



Innovative event formats

Recommendations from the next generation of **Future Leaders**

Summary

For their third project, the ICCA Future Leaders Council tied together the work they did on their first two projects; “social sustainability” and “the association of the future” to look at innovative event formats and how it will improve association congresses in the future. Their work has shown that attendees are looking for the same experience when they attend a congress as they do when becoming a member of an association. Therefore, a congress must provide value to attendees that resonate with them on a personal level and find innovative formats of event design to ensure attendees can experience and interact with content in a new way.

This paper identifies challenges and provides opportunities for improvement in five areas:

- **Congress structure**
- **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)**
- **Content**
- **Networking**
- **Communications**

In a post-pandemic world, attendees and members have higher expectations for in-person events and the traditional formats are no longer acceptable.

Specifically looking at the younger generation, there is a need for in-person events to provide a personal experience that aligns with their values and cannot be found online. The “human” or networking part of a congress has never been more critical.

This paper recommends new innovative event formats that focus on either content delivery or networking. The purpose of these recommendations is to provide insight into how associations may be able to push some boundaries in the future. ICCA - as the leading industry organisation for the association meetings industry - is hereby setting an example, to try out new formats, and be experimental with the guidance of the next generation of future leaders.



Table of Contents

Challenges for Association Meetings	6
Innovative Meeting Formats	9
Opportunities for Association Meetings	12
Conclusion	16
About ICCA and the ICCA Future Leaders Council	99

Challenges for Association Meetings

Below are some pain-points or challenges many association meetings or congresses struggle with. These are divided into 5 key areas:

Congress structure

- **Budget** - finances and budget can determine the success or failure of an event to a large extent. Many organisations rely on their annual meeting as their primary source of revenue. Some associations can struggle to obtain sponsorship or donations from partners or industry affiliates, which is another cause of financial difficulty. The money generated from the conference is therefore often earmarked for the association's operations. Budgets have a significant impact on event formats because some members would rather not spend money on travel when there is an online option available, as well as individuals who may not be able to afford to attend in-person on their own.
- **Traditional formats** - in the post-Covid world, attendees and delegates are looking to engage with content and their peers differently when meeting in person. Sessions with one-way panels and speakers can be facilitated online and no longer provide enough value to take place face-to-face. People are looking to connect with an experience, and traditional formats no longer meet this expectation.
- **Engagement** - associations can also struggle to keep delegates focused and engaged throughout the event, especially if it spans multiple days and includes lengthy sessions, presentations or panels. By repeating the same event format post-Covid, this may result in lower engagement and attendance for future editions.

DEI

- **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** - association congresses are a place for people who share a common interest and a common goal to meet. However, we must not be blind to the fact that this involves travel and accommodation costs, as well as the cost of attending the event itself. For some industries, this may be a barrier to participation, resulting in a homogenous organiser and attendee base (similar economic background/class, geographical representation, ethnicity, education, gender and/or even ability).

Content

- **Finding the right speaker** - when a speaker fails to capture delegates' attention, it is easy for the audience to tune out and miss what is being said. For some delegates, this can even set the tone for the rest of the conference and shape their overall impression of the event. It is also a challenge in terms of budget as those ultra-engaging, highly recommended and renowned speakers may sometimes also come with a significant price tag and/or struggles in terms of availability resulting in them giving their time to the highest bidder.
- **Informational overload** – when there is too much information at once, conference delegates may struggle to remember important information. Too many sessions trying to provide too much information in each session often makes it difficult for delegates to retain the content.

Networking

- **Lack of networking and socialising** - there are seemingly never enough opportunities for attendees to network and socialise, which, more than ever, is what members and attendees want as it is something which cannot fundamentally be replaced digitally.

Communication

- **Understanding what delegates want** - as delegates are the most important aspect of the conference, associations may struggle with collecting enough information to better understand delegates' expectations and thereby the opportunity to tailor the congress content to them. Pre-congress surveys are important but may not result in enough responses to accurately curate the content that will benefit attendees.
- **Misunderstanding of hybrid options & expectations** - without a deliberate strategy, associations default to some form of hybrid, which either become unilateral i.e. an attendee looks into the congress from afar, without any means of interaction between the online and in-person audience - or, they interact with each other but on such a minimal level that the interaction they do have often is with the same few people - who are also attending virtually.

Innovative Meeting Formats

Before choosing an event format, the purpose must be defined: why would an organiser look to implement a certain format into their event? They must first define the purpose of the meeting to answer this question: is the meeting more focused on networking or content?

Described below are some examples of lesser-used, and perhaps untraditional event formats for networking and sessions, thereby exemplifying ideas of meeting formats by meeting purpose.

Innovative event formats focusing on networking:

- **Speed dating** - we all know this very simple form of networking. It is an easily actionable way for participants to maximise their number of contacts in a very short period of time. To strengthen this format: the average 90-minute speed networking event with 100 participants will generate 1,000+ new connections, which is 333% more than traditional networking events.
- **Competitive networking** - randomly select people for individual groups and give them a task to fulfil during the congress. It ensures that people who may not have met come together and work on a challenge. Challenges always keep people engaged, spark team spirit and possibly forge future relationships.
- **Coffee break meets silent disco** - why not mix up the classical coffee break a little bit and let participants enter the dance floor? The advantage: attendees can still carry on the conversation without the interruption of loud music.
- **Hula Hoop Islands** - not heard about this before, why not try it? It is very easy and does not require immense planning. Several hula hoops are spread throughout the event area. People meet on each hula hoop island and get to know each other. This can be done while changing rooms or during coffee breaks. Whenever a person joins a ring, we are sure he/she will be accompanied very soon.

- **Storytelling sessions** - let's invite interested and curious participants to storytelling sessions to get to know each other better. In small groups, each participant tells stories about their lives, their careers or experiences. These sessions create emotional connections in a way that is not reached via traditional networking.
- **Riddles-challenge** - this form of networking is a great way to get strangers to focus on a common goal. Participants are split into smaller groups of 10 people and each group gets riddles to solve. Who will be first? And after that session, one has nine other people within their network they can refer to as they know he/she is an expert in e.g. science.
- **Snowball fights** - another example of a new, unusual event format is a Snowball Fight, which some of us are familiar with. In a Snowball Fight, attendees throw paper balls with questions written on them at one another. Afterwards, they pick up a ball each, pair up with another attendee and discuss the question written on their paper ball. This is a tool often used by Bo Kruger, one of the pioneers of our industry in the innovative event area, to make events more engaging and entertaining for attendees.

Innovative event formats focusing on content:

- **Solution Rooms** - as mentioned before, participants want to gain learnings that they can bring home to their own organisation. Solution Rooms dive in deeper and last between 90-120 minutes. The goal is to work on peer-supported advice for individuals' most pressing problems. Different perspectives, experiences and opinions are valuable, and participants develop a feeling of overcoming or at least tackling challenges to bring back home solution approaches.
- **Campfire sessions** - campfire sessions are not completely new and innovative anymore but a great format to implement into both content-focused and networking-focused programs. These sessions are compact, starting with a short introduction by a speaker but leading to the main focus of group discussions. The speaker acts like a facilitator in order to engage and challenge the group. Provocation is welcomed.
- **Lightning talks** - speakers at sessions only have a limited amount of time but once they start talking, they do not stop. We all know this phenomenon. Lightning talks are strict with regards to time limitations. Speakers only have 10 minutes time to present their topic. They may or may not have slides with them. If so, slides move forward automatically in order to stay on time. Speakers need to be very precise and clear. Participants stay alert and a lot of different ideas can be presented within a short duration. This format can also be used, for example, to pitch different ideas allowing the audience to vote on a winner afterwards.
- **Fishbowls** - fishbowl sessions are a great alternative to the classical conference set up. 3-6 speakers are located at the centre of a room while participants sit around in circles. When run as an open fishbowl, participants can join the stage and be part of the discussion. It often turns into a dynamic session with potential for high engagement as well as positive interaction. Even more challenging is a Samoan Circle. The setup is similar to a fishbowl but without a session leader. This means anyone at any time can enter the stage. Clear topics of discussion - as well as rules - need to be set to ensure the smooth ongoing of the conversation.

- **Gamification** - gamification is often used to “spice” things up in events. Any one of us can easily think of a Group Trivia game or Group Quiz from a meeting we attended and how it left us feeling much closer to our teammates after it ended. Moreover, the trivia we were exposed to from the game never leaves our brains: glaring evidence that gamification helps us learn.
- **Shaping the content** - innovative event formats can be more than a great warm-up exercise: we can even try to shape the course of a typical seminar on-site. At one industry conference (the UFI Latin America Conference), a lecture was broken down into two parts, with a group discussion in between. The groups discussed the content delivered until then and gave feedback to the speaker. This input was immediately reflected in the session that followed. A more daring example will be from a show in Korea, where the audience can vote for the content and the speaker/actor they would like to hear from. Whilst these are not your typical sessions, they are certainly more engaging and immersive.

A point worth noting is that associations do not have to sacrifice either networking or content for the other. Studies show that students learn better from so-called active learning, where they actively participate and engage with the other students, than passive learning, where they sit down and listen to information handed out by a lecturer, although they may feel the opposite. This indicates that active learning benefits us for both of the reasons we hold a meeting. First, it enhances the element of networking by encouraging the participants to engage with one another; and second, the learning and takeaways for an attendee increases. By implementing innovative event formats, the organiser will not have to compromise either content or networking for the other.



Opportunities for Association Meetings

There are plenty of opportunities for improvement when looking specifically at association meetings and events to help the way young professionals experience the event, network at the event, and consume content at the event. They are as follows:

Congress structure:

- **Dare to step away from tradition** - it is time for change. The annual congress programme that has existed in the past 20 years does not work anymore and, crucially, no longer meets the needs of participants. Why? Pure content can be streamed from anywhere at any time. Do we need to go to a congress for 3-5 days to have sessions all day long? What makes an in-person event much more valuable than digital events? It is the face-to-face meeting? And is this best achieved by networking as well as dynamic content? What do participants want to take out of sessions? It is not about pure knowledge anymore, it is about finding solutions to problems identified by attendees. And when it comes to networking, there should be time to really connect instead of only having lunch and coffee breaks of between 30-60 minutes which tend to fly by. This means dedicated networking sessions should complement the event programme.
- **Budget** - to tackle the challenge of budget, different membership models could be structured to include attendance at the congress, for example an all-in-one option that includes a membership fee as well as the registration fee for the congress for a certain number of people. Or open the congress up to non-members to generate more revenue.
- **Define the purpose** - are your attendees there to collect credits for a certification? Are they there to network and engage? Are they there for business leads? Are they there for training and upskilling purposes? Work on defining the purpose for the attendees, clearly communicate the purpose, and adapt the structure and theme of the event.

DEI

- **Training** - offer your congress committee some training on diversity & inclusion prior to planning the congress, or partner with organisations who actively plan events with an inclusive and accessible focus.
- **Partnership** - many associations wish to leave a lasting legacy with their congresses, so work with local partners to understand what can really make a difference in the community. Whether it is raising awareness, collecting money, volunteering or any other positive activity, find a purpose bigger than just the event and the attendees, and align it with attendee values.
- **Inclusion of diverse speakers** - representation matters. Try to find speakers who are differently abled, non-binary, from another socioeconomic backgrounds than the majority of the attendees or speakers from outside the industry. Try to actively make a difference in the way we view the world.
- **Address attendees' physical and mental health** - by providing wellness elements such as quiet spaces, wellness rooms, wellness bars and access to mental health first aid. All attendees need to know there are resources available and how to easily access them. Even if it helps one person overcome a challenge, it will be worth it.

Content

- **Innovative, new meeting formats** – review the extensive list provided in section 2 of options for innovative formats focused on content, and find one that aligns with your meeting purpose and the resources available to you. These may allow for knowledge sharing and the building of a knowledge economy.
- **Longer sessions that deep dive into topics** - as mentioned, rather than presentations and a Q&A format, we understand that active learning requires time to delve into a topic, to form new patterns in the brain. It is difficult to do so with shorter attention spans, albeit it is still possible. By having a few longer, deep-dive sessions, real change and learning will follow.
- **Ban mobile/cell phones in certain sessions** - mobile phones are everywhere and people are accessible all the time. Why not ban phones in those sessions that require focus and deep thought? This is not uncommon, as comedy shows, concerts, plays and other entertainment events already have this rule implemented.
- **Career development** - provide content that will educate attendees and help advance their careers.

Networking

- **Innovative, new meeting formats** - review the extensive list provided in section 2 of options for innovative formats focused on networking, and find one that aligns with your meeting purpose and the resources available to you.
- **Involvement of newcomers to become part of the collective family** - an opportunity for first time attendees to be given extra attention and an introduction into the association membership. This can be done by providing them with mentors or a “buddy” for the congress, by an intense networking session, by giving them a heightened status such as introducing them on stage or giving them opportunities to get to know them such as having their photos taken with a brief bio and putting it up on a wall.
- **Social events** - these should be grounded in the ability to network and create new experiences, provide attendees time and space to talk about non-industry related topics at social events, whilst creating memorable experiences. Have fun!
- **Provide different experiences** – one-size fits all no longer works – allow attendees to have a personal connection to the experience they are having and let them be part of the bigger picture.

Communication

- **Communicate consistently** - it could be as simple as having similar headlines for all emails relating to the event, so attendees can clearly filter based on content. It could also be aligning the channels of communication. For example, encouraging attendees to download an event app before the congress as ALL the information will be available there (and thus not communicating both via e-mail, newsletters, a congress website, an app and social media all at once).

- **Target audience** - understand who your target audience is, and on which channel they are most active. For example, to build up hype for registration by posting on LinkedIn if your attendees are there, perhaps by using a video of the president/host/ MC/local committee/destination. If you are looking to recruit more young professionals to the event, engage one of those already registered, or use previous attendees to launch a social media takeover. For those who want to bring their spouses/family members on the trip, why not run a competition or form of engagement on Facebook?
- **Social media** - a dedicated social media campaign from the beginning stages of the planning process will help establish an online presence and encourage attendees to continuously engage.
- **Use technology to enhance the experience** - why not bring some technology experts into the congress planning committee instead of having event experts plan the technology? Or give the opportunity for the AV team to try something new, something that they would like to see run at the congress. Of course, there is always a budget attached but it is more likely you will get a fair price if it is something the technology team wants to deliver to promote their services.

Conclusion

Since the pandemic, associations have all struggled to provide meaningful face-to-face events. There are numerous different formats out there organised by different associations. This means the traditional annual congress is no longer acceptable as it does not adequately meet the expectations attendees have when they attend events in person.

Now, more than ever, association congresses must have a clear purpose that is communicated before, during and after the event. How does it differ from other formats and other association congresses? This will allow people to easily understand the value, whether it be professional or personal, in attending the congress. Events are the physical manifestation of associations' purpose and, at all times, must relate directly back to what motivates people to become members.

By taking time to re-evaluate congress structure, DEI, content, networking and communication, associations will be in a better position to offer a unique experience that will resonate with both young professionals and long-time members.



About ICCA and the ICCA Future Leaders Council

Shaping the future and value of international association meetings

ICCA - the International Congress and Convention Association - is the global community and knowledge hub for the international association meetings industry. The Future Leaders Council is a leadership initiative, launched in the spring of 2021, to involve young professionals in sharing new ideas, concepts and approaches to meet future challenges of the industry.

ICCA is the global association leader for the international meetings industry. Since its establishment in 1963, ICCA offers unrivalled data, education, communication channels, and business development and networking opportunities. ICCA represents the world's top destinations and most experienced suppliers specialised in handling, transporting and accommodating international meetings and events, and comprises over 1,100 member companies and organisations in almost 100 countries and territories worldwide. As of 2020 ICCA encompasses all major stakeholders in the world of association meetings, by opening its doors to associations with the launch of the "ICCA Association Community", offering education, connections, tools and resources to associations to organise more effective meetings.

With the introduction of the Future Leaders Council (FLC), ICCA aims to facilitate sharing ideas and strategies to keep ICCA current, relevant, and positioned as the thought-leaders for the association meeting community. The FLC consists of eight representatives from each of ICCA's geographic regions for a term period of two years:

- **Africa: 1**
- **Asia Pacific: 2**
- **Latin America: 1**
- **Europe: 2**
- **Middle East: 1**
- **North America: 1**

The FLC members all have a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, beliefs and personal interests which ensures the opportunity for dynamic discussion and approaches from new perspectives. Although this international team is characterised by many differences, the ICCA Future Leaders Council have one thing in common: the drive and ambition to create a better future for our industry by bringing fresh perspectives to the table.

This report is the third of four publications by the ICCA FLC for the term 2021-2023. These research projects are aimed towards the international association community, to assist them in running more efficient and effective meetings whilst introducing new ideas, challenging the status quo and giving young professionals the opportunity to influence and impact the industry now and in the future.



Doreen Richter

Coordinator Guest Events
Messe Frankfurt



Javier Contreras

Business Development Manager
GL events Chile



Diana Frederiksen

MICE Sales Manager
Hilton London Metropole



Sakhile Ndhlovu

Business Development
Coordinator
South African Tourism



Kaili Cashin

Marketing & Communications
Manager
Calgary TELUS Convention Centre



Hyo-In Son

Assistant Manager
IICC Operation Department



Suhaila Al Munthari

Conferences & Exhibitions Affairs Unit Head
*Abu Dhabi Conventions & Exhibition
Bureau Department*



READ MORE HERE

Phone: +31 20 398 1919

Fax: +31 20 699 0781

Email: icca@iccaworld.org

Website: www.iccaworld.org



ICCA

ICCA Head Office

Alpha Tower

De Entree 57

1101 BH Amsterdam

The Netherlands