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From Market Data to Congress Decisions

*Sources and criteria for understanding association
demand and informing business development*

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Understanding the market to guide action

For destinations, congress venues, hotels and service providers, understanding the scale, composition and trends of the congress market is the first step in shaping development strategies. Turning this knowledge into business opportunities requires focused research into the types of congresses compatible with their offer, the organisational requirements of those events and their geographical rotation patterns. It also requires an understanding of the organisations behind them, the objectives they pursue and the processes through which they select destinations, venues and services. This investigation helps identify relevant demand segments and direct both marketing activity and the investment needed to meet their requirements.

The strength of this process depends on the interpretation of the underlying information. Statistical studies and surveys use definitions, inclusion criteria and methods that determine what their findings can establish. Attributing meanings to data beyond those limits can lead to errors in marketing strategy, market selection and resource allocation.

This paper examines ICCA and UIA information resources and considers complementary research on association priorities, event operations and economic significance. It explains which questions these sources can address and where further investigation is necessary. The Congress Intelligence Unit proposes a research framework connecting statistical knowledge of the market with an understanding of demand and decision processes. Its purpose is to make the progression from market evidence to a qualified business opportunity explicit and open to verification.

Respecting sources as a principle of analysis

Source selection is an essential part of research. In a heterogeneous information environment, the standing of the publishing institution must be accompanied by an understanding of who supplies the data, how they are collected and classified, and how closely they relate to the phenomenon under investigation. Methodological transparency allows researchers to assess these elements and use findings within their actual scope of validity.

For the CIU, which studies the formation and evolution of association congress demand, the organisations commissioning events provide a particularly relevant perspective. They define the purposes of meetings, plan their programmes and esta-

blish the requirements that destinations, venues and services must meet. Host venues provide direct information about the activity they accommodate and the use of their facilities. Interpreting the nature of demand through venue information requires identification of event promoters and objectives, together with consistent classification criteria.

Sources are therefore assessed according to their ability to answer the research questions. The perspective from which data are collected, the information available and the transparency of the procedures jointly determine the relevance of each study.

This distinction has practical consequences. A favourable indicator for one market component may be interpreted as evidence that the entire system is performing adequately, reducing attention to needs that the study does not measure. Analysis must make this inferential step visible, distinguish documented results from strategic conclusions and identify the further evidence needed to guide investment, policy and development. Using a source beyond its evidential limits can also undermine its perceived credibility, even when the weakness lies in the interpretation rather than the original research.

Different sources for different research questions

Comparing the studies requires clarity about what each observes, how it collects information and what its results describe. These differences determine the questions the findings can answer and the limits of their interpretation. The table summarises the principal statistical resources considered here. The subsequent discussion distinguishes these publications from tools for researching individual organisations and events.

Research product	Origin of the data	Transparency and collection limits	Relevance to CIU research
ICCA statistics and destination rankings	Association information, member booking calendars and targeted research into market segments and geographical areas. [1]	Inclusion criteria are stated. The public description reviewed does not quantify each channel's contribution by country or detail checks on geographical comparability.	Describes a defined international segment. Interpreting rankings as territorial market positions requires further evidence about coverage.
UIA International Meetings Statistics Report	International organisations are the principal source, supplemented by secondary sources; meetings are linked to organisations in the database. [5]	Inclusion criteria, documentation limits and retrospective revisions are described. Coverage is not exhaustive and recent data remain subject to revision.	Examines documented international activity from a perspective centred on event-generating organisations. It does not itself explain their decision processes.
UIA Survey on International Association Meeting Issues	Direct association responses about meeting organisation, experience and requirements. [6]	Each edition requires examination of methodology and respondent numbers and composition. The invited population is distinct from the responding group.	Examines reported priorities and practices. Findings cannot automatically be extended to all associations.

What makes a comparison meaningful

Data comparability depends on defining the subject of analysis and applying consistent collection criteria. Each question requires specific information: researchers must identify what is needed to measure the phenomenon and ensure that it has the same meaning across the cases compared.

Comparing the number of international congresses hosted by destinations in a given year requires a shared definition of an eligible congress and its consistent application to event counts. Comparing participant numbers requires attendance data collected on a consistent basis. Measuring overnight stays requires information about how many participants used accommodation and for how many nights.

The research question therefore determines the data required. Each indicator can support conclusions about the dimension it measures; using it to answer a different question requires additional information. A ranking of recorded event counts, for example, does not by itself establish whether investment is sufficient to meet changing demand.

The specific contribution of ICCA

ICCA statistics cover international association meetings held regularly, attracting at least 50 participants and rotating among at least three countries. These criteria define the segment observed and allow the scale, geographical distribution and characteristics of recorded events to be examined within that scope. [1]

To populate its database, ICCA states that it uses information from associations, calendars of past and future bookings supplied by member organisations, and dedicated research into market segments and geographical areas. The public description consulted identifies these channels but does not quantify their respective contributions across countries or detail the procedures used to assess geographical comparability. [1]

The distinction matters: establishing which congresses qualify for inclusion does not in itself establish that they are identified with equivalent completeness in every destination. Member calendars document the activity of participating organisations. Assessing how far other research extends that coverage would require information about its criteria, reach and continuity. The general description in the documentation reviewed does not enable that assessment.

ICCA statistics provide useful information about the observed segment. Rankings order countries and destinations by the number of recorded congresses meeting the adopted criteria. Interpreting them as measures of territorial market position nevertheless requires evidence about the comparability of collection. Without that verification, they should not be treated as exhaustive rankings of the international congress market or as standalone proof of destination competitiveness.

The Association Meetings Database also supports research into individual meeting series, including their history, contacts, meeting room requirements and decision procedures. These operational functions are distinct from the statistical use of aggregated records and can support initial opportunity assessment, followed by verification with the relevant organisation. [1]

The specific contribution of UIA

UIA maintains an information system devoted to international organisations and their activities. It includes the Yearbook of International Organizations, the International Congress Calendar, the International Meetings Statistics Report and the Survey on

International Association Meeting Issues. These resources perform distinct, complementary functions: documenting organisations, recording meeting activity, analysing aggregated data and investigating the experiences and priorities of demand. [3-6]

The Yearbook of International Organizations provides profiles covering organisational identity, objectives, structure and activities. The International Congress Calendar documents meetings connected with organisations and enables research into individual events. Both can support an initial assessment of relevant organisations and activities, to be developed through further checks and direct contact. They are reference tools distinct from the statistical report, while forming part of the wider information system supporting it. [3-5]

The International Meetings Statistics Report analyses meetings linked to international organisations in the UIA database on a worldwide basis. It covers meetings of inter-governmental and nongovernmental organisations without requiring a particular frequency, geographical rotation or minimum attendance. Its statistical scope is distinct from the full range of events searchable in the Calendar. [5]

Organisations are the principal information source, supplemented by secondary sources. UIA describes its selection criteria, continuing updates and documentation limits. Records, particularly recent ones, may be supplemented after initial publication. Comparisons over time and interpretations of rankings must therefore take account of revisions. Making these features explicit helps establish the scope of the findings without assuming exhaustive coverage. [5]

The Survey on International Association Meeting Issues adds a different type of evidence by collecting association experiences, requirements and views on meeting organisation directly. Responses illuminate aspects of demand that event counts do not describe, within the limits of the methodology and participation in each edition. [6]

Complementary sources on demand and operating conditions

Research published by other industry organisations can complement the analysis of association congress demand through information on association priorities, event operations and the economic context. Its contribution should be assessed for each

publication, considering who supplied the information, how respondents were selected, geographical coverage and the questions asked.

ASAE research examines association strategy, organisational challenges and meeting participation. It can help identify factors affecting the organisations that generate congress demand. Applying findings to other markets requires an assessment of the associations represented and the circumstances in which the information was collected. [7]

PCMA and Convene's Meetings Market Survey examines budgets, attendance, formats and operational priorities. The survey conducted in September 2025 received responses from 80 event professionals, 89% of whom worked for organisations headquartered in North America. It therefore offers a predominantly North American perspective on respondents' experiences and expectations, although their activities may also extend to other regions. Its sample size and geographical concentration limit generalisation to the global market. [8]

This geographical distinction matters. Association meetings operate within national, regional and intercontinental circuits. An event's international status does not mean that every destination worldwide falls within its rotation area. Findings from organisations concentrated in one region can suggest questions for investigation elsewhere, but their transferability depends on the associations, congress circuits and operating conditions concerned.

IAPCO's Annual Member Survey documents events managed by its member professional congress organisers. It provides evidence about the scale and development of activity within that professional community. Before interpreting changes in reported totals as wider market trends, researchers need to examine any changes in membership composition and survey participation. [9]

Research by the Events Industry Council with Oxford Economics examines the economic significance of business events. It provides context for assessing the sector's contribution to economic activity and employment, particularly in discussions about public policy and investment. Its scope includes activities beyond association congresses and its results do not directly measure association congress demand alone. [10]

These sources can contribute to different stages of analysis, helping formulate and test questions about association behaviour, operating conditions and economic significance. Comparisons require compatible definitions and populations; where these differ, the differences must remain explicit.

Why the CIU uses UIA resources as a principal reference

The CIU studies the evolution of association congress demand to understand its implications for destinations, venues and operators. Source selection responds to a specific requirement: information that helps interpret international trends from the perspective of the organisations generating meeting activity.

The UIA information system is particularly consistent with this objective. The central role of event-generating organisations in information collection offers a relevant perspective on demand. Documentation of criteria and methodological limits makes it possible to assess which conclusions are supported and which require further investigation. Together, these features explain the CIU's choice of UIA as a principal reference. [5-6]

A further contribution is the possibility of combining statistical analysis with research into organisations and their activities. The report, Survey, Yearbook and Calendar support different stages of enquiry, from understanding general patterns to identifying subjects and organisations for further investigation. Their complementarity assists research while preserving the distinction between statistical evidence and the assessment of individual opportunities. [3-6]

This preference reflects consistency with the CIU research model. ICCA and the complementary sources discussed in this paper contribute where their evidence is relevant to the question being examined. Interpretation of the sources and the resulting conclusions remain the CIU's independent responsibility.

At the time of writing, the UIA Survey 2026 is collecting responses. Its findings are therefore not used as evidence in this paper. [6]

Note on the UIA partnership

Association Days Europe is a UIA partner for the Survey on International Association Meeting Issues 2026. This paper is an independent publication of the Congress Intel-

ligence Unit, which retains sole responsibility for source selection, interpretation and conclusions. The partnership does not imply UIA endorsement of this document.

From aggregate data to accessible demand

The CIU research process starts with trends identified through statistical analysis. Changes in the composition and distribution of congress activity inform the selection of segments for further investigation and the formulation of research questions. Statistics provide a basis for deciding where to focus attention before undertaking business development or committing investment.

Research then examines specific niches within association demand. Through focused enquiries, continuing dialogue with association buyers and monitoring of organisational programmes, the CIU investigates planned activities, the needs they address and the selection of destinations, venues and services. This step establishes how general patterns translate into specific behaviours and requirements.

The recurrence of similar requirements across different organisations helps identify shared priorities. To assess their significance, the CIU considers the characteristics of the organisations consulted, examines divergent cases and monitors changes in responses over time. Repeated responses can support the identification of recurring themes; repetition alone does not establish statistical representativeness. This investigation brings into view niche trends that may not be discernible at the level of aggregation used in market statistics.

Demand is then assessed in relation to a destination's or venue's offer. Compatibility with identified needs must be accompanied by knowledge of decision-makers, requirements, procedures and the timing of proposals. These checks turn a potentially relevant market segment into a qualified business opportunity. The CIU supplies the evidence needed to make this progression and guide both marketing activity and the development of the offer.

Reconstructing the process behind the decision

Once an activity appears compatible with the offer, analysis turns to the organisation's previous choices and the conditions likely to shape future decisions. The first

investigation concerns the event's history. This provides a basis for identifying the people involved, the requirements and the decision procedures.

Event history as a basis for assessment

Reconstructing previous editions is fundamental to assessing a congress opportunity. The organisation's past choices reveal recurring characteristics, operational requirements and ways of delivering the event. Event history provides a concrete basis for developing a relevant proposal, supplemented by knowledge of future programmes and any changes in association priorities.

The first element to examine is the sequence of destinations. Comparison should address the characteristics that may have influenced selection: international accessibility, congress and accommodation capacity, the local scientific community and service availability. For example, a series hosted in Paris, London and Vienna suggests investigating destinations with comparable capabilities. A smaller destination with a substantially different offer would require examination of the conditions under which it could meet the event's needs. Previous destinations indicate requirements without automatically determining future choices.

The geographical scope of rotation

Event history also helps reconstruct the geographical area within which a congress moves. An international event may rotate among countries in one region, follow a circuit linking several regions or alternate worldwide. Its international designation does not make every destination a potential host.

This distinction is supported by ICCA's historical study *A Modern History of International Association Meetings, 1963-2017*. In 2013-2017, 43.7% of meetings with a known rotation area were classified as World/International; the remainder were distributed across regional and interregional circuits. This documents the importance of those patterns in the period observed, rather than providing a measure of their current prevalence. [11]

Opportunity assessment therefore requires examination of previous destinations alongside any rotation rules and the association's territorial structure. This distinguishes geographical practice from a formal restriction and establishes whether a destination could be considered for future editions. The absence of previous editions in a particular area does not, by itself, establish its exclusion.

Once the geographical scope is understood, research should examine return intervals, distinguishing a return to the same country from a return to the same city or ve-

nue. The spacing of editions, geographical rules and destinations already announced help identify when a proposal would be relevant. Researchers should also check for agreements covering several years, permanent or recurring venues and arrangements allocating multiple editions in exchange for specific terms or benefits. The sequence of locations alone cannot reveal these commitments; documentary research or direct enquiry is needed.

Venues and the organisation of hospitality

A further level of analysis concerns the venues used and accommodation arrangements. Recurring use of congress centres, hotels, universities or institutional buildings can suggest requirements concerning space, facilities and the meeting environment. Information about designated hotels, categories and rates helps reconstruct the accommodation offered to participants, distinguishing it, where possible, from the accommodation they actually selected.

The logistical configuration also deserves attention: whether activities and accommodation are within walking distance, whether shuttles or public transport are used, and whether participants stay across a wider area. These choices influence the participant experience and the conditions a destination needs to provide.

Side events, social functions, technical visits and accompanying persons' programmes complete the picture. Their presence and continuity across editions help explain the role of the destination in the congress experience. Historical analysis identifies recurring requirements and negotiable elements, assesses the relevance of the offer and focuses subsequent dialogue on information that remains to be verified.

Participants in the decision process

With the event's history established, the next task is to identify who defines its objectives, specifies requirements, evaluates alternatives and makes the decision. Previous editions provide a basis for focused questions about which needs remain valid and which have changed.

Selection processes can differ between associations and between activities within the same organisation. ICCA describes, for example, the potential role of a local association and procedures that do not involve a formal bidding competition. Understanding these arrangements helps identify the appropriate contacts and the right time to submit a proposal. [2]

The CIU proposes examining the following aspects for each opportunity. This is an analytical framework for gathering information: the steps need not follow a fixed se-

quence, and responsibilities may be distributed differently according to the organisation and activity.

Purpose of the activity

What scientific, association or educational objectives motivate the meeting? What outcomes must it deliver for the organisation and participants? Understanding these purposes helps assess how a destination, venue and services can contribute to the programme.

Responsibilities and decision authority

Who proposes the destination, evaluates the proposal and approves the choice? Who negotiates terms and signs agreements? Researchers should distinguish the responsibilities of governing bodies, scientific leadership, the secretariat, any local host and the appointed organiser. The operational contact is not necessarily the decision-maker.

Requirements and alternatives

Which characteristics are essential and which are negotiable? Space, accessibility, accommodation capacity, budget, timing and service requirements define the feasible options. Historical indications must be checked against the future edition, taking account of possible changes in programme, attendance or resources.

Timing and procedure

When are potential destinations identified and when is the decision made? Does the process involve a formal bid, direct selection or an agreement covering several editions? What commitments already exist? The congress date is distinct from the point at which a venue proposal is useful. Understanding the decision timetable makes it possible to act while alternatives remain open.

Evaluation and subsequent choices

How is each edition evaluated and which factors influence future decisions? Dialogue with the responsible people can clarify what was valued in earlier editions and what required improvement. This information supports relevant proposals and helps establish whether a continuing relationship would be appropriate.

Evidence required

Reconstructing the process requires documentary sources and direct dialogue. Association statutes and regulations, bid documents, requests for proposals, previous programmes and interviews with the responsible people can provide complementary information.

Each item should record its source, date and degree of confirmation, distinguishing formal rules from reported practices and unverified hypotheses. Event history documents choices already made; dialogue with the organisation helps explain why they were made and whether the same considerations continue to guide decisions.

An international perspective serving the whole sector

For destinations, congress venues, hotels and service providers, the value of understanding an association extends beyond its principal congress. Analysis should consider its programme of activities and its relationships with national societies, territorial chapters and specialist groups. These connections may reveal national congresses, scientific meetings, training courses and working sessions with different organisational requirements and scales.

An international perspective therefore broadens research to include activities taking place nationally or locally. Dialogue with association representatives can help identify relevant programmes, needs and contacts while establishing the responsibilities of the organisations involved. An international role does not automatically confer authority over national activities: related organisations may retain independent decision powers. The international reach of a relationship does not determine the geographical scale of the resulting business opportunity.

This approach makes the research relevant across the sector. A destination with substantial infrastructure may identify complex congresses, while a smaller destination or conference hotel may find suitable opportunities in specialist meetings, training or national congresses. Analysis must recognise these different components of demand and relate them to the offer, directing business development towards activities for which there is a demonstrable fit.

Applying the method to business development

To translate research into commercial action, the CIU proposes maintaining an opportunity assessment record. This brings together the organisation and event profile, previous editions, identified requirements, decision-makers, procedures and deadlines. It also records an assessment of compatibility with the destination or venue concerned.

Every item should identify its source, date of update and verification status. Distinguishing documentary evidence, information supplied by contacts and unresolved questions makes it possible to determine which conclusions can support a decision and what further investigation is needed.

The record becomes a tool for prioritising action: obtaining missing information, contacting the responsible person, checking hosting feasibility or preparing a proposal. It also distinguishes opportunities ready for action from those requiring monitoring and cases where proceeding is not justified, directing time and resources towards the most substantiated prospects.

From market signals to informed decisions

The value of research lies in turning data into an understanding of the market that can support decisions. Statistics help identify trends; investigation of organisations, event history and selection processes reveals their implications for a destination or venue. Connecting these levels requires interpretation that makes both the evidence behind an assessment and the unresolved questions explicit.

Source selection is a substantive responsibility. Each study must be used in relation to the research question, taking account of information provenance, methodological transparency and the scope of the findings. A favourable result can document progress without establishing that existing strategies are sufficient. Equally, an overall trend can encompass different opportunities within specific niches.

The CIU's contribution is to recognise these differences and translate them into reasoned guidance: which segments to investigate, which people to engage, which aspects of the offer to develop and when to submit a proposal. Research thus provides a basis for business development and investment, subject to verification and revision through continuing engagement with demand.

Sources and methodological references

Public sources consulted on 9 and 10 September 2026. This paper examines the documentation of the studies and information resources cited. It does not analyse microdata or present the results of a new sample survey. The framework connecting statistical analysis, research into demand niches and opportunity assessment is the CIU's methodological proposal. Bibliographic references identify the resources and scopes discussed, rather than implying that their datasets have been combined.

[1] **ICCA** – [Association Meetings Database](#). Event inclusion criteria, declared collection channels and information available in the database. Individual event research functions are distinct from statistical use of the records.

[2] **ICCA** – [Understanding the International Association Meetings Industry](#). Description of destination selection processes and the potential role of local association counterparts.

[3] **Union of International Associations** – [Yearbook of International Organizations](#). Purpose, content and structure of the resource on international organisations.

[4] **Union of International Associations** – [International Congress Calendar](#). Coverage and content of the event resource, research functions and relationship to the UIA information system.

[5] **Union of International Associations** – [International Meetings Statistics Report – 67th edition, 2026](#). Public extract describing information sources, inclusion criteria, coverage limits and data updates. This paper does not make a numerical comparison between UIA and ICCA destination rankings.

[6] **Union of International Associations** – [Survey on International Association Meeting Issues](#). Purpose and presentation of the 2026 Survey, collecting responses at the time of writing. This paper does not anticipate its findings.

[7] **ASAE** – [Insights](#). Research on association strategy, organisational conditions and meeting participation.

[8] **PCMA / Convene** – [32nd Annual Meetings Market Survey Results](#). Survey conducted in September 2025: respondent profile and findings.

[9] **IAPCO** – [Annual Member Survey](#). Reported activity of member professional congress organisers.

[10] Events Industry Council / Oxford Economics – [Global Economic Significance of Business Events](#). Research on the scale and economic contribution of business events.

[11] ICCA – [A Modern History of International Association Meetings – Update 1963-2017](#). Rotation areas, p. 36. Historical analysis of meeting rotation areas known to ICCA.

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Giancarlo Leporatti is Founder of the Congress Intelligence Unit and Founder of Eureka MICE International, a Malta-based consultancy specialising in international association meetings, destination strategy and congress development.

About the Congress Intelligence Unit

The Congress Intelligence Unit is an independent research initiative dedicated to analysing the evolution of the international meetings industry through strategic research, policy papers and original analytical frameworks supporting destinations, institutions and industry leaders.

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