



CTO Interview Series with Clarion Events COO Adam Ford

By Danica Tormohlen, SISO Content Director, Publisher and Editor in Chief

Read highlights from our conversation on Dec. 15, 2021 or [watch or listen to the full 30-minute interview](#).

Backstory: Adam Ford joined Clarion Events in June 2018 as the COO. Over the last 25 years, Adam has worked across a range of industries, geographies and scale of businesses. Most recently Adam was the Group Commercial Director at Reed Exhibitions. Clarion produces shows in 10 sectors in the U.S., Europe and Asia.

Data ownership. “I would say the last 12 months has accelerated the discussion because it used to be more enterprise deals I would do centrally, but now with our event teams are looking at how to engage customers digitally throughout the year. They want to have their own decision-making. They want to use different platforms. One of the biggest shifts is how do we communicate to our commercial teams ... you can't sign anything because there are some more complex regulatory and legal frameworks we need to be thinking through. We absolutely are focused on ensuring the data ownership around our customer's behavior and their participation in these platforms are protected in a way that we get the control of the data. Then we can provide that experience to our customers in the way that is controlled and within our purview.”

Tech stack and recent additions. “We tend to buy, not build. Our tech stack consists primarily of third-party SAAS software like, Salesforce, Pardot, Workday, and most recently we've implemented a customer data platform called Treasure Data. Our initial focus has been around visitors and how do we accumulate all of that behavioral data, declared data and insight. How do we unify the data so we can see them much more clearly.”

Lessons learned on implementing customer data platform. “Focus on the business outcome and then work backwards and prioritize use cases. Our largest set of data resides in our marketing automation tool, Pardot. We ingested all that data into the customer data platform and provided access for all the marketers — in a very short period of time — to effectively use segmentation but a more powerful segmentation engine than they previously had access to.”

Investing in data privacy and security. “We are spending more money on data privacy and secure. Protecting and putting the moat around our castle and making that a little deeper and the walls a little higher.”

More investments in UX on the horizon. “How do we create more seamless journeys for our customers as they interact with webinars, customer engagement platforms or our

own websites to events. There's this UX piece, which I know is going to be important, which enables our customers to have a less disjointed experience. Focusing on the customer, making sure that our investments are quite directly linked to either providing more value or providing better experiences. I'm paranoid about actually making sure that we do double down and we do invest in that experience and those outcomes because our customer's expectations have changed."

How event tech M&As might impact organizers. "I think the next big area is what happens around anonymized data. Not only are the data sets we build valuable, but rapidly increasing in terms of value creation is the algorithms and the machine learning that happens on top of that. Having a deep understanding of how your partners use that data. Building up a training set across all customers — even though it's anonymized — how that data then gets used to drive value for them. It's just something we all need to be mindful of."

Cultural change is critical. "Enhancements in the customer data platform and supporting those customer journeys to be more seamless across that omni-channel interaction. Above all, because these are just tools, systems, and business process, it's the culture. So where I'm going to be spending and I know my senior leadership colleagues are also going to be spending ... is how do we start to embed different way of working, a different way of thinking across the organization that people utilize data in a different way in their everyday job."

Speed of business. "How do we take customer insight and drive product design not once a year, but how do we do this at a much more regular cadence. It's one of the things I'm acutely attuned to is that we've effectively changed the operating cadence, clock speed of our business. Because historically, if you work in a larger company that runs trade shows, it's a very episodic type of workflow. And if you think about the addition of digital engagement now — whether those are moments in time, events or more of a continuous engagement with customers — your ability to learn and iterate is much, much faster, but that takes a different way of working. It takes a different way of thinking."

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