



channel mastery

162: Brian Stephenson, Snowbound Festival
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Kristin: Welcome back channel masters to another episode of the Channel Mastery podcast. I'm really, really excited to share Brian Stephenson with you today who is named director of the Snowbound Festival back in July of 2020 by SIA. Welcome to the show, Brian. It's so great to have you here.

Brian: Hey Kristin, thanks so much. It's a honor to be here. Really excited to talk to you.,

Kristin: You have had quite a, almost year! We're recording this in mid February, 2021. And I would love to have you give a little bit of your background and talk to us about the Genesis and the spirit behind the Snowbound festival. We have so much cool stuff to talk about here today and make it actionable for our audience. So why don't we start by having you give a little bit of your background?

Brian: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm definitely dating myself, but I grew up skateboarding in the late eighties and nineties, got into snowboarding and the early nineties. I was in college, got out of college and was lucky enough to land a job at Airwalk back in the late nineties. So kind of got my feet wet in the winter industry, working at Airwalk for a couple years and then moved over to Sobe beverages which was acquired by PepsiCo. And I worked on Sobe with the Burton relationship in the US open of snowboarding for many, many years almost 10 years and worked on did some work for Mountain Dew and Dew Tour and some of the sports marketing at Pepsi and then went and joined a company called re exhibitions, which is a kind of big trade show organization and trade shows, traditional trade shows world and helped build a new consumer division within Reed exhibitions called ReedPOP.

And we oversaw over 30 of the largest consumer events really in the world including Star Wars celebration with Disney and Lucasfilm. The Penny Arcade Pax! video game shows a New York Comic-Con and a variety of other pop culture conventions all over the world and complex-con as well with complex media. And I got to know some of the folks at SIA, Nick and Maria, who now oversee SIA whenever they were at Burton. And so we had a really friendly working relationship and they had come out and visited complex con and some of our other events and really liked what we were doing from a consumer marketing and a consumer engagement standpoint. And that's whenever we found out that they had acquired the BOE shows the Boston and Colorado ski and snowboard

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expos, and wanted to kind of reinvent and reimagine those. And we had a conversation and it seemed like an incredible opportunity. And that's where I came on board in the middle of 2020 to help drive this forward and to build this Snowbound brand.

Kristin: So, I mean, I have to kind of go here just because it's not only informative, but it's entertaining, I think. So you left this position basically in the height of COVID with so much uncertainty. Like no one could see anything resembling our horizon line at that time. We did know because I was working with the team pretty closely with, you know, some content things we were doing for the industry back then, but we did know that we weren't going to hold in person gatherings. That was for sure.

Tell us what excited you about this, because I mean, I just feel like it's important for people to always see, not that we're ever being opportunistic about people's challenges in the pandemic, but we cannot deny the fact that people have to think differently, have problem solving differently today. And there is a lot of opportunity for that when we can be nimble. And when we're ready to really put the consumer first. So tell us about, like, I feel like there's contrast you, must've seen a little bit of like a scary slope and then also just an amazing run, like tell us what that decision was like for you.

Brian: Yeah, it was really interesting because I was at ReedPOP for 11 years, you know, and then we had built some incredible brands and working on their celebration with Lucasfilm was always a dream of mine, but knowing everything that, the impact that COVID was happening and a lot of the events that I was working on it, like Star Wars celebration pushed to 2022.

So there was this window of time to where we had to think really differently about live events and everybody love this word of the year - to pivot - to virtual events and started thinking about how to do that. And, and there's still that piece, if you're thinking about the consumer and you still have to deliver value, even if you can't have the face-to-face live event, there's still an opportunity to build community and to deliver value and to engage people and have them, you know, still continue to, to want to consume content.

So, my thought process at the time was I always, while I loved working in the pop culture world and it was amazing and I still love it. I'm a huge Star Wars, Marvel comic book geek, like totally, but there was the opportunity to come back to the winter industry where I started my career in what I was so heavily focused on for so many years. And I still love that space so much and seeing the opportunity to build something that would be meaningful for audiences that would drive new participation that would hopefully create this celebration of the winter lifestyle that seemed to be lacking. The just didn't seem like there was that kind of cultural consumer focused cultural happening or event that, that people would rally around and book travel for to come to.

I could see many similarities between the rise of err and a lot of what's going on, you know, forcing people to just rethink how they live their lives and how they engage with the environment even. People are so excited to get outside. And, you know, we're seeing that with, you know sales across the board in the, so things are, you know, it just seemed like there was a ton of potential there.

And knowing that we wouldn't have the face to face events in 2020, obviously a challenge, but also an opportunity for us to launch Snowbound the time to, to really infuse it with meaning, build out a website that would deliver valuable original time for these people coming to the ski show. You know, now we want to be able to build a channel for them to engage the Snowbound brand all year long and then really utilize the time that we had to build out a completely new event concept that we'll be able to bring to life at the Snowbound Festivals in the end of 2021. So fingers crossed, you know, things, you know, glimmers of hope on the horizon. Everything will good to go this fall. I think all of that was factors to my thought process to join the team. And I've got a massive amount of respect for the folks at SIA and, and that entire team. So it was origin, but it was, it was the right decision and I couldn't be more excited about, about the opportunity moving forward.

Kristin: That's awesome. So I feel like there's so many things for us to touch on here. So first and foremost, what Bernie and the team built at BOE obviously was incredible and got us to this point. And I think the beautiful part that we have here is there's a proof of concept, even though what you're building is so different. And you have a whole new ecosystem in which to prove that concept and the community facet of it, and to expand on the actual, like notion of of in-person consumer event in SnowSports in these two cities. I also know a little of the inside baseball in terms of what the leadership of SIA was hoping to accomplish in terms of like, you know, bringing a consumer portal of sorts to its membership, which is super smart and then putting somebody with the pedigree and I think calculated risk taking like you're, you're okay with like trying new things and testing and learning and you're looking at this and such like the way a tech entrepreneur would approach a solution here.

And like having that come out of COVID I think is even more powerful. So as we're looking at this, I would love to have you talk about, you know, what you're trying to bring to life now, like, what is the event itself or the experience, if you will. We all know that consumers can't seem to get enough content today. So let's talk a little bit about your vision in terms of the new experience that you're making additive to these consumer shows.

Brian: Absolutely. It's about honoring the past, but showcasing the future. It may be like you know, a tagline buzzword, but that's absolutely what we want to do. You know it's events, consumer events are not easy animals to they're they're not rocket science, but they're not easy things to bring to life because you're creating an entire ecosystem,

almost a city you know, in and of itself, like whatever I worked on New York Comic con, we would welcome over four days, 250,000 people, individuals through that experience.

And it's just one of those things where it takes a lot and you have to be wired a certain way to really want to do this. And I think looking at what the team were able to create over such a long period of time to these shows were around, you know, for 20 or 30 years and, and very established and very community focused for families and people that would want to come and celebrate.

I think what the shows were previously and what they're going to be going forward as Snowbound and the Snowbound festivals are vastly different in a lot of ways, there's going to be some commonalities in that they'll still be in a traditional trade show environment. But outside of that, I think what we wanna do is really surprise and engage people in new and different ways.

And to keep that conversation going all year long through the online portal, snowboundfest.com to where we'll be telling the stories of what you can experience at the festivals, but everything that you love about all of the content you're consuming through the website and through other channels in, in the winter lifestyle will come to life in person at these events. And, you know, it's a rare opportunity to be able to kind of take the snow globe and shake it up and say, okay, here's what this is gonna look like now, which is very different.

It's an elevated premium experience. Yes. There's still going to be those opportunities commerce for you to purchase skis, boots, snowboards, outerwear. Yes, that will still be a core component of the show, but there's so much more that hasn't been explored from, you know, my past working on Comiccon, like it begins in that in some ways with content and you're able to provide access to something that you get anywhere else from a consumer standpoint.

And there's a triangle of success that we have, and you have to have all three points of the pyramid to be able to run a successful event that will scale and grow. One is you have to have an industry that's willing to support it by being there having booths, bringing their content athletes things like that to the show, you have to have an engaged fan base that that is hungry for an experience to join community and to, to be there in person and to to celebrate what they love most about winter lifestyle, outside, skiing, snowboarding, everything else that, that we all know and love.

And then third is you have to be able to provide access to something they won't get anywhere else. So looking into things like exclusive products or first access to products that you can only get at the Snowbound festivals different shareable moments, immersive type of experiences, that to all your social channels immediately how are we going to use technology to provide a premium, clear, understandable event approach

that it's easy to get into the event and explore the event. And then, you know, beyond that, it's how do you take, you know, our product is a four day or three or four day experience that happens once a year, that's our product. So we have to get it right, because we've only got two shots at it currently. And we need to deliver something that's of value to the consumers, but also to all the exhibitors into the industry and for the consumers, it's their party.

We just want to build something that they're excited about, that they're passionate about, and that they're willing to spend their hard, her hard-earned money on a ticket to come to. So part of that is going to be making them feel something from the second they get there. So thinking about the entire event experience, and I'll give you a little snapshot of the concept is whenever you arrive, there's a registration check-in area. This is pretty standard. Will call, you know, pick up your tickets. If, if you don't have them already this is going to be our lodge. So theme, think of a lodge themed area to where you're coming in, you don't want to stand there in a long line. Everything will be very seamless. Everything will be done ahead of time. We're going to offer multi-day tickets for the first time.

We want to encourage people to come book a hotel room, spend the entire weekend with us, because there's going to be different forms of content that you'll be able to experience each day, whether that's a movie premiere on Friday night and a concert on Saturday night, there will be something that you'll want to come back and experience each day of the event versus, just coming, getting your single day ticket, coming in, purchasing some stuff, hanging out with your friends, maybe a couple of beers, and then you're on your way.

We want to give you a reason to come back and celebrate with us all weekend long. And the tagline is winter starts here. So this is the official kickoff of winter. So whenever you get to the event itself, the festival, so about festival, you're going to encounter the lodge first, and then there's kind of a, an entryway that will be our kind of shock and awe type of brand immersion moment to where you transition from the lodge into the world of Snowbound. So that's going to be a profound experience, I think for people that will be very surprising and I'm kind of giving you a peek behind the curtain right now, but I think it illustrates some of the story and how this is going to be a different type of experience. And then once you enter into the Snowbound festival exhibit hall, you're going to encounter the lift, our lift area, which is going to be the hangout, kind of sating then charging it stains multi tier area. That's very community focused. This will be connected to an app or a beer garden type of area along with a main stage. So we'll have content happening interviews with athletes, icons things happening, educational content, how to's all day long.

So there's kind of this lift hub area. And then from the lift area of the show floor, it goes out to peaks because a lot of the best mountain resorts are made up of different peaks

that you can explore. So we're thinking of different peaks that you'll be able to see visually for wayfinding and you'll be encouraged to, you know, explore the entire exhibit hall. So it isn't just like all the best booths that are up at the front and nothing's happening in the back. That's not what we're doing at all.

So different peaks, we have one is currently called peak performance. So this is where you have all of your hard goods, soft goods, all the winter outdoor brands would be really focused in this area, educating people on the latest products, what they can get. Then we've got peak enjoyment, which is an area where we'll have art and photo galleries from different artists and photographers, legendary photographers that you'll be able to walk through possibly purchase prints. A lot of this is TBD still, but, you know, photo art gallery walkthrough, we'll have all the resorts in that area.

Potentially beauty and lifestyle, travel, different things that you can explore that are really enjoyable. And there'll be musical elements over there as well. And then we've got an area called peak conscience. So our peak consciousness/peak conscious you know interchangeable, but this is our kind of education advocacy area where we'll be talking about a lot of different sustainability initiatives, inclusion family activities, workshops learning welcome to winter booth, potentially to explain everything that you can do in New England or the Rockies to be able to go out for the first time and, and feel empowered and knowledgeable about how to get out on snow, because so much of what we want to do is bring in new audiences or audiences who never thought that embracing the winter lifestyle was for them. So we want to encourage new participation. And I think that's a big core focus of this area. And then lastly...

Kristin: Sorry to interrupt you, is that also where the climate initiatives would be? Yeah,

Brian: So climate United will be there and sustainability is going to be a big focus of ours as well. So you know, there'll be things that we're going to do because events obviously can be very wasteful. So everything that we're doing is picking reusable materials and trying to do as much as we possibly can. Like, we're not going to have carpet. You know, you go to a lot of trade shows, you see a lot of carpet, they think it's a premium thing which looks nice, but by removing just 12,000 square feet of carpet, it saves 5.2 tons of carbon emissions. So, you know, you think about like a hundred thousand square feet, a show floor you know, that's a big environmental impact that just removing carpet, you know, it takes, it also gets rid of like almost three miles of tape that go into landfills. So you know, no carpet and we're going to let people know some of the things that we're doing as we go, but you know, sustainability and climate United, it's a big focus of ours.

Kristin: When I was gonna say is when I did just a couple of weeks back, I did a, a panel for SIA where I brought together, you know, a conversation you know, that you all lined up around ski, Utah, Ski Colorado, Ski Vermont, and Ski California, right? I'm probably not saying that California office correctly, but point being is all four of them talked about the

importance of getting back to sustainable initiatives and, and climate change initiatives in 2022, because COVID really created a compromise that they couldn't dance around. They had to basically keep the lights on and, you know, go forward operationally the way they could, but the way that they have had to do business this year, and they're grateful they've done business, but the way they've had to do it has not been at the level they want from a conscientiousness standpoint. And so that I think is important for consumers to see the industry standing strong together in that way, right in the center of this experience. So that's, I mean, hats off to you. That is fantastic.

Brian: Thanks. I really appreciate it. And it's something...we're still in the very early stages of planning for the show and working with the venues and our, our general contractor to, to have that mindset and that review process for everything we're doing, just to be able to see what our impact is and how we can lessen that environmental impact, like, you know, events like this, nothing's going to be perfect, but we would love to do our part and really walk the walk from the beginning of this event. And then just improve upon that every year as we go. So it is something that's, that's such a core focus and core pillar of the event. So yeah, absolutely.

And then the last peak is peak conditioning. So we would love to have an area of the show floor that's focused on health news and you know, different tips and techniques that you can use to be functioning at your most often level as well. Because it's such, you know, getting outside physical activity you gotta be a peak performance of yourself as well as just having gears. So we feel like that health and wellness peak of the Snowbound festival experience will be really cool for people to check out.

Kristin: Absolutely. It's, it's, you're also, I love so that you mentioned also that I it's something I want to mention here again, just to reiterate for the audience, the way that you are opening up your like widening the portal for the newcomer. Okay. At the same time, I feel like everything you've said is not at all underneath where like somebody who's been in this industry or community for a long time would they would want to see that. So I feel like one of the blessings of COVID around snow sports specifically because our community was so impacted at the end of our season. Last year, we watched, you know, some sister outdoor recreation industries go through the middle part of the year. And then we took on the end when everyone was exhausted, right.

And we're still trucking, but point being is, you're making it about like the consumer and the consumer doesn't have to be the person who always has been like bringing their family to the resort, et cetera. They are, there's so much opportunity with newcomers. And I know that the team at SIA is so focused on that. And everything that you've mentioned here sounds like fun is at the top level of it. And accessibility, you don't have to be anything special to come in and identify as a snowboarder or a skier here or a snowshoer or whatever it is.

Brian: Absolutely. We want to open the doors and invite and welcome everybody, regardless of age, background, ethnicity, skill level, like everybody's welcome here. It's a party to welcome winter and for us to talk about everything that we're most hyped about on getting outside. And if that's somebody that just steps through the door, that's just really interested in getting on a ski or in new jacket, just because they know that this is the spot to have the latest gear, the brands that I really love are here. And you know, all of those stories will come out, but it's all about that entertainment and engagement level. And we just want people to feel excited and welcomed. You know, as I think all of us that are in the industry, like I know I felt like a community the first time that, that I got up on a ski lift and put a snowboard on my feet, you know, it was something to have that sense of community and that deep sense of belonging, even if they're just coming through the doors for the first time ever, and maybe they weren't going to a resort or taking lessons, but, you know, it's a low barrier of entry to just come to the Snowbound festival.

And even if it's just because there's a band there that you really love, that's performing, you know, that just gives us a window to be able to open up a whole new world for some of these first time participants. Very similar again, to everything that we saw whenever I was working on the Comicon and pop culture type of events as well, you know maybe not everybody's in the comic books, but may they love this movie, but then they get exposed to so many other aspects of that world, whenever you come through the door and think it's the same exact thing, it, the content might be different, but the passion and the experience in the thing, the triggers that you can have to, to provide that celebratory experience for people are totally the same.

Kristin: Right? So as we're looking, I want to respect your time here, as we're looking to wrap up, what are some of the focal channels that you're looking to to kind of test and learn from, see traction from, or maybe even define this experience? I mean, I don't know that many people listening to the podcast right now would necessarily see membership sites if that's what this is as a channel. But I believe that in some ways that's kind of what you're creating. It's a, it's a platform that houses all of them. So can you give us your vision on that?

Brian: Yeah. So the, the Snowbound platform itself, it has multiple components. We've got the two festivals which will happen in that November timeframe every year. We would love to scale that up to three festivals, possibly more you know, I would love to see us doing festivals in other countries at some point as well.

So you know, that I think will be very cool and each would have their own unique flavor. And I think because the New England audience is very different than the Rockies audience and everything has to be tailored to that audience, especially the content for what they want.

So understanding consumers, that's square one for us. There's a heavy, heavy data and research component to, we want to do, we want to understand our audience better than anybody else, because we have that direct face-to-face relationship with them.

We have to know what they want. We have to know what they're excited about, what they're into, what are some emerging new activities or brands that should be at the show. Everything at the festival will be highly, highly curated. This isn't you know, a show where we'll just take anybody that wants to exhibit at it. There's, there's a thought process. And there's a curation behind that. Then beyond the festivals, which are kind of the anchor of face to face points, we've got the digital platform which is snowbound fest.com. And that's really a content first platform channel for us that we're able to have new stories, unique stories all sorts of original content. And it, it just launched at the end of October. So it's still in that kind of incubation phase. And, you know, there's over 50 different pieces of original editorial content up there, but we want to get more into video and a lot more storytelling.

Like these are just the beginning steps and that digital environment, which people can engage with all year long. This isn't just a, you know, right around the festivals, we'll have stuff happening and then go dark for several months. That's not what this is about. This is a portal and a channel that people can engage with all year long and be entertained by it and educated.

We see it as a platform. The Snowbound platform is a platform for change in a, an opportunity to bring in new consumers and to really engage people that maybe haven't felt a part of the community in the past. And then beyond that channel, we've also got our social channels, obviously that everybody can at Snowbound Fest, which we'll be communicating and engaging people on a regular basis all year long as well. And having that conversation, not just, most of the marketers, it's like, it's all about communication. It's not at, and that's what we really plan on doing. So those are our immediate channels. Then there's some other things on the horizon that we would love to start to build out and develop as we get the platform solidified. And as we get the festivals coming back, hopefully that answered your question.

Kristin: It did. I feel like Clubhouse could be a really cool one.

Brian: Absolutely. Yeah. And it's, it's so interesting because there's, there's so many different, you know opportunities and channels that pop up like Clubhouse and so many that, you know, there's so many ways to engage now and, you know, everything is constantly changing. So that's why it's always, you have to have your finger on the pulse of the consumer and not just assume that you know what they're into or how they want to engage with you, or, you know, where they're at, like, look at the rise of TikTok and, you know, just the cultural influence that, that so many of these platforms have. So for us, it's just about us knowing the audience where they're consuming their content and how

we can enhance and be additive, like not competitive in any way with any other media channels that are out there and everything we do, we want to be additive about.

Kristin: That's amazing. Well, we are so lucky to have you coming from, you know, earlier in your career, like, you're definitely like, you know, this is your DNA, but then going out into that great big world and coming back into this world at this time with your experience and just your reverence for this community and for the sports, like we just, couldn't be more fortunate Brian to have you.\

Brian: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that and it's a rare opportunity where you get to bring your whole self to work at everything that I've done and everything I've learned over the course of my career, I can bring it all and channel it all into Snowbound. So it's, it's, it's an opportunity that I'm super, super thankful for.

Kristin: Well, I can't wait to support it and see where it goes. So thank you so much. And we will definitely be checking back in with you to get some, some updates and tell everybody where they can learn more about all of this incredible, incredible opportunity to experience the consumer firsthand, basically in real time for the first time ever.

Brian: Absolutely everything right now is that Snowboundfest.com. You can sign up for our newsletter there. We've got a weekly newsletter that highlights different pieces of content. And then all of our social channels are all @Snowboundfest. So you can follow us there as well. Thank you. Thank you so much, everybody.

Brian: Absolutely. We'll see you this fall.