

Convene Podcast Transcript

Season 3 Episode 2 with Austin Whitney, President, Ten Fifty Entertainment

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

[00:03] **Austin Whitney:** Me and my team, we have an obligation to that person to give them an equal opportunity to enjoy that event just like anybody else.

[00:14] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Welcome to the Convene podcast. I'm excited to welcome you to another episode of season three as we offer an exclusive behind the scenes glimpse into Convening Leaders 2024 held in Sunny San Diego this January. This is a special episode which first appeared as part of the mashup studio program. Enjoy the episode.

[00:42] **Magdalena Atanassova:** I'm so happy to be back with another convening podcast interview. My name is Magdalena Atanassova, digital media editor at Convene. I'm happy to be joined by Austin Whitney here, who is the president of Ten Fifty Entertainment. Austin is doing here accessibility tours. And yesterday he also participated at panel discussion titled "Beyond Inclusion, charting the path to equitable experiences in events." Hi Austin. It's a pleasure to have you here.

[01:09] **Austin Whitney:** It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me. Today.

[01:12] **Magdalena Atanassova:** I have a bunch of questions, so should we directly dive in?

[01:17] **Austin Whitney:** Let's do it.

[01:18] **Magdalena Atanassova:** So let's address the first thing. You've been in a wheelchair since 2007.

[01:22] **Austin Whitney:** That's accurate.

[01:23] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And can you tell us how your own lived experience has changed the services of 1050 entertainment?

[01:30] **Austin Whitney:** It's the whole reason I do what I do. My work really boils down to this relatively fundamental question, which is how do event producers create events that are not only ADA compliant, but more importantly, welcoming to people with disabilities? As you mentioned, I had a spinal cord injury in 2007. At that point in time, I was pre consumed with depression, anxiety. I was just in a terrible place. And I went to my first music festival about nine months after that occurred. And honestly, watching my favorite band on stage, that was the first time that I had an inkling that my life might go on, that I might be able to do this thing. And realizing just how much this recreational activity meant to me and having these sorts of amazing experiences to look forward to in the hardest time of my life got me through that time. So, you know, years later, when I was in law school, I really came back on this topic of how do we make events more accessible? How do we make them more inclusive? And, you know, over the last ten years, I've got to work, you know, on hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of events with most of the music festivals and in America, as well as number of sporting events and municipal events. So it's been a great, great journey, but it's all been around. It was very personal to me.

[02:57] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And you've worked with some of the very high profile events such as Formula 1 that just took place in Las Vegas. So can you share with us some of the most significant challenges that you face at such big events?

[03:08] **Austin Whitney:** So I work on events a couple thousand people up to, yes, Formula 1 Vegas, where I'm their ADA coordinator, Coachella, with 125,000 people a day, the big challenge on these events is just continually being adaptable. We plan our events, thinking about what is going to be our fans journey from the moment that they think about going through buying a ticket to preparing themselves, to arriving, to actually enjoying it and then getting home safely. But then we have to think about it from macro level categories. So that's our guess. With mobility disabilities or auditory disabilities or visual disabilities or neurological, cognitive or developmental disabilities or dietary disabilities or whatever ailment, injury or disease somebody might have. As we think about these large groups of folks, there inherently is going to be things that we did not think of because the spectrum of disability is just so wide. So it's those adapting in real time. It's a bit stressful, but in my experience, pretty much every sort of accessibility challenge that I've run up with, with my clients and with our guests, there's some sort of answer. It just, you know, takes some thoughtfulness, and as much of it can be thought of on the front end, the event just goes much better.

[04:34] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And I'm sure that people are very open to the fact that you're trying to adapt in real time and that you have not thought of this particular scenario.

[04:43] **Austin Whitney:** Right?

[04:44] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah.

[04:45] **Austin Whitney:** I mean, again, we can predict probably about 99% of the things that we're going to run into, but those 1%, or when plans start changing or when we start dealing with emergency circumstances, you know, these are all things that, you know, okay, plan is changing, and we have to adapt, and, you know, let's move in that direction. That's the challenging part of the learn.

[05:12] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And how do you use the power of storytelling in these situations?

[05:16] **Austin Whitney:** I'm blessed that I get to work with human beings. Every single person that I'm working with on site has a story, and that's a fundamental thing that I explained to my clients, to my colleagues, you know, that if somebody is choosing to go to one of our events, for example, Bonnaroo just announced our lineup today. It's a great lineup. People with disabilities who are going, who see that and say, wow, my favorite band is playing there. I want to go, you know, in five months to Bonnaroo, to the show. It's going to cost a lot of money. There's going to be a lot of logistics involved. You're going to rural Tennessee, camping for five, six days. That's a big sacrifice. That takes a lot of work to go there. But having that event to look forward to, you know, is a big deal to that individual. And me and my team, we have an obligation to that person to give them an equal opportunity to enjoy that event just like anybody else. So, yeah, I mean, every event, I get to meet people, you know, and I get to hear their stories. That's the thing that keeps me and my team going on. Most of the hundred events that me and my team work on every year.

[06:27] **Magdalena Atanassova:** I need to say thank you for that and helping these people also share their stories. I know we discussed previously that you led the accessibility tours here at Convening Leaders, and what questions stood out to you?

[06:41] **Austin Whitney:** Everything's changed since the pandemic in my world most recently, and questions that we delved into on the tour. Some of the interesting ones involved the technology and how technology has radically been changing things. On the beyond inclusion panel yesterday, there were real time captions provided, which is a really exciting thing that just simply was not doable in most live event settings. Even just a couple of years ago, you know, you mentioned, you know, Formula 1 over in Vegas. You know, we ran into this question of, how do we provide effective communication to our guests with auditory disabilities, or, you know, cognitive processing that affects auditory capacities? And, you know, we say, okay, we have five different venues spread over, you know, miles in different locations. You know, the cars are going very fast. How are we gonna do this? And through the use of technology, we're able to, you know, provide captions to somebody's phone where they could be anywhere in any one of our venues and be able to get real time captions. The technology has just been radically changing things in the last couple of years, and what I am particularly excited about, as we start 2024, any other question.

[07:54] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That maybe stood out to you apart from technology?

[07:56] **Austin Whitney:** I think people's eyes were just opened as we went on the tour yesterday. My goal was to give really practical skills to people and also a level of understanding state building codes, really boring things. I spend a lot of time with the tape measure, though, and I got to explain, like, this is why a 30 inch countertop matters. This is why it matters. To start a person's experience with your brand by, you know, being at eye level, and if it's, you know, if it's substantially higher, you know, say you're working at, you know, 40 inch countertop height, you know, could spill a hot cup of coffee, my feet are going to come out. I'm not going to be able to be able to be flush with there explaining why these things matter and getting to actually see these things. I think that's something that really mattered to the participants yesterday.

[08:47] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Did you share any best practices that now you can share with our online audience as well?

[08:51] **Austin Whitney:** I think ultimately, you know, in terms of best practice, just being thoughtful, just think about your fans experience. Put as much information on the website as possible. Give a way for your fans with disabilities to interact and ask questions. Understand, you know, that, you know, if you're at a convention center, your fans with disabilities have probably had a negative experience at another convention and they probably have questions and, you know, would really benefit from being able to plan appropriately. I mean, just doing the due diligence, you know, when you're going around a venue to think about these things, don't make any assumptions. When you're working in a venue, go and verify that it's actually accurate. Use more signage, but only use signage if it is thoughtfully placed. Don't just add universal accessibility symbols. To add universal accessibility symbols, you know, from there, think about incorporating captions. Think about adding a sensory room for your guests with neurodiversity. Have a really good emergency action plan that involves people with disabilities because that is the most vulnerable group, you know, have a good mobility disability seating area in a section. Oh, and review your sponsors activations, their renders before they actually get built. So much of my work, you know, used to be about like, oh, stressing out, hey, there's this activation we didn't know about, like, not ADA compliant. Review your renders. So that's

my advice. Besides that, to be a good human, be thoughtful, and as you're going through the planning, you know, just really think about how will somebody who's, you know, blind or deaf or in a wheelchair or neurodiversity be engaging with these spaces? And if you don't know, reach out to those communities, involve people with disabilities, do training. That's a lot of notes, but honestly, that covers so much of my work.

[10:48] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah, but that's the reality of things. We just don't know what we don't know. And sometimes just being open and asking the question and working with people like Austin, I believe that's what the takeaway for me, when you don't know, just work with a professional and just to wrap it up, your buzzword for 2024.

[11:06] **Austin Whitney:** You know, I think it's going to be a very accessible year. But Michigan Wolverines just won the national championship last night in college football. So go blue. That's my buzzword this morning.

[11:15] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Well, that's it from us.

[11:18] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Tune in and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts so you never miss an episode. For more industry insights, visit pcma.org/convene. Until next time.