

The Rise of Poland's Meetings Industry

The journey to true innovation, thought leadership
and spectacular success stories ...



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If you think about the world of events and how it has changed over the past few years (as in key variables of success vs. failure), some things will come to mind at once, while others can be a lot more elusive. In a world saturated with industry buzzwords, like innovation, resilience, hybrid and online, success will increasingly depend on more subtle factors than the sum total of '(the right) event venue + (the right) hotels + (the right) restaurants + (the right) city'.

So what does it take to be a great, internationally competitive event-host destination in 2023, and how do you set yourself apart from the crowd as an event destination brand, especially now that so many cities worldwide already boast exceptional, state-of-the-art event infrastructure with top-tier auxiliary services attached?

This article will take a closer look at some of the key ingredients to a truly successful event destination formula, at both country and city level.

To explore its finer points and arguments put forward below in greater details, please go to the 'Recommended Reading' section at the end. This will help you put things in perspective and give you a much more comprehensive understanding of Poland's visionary progress on the global stage of the meetings industry.

Let's jump right in!

What makes Poland truly special is...

In short, the overall experience of organizing an event in just about any major Polish city, whether it's Warsaw, Krakow, Wroclaw, Lodz, Poznan, Gdansk or Katowice! All of these cities have great, unique venues at their disposal, both emblematic of their region's history/culture and state-of-the-art congress centres, capable of delivering both one-time, (audio)visually mesmerizing productions, and top-tier, annual international formats.

As if this didn't make things easy enough, literally everyone seems to be speaking conversational-to-fluent English in Poland, which comes with incredible hospitality and approachability attached. A long list of companies and subcontractors you'll comfortably be choosing from will often make it a point to go the extra mile and make sure you're happy with the end result.

Business reputation matters a lot in Poland, which is easier to understand when you realize that Poles are still battling the stereotypes of the Iron Curtain, pre-1989 era.

A 2020 study reveals that Poland's meetings industry accounts for 1,5% of the country's GDP (est. 35 billion PLN and ca. 220,000 jobs involved) and, given the momentum and the overall progress of the past few years, the number is likely to grow in years to come.



Looking back at the past 5 years of Poland's meetings sector, what I'm most proud of is

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No event is too big or too challenging

Having successfully organized a variety of large, international events like World Youth Days, UNESCO World Heritage Committee Session (41st), COP 24, World Urban Forum or multiple international sports events, it very much feels like no challenge is too big for Central Europe's meetings industry leader.

Poland's biggest cities also enjoy all the benefits of operating within a variety of professional networks (regional, domestic and global) as well as Convention Bureaux. Recently, Poland Convention Bureau (20 years in operation) has become an independent department within the Polish Tourism Organisation. The PTO is itself one of several dozen national tourism organisations operating around the world.

There's also the Polish Congress Ambassador Programme, celebrating 25 years in existence this year. It brings together experts from all over the country, most notably cities like Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław and Poznań.

In effect, a variety of cross-sector networks complement the sophisticated constellation of organizations designed to help the industry flourish internationally. For decades, now, their members have been present at just about every major industry fair worldwide.

Best event destinations

It starts with great infrastructure, but never ends there!

Let's face it, in today's competitive event world, having beautiful and diverse event infrastructure is a necessary step to become a serious player on the global stage of iconic event destinations, but it's never enough, is it? Moreover, brand new, expensive (hence fashionable) infrastructure can make you complacent, inflexible and unimaginative, all of which are polar opposites of what was needed to survive (even flourish!) from 2020 onwards.

To say that there are great many cities out there, with fantastic event venues at their disposal, would probably come satisfyingly close to the 'mother of all platitudes and understatements'. What it means in practice, however, is that - pretty much regardless of where you operate - there's a lot of competition on the event host city market, especially for the most prestigious, international formats. In other words, we are long past the stage where having great infrastructure was enough to put you on the podium of global event host destinations, let alone put you on the map of recognizable industry innovators. So what, then, are the key ingredients to a legendary host city status, now that the 2023 is about to start, and what is it that Poland, as an international event destination, seems to be doing particularly well.

From designing buildings to re-imagining experiences

If you want to reach for some of the most strategically impressive event formats out there, having a large, modern, nice-looking venue might no longer cut it. While the 2020 pandemic forced just about everyone to innovate and think out of the box, 2023 and beyond, very much feels like the beginning of the era of great storytellers and content designers coupled with sophisticated event-destination diplomacy. Moreover, 'content quality as a priority' shift or even 'content accountability approach' are necessary ingredients, if you really want to stand out from the crowd, let alone lead the pack in an industry that has been nothing but notoriously innovative in the last few years, in particular. So much so, in fact, that many have failed to keep up.



But what does it all mean, in practice? Well, to start with, it means that as an event manager (and innovator, hopefully) you should be well aware by now of the practical/creative/functional advantages that the online world (with its hyper-dynamically flourishing set of tools and use case examples) is bringing to your doorstep every single day and, more importantly, how it has already impacted audience expectations towards offline/hybrid events.

After all, even in the loneliest of moments of our pandemic isolation, we had all the access to great online publications, field-specific webinars, lectures and workshops, including those coming from some of the finest universities, think-tanks, brands and institutions in the world. Such ease of access to top quality content across sciences, industries and disciplines, coming from all over the world, is bound to raise your audience's content quality/discipline expectations. This, I fear, is what many event organizers are yet to understand.

If you really are serious about developing a unique, onsite-conference value proposition for your audience, you'd better incorporate the best of the online world into your event design process. Otherwise, you'll end up offering your audiences predictable, lukewarm-to-mediocre onstage content, combined with acceptable-to-unforgettable networking experience, the latter still being by far the most important focus area for too many event organizers out there, other than event promotion and marketing, of course.

To summarize this point, your audience will forgive you a poor, predictable or unprepared speaker or two in your conference line up, but it likely won't forgive you (too) short coffee breaks and lack of networking opportunities. Still, should networking be the principal (and, as is sometimes the case, just about the only) reason why people come to onsite conferences?

When is the last time...?

Ask yourself this: When is the last time you came out of a conference venue thinking: 'Wow! Every speaker (out of 10+) was great, taught me something important, never wasted a second of my time and maybe even left everyone inspired to do something about the matter at hand'?

In my experience, including that of the professional conference auditor, it doesn't exactly happen that often, to put it mildly. In fact, I don't remember a single conference where the bar would be raised this high by the organizers and you could see this attention to, above all, content quality detail, every step of the way.

Now that global conference audiences REALLY understand the differences between online and onsite conference programming (and experience itself!) so much better, it is absolutely crucial to adopt a much more ambitious approach to key questions and focus areas of great event management, including the following:

- If you insist on developing your event formats primarily on site, in a physical conference venue, how do you make sure that your audience really understands your unique value proposition attached to onsite event programming (as opposed to ever more ambitious online content presentation)?
- Successful event management has, therefore, never been more demanding... and holistic, at the same time (see next paragraph)

'Online', means less forgiving

One of the main reasons why so many of us got fed up with online events rather quickly is that, for far too long, a lot of event organizers out there thought they could get away with migrating their tried-and-tested onsite formats online 1:1, with a cosmetic change here and there. Nothing further from the truth, as it turned out, all too soon.

Worse still, following this path was more than enough proof that, as an event organizer:

- You have next to no clue about the Internet and its underlying "user experience fundamentals", especially when compared to how it differs from an onsite-conference-participant experience.
- You have far from enough respect for your audience when it comes to content management and disciplined event planning.
- Worst of all, your overall approach may not be imaginative, creative and innovative enough for the job. It's like being a school teacher with no passion left whatsoever for the teaching subject.

And yet, it's probably fair to say that even by the end of 2020, much of the so-called 'traditional event industry' globally was still lacking in the flexibility/adaptability department, with postponing and cancellations very much in fashion.



If I were to identify specific top 3 goals that Polish meetings industry as a whole should be prioritizing for the next 3 years, it would be

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2020: the catalyst for new opportunities

So what does it tell us, here in Poland?

As an industry catalyst, 2020 may have reshuffled international event-organizer markets more than anything else before it, with those quick to update their skillsets and technical infrastructure to the new requirements suddenly heading the pack and having more assignments than ever before, overnight, and those waiting for the 'traditional' *modus operandi* to return, wasting far too much precious time in the process and staying far behind as a consequence.

Compare it to the notoriously iconic textbook case of Nokia and the birth of smartphones, if you like.

Poland was, overall, quick to respond to the 2020 industry challenges through both structural solutions and impressive innovations. So much so, in fact, that between March 2020 and now, a long list of Polish companies started serving international clients by providing end-to-end online conference solutions.

Many of them tripled and quadrupled their pre-2020 size (even scope) of operations in the process, turning to state-of-the-art software and hardware solutions, offering clients what they desired most in the operational terra incognita they were suddenly forced to populate, i.e. the so-called one-window approach in delivering their events. At that stage they had little choice, knowing far too little about the capricious limitations and new budgeting variables of 'online events', to feel comfortable about it.

Hence, a lot of companies and institutions, keen to push forward with their event format, nevertheless, were very much looking for turn-key solutions, i.e. event-industry business partners capable of delivering end-to-end support, all the way from format design to making every single speaker feel comfortable during preparatory online rehearsals and 'software coaching', not to mention the 'new psychology' on both ends of the spectrum: speakers and their audiences.

When 'traditional barriers' disappear

Needless to say, perhaps, many great online-tech freelancers emerged during this period, capitalizing on the use of Google Ads and SEO to advertise their 'technological intermediary' services more internationally, also by targeting specific companies and international institutions that desperately needed their event formats to continue, one way or another.

As an international conference host, I also experienced something quite extraordinary in the first half of 2020. After much of my event calendar disappeared, literally overnight, in early March, only a month later, I was more busy than ever before, eventually emceeing conferences in just about every EU country, by the time the year was over. About 70 conferences in total. How was it even possible? Well, the answer is simple: the pandemic temporarily levelled the 'market inequalities' that made conference organizers reach primarily for local hosts/emcees (and event management companies!) whenever the need arose.

Now that flight and hotel costs were no longer an issue, it was perfectly easy for a conference organizer in Portugal, Germany, Estonia or, say, Turkey, to find an experienced host they really wanted, based on their online subcontractor research and client testimonials alone.

Time for Skills 2.0

For the industry as a whole, 2020-2022 was the time that Sir David Attenborough would likely describe as 'mass migration', i.e. re-focusing, smart adaptation and re-designing many a business model to suit the need of the hour, preferably overnight. Above all, however, it was a period when everyone realized the importance of taking their industry skills to the next level, if only to better understand all of the budgeting novelties, new categories of risks, prediction and planning uncertainties. It was all about survival or extinction. No excuses.

No wonder, conference and congress centres around the world started partnering with trusted, experienced online-event organizers, to be able to effectively dispel their clients' doubts and address their newly emerging and dynamically evolving needs. This also included rigor and discipline in implementing smart, advanced H&S procedures, safety precautions and standardizing industry best-practice, among others, in order to mitigate client skepticism around the limitations of the 'new normal'.



Jakie wymagania wobec konferansjera stawia event online?

Speaking of skills and skill gaps, large conference and congress venues are often entities run and supervised by public-sector employees, which – in addition to many positive outcomes and consequences – also means that (local) politics can and often is involved in the strategy-building process.

Quality supervision for some projects (or even long-term guidelines and directions) can be inferior, compared to corporate standards. If, for example, you adopt a long term strategy which relies on wishful thinking pillars or simply bad management (with very little substance or quantifiable research to support your course of action), it will take a lot longer (compared to the private sector) to identify the missteps, let alone correct the course of action. Years longer, potentially.

Corporations don't like spending money if positive outcomes and tangible benefits are not clear on the horizon for everyone to understand and appreciate and if mistakes are made or wrong assumptions applied, it takes hours or days to adapt. Similar pressures are much more relaxed in the public sector, for legitimate reasons, in some instances.

Finally, the idea of benchmarks, quality and progress evaluation is much more relaxed when compared to private capital investments and development projects.

These factors may seem trivial to many, but they make all the difference in the world, in far too many cases. So if you feel you could use external verification of your priorities and development directions already set in motion, the only thing that can get hurt by following this direction is your ego.

Other than that, strong benefits and potentially costly mistakes avoided should be more than enough motivation.

Truly sustainable? Really?

The meetings industry worldwide likes to talk about sustainability and innovation more than about anything else these days. As irony would have it, 2020-2022 turned out to be the period when the industry was at its most sustainable in its history. With next-to-no carbon footprint attached to even the biggest of events (no one was flying in, travelling to a single event destination or otherwise wasting tons of fuel, plastic, conference bulletins, lanyards and paper/plastic coffee cups), it was all as environmentally friendly as it gets.

After dozens and dozens of online conferences, however, audiences became ever more sentimentally impatient to get back to conference centres and experience the power of togetherness, feeling part of the same 'ideological tribe' or community of the like-minded. After all, nothing beats the buzz, the positive energy, the hundreds of smiling faces lost in conversations during networking sessions, right?

With restrictions and limitations basically gone, true sustainability is still far from a 'real' priority for the industry. It is number one, however, on the list of aspirational declarations. Can the industry do more to become a lot more sustainable? It definitely can and it definitely should! Can and will it happen without external or legislative pressure? Hopefully, yes. More likely, not fast enough, genuinely enough, or on a scale that creates meaningful impact.

ICCA World Congress in Kraków: Diversity, Legacy and D&I

Even though I'm hardly a novice to the conference world, having hosted over 400 of them in Poland and abroad, by the beginning of November 2022, little did I know that I was in for a major surprise, or quite a few of them, to be more exact.

The name of the hyper-intensive event in question was ICCA World Congress 2022, a 4-day conference for meetings industry experts from around the world, at the beginning of November.



Poland, as a meeting place, has a bright future ahead of it. It is a beautiful and fascinating country. The help you provide to Ukraine also deserves admiration, which is not unnoticed in the world.

I hope that our congress will contribute to the popularization of Poland as a MICE destination and that we will inspire our delegates to return to this country.”

**Senthil Gopinath,
CEO of International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA)**

ICCA World Congress in Kraków: Diversity, Legacy and D&I

From the very beginning of the application/preparation process to the last few weeks before the congress, there was a lot of uncertainty around whether it would attract enough 'brave' meetings world representatives from around the world, given a fully-fledged war east of Poland's border and the pervasive sense of uncertainty as pandemic restrictions were being lifted, one after another, in country after country.

The war, in particular, must have worked as a powerful travel deterrent for many.

To everyone's surprise, however, delegates from nearly 90 countries came to Kraków for what turned out to be a magnificent 4-day testimony to the industry's unity, solidarity and readiness to address tough challenges together, going over and above the industry-specific headaches of the post-pandemic world.

Even if I dedicated this entire article to last year's ICCA World Congress, I wouldn't do justice to its value for Poland, for Krakow and the international meetings industry at large. Instead, let me revert the reader to what others had to say about it

[Recommended Reading' below]



The single biggest challenge for Poland's meetings industry, if we want to develop a reputations as innovators and industry leaders is

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So what's next?

If I were to make one prediction about the most successful meetings destinations in the world in 2023 and beyond, I would say this: the meetings industry's future belongs to those who set the trends (also, if not primarily, on a purely creative level), not those who imitate and follow them, however short the delay may be!

To truly stand out in a competitive, international market, you really need to take your destination's international storytelling and creativity (reputation) to the next level. In doing so, you should learn to become one of the industry's few disruptive innovators, going over and above the customary ways of reaching new audiences (incl. prospective clients) and out-of-the-box business partners, and do so with the sheer freshness and the power of the stories you choose to discover, create and share with the world.



Importantly, great storytelling needs to be/feel authentic, effortless and spontaneous. If you can't produce any of the three (let alone all of them), your second best option might just be finding the best out there and learning from them, adapting their initiatives and creative approaches to your context.

Last but not least, great storytelling rarely works in isolation, so if you really want to succeed, you must make sure that the entire city (region and/or country) supports you in your storytelling efforts. It's one thing to have a group of high-profile ambassadors promoting your city internationally as a global meetings destination, or a great congress centre website with professional (yet uninspiring) social-media profiles attached, it's quite another to have a significant thought-leadership presence in your industry, both in the eyes of industry experts and the general public at large. No better way to go about it than with great content and strong quality supervision.

At the end of the day, it all boils down to continuously asking yourself questions like: Is what I'm proposing really fresh and innovative? If yes, how? What's in it for my audience? What are my destination's truly unique characteristics and which of those characteristics have the strongest storytelling potential (hidden and unobvious as it often is)? How do I set my goals, measure progress and – equally importantly – what do I do, if I'm not meeting my goals in time? Once you start asking yourself these questions regularly and often enough, or get the right people to help you (re)discover your best answers, you'll be on the right path.

And one last thing: if you have specific questions about Poland's meeting industry, remember, nothing beats a person-to-person conversation, so feel free to call Poland Convention Bureau directly.

And see you at a conference, in Poland!

Recommended reading

MEETINGS INDUSTRY IMPACT

- <https://www.pot.gov.pl/en/poland-convention/news/poland-events-impact-2020-pilot-study>

POLISH TOURISM ORGANIZATION

- <https://www.pot.gov.pl/en>

Polish Conference & Congress Association

- <https://www.skkp.org.pl/?lang=en>

61st ICCA Congress in the spirit of sustainable development

- <https://www.pot.gov.pl/en/poland-convention/news/61st-icca-congress-in-the-spirit-of-sustainable-development#n>

How the Meetings Industry Evolved in 2022

- <https://meetings.skift.com/how-the-meetings-industry-evolved-in-2022/>

CONTACT THE POLISH CONVENTION BUREAU DIRECTLY:

- <https://www.pot.gov.pl/en/online-site-inspection>

Poland Convention Bureau has been created in 2002 as a department of the Polish Tourism Organisation and is responsible for the promotion of Poland as an attractive destination for meetings and business events. PolandCVB is the first contact for anyone seeking information on business partners and conference facilities, who is planning to organize an association congress or a corporate event in Poland. Its main goal is to build the image of Poland as an attractive country for organising all types of business events. The Polish Tourism Organization is a member of the meetings industry associations: International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) and Union of International Associations (UIA). Details on www.pot.gov.pl/en/poland-convention

Polish Tourism Organisation
Młynarska 42 Str., 01-171 Warsaw, Poland
tel. +48 666 842 696, +48 785 802 187
e-mail: polandcb@pot.gov.pl
www.pot.gov.pl/en

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