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“Turning changes into chances” - Speech by Koelnmesse CEO Gerald Böse opening the 91st UFI Global Congress on 21 November 2024

The 91st UFI Global Congress brought together the international trade fair industry in the Confex at Koelnmesse from 20 to 23 November 2024. In the year of the 100th anniversary of the trade fair 550 industry experts from all over the world convened in Cologne to discuss the current challenges facing the industry. In his opening address, Koelnmesse CEO Gerald Böse recalled founder Konrad Adenauer, who in 1924, in a climate of great post-war insecurity, called for Koelnmesse to help establish new economic relationships and pave the way for lasting peace. Cologne’s ability to adapt made it the perfect place to discuss the challenges and opportunities in this critical time of rapid technological change and impending trade restrictions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

we feel especially fortunate to be “hosting the hosts” this year, marking our 100th anniversary. And we are proud to welcome you in this building—our brand new Confex, which we inaugurated only a few months ago.

Our anniversary celebration and the grand opening were just two of many highlights this year here in Cologne.

It was the year that saw our industry in Germany and around the world finally bounce back from the shock of the pandemic.

In late spring, we as Koelnmesse Group were able to report a historic sales and profit record for 2023, showing a stunning comeback.

So I’m happy to say that Koelnmesse remains strong as one of the Top Ten leading organizers and venue operators worldwide, with Germany’s third-largest exhibition grounds. And our global presence is growing—most recently in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Yet, we also face challenges. And we’re not alone.

Technology and politics are fundamentally reshaping the world for all us. Protectionism and political division threaten the free flow of goods, people, and ideas. It is hard to predict how certain industries and regions will develop in the coming years.

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Cologne

District Court Cologne, HRB 952

The latest elections in the US could lead to a significant turning point for global trade.

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A reduction of global integration will cause additional trade conflicts. No doubt, this will also affect our exhibition business.

All of this requires us to rethink, retool, and in some sense reinvent ourselves. Which is why this year's theme of the UFI Congress could not be any more fitting: "Changes to chances."

Change, innovation, and disruption are nothing new to us. It's at the heart of what we do: the promise of any trade fair or congress worth visiting is that you get to learn what the future holds.

The UFI Global Congress is no different. This is the third time Cologne hosts the UFI Global Congress. The first was in 1973 and the last was in 2001. Both events saw the world at turning points.

The 1970s were marked by changing social norms, the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, and the arrival of the microchip, which left lasting impressions. The same was true for the decade following 2001—from 9/11 to the Great Recession and the rise of social media and the smartphone.

Each generation has its challenges and promises.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Records show that the city of Cologne was granted trade fair rights in 1360—more than a century before Columbus set sail for the New World.

Cologne has a rich history and plenty of experience in adapting to change.

But Koelnmesse's remarkable history begins in 1924, the year when Cologne's then-Mayor, Konrad Adenauer, inaugurated this great company. It was a time fraught by the nightmare of the First World War. The dust had settled, the world was rebuilding, but Cologne and the Rhineland were occupied territories, and our direct European neighbours were cautious of Germany.

In this climate of great uncertainty, Adenauer urged that Koelnmesse should help weave new economic ties and pave the way for lasting peace. That the economy should prevail where politics fail.

It's a vision we proudly uphold to this day.

It is also a testament to hope and his deep belief in the power of trade fairs to build bridges between nations and cultures.

His 100-year-old message is more relevant today than ever. And I think we all could not agree more.

If the recent pandemic has taught us anything, it's that people want human connection. We are social beings, after all. We crave experiences.

Trade fairs are about experiences. Imagine a virtual Anuga you attend only via the screen in your office—without any taste, smell, or physical touch of any products!

That is not to deny the merit of virtual experiences. They can enhance, enrich, and extend our trade fairs—making them more valuable and efficient for our customers.

Koelnmesse makes use of all this, and we're eager to find more cutting-edge ideas at this congress.

The same goes for sustainability and our efforts to fight climate change—another opportunity for our industry to learn and lead by example.

As we gather here, we follow in the steps of great visionaries. We build on a long tradition. But it is upon us to shape the future of our industry—and to a certain degree, the world. This is the time and this is the place to turn changes into chances.

Welcome to the 91st UFI Global Congress!

Welcome to Cologne!

About Koelnmesse:

Koelnmesse employs around 1,100 people. The city-centre trade fair at the heart of Europe occupies the third largest trade fair grounds in Germany and, spanning almost 400,000 square metres of hall and outdoor space, it numbers among the top ten worldwide. Each year, Koelnmesse organises and manages around 80 trade fairs, guest events and corporate events in Cologne and in the most important markets around the world. Its portfolio attracts over 43,100 exhibiting companies from 125 countries and approximately two million visitors from 220 nations. Until 2040, Koelnmesse is investing more than one billion euro in the development of the trade fair grounds into the most extensive investment programme in its history, to allow it to cover all event formats in the future. Koelnmesse is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2024. 100 years in which Koelnmesse has brought people and markets together worldwide. 100 years in which it has reinvented itself time and again with a visionary passion for the future: [Koelnmesse History](#) | [Koelnmesse](#)

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