



CTO interview with Bill Charles, CIO, Emerald

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

Read highlights from our conversation on Dec. 16, 2021 or [watch or listen to the full 30-minute interview](#).

Backstory: Bill serves as Chief Information Officer, Chief Information Security Officer and Data Protection Officer of Emerald. He joined the public company in 2013. Emerald produces more than 140 annually in the U.S.

Data matters. “Being a public company, we have strict policies on data ownership. When a new platform comes along, we do a thorough evaluation of the privacy, cybersecurity and compliance. We're looking at SOC (system and organization controls) reports and all sorts of stuff we are required to do for our own controls that we have to follow for SOCs.”

Many tech providers to choose from. “We feel strongly that data ownership is between the organizer and the customer. If we see in a contract the technology provider claims ownership of the data, we will either write that out or not do business with that partner. Fortunately with the luxury in our space — we've really grown in the eight years I've been here in terms of technology providers — there are a lot of options out there, and a lot of people who are willing to do business with you.”

Commerce platform added to tech stack. In January, Emerald acquired PlumRiver, a company that developed Elastic, an ecommerce platform for retailers. “We're very much big believers in the synergies and the marriage the in-person event with the online. We had two of our largest events, Outdoor Retailer and Surf Expo, where a majority of the customers were already on the Elastic platform. Rather than partner with these guys, we said let's add this to our tech stack and make this a year-round service we can provide to the buyers and sellers who come to our shows in addition to matchmaking and other things. Now not only are we getting people to meet, but also we're actually allowing them to transact and do business.”

Expanding into more shows and industries. “We've been integrating PlumRiver into Emerald and setting out the product roadmap. They have a strong foothold in the action sports market, where we have a couple of events. We're going to take that model and software and try to make it work with other events, adding new features that might be specific to those industries that are needed.”

Financial model for commerce. “There's been a lot of debate about the financial model for that because there's a lot of different ways you can look at that. I don't think I have firm answer on how that's going to work. I can tell you, on the software side, it's

very different from selling fashion clothing to selling a paddleboard — hard goods vs. soft goods. The software has to be able to handle the different types of products that are being sold in each industry.”

Where Emerald is investing in tech. “The three Cs: Content, commerce and connection. You add in these other subscription-based products, like the commerce platform or content, so there's a lot of investment that's needed on the backend. We don't want to be sending three different invoices to the customer for three different things. We are focused around not only on the front end —how do we, improve the communications with a portal and less emails — but also on the back end, how do we make it easier to bill, invoice, contract. We have a lot of investment there. We recently purchased a product called Zuora. It's kind of a Salesforce of the billing and invoicing space. The other area where we're making a lot of investment is in cyber security.”

Testing matchmaking tech. “We have been testing a lot with different matchmaking platforms. We've looked at Jublia, Grip and a few others. We've been working heavily with our brands to define those needs in terms of matchmaking because they're a little bit different from brand to brand. We've been testing a number of platforms with each of our brands to try and figure out what the best solution is. Those tests are going to be going through Q1 of next year. That's been our main challenge with matchmaking: Understanding how you want to do what you want to do, and then finding the right platform that fits your needs to make it successful.”

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