

Convene Podcast Transcript

Convene Interview, ep. 3

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

[00:05] **Marc Ghafoori:** For all of the events that we were participating in, they were really focused on how do they bring value to each of their stakeholders to make sure that they were enabling those connections and making a real experience.

[00:22] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Welcome to the Convene podcast. My name is Maggie, digital media editor at Convene. Today I'm joined by Marc Ghafoori, who is senior vice president, brand strategy at HERITAGE. Marc is passionate about strengthening and redefining the brand image of HERITAGE, while also advocating for sustainability and inclusivity in all aspects of event planning and production. Marc, it's a great pleasure to have you on the podcast.

[00:48] **Marc Ghafoori:** Thanks so much for having me. This is great.

[00:51] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Tell us about the kinds of events you've been involved in.

[00:55] **Marc Ghafoori:** So really we participate and help facilitate events in every sector that exists, whether it's health, tech, finance, religious, public events, you name it. We're basically, we're helping to facilitate those items so we see things in a really, really broad spectrum of areas within the greater economy of business events.

[01:21] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That's awesome. So you have a good overview of what kinds of changes have happened recently in, in person events. So can you speak about that, you know, post pandemic? What, what has changed?

[01:33] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah, I would say there's been a polarization towards people coming together and wanting to have real experiences. I would say more so than before. Before the pandemic, you might have seen events that were trying to do that. But after the pandemic, I feel like it really put people's mind into focus of what they were really, truly trying to have at the event. And that was experiences, and people were doing that prior to that, but it was really amplified after everybody went through the experience that they did. 21, you really saw like a really, really big ramp up with that. For all of the events that we were participating in, they were really focused on how do they bring value to each of their stakeholders to make sure that they were enabling those connections and making a, making a real experience.

[02:23] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Have you seen it in some sector more than in other certain sectors to be more like experience oriented?

[02:30] **Marc Ghafoori:** I would say it's less tied to sectors, but it's more tied to the kind of financial ability for folks to be able to pull that together, because not all organizations have the mental bandwidth to be able to execute some of those things and to put like someone into that position to focus solely on that. Organizations are sometimes just, just trying to get their event through the door, you know, through whatever means necessary. And sometimes that's something that falls by the wayside, but it's at least something that's, that's in mind for a lot of those folks that are going through that process now because they personally experience that themselves and want to have that show through. And, I mean, the data that's coming from exhibitors and their stakeholders, if they're doing those polls and if they're pulling that data, it kind of leads them towards that for what's being more, more effective.

[03:23] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. Budgets definitely kind of shape the outcome of the event, right?

[03:29] **Marc Ghafoori:** Oh, it definitely does. But, I mean, there's, there's strategies that you can do at all scales. It's just a matter of finding, focusing on that and making sure that that's actually within, within the parameters that you're really trying to attack the event. Yeah.

[03:44] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And what are the things planners are looking for from contractors now?

[03:48] **Marc Ghafoori:** I would say, you know, it's, it's a lot of the same. It hasn't necessarily changed in terms of what they come to. A GSC for general service contractor for on that side. They're looking for someone who can, at the end of the day, execute on what was being asked and do it within the timetable that's required. And in doing so, they, they want to do that with a partner. Like, some people treat it as a transactional and other people treat it as a true partnership to get that event through the door. As a GSC, you know, we do some things that aren't necessarily as sexy. We, we have the tables, you know, carpet and things like that. But there's, there's other things throughout the spectrum that we tackle, too, that are kind of behind the scenes that are more interesting and more satisfying. Some of those services, like, just asking those questions of, like, what can you do to really amplify experience by just rearranging the floor plan, by, you know, simplifying the processes that are

involved with the other vendors that are associated with the event, whether it's on the main stage or your av vendor, your, your specialty decorator, or even floral, you know, like some, some of those things, by, by doing them right and thinking about them methodically can really make a huge difference for, for what you do across the event. So in oversimplification is that, you know, we don't do too much. We do things on the physical side and, and we're a hammer to a nail, but we make sure that we find the right tool to be able to, to build what we're trying to build. So we don't use that hammer for a screw or something like that.

[05:31] **Magdalena Atanassova:** And you mentioned timetables. Has this changed? I know that post pandemic timelines were kind of really strict and very, very short. Has this changed? Do you have now a bit more of a room to operate?

[05:46] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah, I would say things have definitely leveled off post 2020. You know, after, after that point when things, when the lights were turned back on, the spigot was opened, whichever analogy you would use there, you know, it was, it was like drinking through a fire hose, basically. Instead of, instead of your normal, your normal flow, you would get show planners that would reach out and their event is three, four weeks away. You would get some people that were reaching out and their, their event is like three months away for a major national event. And that was, that was because of several different reasons. It would be, they got a, they got an initiative to really push forward on that event from their stakeholders, like, and they, they knew that they needed to have it happen, whether it's financially driven or that, that networking or what have you. And then the other side of it is if their other contacts just were no longer there or the company that they were reaching out to didn't exist anymore. So they were scrambling, just trying to find somebody to help facilitate the needs that they had. Thankfully, that's over for the most part. You don't see that very much anymore. I would say its gone back to that normal planning cycle of nine months to 18 months for some of these organizations. So you can really go through that full process, the full planning process, making sure all the t's are crossed and the l's are dotted and whatnot. It was a challenge, but it was a also kind of fun coming back from no events to all of the events. All right away there.

[07:24] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. Well, fun.

[07:28] **Marc Ghafoori:** Fun is the word to use. Fun's the word to use.

[07:31] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. And that was like, all these shifts also happened because of lack of talent. Right. We had, the whole industry was very affected in this sense. And do you think that has improved and what are your biggest challenges when you're hiring new talent?

[07:48] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah. So I don't remember what article it was, but it talked about, like, a third of the workforce was removed by either them retiring or leaving the industry altogether and going to other sectors. So it created like this, this big void of like, that knowledge gap. Everybody knew it. Like, I'm not telling you anything you don't, you don't know right now, but what was, what was kind of unique about how things progressed was that, you know, you had to pull people from outside of the industry to be able to fill those seats or you had to train somebody to, to fill those seats from somebody that was, like, fresh out of college, fresh into the workforce or what have you, and, you know, those. Those challenges that started in, like, 21 when things got turned back on and this machine got into motion again. You know, we've had a couple of years under our belt to be able to build up some of the talent over that course of time. And, you know, that's definitely been tamped down. We tackled that by really laying heavily into processes and, and, and training modules because we knew, like, through the pandemic that once things got going again that it was. It was going to go fast. And we paired that up with, you know, really leaning into recruiting and, you know, being able to source and find those. Those few, you know, talented individuals that are out there that everyone's trained to grab onto and bring them in. If you don't have those two things paired up, you weren't going to be successful. And that was like, that secret formula that was really working on our side. So, like, everybody was. Everybody was saying, I can't find people. We can't. We can't do it. We were doing okay. We were. We were still struggling with, I would say, more of a green workforce in, like, 21, but we really quickly ramped that up, and it's been much, much better. You know, we're seeing, like, again, back to, like, a normal cadence of hiring, you know, picking up new business and adding team members that are more in a sustainable pace rather than just like a, you know, throw things at it and see what sticks kind of scenario, you know?

[09:57] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. And speaking about talent, what inspired our conversation was your new facility in San Diego. So what made you pick the city?

[10:08] **Marc Ghafoori:** So San Diego was something we had been thinking about for a few years. You know, we had a. We had a large round of events that run through San Diego on a continuous basis. They cycle through the city just because San Diego kind of sells itself. But it's definitely not. Not like the whole reason of why we picked San Diego to go there just. Just based on the operational benefits. It was really based on San Diego's culture within the business events industry and. And how

they really welcomed everyone. And there's. There's other markets that do that, too, a couple that we have branches in. But San Diego really, like, at every level welcomed us for the events that we were. We were taken there with open arms from the CBC to local hotel contacts to the labor that we utilized there locally. Everyone was just super easy to work with, very, very knowledgeable. And that actually is a big component, too, is that knowledgeable workforce that's retained there after 2020. That's big. That was a big reason. And it's like we can lean on that workforce that's there in that city without having to transplant and move team members there to really have that component of what HERITAGE is there locally. We can lean pretty heavily onto the talent that's there and be able to layer on top of that with what we do as a general service contractor and a service provider.

[11:36] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And what skills do you feel are becoming more relevant now in the industry?

[11:42] **Marc Ghafoori:** I would say the skills that are relevant, that one, again is the same, but the only thing that's different is AI, I would say, is throwing like a sprinkling of the need for staying up on the times and where things are, because it's like the Wild west. There's so much going on, you just don't know where it's going to go or what you can do. And everybody's kind of attacking it from every different direction at the same time. But you start to see a pattern kind of emerging on what the best use case scenario is for that. It's not unlike handing things over, but it's, you know, trying to, to make what you do better and faster and more efficient. And the people who have been using it are most functional and you see them, you know, outperforming or outpacing other people, you know, and it's. It's not like this growth that is, you know, two times. It's more like a growth that's like ten times of what your capabilities of being able to, to execute things on. So as long as you stay organized, that's the thing. That's really, I would say, standing out. And now AI is all over the place, everywhere, everyone's talking about it. But if you have the ability to actively listen to what people are saying and then translate that into something that's executable within AI, those two pair together are the key assets that form success for what we do in business events that has been there, minus AI, that active listening component and being able to turn it into action.

[13:20] **Magdalina Atanassova:** You contributed to our AI cover story last year. So how actively are you using AI in your day to day?

[13:29] **Marc Ghafoori:** I have it running on one of my three screens at all times. Basically it's always there. I'm constantly in it and working with it to help expedite my day. I use Chat GPT primarily for what I do and a little bit of image generation from there for kind of spitballing and moving some ideas along. But yeah, it's primary function of my workflow, for sure.

[13:57] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah, using AI, have you seen this ten times? Exponential growth or improved productivity in your day to day? Or is it more of like, yeah, things are moving a bit faster, but you feel you can do more?

[14:13] **Marc Ghafoori:** I would say in situations where I'm communicating internally and externally, I will usually run it through a couple of custom GPTs based on what I'm actually using. And by doing that, I see that exponential growth because instead of spending, I don't know, 20 minutes, 30 minutes on writing an email, I can cut it down into just a couple of minutes. I just spit in what I'm actually looking to say. It returns something back to me. And then I take that and reword it and put it into the message in just like a, you know, super fast like that. And that's real time savings. I don't have to get into the weeds of, you know, brainstorming. That brainstorming component is the biggest time saver there that it really helps to alleviate with a lot of the communication style. I haven't gone too heavily into the graphic generation component, nothing more than like icon development or just simple images. I seem to be finding dead ends whenever I dive into that and I just, I don't have time to, to dive into that at the moment. Just keep putting that onto the back burner. I'm waiting for the next GPT to come out and maybe that'll solve all the problems I've been encountering myself, but I can't necessarily wait for that. I know.

[15:27] **Magdalina Atanassova:** You should try, Claude AI.

[15:31] **Marc Ghafoori:** Oh, really? What's that one?

[15:33] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Well, I just find it better for business stuff. If you run stuff by Claude, like you can create a presentation, upload it in Claude, even in free version, and ask it for a very concrete feedback. So say, act like my VP or my C suite. Look at this presentation. Tell me where it falls short. Is this message coming across? Where does it fall short? If you're very concrete in the asks, I feel that cloud actually gives much better feedback than chat GPT.

[16:06] **Marc Ghafoori:** Interesting.

[16:07] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah, it's interesting to compare. I know the paid version of cloud, everybody's kind of that. I'm, you know, following and learning AI stuff from everybody is really like, yeah, the paid version of Claude is next best thing. But yeah, I'm not that far, but I'm definitely impressed by it's, you know, business acumen, if you can say it like that. For an AI.

[16:29] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah, I found like on Chat GPT, if I built, I built a couple of GPTs to really, like focus it within several different roles and several different, like, review processes, like what you're talking about. And it's been okay, you know, good, good enough, I would say. I would definitely be interested to see what others are out there. I've dove so deep into GPT, I'm like, feel like it would be painful to like pull myself back out and try to reinject, which I think they figured out their money generating, you know, ecosystem based off of that.

[17:07] **Magdalena Atanassova:** For sure they did.

[17:09] **Marc Ghafoori:** Sticky ecosystem. That'll get you. They got that.

[17:12] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah.

[17:13] **Marc Ghafoori:** They got that down.

[17:15] **Magdalena Atanassova:** Yeah. I also link Claude AI in the show notes just for anyone else that's curious or haven't tried it yet.

[17:21] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah.

[17:22] **Magdalena Atanassova:** So we're speaking a lot about talent and I'm curious, are you mentoring someone right now and are you being mentored as well?

[17:31] **Marc Ghafoori:** So not to lay it on heavy for HERITAGE, but it's the only thing I can apply it to for this one. I would say my mentor throughout the last decade has been Ryan Yum here at HERITAGE, president for HERITAGE. You know, he, he's, he's a very active leader. He's not somebody who has just got his feet up and letting the rest of the team run things. He's in it every day. And I love that its that hands on approach that really works its way through everything that we do at HERITAGE. And like I said, I'm not trying to lay it on for HERITAGE, but this is the only application that I have because I'm in here 90% of the time. And then I would say I'm not particularly mentoring someone other than the direct reports that I have that are reporting to me. And I would say that that still does apply because of the way that we train and the way that we pair people for success here at HERITAGE is by pairing them with a team leader that can help them grow both personally and professionally and not try to put roadblocks in front of them, but try to accelerate them. So if somebody's really good at what they do, try to try to amplify that, if they're trying to look to go somewhere, then they have the ear of their team leaders and a career development plan to pair that with to try to like, put them on a course for, for success. Those are the biggest, those are the biggest ones. I'm not trying to plug HERITAGE. I swear, that's the only thing that I have to apply to that because it is, it is where we are. That's what we do.

[19:06] **Magdalena Atanassova:** That's very fair. And what are some of the topics that are standing out currently in these conversations. So you said it's very personalized. But are there anything that we can group together that stands out to you?

[19:20] **Marc Ghafoori:** I don't know. That one's kind of hard. I would say it's transparency and the ability to talk openly in both directions and being able to talk through problems to be able to find some of those solutions that may not have been apparent right away. Talking about what the, what the real challenges are for that individual, whether they're, they're really excelling at this or they're really falling on their face for this and talking openly and honestly about those things so that you can work towards something that is, you know, to the best of their potential. That transparency, that openness, that honesty in those conversations, that is completely key for, for that being successful and, and, like, a real mentorship. Otherwise, it's, it's peacocking, it's inflating your chest, and it's not real at that point.

[20:13] **Magdalena Atanassova:** I think one more addition to this honest and open conversation, creating the safe environment as well, is empathy. And you've written something very interesting about empathy on LinkedIn that also I think I should link to for people to read. So how do you keep your empathetic filter high enough when you attend events? And do you always give a chance and when do you skip?

[20:39] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yeah. So this is, this is one that I really like, actually. So I always try to have a conversation with as many people as I possibly can. Because at the end of the day, at the core of what we do is in the business events industry, we're all oriented towards services and service offerings. You know, some people have physical things, some people have digital, some people neither. And they're just like, organizing, organizing ideas and businesses. But at its core, we're all offering that, that service. And if you're not talking to people and you're not open to what people are trying to sell you on, and we're all selling each other, like, at the end of the day, in one form or fashion. And if you're not open to that, then you're not open to something that, that might be extremely innovative tomorrow. You know, by skipping over that conversation today, you're missing out on what that could be tomorrow. So that, that is something that I always strive to just, no matter how much I'm being sold to, to try to at least have that conversation. And then on, on the subject of what we were just talking about, of transparency, if there's a. If there's a misalignment on what their product or what their service is offering, then I'll be. I'll try to stop them ahead of time to not waste anybody's time and

say, like, look, this just not really in our wheelhouse, but this person over here might be a good person for you to be able to talk to at XYZ company. If they can't be a real solution internally for us to be able to utilize, I try to repoint them to somewhere else that might be beneficial. These people are all human. We're all humans talking to each other and communicating with each other. We have a task to do, and we're trying to do something. And if we're open to communicating and being transparent, then we can do some stuff. That's pretty cool.

[22:21] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I definitely agree with you on that. And, yes, we're always selling something, even when we're speaking to one another. We're, in a sense, trying to sell our ideas to the other person or just open them up to our worldview and how we see things. So I just given another version of a hard sell. Right. It's not always a hard sell. It's sometimes it's much softer than that. And how do you storytell based on data in your work? I know you're storytelling.

[22:53] **Marc Ghafoori:** That's another good one. So I love data because it's like a way of. It's like a crystal ball to see the future if you're looking at it right. You know, the challenge is to really, like, have enough data to be able to tell an accurate and, like, compelling story with just a few data points. You can't. You maybe can't tell a whole story, and it might be. Might be something that most people aren't really worth, they're not willing to listen to. So you really have to pull in as much as you possibly can from the kind of topography of the landscape of what we do to be able to have that story told. And then with that data, really, you just have to dive into it and generate reports, create an organization to that. Whether it's arbitrary at first, something will form itself in the process of trying to understand it, but you just have to kind of. You have to throw yourself at it and try to find some. Some pattern that emerges there between, you know, client interaction and what your product is and. And how that's being used. One might morph the other. You might change your. Your client, you might change your. Your partners that you try to sell your. Your product might change in the process as well. And you can only do that through evaluating the data and. And looking at how things are being how things are being used across the board.

[24:14] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Do you feel the industry is doing a good enough job?

[24:17] **Marc Ghafoori:** Yes and no. The digital side of things is at an extreme advantage over the physical event side of things, which is at an extreme disadvantage. The physical event side of things, we have to physically set up and take down data tracking mechanisms, you know, equipment in venues, whenever we're looking to actually achieve those things through RFID, through Bluetooth, or what have you, for different tracking methods. So it's a little bit difficult to be able to get that granular data that you need for going down to the individual. And it's also like a privacy issue where a lot of people may not be willing to do that. So we have to show the value in sharing that data, just like people have done with Google, with Apple, with any of those other service providers that are not within the business events industry. But, but talk about what value we can bring by sharing that data. And that's how we can be most successful and more successful, I should say, with, with how. How we do things, you know, and I've seen it from big organizations like corporate events to associations down to smaller ones. And most are really just like, like they're not attacking it from what I see as being the most optimal way, because there's just too much friction to be able to collect the data across the board. You can only do so much and so little time, and you've got a tiny window to install your event. You can only set up and facilitate so much there. It's not a permanent installation at the end of the day, most, most of the time. Most of the time it's not.

[25:54] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah. And one personal question, what keeps you inspired about the events industry? But I see you're always with a huge smile on your face. No matter how much work you have. What keeps you inspired?

[26:07] **Marc Ghafoori:** I would say the constant work, I find joy in the moment, and I feel like that's what keeps me inspired is like this. What we're doing is never, ever going to be done, even though you have an event and it's going to happen on January 22, you know, and that event comes and goes, but you're planning the next one by the time that that one's over. And it's this, like, it's this animal that never really takes form or never really takes shape, and it's always being defined and redefined, and you've got people getting swapped in and swapped out from the different organizations that are participating in it, and maybe different companies are swapping in and swapping out so it's, it's always dynamic. It's always changing. And that's where I get the enjoyment from is that challenge every single day of knowing I'm not going to walk in and punch my time card and do the same thing and then punch it and go home and like, no, I don't, I don't want that. I want something that challenges on a daily basis to figure out, like, where does my, where's my personal and my business life? Where's that barrier created? Because it's so, so blend over. Like there is, there's no ability to be able to differentiate the two. It's, it's so intertwined. And that, and that, I would say, is like something that really drove people in the business events industry in like 21, 22 is like, you saw the people that really loved it. It's in their, it's in their blood. Like, you had people that left the industry just to get a

paycheck for a little bit and they came right back because they couldn't get, they couldn't get away, you know, can't take the trade show out of, out of the person. But, yeah, that's where I get inspiration is in the, all of the dynamic elements of it.

[27:49] **Magdalina Atanassova:** What are you most looking forward to, personally and professionally?

[27:53] **Marc Ghafoori:** Personally, I'm looking forward to it. So I've got a couple of small kids, four and a half, and gosh, soon be one and a half. And going on a vacation with family, traveling so much, one of the benefits is you rack up a lot of points and you can be able to do that. You know, you can take the family on a vacation and it's air quotes free, but you've paid for it with all the travel that you've done. So that's, that's something we're looking forward to, is maybe like Disney on the foreseeable future. But, yeah, nice. Professionally, professionally. I mean, I'm, I'm always, I'm always looking for opportunities to grow and, you know, I wasn't at PCMA CL because of the birth of my daughter a couple of years back, and that was a really big FOMO moment, not being there. So I really look forward to every PCMA event. I'm not blowing smoke. I know this is PCMA and all of that, but I really look forward to it because it brings everybody together from every different corner of the industry and everybody, it's just a big mind melt. So it's like, it's a really good opportunity to just like test the waters, have those conversations that are, that are unique. That's how you and I met, you know, like, was at a PCMA. So it was, it's one of those opportunities professionally that I always look forward to because you don't know. You don't know where the hell it's going to go. And it, it could, it could go to something that's extremely fruitful. You go nowhere, and then maybe that sprouts up into something, you know, several years down the road, and maybe it doesn't. He's made a good friend he had drinks with or something, and that's good enough.

[29:28] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Yeah, that's very true. And wrapping this conversation up, was there anything we didn't mention and we should address?

[29:37] **Marc Ghafoori:** I don't think so. We covered most of the stuff that I had in my notes for stuff to talk through.

[29:45] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Awesome. Well, thank you for being on the podcast.

[29:50] **Marc Ghafoori:** Thank you for having me. This is great. I love it.

[29:53] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Thank you. If you enjoyed this episode, do give us a five star review and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. For more industry insights, visit pcma.org/convene. Until next time.