

# **iMEX 2024**

## POLICY FORUM

# Highlights





# **"Good meetings" not "more meetings"**

## **Why and how the business events industry should evolve from transactional to transformative thinking**

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# Objectives

This year's Policy Forum – the largest gathering since 2019 – explored the most existential issues facing the business events industry, with the conversation centered on self-image and rationale for continuing relevance.

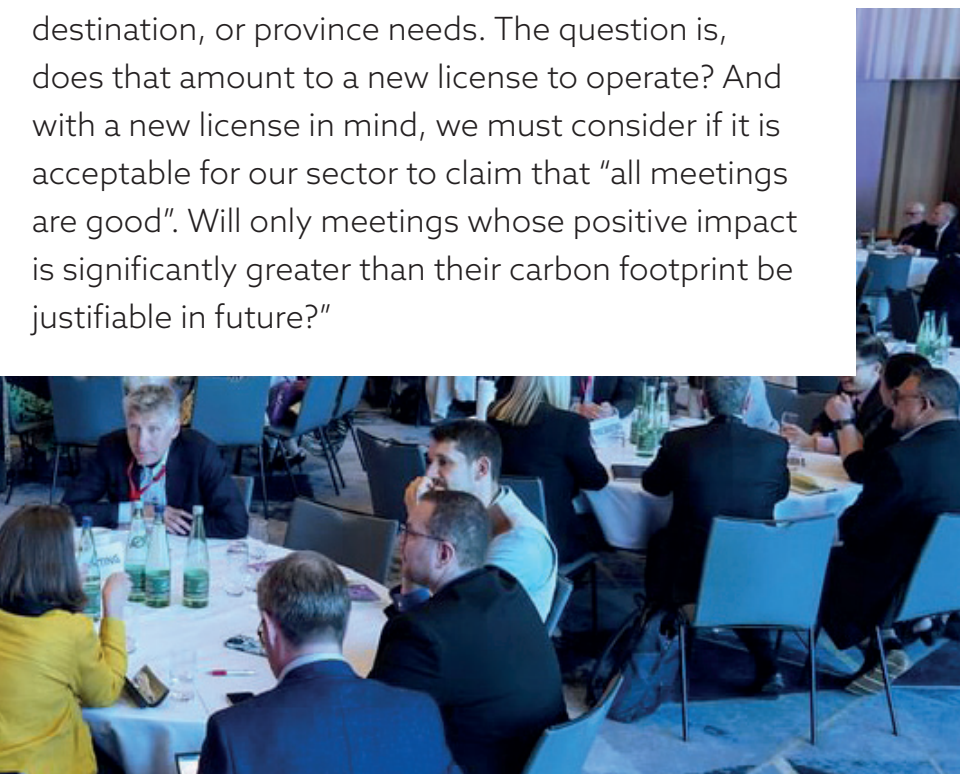
The half-day event, part of IMEX 2024, brought global business events industry leaders together with policy makers representing over 30 different countries.



**Natasha Richards, Director of Impact & Industry Relations, IMEX Group, kicked off the event by telling the audience:**

"2024 is an historic election year with elections in 50 countries. The outcome of these elections has huge implications for human rights, economies, international relations, the environment, and prospects for peace in an increasingly volatile world. Now, more than ever, the business events sector must be seen as part of the good future we all want to have.

"The pandemic has enabled us to reinvent business events – we have had to rethink what a city, or destination, or province needs. The question is, does that amount to a new license to operate? And with a new license in mind, we must consider if it is acceptable for our sector to claim that "all meetings are good". Will only meetings whose positive impact is significantly greater than their carbon footprint be justifiable in future?"





## Provocation Panel #1:

### What should we think of as a good meeting, and (why) is “good” better than more?

#### Moderator:

**Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International**

#### Panelists:

**Tracy Bury, Founder & CEO, Operandi Consulting**

**Nicola Kastner, CEO, Event Leaders Exchange**

## Association view:

**Interview with Tracy Bury, Founder & CEO, Operandi Consulting**



### Q: What makes a good association meeting?

Associations are driven by purpose and mission, with society at the heart. Many associations would consider the ‘S’ in an ESG agenda in their DNA – their purpose is to make a difference in the world. But, for association meetings to have a real impact to be good – not just ordinary – is that they are part of the strategic intent of the association. It’s not a meeting happening in isolation from what the society or association wants to achieve for its community and the bigger picture. There will be a strategy around the event itself, but that event plays a role in the strategy of the association.

Some associations are small and led by volunteers with a passion for their field, and are not event planners. Sometimes their events are held in isolation from the bigger picture. That’s not to say they aren’t good, it means they are not necessarily realizing their full potential. Many associations start from the roots and then move towards professionalization, and they need assistance from others in the event sector to realize their full potential.



**Q. Why good meetings, not more? Can more, also mean good?**

It has to come back to intent. There needs to be a clear purpose and clear objectives. If your objective is about bringing more people together, more inclusion in one place, then that's a different measure you're going to use. It's not about more or less, it's how we make events deliver the intent in the here and now, and longer term.

**Q. What are the barriers to good?**

There is a challenge for associations to be inclusive, and there are barriers around cost, location, and people's real and perceived understanding of the many DEI factors that come into play. Associations need to take the lead. That means going to where your audience is or running a bursary scheme to get people from low-income countries in the room. Associations must break down barriers to include knowledge and make the knowledge relevant for all parties. Visas are a huge barrier, so it is important to work with governments to help them see the value of bringing people together.



## Corporate view:

Interview with Nicola Kastner, CEO,  
Event Leaders Exchange



### Q. What makes a good corporate meeting?

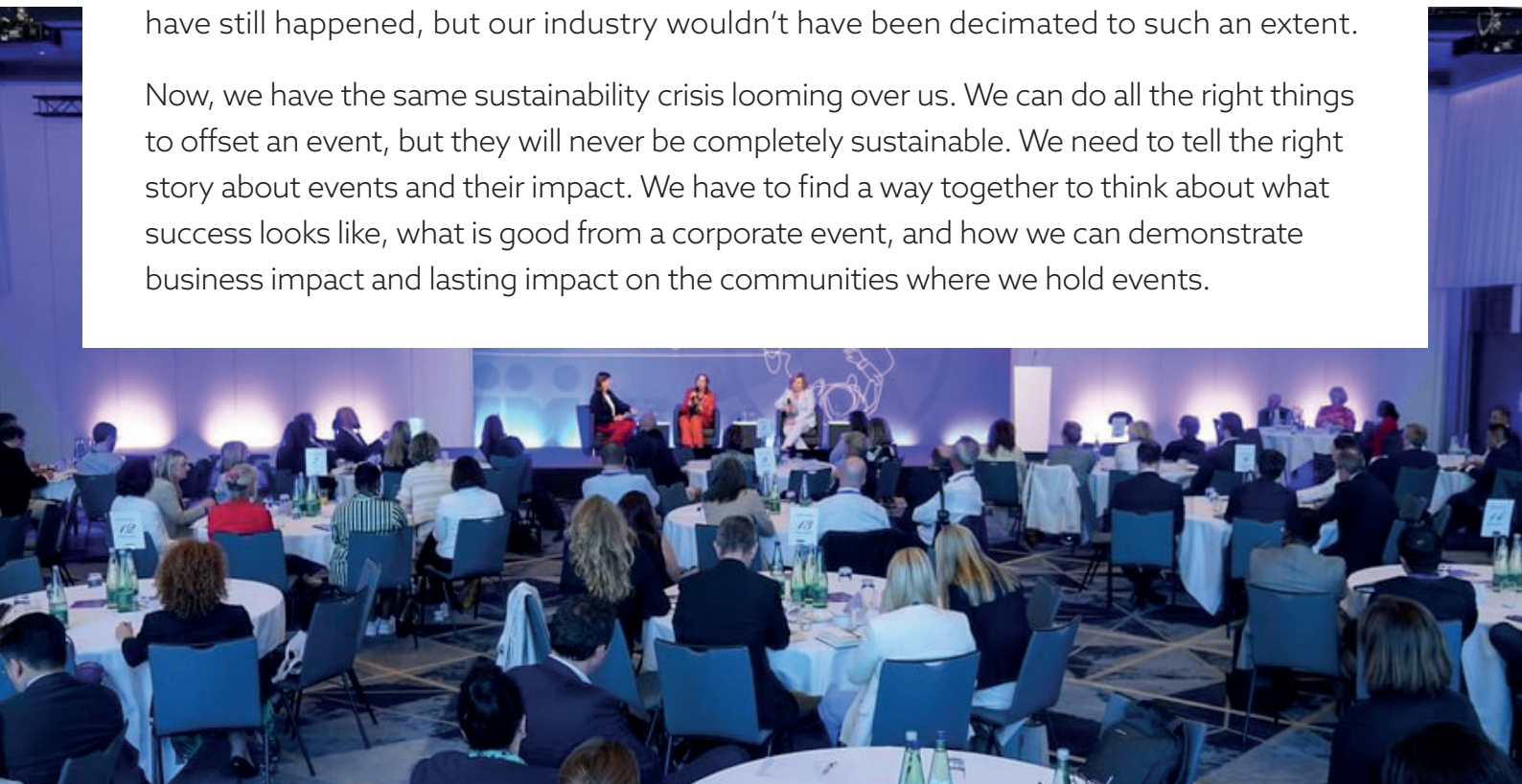
The corporate events industry is starting to understand the fundamental difference between the business of events vs. business events. An event's business is focused on tasks, efficiencies, logistics, and budgets, whereas the business of events focuses on the foundation that every event needs to drive a business outcome.

### Q. Is the positive impact of corporate events being measured effectively?

In the corporate events world, some are measuring the right things – others are not. Holistically, as an industry, we have a huge opportunity – and a huge risk. We need to get better at telling our story about the impact of events, not only on the economies where they are held, but also the results.

For example, in 2009, AIG received a federal bailout and weeks later an AIG incentive made headlines in the media. If AIG could have told the impact story, the fallout would have still happened, but our industry wouldn't have been decimated to such an extent.

Now, we have the same sustainability crisis looming over us. We can do all the right things to offset an event, but they will never be completely sustainable. We need to tell the right story about events and their impact. We have to find a way together to think about what success looks like, what is good from a corporate event, and how we can demonstrate business impact and lasting impact on the communities where we hold events.





## Roundtable discussions & feedback

**Participants were presented with three talking points to discuss at their tables. There was then an opportunity to give feedback on the key points to the room.**

### Basic principles of what makes a good meeting

A list of principles included knowledge transfer, narrative purpose, clarity of outcomes, intentional design, and intangible aims for broader impact, such as the wider societal impact, the creation of solutions, greater inclusivity and collaboration, and potential for serendipity and trust. There is also the potential for events to have a positive financial impact on the economy, employment, and charities within a host destination.

### What can meetings achieve more effectively than alternatives?

Answers from participants included strong business relationships and investment, trust and transparency, authenticity and friendships, carbon aggregation when compared to individual meetings, plus the ability to create consensus and build bridges despite polarization.

One participant cited scale as a benefit. He explained: "When people come together for meetings, so many people can meet key connections in a limited amount of time, which means the scale for deal-making is immense – there's no alternative to that."



Another leader within the audience added: "Cities and countries are facing many challenges and transformation can only be achieved through inspiring and building leadership – and there's no better way of doing that than face-to-face."

One table discussion reflected on how COVID-19 boosted awareness of mental health. The table's spokesperson stated: "Meetings are more important than ever because they are a highly effective tool to inspire employees and help human needs and connections, resulting in productivity gains. Meetings are vital for companies, our culture, values, and mental health."

### **Roles & responsibilities for inclusive meetings**

One leader in the congregation advised: "If you intend to be inclusive, you must be deliberate. Communicate with all stakeholders on what inclusivity means."

Other answers highlighted the importance of bursaries to bring those who are less privileged, or from marginalized communities, to the meeting. "Identifying broader stakeholder groups to identify more diverse outcomes" is key.

Summing up, Tracy Bury, Founder & CEO, Operandi Consulting, concluded: "Inclusivity is multi-faceted. It is an emotive subject, depending on where people are standing, their lived experiences and perceptions. Yet there is a huge opportunity to educate in the process of developing inclusive meetings. People need to see themselves reflected and part of the future of an event. Planners must consider their storytelling and the pictures they use. It is essential for growth and succession planning."







## Provocation Panel #2:

### What needs to change if our meetings are to be “good” or at least, “much, much better”

**Moderator: Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International**

**Panelists:**

**Bo Kruger, Owner, Moving Minds**

**Colja Dams, CEO, VOK DAMS**

Bo Kruger, Owner, Moving Minds, used an unusual metaphor to explain how meetings must change, he stated: “Too many meetings are comparable to a gas station. We pull people in, fill them up with knowledge, drive them out again, and expect them to know everything they should know. The problem is that the tank is full of holes. After 10-12 minutes, the gas starts pouring out. Instead, we should think of events as ecosystems, like in the start-up community. As event organizers, our task is to add fresh air and water for plants to grow, so bees and butterflies can spread ideas, knowledge, and good things. Meetings should be more like a garden than a gas station.”

Colja Dams, CEO, VOK DAMS, suggested that organizations need to ask, “why do we do events in the first place?” He explained: “Are they nice to have, or can they be used for greater impact to drive behavioral change? A good starting point is for a company to ask themselves, what do we want our delegates to do differently after the event? And why aren’t they doing that already?”

Colja also stressed that AI will revolutionize live events, asserting their authenticity amidst a digital content flood. He explained: "AI is changing the world and will drive live events. The more digital the world gets, the more deep fakes we have, the more content we will be flooded with, and the crazier and crazier it gets, there will be only one means of communication that is truly authentic – and that is live events."

Bo also discussed strategies on how the industry can effectively communicate the power of events. He recommended drawing inspiration from Hollywood's 'high-pitch concept' where a movie's premise can be succinctly outlined and easily pitched in just a few minutes. He explained that applying this approach to events could help better communicate their impact. Bo said: "If your next event was a movie, would you go to see it? Events always need a different script, with surprises, and must offer something different every time."





## Roundtable discussions & feedback

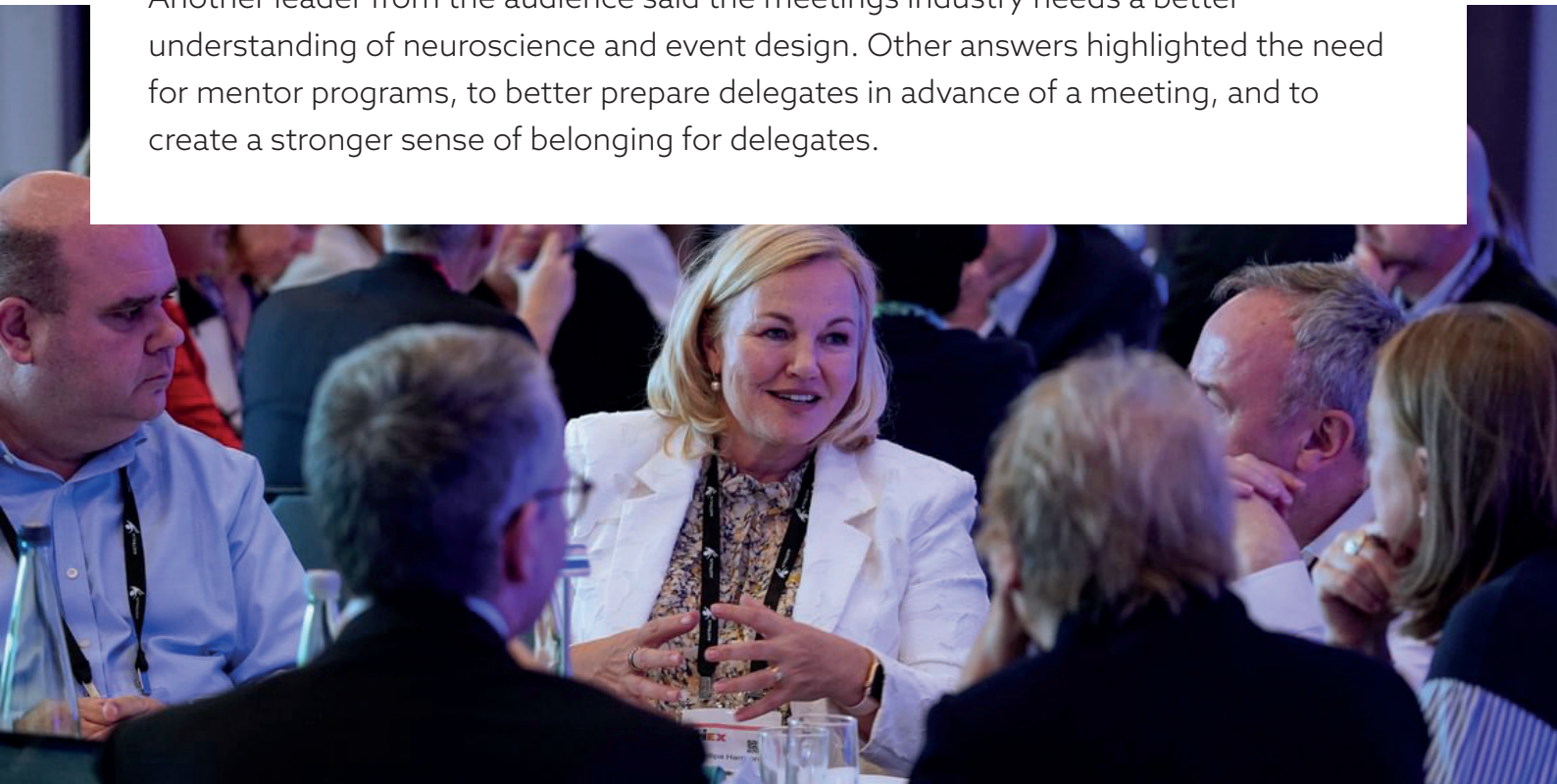
**Participants were presented with two questions to explore at their tables. There was then an opportunity to give feedback on the pertinent points to the room.**

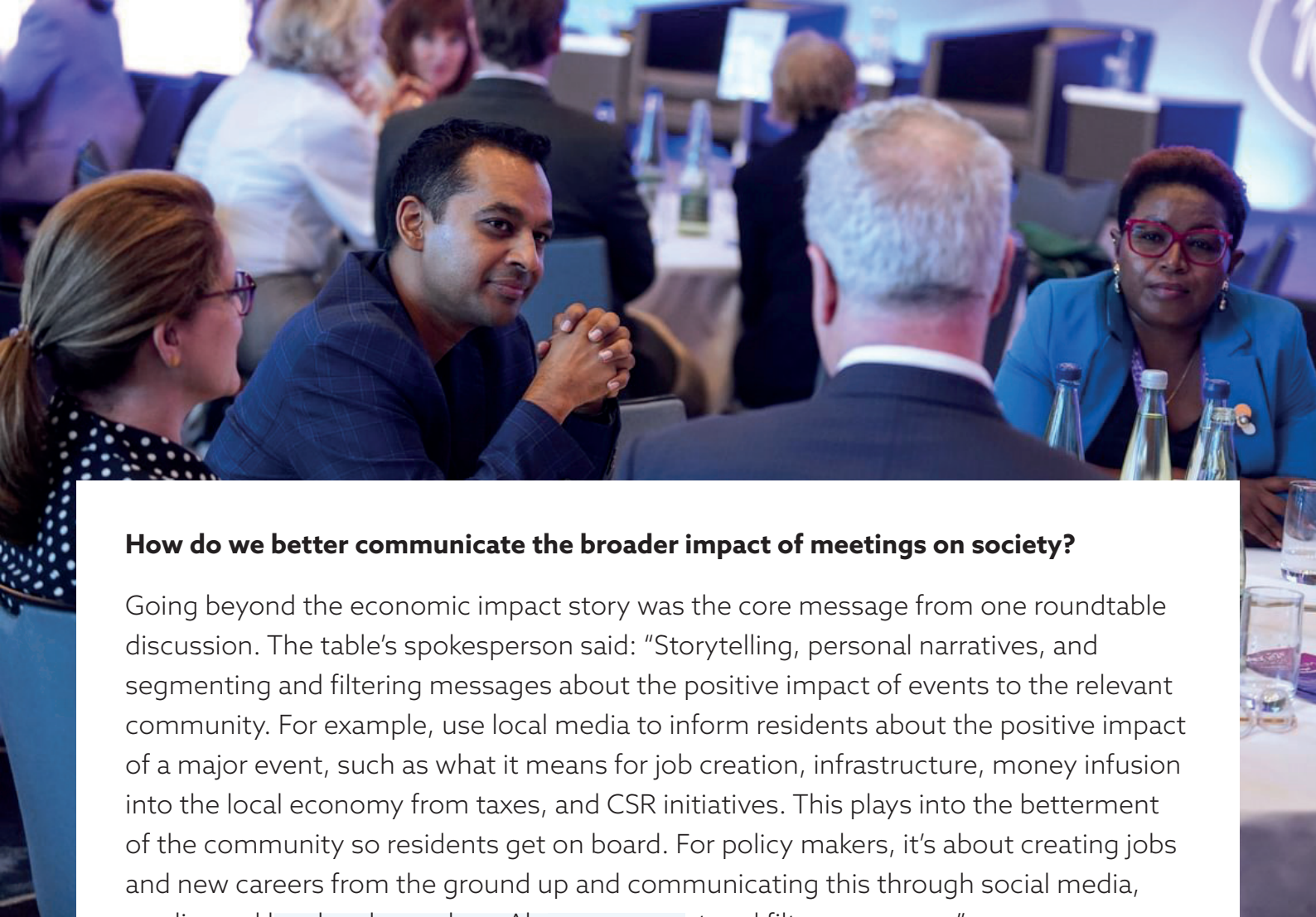
### **What needs to change if meetings are to be good or much better?**

Events need to drive multi-dimensional accessibility. A spokesperson from one table discussion explained the concept: "On a surface level, this means how to get to a destination, ensuring it is affordable, and not exclusive financially. At the event, we must make space for people to meet their specific needs. For example, some delegates will be tired and jetlagged, others will want a drink while many simply need a coffee. Cater to many different needs – from seating to food and beverage – to effectively serve a broad community. There must also be moments of surprise, activity, and engagement in the content. All this will drive multi-dimensional accessibility."

Bo also cited three human needs that events must embrace to be considered "good". He said: "One thing humans need is "relatedness" – we want to connect with people and feel part of a community. The second point is "competency" as we want to feel competent at what we do, and all meetings should help with that. The final aspect is "autonomy" – we all crave choice."

Another leader from the audience said the meetings industry needs a better understanding of neuroscience and event design. Other answers highlighted the need for mentor programs, to better prepare delegates in advance of a meeting, and to create a stronger sense of belonging for delegates.





### **How do we better communicate the broader impact of meetings on society?**

Going beyond the economic impact story was the core message from one roundtable discussion. The table's spokesperson said: "Storytelling, personal narratives, and segmenting and filtering messages about the positive impact of events to the relevant community. For example, use local media to inform residents about the positive impact of a major event, such as what it means for job creation, infrastructure, money infusion into the local economy from taxes, and CSR initiatives. This plays into the betterment of the community so residents get on board. For policy makers, it's about creating jobs and new careers from the ground up and communicating this through social media, media, and local ambassadors. Always segment and filter messages."

There was also a sense from the crowd that the meeting's industry needs to be better at PR and that all narratives should still include data, but there is a need for greater consistency around reporting.

Another table discussion also referenced the importance of citizen engagement and suggested using activations during an event to engage locals while also supporting the goals of a city or destination.

Others suggested that the time between bidding and hosting a meeting needs to be better utilized. For example, Antwerp has secured the World Tunnel Congress and, pre-event, the destination is bringing builders and stakeholders from its own tunnel infrastructure works to different media channels and schools, so the event connects with the public. "Recurrent meetings can become part of a destination's story, too."

Another leader added: "Be deliberate and clear on what the solutions and value of an event are for society. Let the delegates become the advocates, creating a multiplier effect."

Notes from another table recommended that meeting planners should commit to communicating the broader impact story of every meeting.





Today, the conversation is about the license to operate, but what will it be in ten years? The sector needs to future proof itself, be more imaginative of where it will be in 10 to 20 years. For instance, the meetings industry is a laboratory for change. It is at the forefront and cannot and must not stand still.

### Slido Poll



# RESOURCES

## Further information and resources

Please contact [policyforum@imexevents.com](mailto:policyforum@imexevents.com)  
or visit [imex-frankfurt.com/policy-forum](http://imex-frankfurt.com/policy-forum)



The IMEX Policy Forum is organised in collaboration with City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA), the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the International Association of Convention Centres (AIPC), Meetings Mean Business Coalition, Destinations International and German Convention Bureau (GCB) under the auspices of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) and Events Industry Council (EIC).

### Collaborators



### Partners



Thank you for being part of the IMEX Policy Forum  
and please save the date for the 2025 edition,  
**Tuesday 20 May, 2025**