

Convene Podcast Transcript

Season 3 Episode 3 with Xernona Martin, Vice President, Events & Experiences

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

[00:02] **Xernona Martin:** I think the biggest piece about working with the Clintons and other dignitaries or political figures is just ensuring that you understand what their requirements are.

[00:13] **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. In this episode, I speak with Xernona Martin, who among her many responsibilities, manage the security operations on site, a task of heightened importance as we hosted the Clintons. As our keynote speakers, she unveils insights on preparing for high profile guests, ensuring both their safety and a seamless experience for all attendees. Enjoy the episode. Hi Xernona, and welcome to the convening podcast. It's a pleasure to have you a part of season three dedicated to Convening Leaders and PCMA in general. Can you briefly introduce yourself to our listeners and share a bit more about your background as well as your role at PCMA?

[01:18] **Xernona Martin:** Absolutely. Thank you Magdalina, for having me. So I am the Vice President, Events & Experiences with PCMA, I've actually been here for a little less than a year, but it has been complete joy as far as my background is concerned, I've been in events and experiences for about 17 years, mostly on the corporate side, covering everything you can possibly imagine. I think the only thing that I have not planned in my career is a music festival, which I actually look forward to. But as far as my role at PCMA, I am responsible for leading the team that is responsible for planning our flagship events such as Convening Leaders, edUcon and some of our other events as well this year that are mainly focused on our event organizers.

[02:01] **Magdalina Atanassova:** When it comes to convenient leaders, what were your a bit about your responsibilities there?

[02:07] **Xernona Martin:** Absolutely convenient leaders. My main responsibilities were helping to produce the main stage. So working on everything from the creative aspect to the programming to working with our keynote speakers as well, especially with the Clintons. And then I also had a separate responsibility for building out the experience for the district, which is our marketplace.

[02:27] **Magdalina Atanassova:** One of the highlights at convenient leaders was the main stage that you mentioned with the Clintons, but that required a lot of tightened security while we were on site. So can you walk us through the process of working with local law enforcement, Clinton security detail, and other entities prior to Convening Leaders?

[02:46] **Xernona Martin:** I think the biggest piece about working with the Clintons and other dignitaries or political figures is just ensuring that you understand what their requirements are. So from the very beginning, when we were notified that the Clintons did accept our offer. We decided to make sure that we understood from their perspective what their requirements were, if they came along in their contracts and writers and being incredibly thorough, reading line by line, ensuring that we captured everything that we needed to execute on our behalf as far as working with their security detail. And again, you will find this, along with some political figures, especially former presidents and so forth, I would say there's about three or four layers. Right? So you have your advance team. They're not necessarily security, but the advance team does help you prepare for their arrival, allowing you to understand exactly what's needed, what the requirements are, and so forth. Then you have secret service, which will also work with them. That's their detailed security, ensuring that everything is safe and secure, not only inside the venue, but outside the venue. Secret Service is also responsible for transporting them from one place to another and ensuring that they arrive on time as well. Then you have your local security, so you have your local police departments that you want to engage to not only allow them to know that you have a former president and secretary of the United States coming in, but also to ensure that they are aware so that they can help clear any paths, if it's with city traffic or just providing additional support to secret service. And I would say the last piece, of course, is implementing private security on site, if that is necessary. So working very closely with your venue head of security and ensuring that they have everything they need. So those are the four layers that essentially we went through. Right. Just making sure we've understood those requirements and working through each area or each contact to make sure that we have.

[04:38] **Magdalina Atanassova:** What we needed was quite a handful. And that's why you had day one at community leaders used as a test of the flow of people into the main stage and entering with all

these added security measures, because there were more than 4000 people on site. So can you explain for those that were not in attendance, what that kind of looked like? And what did you learn on that day, and what changes did you make for the following day when the Clintons were on site?

[05:10] **Xernona Martin:** Of course, behind the scenes, we're working with their security teams to ensure that we have everything from their green rooms ready to everything for, you know, from stage furniture to the staff that we have on site, ensuring that they have what they need backstage. Right. But front of the house is interesting because we wanted to be sure that we were implementing something new for Convening Leaders, which was our just, like, bag and security check. So just to be sure that we prioritize the safety of our participants as well as the Clintons. We did hire a private security company that then came in, brought out back check. We made sure that we essentially set up stanchions and so forth to support those 4000 people coming in, flowing in and so forth through the back check. And we also had some of those Mac readers, right. And those are essentially what people would assume as metal detectors. So just making sure that happens, I think what else? Some things that we learned along the way that were incredibly helpful is that we did a test run the day before. We knew that we had a group of folks. We knew our participants, we knew we had a very large group that was not used to entering in that way or entering through, essentially Sanchez. They just kind of walked through the door. You know, they grabbed some coffee, walked through the door 15 minutes prior. So a few things we did to prepare was that we wanted to be sure that we communicated very effectively through our event app, through any sort of signage, any sort of pre event communications, that doors would open essentially an hour and a half beforehand. We work with a private security detail to get that timing down right, to understand how soon we needed to open the doors, to make sure that we had a start time at 09:00 a.m. The last thing you want to do is start late when you have a political figure or dignitary coming in that has dedicated their time to do that. But it was interesting, on our test run Monday, sorry if I'm skipping around a bit, on our test run Monday, we realized that our badge scanning just would not work with trying to get 4000 people through the door in an hour and a half, believe it or not. And really the bulk of those folks happening coming in towards the last like 20 or 30 minutes. So we decided on that Monday to pull those badge scanners and to make sure we still maintain the flow of traffic, of pedestrian traffic throughout the. With the stanchions, with the back check and so forth. We made sure that all the security, we added a little bit of extra staff. We worked with our internal staff to ensure that they were helping to greet people, to make it a positive experience so that people understood the flow. We also implemented a separate entrance for our participants that had special accommodation. So if they were coming in with a wheelchair or had, you know, needs around hearing impairment or whatever that looked like, we wanted to be sure. We prioritized them. And as people walked in, we had certain areas of the floor color coded so they could follow a red. If they were special accommodations, they would follow green if they had reserved seating. They would follow blue if it was general seating. So there was actually a lot of planning that went into it to help us create a positive experience, but also a very clear flow to get all of those people through the door within the last, like 30 or 45 minutes. So those are the things that we implemented on the front of house, back of house. Like I said, we were just working with their secret service. We essentially did what they requested. We made sure we had what we needed. We had some additional private security in the back as well of the house as well. But that was our main coordination, which is making sure, again, the focus was not only on the Clintons, but the focus was on making sure our participants had a very positive experience during that time.

[08:39] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Were you personally happy with how it turned out?

[08:42] **Xernona Martin:** I was. I was proud of us. Monday, it was interesting, you know, Monday we saw the flow. We saw that the batch scanners weren't working, but I was proud of us for being incredibly flexible for doing what we needed to do, for prioritizing our participant experience and as well as the Clintons and coming together just as the PCMA team, to be able to welcome and guide people into where they needed to be. So I think from that perspective, from a theory, right, that you feel like work to true implementation, we did a pretty good job with that as well. We also implemented around backchats that a certain size limit were only allowed within that space, which I think does reduce the time that people had to do back checks and the time that people had to go through the metal detectors. So for the most part, yes. To implement something new for 4000 people that has not been done in previous years, especially when you have guests that have been coming for like ten years over. Right. I think we did a pretty good job.

[09:43] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I agree with you. I saw it in person. So I totally agree with you. It was quite the experience. And you already mentioned all the communications that you did prior in all sorts of ways possible to warn people about the security measures. And I'm sure a lot of people were aware, especially those coming from North America and even some of us. But would you change something or do you think communications could be improved next time around?

[10:13] **Xernona Martin:** I think for the communications part, we did a pretty good job. Another piece that I would have liked us to do is just do a little bit more of added staff for our back check. So we were requiring people, of course, to either check their bags or bring a smaller bag. And so I think we did not expect the amount of people to check their bags as they did so I think that's the piece, that's the piece that sticks out to me so that prepare better next time. But for the most part, I think things essentially, from a communication standpoint, went pretty well. I think they went so well that everybody decided to check their bags because we were recommending back shack, right. I think it went so well that people actually listen and decided to check their bags. And then we realized that, you know, it worked, but we weren't as prepared for the amount of people that were coming. But definitely everyone was patient and so great and understood that. We were very thankful for that. But we, I do think that those communications pre event, during the event, you know, push through the app, the signage, and everything that we did helped with just setting, you know, expectations for our participants.

[11:14] **Magdalina Atanassova:** And what about staff? What measures did you implement for the staff at PCMA and also partners that they had to comply with?

[11:22] **Xernona Martin:** So for PCMA, it was all hands on deck. So the PCMA staff, I think we had about 56 people come in. And when I say everybody participated from our c level executives, you know, onto some of our associates and coordinators, they were absolutely fantastic, even our volunteers. So we wanted it to be all hands on deck for two reasons. One, we wanted to be sure that we had our plan very organized and enough staff to accommodate through, like we said, the color coded seating through the lights. We had enough ushers, we had enough people outside that were helping and assisting our private security with just the flow of people. So we wanted to be sure we were well staffed in that area. But we also wanted to show how PCMA is one team. So it was important for us to also show our excitement about the Clintons coming, our excitement with C-level executives, you know, standing at the front door and greeting people as they came through the front door of the main stage and so forth. So I think that was very important as well. And I think it went over well. I mean, our team showed up, they showed out, everybody did what they were supposed to do. Even when back check came in, we had some of our team members jump in to help and assist with our back check right away. So I think it really, from our staff, from our internal staff, I'm very proud of us and just, it was a great experience, especially as just a new executive here for less than a year to see that happen.

[12:42] **Magdalina Atanassova:** But also, not all stuff was allowed backstage, especially during day two because of the added measures. So how did you coordinate that, or which people did you allow backstage, and what were the procedures they had to go through?

[12:57] **Xernona Martin:** So backstage of course, we wanted to be sure that we were being very cognizant and mindful of the requirements from the security teams, from both their advanced teams to secret service and so forth for those recommendations. So part of it is absolutely limiting people that have access backstage. I'll talk about staff first, and I'll just talk about, like, the overall program, which is interesting. So for staff, we just made it very critical and articulated it very clear that whoever needed to be there were the only people that could be there. Right. So we implemented special badges that were color coded as well that allowed them that access to backstage during that day. Not only was it just our internal staff, but it was also our convention center staff. So if we had, you know, the case staff coming to refresh food and beverage, if we had maintenance staff coming to clean, if we had our production staff as well. Right. Our production staff was really large. So we wanted to be sure that everyone backstage went through that same process. They actually entered through backstage. They went through a wand process just to make sure the metal detectors, we made sure that they had those color coded badges and that we made sure that everyone who had those color coded badges and had access were absolutely necessary to the program that day so that we didn't have kind of different people wandering in and out. Right. So that helped us to prioritize the safety of both our participants and the Clintons. In addition to that, I will say that we also, you know, created a list. We did have a meet and greet of the Clintons at the very end of the event. That list was very, you know, color coded, had to go through security and those measurements as well. What was also interesting that we had to balance was that we had acts on stage prior to the Clintons coming. So we wanted to be sure that those acts got on stage. They were able to, you know, make their introductions, go through the videos, make through, you know, kind of go through their speaking as well. And then as soon as they exited, we did have to escort them from backstage right into the general session again. So it was interesting to balance all of those things and making sure that you had a very strict list, additional security behind stage. Everybody understood what they were supposed to do. And again, those communications come in. Right. You want to communicate to your internal staff, the convention center, and also our participants that were part of the meet and greet

about, we would come get them from mainstage seating. Right. And escort them backstage, and they had to line up to take photos. And this is where, like, everything essentially would happen. So that's how that's essentially how it works. I will say this part I didn't say. These two things that I think were, are very interesting tidbits this time was that we had to build a specific green room in the back because we were using an exhibit hall, and we built everything from the ground up. So typically, you may, you know, reserve a room or theater style space that has a green room already built in. That did not happen. So we had to build a separate green room for Clintons, and we also had to build a separate vip meet and greet space for them as well. So if you even looked backstage, you would see this huge production staff, but you would see these kind of private spaces that were built from the ground up, too.

[16:00] **Magdalina Atanassova:** That's very interesting. And I have a question. There was this random conversation of why were the Clintons having a handheld mics? And not what I would call.

[16:13] **Xernona Martin:** Yeah, it's completely based on their preference. So that's what they preferred, and that's what we accommodate.

[16:20] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Because there was a suspicion that it's a security ask, so that you would not touch, essentially, you know, because you have to put the mic and the wire of the mic. So that was the system suspicion. Was that a security thing or a preference thing?

[16:37] **Xernona Martin:** Yeah, it was a preference. So I will say this right, that the handheld mics were in their rider. That's the preference that their events team told us that they wanted. If it's a security thing, we are unaware of that. That's. We don't know that. Right. We just think it was a preference that they had handheld bikes. To be honest, I worked with other political figures and dignitaries that had some of the same security requirements, and they had lavaliers. So I think it's just a preference.

[17:00] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Fair enough. It was worth the ask.

[17:03] **Xernona Martin:** Yeah.

[17:04] **Magdalina Atanassova:** So I hope that the people I had the conversation with are listening, can get their answer. Now.

[17:12] **Xernona Martin:** That's an interesting observation. Yeah.

[17:16] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Prior to this recording, we were talking with you that this is now the first time you're working with the Clintons. Correct. And were the security measures different this time around from what you had experienced before?

[17:29] **Xernona Martin:** Yes, I had, through a previous role, worked with the Clintons before. Neither one were actually in office during that time. So it was. It was sort of similar, but I would say that it was closer to when Secretary Clinton had just left her role with the White House. The only difference, I would say that happened, and it could, again, be just the timing of it all, was that I would say our secret Service, at that point, we wanted to be sure it brought in dogs and things like that prior, the day prior. So that actually did not happen for this Convening Leaders, even though we expected it. So they did bring it in a canine unit just to make sure, you know, the space to store the space for any kind of dangers or threats and things like that. So we did have to open the doors for our secret Service just a little bit earlier in our local police and things like that to do like a full sweep of the room prior to allowing anyone in.

[18:19] **Magdalina Atanassova:** That's interesting. So what were your personal learnings from this whole experience? And you can expand, you know, beyond the security part because convening others was huge.

[18:31] **Xernona Martin:** Yeah, I would think from just preparing for the Clintons and safety and security measures around that the biggest piece is being prepared and being flexible. So we were actually able to contract them a few months out of Convening Leaders. We, of course, have put in a request early, and then we were told a little bit later. So I would always, always recommend two things. If you are considering having someone, guests of their caliber, essentially join your main stage or as a keynote, the first thing is just be prepared to be flexible and understanding. Be ready to read the contracts, their writers, and all of their requirements, and being flexible in what you need to do around for your program to accommodate those. So that's the biggest. That's one piece, because those details that are listed in the contract and the writers are so incredibly important and the flow of the day, how things will work, how you set your stage, what requirements are there, that's going to be one of the major leads for just the overall participation experience and how to prepare for them. I would say the second piece is budget. So make sure that you're budgeting additional dollars to provide that private security if you have to build out any additional, you know, spaces and things like that to accommodate, you know, your. Your dignitary or political figure. So I would say those are the two biggest things. And I would say the third thing is this, that participant experience, understanding that you are going to have an overwhelming response, more than likely to that portion of your

program, you absolutely have to have it down and say, what would I like to see? What clarity do I need as a participant to be able to make this the best experience for me as possible? So understanding from that participant experience, even if I'm a fan and I arrive 30 minutes early before the doors open, what does that look like? Am I being greeted by a smiling face? Am I being greeted by pastries and coffee and those kinds of things that will keep me you know, happy and excited and thrilled to go see that. And then when I walk through these lines, is it clear what I'm supposed to do? Have I been communicated? Am I aware of all of the requirements that I need to be? Do I know where the restrooms are? Do I have access to those things? So I think those top three things of just reading and understanding the contracts, the writers, and the requirements, really working closely with your budget and just creating those buffers to be able to accommodate those requirements as well, and then walking through and prioritizing that participant experience and their safety is going to be. Those are the major learnings, I would think, that come from this experience, and that will help make it successful.

[21:12] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Anything you do differently, if you had the chance.

[21:16] **Xernona Martin:** I think the biggest thing is just the back check, right? We communicate, and we did that great. I just wanted to be sure we had. I mean, you know, realistically, I'm still a planner at heart, right. You know, we would add more people to the back check, even though, like I said, our internal staff completely jumped right in and even got compliments for doing that from. Are very gracious participants. So I think that's the biggest piece. I would have budgeted more. I didn't. Right. I didn't expect. Even though I had worked with them, I didn't expect to have to build things from the ground up that kind of hit our budget there. So that's the piece that I would have just created a bit more of a buffer for us to accommodate. You know, everything went absolutely fantastic, but it's just one of those things that I pride myself on. And being able to have a buffer, I would create a little bit of a larger buffer just to make sure that we could accommodate and provide, you know, so we didn't have to eat it on the back end. I guess you could say.

[22:11] **Magdalina Atanassova:** I get it, and that's. I think you're being an event planner and a perfectionist.

[22:18] **Xernona Martin:** Yes, exactly.

[22:21] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Was there anything we didn't address and we should mention before we wrap up?

[22:26] **Xernona Martin:** I think, no, I just. I think that for those who are planning to prepare to have guests similar to the Clintons or guests that are incredibly well known and, you know, of that caliber, just, I would say the more knowledgeable you are about their needs, the more prepared you'll be. And the more you understand that they're also human beings, the more you'll be prepared. Right. Just making sure that you understand their experience as well is balancing that from the participant is going to provide you great success at your event.

[23:01] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Thank you so much for this conversation and sharing a bit more about how this huge piece of convenient leaders went. Thank you very much.

[23:11] **Xernona Martin:** Yeah, thank you.

[23:14] **Magdalina Atanassova:** Remember to subscribe to the *Convene* Podcast on your favorite listening platform to stay updated with our latest episodes. For further industry insights, head over to pcma.org/Convene. Until next time.