

Creating Accessible Events

[00:00:00.14] CASEY PEARSON: Thank you everyone for joining us today for this session, Creating Accessible Events. My name is Casey Pearson, and I'm on the marketing team here at 3Play Media, and I'll be moderating. A quick self-description, I'm a young woman with long brown hair wearing a black cardigan. And with that, I would like to welcome Colleen and Suzanne. Thank you both so much for being here today.

[00:00:24.55] SUZANNE BAUGH: Thank you.

[00:00:24.81] COLLEEN WOGAN: Thank you for having us.

[00:00:27.55] CASEY PEARSON: It's going to be a really fun conversation. I am in events, so this is a personal conversation for me as it is for hopefully many of the attendees today. But I'd like to get us started by learning more about both of your backgrounds for events. Can you share a bit about how you got into events and then also about Q&A Events?

[00:00:47.49] SUZANNE BAUGH: Sure. Hi, everybody. I'm Suzanne Baugh. I'm CEO of Q&A events. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a white female with short brown hair. I'm wearing black glasses and a black sweater. In full disclosure as an FYI, I am in my home office, and my dog, Rye, is underneath my desk, so I'm praying that nobody comes to the door while we're with you today.

[00:01:14.01] But I started getting into events actually at a very young age. When I was 14, I went to my first concert. And I said, oh, I got to be a part of something like this. And I actually produced my first concert event when I was 17 and then proceeded to go to college for a business administration degree but with an emphasis in the music industry.

[00:01:43.55] So I came out of college and started working for an event marketing, entertainment marketing company doing sponsorship for tours and televised concert events, that type of thing. So that's how I got started. And then in 1999, I left that company, Warner TBA, and co-founded Q&A Events with my former business partner. And that was in 1999, so that's coming up on 25 years this year.

[00:02:19.28] And so far, some of the events that I've done with Q&A Events-- I'd say that probably one of my favorites and one of the most applicable to this conversation is with an organization called DisabilityIN who Colleen and I started working with in 2014 on their annual conference. They were USBLN at the time.

[00:02:40.71] So we started working with them on their annual conference when they had about 400 attendees, and we are still working with them and learning every year and loving seeing their growth, which now they're at around 3,000, so it's been a great journey. I have done a few other events like the Daytona 500 pre-race show and some large-scale festivals. But DisabilityIN is probably closest to our heart.

[00:03:12.84] CASEY PEARSON: Well, we love DisabilityIN. It's certainly a wonderful event. Colleen, how did you get roped into events?

[00:03:20.13] COLLEEN WOGAN: Wow. That's a good, interesting terminology right there. My name is Colleen. I'm middle aged. My pronouns are she/her. I am wearing glasses. I have blonde hair. I am also sitting in my home office.

[00:03:35.67] And so how did I get into events? Well, when Suzanne moved to Atlanta in 1999, I met her shortly after that. And I was in a completely different industry, hospitality. And so I met her, and Suzanne and I became partners in 1999. And as I said, I was working in a different industry, and it became apparent that I couldn't balance my career and helping the Q&A work.

[00:04:08.56] So in 2008, I went over to the event world with Q&A Events and have been in an event world since 2008, learning and helping implement events, and I loved it. I actually said to Suzanne in 2008, I think, this is one of the best jobs I've had. I really enjoy it, and I want to continue on with it. So I've been working in events ever since. And as Suzanne mentioned, we do a variety of events, but DisabilityIN is very close, near and dear to our hearts.

[00:04:37.12] CASEY PEARSON: That's amazing. And I know what you mean. There's few things as fulfilling for an event professional than seeing an event come to life and seeing it all the way through. Well, we'll dive right in. So Colleen, maybe you can keep us rolling here. How important is it for event organizers to recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of attendees?

[00:04:59.47] COLLEEN WOGAN: First of all, I have to say, please pardon me if I look down. This is the best way for me to present this, by looking at some of my notes. But to the question, the short answer is it's extremely important. I think as event planners, it's our job to create an event that every attendee can fully engage in. And it's going to be important for us to drive that conversation and lead that conversation with our clients to make sure that any attendee that plans to come to your event can fully engage and have equal experience in it.

[00:05:34.94] So I'm going to leave it at a short answer. Because later on throughout the hour, Suzanne and I will make comments on, how do we do that? Now, we're not going to be able to answer every question, but at least we'll hopefully be able to give you some guidance to start thinking about things as you're starting to plan the event to make it inclusive for everyone.

[00:05:54.17] CASEY PEARSON: Yeah, that's great, and I couldn't agree more. It's all about really creating an equitable experience for everyone to participate in. What are some of the most common barriers you've seen that prevent individuals with disabilities or accessibility needs in general from fully participating in events? And how can event organizer organizers work to mitigate these barriers? Suzanne, why don't you take a stab at that one?

[00:06:21.88] SUZANNE BAUGH: OK, happy to. I think that there are a number of barriers that we run into. But the first one that comes to mind is more of a virtual barrier. Since we're talking about virtual, I'll go there first. Since we're in a virtual meeting, we'll go there first.

[00:06:40.84] When we had to-- I'm going to use the word pivot-- I know that got to be a tired word during COVID. But when we had to pivot during COVID and move from in-person to virtual events, one of the challenging things that we ran into as we were trying to pivot from disability and live in-person program to disability and completely virtual program was finding an accessible virtual platform.

[00:07:13.81] And it was quite challenging, to the point where at one point, Colleen and I were on a walk and just like, we just need to build our own, because it was so hard to find a platform that was truly accessible, even though that so many of them said they were. And they may have had an accessible font available or accessible colors that you could choose from, but truly from a navigational standpoint, it was very difficult to find that platform. And ultimately, what we had to do was work with the platform developers to try and get them to enhance certain features.

[00:07:56.05] And then Colleen and I were doing things on the back end. We learned so much during that process to try and alt caption ourselves because we couldn't alt caption the pictures internally on the platform, and then ultimately, working with an outside entity to try and help bridge that gap and create some step-by-step instructions that would help attendees be able to navigate and ensure that they had as seamless of an experience as possible.

[00:08:27.17] And going to the in-person piece, one of the challenges that we see on a regular basis is navigating the space. Especially for a couple of different communities, our blind and low vision friends, there are a good number of services now that are available, technology that's available now to help those individuals navigate the space safely and effectively.

[00:08:58.26] I'm not endorsing anybody, but there's platforms like NaviLens and Aira and GoodMaps that can help people from their phone be able to go from one part of the venue to another part of the venue and navigate it safely, but also know within X number of steps, you're going to be at this door, at this room, which I think is a huge technology advancement that is helping our on-site attendees.

[00:09:29.21] Now, there are costs to these services, so the planners need to work with their clients to make sure that they can budget appropriately for those types of services, but they're extremely helpful.

[00:09:43.62] And then from a mobility standpoint, again, as you're trying to navigate the space, we know that if somebody has a mobility issue or difficulty navigating from one part to the other-- so let's do what we can from a housing perspective to work with our hotel partners and place those individuals-- if they identify themselves to us-- place those individuals in rooms that are closer to elevator banks and the meeting space if we're able to.

[00:10:16.27] And then also design our production setup so that if we have a stage that's needed for a presentation-- so like for instance, a general session stage typically is required-- we would also make sure that we have a wheelchair-accessible ramp to that stage. And if we don't have access to a wheelchair accessible ramp, then we would probably forego the stage. So we definitely want everybody who needs to be on that stage to be able to access that stage, and sometimes, that requires a ramp. So we just want to have that from the get-go if at all possible.

And most facilities have them. If they don't, it's more of an anomaly-- at least larger facilities, major hotels, that type of thing.

[00:11:09.27] And then for the deaf and hard of hearing community, access to closed captioning and ASL interpreting is key. The barrier here, I think, is cost. And again, so budgeting is going to be really important on the planning side, on the front end, to make sure that you've got the funding to be able to support these individuals.

[00:11:36.68] But thankfully, I think as technology is advancing, it's allowing us to have a little bit more access to these services at a more reasonable cost. You have technology costs. You have the cost of the service itself, so it still has to be factored in. But hopefully as technology evolves, we'll see that as helping to offset some of the costs as well.

[00:12:04.55] CASEY PEARSON: I love that, and those are some great points. I feel a bit like a bobblehead right now because I'm just consistently nodding throughout everything you say. I think as event professionals, we think through how everyone moves through the event, and that helps us to identify challenges or barriers that people might face as they're experiencing the event or what's taking place, whether it is virtual or in person or a mix of both. So it's cool to think about it that way, and the common barriers that you often see and how you manage those solutions is important to recognize.

[00:12:48.96] I think it's great that you mentioned budgets because that's always top of mind for event professionals. I know we're going to cover maybe some tips for budgeting later on. But when you work with clients for the first time, have you ever run into situations where accessibility-related costs weren't accounted for or maybe not accounted for correctly, and you've maybe had to do some educating on what it means to host an accessible event? And how did you approach that with the client?

[00:13:21.04] SUZANNE BAUGH: Well, I think it's an honest conversation with them, and I think it's becoming more expected than it used to be. That's very refreshing for us, for people who have been working in this space for quite a while. But I think because it's expected, if a client hasn't anticipated offering that, then it's an educational opportunity for us to explain to them why it's so important and to think of it holistically and how important it is for us to be able to truly engage the attendees.

[00:14:06.33] So does it mean that they always say OK, sure, sign me up? I'll do it all? No. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Sometimes, it's stepping stones with certain clients. OK. All right. We'll integrate captioning. Or OK, we're going to integrate ASL. Next year, we'll integrate captioning. And so I think we've seen it be received positively.

[00:14:36.25] But it's not something that if we're coming into a program and it hasn't been planned for, sometimes, they just can't find the funding. So what is the option for us? What is the best and most effective and cost-effective option that we can start to integrate immediately and then build it appropriately for future years?

[00:14:57.71] COLLEEN WOGAN: I think most clients want to do it. It's just a matter of helping them find the money to do it and also educating them on the importance of doing it. Because a lot of times, it may not be on their radar, but continue conversations and asking the questions as event planners to bring that to the forefront. We've seen some of our other programs change because of that.

[00:15:26.92] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah, absolutely. And I think also the feedback from the attendees is so important as well. Because one of the clients that we had received feedback that, hey, we would like for you to have captioning here. And it just would be very, very helpful. And they heard it from multiple attendees.

[00:15:50.52] And so please, as you're an attendee, give that feedback if they request a survey at the end. Give that feedback so that we can keep the ball rolling and see more and more advancement.

[00:16:04.64] CASEY PEARSON: That always makes it easier when attendees provide that feedback. It really backs you up in what your recommendations are. That's awesome. So what strategies can event organizers employ to proactively identify and understand the unique needs and preferences of their attendees? Suzanne, maybe you want to start with that.

[00:16:26.37] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah. Thank you. So I think-- and this is all of our goal, right, is that we plan the program as overall accessible from the get-go so that we know that everybody can fully participate. And part of that is we work with our clients to encourage them to include accessibility answers in their registration process.

[00:16:55.35] And this allows us to be able to pull the reports and the needs from the registration system itself to make sure that the accommodations that we're offering for the program meet the needs of the attendees. But there are also going to be times that we're going to have to reach out to individuals directly to drill down on what their ultimate needs are.

[00:17:20.40] For example, if somebody says, I need CART and ASL. Well, those are two different services, so we may reach out to them directly and say, what's the most appropriate service for you? Do you prefer ASL, or do you prefer CART? So that we can make sure that if whatever portion of the program that's being needed that we have that available to them if at all possible.

[00:17:51.87] And then there also could be people who identify as having a severe food allergy, and so we may need to contact them and then ultimately connect them with the facility to make sure that they're talking to the catering team on exactly what that allergy might be and that we can accommodate what their dietary needs are.

[00:18:10.97] So just, I think, having that information on the front end through that registration process is key and then making sure that we have the follow through where needed to drill down on what those specific needs are.

[00:18:26.36] CASEY PEARSON: I think that's great. And having that open communication with attendees to really understand how you can make sure the accommodations are appropriate is super important. I also have a background in hospitality, Colleen, and nothing gets me like allergies. You have to take those very seriously.

[00:18:48.46] COLLEEN WOGAN: Yeah. It's interesting, post-COVID, how that all changed and making those accommodations and trying to do some planning and pre-planning to help those categories that need help with their food-specific food needs.

[00:19:06.34] CASEY PEARSON: Yeah. And that kind of leads me into the next question. What are some key considerations that event organizers should keep in mind when selecting venues to work with to ensure that they are able to create accessible and equitable experiences?

[00:19:26.87] COLLEEN WOGAN: I'll take that one. Colleen. So we've been privileged to work with DisabilityIN for 10 years. And we also source their properties, which really has helped create an inclusive environment for everybody because we are there at the front end of trying to select these properties that will accommodate everybody's needs.

[00:19:50.96] So we've been doing that since 2014. So when you're looking for a space-- first of all, the hotel-- you first got to identify how many attendees you're going to have. Is it going to be 400, or is it going to be 3,000? So when we first started with DisabilityIN, it was 400, and that looks a lot differently than it does today at 3,000.

[00:20:13.76] One of our main goals is to try to keep everybody under one roof so we don't have to do a lot of transportation so it's not hard on the attendee or the event planners or the client to try to move 3,000 people from one place to the other. So it gets a little harder when your attendee growth is up above 3,000 to try to figure that out. And sometimes, you have to get a little creative with your room layouts and your whole flow of the conference, but that's a consideration.

[00:20:43.76] And then based on what the sales people from the hotels will present to you, sometimes, it might be a different vision than what you have. so We want to try to keep our space as compacted as possible so the space isn't all over their hotel complex. We like tiered spaces. So we like where the general session may be on the third floor, breakouts may be on the second floor, and then maybe offices on the third floor, or something along those lines, where attendees can easily be moved from elevators and escalators to and from the event space. So just looking at your space as a whole, and how do you move through it?

[00:21:29.76] But speaking of elevators and escalators, you also have to make sure that you have enough elevator banks and escalators to get to and from those spaces. So if you have 400 guests, it's going to look a lot different than it would if you have a larger attending.

[00:21:43.70] And just from based on complete experience, also check with the facility to have those elevators and escalators serviced about a week before you go on site, because you never want an escalator to go down in the middle of your program. And we've learned that over the years to get those serviced way before you come on site.

[00:22:05.33] So another space thing that we look for as you walk through the event space are restrooms. If you're walking through and you see an open pathway into the restroom, that's great. If not, if it's a door, will the facility allow you to open those doors during the conference so folks that may be wheelchair users or scooter users that can easily get in and out of those restrooms?

[00:22:29.82] And then taking a look sometimes at your layouts that you have-- for example, if you have a breakout, and it's set in theater, we randomly just remove chairs throughout the space so a wheelchair user or a scooter isn't designated to a certain spot, that they can sit wherever they want with their friends, up front, in the back. And that's just purely educating the staff, your volunteers, on the space.

[00:22:59.96] As far as sleeping rooms are concerned, the first thing I would think about is, do they have enough accessible rooms to meet your needs for your conference? And so double checking that. With DisabilityIN, that's a big check mark for us before we go on to a property review is, how many accessible rooms do they have? And how many can we occupy?

[00:23:20.03] The other is-- speaking of doors, we've all gone into hotels where you try to get into your room, and that door is so heavy that you can hardly open it yourself. Imagine somebody that may be a wheelchair user or scooter user that can't get in that door. So will they release a tension on that door so it makes it a little bit easier for folks to get in and out of?

[00:23:40.24] When you walk in the room, is it accessible? Is it truly an accessible room? One of the things that we've learned along the way is that you might walk into a room. And you walk through the room, and they have this beautiful balcony. And it overlooks a pool and a gorgeous resort. And you just can't wait to get out there. And then you walk to the door, and you open it up, and there's this big lip that you can't even get out to the balcony on. And how do you accomplish that?

[00:24:08.24] And so there are a million things that we've learned throughout the past 10 years. And it's just based on thinking about what you're looking at the hotel and what kind of experience all your attendees will have, and just learning year after year. Suzanne and I are pretty good about going on a property and really digging down and educating the property themselves and having them become a partner with you on, how willing are they to work with you on making some accommodations within the hotel?

[00:24:40.97] So those are all-- if somebody is going to give you a hassle up front, that might not be the property that you want to go to-- which we found most properties are willing to help us and accommodate what we're trying to ask for.

[00:24:54.23] CASEY PEARSON: Those are awesome tips. And planning events is truly a team effort. And to your point, if you're interacting with a vendor or venue that isn't feeling like they're going to be a good partner in helping make this event successful, it's probably best to find a new venue or a new partner. That kind of leads me into our next question. How can event organizers collaborate with venue staff and service providers to address accessibility concerns and ensure a seamless experience? Any advice you have there?

[00:25:33.93] COLLEEN WOGAN: It's Colleen, and I'll take this one again. The first thing is, like anything, just setting clear expectations. We start at the beginning with our hotel contact, and we just have constant communication with them daily, weekly as it gets closer.

[00:25:52.81] So send those clear expectations that they're hopefully filtering down to their staff. We will ask for the hotel to do training for their staff that we'll participate in or our client may participate in, just so that they have a full understanding of how to accommodate folks that are in the hotel.

[00:26:16.29] And I want to make it a point at this part of the conference also to recognize the fact that the disability sometimes is not always a visual disability. Sometimes, it's a non-visual disability. And take in folks that may be ADHD or have dyslexia or hearing loss-- to think about those things as you're planning, because they take special instructions also that you may need to accommodate in your planning.

[00:26:47.68] Another example would be if you go into a hotel, and they have-- because the ADA says, you have X amount of rooms with hearing kits, and you need more than that. Is a hotel willing to go above the ADA regulation and provide more hearing kits for your rooms?

[00:27:07.45] And then the last example I have is-- first of all, I want to say that nine times out of 10, we go on the properties and the staff is just-- they're just amazing. They want to do whatever they can do to help to make you have a successful event and help anybody that may need help to have that fully engaged experience.

[00:27:31.25] And so the one thing we've learned along the way is, we'll have hotel staff. We'll educate them by saying, don't just don't immediately go up to somebody and ask them if they need help or go and help somebody. Ask them if they need help. It's very easy. If you see somebody who may be looking like they need assistance, very gently go up to them and ask, may I help you?

[00:27:56.05] They may say yes, and they may say no. And if they say yes, then know how to help them properly. But there are some times when folks just want to try to figure it out themselves, and they know what they're doing. And they just want to move on to their day. So it's just all through communication from the top up and at the beginning.

[00:28:13.82] SUZANNE BAUGH: I would love to jump in on that and give an example of one time when we saw this come into play with the hotel staff. We were on a project with a client, and we were at our pre-conference meeting with the hotel staff, the managers. And our client was-- he's blind, and he wanted to go through the exercise. Because a lot of our attendees were also blind or low vision persons.

[00:28:47.42] And so he wanted to go through the exercise with the staff on how to safely help someone who is blind navigate to another space. And so he had each of us pair up, and one of us closed our eyes, and the other person was going to be the navigating person. And he explained how to do that safely.

[00:29:11.75] Fast forward to the next day when our attendees are coming in. And one of the bell staff noticed that there was a person who was blind who was using a cane but was kind of just standing in the middle of the foyer and went to her and asked where she needed to go and if he could assist her with getting there.

[00:29:35.69] And she said, yes, I would appreciate that. And he explained to her, I am on your right side. You can grab my elbow, and I will take you to the room.

[00:29:47.24] And that was just like one of the most heartwarming experiences that I had had in a while, because it just showed that the staff at the hotel, the managers of the hotel, took this to heart, took it seriously, went back to their teams, and explained to them how they could help make this experience better for the attendees. And they took it to heart as well. And it was just it was a great overall experience, so I wanted to share.

[00:30:18.23] CASEY PEARSON: That's an awesome anecdote, and it is so amazing to see people really learn and have eagerness to making sure that the event is successful for all parts of the process. I'd like to jump next to virtual and hybrid events, because we've been talking a lot about in-person.

[00:30:40.27] But Suzanne, what steps can event organizers take to ensure that virtual events are accessible, particularly in terms of digital platforms and technologies? I know we touched on that a little bit earlier, but maybe you could expand a little bit.

[00:30:56.30] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah. I mean, I think that, again, first and foremost is finding the right accessible platform. And sometimes, if you can't do this yourself, if you don't have some of the tools or the expertise, you may have to hire someone to come in and test that or enlist your friends or colleagues that use those features on a regular basis to come in and test them to ensure that the overall platform is accessible.

[00:31:31.04] And I think with programs like Zoom or Microsoft or Google, they've kind of all gotten to a point where they-- pretty standard, but if you go into an actual virtual event platform, I think, where you have different types of elements that you're trying to integrate for an overall conference, then you really have to dive in a little bit deeper and make sure that what they're telling you is accessible is truly accessible, and then along with that, ensuring that you're incorporating your captions into your presentation.

[00:32:12.28] And we like to do this not only with the virtual but also the in-person piece as well as ASL services and ensuring that with your ASL services, that whoever's managing the event for you knows how to pin these individuals or allow them to pin themselves so that they are ever present for those people who need that ASL service, and those users can easily find them. I think that's very important.

[00:32:45.86] We try to minimize presentations both for in-person and for virtual. So if we can minimize the presentation materials, we do. If we do have presentation materials, we ask that the presenters describe what is on screen, what is on those presentations. Because you can imagine if you can't see your screen, and there is a presentation up there that has a bunch of facts and data

on there, and the presenter doesn't speak to that, then you are not able to really participate in the session.

[00:33:31.25] And then also, trying to provide those materials in advance if at all possible. Sometimes, that's not. But if it's not possible, then provide the materials after the event, the recording after the event, so that those people who need that additional time with the material to internalize what was being said and really absorb it have the ability to do that.

[00:33:59.99] And also, I think-- this is not so much technology, but this is more of from a presenter standpoint-- is doing what we did a little earlier today and describing ourselves so that those that can't see us can get a sense of who is on screen presenting.

[00:34:17.45] And then from a technology standpoint, this is maybe technology outside of the platform but needs to be factored in when having an event is for any videos that are included in a presentation, making sure that those are audio described and captioned. Those audio descriptions are going to help someone who can't see their screen to really understand what's happening on the screen.

[00:34:41.99] And those captions, while they may be necessary for somebody who needs captions for the event, they're helpful for-- I venture to say they're helpful for pretty much everybody. So those are just some of the elements, some of the features or suggestions that we would recommend integrating into any virtual program.

[00:35:07.70] CASEY PEARSON: That's great. And I can definitely empathize with the process of having to vet platforms and test products for accessibility. And like you said, it can be challenging, but definitely best to involve people who have disabilities in testing those to make sure that whatever is being claimed is actually accurate, and it does provide an equitable experience.

[00:35:37.40] And technology is great when it works, and isn't so great when it doesn't, as we're experiencing a bit today with the captions not populating in Zoom itself. Thank you, everyone, for your patience and viewing the captions on the second screen. But it's all with live events, right? This is kind of what some of the challenges we handle when working with technology. You know it's not pre-recorded, right?

[00:36:04.61] SUZANNE BAUGH: That's right. We can edit that, fix it.

[00:36:07.82] CASEY PEARSON: Right. So talking about leveraging tech for events, how can we really leverage it to enhance accessibility and engagement for virtual attendees while also being mindful of the potential barriers that they might possess?

[00:36:27.38] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah. I think I'll take this if that's OK. This is Suzanne. I think that identifying the type of engagement that you want from your attendees is critical. Do you want to do active polling? Are attendees going to be interacting live with the presenters?

[00:36:50.18] Thankfully, it's become easier. And I think platform developers are working harder as they've been pushed to integrate more robust opportunities to create-- I should say create a more robust, accessible environment so that our attendees can participate in all of the activities that we have going on.

[00:37:15.86] So, for instance, we have a program, an app, that we use that we can provide virtual meetups where people can-- we might be live at a live event, but not everybody can be all places at once, so they can-- a little bit easier with the app, so utilizing some of those technologies where they can meet additional people.

[00:37:41.79] Or if they're attending the event virtually, they might be able to engage with some of the in-person attendees even though they're not there. I'd say integrating polling solutions that work with screen readers-- sometimes secondary devices integrated into a platform can sometimes make it challenging for some people to navigate through.

[00:38:08.23] And then I think it's really important that you build your production setup so that you're incorporating some of the accessibility elements seamlessly. So for instance, if we're not in Zoom, we're in a virtual platform. And the way our attendees are going to see the streamed programming is by going into that virtual platform.

[00:38:36.85] So how do we make sure that our ASL interpreter and our closed captioning is ever present? Well, we design a production palette, if you will, that allows for us to have a fixed position for our ASL interpreter-- a window, if you will-- that's embedded in that palette. Lower thirds for closed captioning so everything is coming in through that lower third location, and all of this is being recorded together so that when in our presenters are talking, all of this, it's all in the same screen.

[00:39:13.75] And when it's recorded, people go to look on demand version. And they're seeing everything as if they were there live. So I think some of those pieces of technology are really important in trying to enhance that environment.

[00:39:34.23] CASEY PEARSON: That's great. Colleen, you talked a bit earlier about how communication plays such a significant role when working with venues. Can you talk next about how event organizers can ensure their communication with attendees is inclusive and accessible?

[00:39:55.15] COLLEEN WOGAN: Yes. Thank you. I think the first thing would be-- I mean, the first thing an attendee is going to do is register. They're going to know about your event, and then they're going to go to register. And so that's going to be the first indication that, if you're going to be inclusive to everybody, is your registration platform.

[00:40:15.49] So is it easy for all attendees to navigate through the registration platform? And Suzanne mentioned this early on, and it's something we learned through COVID, is that a lot of times you might get a registration platform that they say they're accessible. And then you go in, and you start testing it.

[00:40:34.78] Or you purchase it, and you go live. And you start getting feedback on it, and it's not really accessible. So as Suzanne mentioned, we like to have that tested before we go live on it. So that's probably the first line of communication, is how easy is it for somebody to go in and register for your event? And do they do they find that process easy?

[00:40:56.87] In that whole process of communication, whether it's through email or through your registration, are you using the correct fonts? Are you using the correct color? Are you using alt text in some of your communications?

[00:41:10.76] And a big thing for me is a step by step, how to do things step by step. Because as I talked about earlier on the non-visual disabilities, sometimes, that process may seem easy for somebody, but it may not be as easy for somebody else. And those step-by-step instructions on how to exactly get into the registration platform and to use it is really important.

[00:41:40.29] So those are some things that I can think of. And then also asking for accommodations, like Suzanne had mentioned, in your registration. So if I was going into a registration for an event, and they asked me specific questions that would help me engage and get the most out of the conference, then I'm more likely to come to your conference, or I'm more likely to come to your event.

[00:42:04.81] So asking those accommodations so not only I feel welcomed, but also the event planner knows who's coming to the event and can equally prepare to make sure that everybody is engaged and feels like they're going to have the same experience going through the event. So that's where I would start, is communication and the registration piece.

[00:42:27.34] And as I speak through it, the piece about-- I go back to the non-visual a lot because I've experienced that. And it's hard sometimes when you may look like you don't have a disability, but then you need certain requirements or certain help to get through a process. And if somebody doesn't recognize that through some of your planning, then they're more likely not to go or not to enjoy the conference.

[00:42:58.28] SUZANNE BAUGH: Could I add to that, too, Col? One thing that I think is really important-- you can do this in your registration process, but then also in the communication leading up to the event-- provide tools for the attendees. You can drip this out as you get closer to your program.

[00:43:19.13] But provide tools or information so that they know what to expect when they do get on site. For instance, we may work with our hotel facility or whatever facility we're at to provide us with step-by-step instructions for how an individual may be arriving at the property, where they go to check in for their sleeping room, where they go from their sleeping room to the event space to register there.

[00:43:50.72] Sometimes, depending on the property, it can be like 10 pages long, which I know is a lot. But for those people who need that extra time to really internalize how to navigate the space, it can be very helpful. Also, just explaining to the attendees what is going to be available,

what is planned for, accommodation wise, when they get on site, so they know what to anticipate.

[00:44:19.40] Hey, we're going to have ASL and CART in all of our breakouts and in all of our general sessions. You'll be able to view these events later from the streaming platform if you so choose. We'll have meals in this space. This type of meal will occur, so that people, I think, can anticipate what they need to be prepared for. And for some of our attendees, that's really extra important.

[00:44:50.69] CASEY PEARSON: Those are great points. And Communication is just so important for your points about how to navigate the property and what to expect. And for people who may have anxiety, it helps them, too, to know what to expect and what they're coming into. So it really does benefit of everyone in some way, shape, or form. I don't necessarily believe in overcommunicating.

[00:45:18.20] SUZANNE BAUGH: Sure. It's too much.

[00:45:20.21] [LAUGHTER]

[00:45:21.08] CASEY PEARSON: There's not too much. But it's so helpful and to have all those resources and that information available on the event site or wherever it may be. It's great.

[00:45:31.07] COLLEEN WOGAN: If you just simply put a know-to-go sheet before so people that have anxiety or have that need to plan so they feel like they're comfortable in the space, that they can go ahead and read that sheet and get themselves prepared and feel more inclusive in your event. And so It just seems right to me.

[00:45:52.85] CASEY PEARSON: And events are so impactful for an organization's brand. You kind of mentioned it a bit earlier, Colleen. But if somebody attended an event and had a bad experience or couldn't experience it at all because it was inaccessible, they might not come back. They might never come back and never experience or engage with your brand or your organization again, so there's real risk with not creating accessible events.

[00:46:20.87] COLLEEN WOGAN: Exactly.

[00:46:22.94] CASEY PEARSON: Well, you all have provided some really amazing tips and best practices throughout this whole conversation. Thank you for sharing those. Is there any ongoing training or professional development that event professionals should be informed about or stay on top of, specifically when it comes to accessibility? Maybe, Suzanne, you can tackle that question first.

[00:46:49.88] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah. I don't know. I'm sure that there is some formal training that is available. I will say I kind of learned by being thrown into the fire and probably learned the hard way.

[00:47:09.42] When we first started working in the disability space, I knew a lot about events, but I didn't know as much about the accessibility integration into those events as some experts may have. But what I have never had a problem with is asking a lot of questions.

[00:47:33.08] And so those providers that we did work with, I would say, what do you need? What do you have? Here's what we're trying to accomplish. What do you suggest? Doing this every single day is going to be the best approach.

[00:47:54.10] And I think it's really important for planners to be vulnerable to the fact and realize they don't know everything. And I have learned so much from our captioning partners and our ASL partners and the folks that facilitate NaviLens and Aira-- just what they can offer and how that can impact our attendees.

[00:48:27.22] So I learn something every year. And I did see somebody make a comment earlier about providing materials for planning purposes for our captioners and our ASL interpreters. And that was something that thankfully we folded into our prep process right away.

[00:48:51.84] But that was because we asked those providers that were working with us, what do you need? How can we make you more successful? And I think being willing and able to accept those suggestions and the tools that they offer is really important and helpful.

[00:49:11.78] So I'm a big proponent of, learn as much as you can, and you're always going to learn. Don't ever think you know everything that there is to know about a solution.

[00:49:21.03] CASEY PEARSON: That's great. That's super important and valuable to hear. Colleen, what strategies can event organizers employ to measure the effectiveness of their accessibility initiatives at events or identify areas for improvement for future years?

[00:49:41.02] COLLEEN WOGAN: So like any event, you'll send out a survey. Ask questions. I would encourage you that, if you're going to do this, that you send out specific questions if you want to know how to improve your event. Ask those accommodation questions.

[00:49:59.04] And not only ask them, but when they come back, take a look at them, and really take them to heart and see. Like Suzanne said, we don't know everything, but our job is to really try to learn and try to improve and try to accommodate as best we can.

[00:50:18.36] And every year, we'll get a survey back from all of our events, and it's just trying to apply that. Now, there are going to be things that you can do, and there's going to be things that you can't do. So you're going to have to decipher through those what's important.

[00:50:32.79] But taking this question and going back to your question about registration and asking for accommodations, that question is so important. Because if you're on site, and you're getting feedback about something, that's really not the place you really want to get feedback about something. For example, if somebody needed an accommodation, and you didn't have it-- for an example, a ramp on a stage-- those are things that are really hard to react to on site.

[00:51:02.27] And another thing I encourage people is to really-- I guess for lack of better terms-- have hard skin, because it's really hard for us to hear the things we haven't done right. But like Suzanne said, it's an educational piece. And we started back 10 years ago just in this journey and learning it. And every year, we come out with, OK, next year, we're going to do this a little bit differently. And next year, we're going to do that.

[00:51:25.44] But the way you find these things out are by asking the question and asking the detailed questions about accommodations and how the attendee felt engaged in it. Did they properly engage in your event? And that's the best feedback you can get.

[00:51:40.13] CASEY PEARSON: I love that, and I think we are all similar in the sense that we put so much of ourselves into our events, and we truly want everybody to have wonderful experiences. So you are a little vulnerable when you're looking through the feedback. And you're like, OK. Well, now we know what we can do better next year and understanding that.

[00:52:05.09] COLLEEN WOGAN: Real quick. The thing that gets me the most is that on site, if I get a question or ask if they can help with this, is when it's a non-visual disability, and I haven't thought about it. Because those are really hard to identify and the needs that they have.

[00:52:27.70] And so the only way you're going to find out is if you ask the questions and try to service those needs and try to help whomever is coming to your event feel comfortable coming to your event. And so those are the ones that really catch me. Because I'm like, gosh. I wish I would have thought of that. Next time, I'm really going to help that and think about that.

[00:52:47.73] CASEY PEARSON: Right. And that feedback loop is just so important. We had a really good attendee question come in asking, how do you navigate conflicting access needs, or has there ever been conflicting access need arise from an event?

[00:53:03.40] SUZANNE BAUGH: Can you go a little deeper into what kind of conflicting access need might we be considering?

[00:53:12.76] CASEY PEARSON: Maybe this attendee can provide more feedback and clarification on their question. In the meantime, for the sake of being vulnerable, have there been any specific instances where unexpected accessibility challenges arose during the event planning or the event itself? And how did you navigate those and remedy those?

[00:53:36.82] SUZANNE BAUGH: Yeah. I can think of a number of them off the top of my head. Going back to the non-visual disabilities that Colleen was talking about a minute ago, some people can't-- motion, continuous motion can be problematic for some people.

[00:53:59.98] And we found this out. Because if you are in the general session, and we have this beautiful set up, this beautiful production, and we've got big screen, and we've got all these graphics. And we have motion on the screen, and some people are like, I can't handle it. It's too much. Can you stop the motion?

[00:54:30.25] And it's like, OK. Yeah. Production person stopped the motion. And so it just becomes a static piece. But that was like, yeah. We should have thought about that. But we learned that and now implement that when we're in projects, and not just with our disability clients, but also with some of our other clients.

[00:54:54.61] We have a client who wanted to have-- they wanted the fancy motion and all this kind of stuff. And some people were like, hey. It's too much. And I went to the client and said, we need to stop. And they were like, OK, absolutely stop, and were very receptive to that.

[00:55:10.00] There's another instance where I remember we were on a property, and there was a very long pathway that was leading up to the event space or in between the event spaces. And it was ADA compliant, but it was long. And the ramp was carpeted, which can be very difficult for manual wheelchair users.

[00:55:32.14] And so someone, I think, in a manual wheelchair said, this is really tough. And so we got with our client, and they were like, OK. Let's get with the volunteer team. And we put a couple of volunteers at the bottom of that ramp.

[00:55:50.04] And if somebody looked like they were struggling, ask them if they needed assistance. And if they did, help them get up that ramp. But that was a process of an attendee talking to us and us working with the client and the volunteer team to make sure that we could help accommodate those needs.

[00:56:08.82] And then another one that comes to mind is some of our attendees need ASL services. And while we may have them in sessions and we may have them at in the main sessions and the breakout sessions, there's still a communication barrier that occurs at hotel registration desk, at the event registration desk, or there can be a barrier.

[00:56:38.76] And so our client worked with one of their partners, and we were able to facilitate on-demand ASL services at those locations. So that was so helpful for our attendees and for the staff, quite honestly, because it just eliminated that communication barrier, which I think everybody was so excited about. And it was a great addition.

[00:57:02.84] CASEY PEARSON: Those are great examples. We're almost out of time, but I have one attendee question that came in that I think maybe we can really quickly address. Michelle added, I work as an event coordinator for the Carroll Center for the Blind. And although their own events are accessible, they sometimes struggle when they attend third-party events. How would you recommend advocating for the specific accommodations you might need for your group? And I think this could be a really good takeaway for everybody to come away with.

[00:57:37.53] SUZANNE BAUGH: I go back to-- one of the things I mentioned earlier is, as an attendee, letting the company that's hosting the event or the event team know what you need. If they're not asking on the front end, and you get there, and it's not working for you, you're not able to fully participate, how can they improve that for you at their next event? And that is how a

lot of our clients have come to grow in understanding the need for certain accommodations at their events and have started integrating that on a regular basis.

[00:58:21.54] And so I think it's us speaking to it from a planner side and speaking to it from an attendee side going in and making sure that those that are putting on the events know what we need. If they're not asking it, still let them know.

[00:58:37.83] CASEY PEARSON: I love that. That's awesome. Well, we're at time today. Thank you so much, Suzanne and Colleen, for chatting with me and sharing all these great insights. And thank you, everyone, for joining and providing great tips in the chat and engaging with us. And I hope you enjoyed today's session. And thanks again, everyone. Thank you so much, Suzanne and Colleen. I really appreciate your time.

[00:59:02.41] COLLEEN WOGAN: Thank you.

[00:59:03.62] SUZANNE BAUGH: Thank you, everybody.