Convene Podcast Transcript
Season 3 Episode 4 with Megan Culligan, Associate, Events & Experiences

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

[00:04] **Megan Culligan:** And that was something we hadn't done before. You know, usually we have our camera feed in our content feed of whatever's on the screens, but this was another video window, and that added just a layer of complexity to how the video loaded for people because it was another video coming through.

[00:23] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Welcome to the Convene podcast. I'm your host, Magdalina Atanassova, digital media editor of Convene. It's a pleasure to bring you another episode from season three as we offer an exclusive behind the scenes glimpse into convening leaders 2024, held in sunny San Diego this January. In this episode, I sit down with Megan Culligan, the mastermind behind the design and delivery of the digital experience. At the event. She provides an inside look into the vision, setup, and technology utilized, shedding light on both the smooth sailing and the dreaded technology hiccups encountered along the way. Plus, we explore a few applications of AI that emerged throughout the event. Enjoy the episode.

[01:12] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Megan, welcome to the convening podcast. It's a pleasure having you here, and I'm kicking things off right away with a brief introduction. So tell our listeners a bit more about yourself, a bit more about your background, and also share a bit more about your responsibilities during convening leaders.

[01:32] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much for having me. So my background, I've been with PCMA for just over three years. I started right before our all digital convening leaders 2021. So I feel like that was a good introduction to PCMA and CL digital experiences. I've been involved with our digital experiences at our convening leaders events and edge con through those past three years, and this year for convening leaders, I was responsible for both designing the digital experience, which encompassed all of our different live streams of concurrent sessions, main stage sessions, as well as the mashup studio, which is that interstitial in between the in person sessions when we want to give the digital audience something to stick around on the platform for. How I always describe it is we try to give the digital audience periods of meet and greet with different speakers to try and replace some of that serendipity that they may have missed in person, where you can, you know, meet up with a speaker after a session and ask a couple more questions or dig deeper into some of their content. You could run into them, you know, getting coffee in the district in the morning. So that really is the aim of the mashup studio. It's evolved every year since I've been working on it at convening leaders from 22 in Vegas, where we had all day experiences to 23 in Columbus, where we started this kind of half day mashup experience, which stayed into 24 in San Diego. So that was a lot of my on site responsibility, and I worked a lot with our education team to, you know, identify the speakers that we wanted to feature in the mashup studio that we thought would get the most value to the digital audience and things like that.

[03:22] **Magdalina Atanassova:** It was great because I could also be a part of the mashup studio. So thank you for having me there.

[03:29] **Megan Culligan:** Yes, absolutely. That was another great feature. And, you know, one thing, why we did this these half days in the mashup studio was both to capture the attention at its strongest of all of our digital attendees and participants from wherever they were in the world, whether that was in the US or potentially in the EMEA region. But we also then were able to reuse the space for the convene podcast. And so that was just another. Just a creative way that we were trying to look at cost saving measures and just reusing spaces that we may have already built for the conference, and then to bring that into the digital audience who weren't going to see those podcast recordings live. We were still able to feature you and a couple specific convened podcast interviews during the live mashup studio. So we infused that into the digital experience that participants actually saw, but then also on site, not quite live digital experience, but still reusing the space.

[04:30] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. And I love the fact that you were streaming our recordings of the podcast for participants on site. So it wasn't something that, or it. It won't be something that our listeners would see, but then people just passing by could see it on a couple of different screens, and they could just, you know, it could perk up their interest, pretty much. So that was, I think, a cool feature, just something to tease them.

[04:59] **Megan Culligan:** When we were designing the space, too, we wanted to make sure we had monitors outside and by the escalators that everyone was coming down. And, you know, we built a bit of a physical space of walls, but they were plexi, so you could see through them, because we did

want our in person participants as well, to see what we were doing. Though they weren't necessarily watching the stream, as you were saying, right then, it still gave them kind of a view into what, a behind the scenes, because they're all in the events and business events industry. Right. They know what it is, and they want to see behind the scenes. So that was the intention as well.

[05:36] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I saw, personally, many people stop by the mashup studio and ask you questions about the setup and asking questions about how you're running the stream. Can you maybe share a bit more to our listeners as well in terms of setting this up and running this?

[05:53] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah, absolutely. We made a bit of a build of that plexiglass wall, which was to help with sound control a bit, because we were in a really main foyer space, right by registration and on your way to the entrance of the main stage. So we wanted to control a little bit of the sound. So we worked with our partners, with HERITAGE to build that, the wall space, and then encore, as our AV provider, they helped us put together a lot of the AV that went into the stream and the studio itself. Actually, not the stream. We worked with Sonic Foundry on all of our live streaming, including in the mashup studio. So encore did all of the AV. So they did the cameras and the Microsoft Microphones, and, you know, we had monitors so that our host could see what was being presented on the stream, whether it was a tighter shot of her or a double shot of her and the guest being interviewed. So there was definitely a lot of AV that went into what might be seen as a pretty small space. And because of the fast paced nature of the interviews, we have interviews scheduled about every five minutes. Some of them went a little bit longer and were ten minute interviews, but we were in 30 to 45 minutes segments, which means that we had guests come in and out constantly. So we were constantly, you know, re-micing our new guests and making sure that the AV team knew which microphone the next guest was on. You know, the more AV that went into it, we put lower thirds on everything so that people knew in the stream that it was live from the mashup studio. And to give them clues on. Not clues, but to tell them who the guests were that we were interviewing, because some of the guests were not. They were speakers that whose sessions were not featured in the live stream. And so sometimes a digital participant may not know exactly who they are if they weren't able to see a session of theirs. So that was a lot of, you know, the setup and the av that went into it. And then we also. I know we haven't really talked about this yet in the mashup studio as well. Just to give digital participants kind of a break from the constant content, say that three times fast. We featured a game, a game show live from the mashup studio that we started in Columbus last year, adapted it this year called San Diego versus the World. So that was another aspect of AV. Our partners at Falcon events were the ones that, you know, concepted the game show and the questions, and then they also came in with a lot of their own av, because the nature of running a live game show that is being played in the studio by the participants, but also being played by anyone watching, there's a lot that goes into that to make sure the stream is real time enough and that everyone can answer the Slido at the same time. So that was just another aspect of it. We had a lot of people also, I said we had a lot of AV in the small space. We had a lot of people in the small space that you saw. Some of them were hidden behind a curtain. But, yeah, so I think that was really all of the different pieces of the mashup studio in terms of AV. And then the convened podcast, of course, used the existing AV from the mashup studio. So a lot went into it.

[09:22] **Magdalina Atanassova:** We should circle back to the beginning of why did PCMA decide again to do the live stream and to offer it for free to participants? To digital participants, definitely.

[09:35] **Megan Culligan:** So that was, you know, something that PCMA has done even before my time and pre pandemic, the digital offerings of the live streams at our events have been free because we wanted to really just expose the event to more people. We. We know that we are a global organization with global members in our community, and not every. Everyone can always travel across the globe to come to these events, but we know that we're curating valuable content and experiences that we want to be able to share with them still. So, you know, during the pandemic is when CL 21, right before I started, was our first all digital. And I think, as most people did in that time as well, you know, we had to. We were pivoting the dreaded word, and people did charge for those experiences, right, because everyone needed to maintain their sources of revenue. And that lingered it a little bit as we were kind of coming out of the pandemic and still trying to navigate the new normal of what a digital and hybrid experience looked like. Now, PCMA has been doing hybrid for over ten years. The pandemic wasn't our first foray into it, by any means, but I think it just changed. And we just looked at business models and I think went back to the fact that we wanted to offer this to our broader global community. And there. There were things with the free experience that were different from in years past when it was paid. Probably one of the biggest was that the digital participants did not have access to the recordings of the session. So we really encouraged everyone to join us live, because I really liked this comment. In the chat of one of the sessions, someone said, you know, there has to be a difference in what is being offered with your in person, fully paid ticket, which is, I

mean, we have so many different ticket prices, but, you know, sometimes over $1,000 and then what a free experience is. And I really thought that that was just a good call out of highlighting the difference. But we still, again, wanted to bring it to the audience. And something I was super excited about was that we were able to bring all of our main stage speakers. They all agreed to participate in our livestream, including the Clintons, Mayim Bialik, everyone. So that was really exciting, too. Even if you weren't able to join us in person in San Diego, you were still able to hear what ended up being really a great session from all of our main stages, including the Clintons. That was just the one that I think was cited most often of surprising of how much people liked it.

[12:16] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. And the chat was going wild during their session. I mean, during all sessions, but their session, there were a few key moments where I feel the challenge is fired up, like the comment of, I don't know, I think that was one of those moments. And then Hillary saying that the difference between men and women in leadership roles, where men just have to be men and women have to be perfect.

[12:40] **Megan Culligan:** So it was such a comparison to the Barbie movie. I feel like that was what was all over the chat. I even took a screenshot watching it. Someone said, bill is Kenuff, as like a direct callback to the Barbie movie. I loved it. So, yeah, that was definitely a moment that the chat exploded. And I think something else that's so helpful, you know, opening this up to our, our larger global community, having it be free, we were able to see things like that in the chat. The more people you have in the chat, it was almost like they were sometimes in some sessions, they were having their own sessions of, like, learning moments from each other with comments. Because in person, you just don't participate in the chat quite as much because you're focused on, you know, looking at the, the speaker on the stage. But when you're watching digitally, you can have, you can be watching the stream and also having a conversation with someone in the chat. And so I thought that was just another, a really great thing for me to see. I was really encouraged by all of our, all of the comments and everyone participating really actively.

[13:50] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And the fun thing about our industry is that so many people know each other from real life and they just meet in such a chat room and they are just having an experience together and a moment to remember, which I find quite cool.

[14:05] **Megan Culligan:** Absolutely.

[14:06] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Were there any challenges? And I think that's the hot question that everybody's wondering. Its technology. There must be challenges.

[14:15] **Megan Culligan:** Right? Exactly your point. Theres always challenges with technology as much as you test things beforehand. And, you know, we were testing, making sure that all of our streams were working in the platform well beforehand. Then you get on site and set everything up and do more testing. We one thing that happened this year and it just, again, I think it's just different flukey things. But I was setting up stream tests and we had weird audio and visual, they weren't synced. And so we had to spend a bit more time in those tests, redoing the sync and delaying audio so it matched up with video and it just, those things just happen. It wasn't, we've used a lot are these same partners for years and so it's not anything that happened because of a partner. I think it just, I don't know. Flukey is the best word I have to describe it, but that was something that I hadn't experienced yet, so, but I was glad that we were able to catch it before we went live. So that's why the importance of, you know, our, I call them stream tests, but it's once all the AV has been set, we go into every room and do these tests to make sure that the stream plays in the app like it should, that the audio and the sound or. Nope, audio and visual is, you know, matched up correctly and synced. So those were really important. And what else? An interesting one this year that we had. I think this was both a challenge and an opportunity in our main stage. We had an ASL interpreter that was new to the experience this year. And when I heard about it, I was like, that's really important for us to bring into the stream. I want us to showcase that we're doing that and give the opportunity for anyone who may be watching digitally to experience it as well. If it's something that they, if they. No ASL or deaf or hard of hearing. But adding that into the stream was another, it was just another angle that we had to take. And that was something we hadn't done before. You know, usually we have our camera feed and our content feed of whatever's on the screens, but this was another video window and that added a level, just a layer of complexity to how the video loaded for people because it was another video coming through. So it was like you were loading three different videos simultaneously, which takes more bandwidth with. So I think we had, especially if people were opening the stream in the convention center, where, you know, you had, however, 4000 plus people all on the WiFi. I think that was just an extra ask of the Wi Fi. That was a bit difficult, but if you were at home, you may not have experienced any of those challenges. So that was probably something else this year.

[17:07] **Magdalina Atanassova:** It's a very important aspect of any event nowadays just to make it more accessible. And all these accessibility features that were in the app this year, like the. There were, what do you call it?

[17:23] **Megan Culligan:** We had captions and live translation. Yes, we saw our partners at Wordly, and that was something that also was important to us. Same with the ASL interpreter on the main stage, the Wordly, live captions and translation, they're all AI powered. We had that available in all sessions as well. So the main stages and all the concurrence. So that was something that fell under the scope of digital experience in a way. So I was responsible for that as well, though we offered it to our in person attendees as well as digital. And I guess I can go to a challenge with that as well, is that when you're live streaming, there's often a latency where what's happening live in the room and what comes through on the stream is not usually real time. There's usually anywhere from ten to like maybe 40 seconds of a delay. And so we had to figure out a way, because we were using just one service with Wordly, of creating those captions, but we had to put it in two different places. So there was two different links on every session. One was for in room, and that was real time, and then one was for the live streams, which was using the delay of the stream so that you weren't reading captions in real time from the room. But if I'm watching digitally, I may not have seen that, you know, the person saying that come up on the screen yet. So solving for that was another challenge, and that's one that is not going to go away either. I think even as, like, streaming technologies continue to get better, getting that true real time stream is difficult, especially when you get into, like, the scale of convening leaders. So that was something else that we worked through, and I think it ended up working out. We did have those two different experiences where you could read the captions. And what was also great with Wordly is that it was English captions, but it was also translation into they keep changing the number of languages that they translate into. I think it's up to, like 88 or something by now. Maybe it's even higher, I'm not sure. So our participants who were joining us from different regions and from LATAM, could translate into Spanish right away. And they could even. There was also an option that you could plug in headphones and hear it spoken in a different language. And that was, again, wherever you were, whether you were digital or in person, that was something you could experience as part of the event. So just trying to really focus on those different levels of accessibility that we can offer to the participants.

[20:01] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I heard a lot of people just passing by in the venue speaking about that, which made me very happy that, you know, they're aware that it's happening, they're using it even if they're on site.

[20:13] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah, absolutely. Because even we have someone, even on our own PCMA team I know who had said that, you know, sometimes, if English isn't even your first language, though, you're fluent in English completely, if it's not your first language, sometimes it's easier to just read along as well, and it helps with the comprehension of what you're saying. So it's not even necessarily if you're deaf or hard of hearing. There's so many different applications of when someone might prefer to use it. Heck, I use captions when I watch Netflix. Like, we use them all the time. Yeah. It helps us just focus. So it was great how widely it was used by all types of participants.

[20:54] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. If you had a chance, what would you do differently?

[20:59] **Megan Culligan:** Oh, boy. That's a hard question, because. And it's hard only because things change every year. And so I feel like what's been great is that each year we've been able to take learnings from the previous year and do it differently. So I don't necessarily feel stuck in anything that I would want to do all that differently, because I know that I can address it and, you know, the team can address it next year and continue to evolve this experience. I think one thing. This is the opposite of what you asked, but I think one thing that we don't want to change is that we want to continue to offer this experience for free. So that's something to look forward to, I think, for everyone in upcoming events, just look to what the digital experience offering is. So I think that's something for sure that I was excited by. But what would I do differently? I don't know. I think one opportunity I'm excited about is that we are continuing to talk about how the Convene podcast can be more involved in the digital experience. So maybe that's something I wouldn't have known this year to do differently. But going into next year, that's something that I think we can continue to lean into the overlap in and just how we can capture content at the event that's reused and repurposed in meaningful ways. And I think the convene podcast team and you and everyone, that's something that you all can help with a lot. So I'm excited about that. Again, I didn't really answer your question, but that's a good answer.

[22:42] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I take that. I like the fact that you mentioned being free, and I can speak of my own experience. Before joining PCME, I've been watching pre pandemic, the free live stream, and then I've been on site as well. It was a good for me back then selling point to my employer and saying, see how good the content is, you can see it also for free for yourself, and be

convinced that next time maybe you can send me to that event and I can get all the benefits of being on site.

[23:18] **Megan Culligan:** Exactly what you said. We share a lot of the content in the free digital experience, but that is a portion only of convening leaders. And so if we can expose a wider community and audience to that content, and then something else we try to do in spaces like the mashup or different things is show those digital participants a little bit of maybe what you're missing, or just just other aspects of the event that we can't reproduce digitally. Digital networking is so difficult. I think the pandemic showed all of us truly how difficult it is. And so that's something that, you know, we're not focusing on as much because it takes, I mean, that would take a dedicated team of people to try and produce a quality digital networking experience. So the networking of convening leaders is really focused in person, and that's a big aspect of it. And different aspects of the district, our, our show floor, if you want to call it that. A lot of that can't be reproduced digitally, and so we don't focus a lot there, but that's where you can meet with all of our partners and that's where, you know, we always try to feature some type of content. This year it was the tech playground, where you could experience like nine different event technologies and all of those things you can't really recreate in a digital environment in a meaningful way without having tons of resources. So that's what we were trying to show people. Exactly. Here's more things that are at convening leaders and you see the content now, maybe next year or in a couple years, you may want to come in person to experience that content, but also so much more.

[24:54] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. And we're going to have a special episode on the district as well. Looking behind the scenes there.

[25:01] **Megan Culligan:** It's a huge feature of convening leaders, so. And there's so much of it that I wasn't involved in. So I'm excited to listen to that episode as well.

[25:12] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And let's talk about numbers. I know that it's something that we're going to get questions on. I personally was tagged on LinkedIn asking about how many people registered and how many people actually tuned in live and if there were rewatch sessions that you were tracking. Anything that you really can share in terms of ballpark numbers.

[25:36] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So I can definitely share some ballpark. And why they're not necessarily exact is because sometimes there's overlap. Right. If an in person participant suddenly was sick or couldn't attend for some reason, sometimes they registered again digitally. So there's. There may be a little bit of double count, which is why these numbers may not be totally exact. But we had almost a thousand people register digitally and then tracking the views of the live stream, we had well over 50% of those thousand viewing. However, that number is also not necessarily exact because we had in person participants watching the live streams as well. And so that's also something with your in person registration, you get access to. To all of the live streams and to the entire digital experience as it is. And so I even know, I anecdotally just had a participant that I was talking to who said, for the Clintons, she knew there was going to be extra, you know, security and there were bag checks and things like that. And she just decided that that was something she didn't want to do that morning. She didn't want to stand in line and go through that. So she took the opportunity to go up to the district where a lot of our partners had, you know, different breakfast items or a mimosa or something fun. So she went around, got a great breakfast plate together, and found a really comfy, you know, swing chair and enjoyed her breakfast and watched the Clintons livestream from her phone. And she said that was exactly what she needed from the morning, even though she was in person with us in San Diego. So we know for a fact that there were those in person participants watching the stream as well. So trying to get those counts as a little bit difficult, but we had well over 50% tune in to the live streams, for sure. And then again, too oftentimes, especially because we are on the west coast, when you think about travel times, if. If people had to leave early morning to get back to the east coast, they were able to watch the streams of the concurrent sessions on Wednesday morning and the main stage, whether they were packing in their hotel room or things like that. So giving that opportunity to just participate in the content from wherever you are and whatever suits you best in that moment is something that we were glad to bring to people, but it makes our numbers and data tracking a little bit difficult.

[28:06] **Magdalina Atanassova:** At the end of the day, it's what's important for the attendee. Right, for the participant and how they want to consume the content in that moment, which I believe is really, really key.

[28:17] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah.

[28:18] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Do you think this whole digital experience.

[28:20] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Can be run better, better again in quotation marks, with the help of AI?

[28:28] **Megan Culligan:** AI is so interesting because there's so many applications, and sometimes I even feel overwhelmed looking at all of the different ways AI can help us do our jobs better. And I probably haven't explored them even as much as you have, Maggie, or just as much as other people may have. I'm always just so, like, inspired by hearing different case studies of how people use AI and thinking, wow, there's so much more I could be doing. But I have a couple ideas. One thing that was really, really fascinating is that in our main stage sessions, all four of them, we used our Spark AI tool and one of its new features called takeaways. And so we were able to connect Spark with the in room Av to give a live feed of the. I think it was just an audio feed, really, of what was being said on the stage. And Spark then generated like, a sheet of takeaways, of key takeaways, of key moments from the session. And so we shared those in the, in the chats, and people were watching it. I saw people share, you know, the takeaways on LinkedIn after that wasn't, they weren't gated to any members or anything. They were open to anyone to see, you know, the takeaways of each session, which is another way that we were able to share with the broader community everything that was happening at convening leaders. So I think that was really interesting. I saw a lot of interest from people in the chat of how they could take this to their own events. And if we were using it anywhere else, we were only using it on the main stages just because it was a newer feature. I'm interested to see how us and the rest of the PCMA team continue to use that feature at our events going forward, because I think that was really helpful for people just to be able to go back and if you can't take notes fast enough, that was always me in school. I could never write fast enough from what everyone was saying. So having a pre generated list like that was so helpful. And then you could write your own notes on it after, I guess, if you had more thoughts. But that's definitely one application of AI that I think is really, really impactful at events, both for the organizers and for the participants, because I think it helps us as the organizers with, you know, different moments to share after of. If we want to share a highlight on social media, I think that's a helpful place for us to start. But then it was helpful for participants from like a note taking and, you know, synthesis perspective, like I was saying. So that's one and then another one as part of a lot of this has to do with how to use the content after the fact. That's kind of what I just. The different applications of AI that I may be more familiar with. I know there's many more, but we could take the recordings that we had of the live streams and be able to put them through. This isn't something necessarily that we did, just an application that I know exists, and you can put them through different programs. And similar to the spark takeaways, you can make video takeaways where it takes the entire session down into a minute and a half or two minutes of the highlights. And so you can kind of make a highlight reel of each session in video form, just so a different way for people to consume that content. I always prefer watching videos than reading something, even if I'm reading the captions along on the videos while it's going. So those are probably two different applications of AI of so many possibilities. I'm sure there are many, many. And as you know, we go into how we continue to build this experience, I think I will adjust the digital experience of our events in general, I think we can use AI to help us with planning the schedule and, you know, because we build the mashup studio or these interstitial moments in between our live stream sessions. But I think AI can help with that and just so many other things that I'm excited to explore more.

[32:27] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And again, we have to mention all the AI that was already implemented, like Wordly, and all the captions and translations which are already happening. This is just the beginning.

[32:38] **Megan Culligan:** Absolutely. For sure, but it's the beginning. But it seems like there's been so much growth in the past couple of years that it doesn't feel like the beginning. It feels like we've been in it for a while and there's been so much that we've learned, but it is truly still the beginning.

[32:54] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Was there anything we didn't address that we should mention before we end of the digital experience?

[33:01] **Megan Culligan:** I mean, I think we covered so much of it, right? It was really content focused. The biggest change this year is how it was a free experience. But then we also wanted to bring the mashup studio. We talked about the trivia game, which I think was a nice brain break for those that wanted to play. So just, just that we continue to think of ways to make it better and just to bring different types of experience, like those trivia games or things like that, to the audience. But I really think we covered a lot, and I think we've covered all my greatest hits. The convening leaders 2024 digital experience well.

[33:44] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Thank you so much for taking the time and giving all these tips, which I'm sure our audience will appreciate. So thank you, Megan.

[33:54] **Megan Culligan:** Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much for having me.

[33:59] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Remember to subscribe to the Convene podcast on your favorite listening platform to stay **u**pdated with our latest episodes.

[34:07] **Magdalina Atanassova:** For further industry insights, head over to pcma.org/Convene. Until next time, subscribe.