

Scientific Excellence Alone is Not Enough

Why associations need strong development strategies – and what that means for their congress partners



The gap between expertise and organisation

Scientific associations are built on expertise. Their members publish, teach, supervise, peer-review and shape the direction of their fields. Few other organisations bring together comparable depth of expertise. And yet, many of these associations struggle with something their members would solve in an afternoon if

it were a research problem: how to stay relevant to their own membership.

The gap is structural, not personal. Scientific excellence and organisational excellence draw on different skill sets. A congress president who runs a world-class congress is not automatically an expert in member segmentation, digital service design or data-driven decision-making. Nor should we expect them to be. But when an association's strategic development rests entirely on volunteer board members who learn organisational management on the job, the result is predictable: decisions based on tradition and intuition rather than evidence.

What the data says

The most recent DGVM (German Association for Association Management) annual survey, published in early 2025, asked the managing directors of German association-sector organisations to name their top priorities for the year. The results are instructive. 66.1 % named advancing digitalisation and the use of AI as a top priority. 62.5 % named sharpening the association's profile and brand. 57.1 % named intensifying member communication and winning new members. 55.4 % named expanding services and tangible member value (<https://www.dgvm.de/dgvm-jahresumfrage-2025/>).

These numbers are not operational footnotes, but the entire sector telling itself, collectively, that the current way of running an association is running out of road.

And yet market- and target-group-oriented formats for education, events and congresses ranked only tenth, at 28%. That is the interesting number. Associations know they need better member engagement. They know they need digital transformation. But the one channel where most of them actually meet their members in person - the annual congress - is not being rethought with anywhere near the same urgency.

Congresses as underused lever

Most associations run one flagship congress annually or biennially. For many members, that congress is the single most tangible expression of the association's value. It is where content is delivered, networks are maintained, early careers are launched, and membership renewals are implicitly justified.

But the congress is also the richest source of behavioural data an association will ever generate. Who registered and who didn't. Which sessions filled up. Which abstracts got submitted. Which workshops drew early-career members and which drew only the established cohort. Who came back.

Who stopped coming and when.

In most associations we see, this data exists in fragments. Registration data sits in one system, abstract data in another, membership data in a third and post-congress surveys in a fourth spreadsheet that rarely makes it back into strategic planning. The association has the raw material for evidence-based member development. It just doesn't have the pipeline.

What 'strategic development' actually means

'Strategic development' is one of those phrases that sounds consultant-hollow until you make it concrete. For a scientific association, it means being able to answer questions like:

- Which member segments are growing, stagnating, or shrinking – and why?
- Which of our formats actually drive participation, and which survive only out of tradition?
- What do members who lapsed their membership have in common?
- Where do we lose prospective members in the journey from first contact to full engagement?

These are not questions that require a consulting firm. They require joined-up data, a habit of looking at it, and enough organisational capacity to act on what it shows. What many associations lack is not the will but the connective tissue: the systems, processes, and time to turn operational data into development decisions.

Why it matters for PCOs

Here is where the conversation becomes relevant for PCOs – and uncomfortable, in a useful way.

The traditional PCO contract is an execution contract. The association decides on the scientific programme, the venue, the budget frame, the rough format. The PCO delivers. Registration runs. Abstracts are managed. Badges get printed. Everyone thanks each other at the closing reception.

That model is no longer sufficient for an association sector under the pressure the DGVM numbers describe. If two thirds of association leaders know they need to digitalise their member relationship, and more than half know they need to deliver more tangible value, then their congress partner is either part of that answer or part of the problem they are trying to solve around.

The PCOs who will matter in the next five years are the ones who stop thinking of the congress as a closed event and start thinking of it as the most intensive data point in the association's annual relationship with its members. That means caring about what happens before registration opens and after the congress closes. It means connecting congress behaviour back to membership behaviour. It means being able to tell an association's board not just how the event went, but what the event revealed about the association.

This is a different conversation than 'how many delegates did we have this year.' It is a harder conversation. It also happens to be the conversation associations are now actively looking for.

Hermann Hanser, Managing Director of PO HANSE SERVICE: 'The associations that will thrive are the ones that demand more from themselves, and from the people they work with. The PCOs that will thrive are the ones ready to be asked for.'

At CPO HANSE SERVICE, we see our role not only as organisers of successful congresses, but as partners in association development, helping scientific societies turn data, participation, and member interactions into informed decisions that strengthen their future.'

Dennis Radigk

CTO, CPO HANSE SERVICE GmbH