



Place Leaders
Forum

Why business events need a new narrative

iMEX



What destination leaders should take away from the 2026 IMEX Place Leaders Forum

For years, the business events sector has made a compelling case for its economic impact, knowledge exchange and legacy. Yet despite growing evidence of its value, it's still too often viewed through a tourism lens.

The irony is that the economic case has never been stronger. Research highlighted during the Place Leaders Forum showed business events generate \$1.8 trillion in global GDP and support millions of jobs worldwide. Yet the discussions in Frankfurt pointed to a broader truth: economic impact is only part of the story—it's no longer the whole story.

What stood out was not the evidence, but the reframing. What if business events are not a tourism product at all?

For decades, the sector has been measured through visitor numbers, hotel occupancy and delegate spend. Important metrics, certainly, but ones that can obscure a much bigger contribution: business events as instruments of place—shaping talent, accelerating innovation, convening communities and supporting long-term growth.

As leading urbanist [Professor Greg Clark CBE FAcSS](#) suggested throughout the discussions, the imperative is no longer proving value. It's demonstrating what business events make possible.

The implication is significant: the sector may have been underselling itself for years. Business events do not simply generate activity; they help shape the future of places.





From policy to place

One of the strongest themes to emerge was the shift from policy to place.

Greg Clark argued this is more than a semantic shift. It reflects a fundamental change in where influence sits: with the people shaping places—city leaders, destination managers and cross-sector partners responsible for long-term economic growth.

The task is no longer proving the value of business events, but mobilizing the partnerships needed to unlock it. Success increasingly depends on aligning government, academia, industry and communities around shared priorities.

In that ecosystem, business events occupy a uniquely powerful position. Their ability to convene people across sectors gives them influence far

beyond their economic footprint.

As Greg observed, “The soft power of a place is its ability to convene.”

In this framing, an international congress is no longer simply an event. It becomes a strategic intervention—a catalyst for investment, innovation and long-term change. The question shifts from “How many delegates attended?” to “What changed because they came?”

That, ultimately, is the essence of place leadership: moving beyond organizational silos and taking collective responsibility for the future of a destination.

As Greg put it, place leadership requires “giving up siloed thinking and adopting a second job description as leaders of place.”





The convention bureau's second job

For convention bureaus, this reframing is significant. Their role is expanding from destination marketer to destination connector—linking stakeholders, sectors and strategies that do not naturally align.

The most progressive examples shared at the forum reflected this shift.

In Auckland, stronger relationships with political leaders have become central to impact. In Copenhagen, the convention bureau acts as a connector between researchers, investors and innovators. In Sydney, influence is built through active participation in wider place leadership networks.

The shift extends beyond convention bureaus. At the Javits Center in New York, the role of a convention center is also being redefined. President and CEO Joyce Leveston described how the venue has expanded its focus beyond events to include sustainability, workforce development and community engagement. Its green roof, urban farming initiatives and neighborhood partnerships are

designed to strengthen its connection to the wider community.

"We're no longer just this big venue," she said. "It's about how we tie into the community, how we give back and how we improve that community."

Different models, same direction of travel: destination organizations evolving from marketers into conveners, intelligence hubs and orchestrators of place-based collaboration.

As Greg noted, "The role of destination organizations is expanding from promotion to orchestration."

Their role is no longer simply to bring events in, but to ensure those events contribute to wider economic, innovation and societal priorities.

There's no single blueprint for making that transition. As Greg said, "Different places are at different stages of their place leadership journey."

The common thread, however, is alignment: strategy, structure and ambition moving in the same direction.





The challenges ahead

While the sector increasingly understands its broader value, embedding that understanding across institutions remains difficult.

Many destination organizations still sit within tourism-led structures even as expectations expand. Silos between tourism, economic development, education and innovation continue to limit collaboration, while funding models often lag behind strategic ambition. The result is a growing mismatch between what destination organizations are being asked to deliver and how they are funded and measured.

Talent emerged as another challenge. Greg questioned whether the industry is recruiting from the right places. If business events are now viewed as drivers of economic development and place strategy, the sector may need to spend as much time engaging business schools, economics departments and public policy programs as it does tourism and event management faculties.

If business events are becoming instruments of place strategy, the skills required to lead them must evolve, too.





A window of opportunity

For all these challenges, the overall mood was one of momentum.

The forum's most urgent message was that destinations are operating within a rapidly changing landscape. Demographic shifts, technological disruption and geopolitical change are reshaping how places compete for talent, investment, visitors, students and events. What were once separate contests are increasingly overlapping.

As Greg argued, destinations now need a "whole-of-place" strategy rather than separate tourism, investment or events strategies.

The prize is significant. Places that successfully combine innovation, quality of life, culture and identity will be better positioned to compete for growth in all its forms.

Some of the most interesting

opportunities may lie beyond the traditional powerhouses. As Geneviève Leclerc, Co-founder and CEO of #MEET4IMPACT observed, "In many cities, the real opportunity lies in second and third-tier destinations—where collaboration is easier and faster. Emerging destinations can move more quickly because governance is less rigid and more connected."

This resonated with many in the room. In an era defined by partnership and place leadership, that agility may prove a competitive advantage.

But the risks are equally real. Greg's warning was clear: destinations that fail to adapt "don't simply go back to where they were—they go backward."

With a "window of opportunity open right now", the cost of standing still may be higher than many destinations realize.





So what next?

The conversation at IMEX felt less like a conclusion and more like the beginning of a shift.

The direction of travel is clear: deeper political engagement, stronger cross-sector collaboration, more sophisticated impact measurement and closer alignment with economic development priorities.

Above all, there was a sense of urgency. Cities are making decisions now about where to invest, which sectors to prioritize and how to organize for future growth.

The window of opportunity identified throughout the forum will not remain open indefinitely. Underlying all of this is the need

for a new narrative. The business events sector has spent decades measuring what it delivers. The challenge now is to articulate what it makes possible.

That's the narrative shift—and it may be the sector's biggest opportunity yet.



Many of these themes and case studies will be explored further in the upcoming Place Leadership White Paper.





Information



Save the date for the 2027 edition of the IMEX Place Leaders Forum, Tuesday 11 May, 2027.

Further information and resources please contact natasha.richards@imexevents.com or visit frankfurt.imexevents.com/place-leaders-forum

The Place Leaders Forum is organized in collaboration with the International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC), City Destinations Alliance (City DNA), Destinations International (DI), German Convention Bureau (GCB), the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the Strategic Alliance of National Convention Bureaux of Europe and U.S Travel Association, under the auspices of Events Industry Council (EIC) and the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC).

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