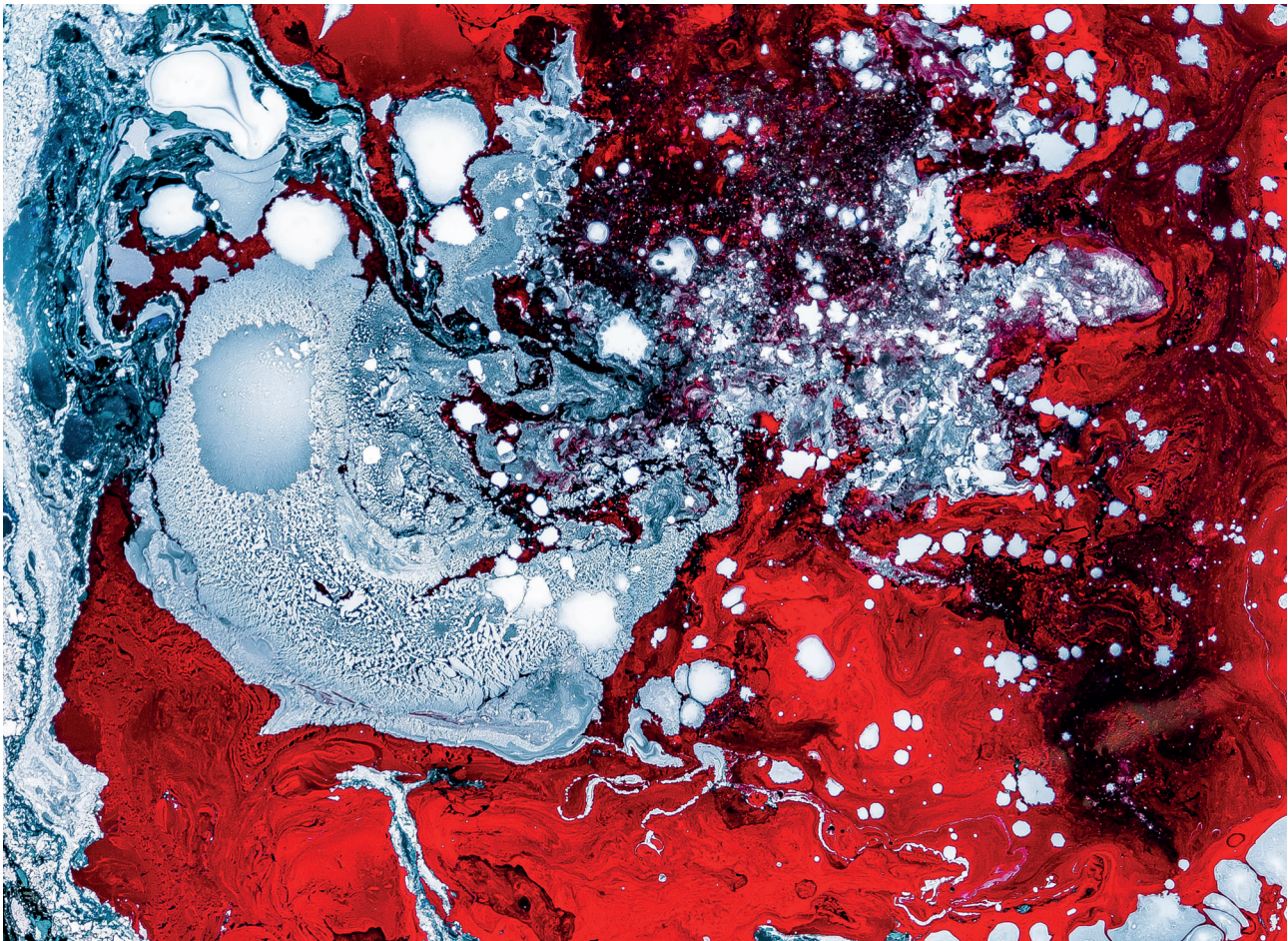


# Creating a Sense of Belonging, Engaging Members



As individuals, we are craving to be part of a wider community. Some want to lead, some want to be led but we all thrive in an environment where there is a sense of belonging, in a place where we can share our knowledge and form positive, lasting relationships.

Words Nicola McGrane



Never before has creating communities and a sense of individual belonging to a group been so important to maximising the potential for individual and societal growth and learning. To excel in your area of expertise, sharing knowledge and understanding different perspectives from a global community is essential to remaining enthused, motivated and ahead of your game.

### UNDERSTANDING ASSOCIATIONS

To build a community and create a sense of belonging, we need to firstly understand what associations are. Why did democracy flourish in the US? Alexis de Tocqueville laid the success of democracy at the feet of associations and the engagement of a community of peers who “*associate*” with each other and “*share what they know*”.

Associations are vehicles through which people exchange information and initiatives. The suppliers and customers of an association are the same. The members are the engine, the heart and soul of the association and deliver the content quality of the congress. They share information; gain insights; generate content; and make connections that extend beyond the congress.

### BUILDING COMMUNITIES

The objective of associations is arguably to build a community through collective partnerships, to create a long-term plan to support and advocate for the community in order to create spaces for all identities. In order to build that community, we need to help people to associate. Attracting the right individuals into your community is critical. The world of associations is a competitive one and unless there is value in the quality of the members, a long-lasting sense of belonging may be short lived.

Ultimately, after attending the event(s) an association organises, members and delegates should leave with a sense of belonging and a plan of advocacy within their community.

Over the years, attending association congresses has developed from being ‘the activity’ to becoming the ‘communication platform’ for all association activities. This platform intends to cultivate a space for members to feel empowered in their intersectional identities.

The balance between personal benefit versus collective benefits to the community also needs to be considered. As well as selling the need to care about your industry, there is a need to sell the personal benefit of being part of a global community. To achieve this, creating the most favourable environment to make meaningful connections, build memorable moments, and personalised learning for all members is important. And if you, as an association, want to attract new members, you should demonstrate what’s in it for them.

### ENGAGEMENT

To create a sense of belonging and a strong community spirit of dynamic members, associations need to engage with their community before, during and after the events they organise and through the annual calendar of activities. Interaction needs to be voluntary and not forced, so engagement is about quality. Not everyone will want to interact, many will want to be spectators, however, they may interact and engage when their personal and professional environment has become more comfortable.

Members of an engaged community want meaningful learning through discussion with others who are tackling similar challenges. Oftentimes, they want to have their thinking disrupted by encountering new and surprising information, test out news ideas to improve on the quality of their service or product, and connect with leaders and experienced practitioners. The need to find a community purpose, even a higher purpose, like that of the World Economic Forum for instance, is also recognised.

So how do we deliver engagement to create a sense of belonging? You can start by

producing an equal mix of top-down learning and group learning. To create a sense of belonging, members want to contribute and be part of the collective long-term plan to support and advocate for the community. Allowing members to select which groups they join to find the solutions and creating an environment of constructive conflict to arrive at harmonious solutions are also options. In this context, interactive technology tools are your friends, as they create platforms to facilitate shared learning and experiences.

People can also feel engaged in an environment where leaders are elbow-to-elbow with members and draw on their respective skills. In this regard, you should encourage leaders and speakers to stay and continue to share outside the meeting room. The foyer is the new meeting space – ensure it is a comfortable environment to encourage meaningful discussion.

Overall, creating an experience that an individual cannot access on their own is paramount. The life of a congress can be extended, as its content can be repurposed for other uses, in a creative way. An engaged and energetic membership leads to a powerful sense of belonging and a loyalty to a community of friends and colleagues that is rarely broken.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Nicola McGrane, CEO, Conference Partners International, Ireland. IAPCO represents today 116 companies comprised of over 6,000 professional congress organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 41 countries. [info@iapco.org](mailto:info@iapco.org) | [www.iapco.org](http://www.iapco.org)

