

Headquarters

NOVEMBER 2026 #127 BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

Centre for Events & Festivals
Making the Case for a Unified
Meetings Industry

Rafael Plata's New Book
Building Trust and Influence
Through Trade Associations

Better Stands
Rewriting the Lifecycle of
Exhibition Stands

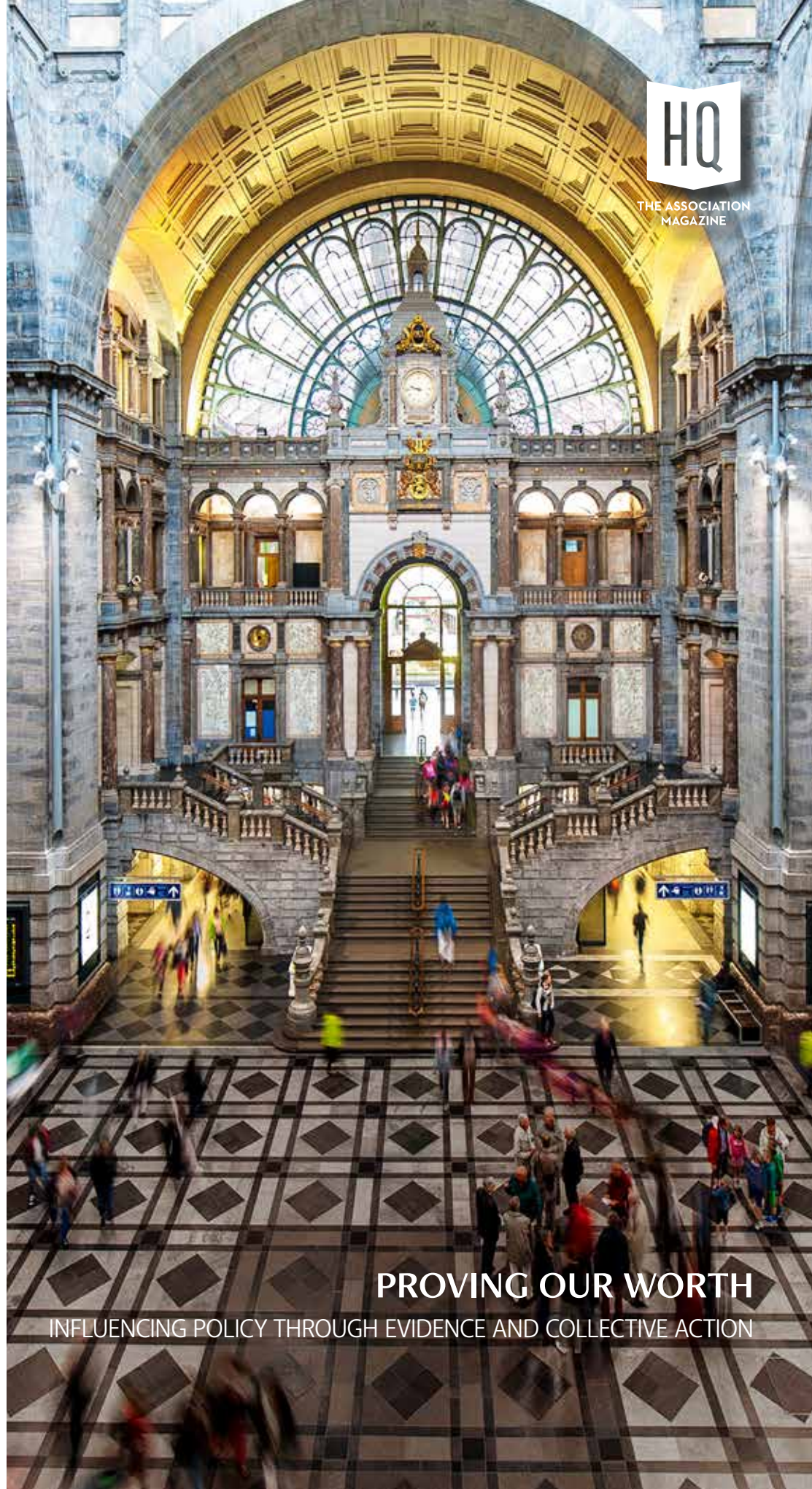
Madrid Convention Bureau
Giving Congresses a Life of Their
Own

Poznań Event Hub
Polish Roots Shaping Global
Routes

Cover Story:
A Rare Chemistry Between
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Editor's Notes

The People We Advocate For

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón, HQ's Deputy Editor

I had been reflecting on the news and its consequences for our industry for weeks when I began this letter on 22 September. That day, **United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres** addressed the **General Assembly** in New York, identifying four tests of power: war, inequality, climate change and artificial intelligence. His speech connected subjects *HQ* has examined across several editions. Almost a month later, I keep revisiting this letter as new crises unfold, deepening the pressures on associations, destinations, residents and business travellers.

In May, I wrote about organisers struggling to obtain realistic destination information when travel conditions were changing quickly. AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes can make it harder to know what to trust, reinforcing the need for honest communication and policies that address misuse.

Keeping up with what is actually happening can feel overwhelming. Since July, we have seen wildfires in Canada and Europe, drought in northern Europe and a tornado in southern France. Floods hit Nepal in August, followed by Thailand in September and eastern Spain in October. Earthquakes have affected Guatemala, Colombia, Nepal, Indonesia, Japan and Spain, with Panama being hit in October. Behind these headlines are people grieving for lost loved ones and rebuilding their homes and livelihoods. War continues to disrupt lives, while rising costs make recovery and everyday decisions more difficult.

Concerns about housing, education and living costs have also brought people onto the streets in France, Belgium, Albania, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Ireland and Greece. Violence deserves condemnation, but peaceful demonstrators deserve to be heard and their concerns addressed. Delegates and hosted buyers also see how residents live and how authorities respond. How a destination treats residents and welcomes visitors influences where associations meet, whether delegates attend and whether employers authorise travel.

Elections across 2026 and 2027, including the United States, Israel, Brazil and Spain, will influence how governments address Guterres's four challenges through decisions on war, social protection, climate and AI. Convention bureaux need long-term plans for residents and visitors that they can pursue through successive administrations. Working with public institutions, universities, hospitals, businesses and community organisations helps establish priorities worth sustaining. Advocacy should explain meetings' contribution to politicians and the public, while allowing local concerns to influence industry decisions. The **Events Industry Council** and **Oxford Economics** estimate that business events supported 24.2 million jobs worldwide in 2025. Behind that figure are livelihoods, alongside opportunities for research, training and cooperation that our events can help people access.

In this edition, **City Destinations Alliance** and **IAPCO** explore how community relationships, shared evidence and coordinated action can strengthen advocacy. During my visit to the **Thailand Innovative Meetings Exchange (TIME) 2026**, which connected international buyers and media with Thai suppliers and industry leaders, I heard **Dr Chadchart Sittipunt, Governor of Bangkok**, connect business events with residents' quality of life. His presentation, *Shaping Tomorrow's Bangkok. A City Designed for MICE & Beyond*, opened by replacing 'MICE & Beyond' with 'Everyone'. He explained how better transport, public spaces and vocational training contribute to a city that works for its residents and visitors.

With the **World Economic Forum** and **UN Tourism** among its co-curators, the ICCA Congress in Panama City connects our industry with wider policy discussions. There and at **IBTM World** in Barcelona, we look forward to hearing colleagues' advocacy stories and sharing them with *HQ*'s readers as we approach 2027.

HQ

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MANAGING DIRECTOR

Vivian Xu

vivian@meetingmediagroup.com

MAGAZINE MANAGER

Manuel Fernandes

manuel@meetingmediagroup.com

DEPUTY EDITOR

Jesús Guerrero Chacón

jesus@meetingmediagroup.com

COMMERCIAL MANAGER

Jesús Parrado

jparrado@meetingmediagroup.com

EVENT PROJECT MANAGER

Jerilee Pinto

eventsupport@meetingmediagroup.com

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Shihao Xu

x3ladesign@gmail.com

RESPONSIBLE EDITOR

&

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

Avenue Maurice Maeterlinck 30
1030, Brussels

FINANCE & ACCOUNTING

finance@meetingmediagroup.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Press@meetingmediagroup.com

RATES

80€ in Belgium

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How **Much** Is **Enough** in the Meetings Industry?

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

Last month, I was invited to witness the reopening of the monumental **Industrial Palace**, a historic convention and exhibition venue within a large events complex in Prague. The stunning old town continued to draw considerable crowds since my last visit, suggesting tourism is becoming less seasonal than a permanent feature of urban life. This impression took on a different significance during a round table entitled, *The Bigger Picture: Prague Exhibition Grounds and What Comes Next*, where representatives of the city, its convention and venue leaders, discussed the Czech capital's MICE ecosystem and the challenges of its consolidation.

Overtourism, housing and heritage preservation emerged as central issues. More interesting was the lack of consensus over how tourism's effects should be tackled. **Adam Zábranský**, **Prague City Councillor for Housing and Transparency**, emphasised the mounting strain caused by excessive visitor numbers, while **Roman Muška**, **Director of the Prague Convention Bureau**, suggested that the problem was more confined to specific areas. At its heart, this disagreement exposed a tension I see arising between destination managers and political activists: an 'open-door' tourism policy and uncapped commercial growth inevitably clashes with the social balance between residents and visitors. These days, it is not difficult to see which side is losing this tug-of-war.

In Lisbon, the expansion of short-term rentals has collided with the need for residential housing: **Airbnb** listings rose from 18,277 in September 2019 to 21,181 in December 2024, equivalent to around 7.6% of the city's housing stock, according to the **OECD's 2026 Economic Survey of Portugal**. In Barcelona, a municipal survey conducted in 2024 found that 63.7% of residents believed tourist apartments caused significant disruption in their neighbourhoods. Neither example proves that tourism is inherently detrimental; both expose the other side of a numbers-driven growth model, in which the pursuit of ever higher figures can impose social costs that conventional measures of success tend to ignore.

The Czech capital welcomed 8.27 million guests in collective accommodation establishments last year, generating almost 19 million overnight stays, while its business events infrastructure continues to expand. Alongside **PVA EXPO PRAHA**, **Cubex** and **O2 Universum**, the **Prague Exhibition Grounds** offer an extensive collection of venues and historic buildings, while the **Prague Congress Centre** is set to add a new exhibition hall, which, according to **Sales & Marketing Director Roman Sovják**, will "stop turning business away". In my conversations with **Tomáš Hübl**, **Chairman of Výstaviště Praha**, one idea kept surfacing: the need to generate sufficient demand to sustain this capacity, broadening the range of events and diversifying revenue drivers.

Although business travel sits upstream of these more traditional segments, it requires infrastructure, accommodation, transport, public investment and human resources. Its impact depends on when it takes place, who benefits and what ultimately remains. As I have argued at length in previous columns, a scientific congress or industry conference can catalyse intellectual capital, research partnerships and innovation, but these outcomes cannot simply be assumed into existence on an Excel spreadsheet. A city may have the physical capacity to accommodate more events without having a social or economic baseline to justify them. That is the fundamental distinction between filling available space and creating lasting value.

As **Mike Duignan** argues in our conversation for this issue, the meetings industry needs to move beyond asserting its value in broad, fragmented terms and demonstrate it through the benefits it creates and the costs it entails. By making a responsible, evidence-based case, the business events industry can establish itself as a viable way for cities to hit their visitation targets. If meetings are to be recognised as instruments of urban development, they must be prepared to answer the same question now being asked of tourism: how much is enough, and who gets to decide?



Prague Congress Centre Prepares for a New Generation of Congresses

Prague Congress Centre (PCC) is investing in a new **Exhibition Hall** alongside more than CZK 120 million (approx. €4.9 million) in stage, theatre and sound technology during 2026. *HQ* spoke with **Roman Sovják**, Sales and Marketing Director at PCC, about how these investments will affect international congresses, changing expectations around technology and sustainability, and the growing emphasis on the delegate experience.



The new Exhibition Hall will mark an important phase for PCC. What will the additional space change for the venue and the international congresses Prague can compete for?

We will stop turning business away. That is the short answer. The hall will open up opportunities for larger international congresses. It adds 5,000 square metres of net exhibition space, bringing our total exhibition capacity to 21,000 square metres, while increasing the venue's overall capacity from 10,000 to 15,000 delegates. In practice, we will be able to bid for events that combine a congress, a large-scale exhibition and a gala dinner for 1,500 guests in one place.

We already have enquiries from around 15 international congresses for which the new hall is a precondition, most of them in the medical field.

What are international organisers asking for today that the new hall will allow you to accommodate differently?

There are two things I hear consistently from organisers.

The first is: "Do not make us move delegates around." The new hall, existing building and **Holiday Inn Prague** will work

as one connected campus, allowing the programme, exhibition, evening event and accommodation to remain in one place.

The second is flexibility. The hall can be divided into up to five independent sections. One day it can operate as a single exhibition floor. The next, it can become a series of workshop spaces or a setting for a gala dinner.

Nothing on this scale has previously been available in Prague. We are also redeveloping the surrounding outdoor areas, adding green spaces and room for outdoor activities and events.

The centre will remain fully operational during construction from 2026 to 2028. How will you manage that transition without compromising the experience for organisers and delegates?

Most of the construction is taking place on what used to be a car park next to the existing building. Work inside the current complex is limited to garages and technical areas, away from the halls and event spaces.



We have agreed with the contractor when noisy work must stop around specific events. The main changes involve logistics, access routes and parking.

From a delegate's perspective, the experience should remain unaffected. For clients planning two or three years in advance, that certainty matters. They can continue to rely on Prague Congress Centre throughout construction.

PCC is also investing in the L-Acoustics L2 sound system. How are expectations around production quality changing, and what will this investment make possible?

The line between a congress and a live experience is becoming harder to draw, and sound quality plays an important part in both. The L-Acoustics L2 system will provide clear, consistent sound across all 2,764 seats in our main **Congress Hall**, from the front row to the back.

The installation will also be ready for spatial audio technology that can follow a speaker's position across the stage. We will be the first venue in the Czech Republic to install the L-Acoustics L2 system.

With the metro next to the venue, an integrated hotel and the city centre close by, how does PCC's location influence the way organisers think about the delegate journey?

For a congress of several thousand people, logistics is one of the first things organisers consider. From PCC, delegates are a two-minute walk from the metro station, while the historic centre is just two stops away. The proximity reduces the need for additional transport such as shuttle buses.

Delegates can walk from the hotel to the Congress Hall and, during a break, explore the Vyšehrad parks or head into the city centre. Those who prefer to remain at the venue have panoramic views of Prague from the building.

Are accessibility, technology and sustainability now influencing venue selection in more concrete ways?

Sustainability in particular. It is no longer a side issue.

Clients look closely at an event's carbon footprint, how delegates travel, how waste is handled and where the catering comes from. We are the first congress centre in the Czech Republic to achieve ISO 20121:2024 certification for sustainability management.

Around 10% of our electricity is generated by solar panels on our roof, while the electricity we purchase comes from renewable sources. Our catering is prepared in-house, and we have strong public transport connections. The new Exhibition Hall is also targeting LEED Gold certification.

From your conversations with international clients, how are expectations of congress venues changing, and what will matter most in the coming years?

Organisers are talking less about room specifications and more about delegates: how they will feel when they arrive, what they will see during a break and what impression they will leave with. The character of the venue therefore matters.

Clients keep coming back to two things: the views and surrounding greenery, and the fact that every room has its own style. There are more than 200 works of art in the building, and no two halls feel alike. After six hours of sessions, that is not a small thing. The eye gets a rest and people return to the hall feeling refreshed.

I think three things will matter most in the coming years: capacity and flexibility, production quality, and a venue that adds value in its own right. Those are the areas we are focusing on at PCC.

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Geneva and the Strategic Choice of Congress Destinations

For many years, choosing a congress destination came down to a familiar checklist: venue capacity, hotel rooms, transport connectivity and budget. These fundamentals remain essential, but destination selection is becoming more strategic as associations navigate an increasingly complex environment.

Organisers are asking different questions. Can the destination strengthen the scientific programme, attract renowned speakers and increase attendance? Can it create opportunities for meaningful collaboration and leave an impact after the closing session? In an increasingly uncertain world, does it offer political stability and security?

Geneva is home to numerous international organisations and leading research institutions, including **CERN**, **Campus Biotech**, **Geneva University Hospitals (HUG)** and the **University of Geneva**. For associations, they offer opportunities to involve experts, organise technical visits, build partnerships and create programmes delegates could not experience elsewhere.

The collaborative environment helps Geneva attract major international congresses. Recent successes include the **Society for Laboratory Automation and Screening (SLAS)** conferences in 2028, 2030 and 2032, the **International AIDS Society Conference (IAS 2027)** and **Velo-city 2028**, spanning scientific and non-medical sectors.

Geneva is also investing in its congress infrastructure. A new modular space under construction at **Palexpo International Exhibition and Convention Center** will increase flexibility and accommodate plenary sessions of up to 4,000 delegates. The **Geneva International Conference Centre (CICG)** will undergo renovation in 2028, while the **Hilton Geneva Hotel & Conference Centre** and **Fairmont Grand Hotel Geneva** are also being refurbished.

Legacy has also become a priority for associations, with congresses expected to create value beyond the event itself. The **Geneva Convention Bureau** works with associations to develop legacy initiatives aligned with their mission and

objectives. For the **2026 European Academy of Neurology (EAN) Congress**, the **Geneva, European Capital of Brain Health** campaign combines public lectures, a school challenge and a city-wide awareness campaign to encourage healthier lifestyles and improve understanding of brain health.

Ronald Lavater, Chief Executive Officer of the **International Hospital Federation**, experienced Geneva during the organisation's **World Hospital Congress** in 2025. "From a value proposition, Geneva is unique. It sits at the apex of global healthcare, with the **World Health Organization** and more than 100 other global health organisations. It was the place to be for our congress. We saw the value for the money in bringing it to Geneva."

Choosing a destination now means finding an environment that can strengthen programmes, facilitate collaboration and support long-term impact. The Geneva Convention Bureau connects associations with local experts, partners and opportunities to develop congresses that benefit delegates, local communities and the association itself.

Geneva Convention Bureau

gvacb@geneve.com

pro.geneve.com/en/meetings-conferences



Antwerp's Local Networks Bring Industry Expertise to Congresses

Antwerp is internationally renowned for its diamond trade and fashion designers, as well as being home to one of Europe's busiest ports. Behind this reputation stands a wealth of scientific and industrial expertise, including Europe's largest integrated chemical cluster, university research, and specialist medical institutions. International associations draw on these networks to develop their congress programmes, supported by a compact, well-connected city and a convention centre boasting its own functioning zoo. Recent meetings in chemistry and digital dentistry reveal more about Antwerp's congress credentials.

Intellectual Capital and Congress Infrastructure

The choice of congress destination influences who contributes to its programme, which institutions and organisations delegates engage with, and the professional contacts they make. As Europe's second-largest seaport by maritime freight, the **Port of Antwerp-Bruges** is a major centre for international trade, logistics, chemical production and energy. Its Antwerp platform houses Europe's largest integrated chemical cluster, where production plants, refineries, storage terminals and pipelines enable companies to exchange materials and by-products. The port also supports innovation in smart logistics, maritime technology, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, connecting Antwerp with expertise across chemistry, supply chains, energy and international trade.

In health and life sciences, the **Institute of Tropical Medicine**, **Vaccinopolis**, the **University of Antwerp** and local hospitals contribute expertise in infectious diseases, vaccine research and medical innovation. Drawing on the city's intellectual capital, **Antwerp Convention Bureau** helps congress organisers establish connections with local researchers, companies and institutions, opening opportunities for specialist presentations, technical visits and professional exchanges. In addition to supporting bids, venues and accommodation, the bureau helps associations incorporate local expertise into their conference programmes.

Antwerp combines international rail connectivity with congress infrastructure concentrated in its compact city centre. Right next to the heritage-listed Antwerp Central Station, **A Room with a ZOO** (part of the **Royal Antwerp ZOO Foundation**), is the world's only convention centre with its own functioning zoo. The complex combines historic architecture with modern facilities and offers approximately 25,000 square metres of event space for conventions of up to 2,700 participants, as well as the 2,000-seat Queen Elisabeth Hall. Every event held at A Room with a ZOO helps support



animal welfare, scientific research, nature conservation and education. Next door, Antwerp Central Station offers direct trains to Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Schiphol Airport, with Brussels Airport 30 minutes away. Two daily direct **ICE** services to Cologne began in September 2026, taking around two hours. London is accessible via Brussels-Midi, with direct **Eurostar** services from London planned for December 2026, although return journeys will still require a change in Brussels. A ten-minute walk from the station, the restored neo-Gothic **Handelsbeurs Antwerpen** offers a historic trading floor for conferences, receptions and gala dinners, alongside around ten multifunctional rooms and adjoining hotel accommodation. Receptions can accommodate up to 1,200 guests.

However, the city's well-established industrial and scientific credentials are not fully reflected in how international associations and meeting planners perceive Antwerp as a conference destination. A perception study commissioned by **Antwerp Convention Bureau** and conducted by **GainingEdge** found that, while international meetings professionals recognised Antwerp, they knew comparatively little about its conference facilities and services. Although respondents also associated the city with compactness, walkability, safety and convenient logistics, accessibility and prestige emerged as concerns.





Expertise in Practice

The 10th **EuChemS Chemistry Congress** brought more than 1,400 delegates to Antwerp from 12 to 16 July 2026, providing a recent example of the city's capacity to host a major international scientific meeting. Organised by the **Royal Flemish Chemical Society (KVCV)** for the **European Chemical Society**, the congress took place at A Room with a Zoo, drawing on Antwerp's established chemistry community and its proximity to research institutions and industrial manufacturers. Antwerp Convention Bureau and KVCV undertook an impact journey, facilitated by **Flanders Convention Bureau**, to explore how EuChemS could create lasting value for Antwerp and beyond. A workshop brought together around 30 representatives from academia, industry, the port and local organisations to identify opportunities for collaboration. One proposal was a public event introducing residents to chemistry's role in everyday life, with the ambition of generating longer-term societal impact. Prior to the event, **BlueChem**, a local incubator for sustainable chemistry, outlined its plans to contribute to the programme with tours and other activities. BlueChem's proposed activities connected delegates with local researchers and industry professionals.

Antwerp's sustainable chemistry network connects university research with industry through specialised facilities. At the University of Antwerp, **BlueApp** supports early-stage



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research, while BlueChem provides laboratories, business support and industry contacts for start-ups and spin-offs. The **BlueChem Kickstart Fund** covers up to 80% of laboratory equipment costs. In the port, **NextGen Demo** supports industrial-scale testing, while **NextGen District** accommodates larger commercial operations. BlueChem also works with the City of Antwerp and Port of Antwerp-Bruges to connect emerging businesses with established manufacturers and explore commercial opportunities.

For **Isabel Vermeulen, General Manager of BlueChem**, connecting scientific research with industrial needs is central to the organisation's work: "Research must remain independent, but research and market cannot be two parallel tracks. Having both present in the same city ensures the relevance of what we build for tomorrow." The **University of Antwerp spin-off D-CRBN** developed plasma-based technology to convert carbon dioxide and progressed through BlueApp and BlueChem before raising €17.5 million to advance towards industrial demonstration. **Inopsys**, an early BlueChem participant specialising in industrial wastewater treatment, was later acquired by **Indaver**, a company active in the port. In 2025, the collaboration between the **City of Antwerp and BlueChem** earned a **European Enterprise Promotion Award** for its contribution to the city's sustainable chemistry ecosystem.

Antwerp keeps attracting international associations operating in a variety of scientific disciplines. The **Digital Dentistry Society** selected the city for its State of the Art Conference, *Digital Dentistry Unlocked*, held on 16–17 October 2026 at **Hilton Antwerp Old Town**. The scientific programme covered AI-based dental imaging, digital orthodontics and clinical 3D printing, areas with links to the city's medical and technological expertise. Researchers at the University of Antwerp, for example, use 3D design and printing to develop equipment for research and clinical applications.

The GainingEdge findings give the Bureau a clear priority: bringing the city's congress credentials into sharper focus among international organisers. Its established industrial and research networks, supported by accessible venues and transport connections, provide the evidence. The challenge is ensuring that Antwerp's place on international congress shortlists reflects the expertise and resources already available in the city.



POLAND'S GREEN TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEETINGS INDUSTRY

In Poland, as across the world, an increasing number of cities are taking action to adapt to the evolving expectations of travellers, event organisers and local communities. Sustainable development is becoming a cornerstone of destination competitiveness. Conference and event organisers are increasingly demanding green certifications, locally sourced products, digital materials instead of printed ones, and energy-efficient infrastructure solutions.

Polish cities are responding to this transformation by actively embracing environmentally and socially responsible practices. They are modernising their tourism strategies, introducing certification systems, investing in sustainable

transport and engaging in the education of local communities. Sustainable development is undoubtedly set to remain a key direction for destinations worldwide in the years ahead, not only within the context of business tourism.

This trend is confirmed, among others, by research conducted by ICCA as part of the Global Association Meetings Protocol, which identifies Sustainability, Equity and Legacy as the leading one of the four main strategic priorities for convention bureaux, according to association clients.

Many conference, congress and hotel facilities place strong emphasis on quality and hold certifications such as Green Key, BREEAM, LEED and WELL.

POLISH GREEN CHAMPIONS



KRAKÓW, GDAŃSK, WROCŁAW AND SZCZECIN are among the so-called Polish Green Champions – cities actively developing a sustainable offer for the meetings industry. Their presence in the international Global Destination Sustainability Index (GDS-Index) confirms Poland's growing importance on the map of responsible MICE destinations. Each of these cities implements its own strategy, combining environmental, social and business objectives.

KRAKÓW – A LEADER IN TRANSFORMATION

Kraków was the first Polish city to join the GDS-Index in 2022, initiating a systematic approach to measuring and managing the impact of the tourism and events sector. The city continues to improve its performance – in the 2025 edition it was recognised among the "Most Improved Destinations". Its activities include the development of urban policies, close cooperation with the industry, and the implementation of reporting tools. The ICCA Congress held in Kraków in 2022 was also organised in line with the principles of a sustainable event.

GDAŃSK – URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

The Baltic city joined the GDS-Movement in 2023 and focuses on strategic management and the integration of sustainability policies with the MICE sector. A key element is cross-sector collaboration and the implementation of ESG standards in tourism and events. One of the city's major challenges is the transformation of former shipyard areas into a new urban district, featuring venues such as ECS, Montownia and 100cznia. Gdańsk made a significant leap forward in sus-

tainable tourism development, advancing by 15 positions in the Global Destination Sustainability Index 2025. In the same year, the city hosted the workshop "Regenerating Polish Destinations: Sustainable Tourism in Action" with GDS-Movement experts Marta Mills and Janie Neumann.

WROCŁAW – INTEGRATION AND ACCELERATION

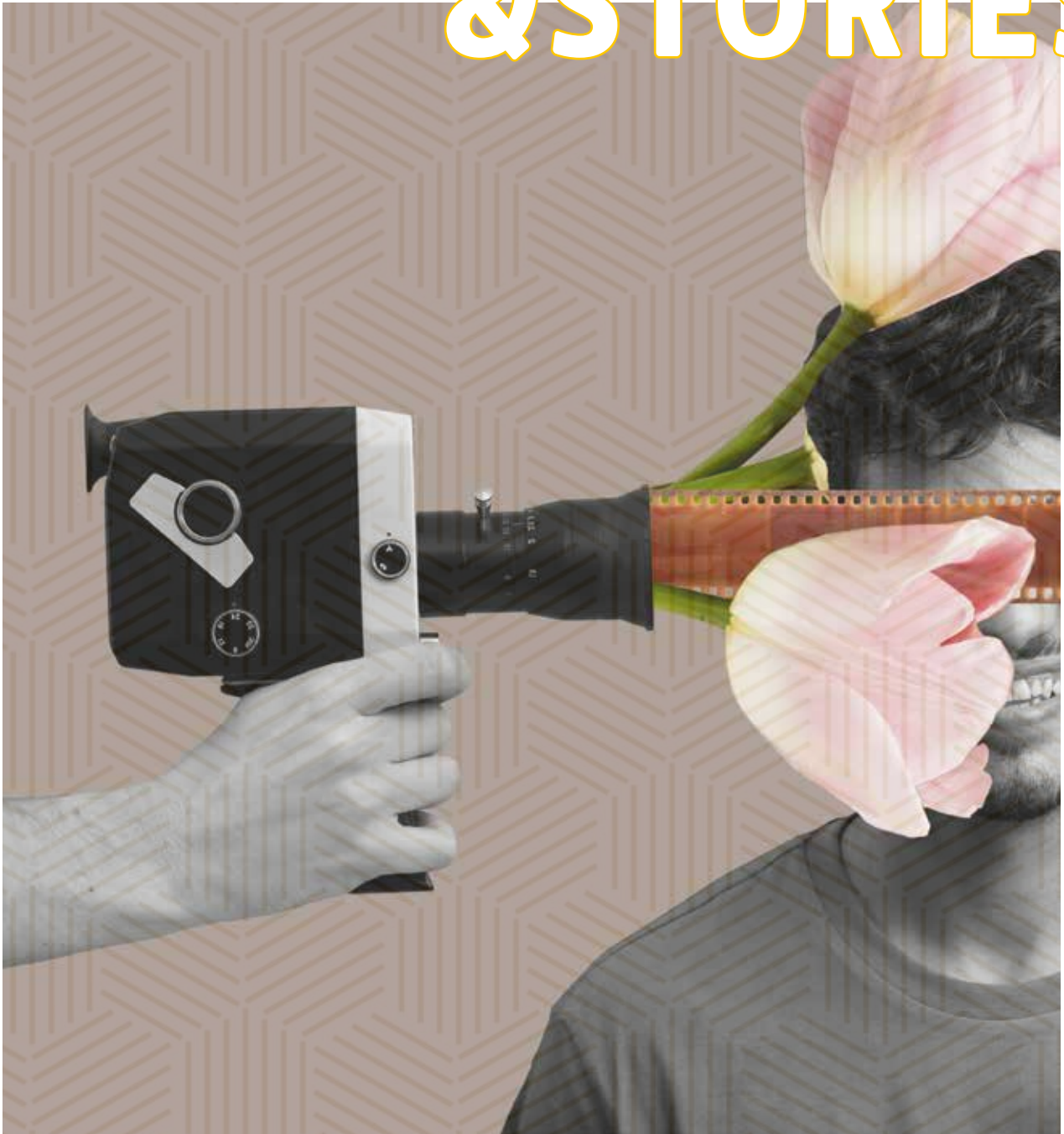
Wrocław joined the GDS-Movement in March 2025, treating its membership as a catalyst for further professionalisation of sustainability efforts. The city focuses on integrating the local MICE community (for example through the publication of the "Green Events in Wrocław" catalogue) and implementing international ESG standards. Participation in GDS-Index enables Wrocław to benefit from benchmarking tools and to further develop its event offering in line with global trends.

SZCZECIN – THE "FLOATING GARDEN" STRATEGY IN PRACTICE

Szczecin joined the GDS-Index on 20 March 2025, becoming the fourth Polish city to participate in the global sustainability benchmarking programme. A major milestone followed in June 2026, when Szczecin hosted the GDS-Forum & Impact Day on 16-18 June, bringing international destination leaders and sustainability experts to the city.



HQ ESSENTIAL INTERVIEWS & STORIES





The Centre for Events & Festivals

The Case for Unity Without Uniformity!

In this featured cover story, **Mike Duignan, Founder and Chairman of the Centre for Events & Festivals (CEF)**, discusses how to unite a fragmented profession through hard data, standards and a shared goal. *HQ* shares his vision of an industry capable of speaking with greater authority to governments, policy-makers and the general public.



An industry can contain a multitude of expert voices and still struggle to speak with authority when governments, policymakers and the wider public are listening. During our conversation, Duignan kept this apparent contradiction front and centre, insisting on the lack of a bridge between the organisations that are already carrying out this advocacy work. CEF has built its activity around that gap, bringing together research, professional development, debate, networking and advocacy while working towards its ambition to become the **Chartered Institute of Events** by 2030. “What is missing is the connective tissue that sits across all of them. There is no single umbrella that serves everyone and can genuinely use cross-event, global convening power: for advocacy, for research and insight, for professional standards and development, for policymaking and for community.”

The case for such a structure does not depend on pretending that a scientific congress, a festival and a sporting event are interchangeable. “A scientific congress is not a music festival, and a trade exhibition is not the Olympic Games. Their audiences, purposes, business models, stakeholders and the value they create can be profoundly different, and CEF recognises and honours that. We have no interest in flattening those differences.” The common thread, though,

lies at another level. “Underneath the differences sits a common architecture. Every event gathers people around a purpose. They all have audiences, intentions and mandates. They run on similar supply chain processes, venues, infrastructure, people and technology. They operate within regulatory environments, and they all have to work for government priorities,” describes Duignan.

What follows is a call for knowledge exchange, drawing on expertise that already exists across the profession but does not always circulate between sectors. “There is so much to be learned in both directions.” That is the premise of what Duignan calls Events 2.0: a profession that asks what becomes possible when knowledge moves between inherited categories. The challenge is creating the conditions for knowledge to move without erasing the communities that generated it. “The principle I keep coming back to is unity without uniformity.” Similarly, the distinction informs CEF’s approach to professional standards. The objective is not to create a single occupational identity for an industry that plainly does not have one. Instead, Duignan sees value in identifying the practices and principles that can travel across its different disciplines. “We cannot create one highly specific identity that describes everybody who works in events, and we should not try.”



Standards, he argues, gain legitimacy through participation, and must remain capable of evolving as professional practice changes. CEF's *Professional Excellence Framework* is intended to map that common ground, while its Fellowships provide international recognition across the wider field. The potential payoff is mobility: "If someone moves from sport into business events, from festivals into exhibitions, or from one country to another, they should be able to carry a recognised professional currency. Standards are where trust and legitimacy are built. What we are after is professional portability." Still, professional language is only part of the problem; the most consequential question is whether it can produce solid evidence to underpin the sector's collective value. "The core problem is not that the industry has no evidence. It is that so much valuable data, evidence and case material sits behind closed doors."

CEF's answer includes **EventAdvocate**, which helps professionals turn evidence into usable advocacy, and CEF Insights, which translates research for practitioners. The five Vs (Volume, Variety, Velocity, Value and Veracity) assess whether information is substantial, diverse, timely, relevant and trustworthy. The deeper change concerns what the industry chooses to measure: "We have to be far more sophisticated in how we understand and evidence the value events create. As an industry we are very good at talking about the immediate economic effects: visitor spending, hotel nights, delegate numbers, direct economic contribution. Those are important, but they are only part of the story." Duignan emphasis falls on the link between the person in the room and the larger outcome attributed to the event. "What did someone learn? Who did they meet? Did a conversation turn into a business relationship, an investment, a research collaboration or a policy idea? Those individual changes are often the building blocks of the bigger impacts, and we need much better longitudinal evidence connecting the two."

For Duignan, academia and industry need each other. Research supplies methods, theories and longitudinal approaches; practitioners supply the environments in which those ideas can be tested. "The best future relationship is not academics studying industry from the outside, or industry occasionally commissioning academics to confirm what it already believes. It is genuine co-production: researchers and practitioners identifying problems, building evidence, testing solutions and then feeding what they learn back into practice." The political implication is straightforward. Evidence does not replace advocacy, but it changes the basis on which advocacy can be conducted. "Access should never become a substitute for evidence, and evidence should never become a disguise for a political ask that was decided in advance."

The issue is especially relevant for business events, whose consequences are harder to convey to the outside world. "Someone sees thousands of delegates arriving at a convention centre and thinks 'big meeting.' What they cannot see is the scientific collaboration, the investment conversation, the new business relationship, the policy idea or the knowledge exchange happening inside. The building is visible; the consequences are often invisible." The communications task starts once the event is over. Duignan wants the industry to carry that momentum into mainstream media instead of keeping these stories within professional circles. "Those are the narratives that turn a business event from a meeting into an instrument of economic and intellectual development."

Destination Canada's *Business Events Impact and Legacy Study*, for which Duignan was Chief Scientist, shows how the methodology can support a more enduring evidence architecture. The next step, he suggests, is to create enough commonality for comparable evidence to accumulate across destinations. "Even an excellent study is still an individual study. The next step is turning individual studies into shared adoption." The argument returns to its starting point: shared frameworks, credible evidence, delegate assessment, professional language, and institutions like CEF that can bring separate communities into the same conversation. "For me, the real test is whether we have moved from asserting our value to evidencing it." And the measure of that change would be visible not in a louder industry, but in a more pragmatic one: "A mature profession should not have to start from zero every time it explains why it matters," Duignan concludes.





The Intelligence Hub

IAPH Brings the Global Port Community Back to London

As the **World Ports Conference** returns to London after almost three decades, the **International Association of Ports and Harbors (IAPH)** sees a sector navigating uncertainty on several fronts at once. **Olympia's new International Convention Centre (ICC)** provides the physical setting for a conference designed to connect those challenges with the people and institutions capable of addressing them.

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

"There are threats in the sky, on the network, at the quayside and beneath the waves." According to **Patrick Verhoeven, IAPH Managing Director** (pictured right), that list captures something of the uncertainty now confronting the global port sector. The industry is preparing for an unclear energy future, while adapting to climate change, navigating geopolitical disruption and responding to accelerating technological change. The challenges vary according to geography, but the need for cooperation is becoming harder to separate from the work of running a port. "The theme for our annual World Ports Conference in London this 3-6 November is *Port leadership for a brave new world*, and it speaks to the volatility and uncertainty of the present moment, as well as the list of expectations facing port leaders," Verhoeven says.

IAPH's response is built on its collective expertise. Its technical committees, working groups and taskforces develop tools and guidance for members, whilst the **World Ports Sustainability Program** contains more than 600 port-related projects. The association has recently passed 400 regular and associate members across 100 countries. Its international reach goes back to IAPH's origins in cooperation between Japanese and American ports in the early 1950s, when its founding motto linked global trade and peace through the work of ports. Seven decades later, Verhoeven sees the same principle at work in a more fractured international environment. "The need for an organisation like ours, connecting supply chain interests across national borders, seems stronger than ever," he says. "Port leaders are facing protectionism, trade war and armed conflict, but challenges often bring out the best in the port sector, as we saw during the pandemic, driving adaptation and innovation."

The tension between ambition and practicality is particularly visible in the energy transition. There is great uncertainty as to which alternative fuels will prevail in the medium to long term, compounded by the current regulatory deadlock over the industry's pathway. "Right now, all the indications are that ports must prepare for a multifuel future," Verhoeven states. "This necessitates that ports remain flexible in response to

market and regulatory changes." Uncertainty makes cooperation part of the infrastructure itself. Investment decisions must be coordinated between ports, regulators, energy providers and other stakeholders, and regional differences must be taken into account.

It is against this context that the World Ports Conference returns to London. The conference itself has a longer history with the city than its 1997 edition might suggest. London hosted the fourth edition in 1965, a meeting Verhoeven describes as a defining moment in IAPH's development. In its aftermath, the association gained recognition as an NGO by the **United Nations** and expanded into a genuinely global organisation. One Japanese founder went so far as to say that "IAPH became a world organisation only by dint of the London conference." The circumstances have changed considerably since then, but Verhoeven sees continuity in the conference's purpose. "We remain the voice of global ports, and in the absence of a global regulator, our members work together across national boundaries to set standards and influence the quality and direction of maritime legislation."

The 2026 conference reflects how that role has evolved. Since 2020, IAPH has moved from a host-sponsor model to working with an events company, and from a biennial to an annual conference. The London edition expands to four days, with roundtables and breakfast briefings alongside the main programme at Olympia, in Kensington. "There has been an interest in more dialogue and interaction among attendees, and also a broader mix of themes to reflect the deep and diverse ports and shipping audience that we can expect from London. We want to keep things fresh." The choice of London is therefore closely connected to the conference's ambitions. Verhoeven calls the city 'the intelligence hub of global shipping', pointing to its concentration of maritime services, insurance, legal and financial expertise, shipping organisations, energy companies and, critically, the **International Maritime Organization (IMO)**.



The wider city will form part of the programme itself. The welcome reception will be held at the IMO, sponsored by the **Port of London Authority**, with delegates encouraged to meet national representatives they may never previously have encountered. “London gives us the chance to bring together port and port business with shipowners, investment banks, cargo owners, insurers, regulators, thought leaders and technologists,” Verhoeven adds.

Adam Pollington, Sales Director (pictured right) at **Olympia Events**, told us that the opening of the new ICC will change the nature of the dialogue that can be established with international associations. “The ICC adds a purpose-built convention offering to Olympia’s existing event spaces, allowing us to host more complex conference formats while still benefiting from the character and flexibility of our heritage venues.” The four-day IAPH programme, with plenaries, breakout discussions, roundtables and briefings, is precisely the kind of format for which the ICC was designed. Its auditoria and flexible spaces allow delegates to move between different forms of engagement while remaining within the wider Olympia estate. “What appeals to organisers is the ability to create different experiences across the destination. They can hold keynote sessions in the ICC, networking events in one of the many restaurants on site, and give delegates access to hotels, bars and cultural experiences without leaving the estate,” says Pollington. “Olympia is now a destination rather than simply a venue.”



Alongside the formal programme, delegates will have opportunities to visit the **National Maritime Museum**, **Cutty Sark**, **Thames Rowing Club** and **DP World London Gateway**, as well as take part in a river cruise on the Thames. The cultural dimension is integral to the meeting. London is both a maritime city and a global business centre, and some of the connections made during the conference may come from experiencing the city itself, not only from what happens inside the ICC. “We talk about this conference being the place where delegates make the breakthroughs that count and the connections that matter,” Verhoeven says, “but really we want this to be the beginning of the story.” This point is worth noting because the conference is only one stage in a longer process involving committees, technical work, meetings and investment decisions. Its value will be judged by what follows after delegates leave. “When delegates realise the work our committees are doing – around future fuel readiness, onshore power, cybersecurity, and cruise sustainability – it will encourage even more members to share their expertise to the overall good. London should be one link forged in that chain,” Verhoeven concludes.





Trust, Influence and the Art of Consensus with Rafael Plata

Having a seat at the table is only the beginning of effective advocacy. The real test is whether associations can build consensus, challenge the interests they represent when necessary, and show that their advocacy has produced meaningful outcomes. Drawing on more than two decades of association leadership, regulatory strategy and public affairs, **Rafael Plata, Director General of the European Association of CCP Clearing Houses (EACH)**, explores these questions in his new book: *Trade Associations: A Practitioner's Handbook*. He examines the role of trust and evidence in building a credible collective voice and what it takes to turn advocacy into measurable impact.

A Conversation with HQ Magazine Manager, Manuel A. Fernandes

Looking back across your experience and with your new book coming out, what should a trade association ultimately provide effectively to its members?

The focus is on why you need a trade association because there are some elements that you can only achieve as a group. My book is a sort of a best practice collection from different fields and trade sectors coupled with my own perspectives. When legislation affects companies across Europe, each can approach authorities independently, but only from its own perspective. An association allows us to step back and look at the industry as a whole: what do we collectively need, and where do our interests converge? When we reach that consensus, we can speak from a common position.

A trade association is a bit of a schizophrenic organisation: on the one hand, you want to establish a common message; on the other, your members are competitors. There are issues where consensus is simply not possible. When members' interests are directly opposed, we recognise that it is no longer something for the association to address collectively.

How does an association turn divergent member interests into a collective position that is meaningful to them and credible to policymakers?

You need to understand your members. A position paper is only the beginning. You need to go back to them, ask what they really think, challenge their position and understand what is behind it. If there are significant discrepancies, you may need to move up a level and focus on the broader principles on which members can agree, rather than forcing a detailed position where there is no real consensus.

If you cannot establish a common position, some associations use footnotes or qualifications to support a minority position. I am not particularly keen on that approach. It may unblock a public stance, but it reduces the meaningfulness of a trade association and dilutes your voice. The answer is to understand where the disagreement really lies and work through it.



Can an association remain an effective advocate if it is never prepared to challenge, moderate or even reject a position put forward by its members?

The answer is no. I think you need to challenge your members, but you have to do it in a constructive and diplomatic way. Sometimes a member will come to you under pressure, asking for something that may be financially or operationally unsustainable. If you conclude that it simply does not make sense, it is important to say so and explain why.

Associations can build a long list of advocacy activities (meetings, consultations, papers, coalitions, events) without necessarily knowing whether any of those activities actually changed anything. The important question is their impact. Additionally, it is essential to build trust, not only around results, but also to get everyone involved. When your members trust you, you are more likely to work more effectively and achieve better results.



Advocacy is a long-term game that requires agile short-term action.

What distinguishes genuine influence from simply having access, and where do you think associations most often confuse the two?

In recent years, there has been a trend to refer to corporate lobbyists as Heads of Regulatory Strategy. This reflects a growing awareness that regulation is not simply something companies need to comply with, but that they can use to their advantage. The key question is why members want to be part of a trade association and what they want to get out of it, recognising that different objectives may operate on different timelines. That means a clear strategy agreed by all members, with key objectives that ultimately have a tangible impact on them.

You need to understand what legislation is being proposed, what is coming up and what the authorities are thinking. That means engaging with key players, meeting new professionals, reading and attending meetings. Once you have the right time, people, communication and message, you need to build trust with decision-makers. I have seen a lot of lobbying that is not grounded in substance. Some of it is successful in the short term, but I see lobbying as a long-term engagement.

What makes evidence used in advocacy genuinely credible, and how can associations ensure it informs their positions without simply serving their primary interests?

Until not that long ago, surprisingly, much of the lobbying relied on the authority of the person leading the claim. Now there is much more emphasis on evidence. We want data, we want studies. Nowadays, there are consulting firms that are willing to prepare evidence to support almost any position. If you want evidence that there is “life on Mars,” they will prepare it; if you want evidence to the contrary, they will do that too.

It is very important to understand your industry and to make sure that the evidence you use is factual. My approach is to encourage members to do their very best and aim high, but sometimes we find ourselves in a weaker position because their goals cannot be backed by the data. We must, therefore, readjust our plans and our negotiating position. That process, to me, is quite revealing and magical.

How should associations think about measuring impact, and what would you regard as meaningful evidence that an association has influenced a policy outcome?

Historically, trade associations did not generally measure success, but now most of them are following clear KPIs to actually track what they want to achieve. We may be talking about specific legislation, increased visibility, or a policy briefing. The most meaningful measure is to move beyond activity-based metrics altogether. Forget the number of amendments and meetings, because those figures can be deceptive. What is the actual impact on your members' businesses?

I have led campaigns that managed to remove provisions that would have significantly increased costs for our members. We were able to quantify the financial impact, which reached several million euros. That is a real outcome. If an association cannot demonstrate what it is achieving for its members, then what is the value of the association?

The **Conversation** Before the **Conflict**

Making Room for Disagreement

Why better dialogue may be the most practical form of conflict prevention, according to Facilitator, Mediator and Trainer **Angela Herberholz**, specialised in leadership facilitation.

“Alignment is not accidental.” In international associations, where different cultures, professional interests, institutional priorities and personalities meet, alignment can be difficult to recognise. A decision may be made while reservations, assumptions or disagreements remain unresolved. The early signs are often subtle: a subject that was supposedly resolved keeps returning to the table; people who normally challenge become quieter; conversations that move outside the meeting room. There is more passive agreement, avoidance or reactive communication. “Real alignment requires the ability to share different perspectives, challenge one another, give and receive constructive feedback, and take ownership of what has been decided,” says Angela Herberholz, **Founder of Herberholz Mediation Services**.

These behaviours do not automatically constitute conflict. They are signals that deserve attention before silence and avoidance become the organisation’s habitual response. Herberholz’s 2025 research among more than 100 professionals across the global business events industry, found that close to 70% believed interpersonal tension needed careful management. Less than half felt equipped to manage it, while almost half had received no conflict management or prevention training. Leaders therefore have a role before a mediator enters the room: “An open door does not create trust. What happens when someone walks through that door does,” she says.

Difference is Part of the Brief

Trust becomes more complex in international associations, where diversity is part of the membership itself. “Every organisation is a melting pot in its own way.” National and cultural backgrounds meet professional experience, institutional interests, responsibilities and different expectations of what an association should deliver. Herberholz sees that variety as an asset, provided the process allows those interests to contribute meaningfully. “Are we exploring? Consulting? Deciding? What can people genuinely influence, and what has already been decided?” A useful starting point is to establish what the conversation is actually for.

People become frustrated when they cannot see where their contribution fits. Herberholz also encourages leaders

to challenge their assumptions with a simple question: “What perspectives may be missing here?” Listening to another perspective does not require agreement. Constructive dialogue may produce a decision, a clearer disagreement or a new question. “Global does not have to mean uniform.” She saw that principle through **Global Exhibitions Day** during her time at **UFI**, where different parts of the exhibition community could work towards a shared international purpose while adapting participation to local realities.

Governance Needs Room for Disagreement

The same principle applies to boards and committees. Supporting a decision is not necessarily the same as agreeing with it. What matters is whether people understand how a decision was reached, whether relevant insights were heard, and whether responsibilities and next steps are clear. “Facilitation can examine the structures surrounding a decision: who decides, who advises, who implements, how interests are represented and what happens when disagreement remains.”

Herberholz’s work with **IFES** on the EU-funded **BEFuture** project included governance, roles, responsibilities and decision-making around **Better Stands**. “A transparent governance structure does not eliminate disagreement. It makes disagreement easier to navigate without blocking progress.” For associations, disagreement is often a consequence of representation itself, while governance has to accommodate competing interests without allowing every difference to become an obstacle to action.

For an external facilitator and mediator, establishing trust requires particular attention. “Neutrality has to be experienced, not simply declared.” Herberholz describes independence as instrumental to her work. Individual conversations before joint sessions allow participants to understand the process, ask questions and explain their experience before entering a shared discussion. International, multilingual work adds another layer; confidentiality, hierarchy, disagreement, emotion and decision-making may be understood differently across cultures. The facilitator therefore has to remain curious, including about their own assumptions. Reputation and experience may help





an organisation decide whom to appoint, but trust develops through behaviour during the process. “When relationships are already strained, perceived neutrality matters just as much as intended neutrality,” she adds.

Prevention Starts Inside the Organisation

Business events provide a particularly concentrated environment for these dynamics. “I often describe this industry as a pressure-cooker-like environment.” Tight timelines, multiple stakeholders and high expectations leave little room for unresolved assumptions. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical developments, changing client expectations and operational disruption can add further strain. “Pressure rarely stays operational. Eventually, it becomes relational,” she argues.

In one international event project, two leaders who had worked together for years were joined by a third person with leadership responsibility. During onboarding, expectations around responsibilities, accountability, availability, communication and ways of working were not fully clarified. As the project intensified, those assumptions surfaced: communication became reactive, email began replacing direct conversation and the surrounding event environment added pressure. “The pressure had exposed assumptions that had never been aligned in the first place.” Sometimes, Herberholz argues, the immediate objective is simply to make the relationship workable enough for the event to proceed. A short, structured conversation can clarify what is happening, establish responsibilities and agree on next steps. Deeper relational issues can be addressed afterwards.

Herberholz’s research found that managers spend an average of 3.7 hours a week dealing with workplace conflict, around 15 hours a month. Conflict is already being managed inside

organisations, whether formally recognised or not. Training is one part of the answer, but organisations also need clear pathways showing when a direct conversation is sufficient, when HR should become involved, when internal facilitation might help and when external mediation is appropriate. “Conflict management becomes an organisational capability when people know not only how to address interpersonal tension, but what to do when a conversation is not enough,” she notes. “Mediation should not be seen only as the final step in an escalation process. It can also be one of the tools that prevents escalation in the first place.”

Accountability Needs Dialogue

The same balance appears in leadership. “Accountability without dialogue can become blame. Dialogue without accountability can become avoidance.” For Herberholz, accountability involves ownership of roles, commitments, behaviour and consequences. Disagreement can be part of accountability when someone raises a concern or challenges a proposal. The practical test is specificity: what was agreed, what happened, what was the impact, what needs to change and who will act?

Her work with the **Senior Leadership Team at Manchester Central** has included turning reflection into individual leadership commitments and practical actions. Tension can reveal an assumption that needs testing, a perspective that has not been heard, a decision that deserves examination or an opportunity to adapt. Leaders do not have to navigate every difficult conversation alone; facilitation and mediation can form part of an organisation’s capability for working through disagreement. “Perhaps the assumption I would most like us to abandon is that a difficult conversation is something to fear. It may actually be an opportunity to lead.”



Radisson Hotel Group

Sustainability Targets Must Be Global but Ownership Must Be Local

Developed with **GDS-Movement**, **Radisson Hotel Group (RHG)** sustainability roadmap seeks to close the gap between ambition and action in the sustainable efforts of associations and PCOs. **Inge Huijbrechts, Chief Sustainability & Security Officer**, discusses shared responsibility, data-driven decisions, circularity and the business case for lasting environmental and social impact among large hotel chains.

Your roadmap identifies implementation as the meetings industry's main sustainability challenge. What does it take to apply global commitments consistently across a diverse hotel portfolio?

We try to make sustainability (or responsible business, as we call it) seamless for guests and fun for our teams. We do this through eco-certifications, 100% carbon-compensated meetings and **Verified Net Zero (VNZ)** hotels. The real challenge is embedding global ambition in the hundreds of daily decisions across engineering, food and beverage, housekeeping, procurement, waste management and guest communications. Our VNZ journey has taught us that sustainability cannot sit alongside the business; it must become part of how a hotel operates every day.

This means addressing our biggest impacts systematically, from electrification and renewable energy to food, waste, laundry and procurement. We engage our teams through sustainability champions, training and our annual **Move to Zero** campaign. This year, *The Hidden Impact* challenged our 'Resource Detectives' to find the 'missing megawatt, the lost drop and the wasted meal'. Standards and ambition can be set centrally, but implementation must happen locally because infrastructure, regulations and market conditions differ.

How can hotels, destinations and event organisers share responsibility for reducing the environmental footprint of meetings?

Hotels can improve building efficiency, electrify equipment, purchase renewable energy where available, redesign menus, and work with suppliers to improve operational performance. No hotel controls the entire event journey. Delegate transport can account for up to 75% of a meeting's footprint, yet sits largely outside the hotel's control. The availability of renewable energy, waste management systems and certified suppliers varies by destination. The roadmap therefore emphasises collaboration, involving destination partners earlier in the planning process.

Responsibility needs to be shared, but not diluted. Hotels should be accountable for what they can influence and transparent about what they cannot. Meaningful outcomes depend on stakeholders working towards the same objectives, using consistent standards and credible data. Destinations can help provide accessible public transport, recycling infrastructure, water-refill points and participation in community projects. In selected destinations, we work with tourism and travel partners to address local challenges, including waste and employability.

How does RHG distinguish between sustainability data that supports reporting and data that drives operational decisions?

Both matter, but they serve different purposes. Reporting data provides transparency, accountability and consistency, helping us track performance over time. Operational data enables hotel teams to make better decisions. Food waste tracking reveals where waste occurs, whether in preparation, overproduction or at buffet service, allowing teams to take targeted action. Recipe-level carbon calculations can help chefs adapt menus while maintaining guest satisfaction.

For us, a meaningful metric must relate to a material impact, be measured consistently, be actionable at hotel level, and be verifiable. If it cannot influence a decision, it will not drive operational change. We translate technical concepts into clear value propositions for clients. At our VNZ hotels, we rate the carbon footprint of buffet items from A to E, nudging guests to choose lower-carbon options.

Where are the greatest opportunities for circularity in hotels, and what prevents them from becoming standard practice?

Some of the biggest opportunities lie in areas hotels use every day and at scale: F&B, amenities, water solutions, laundry, refurbishment materials and procurement. The most sustainable waste is waste that is never created. Better forecasting, smarter menu design and surplus redistribution can reduce environmental impact and operational costs.

Reusable solutions and durable products offer opportunities in packaging and amenities. The next frontier is moving circularity upstream into construction, refurbishment, textiles and equipment procurement, with greater emphasis on durability, repairability and end-of-life recovery.

The barriers are often implementation. Infrastructure and regulations differ across markets, data remains limited, and scalable supply-chain solutions are not available everywhere. The task now is to accelerate adoption.

How does RHG approach social impact, and what demonstrates that an initiative is creating lasting value?

Social impact is embedded through our **Think People** and **Think Community** pillars, which focus on our team members, local communities, business practices, skills development, human rights and creating operational opportunities. What matters is understanding outcomes. It is relatively easy to count volunteer hours, donations or people reached. The more difficult question is whether an

initiative has created value. Training programmes become more meaningful when they improve employability or career development.

In 2025, RHG team members contributed tens of thousands of volunteer hours through local community initiatives, while the **Radisson People Foundation** supported more than 400 team members facing hardship. The figures demonstrate engagement, but the objective is to create lasting opportunities, stronger communities and measurable improvements.

Our longstanding partnership with **Just a Drop** connects guest actions to community impact. Through our towel-reuse and light-housekeeping programme, guests can reduce water and resource consumption, while RHG donates to the charity. The partnership has helped provide access to clean water and sanitation for more than 35,000 people, contributing to benefits including improved health, increased school attendance, particularly among girls, and stronger economic resilience. For meetings and events, social impact is most effective when designed from the beginning, rooted in local needs and supported by credible partners. So what changed, and will that change last?

How is RHG recalibrating the business case for sustainability, balancing investment, operational efficiency and long-term value?

Sustainability is a combination of all three, depending on the initiative. Upgrading legacy buildings, electrifying systems and major energy implementations often involve longer payback periods. However, these measures help future-proof assets, reduce exposure to energy costs and improve resilience in a changing regulatory environment. Other initiatives deliver more immediate benefits. Reducing food waste, improving efficiency and optimising resource use can lower costs while reducing environmental impact. Better water management and more efficient buildings strengthen operational resilience and competitiveness.

Since launching our VNZ hotels programme in 2025, we have seen a 70% increase in brand awareness and a 25% increase in direct bookings linked to the initiative. Research shows that 84% of B2C travellers value sustainability, while 52% of travel managers want sustainability benchmarks when making purchasing decisions. Corporate clients, investors and guests expect transparency and credible sustainability performance. Sustainability is becoming part of how businesses assess risk, resilience and value creation.

Sustainability is about creating hotels that are more resilient, more attractive to guests and corporate customers, and better positioned to generate value as environmental performance becomes a core business expectation.

When **Reuse** Becomes the **Standard**

Meet the Better Stands Programme

From a practical application at **IMEX Frankfurt** to a framework reshaping how exhibition booths are designed, built and valued, **Better Stands** is moving the conversation from what happens to a stand to the decisions that determine its environmental footprint.

An exhibition hall can change almost overnight. Empty space becomes a dense landscape of structures, lighting, graphics and meeting spaces; days later, much of it is dismantled and disappears again. For visitors, the transformation is part of the spectacle, but for those watching the build and breakdown, it reveals an intricate chain of design choices, materials, procurement decisions and logistics compressed into a remarkably short window. Developed to address the familiar build-and-dispose model of exhibition booths, Better Stands has evolved from a practical pilot into a framework for measuring and encouraging reusability. At IMEX Frankfurt 2024, it began as an experiment. By 2026, the question was how to make them progressively more common. For **Milda Salciute** (pictured above), **Director, Events Consulting at GDS-Movement** and **Better Stands Assessor**, the first lesson is that a stand cannot be considered in isolation. At IMEX Frankfurt 2026, her team assessed 180 custom-build booths, with 69% achieving a Bronze, Silver or Gold tier. “The greatest barrier is often not a particular material or construction method, but the disconnect between decisions made at different stages of a stand’s lifecycle,” she says. “Reuse needs to be planned collectively, with each stakeholder’s decisions supporting the stand’s next use, not just its first appearance.”

David Harrison (pictured below), **CFO of IMEX**, says the organisation reached a similar conclusion during its pilot: “The biggest lesson was that sustainability outcomes are largely determined long before the show opens. Reusability has to be considered at the design, procurement and specification stage as a collaboration between exhibitor and contractors.” That finding changed when IMEX gathers the information needed for its assessment. “We quickly learned that gathering accurate data during the build itself is difficult. There are limited opportunities to inspect materials sufficiently once construction’s underway, so we have moved much of that work earlier into the booth design submission process,” Harrison admitted. “We realised that effective measurement requires dedicated time and focus which is difficult for our team to fulfil, particularly during the show itself.” IMEX subsequently brought in specialist partners, like the GDS-Movement, to support the assessing process.

The level of scrutiny involved is largely invisible to visitors. What they do not see is the precision required to turn an empty hall into that environment within days, and then dismantle it soon afterwards. The work behind that process can also challenge assumptions about what makes a stand sustainable. Salciute has observed that booths requiring more deliberate assembly and dismantling can sometimes achieve higher reusability ratings. “It is important to stress that this is not a consistent correlation and that construction time is not an assessment criterion. However, it highlights that the way components are assembled, separated and prepared for another use matters just as much as the materials selected.” Better Stands makes this complexity visible through its Bronze, Silver and Gold tiers. “Measurement identifies areas of progress and highlights where progress has already been made. The Better Stands framework gives exhibitors and contractors clarity through a clear and consistent benchmark, rather than broader, less-specific sustainability claims,” Harrison tells us. The proportion of exhibitor booths classed as reusable at IMEX Frankfurt rose from 63% in 2025 to 69% in 2026. Yet the ambition is not to create a permanent hierarchy in which Gold remains an exceptional achievement. “Success would be reaching the point where reusable booths are no longer viewed as best practice, but simply standard practice. We are seeing year-on-year improvements here,” he adds.

Furthermore, the tiers also provide a pathway towards that baseline without demanding immediate perfection. “The tiered approach allows participants to understand their current stand, identify realistic next steps and improve over time,” notes Salciute. “Organisers can use the assessment findings to set minimum Better Stands tiers once the market has developed sufficient solutions and participants have had time to adapt.” Better Stands is becoming a shared framework across organisers, markets and supply chains, but Salciute is careful about what it claims to measure: “The framework provides a common language for assessing stand reusability, which allows organisers and suppliers to





set clearer expectations and compare results within the assessment.” This point demonstrates that upcycling has an economic context. Salciute points to the importance of an exhibitor’s planning horizon: “Reuse is not automatically the less expensive option in every circumstance. A meaningful comparison needs to consider repeated use, adaptation, storage, transport, and maintenance, not just the initial build cost.” Harrison approaches the same question from the organiser’s balance sheet. Implementing Better Stands represents “a significant outlay to IMEX”, but the organisation sees a return in “helping to future-proof business and strengthen the long-term value of our organisation”.

Transport is another major consideration. “One of the most important lessons has been that the greatest opportunity for positive impact often lies beyond the booth materials themselves,” Harrison says. “Through conversations with booth builders and designers, we have learned that transportation can be one of the largest contributors to a stand’s carbon footprint.” For the redevelopment of **Hall 9** at IMEX Frankfurt, IMEX prioritised partners able to use materials already located on site. When exhibitors request recommendations, the organisation also seeks to connect them with suppliers operating locally or with storage close to the venue. Exhibitors create demand when they specify reusability. Contractors respond by developing systems that can deliver it. Organisers can alter procurement requirements and set expectations. Venues and local suppliers determine what is practical once the stand has been dismantled.



Their interaction is where Better Stands could have its greatest long-term effect. “Beyond assessing individual booths, it can influence how the industry designs, procures and values exhibition infrastructure,” Salciute highlights. “Over time, this can shift the market towards systems that are designed for longevity, adaptation and multiple uses.” There is also a creative question. The exhibition stand remains a highly visible expression of a brand, and reuse could be interpreted as a constraint on individuality. Salciute sees the relationship differently. “Better Stands is not about limiting creativity, but embedding reusability into the creative brief.” Her example is exhibition carpet, where demand has helped make recyclable options more accessible and commercially viable. “As more exhibitors ask for reusable or lower-impact materials, suppliers have a clearer commercial incentive to develop and scale those solutions,” she concludes.

HQ DESTINATIONS & EVENTS



Montréal makes it more



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has a little something extra.**



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EVENTS



Madrid for Meetings... and the Things a Congress Cannot Pack!

Madrid is putting its mature meetings infrastructure to work on something harder to measure: the people, knowledge and local relationships that can outlast the event. **David Noack Pérez, Director of Madrid Convention Bureau (MCB)**, explains the tools and resources available to gauge this human dimension of the city.

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

In 2025, MCB supported 187 congresses; a figure that captures the scale of the operation but is merely a statistical indicator of the direction the city is now taking. After years spent building capacity and experience, Madrid is putting greater attention on what sits around those congresses: the universities, hospitals, researchers, professional communities and relationships that can give an association a reason to engage locally at a deeper level. “Madrid’s meetings ecosystem has become more connected, building on many years of experience in hosting international congresses,” says Noack Pérez. “Alongside its venues, accommodation and transport connections, one of the city’s greatest strengths is the expertise of its organisers, suppliers, and scientific and professional communities.” Madrid is making its local expertise a more deliberate part of its approach to attracting international congresses. “We are strengthening a knowledge-led approach to attracting international congresses,” Noack says. “The Convention Bureau is working to map and connect universities, hospitals, research institutions, professional communities and companies around relevant sectors.”

The work lies in connecting Madrid’s knowledge base with the people and institutions that can give an association’s congress a stronger local footing, and building those relationships into the proposition from the outset. “The competitive advantage is more than the concentration of expertise itself. It is our ability to make that expertise accessible and relevant to an association’s objectives, whether through scientific exchange, professional engagement or opportunities for collaboration beyond the congress.” Madrid’s **Ambassadors Programme** places local scientists, academics, doctors and other professionals at the centre of the process, drawing on relationships that often span several institutions and international societies. “Many professionals based in Madrid participate in international societies alongside their roles in national associations, hospitals, universities or research institutions,” Noack explains. “These overlapping relationships create valuable opportunities for scientific exchange and future congress bids.”

A bid, then, becomes a test of coordination as much as persuasion. The CVB has to understand what an association wants to achieve, identify the relevant people and institutions, and make the pieces fit without making the process feel like a relay race between unrelated suppliers. “Our greatest value lies in connecting these contributions,” says Noack.

“We help translate the association’s requirements into a coordinated destination response, taking account of practical needs as well as opportunities for scientific engagement and local collaboration.” The language of competition is also less useful to Madrid than it might first appear. In a country with Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga and Seville all offering substantial meeting capabilities, Noack sees the national market as a portfolio: “From our experience, it is much more a question of complementarity than a competition between cities.” Madrid’s size remains an asset, particularly for complex international congresses, but Noack is careful not to make the whole argument: “Our focus is to demonstrate how Madrid fits the needs of each association. The quality of the connections we can help create is as important as scale.”

In 2026, MCB increased its operating budget by 22.5%, with additional promotion in established markets and a stronger programme of social legacy projects attached to major congresses. Its international strategy is also becoming more explicitly sector-led, targeting opportunities where Madrid’s expertise and professional communities match the interests of associations. “We look at each organisation’s membership, congress rotation, decision-making process and objectives, alongside practical considerations such as connectivity and the support required to build local relationships,” Noack says. The idea takes on a more concrete form when a congress becomes a vehicle for something local. Madrid’s sustainability and legacy work now has its own practical infrastructure, including the **PLUS platform**, the **Sustainable MICE Guide** and a directory of social organisations. MCB’s *Madrid, Creating Legacy Through Your Meeting* guide takes the process further, setting out a sequence that runs from defining a legacy vision



before the event through monitoring, post-event evaluation and longer-term follow-up.

Madrid does not claim to have resolved the challenge of measuring legacy. “At destination level, Madrid ranked 21st among participating destinations in the **2026 GDS-Index**,” Noack says. “This provides a useful benchmark for the city’s sustainability performance, although it does not, by itself, measure the legacy of an individual congress...” Then comes the more revealing admission... “Recording the actions implemented during an event is different from demonstrating their lasting effects. Strengthening our ability to assess those longer-term outcomes remains an area of work.” **ENCALS Meeting 2026** provided a useful glimpse of what that ambition looks like in practice. The **European Congress for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)** brought around 1,200 delegates to Madrid and combined its scientific programme with public-facing activity (*see image below*): a blood-donation campaign with 140 collection points, an ALS film and discussion programme, 2,000 information leaflets and more than 50 environmental and social actions developed through PLUS. “On sustainability, the congress used our PLUS platform to support more than 50 actions aligned with six UN Sustainable Development Goals,” Noack explains. “The immediate contribution was a programme connecting the scientific meeting with public participation and local organisations.”

The **Madrid Challenge**, born out of the **BestCities Global Forum 2021** in the city, brought the impact discussion into the bidding process by encouraging associations to include impact objectives in requests for proposals. “The continuing

task is to translate those commitments into practice, taking account of the different missions and resources of each association.” Noack continues: “Being part of BestCities also gives Madrid a valuable space to exchange experience with other destinations.” For all the talk of infrastructure, bids and congress calendars, the proposition eventually arrives somewhere rather human. “I would like association leaders to see the depth of Madrid’s knowledge and professional communities alongside the infrastructure and experience for which the city is already known.” Ultimately, it is the hope that the city will prove useful in ways that cannot be tucked away in a delegate’s folder, snapped during a site inspection, or reduced to a single venue. “The next generation of our congress portfolio will combine operational quality with stronger links to the city’s areas of expertise and its communities. We want organisers and delegates to leave with more than a positive experience of the event. We want them to leave with relationships and knowledge that continue to matter,” Noack concludes.



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Museum of the Future © Visit Dubai

Dubai as a Launchpad for Global Meetings

Dubai's connectivity, convention infrastructure and regional expertise are supporting international associations looking to establish a presence, develop partnerships and engage with the region.

Author: Manuel Fernandes, HQ Magazine Manager

Dubai's confidence as a business events destination is currently being tested globally. The final quarter of 2026 has brought a succession of international conferences spanning healthcare, energy, insurance, chemicals, investor relations and technology, including the **Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association Forum**, the **International Society of Hypertension Scientific Meeting** and the **Aesthetic & Anti-Aging Medicine World Congress**. For **Dubai Business Events (DBE)**, the continued flow of international business, alongside signs of growth in visitation and hotel occupancy since March 2026, reflects a market that remains willing to entrust the city with complex events. Resilience and business continuity have also become part of Dubai's proposition after a period of regional uncertainty, alongside its established strengths in connectivity, infrastructure and operational readiness.

A Foothold in the Region

For international associations, Dubai's ambition begins before the congress itself and can continue through a longer-term regional presence. Its geographical position and extensive air links have long made the emirate an accessible meeting point between major markets. DBE's proposition now places greater emphasis on what associations can do once they arrive: establish partnerships, develop communities and engage with the region through established in-market expertise. The **Dubai Association Centre** provides a route from hosting an event to establishing a longer-term regional presence. Through its representative-office framework, associations can access centralised facilities, local expertise and the wider business environment while developing membership, partnerships and activities.

The **AI Safer Congress Ambassador Programme** approaches the same objective from another direction. Its network of academics, healthcare professionals, business leaders and government representatives connects international associations with UAE-based expertise, helping strengthen bids while opening channels between global professional communities and Dubai's institutions and industries. For congress organisers, these mechanisms create a proposition that continues beyond the traditional congress cycle. Associations can meet their community in Dubai while also using the city as a base for wider regional engagement.

Building Capacity, Connecting Expertise

Dubai is also expanding the physical capacity to support that ambition. Phase 1 of the **Dubai Exhibition Centre** expansion has been completed, providing 140,000 m² of event space, with the full masterplan reaching 180,000 m² by 2031. The scale expands the range of formats that major international gatherings can accommodate: plenary sessions, exhibitions, specialist programmes and networking can operate concurrently, with the fully completed venue designed for either one mega event or as many as 20 smaller events at the same time. The added capacity forms part of a much wider meetings infrastructure, ranging from purpose-built convention facilities to hotel meeting rooms across the city. Associations can therefore work across different conference scales and formats.

DBE is also focusing on sectors in which the emirate has substantial economic activity, with technology and AI increasingly prominent among them. The **Dubai Universal**



Aerial of Burj Khalifa © Visit Dubai

Blueprint for Artificial Intelligence, Dubai AI Week and the development of the **Dubai AI Campus** have all reinforced that direction, whilst the **Dubai International Financial Centre's** aspiration to become the world's first AI-native financial centre adds another dimension to the fintech sector. DBE also points to Dubai's 2026 position in the **Boston Consulting Group Intelligent Cities Index**, where it ranked second globally overall and first in the index's adoption of AI technologies and smart-city solutions.

The emphasis, therefore, is on attracting events connected to industries in which Dubai already has economic depth. Technology and AI sit alongside financial services, healthcare and life sciences, energy, engineering, logistics and mobility; sectors that also feature prominently in the destination's outlook for 2027. That sectoral focus gives the ambassador network another function. AI Safeer connects international professional communities with people who understand the local landscape, while DBE works with ambassadors to bridge global networks with Dubai's expertise, institutions and business environment. The objective is not simply to secure a congress, but to create the relationships capable of giving that congress a stronger local context.

The Value That Travels Home

A congress can also set changes in motion locally. DBE describes business events as platforms for knowledge exchange, professional development and sector growth, with the ambition that their value should continue after delegates return home. Following the **2023 World Physiotherapy Congress**, collaboration with the **Emirates Physiotherapy Society** contributed to a campaign that led the **Dubai Health Authority** to approve direct access to physiotherapy for the

local population. Outcomes such as this also inform how Dubai assesses success. Delegate numbers and economic impact remain relevant, but DBE says they are considered alongside sector growth, international partnerships, repeat business, local engagement and tangible legacy.

Dubai's association strategy also reflects a wider question for the business events industry: what can an international gathering enable after delegates leave? In Dubai, the focus is on the relationships built around the event with associations, professional communities, institutions, companies and government entities. The same priorities are reflected in DBE's engagement with **BestCities Global Alliance**, particularly event legacy, sustainability, innovation and longer-term impact. The Alliance also supports joint business development, market intelligence and international association engagement. With Cape Town hosting the 2027 Global Forum, the partnership creates further opportunities for collaboration.

Meanwhile, the pipeline for 2027 reflects the breadth of the overall proposition, exploring opportunities across Asia, particularly India and Greater China, as well as the **Gulf Cooperation Council**, Europe, Africa and selected North American markets. Dubai's confirmed 2027 congress wins include **Apimondia**, the **World Engineers Congress**, the **SICOT World Congress**, and the **TOKEN2049** Dubai scheduled for 21–22 April 2027. Dubai is building the capacity to host large and upscale gatherings while developing the institutional links that allow associations to engage with the city beyond their meeting dates. For international associations, the proposition combines access, capacity and proximity to the people and sectors central to the region's professional landscape.



Poznań Event Hub Opens Up New Event Possibilities



Launched in 2025, **Poznań Event Hub** brings together four venues under **Grupa MTP: Poznań International Fair, Poznań Congress Center, Port Solecz, Hipodrom Wola**, currently undergoing modernisation. **Magdalena Hołowińska, Head of Sales**, speaks about the organisation's vision and Poznań's position in the international congress market.

The Hub, launched in 2025, brings four distinct venues under one umbrella. What prompted Grupa MTP to create it, and what possibilities does it offer for event organisers?

Poznań Event Hub is a natural evolution of more than a century of experience in the MICE industry. Grupa MTP has always created space for business and cultural events, but today's market demands flexibility, synergy, and a unified brand. The Hub is an umbrella brand connecting our flagship venues, such as the **Poznań International Fair, Poznań Congress Center**, or **Port Solecz**, nestled in the historic Solecz Park.

We offer over 170,000m² of event space, ranging from state-of-the-art exhibition halls and the iconic **Earth Hall** to intimate, green retreats ideal for networking and relationship-building. This gives planners total freedom when shaping their programme. They can kick off the day with keynote sessions at the congress centre, move the exhibition to the expo pavilions, and host an evening networking reception in the intimate ambience of Port Solecz.

With the Hub still a relatively new identity, what do you want international associations and planners familiar with Poznań's trade-fair heritage to understand about its wider event offer?

We want the world to know that Poznań is so much more than a traditional, respected trade fair capital. It is a vibrant, modern hub with a thousand-year history, one that blends a century of industry heritage with cutting-edge infrastructure and a welcoming urban atmosphere.

Hosting an event here guarantees top-tier venues, excellent accommodation, and premier services at competitive prices, along with continuous host-city support for congress organisers. One of the city's greatest advantages is its location halfway between Berlin and Warsaw. Air and rail connections ensure access from Europe and beyond, and delegates can enjoy complimentary public transport throughout their stay.

Getting from the airport to the city centre takes 15 minutes, while the main railway station is a 5-minute walk from the fairgrounds. The Old Town and major landmarks are within walking distance.

The city provides 4-star and 5-star hotels alongside a spectacular culinary scene, featuring 25 Michelin-recommended restaurants, a number that continues to grow as Poznań boldly aspires to the title of Poland's culinary capital.

Delegates leave Poznań not only impressed by our organisational standard, but also delighted by the city's cleanliness, abundant green spaces, strong sense of safety, and rich cultural offering.

How do you work with meeting planners to determine which spaces and formats best suit their programme?

The key to our success lies in listening to and understanding the unique DNA of each project. We conduct an in-depth analysis of the organiser's goals and needs, target delegate profile, industry specifics, programme dynamics, and budget. Our analysis allows us to tailor a proposal that combines the right venues and services into a cohesive experience.

Our main advantage is a city-centre location with 229,000 m² of modern exhibition, event, and administrative space, alongside underground parking. The pavilions are interconnected via covered skywalks and passageways, allowing delegates to move between spaces without stepping outside.

These spaces give us the flexibility to design everything from intimate gatherings to mega-events hosting tens of thousands of attendees. Delegates also have access to a lush garden to recharge and connect between sessions.

We act as a partner and adviser from the initial enquiry and spatial design to a seamless, successful delivery.

How important is the relationship between Poznań Event Hub's venues and the wider city experience for international delegates?

Today, a venue alone is no longer enough. Delegates are not just looking for another conference hall; they expect authentic experiences and real added value.

Our biggest advantage is our city-centre location, which allows guests to immerse themselves in the pulse of Poznań. Once sessions are wrapped up, delegates can reach their hotels in just a few minutes' walk, indulge in the culinary scene of the Old Town, or unwind in nearby green parks. Poznań itself becomes an active partner of the event. The upcoming **International Astronautical Congress (IAC 2027)** will take over the entire city, from accommodation and fairgrounds to public spaces.

We also empower organisers to host CSR-conscious events. We prioritise local and regional sourcing, have completely eliminated single-use plastics, reduce printed materials, and help

measure carbon footprints. We want attendees to experience the destination, offering tours that reveal Poznań's historic charm and vibrant culture.

During one recent event, we invited delegates to bring lanyards from past conferences. It looked fantastic, sparked networking conversations, and gave a second life to hundreds of badge holders. Our goal is for delegates to leave Poznań feeling they were part of something meaningful, responsible, and unforgettable.

What types of international events are you looking to attract, and how does that relate to Poznań's wider strengths as a city?

We are focused on attracting flagship international business, medical, and technology congresses that shape the future of key economic sectors. We look for events that inspire, set new trends, and create a lasting legacy.

Our city is one of Poland's most important academic and innovative hubs. A prime example is winning the bid for the IAC 2027, where a decisive factor was the strong academic backing of **Poznań University of Technology** and its specialised programmes in aerospace and aviation. We are also strengthening our position in the medical sector. Next year, we will co-host **ICCA The Future of Healthcare Meetings**, a forum for medical and MICE industry leaders. Winning this event is a crucial milestone toward establishing Poznań as Poland's premier destination for international medical meetings. We have also secured the **AC Forum Annual Meeting 2028**, giving us an opportunity to showcase Poznań's potential to international association decision-makers.

Local ambassadors play a vital role in this process. We regularly bring together academic and business figures through the **Poznań Congress Ambassador Club**. By maintaining a dialogue with the scientific community, we bridge the gap between academia and the MICE industry. These local champions are invaluable in bringing world-class events to Poznań. We are not just looking for one-off events. We strive to create a long-term impact that enhances the city's prestige, drives regional economic growth, and delivers genuine value for our community.





South Africa Builds its Meetings Strategy around Sectors, Cities and Continental Reach

South Africa's business events strategy is entering a more nationally coordinated phase. The country ranked first in Africa in **ICCA's GlobeWatch Business Analytics 2025 Report**, with 115 international association meetings, while Cape Town retained its position as the continent's leading city for association congresses.

Corné Koch took up the role of **Chief Convention Bureau Officer** at the **South African National Convention Bureau (SANCB)** in December 2025, after more than a decade in Cape Town's business events sector. Her national mandate now places her at the centre of South Africa's effort to connect congresses with sector development, academic networks and a wider map of host destinations.



A National Meetings Ecosystem with Sector Depth

Koch's move from the **Cape Town and Western Cape Convention Bureau** at **Wesgro**, the official **Tourism, Trade and Investment Promotion Agency** for Cape Town and the Western Cape, to the SANCB comes at a point where South Africa has a strong confirmed pipeline across health, technology, mining, agriculture, energy, tourism and education. The bureau reports 66 international and regional conferences secured between 2025 and 2030, expected to contribute more than R1.2 billion (approx. €62 million), with events distributed across established hubs, secondary cities and smaller destinations.

SANCB's national positioning builds on Cape Town's established performance while giving greater visibility to places such as Johannesburg, Durban, Tshwane, Stellenbosch, Sun City, Paarl, Pilanesberg, Hermanus and Makhanda, broadening how South Africa presents its meetings offer. For Koch, the task is to make those destinations more visible to international planners and associations.

"International meeting planners often focus on the major cities, but there are destinations across South Africa that offer the same value proposition," she said. "Part of our role is to profile those destinations, highlight their infrastructure and improve awareness of what they can offer the meetings market."

A wider destination map also allows South Africa to match congresses with sector strengths in different parts of the country. Cape Town will host the **18th World Congress on Public Health** in September 2026 at the **Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC)**, under the theme *Health Without Borders: Equity, Inclusion, and Sustainability*. The same city continues to host **Africa Tech Festival**, **Investing in African Mining Indaba**, **Africa Energy Indaba** and

Enlit Africa, connecting the country to debates on digital infrastructure, mining, energy transition and water. Gqeberha, a major South African seaport and the Eastern Cape's largest city, will host the **Skål International World Congress** and the **International Conference on Business Models in Agriculture**, while Durban will welcome the **African Agri Investment Indaba**.

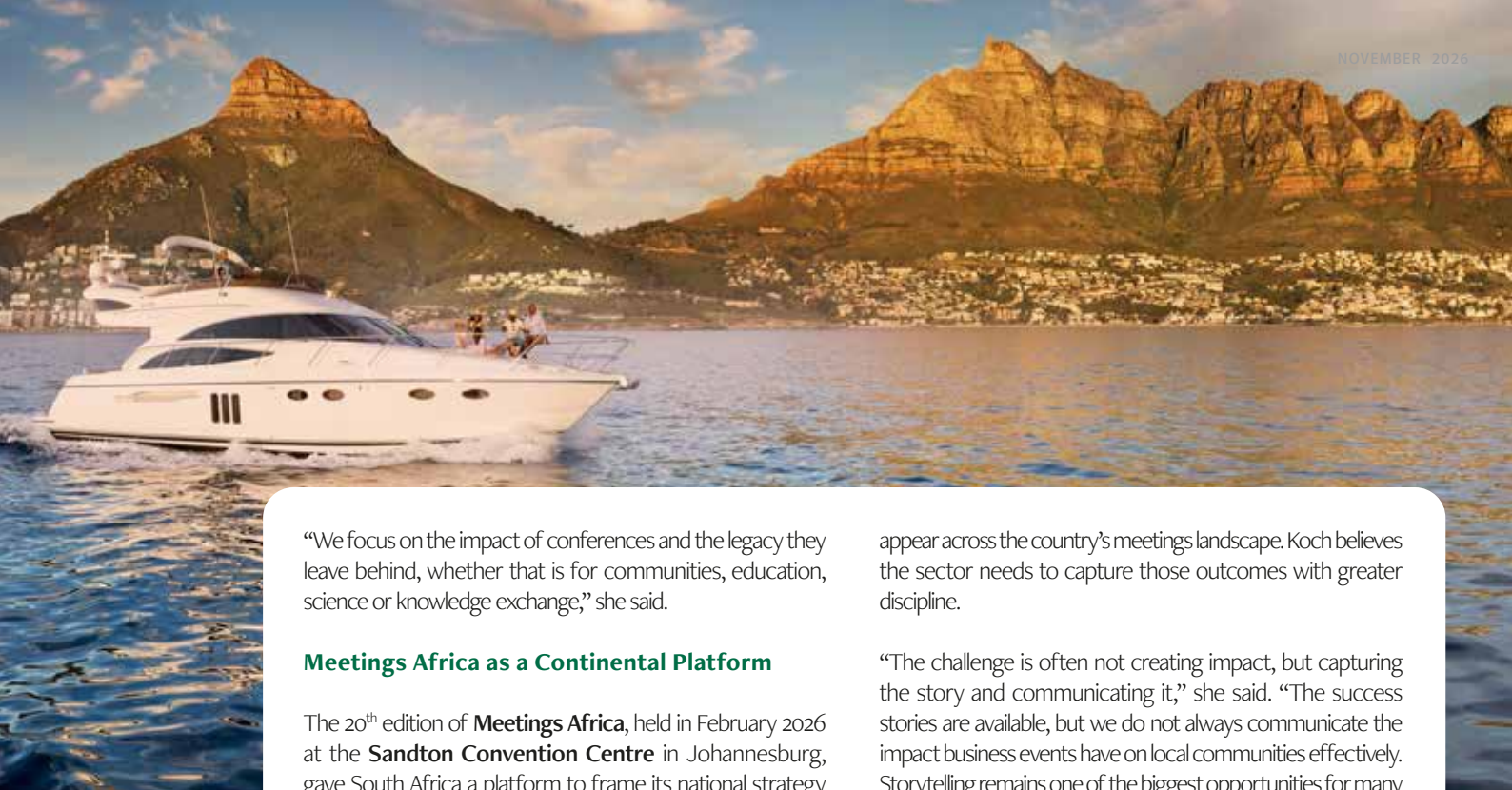
South Africa's priority sectors reflect the country's research capacity, professional communities and economic agenda. "Medical and life sciences, agriculture, education, manufacturing and business process outsourcing are among the sectors we focus on most closely," Koch said. "These are areas where South Africa is generating innovation and where we see strong opportunities to attract international meetings."

Academic networks play a practical role in that strategy. Universities identify congress opportunities, support bids, provide local hosts and help shape scientific programmes. Their involvement gives associations access to local expertise before a meeting takes place and helps the knowledge generated by the congress remain connected to local professional communities afterwards.

"Universities are critical partners in our work to attract meetings," Koch said. "60 to 70% of the meetings we attract are linked in some way to universities and academic networks."

Around those academic and sector links, the SANCB is putting more emphasis on legacy. Public health, agriculture, energy and technology meetings can support skills transfer, policy discussion, research collaboration and local supplier participation. Koch sees those outcomes as part of the case for attracting international meetings, building legacy into the bidding conversation before an event has been confirmed.





“We focus on the impact of conferences and the legacy they leave behind, whether that is for communities, education, science or knowledge exchange,” she said.

Meetings Africa as a Continental Platform

The 20th edition of **Meetings Africa**, held in February 2026 at the **Sandton Convention Centre** in Johannesburg, gave South Africa a platform to frame its national strategy within a wider African context. Organised by **South African Tourism** through the SANCB, the show has spent two decades connecting African business events suppliers with international buyers.

Buyers from more than 50 countries attended the 2026 edition, alongside hundreds of exhibitors from South Africa and other African markets. More than 120 small, medium and micro enterprises took part, while the **Sustainability Village** created a direct market-access route for local artisans and social enterprises using sustainable materials. The model replaces conventional delegate gifting with purchasing opportunities that send value to small producers.

Koch sees Meetings Africa as an international and continental platform rather than a national showcase. “Meetings Africa is a show for the continent. One of our priorities is to attract more African buyers and ensure that the event reflects the diversity of meetings taking place across Africa, not only international association congresses.”

Meetings activity across Africa includes regional trade forums, professional education events, investment meetings, sector platforms and congresses linked to public policy or development priorities. Meetings Africa brings those layers into one marketplace, while giving smaller suppliers and emerging destinations access to buyers they would rarely reach through individual promotion.

South Africa’s next area of work is the communication of impact. Community partnerships, academic involvement, sustainability projects and small-business participation already

appear across the country’s meetings landscape. Koch believes the sector needs to capture those outcomes with greater discipline.

“The challenge is often not creating impact, but capturing the story and communicating it,” she said. “The success stories are available, but we do not always communicate the impact business events have on local communities effectively. Storytelling remains one of the biggest opportunities for many of our destinations.”

The **2027 World Economic Forum Special Meeting** will be a perfect opportunity to communicate that impact. The Forum will show the world South Africa’s capacity to host international leadership discussions linked to policy, investment and economic development. For the SANCB, the larger task is to make each major meeting part of their national proposition: a country with established venues, sector expertise, academic partners and a continental role in shaping the future of African business events.



Manchester Takes on CHS and a Growing Events Portfolio

The **Conference & Hospitality Show (CHS)** brought its Leeds and Birmingham editions together in Manchester in September, launching a new flagship UK show outside London and the first of a planned three-year run in the city. More than 300 venues, hotels, destinations, and suppliers exhibited at the **AO Arena**, attracting over 500 event buyers and industry professionals, including a record number of hosted buyers. *HQ* joined the show and spent two additional days exploring Manchester as a host destination, moving between central event venues and meeting spaces across Greater Manchester to see how the destination works for different programmes and groups.

Author: **Jesús Parrado**, *HQ's International Commercial Manager*

A Larger Northern Meeting Point

CHS Manchester took over the **AO Arena**, a 23,000-capacity entertainment venue in the city centre, for a format bringing exhibition, education and networking into the same setting. Buyers could combine scheduled appointments and conversations with content across the **Revolution**, **Discover Manchester** and **Industry Hub** stages, where sessions addressed social value, destination development, major-event delivery and wider industry issues.

The larger format followed CHS's decision to replace its separate Birmingham and Leeds shows with one northern event. During the closing session, **Emma King, Founder and CEO of CHS**, called Manchester the 'natural solution' for bringing the two together. Exhibition space had sold out, and King said the turnout had exceeded expectations for the first Manchester edition.

The knowledge programme also addressed questions extending into the work of associations and event organisers. *Northern Roots: Delivering Social Value Through Urban Green Space* examined a 160-acre project in Oldham that combines an urban farm and eco-park with learning, health and community activity. *Destination Manchester: City-Wide Collaboration for Major Events* looked at how **Manchester City Council**, **Marketing Manchester**, **CityCo** and partners in transport, accommodation, hospitality and culture coordinate around large events, from **The Manchester Flower Festival** across public spaces to hosting the **BRIT Awards**.



Laura Mason, Head of Business Tourism at **Marketing Manchester**, outlined new accommodation and meeting spaces around **Etihad Campus**, the return of **Campfield Studios** to event use and the renovation of **Manchester Town Hall**, which is due to reopen in 2027. She also highlighted **Therme Manchester**, a large-scale wellness resort planned for 2028, among developments taking shape across Greater Manchester, including **The Loom** and **Northern Roots** in Oldham, **Stockroom** in Stockport, **Rochdale Town Hall** and **The Wellbeing Farm** in Bolton.

The CHS programme had begun the evening before the show, with **Manchester Calling** bringing delegates together at **Manchester Central**, the former railway station now offering over 23,000 m² of event space. Its proximity to Manchester Central and the **AO**

Arena, just a 15-minute walk away, made **The Edwardian Manchester** a convenient base for hosted guests. The historic five-star hotel has 20 meeting spaces for up to 500 people, alongside **Peter Street Kitchen**, the **Library Champagne Bar** and spa facilities.

Greater Manchester Across Event Formats

The day after CHS, our programme began in Gorton at **The Monastery Manchester**, a 19th-century former Franciscan church restored as an events and community venue. Its history remains visible in the **Great Nave**, now used for conferences, dinners and receptions for up to 650 people, with smaller rooms providing alternatives for private dining and breakouts. A charitable trust owns the property, while income generated by the



Manchester Museum © Marketing Manchester

events business is reinvested in maintaining it and supporting community work.

The **University of Manchester** builds on its research strengths to attract international conferences in areas such as the study of graphene and other advanced materials, health and cancer sciences, AI and digital technology, and sustainability and climate research. The university's conference and hospitality team collaborates with academics, Marketing Manchester and the convention bureau to identify and pursue relevant bids. The range of physical spaces available includes nine smaller meeting rooms in **Oddfellows Hall** and the **Nancy Rothwell Building**, which has a 720-m² exhibition area, theatres for 450 and 550 delegates, and more than ten seminar rooms that can accommodate between 20 and 160 people. Larger teaching spaces are more available during Easter and university holidays, making the academic calendar important for conference planning.

The **Manchester Museum** is located within the same university complex, enabling organisers to combine academic meeting spaces with receptions and dinners without requiring delegates to travel to different parts of the city. The **Living Worlds Gallery** can host 120 guests for dinner or 200 for a reception, while the neighbouring **Whitworth Hall** can accommodate up to 600 people in a theatre-style layout and 300 for dinner. The museum has recently undergone a £15 million (approx.

£17 million) refurbishment and extension project, which added new gallery spaces.

Aviva Studios in St John's was designed around the production demands of **Factory International**, the organisation behind **Manchester International Festival**. Its four spaces can be hired separately or combined, with the **Warehouse** accommodating up to 4,500 people and **The Social** providing a smaller bar setting. Around 40 in-house technicians cover technical production, while two 40-tonne truck lifts give articulated lorries direct access to the Warehouse. Venue hire supports Factory International's cultural and skills programmes.

Exhibition and **Sexy Fish** provided two contrasting options for dining and evening functions. Set in a former 1850s museum, Exhibition brings together three independent kitchens alongside a cocktail bar. Sexy Fish pairs its Asian-inspired menu with private-event facilities, including the 36-person **Tropical Reef Room**. Movable furniture and electronically controlled doors can create separate areas for networking or private functions, supported by audiovisual facilities and soundproofing for simultaneous music.

Sport provides a different backdrop at **Emirates Old Trafford**, home of Lancashire Cricket, where conference facilities and accommodation are integrated within the cricket ground. Its main conference and

exhibition hall, **The Point**, offers 1,125 m² of pillar-free space overlooking the pitch. Hospitality suites, smaller meeting rooms and outdoor areas support breakouts and social events, while the adjoining 250-room **Hilton Garden Inn** has 136 rooms with pitch-view balconies. Multi-day events can keep plenary sessions, accommodation, catering and hospitality within the same complex.

The final visit was to **LOWRY** at Salford Quays, a theatre and gallery complex opened in 2000 as part of the regeneration of the former docks. Home to the world's largest public collection of works by **L. S. Lowry**, it combines theatre, exhibitions and community programmes with substantial event facilities, including the 1,730-seat **Lyric Theatre**, 440-seat **Quays Theatre**, 150-seat Studio and five meeting spaces for groups of 20 to 250. A recent international radiology conference showed how those spaces can accommodate specialist requirements: lounge, bar and restaurant areas became exhibition space, while another room was equipped with 20 ultrasound machines for hands-on medical training. Commercial event income supports LOWRY's charitable work in performance, learning and community engagement, linking its business events activity directly to its wider cultural and social contribution.

For more info: www.meetinmanchester.com

PCMA Convening EMEA 2026 Puts Trust at the Centre of Better Decisions

PCMA Convening EMEA 2026 brought 565 business events professionals from 42 countries to Lisbon for its largest edition to date. Over three days, the programme examined what organisations increasingly expect events to deliver and how the industry is responding. Leadership, technology, association strategy and destination collaboration brought different perspectives to questions of trust, evidence and meaningful exchange, while returning to a more fundamental question: what do people need from meeting face to face?

Author: Jesús Parrado, HQ's International Commercial Manager

Ideas for a Changing Events Industry

Convening EMEA organised its knowledge programme around three pillars, Connection, Integrity and Future, with formats ranging from larger presentations to workshops and smaller group discussions. Sustainability, technology, artificial intelligence, geopolitical risk and association strategy appeared across the agenda, alongside sessions examining intercultural communication, disagreement and the changing expectations of event participants. The programme reflected issues of particular relevance to the work of associations and business events professionals.

Dr Elke Geraerts, Doctor of Psychology and CEO of Better Minds, a science-based organisational consultancy and training company, examined how easier access to information is changing the proposition of attending a conference in person. Recordings, accelerated playback and AI-generated summaries increasingly allow people to access content without travelling. Geraerts focused on the capabilities that gain importance when people do gather, including critical thinking, judgement, empathy and creativity.

Geraerts questioned agendas that leave little room for reflection, particularly when delegates already work with high volumes of information. Breaks and informal exchanges give participants time to consider what they have heard, discuss it with others and relate it to their own work.

Dr Poornima Luthra, Principal Lecturer of People, Culture & Inclusion and Deputy Head of Department at Imperial College



Business School in London, focused on disagreement and psychological safety. Giving people space to express a position does not require an organisation to adopt it. Decisions still have to be made within organisational priorities and ethical boundaries, while people need to feel that their perspective has been heard.

Her work on cross-cultural leadership brought communication and decision-making into the same discussion. Directness, hierarchy, silence, consensus and the pace at which decisions are reached can carry different meanings across cultures. International associations encounter such differences among boards, members, staff and partners. Making working preferences explicit can help organisations identify whether friction comes from a

substantive disagreement or from different expectations about how people communicate and work together.

Findings from the *PCMA Outlook Report* brought data and organisational impact into focus. Event professionals are taking on greater strategic responsibilities, yet 68% of respondents reported difficulties accessing the right data to demonstrate impact. Limited access to reliable evidence affects the ability to substantiate decisions around budgets, event portfolios and organisational priorities.

Associations face a related shift in how they understand the communities around them. The research presented in Lisbon indicated that traditional membership may stagnate or decline while wider communities continue to

grow, with only 23% of associations described as effectively monetising those audiences. Events often reach professionals outside formal membership structures, making it increasingly important to understand who those participants are, what they value and how the relationship with the association can develop.

Ronni Abergel, Founder and Director of the **Human Library Organization**, approached inclusion and curiosity through direct conversation. The Human Library allows participants to ‘borrow’ a person whose identity or experience may attract assumptions, stigma or prejudice and ask questions in a structured setting.

Abergel acknowledged that curiosity can involve discomfort and imperfect language. Participants were encouraged to ask, listen and remain open to having their assumptions challenged by someone speaking from lived experience. Even small design choices entered the discussion, including whether name badges were readable enough for participants to address one another properly.

The Human Library also offered a useful example of programme design serving a defined purpose. The format required participants to practise curiosity and inclusion through direct conversation with other attendees.

Many Routes into Lisbon

Five Exploration Tours on the opening day took participants into Lisbon through food, culture, creative expression and urban development, bringing the host destination into the programme before the conference sessions began. I joined the group visiting Beato Innovation District, while other routes explored Belém, historic neighbourhoods and the urban transformation of Parque das Nações.

The connection between events and their host destinations was explored further in the knowledge programme, where a discussion involving the perspectives of destinations, venues and associations examined the coordination behind major international events. Lisbon offered a relevant reference

point through Parque das Nações, the district redeveloped for **Expo ‘98** and now home to event infrastructure alongside public transport, hotels, workplaces and housing. The district is also home to the **Lisbon Exhibition and Congress Centre (FIL)**, host venue of PCMA Convening EMEA 2026. Speakers described steering structures that bring public and private stakeholders together ahead of major events such as the **Web Summit**, with operational planning extending to decisions such as adjusting metro frequency to accommodate tens of thousands of participants.

Assessing the value of conferences and events involved attendance and economic impact alongside sector relevance, knowledge exchange, relationships with local organisations and repeat business. Such evidence can help convention bureaux and venues explain the use of public and private resources committed to attracting and supporting international meetings.

One example came from the **European Association for International Education (EAIE)**, which uses its **Venue Collaboration Day** to transfer sustainability knowledge

between successive congress hosts. Previous, current and future host venues share practices across food and beverage, logistics, production, data and reporting, allowing incoming hosts to build on experience gained during earlier editions.

Seville Takes Over in 2027

Convening EMEA closed its largest edition to date with 565 participants attending in person, 814 including the global digital audience, and 42 countries represented. PCMA will bring Convening EMEA to Seville from 13 to 15 September 2027, with **FIBES, Seville Conference & Exhibition Centre**, confirmed as the venue.

Moving from Lisbon to Seville also keeps Convening EMEA on the Iberian Peninsula for a second consecutive year. Nine years after PCMA brought its **European Influencers Summit** to Seville, the scale will be markedly different. More than 600 participants are expected in 2027, as Convening EMEA continues to examine how the time, knowledge and relationships created through events translate into value for the people and organisations involved.



TIME 2026 Connects Business Events to Social and Economic Value in Thailand

The Thailand Innovative Meetings Exchange (TIME 2026) is the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB)'s flagship international platform, connecting meeting and incentive buyers with Thai suppliers, destinations and industry experts. In 2026, over 110 international hosted buyers, media and, for the first time, content creators joined a six-day programme in Bangkok and Khao Lak. HQ joined them on my first visit to Thailand and Southeast Asia. The programme moved from Bangkok's dense business environment to Khao Lak's slower resort life in Phang Nga Province, showing the range of Thailand's business-events proposition. Across knowledge sessions, business exchanges and experience tracks, one idea gained ground: events can create value for delegates, companies, industries, communities and people who live in host destinations.

Author: Jesús Guerrero Chacón , HQ's Deputy Editor

Thailand Moves From Volume to Value

TIME's Knowledge Exchange opened in Bangkok with sessions on changing markets, technology, sustainability, buyer expectations and event design. TCEB President Dr Supawan Teerarat used *The Power of Possibility* to define three shifts in Thailand's direction: volume to value, destination promoter to economy connector, and MICE as a catalyst for transformation.

"The future is not simply about bringing more people to Thailand. It is about creating more value because they came," she told delegates. For Teerarat, that meant knowledge entering the country, Thai companies meeting

global partners, investment conversations beginning and opportunities reaching cities and communities. TCEB now recognises 16 certified MICE Cities, following the addition of six destinations in September 2026, each with different industries, infrastructure and local assets. TIME 2026 also took buyers beyond that network to Khao Lak, showing that destinations can support business events when their setting and offer suit the event format. Teerarat's *Power of Possibility* was visible in our itinerary.

Thailand seeks to connect international events with healthcare, technology, the digital economy, green industries and the creative economy. **MaxiMICE Thailand**, introduced at

IMEX Frankfurt in May 2026, translates that concept into three key areas. Convenience covers connectivity, venues and organiser support. Experience draws on Thailand's culture, local knowledge, wellness, creativity and destination settings. Impact covers the business, knowledge, sustainability and community outcomes an event creates.

Right Next Door: Unlocking the Power of ASEAN's Repeat Business added a market perspective across the 11 Southeast Asian countries that make up ASEAN. Speakers working with Singaporean, Indonesian and Filipino clients described how culture, spending patterns and previous experience of Thailand create different expectations across markets often



grouped under one ASEAN label. Repeat visitors may already know Bangkok's main temples, shopping areas and city highlights, so returning groups increasingly seek a different way into the destination through food, wellness, neighbourhoods, local production or another part of the country. ASEAN is geographically close, but its source markets are far from interchangeable.

Bangkok Links Events with Jobs and Quality of Life

When governments understand the value of business events, their role can reach into jobs, infrastructure, public services and quality of life. Bangkok's event capacity includes three major convention hubs: **IMPACT Arena**, **Exhibition and Convention Center (HQ interviewed IMPACT in issue #125, July 2026)**, **Bangkok International Trade & Exhibition Centre (BITEC)** and **Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC)**. They serve events of different scales and sectors alongside convention hotels and an expanding transport network.

At TIME 2026, **Dr Chadchart Sittipunt, Governor of Bangkok and Head of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA)**, presented *Shaping Tomorrow's Bangkok. A City Designed for MICE & Beyond*. The opening slide made one change: 'MICE & Beyond' became 'Everyone'.

"We need to improve the quality of life of our people and visitors, and increase productivity for businesses," Sittipunt said.

More than 553,000 small and medium-sized businesses employ 3.6 million people in Bangkok, compared with 3.4 million across almost 8,000 large businesses. Business-event spending reaches both, from major hotels and companies to street vendors and smaller operators.

Those seven million workers share the transport networks, footpaths and public spaces used by delegates during major events. Bangkok's rail network is planned to reach 11 lines, 297 stations and 466.1 kilometres by 2028. Work on 1,000 kilometres of improved footpaths aims to increase walkability and



accessibility, while 530 15-minute parks have been completed and more than 2.7 million trees planted.

BMA vocational schools provide training from English for service to hospitality and traditional Thai massage for wellness. New hotel permit applications are moving online, open-data tools give businesses access to city information, and **Traffy Fondue**, a BMA digital reporting platform, lets residents report city problems and rate how completed cases were handled, giving the administration a way to track both response and resident satisfaction. Sittipunt's TIME figures showed around 1.42 million reports, with more than 1.15 million completed.

"The 1.42 million complaints are not our weakness. They are trust," Sittipunt said. Residents trust the city to respond, while organisers rely on many of the same systems to deliver their events.

Meetings Take a Different Route to Local Value in Khao Lak

After Bangkok's fast-paced schedule of knowledge sessions, supplier meetings and urban venues, TIME took delegates by air to Phuket and then north along the Andaman coast to Khao Lak. Around 1.5 hours from Phuket International Airport, the resort destination in Phang Nga Province brought a different pace. Beachfront properties, wellness facilities, outdoor settings and

more intimate meeting environments suited incentives, retreats and corporate groups with different briefs and a more relaxed rhythm.

International buyers met Thai and local suppliers at a second business exchange, while delegates chose among itineraries spanning temple visits, wellness, sport, adventure, nature and sustainability. TCEB coordinated those different routes within one group, putting the earlier ASEAN discussion into practice: a familiar destination can feel different when organisers offer new ways to experience it.

Smaller groups, wellness sessions and shared activities created more space for informal conversation, while local businesses, community initiatives and environmental projects became part of the programme. Upcycling discarded fishing nets and plastic bottles offered one way to integrate Corporate Social Responsibility and sustainability into the delegate experience.

Flexibility gives organisers scope to tailor meetings and incentives to varying interests, energy levels and objectives.

Continue the Journey

Visit HQ's website for the full TIME 2026 report on the tracks, venues and experiences across Bangkok and Khao Lak.

HQ INSIGHTS

Tech, Associations & PCOs



Stop Counting Footfall. Start Designing Meetings.



Event meetings have spent decades as an accident of the floor plan. That is changing. Research for **ExpoPlatform's** ebook *The Meetings Engine* found that 91% of organisers plan to introduce new meeting formats in the next twelve months.

Author: Conor Riordan, Digital Content Editor at ExpoPlatform

The figures beneath that headline tell the same story: 88% believe pre-scheduled, purpose-built meetings would improve exhibitor experience and lead generation; 94% say the same of buyer and visitor experience; and 82% see them as a route to new revenue. The operative word is 'would'. Organisers know the lever exists, but most have yet to pull it.

The Inherited Default

The traditional meetings model was never designed. It evolved. Lounges got bigger, apps got bolted on and the industry came to judge events on whether they felt busy. A busy hall proves very little. Exhibitors leave with badge scans instead of decision-makers. Buyers walk the floor looking for suppliers they never find. Organisers enter rebooking conversations with footfall figures that cannot show whether the right meetings happened. All three problems share a root cause: meetings are treated as something that happens at an event instead of being designed into it.

Commercial Value and Attendee Value are One Argument

Purpose-built formats such as concierge meetings, round tables, board meetings, hosted buyer programmes and speed networking change what organisers sell, turning premium formats into inventory with measurable outcomes.

Overcorrection is the risk. A senior buyer whose calendar is packed with back-to-back pitches stops turning up. The buyers exhibitors most want to meet are the least tolerant of wasted time and the least willing to be processed. The ebook's answer is curated serendipity: a short window of high-value pre-arranged meetings, with the rest of the day left open for small-group formats where discovery can still happen.

Commercial objectives and attendee value can align. A buyer who meets the right people comes back, while an exhibitor who meets that buyer rebooks. Both make premium formats easier to sell.

Where AI Stops

AI has made multi-format meetings programmes operationally viable. Matching thousands of profiles, rescheduling around no-shows, and reading behavioural signals are jobs where algorithms outperform spreadsheets. What buyers read and watch reveals their intent more accurately than a registration form. Meetings built on those signals can improve ROI for stakeholders while preserving serendipity.

AI cannot decide which formats to run, for which audience or against which commercial goal. It cannot write the personal note that persuades a C-level buyer to take a meeting or handle the exhibitor whose biggest competitor has just walked through the door. Meeting planning still involves intuition, and even the most capable models need human oversight. AI works best as infrastructure, supported by human judgement.

What Organisers Need to Rethink

Organisers who pull ahead in 2027 will treat meetings as a discipline, guided by three questions. Who is the highest-value audience and how do they buy? What does the exhibitor proposition sell? Where is revenue coming from and where could it come from?

The answers rarely point to every available format or just one. Strong events combine three or four, each assigned to a specific outcome. Already, 91% have decided the old default is not good enough. The challenge for 2027 is turning that intent into event design.



The **Advocacy Work Associations** Can Now Afford to Do

Most association leaders could name three things their organisation should be doing more of, if the team had time: following the outcomes of a congress beyond the closing survey; connecting years of research to the questions members are asking today; equipping chapters with evidence they can use in conversations with policymakers. What these ambitions lack is not purpose but someone with enough hours left in the week to carry them forward.

Author: Vamshi Velmajala, CEO & Co-founder of Snapsight



The annual meeting must happen. The certification programme must run. Members need answers. The work of understanding longer-term impact, connecting institutional knowledge and preparing for future advocacy opportunities gets fitted around those commitments. AI is changing that capacity equation. Work that once required extensive manual research, specialist technical support, or a separate project budget is becoming more manageable. For associations, this opens a consequential question: which parts of our mission can we now pursue more fully?

The Value That Is Hard to Carry Forward

Associations create value through work that accumulates over time. A professional standard improves practice. A congress introduces researchers who later collaborate. A mentoring programme helps someone remain in a profession. A committee recognises a problem before it appears on the public agenda. Understanding these contributions requires follow-up. Communicating them requires evidence and context. Often, the people best placed to do that work are already delivering the next programme.

The same difficulty affects advocacy. An association may hold relevant findings across member surveys, research publications and expert discussions, yet still need days to assemble them around a particular question. A chapter leader preparing to meet a public official may never encounter the most useful material. **Tommy Goodwin's** call for wider participation in advocacy, published on *The Iceberg*, emphasises coordinated messages delivered by people who understand their local context. That depends on a practical capability: making an organisation's knowledge available to the people representing it. AI gives associations new ways to build that capability into their everyday work.

What Has Changed in AI

Many professionals first encountered generative AI through drafting and summarising. Those remain useful applications. The more significant development is the ability to connect AI to an organisation's own information and the processes through which people use it.

A system can search a selected collection of research, retrieve relevant passages and prepare an answer with references. It can help organise interviews around agreed outcomes, compare findings across reports or identify questions that the available material leaves unanswered. Some applications connect this analysis to actions: helping structure an impact project, proposing indicators or guiding a user towards information that still needs collecting.

The association supplies the expertise and decides what the findings mean. AI reduces some of the effort required to reach that point. References help people inspect an answer; they still need to check whether the sources support it.

From Recording Activity to Understanding Change

My work developing **ImpactAIQ** (*find out more on HQ website*) with **Gevme** and **#MEET4IMPACT**, alongside **IcebergHub** powered by *The Iceberg*, has brought me close to two sides of this opportunity. ImpactAIQ supports the planning, measurement and communication of impact, connecting the change an organisation hopes to achieve with indicators and the information collected against them. IcebergHub makes existing industry research, case studies and advocacy resources easier to discover and use, so that evidence, like the case below, can be found by the person who needs it rather than by the person who happens to remember it.



The **International Council of Nurses Congress 2023** in Montréal was designed to do more than convene. It set out to address post-pandemic workforce shortages, to open discussion on equity and systemic racism within the profession, and to influence ethical recruitment practice at a time when wealthier health systems were drawing nurses from countries that could least spare them. **Destination Canada's Legacy & Impact Study**, which followed fifteen international events over three years with #MEET4IMPACT and **GainingEdge**, later documented the congress as having raised the visibility of those issues, shaped policy and contributed to reform within the sector. The immediate reporting would have covered attendance, participation and satisfaction. The study's value lies in the fact that someone kept asking what changed afterwards, and recorded the answers in a form the profession can now use.

AI can make that pattern routine instead of exceptional. Follow-up responses can be organised, linked to a programme's intended outcomes and prepared for review, leaving staff more time to speak with participants and interpret what they hear. The resulting evidence can improve the next programme and inform the next policy conversation. A positive testimonial, a documented change and evidence that a programme caused that change remain different things. Technology can help investigate those distinctions, while professional judgement gives the conclusions credibility.

Expertise Within More People's Reach

There is an access dimension here. An association's knowledge becomes more useful when a wider range of people can draw on it confidently. A chapter leader may need a relevant local example. A volunteer may need a plain-language explanation before a meeting. A small association may need

to explore research it could never afford to commission itself. AI can help people navigate that material and prepare for a conversation. It can also help a chapter in another country access congress evidence in its own language, provided the interpretation is reviewed, since findings from one jurisdiction cannot be assumed to apply directly in another.

Timing matters in advocacy because participation depends on preparation. A consultation opens, a committee calls for submissions or a minister raises a question in public, and an association may have only weeks to respond. Organisations that have already assembled their evidence are better placed to take part.

Choose One Ambition That Has Been Waiting

The starting point is an important question the association has repeatedly lacked capacity to pursue. What happened after the professional development programme we ran three years ago, and what would we say to a policymaker about it? Choose one such question. Assemble the relevant material, establish who will review the findings and use AI to test where the effort can be reduced. Document preparation, permissions and ongoing review still require attention; a focused question makes that work manageable. The result should be something the organisation maintains, with new evidence improving its understanding over time.

Associations have spent decades building expertise, relationships and professional knowledge. AI is expanding their capacity to connect those assets, assess the difference their work makes and bring that evidence into public decision-making. For leaders, the opportunity is to revisit ambitions that have been sidelined by immediate priorities and give one of them a permanent place in the association's work.

Shaping the **Future Talent** of **Convention Centres**

In 2021, a small group of industry *aficionados* came up with the idea that **AIPC** should create a platform for upcoming talent. The goal was twofold: allow this talent to develop at high speed while providing AIPC members a way to attract and retain talent. With the sixth edition about to start, there are both lessons learned and great stories to tell.

Authors: Ciara Davidson (*pictured below*), Director of Transformation and Governance at ICC Belfast, and Sven Bossu (*pictured above*), AIPC CEO

Some of the most meaningful innovations emerge during periods of profound uncertainty. For the global convention centre industry, the COVID-19 pandemic was precisely such a moment. Venues stood empty, established business models were challenged, and industry leaders faced fundamental questions about the future of face-to-face meetings. It was against this backdrop that the **International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC)**, launched its **Future Shapers** programme in 2021. The ambition was to identify emerging leaders within the community, equip them with new skills and perspectives, and empower them to actively shape the industry's future.

With the full support of the AIPC Board of Directors, the initiative was developed by an international task force. At the time, its members were **Kathleen Warden** of the **Scottish Event Campus**, **Elaine Wan** of the **Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre**, **Samantha Glass** of **ICC Sydney** and **Kareem Salvant** of **New York's Javits Center**. From the outset, the programme combined leadership development, international collaboration, mentoring and practical innovation challenges, culminating in presentations to senior decision-makers.

The original concept envisaged a 12-month programme with a maximum of 20 participants, reflecting a deliberate commitment to intensive engagement and meaningful peer-to-peer learning. Its underlying philosophy was that the future of convention centres should not simply be discussed by today's leaders, but also actively designed by tomorrow's.

Collaboration & Challenges

The Future Shapers model rests on three interconnected pillars: education, collaboration and application. Participants,

selected from high-performing professionals working within AIPC member venues, engage with international experts on subjects ranging from leadership and communication to business development and organisational agility.

Yet, the programme's defining feature is its practical dimension. Participants work in multicultural, geographically dispersed teams to identify significant challenges facing the convention centre industry and develop credible solutions.

These ideas are refined into business cases and presented at the **AIPC Annual Conference**, where participants face an audience of experienced venue executives, creating an unusual learning environment. Emerging leaders are being challenged to demonstrate strategic thinking, build consensus, develop commercially relevant proposals and communicate persuasively.

The international nature of the programme adds another dimension. Participants must navigate cultural differences, contrasting professional perspectives, and multiple time zones, often while maintaining demanding full-time roles. Challenges mirror the complexity of leadership in an increasingly interconnected global industry. The programme also creates relationships that extend beyond graduation, supported by an expanding alumni network and opportunities for former participants to mentor subsequent cohorts.

From PowerPoint to Practice

The programme's evolution can be traced through the ideas, achievements and experiences of successive cohorts. The inaugural group, graduating at the **2022 AIPC Annual**



Congress in Budapest, demonstrated the potential of the model. Two teams presented innovative digital solutions addressing longstanding operational challenges. Team EventShaper proposed an integrated event management platform connecting venues, organisers and service providers. Team Optimum developed a concept to streamline venue sales processes, improve responses to requests for proposals, and optimise revenue management. Importantly, their proposals attracted interest in further development, building solutions with potential commercial value.

The second cohort, graduating in Luxembourg in 2023, raised the bar further. Team Visionary won the annual challenge with a proposed four-dimensional space visualisation tool, allowing clients to explore different event configurations during planning and site visits. The concept targeted a 15-20% improvement in enquiry conversion rates, alongside greater planning efficiency. The competing Team E:QUAL proposed an international professional community focused on wellbeing, safety, recruitment, training and industry standards. The projects showed that innovation is not limited to technology; it also makes it possible to rethink how the industry attracts, supports and develops its people.

By 2025, the programme had reached its fourth cohort, addressing sustainability, workforce development and operational performance. The winning Team Synergy, including **Dave Young** of **ICC Belfast**, developed a concept focused on cross-functional training, collaboration and greater workforce flexibility. Young described the experience as a career highlight, while ICC Belfast's **Chief Executive, Rob McConnell** highlighted the international relationships and professional development opportunities created by the programme. Notably, Young was the third employee from the venue to be selected for Future Shapers, which emphasises the value that some organisations place on repeated participation.

The fifth cohort brought the story to Bilbao in 2026. Ten emerging leaders developed **Venue IQ**, a platform for transforming operational and client feedback into actionable intelligence, and a **Convention Center Hospitality Excellence Certification** concept designed to improve service standards and customer experience. The projects proved how the programme has evolved alongside the industry's priorities, from digital efficiency and commercial optimisation to sustainability, talent and hospitality excellence.

Legacy

Beyond individual projects, Future Shapers offers valuable lessons for organisations seeking to develop leadership talent and encourage innovation. First, leadership develops through experience, combining expert input, teamwork, business-case development and public presentation to put theory into practice. Second, diversity strengthens innovation by challenging assumptions and bringing alternative perspectives, while geographical, cross-cultural and time-zone collaboration adds to the learning experience.

Third, innovation needs commercial discipline. A compelling idea is only the beginning. Participants must consider feasibility, market demand, operational implications and financial sustainability. This encourages a shift from creative brainstorming towards strategic problem-solving. Fourth, executive engagement benefits both sides: participants gain visibility, feedback and access to decision-makers, while senior leaders gain fresh perspectives on venue operations. Finally, an active alumni community, including former participants as mentors, extends learning beyond graduation and builds a lasting professional network.

Furthermore, translating promising concepts into sustained implementation remains important. Future cohorts could benefit from structured post-programme support, pilot projects and measurable follow-up, helping to track both the learning processes and what their ideas have changed. Five years after its launch, Future Shapers represents a practical expression of AIPC's belief that the industry's future depends on investing in people as much as in buildings, infrastructure and technology.

Its influence is also becoming more closely connected to AIPC's governance. The association's plans announced in 2025 included representation for Future Shapers at Board level through a committee observer role, creating a potential pathway for emerging leaders to contribute to the association's strategic direction. The programme's greatest legacy may ultimately be a change in mindset: the recognition that leadership can be cultivated across organisational boundaries, that collaboration can accelerate innovation, and that emerging professionals deserve a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their industry's future.



Your **Members** Are Your Best Advocates

Set Them Up for Success!

Members are an association's most credible advocates, but commitment alone is not enough. Turning their willingness to act into meaningful influence requires the right roles, the right preparation and the recognition that keeps them engaged. Because advocacy is only as powerful as the people equipped to carry it forward.

Author: Mark Levin, CAE, CSP



There is an old saying in the trade association field that is always brought out at election time here in the United States: "Get into politics or get out of business!"

Having just been through our midterm elections, we have been hearing that even more frequently in the past months. Since much of my association management career has been spent working with and for trade associations, I have used that saying myself many, many times. I still consider it a valid statement: if you run a business you need to understand how political and governmental decisions impact your bottom line, then get involved in helping to determine what they will be.

But it is not just business organisations that need to be effective in advocacy and political action. Professional societies, while not always engaged in direct political action, still must act on behalf of their members (and their members' clients, patients, institutions, causes, etc.).

In every association, our members are the best advocates we have. They are the people and companies who have real credibility with elected officials and governmental agencies. Our task, as association executives, is to not only encourage them to get involved in advocacy, but it is also to make them effective advocates. Getting them to commit to participation is just the start.

Here are some things we all can do to make our volunteers successful advocates:

- Give them options for participation

Not everyone wants to be a spokesperson. Some members do not want to speak in public or even speak one-on-one with public officials. Some people will show a willingness to participate but are worried about having enough time to do

anything substantial. But they do want to help, so be prepared to help them find their comfort zone in your advocacy efforts. Break down the advocacy function into smaller, more specific tasks.

These might include: letter/email writing; hosting an event; recruiting additional volunteers; making financial contributions (where appropriate); identifying key contacts (people or companies with influence or relationships with public officials); posting social media messages encouraging other members to participate.

Whatever task they agree to do (or at least try), make sure you have a clear definition of what the job entails. Give them a written job description or YouTube/video link to use as a resource. Let them know that they have a support system ready to help them.

- If they want to be a 'vocal advocate', make sure they are good at it!

Be sure to define the parameters of their role as a spokesperson. Be very clear about whether they are (or are not) an official spokesperson for the organisation. Remind them that their credibility as a spokesperson is actually greater when they speak as a practitioner in a field or a businessperson in an industry or community.

Give them some tools. Prepare position papers or videos that clarify your organisation's positions and the rationale for those positions. Be sure to keep these items up to date.

Provide spokesperson training at every level. Whether meeting with elected officials, addressing a group, or talking one-on-one to others in the industry or profession, help your volunteers practice effective speaking and listening skills. In



addition to providing them with the right information, give them tips on how to anticipate and overcome objections, and how to keep within time constraints, how to make eye contact, etc. There are plenty of spokesperson training videos and other tools available. Holding live spokesperson training sessions (in-person or virtually), is an important benefit to offer those who want to advocate for your group.

- ‘Pay’ them for their participation

Members who volunteer to be active in your organisation’s advocacy efforts do not expect any monetary reward for their participation, but they do expect some thanks. We do that in the form of recognition.

Our volunteer recognition needs to be timely and appropriate. A member who sends one email to a member of the legislature does not necessarily merit a full-page article in your organisation’s publication. However, they did make an effort and should be recognised/acknowledged for their participation.

Here are a few suggestions:

- list them on your organisation’s website in the appropriate manner.

- send a thank-you letter or email from another volunteer (perhaps your organisation’s President), in addition to someone on the organisation’s staff.

- recognise them at your organisation’s next event and/or at their local chapter meeting.

Advocacy is best carried out by those who are part of the group affected by public policy. Give them a role that is comfortable for them, train them to be effective advocates, and then ‘pay’ them for their participation with appropriate recognition. Remember, when people stop getting ‘paid’ they stop showing up for ‘work’.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Levin, CAE, CSP has more than 20 years of experience as an association executive and is also an internationally-known speaker and consultant to the non-profit and association community. He currently serves as **Executive Vice President** of the **Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute**, an international trade association, and as **President of B.A.I., Inc.**, his speaking and consulting firm.

Advocacy Starts Before the Policy Conversation

The policy meeting is rarely where advocacy begins. Long before the briefing papers are circulated or the formal discussion starts, something more fundamental is already shaping the outcome: whether decision-makers trust the people making the case. Evidence provides credibility. Timing creates relevance. But trust opens the door to being heard.

For **City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA)**, recent conversations across Europe highlight why effective advocacy depends on what happens before the policy conversation begins, and on the relationships built well in advance.

For destination organisations, advocacy is becoming inseparable from destination management. Questions around mobility, accessibility, artificial intelligence, data governance, sustainability, competitiveness and community support now intersect with transport policy, urban planning, economic development, technology, housing and residents' quality of life.

This changes the role of destination organisations and the associations representing them. To have influence, it is no longer enough to communicate the importance of tourism. Destinations need evidence, cross-sector partnerships and a shared understanding of the changes affecting the visitor economy. Recent CityDNA participation in discussions in Berlin, Palma de Mallorca and Istanbul illustrates this evolving environment.

From Shared Data to Shared Responsibility

At the **GetYourGuide Unlocked Summit** in Berlin, in September, **CityDNA's Head of Relationship Marketing & Commercial Development, Inge Bauwens**, joined **Alessandra Priante** from **EY** and **Hazel McGuire** from **Intrepid Travel** in a discussion moderated by **GetYourGuide's Co-Founder & COO Tao Tao** on how destinations and distribution partners can grow sustainably.

The conversation addressed a wider challenge: how public and private actors can better align data, distribution, local knowledge and commercial expertise around destinations' long-term interests. No single organisation controls the visitor journey. Travellers move through an ecosystem of transport providers, digital platforms, attractions, accommodation, local businesses, public authorities and destination organisations. Decisions taken by one actor can affect many others.

For DMOs, this makes collaboration an important part of stewardship and advocacy. When public and private actors

better understand one another's evidence, constraints and objectives, discussions can move beyond individual interests towards shared responsibility.

Evidence Only Matters If It Becomes Useful

At the **D3HUB Final Event** in Palma de Mallorca, in September, **CityDNA's Projects Coordinator, Camille François**, joined **John Fitzgibbon, Managing Director of NECSTouR**, **Klaus Ehrlich, Secretary-General of RuralTour**, and **Tim Fairhurst, Chief Executive of the European tourism association (ETOA)**, to discuss how destinations can collaborate, accelerate and scale up their data-driven journey. The event concluded three years of work towards a European competence centre supporting stronger data management within tourism destinations.

"Being data-driven is not about collecting more data. It is about giving destinations the skills, tools and partnerships to turn evidence into better decisions. Collaboration is essential: by sharing knowledge and learning from one another, destinations can move faster and make data genuinely useful for the places and communities they serve," François said.

Turning data into useful evidence requires skills, governance and the ability to connect information often fragmented between public bodies and private operators. It also requires networks through which destinations can share experience rather than develop every solution independently. Evidence strengthens advocacy when it helps decision-makers understand what is happening, why it matters and what action could follow. Without that translation, even the most sophisticated data runs the risk of remaining just that: data.

Positioning Destinations in a Changing World

A different perspective emerged in Istanbul, where **CityDNA President, Barbara Jamison-Woods**, joined **Steven**

Paganelli, Vice President of Global Media & Partnerships at TripAdvisor and Chair of the Destinations International Foundation, Jaime Mayaki, Director of International Development and Cooperation at UN Tourism, Efi Koudeli, Senior Regional Director Europe at ICCA, and Hasan Dinç, President of SITE Global and Managing Director of ODS Turkey, for the session *Vision 2036: Positioning Destinations Through the Eyes of Global Industry Leaders*.

The discussion looked towards the next decade of destination competitiveness and positioning. Competitiveness today means considerably more than increasing visitor numbers. Accessibility, connectivity, reputation, sustainability, visitor experience and the relationship between tourism and local communities are shaping how places compete. Trust is central to this. Destinations depend on trust between visitors and places, businesses and public authorities, and the visitor economy and host communities. Destination organisations therefore play an important role in connecting these perspectives and keeping tourism development aligned with wider place priorities. Bringing different interests together is itself a form of influence.

Moving from Conversation to Collective Direction

The question of how destinations can align their priorities also extends to CityDNA's own membership. From 19–21 October, CityDNA members gathered in Verona for the **2026 Autumn Conference** under the theme *Moving Together: Cities in Motion. Destinations in Alignment*. Movement was explored both literally (how people travel to, through and between cities) and strategically (how destination organisations respond collectively to technological, social and economic change).

Mobility, accessibility, data and AI formed central strands of the programme. Member-led workshops brought destination professionals, CityDNA Board and Knowledge Group members and industry partners together, linking operational experience with the Alliance's wider strategic direction. The discussion also moved beyond the conference room. Small-group 'walkshops' used Verona itself as a learning environment, exploring accessibility, visitor journeys, climate and resilience. Accessibility could be observed on a pavement. Visitor flows could be experienced in a square. Mobility decisions became visible at a railway station. Bringing evidence closer to lived experience helped make the discussion stronger.

Advocacy As a Continuous Process

For associations, advocacy does not begin when a position paper reaches a policymaker. It begins when members generate credible evidence, when organisations exchange perspectives, when networks identify common challenges, and when an association can translate those conversations into shared direction without losing the diversity of its membership.

The policy environment facing European destinations will continue to grow more complex. Tourism increasingly sits within wider conversations about cities, mobility, digitalisation, climate, economic development and community wellbeing.

In that environment, influence will depend not simply on speaking louder, but on making the case more convincingly. Effective advocacy requires evidence to understand what is happening, timing to know when intervention can make a difference, and trust to ensure there is someone willing to listen. For destination alliances, building all three is becoming one of the most important parts of the job.

Let's Continue the Conversation

The future of city destinations is shaped through collaboration, shared knowledge and collective ambition. Whether you represent a city or destination, or an industry partner looking to contribute to this journey, City Destinations Alliance welcomes the opportunity to connect.

Meet CityDNA representatives at the upcoming industry events:

- **World Travel Market**, London | 3-5 November 2026
- **ibtm world**, Barcelona | 17-19 November 2026

Alternatively, to explore how you could become part of the CityDNA community, you are welcome to arrange a personal conversation with our president, Barbara Jamison-Woods by contacting headoffice@citydna.eu

Many **Voices**, One **Message**

Message discipline is not about everyone saying the same words. It is about everyone pointing in the same direction, and collective intelligence is how a diverse industry gets there.

Author: Giulia Ineke Sarri, Council Member & Chair of Advocacy Committee at IAPCO

Ask a minister what the business events industry is, and the answer will depend on who visited their office last. A convention bureau talks about hotel nights and delegate spend. A venue talks about infrastructure, an exhibition organiser about trade, a PCO about the congress that brought thousands of researchers to town. Every one of those meanings is true, but taken separately, in different contexts and from different perspectives, they leave policymakers with a blurred picture that rarely makes it into a national strategy or, even a regional or international one.

Evidence and trust matter, but they carry less weight when different parts of the business events industry present competing messages to policymakers. The *JMIC Global Manifesto* clearly states that mixed messages, competing agendas and narrow sector interests weaken our position. Message discipline is the remedy, but discipline is not standardisation, and that distinction is where we should lay our focus.

Advocacy is a Pillar, not a Side Project

IAPCO rests on three strategic pillars: Community, Education and Advocacy. They are not three separate departments, as each one makes the others stronger. Community gives advocacy its credibility. IAPCO speaks for accredited PCOs who deliver congresses for associations in every discipline, on every continent. Education gives advocacy its capability: a message is only disciplined if the people carrying it understand it well enough to adapt it without bending it.

Advocacy, in turn, protects the conditions in which our community and our profession can thrive. Treating it as a pillar means accepting that advocacy is everyone's job. Still, when it comes to unifying intent, it is fundamental to unify voices as well. In fact, the collective narrative cannot be delivered by one central authority alone. It must be interpreted and iterated locally, so that it is relevant and trusted by each government that hears it.

Maintaining message discipline across diverse memberships requires a shared core (a small set of facts, positions and words that do not change), alongside the freedom to translate that core into the priorities of a health ministry, an innovation agency or a regional development fund. Rigid scripts fail because they ignore local reality. Improvisation

fails because every voice slowly loses character. Collective intelligence sits between the two: the core is built together, by people from different corners of the ecosystem, and every local translation is shared back so the whole community learns from it.



Where to Start?

A common discipline begins with numbers. Drawing on the **Events Industry Council's 2026 Global Economic Significance Study**, the JMIC Manifesto gives us that core: business events generate €677.4 billion in direct GDP, and more than €1.61 trillion in total GDP. Including indirect and induced effects, their total economic impact reaches €2.77 trillion, supporting 24.2 million jobs in 2025, 9.7 million of them direct. **UFI's** April 2026 study adds €393 billion in economic impact from exhibitions alone, supporting 4.3 million jobs.

Yet, the Manifesto is also clear that hard data vastly underestimates our true value. The shared economic figures must therefore be paired with real-life evidence. The **International Council of Nurses Congress** in Helsinki in 2025, one of the IAPCO case studies in the Manifesto, generated an estimated €10.5 to 17.5 million in economic impact. Its lasting contribution, though, was the **Student and Early Career Nurses Alliance** and the adoption of the *Helsinki Communiqué*. Numbers open the door, but legacy keeps it open. When every member uses the same figures, from the same sources, while considering business events as instruments of economic, scientific and social policy, rather than a sub-product of tourism, policymakers start paying better attention.

Look across the initiatives IAPCO leads, shares or supports, and the same lines appear again and again:

- Born at our **Annual Meeting & General Assembly** this year, together with **AIPC**, **AMCI** and **PCMA**, the **Athens Promise** argues that advocacy is strongest when it is coordinated globally and advanced locally. It asks professionals, organisations and associations, to pledge their support and carry the message into their own networks.



- The JMIC Global Manifesto is the toolkit behind the pledge, and was developed by a working group chaired by **IAPCO CEO, Martin Boyle**, with contributions from **ICCA, UFI, IFES**, and the **Copenhagen Convention Bureau**. Its fifteen arguments and ten practical steps, like creating consensus, doing the ‘translation’, being consistent, choosing your timing, give every member a shared grammar.

- Co-funded by the **European Union** and coordinated by the **Catalan Tourist Board, BEFuture** brought together convention bureaux, business support organisations, universities and communication specialists with one mission: to help Europe’s business events sector become more innovative, regenerative, resilient and responsible. Rather than writing a vision in isolation, it co-designed solutions with the whole ecosystem, through co-creation workshops, a talent development programme, an open innovation marketplace, and an acceleration programme across six European countries, with support from **ICCA**, the **Strategic Alliance of the National Convention Bureaux of Europe (SANCBE)**, **City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA)** and **IBTM World**.

From Theory to Practice

For any member, company or partner wanting to strengthen our collective voice, five habits make the difference:

- One set of core figures, always cited to the same sources, so our numbers never contradict each other in a politician’s briefing pack.
- We class ourselves as business events... not ‘tourism’, please!
- Adapting to the local context. Start from the government’s priorities, like health, skills, innovation, investment, and show how events help deliver them.

- A story beside every number. A legacy case from your own congresses makes the data real and memorable.

- A feedback loop. Share what worked, through **IAPCO**, **JMIC**, *The Iceberg*, your own *HQ*, specialised and general media, so the core keeps getting sharper.

Evidence gets us heard and timing gets us in the room, but trust is what keeps us there. Policymakers trust an industry that is predictable: whose figures match from one meeting to the next; whose asks do not compete; whose representatives reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Our industry should stop waiting to be invited to other people’s tables and start setting its own. No single association can do that alone. It takes PCOs, venues, bureaux, association managers and organisers, each bringing what they know, activating the true ecosystem. That is collective intelligence!

So here is our invitation as the **IAPCO Advocacy Committee**:

- Sign The Athens Promise.
- Use the JMIC Manifesto in your next conversation with a public authority.
- Join us at industry events, whatever your generation or membership.
- And bring your own legacy story, because that is how our shared message grows.

Seven Priorities for Destination Competitiveness

At **FIEXPO Latin America 2026** in San José, Costa Rica, convention bureaux, venues and destination leaders examined the barriers they face in attracting international events and the actions they can take to address them. The discussions and survey findings led to the **San José Declaration**, which sets out seven commitments to strengthen destination competitiveness and track progress. The **Forum of Latin American Destinations** created and led by **Juan José García, Chief Sales & Marketing Officer** (*pictured on the next page*) at **Bco Congresos**, and **Santiago González, Director** at **MICE Consulting**. In this interview, García discusses the priorities identified and their relevance for destinations within and outside Latin America and the Caribbean.

Based on the survey responses and discussions, what were the most common barriers, growth opportunities and recurring concerns across the region?

Recurring barriers included fragmentation among destination stakeholders, a lack of continuity following political, leadership or budgetary changes, unpredictable funding, and gaps in data, customer relationship management (CRM), market research and turning information into decisions.

Growth opportunities included identifying sectors, associations and rotation cycles before bids open, connecting events with local knowledge, universities, economic sectors and professional communities, developing ambassador communities, professionalising teams and strengthening regional cooperation through shared intelligence, methodologies and training.

A central concern was sustaining long-term international strategies with stable resources. Participants also discussed demonstrating the value of events through legacy, innovation, talent, investment, sustainability, inclusion and reputation alongside economic impact, and ensuring the Forum's agreements lead to action through metrics, follow-up and institutional memory.

What did the Forum reveal about how destinations interpret their biggest obstacles, and where might they be missing the bigger picture?

Budget, connectivity and infrastructure limitations form part of broader questions of governance, strategy and delivery. Infrastructure remains essential, but differentiation increasingly comes from connecting a destination's economic sectors,

universities, knowledge and professional communities to its value proposition.

Data and contacts need to become intelligence to prioritise markets, anticipate bids and measure results. Each destination must adapt these elements to its circumstances through shared objectives, public-private collaboration and continuous follow-up.

You encouraged participants to focus on what destinations can influence directly. Why do these opportunities remain underused, and where should destinations start?

Many initiatives require sustained coordination among stakeholders. Universities, hospitals, clusters, businesses, public authorities and convention bureaux may share interests, but not objectives, information, resources or a stable structure for working together. Political and leadership turnover, short-term budgets, small teams and reacting only when a bid appears compound the difficulty.

An ambassador programme, for example, requires identifying people with credibility and influence, supporting their participation and recognising their contribution. Sector partnerships work when connected to destination priorities and a strategy for attracting international events.

Destinations can begin by identifying sectors, institutions and local leaders that offer knowledge, reputation or access to international communities. They can then establish clear responsibilities, select priority markets or opportunities, share information, measure results and communicate event value through legacy, innovation, talent, investment and social impact alongside economic return.



What skills do convention bureau teams most need to strengthen, particularly in advocacy, communication and stakeholder engagement?

Convention bureau teams need industry knowledge and the ability to connect different interests and turn strategy into results.

In communication, they need to explain event value through knowledge, innovation, reputation, talent, investment, sustainability, inclusion and legacy, adapting their arguments to policymakers, businesses, associations, academia and local communities.

In advocacy, a critical capability is evidence-based influence: interpreting data, identifying shared priorities and using them to secure resources, institutional continuity and political support. It requires demonstrating why a sustained strategy for attracting international events benefits the destination.

Stakeholder management requires professionals to engage local leaders and institutions, build trusted relationships, align expectations and support ambassadors. Teams also need market intelligence to anticipate bids, develop value propositions, manage complex projects and measure results.

Destinations already have access to data, training and industry tools such as ICCA's Business Intelligence. Is there still a gap between having these resources and applying them effectively?

There is still a significant gap between accessing knowledge and applying it. Many destinations have data, contacts, training and tools such as ICCA Business Intelligence, but their value comes from using them to prioritise markets, identify opportunities, allocate resources, prepare bids and measure results.

The difficulty is often organisational. Data remain fragmented or disconnected from commercial and strategic processes,

while courses, certifications and professional networks do not always translate into working practices. Institutional discontinuity and a lack of specialised teams can also result in accumulated knowledge being lost.

Destinations should define which decisions they want to improve and connect each tool to a specific responsibility. ICCA Business Intelligence, for example, can inform market intelligence, ambassador engagement and bid planning.

Teams need the capability and discipline to interpret information, share it with stakeholders and apply it consistently.

What are the most important commitments in the San José Declaration, and why are they relevant to destinations outside Latin America and the Caribbean?

The San José Declaration establishes seven commitments based on common principles that destinations can adapt to their circumstances. These commitments include stable public-private governance with clear leadership and responsibilities, supported by predictable funding and professional teams able to research markets, develop bids and manage relationships.

It also calls for destinations to turn data into intelligence, identify priority sectors and opportunities, and build ambassador communities connected to universities, professional networks and strategic industries. Measurement covers knowledge, innovation, reputation, talent, investment, social impact, sustainability, inclusion, accessibility and legacy alongside economic contribution.

The Declaration encourages cooperation between destinations through shared methodologies, intelligence, training, tools and case studies. The central message is transferable: destination competitiveness depends on bringing local stakeholders together, sustaining a long-term strategy and demonstrating the wider value generated by events.

How **Global PCO Networks** Turn **Meetings** into Measurable **Public Value**

International conferences can fill hotels, attract thousands of delegates and deliver a seamless programme. Such outcomes remain important measures of success, but associations, host institutions and funders are now asking what legacy these events leave.

Article kindly provided by World PCO Alliance based on their Members' Insights

The answer includes immediate economic impact and wider public benefits. Value is created through knowledge exchange, stronger networks, professional development and greater inclusion. Professional Congress Organisers (PCOs) can connect international expertise with the priorities and capabilities of host destinations and participating delegates. Case studies from Ireland, Japan and Taiwan show three ways to make that connection count.

Design with Intention and Follow-Through for Impact

The **Autism-Europe Congress 2025** in Dublin (*check out our HQ #124 for an in-depth report*) showed how public value can be strategically embedded in the planning process. **AslAm (Ireland's Autism Charity)**, **Keynote PCO**, and **Fáilte Ireland**, alongside venue partners conferred with the autistic community on the provision of accessibility measures across communications, registration, venue design, sensory considerations and staff training for the congress.

Measurement was integral to the process. The organisers received 308 pre-event attendee responses and 385 post-event surveys, supplemented by feedback from invited speakers and conference staff. The data helped assess participant needs against the actual experience of the conference. Defining those needs before the event also made evaluation a tool for improving future delivery, going beyond a cursory retrospective exercise in reporting attendance and satisfaction.

The work that started at the congress has since progressed beyond the initial conversations. An **Autism and Employment Roadmap** launched with Irish business group **Ibec** has moved towards implementation, supported by continued industry engagement. Since September 2025, partner companies have advertised more than 300 jobs through AslAm, creating opportunities for autistic jobseekers. Congress sponsor **Allied Irish Banks (AIB)** achieved Autism Friendly accreditation across all 170 branches. Bilbao, Spain, the congress' next host, has committed to using recommendations from Fáilte Ireland's inclusive-event guidelines.

The outcomes show how intentional design, empathetic engagement, meaningful measurement and sustained follow-through can help a congress achieve long-term impact.



Inclusion worked because we listened before the programme was finalised. Bringing lived experiences into the planning process helped us make practical decisions, and the feedback gives future hosts a tangible framework to build on.

Dr Noel Mitchell CMM, Chairman of Keynote PCO

Connect Global Expertise with Local Opportunity

At the **2024 IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation (ICRA)** in Yokohama, technical tours and a dedicated technology exchange connected international researchers with local engineers and regional businesses. The conference also reached about 3,500 students, introducing them to robotics and automation outside its core professional audience.

The conference provided an opportunity to introduce Yokohama to an international community of researchers, academics and industry professionals. Collaboration with the city, its convention bureau and **PACIFICO Yokohama** brought the destination's strengths into the conference experience. More than 500 attendees participated in a traditional tea ceremony, alongside cultural workshops, performances and regional food featured throughout the programme. The conference received a **2025 Japan National Tourism Organisation** award for these initiatives.

The value is twofold: global expertise reaches the local ecosystem, while the host destination gains visibility among an international audience. By integrating local industry and cultural experiences into the programme and creating opportunities for reciprocal exchange, conferences can serve as destination-marketing platforms. The connections established through these interactions can also support future dialogue and collaboration.

“ *A conference such as this can be a great catalyst for connections that might otherwise take years to establish. Our priority in Yokohama was to bring international researchers and local partners together in ways that were relevant and beneficial to both communities.*

*Ms Shoko Suzuki, Project Manager
from Congrès Inc., International
Meetings Section, Tokyo MICE
Business Division*

Build Lasting Relationships and Capabilities

Public value can also benefit organisers, partners and conference attendees. The **2024 Junior Chamber International (JCI) World Congress** in Taoyuan, Taiwan, welcomed nearly 4,000 members from 100 countries. Following this international exposure, **JCI Taiwan** recorded its highest registrations for the 2025 and 2026 Asia-Pacific conferences. The Taiwanese chapters have since maintained international connections through reunions, visits and online exchanges. The congress programme also addressed locally relevant issues, including a **Women's Empowerment Forum** and an LGBTQ+ forum co-organised with the **Taiwan Hotline Association** and **JCI Europe**.

Individual delegates offer another perspective on congress legacy. **Mr Lu Lung Lin**, then **Director** of the event's organising committee, was subsequently appointed to the 2025 **JCI World President's Special Assistant** team. The experience sparked his interest in the business events industry, leading him to join **K&A International**, a founding member of the **World PCO Alliance** and the PCO behind the 2024 JCI Congress in Taoyuan. Mr Lin's experience shows

how a conference's legacy can emerge through personal and professional development. Relationships, leadership experience and professional skills can continue to benefit local and regional communities long after the event.

“ *Organising the 2024 World Congress opened doors to an international community and helped shape my own career. The experience stays with people through the relationships they build, the confidence they gain and the roles they take on next.*

*Mr Lu Lung Lin, Event Manager at
K&A International*

Public Value, the Gift that Keeps Giving

The examples from Dublin, Yokohama and Taoyuan highlight the role of international PCO networks. Public value may differ across destinations, and the objective is to make approaches transferable while adapting them to local priorities and requirements. For the World PCO Alliance, its global network of locally embedded organisers facilitates the exchange of practical knowledge and expertise across international markets.

The measure of a successful conference should also include the lasting value it creates.

“ *The strength of a global PCO network lies in connecting international expertise with local insight. By sharing what works and the outcomes achieved, we can help associations create meaningful and measurable value for the communities they serve.*

*Mr Sumate Sudasna, President, World
PCO Alliance*

Beyond the **Congress**

How IPVS Is Building a Truly Global Scientific Community

For many associations, the annual congress is the most visible expression of their mission. Yet, the conference itself is only one part of a much broader ecosystem of education, research, membership, advocacy and community engagement. Increasingly, associations and their event partners are looking for ways to ensure that meetings do more than convene delegates for a few days. They are exploring how conferences can support long-term organisational goals, strengthen communities, expand global reach and create meaningful impact.

Authors: Iva Popova (pictured above), Marketing Communications Manager; Louise Gorringe (pictured below), VP Association Management, Kenes Group

The **International Papillomavirus Society (IPVS)** offers an example of how an association can use its congress to advance its wider mission. As the leading global authority dedicated to the prevention, control and elimination of papillomaviruses and their associated diseases, IPVS brings together researchers, clinicians, public health professionals, policymakers and advocates united by a common goal: a world free from HPV-related diseases. The Society works to advance research, education and public health initiatives while facilitating global collaboration across disciplines and regions.

Behind IPVS's mission is a long-standing partnership with **Kenes Group**, which serves as both IPVS's Association Management Company (AMC) and Professional Congress Organiser (PCO). Beyond delivering the annual conference, Kenes supports membership growth, governance, stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, educational initiatives, public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts. A key focus of the partnership is translating scientific knowledge into tangible public health impact through year-round engagement and conference legacy programmes that continue delivering value long after the congress has ended. The global HPV community gathered in Athens, Greece, for the **38th IPVS Annual Conference 2026** under the theme *Lighting the Flame for a World Free from HPV-Related Diseases*. The conference brought together experts from around the world to share scientific discoveries, advances in prevention and treatment, and strategies for global action.

More Than a Scientific Meeting

One of the most interesting aspects of IPVS is not only the calibre of its scientific programme, but the deliberate way the Society has invested in community building. Like many international associations, IPVS faced challenges familiar to association leaders worldwide, such as fluctuating

membership, uneven geographical representation and the need to engage the next generation of professionals.

The Society adopted a coordinated, long-term strategy focused on accessibility, inclusion and year-round engagement. Through initiatives such as tiered membership structures, regional ambassadors, support for early-career researchers, public awareness campaigns, advocacy programmes and stronger connections between conference participation and society membership, IPVS has expanded its global community while ensuring that scientific knowledge translates into meaningful public health impact.

The results have been significant. By 2025, IPVS reached a record membership of more than 1,500 members, with Africa and Asia, both areas of focus for the field, becoming the Society's largest regions. Growth was driven not only by recruitment efforts, but by a commitment to reducing barriers to participation and creating meaningful opportunities for involvement. For associations seeking sustainable growth, membership expansion is more about making participation accessible, relevant and valuable.

Extending Engagement Beyond the Annual Congress

Another challenge facing modern associations is maintaining engagement between events. Members expect opportunities to learn, connect and collaborate throughout the year. In response, IPVS has expanded its educational and community initiatives, creating multiple touchpoints that keep members connected to the Society and its mission. Through webinars,





educational resources, mentorship programmes, early-career researcher initiatives, committees, ambassador programmes and ongoing communications, engagement continues long after delegates return home.

Creating Legacy Beyond the Event

Perhaps one of the most relevant lessons for the meetings industry is IPVS's approach to conference legacy. For IPVS, conference success is measured not only by attendance, scientific content or stakeholder satisfaction, but also by the lasting impact generated in the host destination. A powerful example emerged from the Society's conference in Edinburgh. Working alongside IPVS, local stakeholders, destination partners and health authorities, Kenes helped coordinate a legacy initiative that expanded public awareness of HPV, strengthened educational resources and created partnerships that continued delivering value long after the congress concluded.

Built around the Society's **One Less Worry** awareness campaign, the programme developed local educational tools, awareness resources and public-health initiatives that remained available to Scottish communities after the event. The project demonstrated how scientific meetings can become platforms for wider social impact, contributing not only to professional exchange but also to public health awareness, education and community engagement.

The lessons learned in Edinburgh have informed legacy planning for IPVS 2026 in Athens, where a dedicated coalition of Greek HPV experts, researchers, advocates and educators has already launched a nationwide programme designed to extend the conference's impact. The initiative focuses on raising public awareness of HPV, encouraging vaccination uptake, promoting screening and strengthening partnerships across healthcare, education, and civil society. Working across the public, healthcare professionals, youth organisations and the media, the programme combines education, outreach and awareness initiatives designed to drive long-term behaviour change. A pre-conference event with **WHO Greece**, media partnerships and public activation campaigns are among the activities helping to build momentum ahead of the congress.

IPVS has positioned legacy as a long-term commitment to improving public health. The goal is not simply to create awareness during conference week, but to support sustained action and lasting partnerships that contribute to the elimination of HPV-related diseases in Greece for years to come.

Partnership as a Strategic Growth Driver

As both AMC and PCO, Kenes supports IPVS across membership management, governance, communications, stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, conference delivery and legacy development. This integrated approach allows IPVS to align its annual conference with wider organisational objectives around membership growth, regional expansion, community engagement, and public health impact.

The result is a stronger connection between event participation and long-term organisational development. Membership initiatives support conference growth, conferences strengthen community engagement, and legacy programmes create value, all contributing to IPVS's mission of advancing research, collaboration and global efforts to eliminate HPV-related diseases. For event and association professionals, the partnership provides a strong example of how PCOs and AMCs can evolve from service providers into strategic partners that actively contribute to the success of an association.

Building a Lasting Public Health Legacy

As the global health community continues working toward the elimination of HPV-related diseases, collaboration remains essential. IPVS 2026 provided an opportunity to share the latest advances in prevention, vaccination, screening and public health. But it also highlighted something equally important for the meetings industry: the role that associations and conferences can play in building communities, creating legacy and supporting long-term organisational goals. Through its conferences, membership programmes, educational initiatives and public-health legacy work, IPVS continues to show how an association can transform a shared mission into a global movement.

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