



ICOMIA AND IFBSO CONGRESS 2026



WASHINGTON, D.C. | MAY 26th – 28th , 2026



CONGRESS 2026 Report

Washington DC | MAY 26th - 28th

Introduction

The 2026 IFBSO and ICOMIA Congress, hosted by the National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA) in Washington D.C., brought together global boat show organisers, marine industry associations with US boatbuilders and industry stakeholders.

Representing 39 member boat shows across 20 countries, IFBSO continues to grow from strength to strength. Over the past year alone, nine new members joined the Federation, reinforcing the value of collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst the world's leading boat shows.

Congress 2026 welcomed representatives from 34 different boat shows and provided an invaluable opportunity for delegates to exchange ideas, discuss shared challenges, and identify practical solutions to implement at their own events.

While the programme covered a wide range of topics, several common themes emerged throughout the week. Delegates were challenged to rethink boat shows as experience-led platforms rather than purely transactional events. Discussions highlighted the importance of **reducing friction**, the power of **storytelling**, attracting new audiences, empowering exhibitors and strengthening sustainability initiatives through meaningful **collaboration**.

The Congress also reinforced the importance of partnerships. Whether discussing workforce development, diversity and inclusion, ocean conservation or event technology, speakers consistently highlighted that the industry's greatest opportunities will be realised through collective action.

This report provides a snapshot of the key discussions, experiences and outcomes from Congress 2026. Detailed presentation summaries and session notes were compiled for each session with VOXO. The gallery of photos and summaries are available to members via this [LINK](#).



CONFERENCE AT A GLANCE

39 IFBSO member boat shows worldwide
20 countries represented across the IFBSO membership
34 boat shows represented at Congress
20 IFBSO member delegates in attendance
9 new members joined IFBSO during the past year

KEY THEMES OVER THE 3 DAYS OF CONGRESS



Storytelling

Reducing
friction

Experience over
transaction

Collaboration

Attracting the
next generation



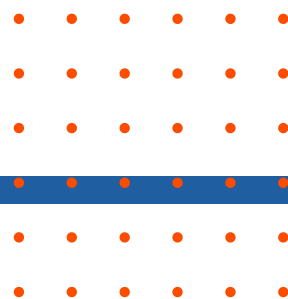
WELCOME TO D.C.



The Congress officially commenced with a warm welcome from NMMA, who hosted delegates in the vibrant Wharf District of Washington D.C. Situated on the Potomac River, the Wharf provided an ideal backdrop for the week's programme, combining world-class facilities with excellent opportunities for networking and social engagement.

Prior to the formal programme, delegates enjoyed a marine tour of Chesapeake Bay, hosted by the Marina Committee and NMMA. The tour provided valuable insights into the region's boating infrastructure and offered delegates an opportunity to connect before the official start of Congress.

The week began with welcome drinks at the Wharf, setting the tone for what would become a highly engaging and collaborative Congress.





DESIGNING EVENTS PEOPLE REMEMBER

EVENT REDESIGN LAB – DAHLIA EL GAZZAR

Dahlia El Gazzar opened the Congress with a highly interactive workshop that challenged delegates to rethink the event experience from the perspective of visitors, exhibitors and stakeholders.

Rather than focusing on logistics, the session explored how event organisers can intentionally design experiences that create stronger emotional connections with attendees. Delegates worked together to identify common challenges and develop practical solutions applicable to their own events.

Visitors remember how an event made them feel
long after they have forgotten the floorplan.

EVENT TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE KIMBERLY HARDCASTLE

This session explored emerging trends influencing the global events industry. Kimberly highlighted the growing importance of Gen Z audiences, rising expectations around technology and the increasing importance of purpose-led organisations.

Attendees now expect seamless experiences, meaningful engagement, and opportunities to learn from subject-matter experts. They are increasingly interested in understanding what organisations stand for and the impact they have beyond the products they sell.



The tolerance for friction is waning



FIRESIDE CHAT: LESSONS FROM CES

One of the most engaging sessions of the Congress was the fireside discussion between IFBSO Chairperson Niels Klarenbeek and John Kelley from the Consumer Electronics Show (CES).

Although CES operates on a vastly different scale to most boat shows, many of the lessons shared were directly relevant to the boating industry. John highlighted the importance of listening to visitors and exhibitors through surveys and feedback mechanisms and stressed that reducing friction should remain a priority for every event organiser.

John also reminded delegates that boating remains one of the most aspirational products in the world.

"You are lucky. You sell something people dream about."

Reduce friction.
Tell compelling stories.
Never stop innovating.



COLLABORATION

SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH COLLABORATION 11TH HOUR RACING

The joint session with ICOMIA and 11th Hour Racing focused on the power of collaboration in driving meaningful environmental change.

Delegates explored how industry organisations, boat shows and conservation groups can work together to amplify sustainability initiatives and educate consumers about ocean stewardship.



A key area identified for future collaboration between IFBSO, ICOMIA and 11th Hour Racing is the protection and restoration of Posidonia seagrass in the Mediterranean. This endemic species plays a critical role in carbon sequestration and marine biodiversity but is increasingly under pressure from human activity. As Mediterranean countries introduce stricter regulations to protect these underwater ecosystems, there is an opportunity for boat shows to help raise awareness and educate boaters about both the environmental importance of Posidonia and the regulations designed to protect it.

Boat shows remain one of the industry's most powerful platforms for sharing sustainability messages with consumers.



JOINT MEETING ICOMIA BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND IFBSO EXCOM

The joint meeting between the ICOMIA Board of Directors and the IFBSO Executive Committee provided an opportunity for both organisations to align priorities and explore opportunities for closer cooperation.

Discussions focused on shared industry challenges, future initiatives and areas where collaboration could deliver greater value for members. The official Bid Document outlining the process for bidding to host future Congresses was also ratified.

The session reinforced a message that echoed throughout Congress: collaboration is not simply beneficial; it is essential.



A MILESTONE FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

One of the most significant outcomes of Congress 2026 was the formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between ICOMIA and IFBSO establishing a Joint Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

While the two organisations have collaborated for decades, this agreement formalises a shared commitment to creating a more inclusive and representative marine industry.

The new committee will combine resources, expertise and networks to support initiatives that encourage greater participation from women, young professionals and individuals from backgrounds that have historically been underrepresented within the sector.

The marine industry requires new perspectives if it is to continue growing, innovating and remaining relevant. By working together, ICOMIA and IFBSO can achieve far greater impact than either organisation could independently.



A thriving and future-proof industry depends on creating opportunities for new voices, new perspectives and new talent.



ATTRACTING THE NEXT GENERATION

WAVES OF CHANGE PANEL DISCUSSION

A recurring theme throughout Congress was the need to attract new talent into the marine industry.

The session explored workforce development initiatives and highlighted the opportunities available to young people pursuing careers in marine manufacturing, engineering, marina operations, sustainability and event management.

Several speakers reinforced the importance of raising awareness of the diverse career paths available in the marine sector and ensuring the industry remains attractive to future generations.

Creating awareness of the opportunities in our industry is a priority



The marine industry has a talent shortage, not a jobs shortage



SUNY Maritime graduates are in such high demand that virtually all students secure employment upon graduation.





UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S CONSUMER

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK – SHAWN DUBRAVAC

Shawn provided a detailed overview of current economic conditions and consumer sentiment in the United States. While economic fundamentals remain relatively stable, uncertainty continues to influence purchasing decisions. Consumers are taking longer to commit to major purchases, and confidence levels remain subdued, at a 50 year low.

The session also highlighted several important demographic shifts, including the growing economic influence of women and concerns about the rising number of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

Consumer confidence has become one of the most important indicators influencing discretionary spending and purchasing behaviour.

IPSOS CONSUMER RESEARCH

Research presented by Ipsos reinforced a theme that surfaced repeatedly throughout Congress: consumers increasingly value experiences over transactions.

Visitors attend events not only to see products but also to learn, connect and engage with experts. The emotional connection they develop with a brand, product or lifestyle often has greater influence than a traditional sales interaction.

The strongest events create memorable experiences rather than transactional environments.



WHAT BOATBUILDERS WANT FROM BOAT SHOWS

The boatbuilders' panel provided valuable insight into how manufacturers view boat shows and the role they play in the customer journey.

All panellists reaffirmed the importance of boat shows as a key marketing and sales platform. They emphasised the need for knowledgeable staff, meaningful visitor engagement and experiences that capture the emotional appeal of being on the water.

For many consumers, a boat show is not only an opportunity to evaluate products but also an opportunity to build trust with dealers, brands and industry professionals.

Boatshows are battling for relevance



SHARING THE INDUSTRY'S STORY

The Wards Way Podcast

Throughout the week, Congress welcomed Kristina Hebert, President and CEO of Wards Marine Electric and host of The **Wards Way Podcast**.

The Wards Way Podcast champions excellence across the marine industry by bringing together industry leaders, innovators, policymakers and business owners for meaningful conversations about the opportunities and challenges shaping our sector. During Congress, Kristina conducted a series of interviews with delegates, speakers and industry stakeholders, creating a valuable platform to share ideas and amplify the work being undertaken across the global boating community.

Beyond providing additional exposure for Congress, the podcast highlighted the importance of storytelling within our industry. Boat shows, associations and marine businesses all have a role to play in sharing the positive stories of boating, innovation, sustainability, careers and community impact. Through conversations like these, we can help raise awareness of the economic and social value of recreational boating while inspiring future participants and industry leaders.

If we want to grow our industry,
we need to tell our story.



BEYOND THE CONFERENCE ROOM



As always, networking remained one of the most valuable aspects of Congress.

NMMA delivered an exceptional programme that balanced educational content with numerous opportunities for delegates to connect and strengthen relationships.

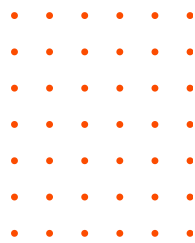
Highlights included the Global Women's Walk, rooftop networking receptions overlooking the Potomac River, tours of the United States Capitol and Library of Congress, and boat cruises hosted by Brunswick and Freedom Boat Club.

Congress concluded on a high note with a Great Gatsby Gala Dinner. We were able to celebrate ICOMIA's 60th Anniversary, a special milestone to share with a trusted industry partner.

These informal interactions continue to play an important role in strengthening the global network of boat show organisers and marine industry leaders.



LOOKING AHEAD



Congress 2026 reinforced the importance of collaboration, innovation and continual learning.

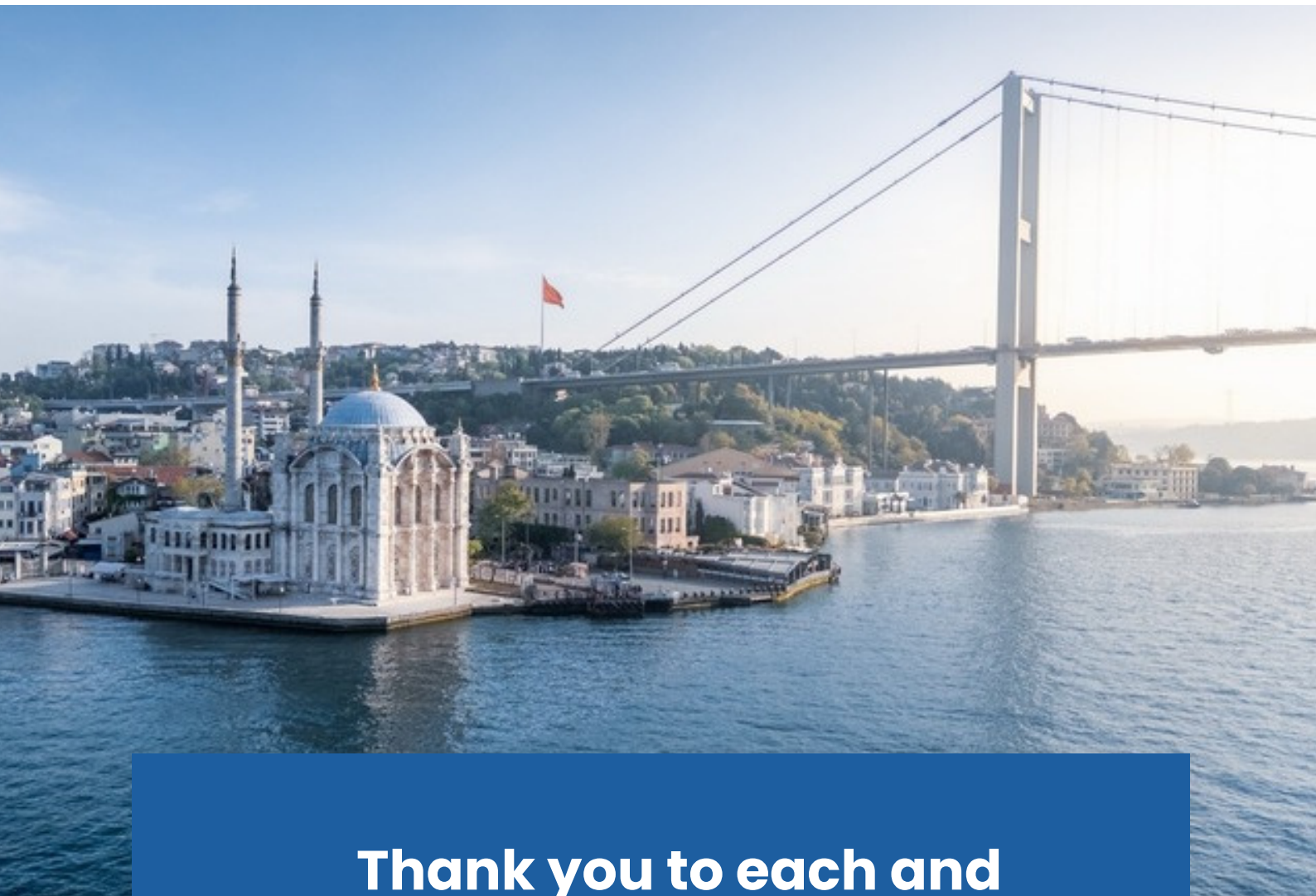
Across four days, delegates explored practical solutions to shared challenges while strengthening relationships across the global boating industry. From sustainability and diversity to technology, consumer behaviour and workforce development, the discussions demonstrated that boat shows remain one of the industry's most powerful platforms for connecting people to boating.

As we reflect on the key lessons from Congress 2026, it is worth recognising that many of the themes discussed throughout the programme were already evident in the event itself. Under the leadership of Jennifer Thompson and the NMMA team, Congress embraced event technology to remove friction and enhance the delegate experience. From AI-assisted meeting notes and a centralised photo-sharing platform to practical tools that helped delegates navigate the programme and explore Washington, technology was used to solve real problems rather than simply add features.

The team also secured sponsorship support to help offset event costs while maintaining a high-quality delegate experience. By identifying common attendee pain points and proactively addressing them, NMMA demonstrated many of the principles shared by our speakers throughout the week. The result was a seamless, engaging and highly connected Congress that set a strong benchmark for future events.

Our sincere thanks go to Jennifer, her team and all of the NMMA staff and volunteers whose hard work, attention to detail and hospitality made Congress 2026 such a memorable success.





**Thank you to each and
every IFBSO member who
participated to make it a
magical event.
We look forward to
welcoming ALL members
to Istanbul in 2027!**

**Congress 2027
Istanbul, Turkey
31 May – 4 June 2027**

