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Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2026

EVIDENCE BRIEF · INDUSTRY EVENTS AND MARKETS

Most Events Reproduce, Few Configure

Do events actually configure fields?

Around 32,000 exhibitions and more than 12,000 rotating association meetings take place each year, and many claim to shape their industry. Studies of medical conferences, business conferences in Toronto, trade fairs and UN climate summits show that only a few events do; most keep their communities together and move knowledge in small steps.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026 Worldwide, U.S., Canada

5 studies · 2 industry sources

field-configuring events | industry conferences | trade fairs | flagship events | climate summits | industry standards | knowledge exchange | business conferences | event impact on industries | COP

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KEY FINDING

Only a few events reshape their industries: standard-setting conferences, high-stakes summits and flagship trade fairs. Most conferences and fairs, however large, reproduce existing communities and circulate incremental knowledge, and even summits lose their configuring power as their field grows complex.

Five studies, 2008–2025; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Few events reshape their field.** Studies of conferences, trade fairs and climate summits find field-shaping power concentrated in flagship and high-stakes events, while most events reproduce existing communities [1–3].
- **Large is not the same as decisive.** None of three Toronto business conferences studied in 2012, including Microsoft's partner conference with more than 16,000 attendees from 156 countries, reshaped its field [2].
- **Standards are set in closed rooms.** In the emerging cochlear implant field, a consensus conference of the U.S. National Institutes of Health closed the debate on the technology, while open conferences let firms present and interpret it [4].
- **High stakes draw attention.** The New York Times published on average 63 articles per high-stakes UN climate conference, such as Kyoto, Bali and Copenhagen, compared with 7.6 per regular conference [3].
- **Summits melt as fields grow complex.** As climate policy multiplied its issues, the conferences lost much of their power to drive change and acted more like trade fairs for relationships, money and knowledge [3].

FOR THE MARKET

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Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Organisers & associations	An event shapes its field when it carries a mandate, high stakes or flagship status; most events earn their value by keeping communities together and moving knowledge. Positioning an event as agenda-setting requires a forum where rules or standards are actually decided.
Exhibitors & sponsors	At most trade fairs and conferences the return comes from renewed contacts and incremental market knowledge, not from industry-defining moments; flagship fairs are where agendas are set.
Academia	The concept of field-configuring events applies to a minority of events and is hard to identify in advance; comparisons across event series and over time are needed.

Events that claim to move industries

Industries meet constantly. UFI counted around 32,000 exhibitions worldwide, with 4.7 million exhibiting companies and 318 million visitors, and ICCA counted 12,438 rotating international association meetings in 2025[5,6]. Research on field-configuring events asks which of these gatherings actually reshape technologies, markets and industries.

The concept distinguishes events by their mandate. Some events hold formal authority, such as professional bodies that set rules, while others act indirectly as networking hubs[7]. Their role also changes over a field's life: when a field emerges,

events set standards, practices and vocabulary; when it matures, they mainly reproduce it[7].

Roles of events in their industry or field, by type of event

Classification of the studies' findings.



Sources: Garud; Henn & Bathelt; Bathelt & Sydow; Schüßler et al. · Release dates: 2008 to 2025 · Regions: U.S.; Canada; Worldwide · Classification: Eventamin

Configuring a new technology

Conferences can define what a new technology is. In the emerging field of cochlear implants, a researcher attending three conferences followed how the technology took shape[4]. At an international otolaryngology congress and at a

convention of speech and hearing professionals, firms and clinicians presented the implants and made sense of what they could do[4].

The decisive step came in a closed room. At a consensus conference of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, a 14-member panel drafted the statement that closed the debate and set the standard for the field; the researcher could not observe the panel at work[4].

Conferences that reproduce their field

Most conferences keep their field going rather than change it. Three conferences studied in Toronto in 2012, from Microsoft's Worldwide Partner Conference with more than 16,000 attendees from 156 countries to an investment summit with around 290 attendees, all circulated incremental knowledge and renewed relationships[2]. None of them produced a defining result for its field[2].

Trade fairs work in the same way. Only a limited number of fairs, typically flagship events, carry a strong normative agenda; most organizers control access and support knowledge exchange but hardly set agendas[1]. Fairs are best understood as temporary markets, temporary clusters and community gatherings at the same time, in which physical presence remains essential despite digital channels[1].

CONFERENCE	SIZE	ROLE FOUND
Microsoft Worldwide Partner Conference (software)	More than 16,000 attendees from 156 countries, over 600 sessions[2]	Product presentation, renewed contacts, incremental updates[2]
Natural Resource Investing Summit	Around 290 attendees, 21 presenting firms[2]	Gradual building of trust between investors and firms[2]
World Conference on Disaster Management	Around 1,100 attendees[2]	Myriads of incremental pieces of knowledge[2]

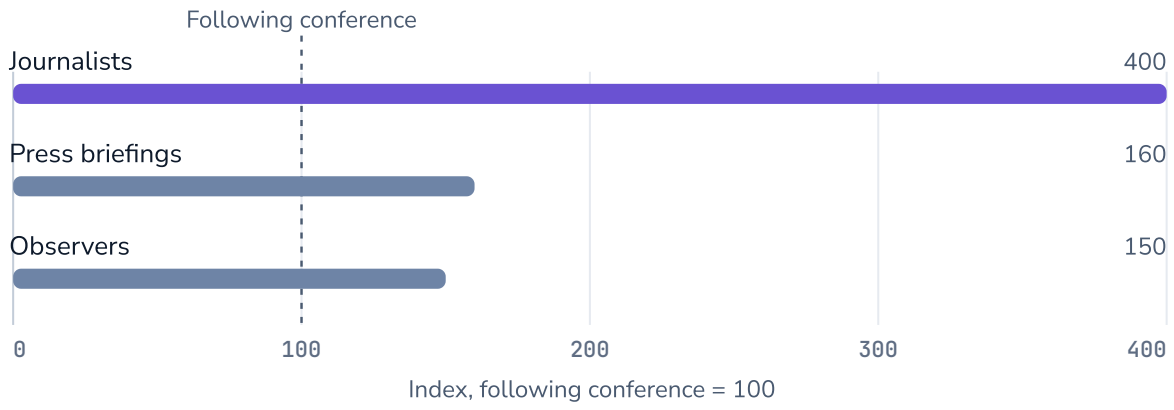
High-stakes summits and regular ones

Within an event series, a few editions carry the weight. Among the UN climate conferences from 1995 to 2012, three high-stakes conferences, Kyoto in 1997, Bali in 2007 and Copenhagen in 2009, marked milestones and drew far more attention than the regular ones[3]. The Kyoto conference had 50 percent more observers, four times as many journalists and 60 percent more press briefings than the following year's conference[3].

Regular conferences built trust and technical progress, and high-stakes conferences created momentum; change came from the interplay of both[3]. As the field grew more complex and its issues multiplied, the conferences lost much of their power to drive change[3]. For observers, they increasingly worked like a trade fair for relationships, money and knowledge[3].

Attention to the 1997 Kyoto climate conference compared with the following conference, by measure

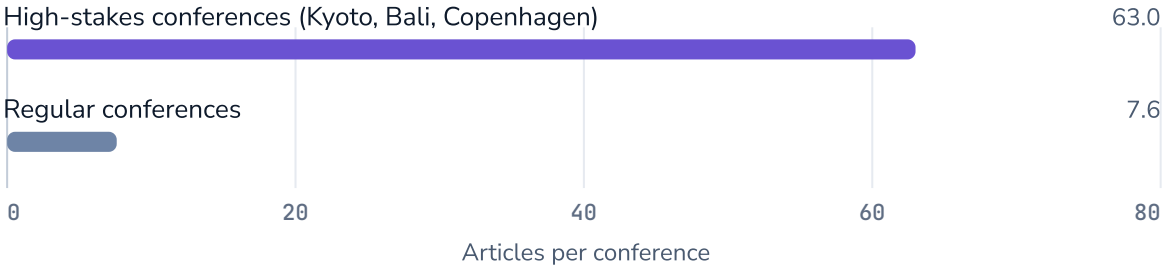
Index: 1998 Buenos Aires conference = 100.



Source: Schüßler et al. · Release date: 2014 · Region: Worldwide · Data: UNFCCC records, 1997 and 1998

Average number of New York Times articles per UN climate conference from 1995 to 2011, by type of conference

Average number of articles.



Source: Schüßler et al. · Release date: 2014 · Region: Worldwide · Period: 1995 to 2011

Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2008 and 2025: a review introducing the concept, first-hand field research at three medical conferences, 33 short interviews at three Toronto conferences, a longitudinal study of 17 UN climate conferences, and a conceptual analysis of trade fairs[1–4,7]. The studies are qualitative, and their evidence is strongest for single fields. The classification of event roles is Eventamin's coding of the findings. The ICCA figure is taken from the publisher's summary.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Bathelt, H., & Sydow, J. (2025). Beyond Temporary Organizations: Trade Fairs as Temporary Markets, Clusters, and Community Gatherings [Journal article]. *Project Management Journal, 56(5), 557–566*. https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728251335244 First-hand

2 Henn, S., & Bathelt, H. (2015). Knowledge generation and field reproduction in temporary clusters and the role of business conferences [Conference paper]. *Geoforum, 58, 104–113*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.015 First-hand

3 Schüßler, E., Rüling, C.-C., & Wittneben, B. B. F. (2014). On Melting Summits: The Limitations of Field-Configuring Events as Catalysts of Change in Transnational Climate Policy [Journal article]. *Academy of Management Journal, 57(1), 140–171*. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0812 First-hand

4 Garud, R. (2008). Conferences as Venues for the Configuration of Emerging Organizational Fields: The Case of Cochlear Implants [Conference paper]. *Journal of Management Studies, 45(6), 1061–1088*. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00783.x First-hand

5 UFI. (2026, April). Global Exhibition Industry Statistics [Report]. Retrieved November 9, 2026, from ufi.org First-hand

6 ICCA. (2026). GlobeWatch country and city rankings 2025 [Article]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from iccaworld.org Reported

7 Lampel, J., & Meyer, A. D. (2008). Field-Configuring Events as Structuring Mechanisms: How Conferences, Ceremonies, and Trade Shows Constitute New Technologies, Industries, and Markets [Conference paper]. *Journal of Management Studies, 45(6), 1025–1035*. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00787.x First-hand

The evidence

5 studies · 2 industry sources

SAMPLE

Five studies: a review, field research at three medical conferences, 33 interviews at three business conferences, 17 UN climate conferences, a conceptual analysis of trade fairs; two industry sources

YEARS

2008–2025 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Observation and interviews at conferences in the U.S. and Canada, a longitudinal study of UN climate conferences, conceptual studies of field-configuring events and trade fairs

About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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