Trends for associations in 2026 according to ICCA

2026-01-29

The year 2026 is shaping up to be a breakthrough moment for associations around the world. In the face of geopolitical uncertainty, the rapid development of artificial intelligence, increasing sustainability requirements, and evolving member expectations, these organizations must redefine their role, their ways of operating, and the value they deliver to their communities.

As emphasized by Senthil Gopinath, CEO of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), the year 2026 will favor those associations that are ready to adapt to change, collaborate across borders, and clearly define their purpose in an increasingly complex world.

Managing complexity in the context of global change

Trade tensions, regional conflicts, and shifting legal regulations directly impact international travel and cross-border cooperation. For international associations, this means both new challenges and new opportunities.

In 2026, a key role of associations will be to function as trusted platforms for dialogue, enabling the exchange of knowledge and facilitating cooperation regardless of political or economic circumstances. Scientific collaboration, the development of professional standards, and international knowledge transfer remain the foundation of their activities.

Thanks to its global network and broad perspective, ICCA supports associations in making informed decisions regarding event locations, analyzing destination conditions, and navigating regulatory changes. The organization consistently highlights the importance of meetings as a tool for building understanding and intercultural dialogue that transcends divisions and strengthens shared values.

Artificial intelligence: from potential to practice

Artificial intelligence is no longer a concept of the future — in 2026, it is becoming a practical tool supporting the work of associations. The key question is no longer whether to use AI, but how to use it responsibly and effectively.

AI can support the personalization of member experiences, streamline operations, analyze data, and assist in strategic planning. At the same time, new challenges emerge, including issues related to ethics, data protection, algorithmic bias, and maintaining the human dimension of relationships.

As ICCA emphasizes, technology should enhance human capabilities, not replace them. Trust, a sense of community, and the relationships built during in-person meetings remain irreplaceable — even in an increasingly digital world.

Sustainability: from declarations to measurable outcomes

In 2026, sustainability is no longer merely part of a communication strategy. Members, partners, and

host cities expect concrete, measurable results and transparent reporting on the environmental and social impact of events.

Organizing events naturally involves emissions related to travel, yet it also brings significant benefits: knowledge exchange, innovation development, and stronger communities. The challenge lies in finding balance — through more responsible destination choices, designing sustainable events, increasing accessibility and inclusivity, and clearly communicating their impact.

ICCA supports associations by promoting best practices, long-term impact planning, and collaboration with destinations committed to advancing sustainability goals.

Social change and evolving member expectations

Generational shifts, new work models, the growing importance of diversity and inclusion, and evolving professional identities influence the ways in which members engage with associations.

Modern members expect