TRANSCRIPT: A100 Podcast: Empowering Accessibility in Associations

Colleen Gallagher: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Association 100 podcast. The A100 podcast is an extension of our Association 100 bimonthly newsletter that focuses on best practices, top trends, helpful ideas and smart strategies and tactics that work in the world of associations. The podcast will feature meaningful conversations with association professionals across the country taking a deeper dive into trending topics offering insights that both inform and inspire.

Welcome back to the A100 podcast. I'm Colleen Gallagher, and I'm joined by my co host, Meghan Henning. This is our first episode back in 2024, and we're so excited for the new year, although I'm still not used to saying 2024 yet, but I'll get there. I'm really thrilled to welcome our guest today, Rosemarie Rossetti.

And Rosemarie is a PhD and an accessibility consultant. And she's really focused on accommodating people with disabilities at meetings and events. Associations [00:01:00] often hire her to work as a speaker and consultant with their meeting professionals. And this is just such a timely topic. So thank you so much for joining us today, Rosemarie.

Rosemarie Rosetti: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for allowing me to share my expertise.

Colleen Gallagher: You're really strongly focused on this and do a lot of work with it, and it's something that's very personal to you. Can you tell us a little bit about your history and how you got involved in this kind of work?

Rosemarie Rosetti: As an introduction, people need to understand that I'm in a manual wheelchair.

I have a spinal cord injury as a result of an accident that happened in June of 1998. While riding my bicycle, suddenly a 7, 000 pound tree fell on top of me, leaving me paralyzed from the waist down. Now, at the time I had a business, Rossetti Enterprises just celebrated its 27th year. However, it was not a business focused on disability inclusion.

That happened as a result of the injury. I transitioned the [00:02:00] business then many different times throughout its 27 year history. And as a result, coming to the idea of, as I was speaking around the country, I was doing motivational speaking. And I was being invited to many stages that were not being accommodating to me.

I was going to many hotels that were not suitable for accessibility. And so it appeared to me in 2019 that the business needed to take another transition. And that transition was to work with meeting professionals to tell them what to do specifically when they had speakers with disabilities. But then I expanded it to the entire audience to say, not only do you need to accommodate the speaker, but every one of your members that is coming that needs some accommodation due to their disability.

So that started in 2019 and has really gone. Very well speaking [00:03:00] about it at MPI Chapters and Society of Government Meeting Professionals and the Associations of Executives in the association market. And then someone asked me, Could I do a consulting job for an association? And that was the first time anyone had asked me to do a site visit and to work with the whole planning team so that they had everything provisioned as they're planning their national meeting.

And so with that, the business expanded into more consulting with the associations who wanted me there to guide them all along the

way to look at their website, to look at the registration, to look at all the contracts, all the communication that they were sending out to their members and to find the vendors that were needed for the accommodations.

Meghan Henning: That's amazing. What are some of the key accessibility factors that associations [00:04:00] should be considering?

Rosemarie Rosetti: It's a matter of looking at how you're announcing the meeting to begin with, to let people know that you are an organization that is going to accommodate people. So putting that out front and center as you're announcing your meeting or your event.

And then as you're putting the registration material out there to make sure you've got the right questions and information that you're gathering from people who are registering, you've got to know who's coming, you've got to know what they need, and they need to know what you're willing to provide. Not all the time will a registrant.

tell you that they have hard of hearing, but yet when they go to the conference and realize you had a sign language interpreter, they're happy. So sometimes you can't predict every single need that's going to be there, but if you've made the provision in advance, then everybody's happy [00:05:00] because you've thought of it first.

Meghan Henning: And for an association that's just thinking about this, maybe for the first time, where would you advise that they start?

Rosemarie Rosetti: They start by hiring someone like me as an accessibility consultant. That would be my preference is to go with somebody as a trusted partner, as a guide. To say, let me explain how I work with you and let me see what you have been doing in the past.

Share with me the documents. Share with me how you registered people. Share with me where you have gone in the past for a venue. And any evaluations that you had from the last conference.

Colleen Gallagher: Yeah, that's so interesting. It's early January while we're recording this, but you have already been on the road for an event.

So tell us how that went, what your role was and what were the kind of big learnings from that?

Rosemarie Rosetti: I had a major association. They had their annual meeting in November in Seattle. I had worked with them from February until [00:06:00] November, and it was a wonderful experience. They did a great job. It was the Association of the American Medical Colleges, so they had 4,600 people working with the Seattle convention team.

That convention center, the new part is only a year old, so it's a wonderful venue to hold. A conference and the team that I worked with was just amazing. Anything I had suggested they stepped right up there, got the venues, got the budget approved. We went to the site in August to do a full site review.

They had 12 hotels they were working with for housing and three hotels they were working with for offsite venues. Because it's in Seattle and I use a wheelchair, I knew what Seattle was going to be like. So we needed to communicate to the people coming that if they couldn't walk very long distances and especially [00:07:00] if they were planning to be in their own scooter or manual wheelchair, they needed to have a provision.

So they actually rented scooters for anyone that needed it at no cost to the attendees. That's great. Oh wow. And the sideline of that is one of the meeting planners decided to use a scooter because she

had a mobility problem in terms of her ability to walk through the convention center and supervise the whole convention.

She said, Oh, my gosh, this made me so much more productive and fast by having this scooter. I will never have another convention where I don't have a scooter provided. So it helped the planning. Person also, not just the registrants.

Colleen Gallagher: Yeah, that's amazing. And I think it's so interesting how such a small act can make the conference so much easier and more inclusive for so many people that probably might not have been able to come or not able to experience the full [00:08:00] conference otherwise.

So true. So shifting gears a little bit. A lot of things are in person now, which is awesome and fun to be back together But there's was obviously a huge wave of virtual events with covid and some of those are hanging around So we're still seeing a lot of virtual opportunities especially, for cases where people can't always come together for certain associations.

So where do you start with a virtual event and how are associations able to make those more accessible and more inclusive?

Rosemarie Rosetti: There's two suggestions. Making sure there's captions that are available, and those are simple to add with many of the software applications for virtual meetings.

It's just a matter of applying the captions so that people could read them, letting the audience know how to access them, and then if the fonts can be changed, letting them know how to change the font size to make that more visible, and then asking in advance if anyone needs sign language interpreters or just announcing [00:09:00] we are going to have a sign language interpreter and that person should be pinned P.I. N. N. E. D. Pinned so that their face and their arms and their hands are visible during the interpretation. So those are two

recommendations. Sign language interpreter that's pinned and then the captioning feature. Yeah. Accessed and explained to anyone that wants to see that and the transcript can come later.

So people would like to see it. And keeping that available for anyone that says, the captions were just too fast. Can I have a transcript later?

Colleen Gallagher: You know what, Meghan and I are both communicators as our job function and at heart and, a lot of it is making sure people know about these things.

If it's going to be inclusive and you don't tell anyone it's happening, it's not going to really help them come or help them experience the conferences as best as everyone can.

Meghan Henning: You had mentioned that you were just in Seattle, and, I think that it sounds like it was [00:10:00] such a big success. Are you seeing associations place greater emphasis on accessibility at their events in effort to be more inclusive? And what would you say is Is it just, is it at the beginning stages that associations are now emphasizing on accessibility, or have a lot of them been doing it all along?

Rosemarie Rosetti: I don't have any data, Meghan, to support the answer to your question. All I could say is from personal observation, when I ask a MPI chapter if I can speak, Oftentimes, it is a very important topic and they do want me to speak at their chapter meetings. Also, the National has had me speak at the World Education Congress.

PCMA just had me at EDUCON in Montreal doing an accessibility tour live with wheelchairs for the audience to be in wheelchairs. They also had me at the convening leaders last January here in Columbus, doing an [00:11:00] accessibility tour of the convention center. So this from personal experience I'm having a great success introducing

myself to meeting professionals and organizations that would like me to speak at their chapters or at their national conventions.

And reaching out to major associations knowing that they have a conference to say, have you thought about, what are your plans? I'm not getting resistance.

Meghan Henning: That's great. That's good to hear.

Colleen Gallagher: Yeah, that is really good to hear. With that said though what challenges are associations facing in trying to be more accessible for their members and attendees?

Rosemarie Rosetti:

They have no budget. That's one thing. Where is it coming from? So the initiative has to come from the top of the CEO, the president of the association, the executive director, the board of directors, the board of trustees. It has to be an initiative from the top, and then it circulates back down [00:12:00] to the actual workforce, the meeting professional that carries that out.

So it needs to be embedded in that convention budget from the beginning so that they don't say, Oh, we'd love to do this. We'd love to have sign language interpreters, but it's going to be 5, 000 and we don't have 5, 000 in the budget. Then you can't have a sign language interpreter.

Colleen Gallagher: Are there any low hanging fruit that are easy to achieve objectives to get started for associations that might not have those budgets?

Rosemarie Rosetti:

If you don't have a budget to do anything, I don't know there's any low hanging fruit. It'd just be a matter of looking online at rosemariespeaks.com. I've got tons of videos, tons of articles, other

podcasts there's information I freely share, so learning from me not only by listening to this podcast, but go look at some of the videos I've done at the various convention center.

And all the [00:13:00] articles that I've written on this topic. So at least you could be aware. Now, can you get some of this done? You'll have to figure out where the money's coming from in terms of getting it done or just doing things differently as you're. Creating the registration material and creating the communication.

It doesn't cost any more to change the language or the communication that you're sending out. Yeah, 100%.

Colleen Gallagher: I love that you share that information freely and are so willing to provide information for Associations out there that are looking to take those next steps. What challenges are you seeing associations face on this front when they try to become more accessible for their events?

Rosemarie Rosetti:

Besides the RFPs that they send out to the venue, we have to put something in there. That you want accessibility built into that venue. And then picking the venue. You pick a venue like Seattle [00:14:00] Convention Center that's pretty new. You have a sense that it's going to be very accessible with low pile carpeting and great lighting and restrooms with the latest in accessibility features and powered doors in the restroom and powered doors to get in and good directional signage and braille.

So it's a new center. You would expect to have that versus an older venue. So be aware of when you're picking a site how new it is and what features they have included if they've updated the facility recently for accessibility.

Colleen Gallagher: Okay, that's helpful. So if we reconvene a year from now, have you back on the podcast, what would have to happen for you to say, wow, 2024 was a great year. Associations really jumped on this. What would that look like?

Rosemarie Rosetti: That would look like more associations. Reaching out to their members and more associations. If I were [00:15:00] speaking at those conventions, I'd have nothing negative to say. So as I speak, I'm a spy in the audience. I come in the night before I might go to a couple sessions.

I'll snoop around at the breakout. I'll go to the dinners, the networking sessions, and I'm hoping that. They've got low tables for me to have the networking opportunity that the networking area has different heights of chairs and armrests on chairs and the circulation pattern that all food is properly labeled so that we know what ingredients are in it and whether they're gluten free or vegan.

I have a lot that I look at as a participant. So I'd like to say the next time I'm at a convention, whether I'm speaking or not, even as an attendee, that I start taking pictures and document the good things that were done.

Colleen Gallagher: I love that. I'm going to be on the [00:16:00] lookout as I go to events this year. So I'll let you know what we see.

Meghan Henning: We conclude every podcast with a couple fun questions just to let our audience get to know you in this lightning round style. So where did you grow up?

Rosemarie Rosetti: I grew up and continue to live in Columbus, Ohio, where I am an ambassador for tourism here for the Experience Columbus team. So I'm an advocate of Columbus and have lived here my entire life, basically.

Meghan Henning: That's great. What's your Starbucks order?

Rosemarie Rosetti: When I go to Starbucks, it's usually at breakfast when I'm at a hotel, and it'll be for the breakfast sandwich and some hot tea.

Meghan Henning: Okay. And if you won the lottery tomorrow, would you still work?

Rosemarie Rosetti: If the lottery is large enough, I will not work, but I will be involved with figuring out what to do with it as a philanthropic either starting a foundation or sending it off to other [00:17:00] foundations.

So there'll be a lot to manage if it was a large amount.

Meghan Henning: Yes. What's the last show you binge watched?

Rosemarie Rosetti: I think it'd be the Waterfront Cities of the World. We're continuing to watch that every night, so it goes throughout Europe and Asia and everywhere, even in the U. S., and it's just a fascinating look.

I'm interested, yeah. Go to Tubi, Waterfront Cities of the World. It's just, we're hooked.

Colleen Gallagher: On my list.

Meghan Henning: Yeah, I'm gonna put that on my list, too. What is a food you cannot live without?

Rosemarie Rosetti: We can live without anything, basically. But one that I would miss the most if someone said no, you cannot eat this anymore.

It would be chocolate. And as we look at the five food groups, we have fruit. So chocolate belongs on strawberries. Absolutely. We have the grains. And if I make lentil chili, there can be chocolate in

that chili. [00:18:00] That's a nice enhancement. And if we have dairy, of course, there's going to be chocolate chunks in ice cream.

Yes. And then we look at our protein and we say Reese's pieces and Reese's cups. What better way?

Meghan Henning: I love it. What's your bucket list travel destination?

Rosemarie Rosetti: We're planning something right now. It'll either be a combo of Paris and London, or it may just be London by itself because of the Olympics and the high cost of going to Paris this year.

I also have a meeting with a potential client that's holding a major conference in Brussels. It could be that we just combine the Brussels experience. So I've got many different options. We're just waiting. Will business come to me and we mix business with pleasure, or do we start with pleasure and then start contacting people in that city saying, Hey, I'm already here.

[00:19:00] What can I do?

Meghan Henning: Yes. You have a big plan for 2024. Thank you for a great conversation. We loved having you on the A100 today.

Rosemarie Rosetti: Oh, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Colleen Gallagher: And that's a wrap on today's episode. Thanks for listening to The Association 100 podcast brought to you by the A100 publishing team, powered by OnWrd and UpWrd Marketing and Communications. You can subscribe to The Association 100 podcast on Spotify so you'll never miss out. Or listen via our website at theassociation100.com.

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