/voice for all SDs at the capitol. Looking out for SDs as a whole.

Events - very well attended, educational, networking, leadership

On demand webinars; resources like downloadable templates and examples, open forum for members.

At end of blog, promote VMI webinar on communications planning for SDs that is in March.

- How would your parents describe what you do for a living and what CSDA is?
 - Great question! My mom loves reading *California Special Districts* magazine and seeing my byline, so she'd say I write for a magazine about California government.
- How do you think the average community member describes what districts do?

- We are working on this! One aspect of my work includes operating a national public awareness campaign on social media. The Districts Make The Difference campaign is on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter at @LocalDistricts. It is sponsored by the National Special Districts Coalition. It's an extension of what I do for CSDA, but across the country. We tell the stories of special districts and share news from all over that helps the public understand the services they rely on are often not provided by their city or county – there are more than 30,000 special districts in the US! I'd say the average citizen doesn't understand how common it is to have a special district in their community – but we are working on expanding their knowledge!
- What do you think is the biggest communications pain point for districts?
 - One of the most important points is to help legislators, and the public, understand the difference between a city/county service and a special district – and that, right now, there are times when funding just is not getting to the district level. Even legislators often don't realize when they create a bill with the intention of supporting a service, that unless they specifically include "special districts" in the bill, those community-level services may not get all the way down to the community level. That's why our advocacy team is so critical to ensuring districts are represented at the capitol.

Special District pain point: community not understanding funding and why it's important?

- If you could have dinner with any 3 people dead or alive who would they be and why?
 - Eleanor Roosevelt – I'd love to hear about being a woman in the spotlight in the 1930/40's and how she found ways to open doors for women in future generations.
 - My grandma, Helen Sponable – she passed away before I could know her from an adult perspective, but she was a strong family leader and worked in the community as a lady in white (before EMT's), and I'd love to know more about her perspective on life and leadership.
 - Grandpa was in USAF, Lt. Col and flew bombers. Retired from Mather. Grandma responder for South Placer... responding to car accidents, emergencies. "Lady in White" program.
 - Malcolm Gladwell – I love how in-depth he goes when he tells a story, how he frames the story, and how he helps his audience see many sides of human behavior.

Kristin - Membership Comms Director... inbound training in Boston in Sept by HubSpot; things that are immediately actionable and even free

"I am a storyteller" says this a lot

About CSDA

The California Special Districts Association (CSDA) is a 501c(6), not-for-profit association that was formed in 1969 to promote good governance and improved core local services through professional development, advocacy, and other services for all types of independent special districts.

Since 1969, CSDA has been offering its members cost-efficient programs and representation at the State Capitol and boasts a membership of over 1,300 organizations throughout California. We are the only statewide association representing all types of independent special districts including irrigation, water, park and recreation, cemetery, fire, police protection, library, utility, harbor, healthcare, and community services districts...just to name a few.

CSDA provides education and training, insurance programs, legal advice, industry-wide litigation and public relations support, legislative advocacy, capital improvement and equipment funding, collateral design services, and, most importantly, current information that is crucial to a special district's management and operational effectiveness.

Mission: CSDA is the voice for all special districts, providing members with the resources necessary to best serve their communities.

Vision: CSDA is the essential statewide network of all special districts.

It is CSDA's goal to be transparent and operate in the most prudent and ethical manner on behalf of our member agencies. While CSDA is a private, not-for-profit corporation, our members and partners are public agencies. Recognizing this, CSDA strives to maintain the highest levels of transparency and accountability expected of corporations and public agencies.

Kristin's bio:

[LinkedIn](#)

Communications Specialist with California Special Districts Association. My focus is on content creation, automated marketing strategies and support of the CSDA staff and executive communications. I also lead the marketing and communications for the national Districts Make the Difference public outreach campaign and support the National Special Districts Coalition.

North Central College

Naperville, Illinois, United States

BA Business Management

Management and Communications

- Public Relations
- Reporter/Freelance Writer

Sensorio: A Radiant Blend of Light, Technology, and Hospitality in Paso Robles, CA

Nestled in the picturesque rolling hills of Paso Robles, California, Sensorio stands as a unique outdoor cultural attraction that seamlessly merges light, technology, and hospitality. This captivating destination invites guests to sip and stroll through a radiant field of lights, creating an immersive experience that appeals to various sensory levels and leaves visitors with unforgettable moments.

Ryan... "When guests first walk into the field of lights, they are taken back with just how big the venue is and how the topography of the land immerses the guest within the exhibits and takes them to a place to relax, reflect and enjoy!"

What sets Sensorio apart is the unexpected awe it elicits from guests. As visitors first step into the mesmerizing field of lights, the sheer size of the venue and the way the topography immerses them within the exhibits often leaves them taken aback. Sensorio becomes not just a destination but a place to relax, reflect, and relish in unexpected moments of joy.

The Permanent Glow:

Addressing misconceptions head-on, Sensorio aims to showcase its permanence and growth as a venue. If granted a billboard with no restrictions, the team would proudly display an aerial shot of the Field of Lights, emphasizing that Sensorio is a permanent and continually expanding destination. This visual narrative aims to dispel any lingering notions of Sensorio being a temporary exhibit, inviting guests to explore the numerous amenities and moments it offers.

Investment and Growth:

Given a hypothetical budget of \$1 million with no red tape, Sensorio envisions a two-fold investment strategy. Firstly, expanding outreach beyond California, targeting cities with direct flights to San Luis Obispo and engaging with groups interested in immersive venues. Secondly, the funds would be channeled into building internal infrastructure, ensuring that as Sensorio grows, its commitment to hospitality and high service standards remains unwavering.

Unleashing Potential:

When asked about the removal of all barriers and constraints, the dream scenario for Sensorio involves a leap into the future through a time-traveling portal. The goal is to witness Sensorio's growth in five years, envisioning it as a global destination for travel, wine, food, live music, and of course, the enchanting lights that have become its signature.

Heartfelt Appreciation:

Reflecting on the best compliment received, the team at Sensorio values the narrative it has created within the community. It's not just about individual reviews but the collective gratitude from local businesses and residents, acknowledging Sensorio for bringing in visitors and contributing to the region's vibrant cultural scene.

Family Perspective:

If asked how their parents would describe their role, the response is humble. Running the Field of Lights installation in Paso Robles would be the straightforward answer, potentially followed by a charming mispronunciation of Paso.

Community Perception:

To an average community member, Sensorio is simply "the light thing in Paso that you can drive through." This concise description captures the essence of Sensorio's luminous attraction in the eyes of the locals.

Dream Dinner Guests:

Ending on a personal note, the interviewee shares their dream dinner guest list, featuring their Aunt Pat, an influential figure in their hospitality career; Will Guidara, author of "Unreasonable Hospitality"; and the legendary Bill Murray, whose eclectic charm and wit would undoubtedly make for an unforgettable dining experience.

In conclusion, Sensorio stands as a beacon of innovation and immersive experiences, inviting guests to step into a world where light, technology, and hospitality converge to create moments that glow with lasting memories.

Questions:

Ryan - bio, photos

Tell me about Sensorio (opportunity to use your elevator pitch!): Sensorio is a unique outdoor cultural attraction in Paso Robles, set in the rolling hills that merges light, technology & hospitality in which guests can sip and stroll through to experience various sensory levels and to make their memorable moments glow.

What is one thing that your experience offers visitors and residents that they didn't expect? (Is there anything people say is the "wow" factor or surprise?) When guests first walk into the field of lights, they are taken back with just how big the venue is and how the topography of the land immerses the guest within the exhibits and takes them to a place to relax, reflect and enjoy!

If you could have a billboard with anything on it, what would it be and why? It would have the amazing arial shot of the Field of Lights that we posted a few weeks ago on social media and would speak about how Sensorio is a permanent (and growing) venue. I think so many people may think that we are/were a temporary exhibit and now, we are a permanent venue that offers numerous amenities and moments that guests can take advantage of.

If you had \$1 million to spend on Sensorio with no red tape, how would you spend it? I think it would go to two different categories. The first would be continuing to reach out to cities outside of California that have direct flights to SLO and or groups/channels that are interested in venues like Meow Wolf or a part of the IAAPA expos. This type of business segment is really starting to take off and customers are continuing to spend their hard-earned money on ticket venue experiences. I think Sensorio is at the cusp of being recognized not only as a CA destination location but a must-see location for travelers throughout the globe. The second category would be continuing to build our internal infrastructure. We have an amazing team that touts hospitality and high service standards and as we continue to grow into a larger venue it will be important that these ideals are not lost while improving communication, productivity, and connectivity.

If I could remove all barriers and constraints, what would you do and would you want to accomplish? I would jump into a time traveling portal to see what Sensorio looks like in five years and to see the growth of the venue, the hotels and conferencing services and see what a destination location for travel, food and wine will hopefully be, live music and of course the lights at Sensorio!

What is the best compliment Sensorio has ever received? I spent a lot of time on this one, looking through reviews, talking with staff and even our owner. I don't think it more of a narrative that Sensorio has been able to create and the guests and local business who are thankful about having Sensorio in the area to bring in guests, but also giving families and guests something else to do in this amazing and up and coming wine region. A close second would be the amount of comments about our Sensorio burger...

How would your parents describe what you do for a living? I think they would say that I run the Field of Lights installation in Paso Robles (I'm sure they would mis pronounce Paso..). From there it might get a bit interesting on the details as to overseeing operations of the venue.

How would an average community member describe what Sensorio is? The light thing in Paso that you can drive through.

If you could have dinner with any 3 people dead or alive who would they be and why? 1. My Aunt Pat-She put me on the path to my hospitality career and I would have that dinner in her kitchen that I grew up in with the commercial mixer in it and her with her apron cooking for everyone. 2. Will Guidara-The Author of Unreasonable Hospitality-I'm reading this book right now and finding it so impressionable on what we do here at Sensorio, but also how he has some many like Food/Hospitality experiences that I can relate with (Other than running a Top 50 World renown restaurant..) 3. Bill Murray, I've always been a fan and what a unbelievable dinner guest he would be and I bet would help wash the dishes. The documentary on Netflix the Bill Murray stories is an amazing watch!

In high school his first job was at a mom and pop pizza place... got his bones working in a restaurant. Buy senior year pretty much running the place. Went into culinary school.. Aunt pass a long time ago but knew he was pointed in this direction. Knew he was working in SF restaurants. Aunt owned a catering /banquet venue for parties and venues. Cooked and served, before Ryan was born.

Working at the pizza place, "Kevin" (owner) was instrumental to Ryan's development.... Still friends and connected today. Today runs a burger Pizza Cottage.

FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

Where did you grow up? **Columbus OH, school in Rhode Island**

Where do your parents live? Mom has passed, Dad is in OH (hasn't seen Sensorio yet)

Land Gorilla - Construction software company, Ryan was customer service-focused

He and his wife moved to SLO.... Valerie went to Cal Poly and would come down to visit and had a goal to move here. Moved here in 7-8 years ago. Valerie went to Cal Poly

Advice you would give yourself when you started this job...

Or your old self: Don't sweat the small stuff. Things happen... how you move forward and figure things out is the big thing. People make mistakes, don't get stuck on that because that's how you learn.

For Sensorio - Don't worry about having to know everything on day 1. So many moving parts and the venue and property is growing at such a huge pace.

When the owners... temporary, and then found a way to give back something everyone can enjoy. Who owns Sensorio (Google)?

Time Well Spent in Arroyo Grande: A chat with Sean Dasmann, Chair of the Arroyo Grande Tourism Business Improvement District

“Off Highway 101, nestled between ancient oaks, rolling wine country and local surf spots is our little town of Arroyo Grande. It’s a community that’s truly unique, with a genuine warmth that puts you at ease before you even kick off your shoes. There’s our walkable downtown Village dotted with antique shops in old Victorian buildings, farm-to-table eateries and watering holes, and other treasures waiting to be found. There’s our historic Swinging Bridge overlooking the creek, where you’ll spot our beloved brood of local roosters. Most of all, there’s a feeling in the air like this is where you’re supposed to be, and we swear, it’s not just the perfect Central Coast weather. Spending time here is spending time well. Ready to join us?”

- [Visit Arroyo Grande website](#)

Situated halfway between San Francisco and LA, along the coast on the 101, is the charming small town of Arroyo Grande. A special destination that is off the beaten path, where visitors can find peace and relaxation, and enjoy the myriad of outdoor experiences offered on the Central Coast.

The Arroyo Grande Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) Advisory Board is made up of representatives from lodging or hospitality-related businesses in Arroyo Grande appointed by the City Council. The TBID seeks to reach travelers whose interests and behaviors align with the genuine experiences found in our area. These travelers are ready to discover the magic of Arroyo Grande—a town differentiated by its charming atmosphere, striking scenery, and access to some of the California Central Coast’s most sought-after experiences. The Arroyo Grande TBID is funded by a 2% assessment charged by hotels for the purpose of promoting the city as a destination.

[Sean Dasmann](#) is the Chair of the Arroyo Grande TBID and the General Manager of The Agrarian Hotel, located in the city’s historic and welcoming Village of Arroyo Grande. Serving as the Chair of the TBID, Sean actively contributes to shaping the board's agenda and overall direction. His “day job” overseeing the operations and guest experience of the 54-room Agrarian Hotel gives him the expertise and insights to provide input and leadership on the marketing efforts of the tourism district. Sean joined the TBID right after he joined the Agrarian team, and he has held the chair position for the past two years.

Sean’s resume is varied, working in the event entertainment business since 1989 (and, in fact, he still DJs weddings and other celebrations on the regular). This background has brought a focus on guest experience to his role at The Agrarian Hotel and the TBID.

BREAKOUT

Arroyo Grande TBID Vision: To create a thriving community rooted in authentic hospitality and nourished by a strong economy

Mission: To market Arroyo Grande as a desirable travel destination, create memorable experiences and support a prosperous economy and community.

The current marketing goals for the Arroyo Grande TBID are three-fold:

1. Position Arroyo Grande as a travel destination
2. Increase overnight stays in Arroyo Grande
3. Introduce new visitors to Arroyo Grande

To reach the TBID's goals, Sean and the TBID board have worked with Verdin to focus on the authentic experiences and meaningful memories that can be created spending time together in Arroyo Grande. Their recent ADDY award winning campaign, "Time Well Spent," attracts families, couples and friend groups to enjoy each others' company in an environment of relaxation, beauty and history.

[Put screenshot examples of Time Well Spent campaign here.]

Arroyo Grande, Past & Future

One special thing about Arroyo Grande is its rich heritage and history. The township of Arroyo Grande was established in 1862 as an agricultural town. The railroad came to AG in 1882 with a new depot, and the city of Arroyo Grande was incorporated on July 10, 1911. To date, agriculture is still at the heart of the Arroyo Grande valley, boasting strawberry fields and row crops including broccoli, bell peppers and lettuce. The Arroyo Grande Valley is also a designated American Viticulture Area (AVA), producing award winning Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, in addition to many other varietals.

Sean grew up in Arroyo Grande and graduated from AG High School, so he has a deep love of the area and is dedicated to its success. One priority for Sean and the AG TBID is supporting the businesses in the city, to help the city thrive. The TBID has done this through midweek campaigns to bring visitors in, through the "No Weekend Needed" campaign. Next on the list is to find a new experience in AG to offer visitors, something that shares the history of the city and adds to the two other captivating attractions for tourism, Lopez Lake and the Village of Arroyo Grande. Keep your eye on VisitArroyoGrande.org to see what develops.

As is typical in most communities with a destination marketing organization, there is not a lot of awareness from the community regarding the AG TBID's work to promote the city and its assets, but the results show in community enhancement. Sean intends to continue to work with the Board and the City to educate residents about the tourism district and their role. He said the best compliment he's received in this role was from Arroyo Grande's Mayor Caren Ray Russom, asking him to continue on the TBID as chair after some restructuring of the

Board. One area of opportunity he's identified is to promote the TBID's budget to support local events, if the organizers can show how the event could attract visitors and enhance their stay.

Mayor Caren has been an integral part of the TBID, and appreciates the hard work of the volunteers who serve on the Board for the betterment of the community. She particularly likes the TBID's ability to collect data, allowing City leadership to better understand their visitor demographics, and driving economic growth through informed decisions. The Mayor would love to put a focus on envisioning more multi-day events during shoulder seasons to boost these slower times of year, adding to the City's Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) and sales tax revenue and enabling the City to do more to enhance the City for residents and visitors alike. Both Sean and Mayor Caren feel there is opportunity to create more stories and experiences around Arroyo Grande's history, adding another dimension to the main attractions for visitors, which are the quaint and welcoming [Village of Arroyo Grande](#) and [Lopez Lake Recreational Area](#).

Sean invites the community and visitors to two upcoming events to celebrate the holiday season: the 2nd Annual Tree Lighting & Snow extravaganza and the Holiday Parade. The Tree Lighting & Snow event, held at Elm Street Park on Sunday, December 10th, 2023, from 5:00pm to 7:00pm, offers a magical experience with, literally, tons of snow. The celebration includes a tree lighting and photo opportunities with Santa, and a host of activities including food vendors, a s'more station and horse-drawn wagon rides.

The Arroyo Grande Holiday Parade is an annual tradition taking place on the first Sunday of December at 5 p.m. The parade starts near City Hall and will wind its way through a festively lighted and decorated Village. It is a joyful spectacle that marks the official start of the holiday festivities in Arroyo Grande.

Questions:

Tell me about your role/work with The Agrarian and AG TBID.

- Chair of the AG TBID, run the meetings, try to give input on agendas and direction of the board.
- GM of The Agrarian - manage, guests, employees and rates. Day to Day operations, marketing and image. Agrarian has 54 rooms

On TBID since started.... Chair for two years.

A lot of admiration for city employees

What is one thing that the AG TBID has done for AG that the community was/is surprised by?

That we exist....

Wish the community knew about the support for events, if it'll bring in more visitors

If you could have a billboard with anything on it, what would it be and why?

I thought billboards were not quantifiable - lol

For AG? - Have you experienced A.G. ?

If you had \$1 million to spend on AG Tourism work with no red tape, how would you spend it?

I think it would be great to develop another great attraction like the Village, or Lopez Lake (a 3rd amazing reason to come stay in AG). Something historical would be cool.

Get people to the Village ... go to Rooster or Mason and not wander through the village.

Great staycation spot. The village is the place to come. Expand more on the midweek campaign to get people.

Could TBID do a staycation campaign that promotes to locals.

If I could remove all barriers and constraints what would you do and would you want to accomplish?

A busy thriving Village 7 days a week 365, all businesses open 7 days a week and busy.

Could there be an midweek campaign that includes promotion of village businesses.

What is the best compliment your work with AG TBID has ever received?

I guess being asked by the Major, to stay on and ultimately chair the board again after the recent restructuring of the TBID board

How would your parents describe what you do for a living?

Managing a Hotel and DJing Weddings! Greater involvement?

How would an average community member describe what AG TBID's role is in promoting their city?

I don't think the average member knows we exist.

There is concern about too many visitors?

Great midpoint spot - Pismo, wineries, Lopez... the secret spot (that we want everyone to know about)

Fun to develop relationships with "regulars" who like the experience in AG and in the Village.

Happy hour only during the week to reward the business traveler - all local wines and generally all beers

If you could have dinner with any 3 people dead or alive who would they be and why?

Family that passed to early - Dad and grandparents.

What would you hope to learn? Dad was an AG cop... (prior was in Marines, then PD in Oakland). Dad's Biggest regrets and accomplishments?

Caren Russum:

- What is one thing that the AG TBID has done for AG that the community was/is surprised by? I think the ability to get data is really interesting. The TBID knows where our tourists are coming from, and who they are. That helps us understand our clientele and what we need to do to promote and grow our tourism market, which is a significant economic driver.
- If you could have a billboard with anything on it, what would it be and why? (Oh Mary, this is such a loaded question- hahahaha!) Regarding the TBID- I think it would have comparative imagery, old and new, and say in script "Since 1911."
- If I could remove all barriers and constraints what would you do and would you want to accomplish? I wish we could envision more multi-day events during the shoulder seasons that would help drive TOT.
- How would an average community member describe what AG TBID's role is in promoting their city? Assuming they knew what "TBID" stands for, I would assume they would describe it quite literally: that it promotes tourism for and toward our businesses.
- What do you want your community to know about the AG TBID and its work? I want the community to know that we have amazing volunteers that give their time for free in order to create positive experiences within our city. It's quite romantic, isn't it?

Historical photos of Branch St?

Historical society photo of Branch St to go with Caren's billboard idea?

SEAN'S BIO

General Manager

The Agrarian Hotel

Feb 2021 - Present · 2 yrs 10 mos

Regional Manager, MC, DJ

Epic Entertainment Group · Full-time

Jan 2016 - Present · 7 yrs 11 mos

Grover Beach, Ca.

CENTRAL COAST WEDDING PROFESSIONALS

Past President / Public Relations

1992 - Present · 31 yrs 11 mos

San Luis Obispo, California Area

Owner

AMS Entertainment

Dec 1988 - Dec 2015 · 27 yrs 1 mo

Pismo Beach, Arroyo Grande and the entire Central Coast

Manager

Del's Pizzeria & Italian Restaurant

1986 - 1995 · 9 yrs

BETTINA:

Downtown SLO: Innovative, Welcoming & Inclusive

Nestled along California's Central Coast, halfway between LA and San Francisco, is San Luis Obispo, often referred to as "SLO" (pronounced "slow"). With a population of 47,000 and serving as the County seat, it is a college town that houses Cal Poly State University, and has a pulsating heart in its downtown area. This is Downtown SLO, a vibrant 27-block stretch filled with small-town charm, scenic beauty, and a community spirit that is palpable.

Bettina Swigger has been a transformative force behind this thriving hub over the past five years. As the CEO of Downtown SLO from 2018 to 2023, Bettina's vision and leadership have infused the district with energy, inclusiveness, and creativity. Originally hailing from Albuquerque, New Mexico, Bettina's journey from her musical and literary pursuits at Colorado College to her role leading a team in the cultural upliftment in San Luis Obispo, including during the pandemic, is awe-inspiring. With roots in arts, music, and community-building, she brings a multifaceted perspective to her role.

An Unconventional Blend of History & Innovation

Walking through the tree-lined streets alongside San Luis Creek, Downtown SLO offers a blend of the old and new. With a rich mix of locally-owned shops and national brands, restaurants, hotels, public art and mixed-use developments, it's a friendly place that is anchored by history and gathering spaces. The cornerstone of this is Mission Plaza, adjacent to the historic 250-year old San Luis Obispo de Tolosa Church, which brings the community together through music, festivals, holiday pop-ups and more. One of SLO's favorite attractions is its nationally renowned Farmers' Market, an event that has grown and evolved over the years.

The Farmers' Market: More than Just Produce

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2023, San Luis Obispo's Farmers' Market is no ordinary market. The first in the country to close down a major downtown street to cars and bring in local farmers, businesses and makers to take over the streets selling their wares, SLO has led this trend within the Farm to Table movement. Every Thursday night, it draws in a crowd ranging from 5,000 to 15,000 of locals and visitors, transforming the downtown area into a hub of activity and commerce. During COVID the Market was closed for 18 months and, under Bettina's leadership, when it returned, it transformed into a potent small-business incubator, by giving many local entrepreneurs the platform to thrive and grow. As a result, several small businesses have opened brick-and-mortar shops and restaurants, many of them owned and operated by women and BIPOC. The Market also distributes more than a thousand dollars each week in EBT/food benefits to those who are food insecure, giving them access to fresh, healthy food.

The Vision for Downtown SLO

San Luis Obispo has grown its public art presence tremendously in the past few years. This evolution is still in its first steps, but one can already imagine a Downtown SLO vibrant with public art, where murals tell stories and sculptures offer immersive experiences. The newly designated Cultural Corridor on the west end of downtown currently offers history with the Mission and History Center, art and imaginative experiences with the SLO Museum of Art and SLO Children's Museum, and soon will bring the performing arts into the corridor with SLO Repertory Theatre. Amidst all the artistic visions and aspirations, Downtown SLO remains committed to deeper societal issues, including equity and inclusion, and with a keen focus on addressing homelessness and supporting the unhoused.

The Heart of Downtown SLO

For many locals, Downtown SLO isn't just a place – it's an emotion. From comments like "Everything your team does makes me so proud to live in this town" to simpler acknowledgments about hard work, Bettina's influence in creating experiences and fostering cultural vitality is evident. Her roots in music, community, and leadership are woven into the fabric of Downtown SLO, ensuring it remains a place where memories are made and cherished long into the future.

Don't Miss Out! What's coming to Downtown SLO

As we jump into the holidays, Downtown SLO has big plans to make the season magical. The Holiday season kicks off with the opening of Santa's House and the Holiday Plaza on November 24, with dazzling photo opps, thousands of lights, and perfectly Instagrammable moments. The 46th Annual Holiday Parade will take place on December 1, with the theme of "Out of This World," with more than 80 festive floats.

BREAKOUT:

I'd love to have a billboard right on the 101 that says:

Slow Down in Downtown SLO:

Recharge yourself and make your journey the destination

- Bettina Swigger, former CEO, Downtown SLO

More About Bettina Swigger

Bettina Swigger, who served as the CEO of Downtown SLO from 2018 through 2023, has passionately steered the organization towards promoting a thriving downtown area in San Luis Obispo, CA. She is committed to fostering community engagement, creative placemaking, and ensuring equity and inclusion. Prior to this, Bettina was the Executive Director of Festival Mozaic from 2011-2018, also in San Luis Obispo County. She has been named a Top 50 Women in Business by the Pacific Coast Business Times and Top 20 under 40 by the San Luis Obispo Tribune. Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, Bettina is an alumnus of Colorado College and is deeply rooted in the arts, from co-founding an underground music collective to playing the viola in various ensembles to self-publishing a book of poetry. After her substantial contributions to the arts and downtown development in San Luis Obispo, she has taken up the mantle as the CEO of The Downtown Boulder Partnership, furthering her mission of promoting downtown vitality.

Meta Title: District Marketing Mojo: A Chat with Bettina Swigger

Meta Description: In our series on business improvement district marketing, we chat with former Downtown SLO CEO Bettina Swigger. Read the post.