

Convene Podcast Transcript

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**Note: the transcript is AI generated, excuse typos and inaccuracies*

[00:04] **Magdalena Atanassova:** This is the Convene podcast. My name is Maggie, digital media editor. Welcome to another episode of the Convene Talk. Curt, tell our listeners more about today's topic.

[00:17] **Curt Wagner:** Okay, thanks, Maggie. Today we're talking about this recent BizBash story about booking controversial event speakers. And the story offers ideas on what you can do to prepare for these speakers. And it's an interesting story considering recent events. But even what's happening this year, with the elections going on and all the international conflicts, laws concerning reproductive rights and all that kind of stuff, there's probably no shortage of potentially controversial subjects or speakers that could inflame your attendees. I thought the story had the what might be the understatement of the year? In a quote from Chris Campbell, founder of and CEO of speaker casting, she told BizBash, these are not the times to casually throw a controversial speaker on the stage. And that's definitely true. And when I first saw the story, the story does not mention it at all. But I immediately thought of former President Donald Trump's July 31 performance at the NABJ conference, where he sort of sparred with ABC News correspondent Rachel Scott and questioned Vice President Kamala Harris's race, which was what? Good for at least two weeks of news, maybe in the news cycles, until he did something else. But there is some good news, at least according to a survey of 340 organizers and 378 speakers that was conducted by aa speakers earlier this year. I wrote a little story about this survey, and in it, more than three quarters of the organizers said they would at least consider asking a keynote speaker to change a potentially polarizing presentation, and 27% they would said they would not. Of the keynote speakers who were surveyed, which was what? 378, 96% said they would at least consider changing their presentation if asked, and only 4% said they would refuse. And I'm guessing Trump would have been in that 4% had he been asked. But BizBash goes on to mention five ways that planners can minimize risks, and I'm just going to list them here, and there's information about each one of those that get into specifics. But I thought that we could sort of talk about these five things if there's any more that we can think of to help minimize the risk. I think PCMA has waded into potentially controversial places with some of their speakers in the past, not because the speakers were necessarily going to, you know, intentionally try to shake up the audience, but maybe just because audience members might not agree with what the speakers had to say. And, you know, possibly even this January at convening leaders 25 that could happen. Anyway. Here's the five points. Carefully think through your reasons for booking the speaker host, pre planning calls and on site rehearsals. Prepare the audience. Also be ready for them to go off script, but move quickly to get the event back on track and have a dedicated team monitoring real time feedback so they get into specifics about what you can do within those five ways. But I just wanted to see what everybody else thought of the steps there. Barbara.

[03:50] **Barbara Palmer:** Yeah. You know, I'm thinking about the appearance of former President Trump at the National association of Black Journalists. And, and that was actually a tradition to have the candidates interviewed at that meeting. So I feel like that would have been controversial had they not invited him. The part that interested me the most was the fifth step is having, like, the aftermath. And I'm remembering when we talked, when I interviewed Jess Pettit, and she talked about polarizing speakers and audiences that are polarized by current events. And one of the points that she made is not just monitoring social media accounts, but actually having places, dedicated places where people can respond. And there's all different ways that she suggested you could do it. Like, I know PCMA has difficult conversations, or maybe if you had a controversial speaker or a speaker that you thought might be polarizing, people would feel very differently about that, that you could just have a place to have a conversation afterwards. You could have a place where an inbox or a phone number where somebody could call and say what they felt about it. But I think social media is great, but I think you need to do more than just monitor it if you're wanting to, like, really serve the people that have a lot of opinions afterwards. I would love to hear a follow up on the, the event with President Trump. And if they did have conversations after that and how they kind of worked through that, what are you thinking? Michelle?

[05:57] **Michelle Russell:** Thanks, Barbara. I'm thinking that some comment that a comedian made recently, which is just because you're offended doesn't mean you're right. I think everybody needs to recognize that not everything everybody says on stage is going to be warmly embraced by everyone. And then is that what you really want? So I spoke with Anick, and my high school French teacher will not be happy with me because I'm going to assassinate her last name. Beaulieu Anick anyway, I

know her as Anick, who is the president of C2. And, you know, they do this very innovative business conference every year. And one of the things she said that they did this year was that they're trying not to be vanilla, is what she said. You don't want your event to be vanilla. So how do you make it so that you are bringing in other voices and other perspectives? And she said, when we approach a certain topic, we wanted to have multiple points of view, contribute to the conversation on stage. What that does is that it fuels your desire to keep talking about what you just heard. There's a little friction, there's a little conflict. There's an opinion in there. It's not vanilla. You're like, oh, that person said that. I don't know if I agree, but that person said that, and I'm totally aligned. Are you? So what she's saying is when presented in the right way and you have an audience that's willing to kind of take what they heard and then debate with each other, then you're creating an opportunity for more conversations and connections. And I think conferences should be breeding that kind of conversation. Otherwise, you're just not going to make everybody happy and you're also going to have kind of a bland conference.

[07:55] **Casey Gale:** Something that I think PCMA does really well in regard to controversial topics is having panels where people can kind of discuss two sides of the same topic. When you were just speaking, it brought to mind the panels that we've had, I think, at both Convening Leaders and edUcon in the past about boycotts and if boycotting a destination is a good thing to do or a bad thing to do, and they had people representing kind of both sides and both reasons why it's good or bad. And I feel like that's a sort of safe way to have maybe some controversial topics involved in your conference because you're not having someone talk at your audience with a certain point of view, but they're having a civilized discussion, kind of discussing the different points that could be brought up for and against any topic. And that might make people also feel more included in the conversation, too, regardless of how they fall. Jen?

[08:57] **Jennifer N. Dienst:** Yeah, that's a great point, Casey, because I feel like, you know, I'm thinking back to the panel at convening leaders where a event planner talked about their decision to move their meeting, and there were panelists because of abortion laws in the state of Texas, and she had a really great example of a meeting that needed to move for safety and security reasons, while the other panelists really were taking more of the position that we should try to stay in these destinations because, you know, we need to support the populations that are there. It doesn't have the effect that we think it does when we move our business. And it was so illuminating because I was really, I was writing that story at the time and I really thought that, like, no, we need to, like, dig in. We need to stay in these destinations. And the example that was given, I think, was, was a perfect exception to that rule. And I don't think I would have known about that example if it wasn't for that panel. And we can link those stories in the show notes. But, you know, when I was reading through this, this story, what I thought was interesting, the number five tip, have a dedicated team monitoring real time feedback. That kind of got me thinking about the, again, the panel with Trump and a, I cannot do acronyms, NABJ. And how apparently the whole reason for, for the hour long delay was that they wanted to have real time fact checking, like actually have a screen on the stage that would show in real time whether, you know, what he was saying, whether it was true or not, kind of like what we see at the debates. And that didn't happen. Trump's team apparently did not want that to happen. But I thought in this age of disinformation and misinformation, that something like that, when we have politically themed panels or content and maybe there's speakers who tend to spout misinformation or disinformation, having something like that isn't a bad idea. And I think they talk about in the story, having a crisis management team and security on standby is one thing, but they also think that monitoring and managing feedback, whether it's in person or on social media, is also really important so that they can respond quickly if something is brought up that's untrue, maybe, or something that's going on, on the social media channels as well. So I feel like that's something to think about. Planners can think about having if they have these kind of polarizing political figures. Curt, what are you thinking about?

[11:50] **Curt Wagner:** Just bringing up the Trump thing again? I feel like NABJ, the organizers probably did every one of these five things, but they maybe didn't, it just didn't work for them. Right. I'm sure, as Barbara said, this was a traditional thing where they invite the candidates and so that they probably thought through their reasons, they probably thought about all the arguments there'd be, it was a very divisive thing within the group about why they invited him and everything. But I'm sure that pre planning calls weren't, weren't okayed and then, you know, prepare to go off script. Well, that happened. And, you know, it's just, there's not really a lot that can go on with that. But, and then, as you said about the delay, I was looking for a story that maybe somebody talked to them post event and went through their thinking and everything. I could not find that. But I did find, I think it was the, one of the higher ups in the NABJ was talking about the whole thing with fact checking and that they were just minutes from actually saying, he's not available or he's not going to be coming out on stage

during that whole thing about the fact checking. And then he apparently just walked out there. So, you know, it was just one of those things. But the other point I wanted to make Washington, something Michelle said made me think of this. In this story, they talk about preparing the audience, which is number three. They say that whoever's the moderator or the mediator or the MC, whatever you want to call them, can bring it up before they introduce the speaker and just say, you know, this person maybe has some controversial ideas or maybe you don't agree with this person's viewpoints or whatever to sort of, you know, pointing out the elephant in the room, I guess, and explaining that, you know, your reactions are going to be, could either be positive or negative, but, you know, we're here to listen and we're here to think and that kind of thing. So it's just another way to do that.

[14:00] **Barbara Palmer:** You know, I was just thinking about some research that Freeman did about trust. They were surveying people that attended events, but the top place that they trusted, above media and above thought leaders were associations like the associations that they belong to. What it made me think of is just that this is such a great opportunity to have those kinds of conversations that, you know, the public conversation on social media often devolves into just very, you know, extreme examples of views. And I think so meetings are such a great place to add context, for it to be somewhat controlled and just to practice thinking more, you know, with more complexity about different views. And I was trying to think of a person that I wouldn't necessarily want to hear, but thinking that if I was able to put their views in context, I would come away with something valuable. Casey, I see you nodding your head. What are you thinking about?

[15:31] **Casey Gale:** Well, what you just said segues exactly. And what I was going to talk about. I think it's important to consider who your audience is when you select a controversial speaker, because there is a difference between controversial and harmful speakers. If you have an audience that's primarily women, primarily people of color, primarily LGBTQI+ people, and you have a politician who's actively trying to take away their freedoms, that's not controversial, that's harmful. But if it's, you know, a journalist perhaps, who just represents a different thought than your audience does, typically that might be interesting to hear from them or, you know, someone in the field who just represents a different thought than most of your audience, that's fine. Or different research, all that's good. But I think there's a fine line between controversial and harmful, and that should always be considered when picking a speaker.

[16:32] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, I wanted to add a little bit different point of view to what you have all covered, because I cannot really add much on the political side that you went into, just because I'm not really into that, even though I really took away something. Or just a quote from Barbara's story on navigating political polarization at your events. I love the line where Barbara, you quoted Jess Petite Petit, sorry for mispronouncing the name where you say meeting planners, she added, have a backup plan if they run out of tacos. But they are not planning for how the election is going to impact their event. So I just. Not that line, because it brings the industry into a different kind of direction. But actually, I was thinking about our industry and events for event professionals. And I've always felt that we are a very nice and polite industry. So I was trying to think of, you know, controversial speakers for us who's going to be controversial. And it feels that we're all nice to each other. So nobody or we rarely bring up into the limelight topics that are controversial. We speak about them in the hallways, but not on stage. But maybe there were a few occasions that we've had that. And I think it really goes into. Michel, I think what you said, that the audience might not agree with the speaker. And I immediately went into last year's Convening EMEA and the Uncomfortable Conversations. And I was part of that session. And there was this conversation that we openly had on planners planning for people with different needs and how they approach it and how much planners lack in terms of knowledge and how they should be open about it. And the fact that just the way the session was built, it was so open and so vulnerable. Planners could say and voice their concerns and say, yes, I don't know so much about how to plan for these people. And when I put an open call saying, at registration, you know, just say what you need, and we'll try to accommodate you, it's scary because I don't know what will come out of that. And I felt that was truly, what was the point of uncomfortable conversations? So it wasn't necessarily controversial. I've seen conversations on LinkedIn wherever, let's say there was a person who is certified to lead such sessions, and they force their opinion on event planners, choking them and saying, in a way you don't know, so you don't have the right to say. And I think that's unfair. I think it's very important for people to just voice when they don't know so they can get the help that they need, especially in the very complicated job of event planners. So that's kind of my two cent into just a different point of view. Curt, anything to add?

[19:39] **Curt Wagner:** No, I just, I think, I hope that people read the story. I think the five points are good points to bring up and to have planners think about if they do this. And I think the number one point is the most important is carefully think through your reasons for booking the speaker, because

as we all agree, there's no reason to do it if it's not going to in some way enlighten your audience or educate them or anything like that.

[20:09] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, I agree with that as well. I think we all agree with that.

[20:13] **Curt Wagner:** They might sell tickets, but it'll just ultimately disappoint them if they don't get anything out of it.

[20:22] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, then all the damage control. Right. Good luck with that. Well, thank you, Owen. Thank you, Curt, for bringing this topic up. As usual, you'll find all the article links in the show notes if you enjoyed this episode. To give us a five-star review, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts and share the podcast. And for more industry insights, don't forget to visit pcma.org/convene. And until next time.