

Convene Podcast Transcript

Convene Series: Insights from CEMA Summit 2024

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

[00:04] **Brian Mason:** I like to think that we take risk so that our members don't have to at their events.

[00:16] **Magdalina Atanassova:** This is the Convene Podcast. My name is Maggie, Digital Media Editor. Welcome to season five of the Convene Podcast, brought to you by Madrid Convention Bureau. Today I'm joined by Brian Mason, who is a visionary leader in the realm of strategic events and integrated experiences. As the VP of Strategy and Operations at CEMA, the Corporate Event Marketing Association, Brian leverages his extensive background in orchestrating multimillion dollar global events to drive organizational success. Brian, it's a great pleasure to have you on the podcast.

[00:56] **Brian Mason:** Thank you. Thank you for having me on. It's a pleasure for me to be here.

[01:00] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah, of course. Can you share with our listeners more about the synergies between CEMA and PCMA?

[01:07] **Brian Mason:** Yeah, absolutely. So PCMA acquired CEMA in 2021, but for a very long time I think they've been very closely related. Obviously we're in the same industry and creating business events that are changing the world and we feel that in both places. And so when the acquisition took place, it felt like a really good marriage. Right. And so we have a lot of the same industry partners that we work with, we have a lot of the same challenges, we have a lot of the same successes. And so there's a lot to learn, you know, between the two of us. And I think there's a lot of gray area where we overlap in many of the events that we produce.

[01:56] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. And there's still some work to be done in integrating both. But in the meantime, you're serving your members and can you share some of the latest resources that you're currently working on for them?

[02:10] **Brian Mason:** Yeah. So we are building a 365 day year kind of plan for our members so that there is value to the membership organization all year round. We know that our event marketers are super busy. I mean, I'm talking to people and they have events out out the ears. Right. Which is really great. That means there's a lot of business for a lot of people, but there's not a lot of time necessarily for them to do some professional development and some. And so at CEMA we're looking to build those educational series and opportunities for our event marketers all through the year. Of course we have CEMA Summit, which is our annual family reunion that we have in the July, August timeframe. It's about 800 people that attend Summit and it's a really chance for them to get together at once a year for a day and a half of Educational series, plus just getting together and networking. Right. Like a lot of times people just want to let their hair down and be with friends that they don't get to see all year round. But it's not just enough to have one event. So we have a whole series of events that take place. We have everything from behind the scenes study tours that we do almost once a month now, which is great for us. We have local, regional pop up networking events and we're creating educational series really trying to tackle some of the biggest questions and new technologies that are out in the industry and make it available to our audience so they can understand and learn them.

[03:59] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah, it's a very fast paced field to the world of marketing.

[04:04] **Brian Mason:** It is, it is. And you know, with the onset of AI, it's changing quite a bit. And so AI, you know, came on the scene about a year and a half ago, really big. Right. And so now everyone's trying to figure out, well, how do I use it? What do I use AI for? How do we use that? And you know, we just did series in late October, November, AI in the events industry in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Austin, which was really successful. And we had some really great content from Impact XM and RingCentral that are really tackling some of the challenges that people are facing today.

[04:45] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Can you share some of those challenges? What did you see?

[04:49] **Brian Mason:** I think as we look at the event industry, we're expected to do more with less. And that's not that budgets are necessarily being cut, it's just that things are more expensive. And so how do we create the same event with the same budget but at a more expensive cost? And AI is helping us do that. AI helps us create budgets to do RFPs, help us to create pre and post content. And so those kind of things help us be more efficient in the way that we work.

[05:23] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And do you hear concerns about when marketers use AI that things kind of start to sound very generic or, you know, it's, they miss this human.

[05:36] **Brian Mason:** At this point, I like to think as AI as a good first draft. Right. And so if you're writing things like an RFP for an example, which doesn't really need to sound so personal, but it can, it can be the first draft for you and then you can go in and customize it, those kind of things. If it's

writing specific content for your organization or company, again, you need to go back through and really take a look and see, making sure it sounds like it's from your voice.

[06:08] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, I hope that more professionals are paying attention to that because it's at this point that I feel we all can sense it when it's written by AI or something is produced by AI rather than having the person really take the time to do it.

[06:27] **Brian Mason:** Yeah.

[06:28] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And I just want to stop a little bit and focus on Summit. Because you had to pull it off with a brand new team.

[06:36] **Brian Mason:** Yes.

[06:36] **Magdalena Atanassova:** While serving a very, you know, demanding audience. So how did you manage to do that?

[06:43] **Brian Mason:** So it really starts from the top and it started with Traci DePuy, our CMO. Tracy and I both come from Salesforce and so we have an extensive background in events and she and I share the same vision. I think the great thing about Summit is the bone structure has always been there for Summit. Right. People come back and they're. They expect certain things. And so for us it's just putting those into place and letting organically happen what does happen. Right. Making sure that people had time to connect, making sure people had time to network with each other, to share peer to peer knowledge and learning. Creating content that people really wanted but don't have a chance to go out and get on their own. Right. And so creating those day and a half was a team effort by many people and we all kind of just jumped in the boat together and held hands and said, we're going to put this on and make and make it good. And it really did. You know, I think one of the key things for us at Summit and at CEMA is a non selling atmosphere. Right. Our members want to come in and not feel like they're being sold too. And we really stayed true to that this year. And I think that's one of the things that really made Summit a great event this year is we really, really stay true to keeping a 50, 50 split between industry partners and event marketers so that event marketers could come in and feel like, hey, we're just here to learn and to enjoy and to network with one another. And as long as we keep that core, the event itself gets put on easily.

[08:27] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, I like that. Aren't there these sneaky little sales people that try to steal, you know, bid or showcase their, you know, their company in one way or another?

[08:40] **Brian Mason:** There are sneaky little salespeople that try. We have been very aggressive in stamping that down. And I think the people that have been with CEMA long enough know that building the core relationship is really the way to build the business. It is not about sneaking in and having a coffee chat with someone or showing your wares for someone. You know, we have opportunities and sponsorship opportunities for people to be in front of one another. We also have networking experiences where people get to go in and learn about one another and experience. This year we had a keynote from a company called Projectory. And Projectory really helped us break ice in our first keynote and get people talking and speaking with one another. And once that happens, the magic really takes place amongst itself. You know, the industry is really a small, tight knit group of people. I say that it's, you know, a thousand people. Right. You know, but in that they've known each other for a very long time and they've known each other and supported each other in many different job transfers, many different role transfers. So it is really about building a long term relationship. And I think the sneakiness airs itself and it stands out and people pass on it.

[10:11] **Magdalena Atanassova:** I like that you highlight the fact that that's why we put events at the end of the day to reinforce this human relationship because it stays with us. And what were the risks that you took during this year's summit? And maybe if you can share what went well and what can maybe improved upon or done away with.

[10:32] **Brian Mason:** There's a couple of risks that we took this year and I like to think that we take risk so that our members don't have to at their events, meaning we try something different so that they can see it and whether it worked or not and they don't have to worry about, oh, I need to try this and not know if it works. At my event I saw that it worked or I saw that it didn't work, you know, so one thing for us is this year we had our event at the new Summit Convention center in Seattle. We haven't done it in a convention center where we've split between a hotel and convention centers before. So that was a bit of a risk. But we had great partners in Visit Seattle that really wanted to showcase this environmentally friendly and new building. And so while it seemed big and for us to be in this building, it did showcase the building itself and people understood why we were there. So in an essence, yes, they would have loved to have all been together in one building, but they were okay with us taking that risk and really showcasing. I think the other thing I mentioned, us using Projectory as our main keynote kickoff was a little risky for us. They have a very analog visual concept that they use balloons on tables as a measuring stick. And it, it is really visually awesome to see when you're in the room. It's such a simple idea and you know, we could have used an app and we could have voted. But the

balloons itself gave people an idea of talking to each other. They gave an idea of where the room sat. And so it was a little bit of a risk for us, I think, but I think it paid off greatly. We love Projectory. It was a really good keynote to open the event. And also it got people talking. They talked about it, you know, through the entire. Through the entire event and something that.

[12:41] **Magdalena Atanassova:** You tried and you were not going to try ever again or repeat ever again.

[12:46] **Brian Mason:** We will go back into being into a Hotel in 2025 in Austin at Summit. We are at the Fairmont Hotel. We will have everything in one building. And until we get too big, and if we ever get too big, we will continue to keep it in one building. I think we have heard from our members that they really like that closeness and the ability to be in one place. And I think that is one thing that we will continue to do.

[13:13] **Magdalena Atanassova:** A word from our sponsor.

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[13:35] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Now back to the program. So what else are you planning for summit in 25?

[13:42] **Brian Mason:** So we just kicked off in November, our site visit and there's a lot of interesting things. You know, Austin is an amazing city and so a lot of music. So you're going to see some music come in in 2025 and I think we're really going to step up education. We did this year. Our education was really good, but I think we have the opportunity really step it up next year. We've heard from members. This is an area for us to grow and so we'll be looking at bringing in different speakers, different peer to peer learning groups and things that really work for us.

[14:22] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That's wonderful. I cannot wait to see more. Austin is really a good host destination.

[14:29] **Brian Mason:** Yeah, they have been awesome to work with. We've done a couple of events and you know, there's a real burgeoning technology scene that happens in Austin. We CEMA has been very technology focused only because that was our origin. Right. So as we grow into 2025, we'll be looking at other industries to grow the organization as well. But being in Austin just feels like the right place for us as we move into this kind of new era of CEMA and PCMA together.

[15:03] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Awesome. And do you want to share some of what you're cooking in terms of the other events.

[15:09] **Brian Mason:** Sure. Like I said, we're looking at to being at some other events. So study tour wise we're excited about being at HIMSS this year which is healthcare focused event and Viv also. So two healthcare events that we're looking to be at. We also look to be at CVENT Connect in San Antonio which is a great partner of ours as well as a member of ours. So we're looking to see how they showcase. We also look to go to Europe this year and I think this is the first time in a very long time that we've done a study tour across the pond, should we say, and looking to do something in London and partner with our sister organization EMA in the in the UK to really bring about a study tour at an event over there. We haven't finalized which event exactly, but we will be over in Europe at least one time this year and then late in the year we hope to be in Montreal to do a behind the scenes study tour of Cirque du Soleil. This is something that we feel like would be of great interest and something that's kind of exclusive. And also they're such great storytellers, you know. And in essence that's what we do. We storytell through events. And so to go up and see that magic in Montreal is going to be amazing for our organization.

[16:41] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That makes me excited.

[16:43] **Brian Mason:** Yeah, absolutely.

[16:44] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And I don't know if you would like to speak about that, but you're undertaking a research with PwC. Do you want to say a bit more about that?

[16:56] **Brian Mason:** Yeah. So we've done a benchmarking survey with PwC and there has been some really interesting findings, you know, that we're hearing from obviously from our members. But the findings that we've received in the PwC survey really echo what we're hearing. So we're looking to push forward that research findings on benchmarking of ROI and roe, benchmarking of teams and how they're organizing and also like how you're developing and bringing up your teams. You know, there's been a lot of shuffle within the event organization and I think people are looking to develop those teams. I think that's where CEMA can be a real partner for all of our members. Is really helping people develop and think strategically. You know, more and more corporate America is asking event people to be more strategic and we always have been. But now they're understanding that events are

purposeful. They're not just parties, they're not just networking events. They drive Business. And so we need people that are coming in that are thinking not just logistically, but thinking strategically.

[18:18] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, I really like the fact that you're going this route because like we said in the beginning, marketers are so busy.

[18:26] **Brian Mason:** I have an advisory board of about 20 people that are a mix of event marketers and industry professionals. And they, to me, they feel like a microcosm of the larger organization. And I know how busy they are and they are dedicated to CEMA and giving of their time, but many times they're on a plane and they're traveling to New York or to San Francisco or to Europe or to Asia. Like, so it's just, it's just we just need to make sure that we are meeting our members where they, their needs are.

[19:03] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And speaking of that, do you foresee any specific skills or roles becoming essential for event marketing professionals in the next 5 to 10 years? Years.

[19:14] **Brian Mason:** So strategy, I think this strategy is really important and this is where people need to start thinking about how do I move the business of the organization that I'm working for, right. How do I meet their KPIs and their goals? And a lot of times there's so many logistics that take place and so many moving parts and some of these teams, you know, are just working on night and day basically to get these events going. But we do have to make sure that they're moving the needle. Right. And so if people understand business, they're going to understand how their events move that business along. And they do. They do quite a bit. And that's why there's, you know, billions of dollars spent in the industry today. And while it's, it's hard to find venue space many times because events come in back to back to back to back. And you know, you see events now that are 2,000 to something like Dreamforce that is, you know, 50, 60, 70,000 people. And you just have to find you. There's not much space that you can hold that many people. Right. And so having those events take place all the time, they have to move the. They have to move the business.

[20:40] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Maybe I can add, it's understanding the business, but understanding that businesses are made of people. So how do people think and operate? Right. And serving those people. What's one emerging trend in event marketing that you think is being overlooked right now but has the potential to redefine the industry?

[21:01] **Brian Mason:** Let me. I think one AI for me is it's not being overlooked, but I think AI is really going to change the industry quite a bit. And I think we're just scratching the surface of what it can do right now and how it can help events. And I think as we dig into more and more, a perfect example is Spark, the tool that is by PCMA that is made for events specifically. I think it's going to just raise the level of events so much more because people are going to be able to do so much more with less and you're going to be able to fine tune those details and make just the level of events that much greater.

[21:49] **Magdalena Atanassova:** How are you using AI in your day to day?

[21:52] **Brian Mason:** So I, I'm learning as specifically as everyone else goes along. So, you know, we're, we are using it for writing content, we're using it to help create, like I said, RFPs. We're looking to, you know, build different things with it and, and we're learning as everyone else is.

[22:16] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Sorry to put you on the spot.

[22:17] **Brian Mason:** No, no, no. You know the interesting thing, the interesting thing about that is that we all are learning it all together. Like this is such a new tool. Like I, every time I go into Spark, I'm like, oh, I didn't know it could do that. Oh, I'm excited. I can do this. Oh, now I can go back. Oh, look at that. I'm going to try this. You know, and I think that's the great thing about this product. You know, it's interesting. I'm old enough to know before the iPhone took place, before there were cell phones, when we actually had a fax line in my booth at an event, you know, and I couldn't imagine how the iPhone would change the world or that kind of smart tablet would change the world. And it has. I don't know exactly how AI is going to change the industry, but it already has made a big impact and it will continue as we develop and understand new, new better ways to use it.

[23:21] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, for sure. At least it's pitting so many processes that we had to do manually before. So for sure I'm most excited about it. Was there anything we didn't address and we should mention before we wrap up, you think?

[23:37] **Brian Mason:** In 2025, CEMA looks to grow about 300 members and people are like, that's a lot of new members. But I think there are a lot of event marketers out there that don't really know the power of CEMA. And not that we want it to get so big, but there are just a lot of event marketers. And as we look at different industries, we look at healthcare and we look at financial services, you know, there are a lot of event marketers in those organizations that don't know CEMA. And we want to supply the education and the network and the learning for those people as well. And I think there's enough room in the tent for everyone. Right. And so I'm excited where 2025 and beyond is going. I think, you know, partnering with PCMA gives us the infrastructure and the knowledge of growing as PCMA didn't, but retaining the culture and the community. Right. It's really about retaining the culture

in the community. And you know, I learned that from my days at Salesforce. I spent 14 years at Salesforce. I started. I was under 10,000 employees when we started and when I left, we were over 80,000 employees. And you know, there was this idea of retaining the culture of Salesforce and how do you do that and grow that exponentially? While we don't want to grow that big at all, it is really important to retain the culture and the community of CEMA. And that's. That will. That is our challenge and that is one that I'm happy to take on because I think it is an important one to handle. And I think as we do that and we use what has been built over the last 20 plus years that CEMA has been around, there still are a lot of people that don't know who CEMA is. Right. And so we have the ability to grow that within our. Within the organizations and within other industries to share that community and culture.

[26:00] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That's great. Well, I can only wish you all the best of luck in undertaking this challenge because it is a challenge, a big one.

[26:10] **Brian Mason:** Thank you. You know, I am excited about it. This is my first full, not quite full year. I'll be about 10 months into this organization and it has been an amazing first year. I mean, we've done so much already and really the sky is the limit for us. And as we, you know, like I say, partner with EMA in the UK we did an amazing event with PCMA LATAM in November last year, a brain date online activity. And you know, reaching out to those regions really helps us grow. All of our members do events in all of those regions. Right. And so we have the opportunity to grow and learn from all of those regions and bring them, you know, into seem as part of the family.

[27:05] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. Well, good luck with growing the family.

[27:09] **Brian Mason:** Thank you so much. I appreciate it. I. I hope we can do this again and talk in another six months or so and see where we. Where we've grown to.

[27:18] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Oh, yeah, that's the plan. And I'd be yeah. Curious to see how everything is evolving and sharing more with our audience. So thank you so much for taking the time and being on the podcast.

[27:30] **Brian Mason:** Thank you. I sure appreciate it.

[27:35] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Remember to subscribe to the Convening podcast on your favorite listening platform to stay updated with our latest episodes. We want to thank our sponsor, Madrid Convention Bureau. Learn more about how to make your next meeting Madrileño at esmadrid.com/mcb. For further industry insights from the convene team, head over to pcma.org/convene. Stay inspired. Keep inspiring. And until next time.