

Action Expo Tradeshow, Pandemic Pivots and the Local Community with Mike Freihofer

Transcript

J: Hello and welcome to Meet AC's newest podcast series Atlantic City Voices. I'm Jessica Kasunich, communications manager with Meet AC.

K: And I'm Karina Anthony, marketing director with Meet AC and we are your official podcast host for Atlantic City Voices.

J: Throughout our monthly series of Atlantic City Voices, we will be interviewing various voices of Atlantic City who are important leaders in our community and destination.

K: The topics we discuss will vary, but many will focus on important conversations around regenerative tourism and redevelopment and investment throughout Atlantic City.

J: We'd like to welcome and introduce our podcast guest, Mike Freihofer, CEO for the Action Expo Trade Show and owner of Brigantine's newest surf shop Brig surf shop.

K: Hi, Mike. Welcome.

M: Hi, Jessica. Hi, Karina. Thank you for having me.

J: Welcome, Mike. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

M: My pleasure.

K: So, let's get started by telling our listeners a little bit about yourself.

M: So, I was born and raised in Northfield. My families from the Atlantic City area, going back quite a ways. I started surfing in high school over mainland, and I just fell in love with it. I had done all the traditional sports growing up, but something about the beach environment and the people that hung out there really drew me in. I never had the talent to do it professionally, so I decided early on that I want to get involved in the business side of it. I worked at a surf shop over in Ocean City. I went to school down in Florida, I ran the surf club down there started getting into rapping, work there, the marketing side, everything. And when I graduated college, I wanted to go on and become a surf rep here up in the Northeast. So, I moved back to New Jersey, got married and realized that I wanted to do more in the industry. So, I moved out to California, hoping to expand my career; I was out there for about eight or nine years, maybe ten years, and was producing magazines, got to know all the big company heads. I hung out in, you know, the Costa Mesa, California area, which is known as Velcro Valley, because that's where most of the surf industry was at the time. And I lived in San Clemente, which is where the publishing side in the marketing world took place. Really, really loved it, got super into it, realized that we weren't going to be able to afford to live in California because by this point, we had two

kids with the third on the way. So, I moved back to New Jersey, and I always remember that growing up, it seemed as though from New Jersey standpoint or even the Northeast, we were this outside forgotten area of the industry. We did a lot of business up here, There, were some formidable surf shops, big numbers being done, but there wasn't really a voice for it. So, we started publishing magazines. We started doing some events, surfing contests, we did some cool snowboard events, really got into the whole thing. And there was a big trade show taking place in Atlantic City at the time called Action Sports. Action Sports Retailer folded, I believe, in 2001, and I started getting a lot of phone calls from some of my friends saying that we should start a trade show and next thing you know, we're in the trade show business.

K: That is a very impressive, long resumé

J: Absolutely. We're so thrilled that you brought your talent back here to Atlantic City.

M: Well, there wasn't a grand design to it, it was really more of the fact that we you know, my business, California, it didn't work out so well. So, we're broke. We were broke and we needed a place to go while we had a kid. So, we moved back and opportunity just kind of presented itself and we ran with it from there.

K: Isn't it funny, though? I mean, I feel like no matter what the circumstances, a lot of people end up coming back to New Jersey to where they're from.

M: One of the people that I used to work for, a man named George Gerlach over at Surfer Supplies in Ocean City when I first moved out to California, I remember him saying to be so, so dead set. Absolutely correct. He goes, you'll be back. And I'm like, there's no way I'm never coming back to surf. And California, the surf industry is so awesome and everything. And he was right. It's a great place, but it's not quite New Jersey. There's just something about this area, South Jersey in particular, that you can leave it, but it never leaves you. And you know, there are things I miss about California, but the people, the atmosphere, the camaraderie, it's like one great big giant family and that part of it is super gratifying.

J: Yeah. I think everyone always says that there's just something special about New Jersey. And like you said, it's not really about our area. So, tell us more about the Action Expo tradeshow that has been held annually at the Atlantic City Convention Center. How long have you been producing this event in Atlantic City and what is the pre-show specialty?

M: We've been doing the show since about 2001, and we are a manufacturers rep B2B show. That means that if you're a rep like I was for years for a company called Hurley, we deal with a lot of local surf shops and we have our samples and we go around from surf shop to surf shop historically and you drive from Maryland to Maine, you hit each surf shop, you show them the line and you get your orders. Well, that as the industry grew and the demands on the lines got bigger, the money got bigger, it just became impossible to cover so much area in such a short amount of time. So, trade shows really were a great way, very efficient way to get things done. When ASR pulled out, which was a very big show owned by a very big company. Most of the reps realized wow, I can't afford to go on the road like I used to. I don't have the time to do it because deadlines are so short. So, we need to do a trade show. And they called me, I happened to be publishing magazines at the time and they said, hey, do you have any contacts in Atlantic City? I'm like, well, gosh, most of my friends are marketing people or they're a work in the work

in the casinos. So, I reached out to a few people one thing led to another, they all said, oh my gosh, you know, we have meeting space. We know decorators we can help you out. So, we sort of limped in through a teamwork effort into what became of a long-standing business.

J: Where do you see most of your attendees in reverse coming from the Northeast region?

M: Yeah, we draw tech typically for these types of shows, which I call a regional show. We draw from about 150 to 200 miles in concentric circles around, depending on the geography. We do a smaller hotel show in Ocean City, Maryland, because the retailers there just don't seem to want to get on the on the ferry. We do one in Long Island because nobody really wants to drive on the belt and go through the Verrazano. And then, of course, we do it up in Providence, Rhode Island, because it's just really too far away for those retailers to make it down to Atlantic City in an efficient manner. So, but, you know, the New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland area, we get just about every shop come to see us. It's been pretty good.

K: Yeah. And, you know, the beach environment here in Atlantic City is just so important to our ecosystem. And that's something that Meet AC is toning with our Meaningful Meetings campaign. Can you expand on your relationship here with us, at Meet AC?

M: Well, none of this would have happened had it not been for the folks at the Atlantic City Convention Center. I can't even tell you how helpful they've been. I mean, they have my back there tremendous. Margie, Ann I mean, everybody over there has always done what they could to help foster my business. And its growth, knowing that it's good for the town, it's good for the state, it's good for the convention center. Everybody wins. Our shows are all mid-week, generally speaking, off season. So, we bring people to town at a time when for the most part, the town really needs it. The casinos have been wonderful to work with. We've been at them before. We found our home over at the convention center, now. Outside of being, it's almost like their family, like they care about my show that much. It's not just a dollar and sense thing and they care about the town that much and it's it to me, I get the impression it's not just a job to them, it's a real vocation. It's awesome. Really tremendous people.

K: Yeah, that's true. I mean, we I feel like we all treat every show here like we truly care about it. And we understand the impact that it has in Atlantic City. And even the vendors that we work with in marketing, we see every one of them as an extension of our team. So we try to do the same for everyone else.

M: Well, it definitely resonates because, I mean, I can't think of anyone there who doesn't go above and beyond to help us. I mean, you know, not one. Not one.

J: Absolutely. You know, as your official destination management organization of Atlantic City, we're your one stop shop and we encourage event organizers like yourself to go through our service and use our services because they're very important and they really make your process so much easier and smoother. And we're just here for support.

M: And you do a great job of that. I'm always amazed when I hear that there are shows that don't consider Atlantic City for their venue because there are other shows similar to mine in different genres, whether skiing and snowboarding or whatever it might be. And I always talk to them because there's a lot of crossover and I say, you guys should come back to Atlantic City. Like, I just don't know why you wouldn't be here. It's got all the hotel rooms you need. It's got lots of fun things to do at night. The restaurants are fantastic. The boardwalk is amazing. I just, you know, the rooms are cheap if you're mid-

week. I mean, you just I don't know where you can find the combination of what Atlantic City does to host a better show.

J: I know Mike you're going to be on our marketing team next.

M: I'm all for it. I feel like I already am. I mean, I feel like you guys are on my team with the trade show, and it and that's how I like to work it.

J: So in September of 2020, you improvised and pivoted action expo. The trade show was held in the outdoor parking garage of Ocean Casino Resort. Take us behind the scenes of this experience, were there any hesitations among attendees and exhibitors?

M: I mean, it was weird, you know, at first because you know, no one who's going to who's going to do a trade show in a garage, you know, I mean, but I'm always interested in something new. I love a challenge and I know with our industry we're not that fancy. I mean, we're not super foo foo. Most of these reps are independent companies. You know, they're not working with the corporate dime. So for them to get their job done and cut costs, they'll do just about anything and go just about anywhere to make that happen. So, there were some people who were concerned about the garage and you know, for whatever their reasons would be, I understand. But Ocean did an absolutely kick ass job of making that environment work. You know, we were lucky that it was September, and it was the weather couldn't have been nicer. It wasn't too hot, it wasn't too cold, it wasn't raining. There wasn't any wind and Ocean had set up some kind of a VIP area out in the garage that they converted to a tradeshow area. And while I don't think it would be something we could do consistently, over the long haul, the fact that we were the first show of our kind nationwide, if I'm not mistaken, to have something that was successful I think everybody realized, hey, man, it's not what we thought it would be, but it was still pretty damn cool. We had a great party outside out on the deck by overlooking the ocean. I mean, all things said it couldn't have been any better. And I and I give a lot of credit to the folks over at Ocean for having enough vision to pivot us and put us out there.

J: Yeah, I love the ut of the box thinking, you know, during this whole COVID time really forced everyone to and challenged everyone to think out of the box and, you know, be able to hold these type of events. But, you know, just differently.

M: Yes. And that's, you know, it's a testament to our size because we're not a very big trade show, which enables us to be extremely agile when it comes to deadlines or venues or weather events. Whatever it might be. We can move pretty quickly. And, you know, working with people like Meet AC and the casinos, they've always been very good about helping us achieve our goals because they realize that our goals are co-mingled with theirs. They want to be successful. They want people there, you know, spending money drinking beer, buying food, whatever it might be. You know, they want people there and we are able to deliver people. And it's just been such a great symbiotic relationship. And I hope it continues forever.

So it seems like you're really setting the trends here with Action Expo. And also, it was one of the first events to return to the Atlantic City Convention Center when capacity restrictions for meetings and events were lifted in the state of New Jersey. What was the sentiment among attendees and activities to be able to meet and conduct business in person again?

M: Well, it's our industry is very, very face to face. We have long standing relationships with our retailers. I mean, some of these people are our friends. You know, they they've been in my wedding. I've been in their wedding. I mean, it's just it's that intimate. So, for us to be able to get together again and see each other is, you know, that's a bonus in itself. But there's also the clothing aspect of it. You know, you want to feel a T-shirt, you want to feel some of the fabrications, and you can't do that over a zoom meeting. And also, very selfishly, I'd say as a rep, if all of a sudden I can be replaced by a computer screen and a Zoom meeting, why are they paying me to do my job? They could just have somebody in California put together a Zoom meeting or a video and send it out to everybody and save themselves some money. So that in-person relationship is so important in our world. And being able to be in one place doing it all again, just like normal was, it's hard to put a value on that, to be honest with you. It was fantastic. I mean, very, very well received.

J: Yeah, absolutely. We always say there's nothing like face-to-face connection and we even saw increased attendance and several events through the fall season of 2021 after restrictions were lifted and attendees were just so excited to be back. And you know, you see all these people and it's just great. Another venture of yours that have recently opened in Brigantine is the Brig surf shop. What was your idea behind opening a surf shop and what does this do for the local communities and surrounding shore towns?

M: Well, it, it really wasn't an idea for me. Like I've I'm a rep and trade show producer, so I happen to know a lot about the industry. And I've been asked from time to time to consult for people looking to open up a surf shop, whether whatever the town might be. So I like to build business plans. I, I see them as a little bit of a puzzle, like kind of a mind teaser. So I put together a business plan just in case anybody had ever asked. And, you know, I do some business over here in Brigantine and I started to realize that with a lot of friends here, here and talk about the way the economy is turning, the way the real estate market is going, I started to realize there's only one real surf shop over in Brigantine, and it's that's not going to be enough for the demand. So I went to a few friends of mine and I gave them a copy of the business plan and I said, Hey, what do you guys think about opening up a surf shop? Over here? You've got a great name. You're a good, established business. You should open up in Brigantine. And they looked at the business plan they passed, said, Okay, well, whatever, you know, that's that's fine. No big deal. And I started looking at the business plan. It kind of got in my head a little bit, and the numbers just kept jumping out at me and like, Gosh, this is just too good to be true. Unless I'm completely mistaken about it. This, I think, is going to be a home run. So sooner or later, someone's going to do this. Why not me? So I went back to my friend who I'd asked before and said, Hey, do you have any objection if I go do that? And they said, No, not at all. Like, we love you, blah, blah, blah. You kudos, hogs, high fives, whatever. And the next thing I know at the beginning of October last year, we weren't doing a surf shop, and by the end of October, I was doing a surf shop and it came together nicely. I think it absolutely serves a clientele because, you know, you just want variety in this world and no one store can cover at all. And we've been able to bring in a sense of variety. I think that my knowledge of the industry is something that most of our customers can appreciate because I can give them back stories on things that they might not otherwise get. Part of the reason you go to a surf shop is because there's a community and there's a community surrounding surfing that's a lot different than a lot of other sports. And they walk in our store and they can feel that we have a little chill area here. You can sit down to watch TV. Surf videos are always playing. We have good music. It smells nice. The selection is nice, the presentation is nice. We've built a compelling environment for people to come in who didn't have that

option. It was either leave the island to shop or worse, go on the Internet to shop. And that doesn't benefit anybody. From a rep standpoint, even from a company standpoint, you want to be able to be enmeshed in that that stoke of a surf shop. And I think we've done a pretty good job of presenting that, and we're just getting started.

K: That's really respectable. And we here at Meet AC are all about building up the local community building environment for people to interact and engage. And that's why we love talking to people like you, because you have that similar sense of place here in Atlantic City. And it's just so important for us to continue to build these types of relationships that really bring our communities together.

M: You know, it's funny that you say that because we're during the pandemic, of course, nobody was going anywhere. And if we didn't learn the value of human interaction during that time, then we you just weren't paying attention. Why do people go to bars? They can certainly drink cheaper at home. Why don't they go to restaurants? They can eat cheaper at home. Why do they go to casinos? Because it's not as much fun gambling on your phone as it is to be live at a craps table where someone's rolling and winning. I mean, there is an experience of being face to face that you cannot replace with the Internet and if you build a compelling set of circumstances, an environment, people are going to take advantage of it. And I think we've done that. I think that every surf shop has every business not even just surf shop. Every business has an obligation to their customers to build a compelling environment for them to come enjoy.

K: We couldn't agree more and talking about our local communities and going out and engaging with everyone. One final question that we like to ask all of our guests is naming your top three favorite restaurants to dine in Atlantic City.

M: See that's such an unfair question. Because I, I couldn't I couldn't knock it down. So if I had to it, it would certainly depends on my mood. So the first one I would, I would mention, and this is in no particular order is the Chart House in Atlantic City at the Nugget. I just can't I think it's got one of the best happy hours gone. If you can find a better view in Atlantic City, I don't know where it is. It's the Chart House. So it's always consistent I love being there. I'm fascinated by the marina area, by the boats. It's just it's stunning. It's just stunning. At sunset, the casinos are starting to light up. You can see the ocean in the background. I mean, it's just one of the most impressive places to go to have a drink and some appetizers that I can think of. As far as experiential things go, Chef Vola's all is tops. You know, people that come in for my trade shows, they talk about Chef Vola. All of that's where they want to go. Angelo's hot on a teal because it's just so unique. I mean, you're not going to find establishments that have that kind of character and even, you know, it's funny, you know, you think of fine dining at a lap of White House. I mean, it's people Bob Hurley still talks about White House. I mean, my friends out West ask me like, oh, the trade show, and I got to come in and get my White House sub. I mean, it it's such a it's such a cool place to be. Dock's is awesome. Cafe 2825 is incredible.

K: I think that's more than three yeah.

M: I mean, that's the thing. It's it's a trick question. I don't know where to do to end. I mean, the beer gardens. Unbelievable. The Bally's Bally Sports book, you know, the list goes on. I mean, you can't buy it.

J: it's so hard with our growing culinary team here in Atlantic City and I couldn't agree more with you about the Chart House. Wow. I think it's so overlooked with their spectacular views and their happy

hour. I know my parents are always talking about their happy hour and all these other great dining scenes, whether it's a local, you know, hidden gem or a celebrity chef establishment. So we're very proud of those food restaurants and the growing culinary scene here.

M: Look at look at knife and fork. Have you ever gone there for happy hour? I mean my God, it's the bacon. You can eat bacon. If you have the bacon, Knife and Fork, you'll never have any other bacon again. You feel like you're being robbed. It's like, why is my bacon a thick cut and caramelized? I mean, it's so good.

J: I know we are quite spoiled here, especially with our seafood option right on the coast. So just here as a wrap up. Mike, thank you so much for being a guest on Atlantic City Voices. We always appreciate your yes mentality and appreciate your continued business in Atlantic City and we look forward to seeing what's in store more. And we'll have to come take a field trip to the Brig surf shop soon.

M: Please, please do, I'd love to see you and I can't thank you guys enough for all your support over the years. It's a tremendous opportunity and privilege to work with you.

K: Thank you for listening and stay tuned for next month's podcast to find out who the next Atlantic City voice will be.