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A REPORT FOR PEOPLE WHO RUN ANNUAL CONFERENCES

The Next Attendee

Where new registrations come from now that email, search and social are all harder, what a new attendee costs, and how little is published about who sells the seat.



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Directors of meetings, association leaders, and conference marketing and membership teams

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two thirds of last year's attendees will not be back, and the usual ways of replacing them are under strain.

Somebody in every conference budget meeting asks where next year's attendees will come from and what each one will cost. This report collects what was published on that question in the past year: what organizers do to find attendees, how attendees say they find events, what paid media costs, how far AI has changed discovery, and who sells the seat. The short version: organizers lean on email and their own old lists, attendees say they hear about events from colleagues, vendors and their associations, and nobody has published how many organizers can say where a given registration came from.

Organizers who use email to find attendees

100%

70% say corporate firewalls block it. Trade show organizers, AAR study, spring 2026

Attendees who have used AI to find an event

21%

Freeman, September 2026 survey

Organizers who say first-time attendees rose

48%

22% say repeat attendees rose. Their own estimates, AAR study, spring 2026

Five findings

1. **More organizers see first-timers rising than see companies sending teams.** In a spring 2026 survey of 106 senior trade show organizers, 48 percent said first-time attendees had increased over two years and 22 percent said repeat attendees had. Thirty-eight percent said the number of attendees each organization sends had gone down, against 11 percent who said it had gone up. These are impressions: CEIR finds fewer than half of shows track new attendees at all.[3,18]

2. **Everyone runs the same four tactics, and usage is not effect.** Email 100 percent, social posts 96, digital ads 83, paid social 78. Half name email as their single most effective tactic, and 70 percent say corporate firewalls block it. In the 2025 edition, 62 percent used print ads and 6 percent named them among their most effective tactics.[3,5]

3. **Attendees name people and organizations before websites.** In Freeman's September 2026 survey, attendees were most likely to hear about an event from colleagues, from vendors and from professional organizations (45 percent each). The event's own website was named by 29 percent and online search by 21 percent. An email from the organizer was not among the options. One in five has asked an AI tool to find events.[9]

4. **Paid acquisition has a published price, from one agency.** Across the 2025 campaigns of mdg, an agency owned by Freeman, a paid delegate conversion cost $24.17 and a free registration $10.73 to $12.58. No independent benchmark exists, and the agency itself warns against reading the figure on its own.[13]
5. **The attendee starts the sale, and nothing is published about who finishes it.** Half of attendees say going was their own idea, and only 18 percent approve their own funding. No public data describes attendee sales teams at conferences: how many organizers have one, how large it is or what it brings in. Section 4 says where the evidence stops.[9]

One ask

Before spending another dollar on reach, put a source on every registration and count attendees per organization. Sections 6 and 7 show how a team of two starts on both with the systems it already has.

SECTION 1

The acquisition bill

1.1 How much of the room has to be replaced

Every conference team knows the feeling in the first planning meeting of the cycle. Last year's number is on the screen, the target is a little higher, and nobody in the room can say how many of last year's people are coming back. Freeman's January 2026 recap puts year-over-year attendee retention at 30 to 35 percent and calls it an industry average.[1] Its head of research described the figure as a blended rate drawn from data going back to 2008, and said the most generous data he could find put it in the low 40s.[2] Freeman does not publish the events behind it, and no figure exists for association conferences on their own.

If the average holds for your event, about two thirds of last year's attendees will not be on next year's list. Their places are taken by two different groups: people who came in an earlier year and skipped one or more, who are already in your database, and people who have never come. No published study separates the two, and a range of 30 to 55 percent "net-new registrations" appears in a trade column with no source, so it is not used here.[22] An earlier report in this series, The Return Rate, is about keeping last year's attendees. This one is about everyone else.

THE ACQUISITION MATH

A 2,000-person conference with 35 percent retention has to register 1,300 people who were not there last year just to stand still. Some are lapsed attendees and some are strangers. If every one of them came from paid media at the one published cost for a paid delegate conversion, $24.17, the media bill would be about $31,000, before agency fees and staff time.[13] They do not all come from ads, and the source does not define a conversion, so treat the figure as an order of magnitude. The arithmetic is this report's. The useful part is the question behind it: for how many of the 1,300 can you name a source?

1.2 First-timers up, depth down

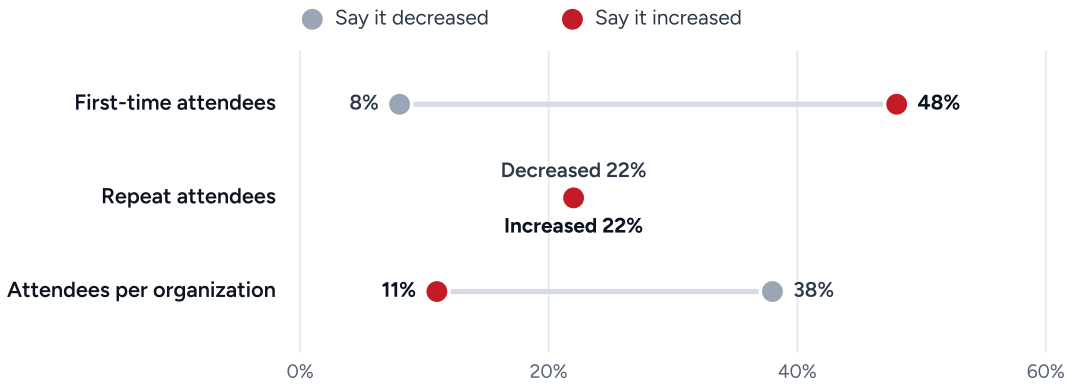
The best single source on how organizers acquire attendees is the Attendee Acquisition Roundtable study from Lippman Connects, Trade Show Executive and EVOLIO Marketing. The 2026 edition surveyed 106 senior leaders in March and April. It is a trade show sample, and an invited one: respondents came from mid-size and large B2B shows, 65 percent work for associations and 26 percent for independent organizers, 63 percent run a largest event of 125,000 square feet or more, and half have more than 20 years in the business.[3] It says nothing separately about conferences without an exhibition. Read it as the closest published evidence, not as a census.

Its clearest finding is a split. Forty-eight percent of respondents said first-time attendees had increased over the past two years, and 8 percent said they had decreased. For repeat attendees the two answers were level, 22 percent each. For attendees per organization the balance reversed: 11 percent reported an increase and 38 percent a decrease.[3] The report's own words are that "growth in new attendees does not automatically translate into loyalty."[3]

Two cautions before leaning on it. These are shares of organizers who say a measure rose or fell, not the size of the change, and by subtraction about half reported neither: 44 percent for first-timers, 56 for repeat attendees and 51 for attendees per organization. They are also impressions. CEIR's September 2026 benchmarks found that fewer than half of shows in every size category track new attendees at all.[18]

FIGURE 1 **New faces up, familiar ones level, companies sending fewer**

Share of trade show organizers who say each measure increased or decreased over the past two years. The rest, about half in each row, reported neither.



Source: Lippman Connects, Trade Show Executive and EVOLIO Marketing, The Attendee Acquisition Reality Gap, 106 respondents, March to April 2026.[3]

The last row still matters most for the budget. Among respondents with large shows, 44 percent reported fewer attendees per organization, against 17 percent of those with smaller shows; the smaller group is about 39 people, so read the gap as a direction.[3] To make it concrete with an invented example: a company that sent five people and now sends one still appears in the registration report as a customer, and leaves four seats to fill some other way. Sam Lippman, whose firm runs the roundtable, told Trade Show Executive that the low level of repeat attendees set beside the reliance on previous attendee lists "should serve as a wake-up call for attendee acquisition marketers."[4]

None of this means events are shrinking. In the 2025 edition of the study, 67 percent of organizers said their number of attendees had increased over two years and 12 percent said it had decreased. Finding new prospective attendees and attracting the right quality of attendee were level as the top-ranked challenge, at 32 and 31 percent.[5] The 2026 report's first takeaway is that audience fit, "not just audience size," is the defining concern.[3]

1.3 Why it got harder

- **Acquisition is the priority, and budgets are flat.** Forrester's Q1 2026 survey covers more than 400 people who decide on events at B2B companies, not conference organizers. Audience acquisition was among three priorities that dominate for more than 90 percent of them, net-new lead generation was the primary objective for over half, and two thirds still faced flat or declining budgets.[6]
- **The people who stay home are asking about value.** In Freeman's May 2026 study of non-attendees, most named value for the cost as the main reason to miss an event. Sixty percent said education only available in person would be enough to bring them, and 51 percent said the same of top experts being there to meet.[7] In its September 2026 survey, when attendees chose another resource over an in-person event, 49 percent said the travel cost and time were not matched by the value.[9] More reach does not answer a value question.
- **The trip and the ticket cost more.** American Express Global Business Travel's 2027 forecast, published in October 2026, expects cost per attendee to rise for every type of meeting; the coverage read for this report gives no percentage.[8] Fifty-three percent of organizers in the 2026 roundtable study said registration fees had risen over two years, by about 10 percent on average.[3]

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Match last year's attendee list to this year's registrations so far, by email and then by name plus organization. Count three things: returning people, people with no record of attending before, and organizations that sent fewer people than last year. The third number is the one nobody has on a slide.

SECTION 2

How people find an event now

2.1 People first

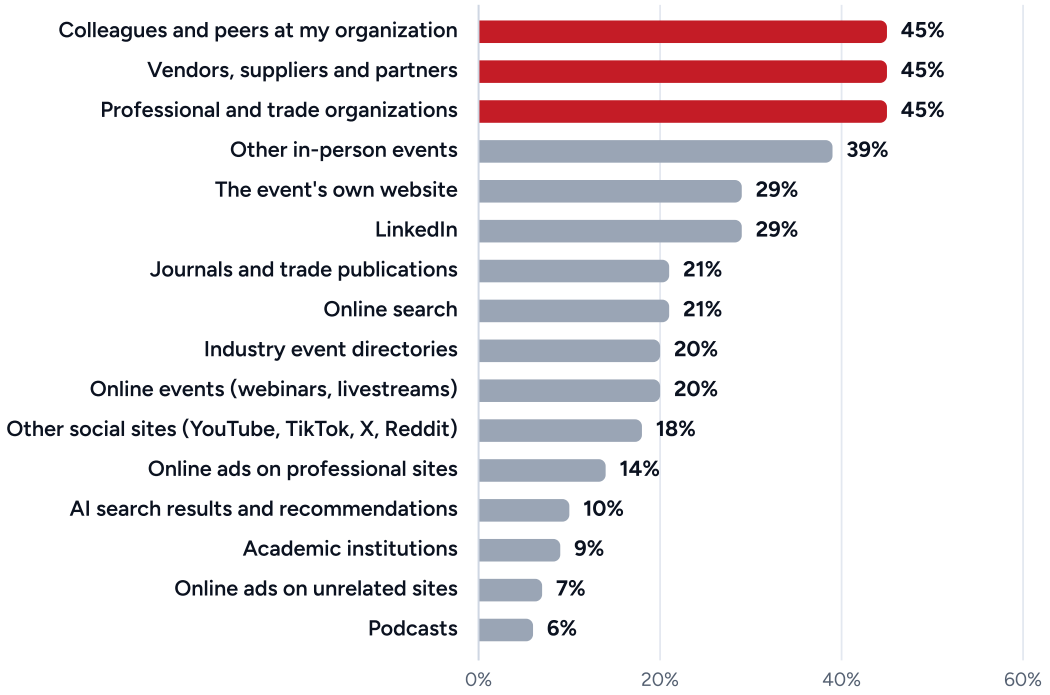
In September 2026 Freeman surveyed 2,272 attendees and 1,187 exhibitors about what happens before an event: how they find it, how they judge it and how they prepare. Freeman describes the respondents as 70 percent trade show and 30 percent conference.[9] It is the largest current study of the question this report is about, so it carries most of this section.

Asked where they are most likely to learn about a relevant event, attendees put three sources level at the top: colleagues and peers in their own organization, vendors and suppliers, and professional and trade organizations, each named by 45 percent. Other in-person events followed at 39 percent. The event's own website and LinkedIn were each named by 29 percent, online search by 21 percent and online ads on professional sites by 14.[9]

FIGURE 2

Attendees hear about events from people and organizations they already know

Sources attendees say they are most likely to learn about relevant in-person events from. Each respondent could pick up to five of these 16. An email from the event organizer was not an option.



Source: Freeman Trends Report, The Pre-Event Edition, appendix table, survey of 2,272 attendees, September 2026 (respondents 70 percent trade show, 30 percent conference). Freeman's main chart combines LinkedIn and other social sites as 41 percent.[9]

Two things about the list matter before setting it beside what organizers do in Section 3. An email from the organizer was not one of the options, so the survey cannot say how often that email is the first contact. And for an event run by an association, "professional and trade organizations" is the organizer. What the list does show is that a colleague and a vendor are named as often as the association, and well ahead of the event's website, search and ads. Those are introductions the organizer does not send and usually does not see. The survey asked where people are likely to hear about events, not which channel produced a registration.

The same survey found the introduction is already being made for free. Fifty-eight percent of attendees said that once they register they encourage peers to register too.[9] Exhibitors behave the same way in the other direction: 40 percent say they learn about events worth exhibiting at from an existing customer's recommendation.[9] Section 4 treats those two facts as a sales channel.

2.2 Search sends fewer visitors

The event website still matters, as the place people check before they commit. Fewer of them arrive at it from a search. SparkToro's 2026 study, built on Similarweb's panel of US browsers from January to April 2026, found that 68 percent of Google searches ended without a click to any website.[10] That is all searches, not searches for events.

Publishers have felt it first. Chartbeat's 2026 Publisher Playbook reported that Google Search referrals to the publisher sites in its network fell 40.2 percent between July 2025 and July 2026, after a 21.9 percent fall the year before. Search went from about 9 percent of their pageviews in July 2024 to 5 percent in July 2026.[11] That is a publisher figure. Nobody has published the equivalent for event websites.

2.3 AI assistants: small in traffic, real in behavior

Two kinds of number describe AI and discovery in 2026, and they measure different things.

The first is traffic. SE Ranking, which sells search visibility tools, measured referrals across 101,574 websites that use Google Analytics. Its tracked data runs from January 2025 to April 2026. AI platforms sent 0.24 percent of all website traffic in 2025 and 0.32 percent in the first four months of 2026; for 2024 it gives a reference value of 0.02 percent without describing how that was measured. Organic search sent 42.75 percent in the 2026 window. The sample is every kind of website, not event sites.[12] Chartbeat's figure for its publishers is far smaller: AI referrals grew eightfold in two years and reached 0.01 percent of traffic.[11] The two differ because the populations differ, a broad set of commercial sites against news publishers. Both put AI referrals well under one percent of visits.

The second is behavior. In Freeman's survey, 21 percent of attendees and 25 percent of exhibitors said they had used an AI tool to discover relevant events. Ten percent of attendees named AI results among the sources they are most likely to learn about events from.[9] Among the attendees who had used it, most found it useful, and 53 percent said it changed what they would consider.

Attendees who have used AI to discover events

21%

25% of exhibitors. Freeman, September 2026

Of those attendees, say it helps build a short list

82%

65% say it works better than other options

Of those attendees, say it changed which events they would consider

53%

Freeman, September 2026

One reading of the two, which no study has tested, is that an assistant can shape a choice without sending a visit. Someone who asks which conferences to attend gets a short list in the answer and may arrive later by typing the event's name. If that is right, referral traffic undercounts the effect, and a "how did you hear about us" question at registration would catch what analytics miss. No independent study measures registrations that began with an AI assistant, and the vendor audits that claim to are too small to cite.

2.4 What they check before they say yes

Once an event is on the list, attendees go to its website to decide. The pages they use most are the exhibitor list or floor plan (55 percent), the detailed program (49 percent) and the education sessions (41 percent). Asked where events fall short in helping them decide, 41 percent said the program lacks detail and 40 percent said it is not posted early enough.[9]

Asked what information about other attendees would make them register, 60 percent chose the types of organizations that attend and 45 percent the names of industry experts who will be there. Attendee titles were chosen by 24 percent and the number of attendees by 22.[9] The question a prospect is asking is "who is coming" more than "how many."

The decision and the registration happen at different times. Eighty-four percent of attendees say they decide to go a month or more before they register.[9] Registration itself comes late: organizers in the roundtable study say 55 percent of their attendees register within four weeks of the event and 40 percent use early-bird discounts,[3] and campaign data from mdg, quoted in Freeman's report, puts about half of registrations in the final four weeks.[9] An earlier report in this series, The Last Four Weeks, covers what that does to the pace report. For acquisition it means two jobs: being on the short list when the decision is made, and still being in touch when the registration finally happens.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Open an AI assistant and ask it, in a prospect's words, which conferences someone in your attendees' role should go to next year. Then ask it for your event's dates, price and who attends. Write down what it got wrong. Freeman suggests the same test, and it takes ten minutes.

SECTION 3

The channel ledger

3.1 What everyone does

The 2026 roundtable study asked organizers which tactics they use to acquire attendees. Four were close to universal: email blasts (100 percent), social posts (96), digital ads (83) and paid social (78). Behind them came exhibitor "guest" tickets (67), print ads (57), peer-to-peer invitations (54), influencer marketing (49) and direct mail (43).[3]

The study's authors draw the conclusion themselves: "Many acquisition tactics are nearly universally used, but only a small number are named as most effective," and "presence is not performance."[3]

3.2 What they say works

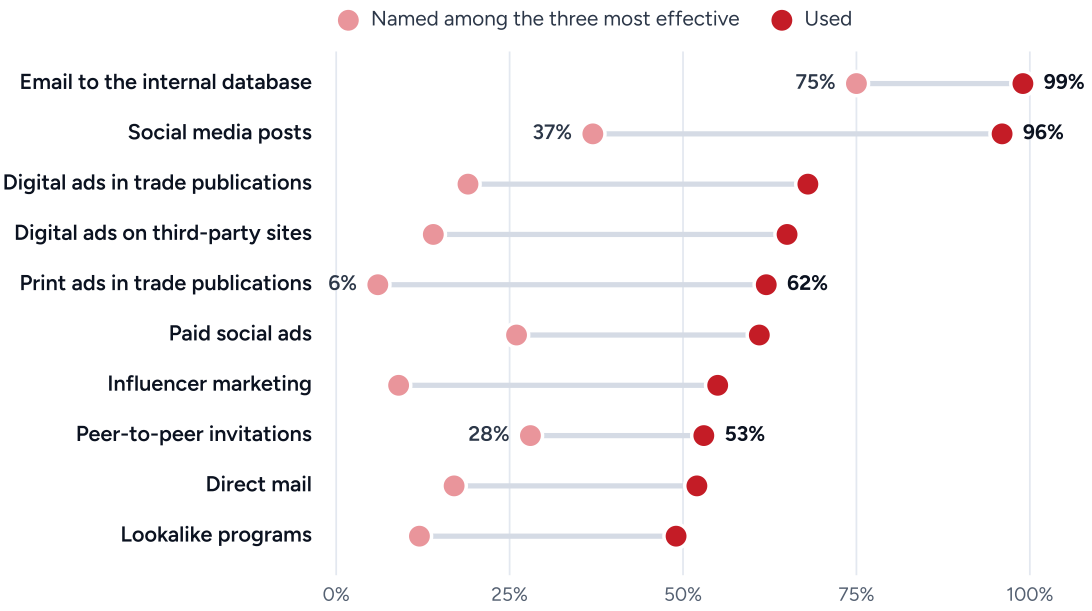
The 2026 study asked for one most effective tactic. Half chose email. Digital ads were chosen by 15 percent of large-show organizers and by none of the roughly 39 with smaller shows.[3] The 2025 edition

asked the question a more useful way: name up to three tactics that are most effective. Set beside usage, the answers show how much of the plan is habit.[5]

Email to the organizer's own database was used by 99 percent and named by 75 percent. Nothing else came close. Social posts were used by 96 percent and named by 37. Print ads in trade publications were used by 62 percent and named by 6. Peer-to-peer invitations had the best ratio after email: 53 percent used them and 28 percent named them.[5] These are organizers' opinions of their own tactics. No published study measures registrations by channel across events, which is the finding of this section.

FIGURE 3 **Used by most, rated by few**

Share of organizers using each tactic, and the share naming it among their three most effective. March 2025; the wording of the tactics is the survey's.



Source: EVOLIO Marketing, Attendee Acquisition Roundup, show organizer study of 149 responses, March 2025. The 2026 edition asked for a single most effective tactic, so the two years are not on one scale and only 2025 is charted.[5]

3.3 What email is up against

Email is the one tactic organizers both use and trust, so its problems are the plan's problems. In the 2026 study, 70 percent said corporate firewalls block delivery, 48 percent said email reaches younger generations poorly, though only 3 percent rank that as their top challenge, and 45 percent reported trouble getting accurate reporting from it.[3]

Association email benchmarks show the same strain from the sender's side. Higher Logic's 2025-2026 benchmark, drawn from about 1,500 associations and nonprofits and more than 2 billion emails sent on its platform, reports an average open rate of 33.54 percent and an average click rate of 2.68 percent. Lists under 500 contacts open near 48 percent and click above 8 percent, and both rates fall as lists

grow. Total volume rose every year from 2022 to 2025, and Higher Logic says engagement did not keep pace. It also notes that privacy features and automatic image loading inflate opens, so the click rate is the one to watch.[15]

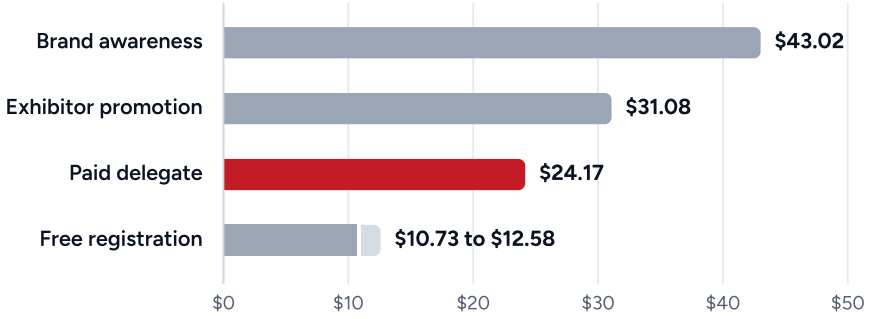
Members see it from the inbox. In Higher Logic's member survey, 61 percent said email is their main channel for hearing from their association and 51 percent said they receive too many messages; the post gives no date or sample for that survey.[15] Association staff still rate email their most valued engagement tool, at 83.4 percent in Naylor's 2026 benchmarking survey of 665 association professionals.[16] The channel is trusted, crowded and partly blocked, all at once. Two limits apply: the benchmark covers all association email, not event promotion, and the small-list figures compare lists of different sizes, which is not a test of splitting one large list. They are still a reason to try a narrower send before a bigger one.

3.4 What paid media costs

One source publishes prices. mdg, an event marketing agency owned by Freeman, reported cost per conversion across its 2025 paid media campaigns: 2.7 billion impressions, 25 million clicks and more than one million conversions.[13,9] A paid delegate conversion cost $24.17. By industry the same measure ran from $2.55 in electronics to $58.09 in healthcare. A thousand impressions cost $1.59 on programmatic display and $9.56 on LinkedIn.[13]

FIGURE 4 **What a conversion costs, by campaign goal**

Cost per conversion in US dollars across one agency's paid media campaigns in 2025. Free registration was reported as a range.



Source: mdg, Event Industry Trend Report, as reported by Conference News, June 23, 2026. The coverage does not define a conversion or say whether the figures are means or medians.[13]

Three cautions apply. These are one agency's clients, not the industry. The trade coverage does not say what counts as a conversion, and a completed registration is a different thing from a started one. And mdg itself warns against treating cost per acquisition as a standalone benchmark.[13] Its report makes a point that is easy to agree with: "Success is measured by attendance, not registrations."[14] A cheap registration that does not show up cost more than it looks.

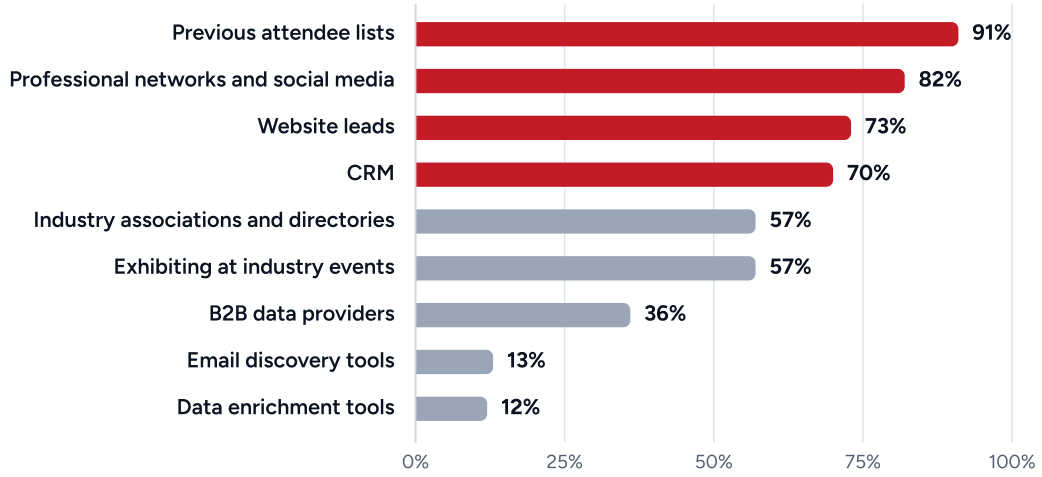
One more reference point comes from inside an event platform. Across what Bizzabo calls mature, multi-event organizations on its platform in 2025, "visit-to-registration conversion" averaged 21.5 percent. What it calls dynamic registration flows converted at 24.4 percent and static ones at 11.6 percent.[17] Bizzabo does not publish the number of customers or events behind those figures, how a visit is counted or what makes a flow dynamic, and a multi-event program is not an annual conference. Use the figure to ask what your own rate is, not to judge it.

3.5 Where the names come from

Before any tactic there is a list. Organizers in the 2026 study rely most on the people they already know: 91 percent on previous attendee lists and 70 percent on the CRM. Thirty-six percent buy from B2B data providers.[3] The study adds that organizers collect role, interest, industry and purchasing authority at registration, and that this data is "not visibly translated into personalized outreach."[3] So the main prospect list is last year's attendees, most of whom by Freeman's average do not return, and the fields that would let a team aim a message are filled in and left alone.

FIGURE 5 **Prospecting starts with the list organizers already have**

Share of trade show organizers who rely on each source to find prospective attendees.



Source: Lippman Connects, Trade Show Executive and EVOLIO Marketing, The Attendee Acquisition Reality Gap, 106 respondents, March to April 2026.[3]

3.6 What nobody tracks

No published source reports the share of organizers who can attribute a registration to the channel that produced it. What exists points one way. Forty-five percent of organizers report trouble with accurate email reporting.[3] In the 2025 roundtable study, 87 percent used the number of attendees as a success measure and 46 percent used the number of new attendees.[5] CEIR's September 2026 benchmarks found that fewer than half of shows in every size category track new attendees at all.[18] An organizer who does not count new attendees cannot know what a new attendee cost.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Pull every registration from your last event and look at the source field, the tracking code or the "how did you hear about us" answer. Count how many are blank, or say only "website." That share is the part of your marketing budget you cannot evaluate.

SECTION 4

Who sells the seat

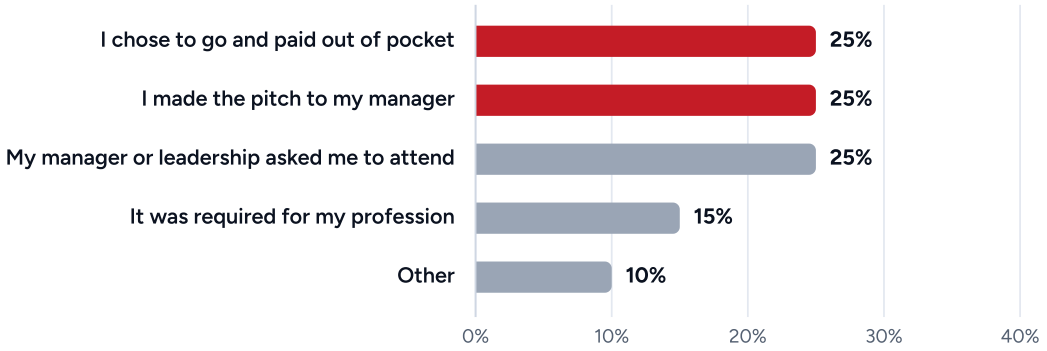
At a trade show, a booth is sold by a salesperson. A seat is usually sold by an email. This section is about the difference, and about how thin the public evidence on it is.

4.1 The attendee often sells it first, to their boss

Freeman asked attendees what started their attendance at the most important event they went to in the past two years. Half said it was their own idea: a quarter chose to go and paid out of pocket, and a quarter pitched it to their manager. Another quarter went because a manager or leadership asked them to.[9]

FIGURE 6 **Half of attendees start the decision themselves**

What attendees say started their attendance at the most important professional event they attended in the last two years.



Source: Freeman Trends Report, The Pre-Event Edition, survey of 2,272 attendees, September 2026.[9]

Many still need a signature. In a separate question about what they must demonstrate to get funding, only 18 percent said they approve their own. The rest most often have to show which products or solutions at the event could benefit the organization (46 percent) and how attending will improve their own skills (44 percent).[9] The two questions do not line up exactly, since one is about a single event and the other about general practice. Together they say that for a large share of seats the first sale is

made inside the attendee's organization, by someone with no sales material. Freeman's advice is a ready-to-send justification kit: a letter template plus the sessions and exhibitors most relevant to the person's role.[9]

4.2 Companies, not names

The measure organizers most often reported as falling in Section 1 was attendees per organization. Where an employer pays, that is a sales problem in the plain sense: an account is buying less. A marketing email is a weak tool for it, because the email goes to individuals and the decision to send a team is made by a budget holder who may not be on the list.

Teams that do attend together behave like teams: 46 percent of Freeman's respondents say they meet beforehand to divide up sessions and exhibitors, and 28 percent say they typically attend alone.[9] What the organizer needs is the view. A registration report that lists people, and does not roll them up by employer across years, will not flag a company that sent six people last year and two this year. No published benchmark exists for the share of registrations that come through group or company bookings.

Two limits apply. Freeman's attendee sample leans small: 53 percent work at organizations of 100 people or fewer, and 40 percent say they alone decide whether they attend.[9] And the company is not always the buyer. At a scientific or professional society meeting the attendee may pay, and the reason to come may be a paper, a credit or a certification; 15 percent of Freeman's respondents said attendance was required for their profession.[9] No published data covers acquisition for those meetings, where the unit worth counting may be the department, the lab or the chapter.

4.3 Exhibitors and speakers already invite people

Colleagues and vendors, two of the three sources attendees name most, are a channel organizers already use and rarely measure. Sixty-seven percent of organizers give exhibitors "guest" tickets and 54 percent run peer-to-peer invitations.[3] Forty-five percent of attendees say they hear about events from vendors, and 58 percent encourage peers to register after they do.[9] Freeman's observation is that most referral programs give the person sharing nothing but a graphic to post, and that a real reward, such as early access, would turn the habit into a steady source of registrations.[9]

How many registrations those invitations produce is not published anywhere this report could find. It is the cheapest gap to close in your own data: a code or link per exhibitor and per speaker, and a count of what each one brought.

4.4 What the team looks like

Here the public record runs out quickly, and it is better to say so than to fill the space.

- **Selling attendance is a named job at some commercial conference organizers.** At least one publicly describes a delegate sales department, paid a base salary plus commission.[21] No survey

reports how common that is, how large such teams are, what they are paid or what a salesperson brings in, and this report quotes no figure for any of those.

- **At exhibitions, sales means booths.** For independent B2B shows, CEIR reports a revenue mix of 60 percent exhibit sales, 20 percent sponsorships and 16 percent attendance.[19] The one account of an exhibition sales structure read for this report, an August 2026 IAEE interview with a consultant, does not mention selling attendance at all.[20] Exhibit and sponsorship teams are outside this report. For a conference that lives on paid registration the mix is different, and no equivalent benchmark is published.
- **For associations, nothing is published either way.** No survey this report found asks whether anyone on staff is responsible for selling attendance, as distinct from marketing it.

THE FIRST SALES HIRE

A team does not need a sales department to start. It needs one person, part time, with four things on day one: last year's attendees rolled up by organization, this year's registrations rolled up the same way, a named contact at each organization that sent fewer people, and a group offer they are allowed to make. This is this report's recommendation, not a published practice, and nobody has published what such a role returns. Count the registrations it brings before making it permanent.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

List the 25 organizations that sent the most people last year. Beside each, write how many are registered now. Pick the five furthest behind and have someone call them this week, to ask what changed before offering anything.

SECTION 5

In their own words

Surveys tell you how many. Practitioners tell you where it breaks. The first five comments come from public Reddit communities, quoted verbatim, with posters identified by role. They were collected for a study of event data, not marketing, and two of them are about contact data after an event. They are here because each describes a record that acquisition depends on. The corpus notes no vendor affiliation for any of the five. The last is an attendee quoted in Freeman's September 2026 report.

> "DonorBox only credits the ticket purchaser. So if one person buys 5 tickets for their friends, we only see the buyer… The other 5 people are invisible in our records."
>
> Small membership nonprofit, r/nonprofit[23]

> "The product claims to have an integration, but all it actually does is send data to a source field on a contact. If you interact with people across multiple events… this is super one-dimensional."
>
> RevOps builder, r/tradeshows[23]

> "Marketing ran the event, sales owns the follow-up, and the data ends up belonging to neither."
>
> B2B field marketer, r/b2bmarketing[23]

> "It's me and my boss on Events."
>
> Planner, r/EventProduction[23]

> "We use Qualtrics for registration, then transfer that data to excel then manually take attendance… then input that data back into excel. This includes manual sorting of company/email/member type."
>
> Association staff member running events of 80 to 120 guests, r/projectmanagement[23]

> "Letting folks know that I am attending and often set up a meeting/lunch with the invitee."
>
> Attendee, on how they encourage peers to register, Freeman survey[9]

The source problem has its own thread on a vendor community forum. In July 2025, a senior manager of digital operations at a large company asked other Cvent administrators whether anyone was using tracking parameters to follow registrations. Their website kept the campaign tags, the poster explained, but the tags were lost when a visitor clicked through to the registration form, and every registration arrived labeled as coming from the website. A project manager at an event agency replied twelve days later, suggesting a separate set of tags on the links from the site to the form. When the thread was read for this report, that was the only reply.[24] The exchange is paraphrased here, and it describes one team's setup, not the product in general.

Trade columnists have been blunter. Dahlia El Gazzar, who runs an event agency, wrote in Smart Meetings in March 2026: "If your growth plan is 'email the list harder,' I have news: That's not a growth plan."[22]

Four things the comments have in common

A handful of comments is not a survey. Each point below rests on one or two voices and is offered as something to check in your own systems.

1. **The record of where someone came from is thin.** One poster's connection writes a single source field that cannot hold more than one event. One forum poster's campaign tags fall off between the

website and the form. In both cases the marketing happened and the record of it did not survive.

2. **The buyer is visible and the group is not.** At one nonprofit, one person buys the tickets and the rest of the group has no record. At one association, company and member type are sorted by hand. A team that cannot see a group cannot sell to one.
3. **The data sits between departments, and the department is small.** Marketing runs the event, sales owns the follow-up, and "me and my boss" is the whole events team. Nobody in these comments mentions spare hours, which is why Section 4 asks for one part-time person and a short list.
4. **Attendees are already doing the inviting.** In the comments Freeman chose to publish, they tell colleagues they are going and set up the lunch. None of it is counted, so none of it is thanked or repeated on purpose.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Register for your own event twice on a work laptop: once from a link in one of your own emails, and once by clicking through from a tagged link to your event website. Then find both registrations in the back end and read the source field. If either one does not name where you started, you have found the gap.

SECTION 6

The playbook for a team of two

The counting can start with two exports and a spreadsheet. Keeping it going through a whole cycle is where the systems have to cooperate, and the right-hand column in 6.2 says where.

6.1 The acquisition KPI sheet

Eight numbers, kept in one sheet and updated weekly from the day registration opens. Where a published reference point exists it is given with its population. Where none exists the cell says so.

ACQUISITION KPI SHEET	REFERENCE POINT, WITH THE SOURCE
New registrants, and their share of all registrants	No published benchmark. Split new from lapsed (see the box). Your first year is the baseline.
Attendees per organization, for your top 50 organizations	No published benchmark. Thirty-eight percent of trade show organizers say it has fallen.[3] Track your own change, year on year.
Share of registrations with a known source	Aim for all of them. "Website" and blank both count as unknown. This report's recommendation.

ACQUISITION KPI SHEET	REFERENCE POINT, WITH THE SOURCE
Cost per registration, for each paid channel	$24.17 for a paid delegate and $10.73 to $12.58 for a free registration, across one agency's 2025 campaigns.[13] A reference point, not a target.
New registrants who attended	For each paid channel, divide its media and agency spend by the new registrants from that channel who checked in. This report's recommendation, following mdg's point that success is measured by attendance.[14]
Visits that end in a registration	21.5 percent across multi-event programs on one platform in 2025; sample and definition not published, and not comparable with a paid annual conference.[17] Track your own trend.
Email click rate, by list	2.68 percent on average across about 1,500 associations and nonprofits, for all email and not only event promotion.[15] Watch clicks, not opens.
Registrations per exhibitor code and per speaker code	No published benchmark. Count them before setting a target. This report's recommendation.

WHAT COUNTS AS NEW

- **New** means you hold no record of the person attending before. **Lapsed** means they attended once and missed the last two editions. Count the two apart: lapsed people are already in your database.
- **Match** on email first, then on name plus organization. A job change is a new email and the same person.
- **Leave out** staff, exhibitor booth staff and speakers who only spoke, or count them on their own lines.
- **Split** members from non-members, paid from free, and in-person from virtual. A free registration and a paid one are different purchases.
- **If the event moves cities or runs every two years,** compare with the last two editions, expect more new local names, and say so on the slide.
- **An organization** is the employer on the record, cleaned so that one company is not five spellings.

6.2 From 13 weeks before early pricing ends to the event

Attendees say they decide well before they register, and organizers say more than half register in the final four weeks (Section 2.4). So the plan starts early and does not stop at the deadline. The sequence is this report's recommendation, built from the findings in Sections 2 to 4.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT HAS TO BE TRUE IN THE SYSTEMS
Weeks 13 to 11	Roll the last two attendee lists up by organization. Mark the organizations that sent fewer people. Create one tracked link or code per channel, and test that each survives the registration form.	Both lists can be exported with email, name and employer. A test registration shows its source in the back end.
Weeks 10 to 8	Call the organizations that shrank or lapsed, with a group offer. Give every exhibitor and speaker a personal code and two lines to send. Publish the justification letter and the list of who attends, by type of organization.	A code can be tied to the exhibitor or speaker who owns it. Calls and outcomes are logged where the email tool can see them.
Weeks 7 to 5	Send fewer, narrower emails, split by the role and interest fields collected at registration. Run one paid channel with a cost cap. Add program detail to the site as it firms up.	Registration fields from past years are on the contact record, not in an old export.
Weeks 4 to 1	Read the weekly source report and move money toward what registers. Send each exhibitor their own count. Make the second call to organizations that said "maybe."	One report shows registrations by source and by organization, without a spreadsheet in between.
From the deadline to the event	Keep the weekly report going; by the organizers' own count, this is when most registrations arrive. Follow up the people who were invited or called and have not registered. Point late messages at program detail and who is coming.	The list of people invited or called can be compared with registrations.

6.3 The data minimum

- [ ] A source on every registration, written by the system and not typed by a person.
- [ ] One record per person across years, so new and returning can be told apart.
- [ ] An employer on every record, cleaned enough to count people per organization.
- [ ] Every person in a group booking has their own record, not just the buyer.
- [ ] Member type that matches the membership system, so the member rate and the member count are both right.
- [ ] An invitation code that knows which exhibitor or speaker it belongs to.
- [ ] Consent for marketing recorded with its date and its source, for every prospect who did not come from your own list.

6.4 Three honest ways to get there

- **What the registration tool does on its own.** Check first whether yours can make tracked links, issue codes and export an employer field. Right when the event site and the form are one system and someone checks the source report weekly. Wrong when the site is hosted elsewhere, because that handoff is where the source gets lost.
- **A general automation tool someone on staff owns.** Right for copying registrations into the CRM with their source and for alerting whoever makes the calls when an organization registers. Wrong when the owner is also running the event, because nobody maintains an automation in show week.
- **A specialist build, in-house or outside.** Right when people must be matched across years and systems, when groups and member types have rules of their own, or when sales and marketing need one list. Wrong when a tracked link and a weekly export would have answered the question.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Create the sheet in 6.1 with last year's numbers in the first column, even if half the cells say "unknown." The unknowns are the work plan.

SECTION 7

A decision guide for technology and data

For the reader about to buy, renew or connect something. Dated, vendor-neutral, and limited to what acquisition needs.

7.1 Source tracking that survives the form

A source is only useful if it is still attached when the registration is complete. One place it breaks is the step from the event website to the registration form, where campaign tags can be dropped and every registration filed under the site. The forum thread in Section 5 is one documented case.[24] Ask any vendor to show a test registration that starts from a tagged link on your own site and ends with the tag on the registrant's record, and then on the contact in the CRM or membership system. Ask also what happens to last year's source when the same person registers again, so the field keeps a history and not just the latest value.

7.2 An event page an AI assistant can read

One attendee in five has asked an AI tool to find events.[9] An assistant can only recommend what it can read. Freeman's guidance is practical: put dates, location, pricing and speakers in plain text on the site and not inside PDFs or images, write content around the questions prospects ask, and keep the event's details consistent wherever they appear, including partner and media sites.[9] EVOLIO made the same point to trade show marketers in July 2025, calling it answer engine optimization.[5] Beyond that, claims

about what makes an assistant choose one event over another are not backed by any published measurement, and the traffic it sends is still a fraction of one percent.[12] Do the plain-text work because it also helps people. Be wary of anyone selling a ranking.

7.3 Bought names and consent

Thirty-six percent of organizers buy prospect data from B2B providers, 13 percent use email discovery tools and 12 percent use data enrichment.[3] Twenty-four US states have now enacted comprehensive consumer privacy laws, counting Florida's narrower one, after Alabama, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Vermont passed theirs in 2026.[25] Their rules, exemptions and start dates differ, and they are not the only rules in play: commercial email, text messages and phone calls each have their own, and registrants outside the United States bring their own country's law with them. Which of these applies to a bought business list is a question for counsel, and this report does not answer it. Ask a data provider where each record came from, what the person agreed to and when, and whether the list has been checked against your own unsubscribes. Record the answer on the contact.

7.4 One list for the caller and the email

If someone is going to call organizations, the notes from those calls and the email schedule have to live in the same place. Otherwise a company that just agreed to send eight people gets three more "last chance" emails. The system does not have to be a sales CRM. It has to show, for one organization, who has registered, who was invited by whom, and what was last said.

7.5 Ten questions to ask before buying or renewing

1. Can you show a registration that keeps its source from a tagged link on our own website to the registrant's record?
2. Does the source reach our CRM or membership system, and is last year's source kept when the person registers again?
3. Can every person in a group booking have their own record and their own email?
4. Can we report registrations by employer, and compare with last year?
5. Can a code be tied to the exhibitor or speaker who shared it, and can they see their own count?
6. How is member type kept in step with the membership system?
7. How do you match a returning person whose email has changed, and can we see and correct the matches?
8. Where is marketing consent stored, with its date and source?
9. Can we export every registration with its source, employer and invitation code at any time, and after the contract ends?
10. What does it cost, in money and staff hours, to get a weekly report of registrations by source?

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Send questions 1 and 2 to your registration vendor by email and ask for a screen recording, not a yes. The answer tells you whether next year's source report is a setting or a project.

SECTION 8

Methodology, timeliness and sources

How this report was made

This is a desk-research report. It draws on studies published between July 2025 and November 2026, read in the original where the publisher makes it public and otherwise through the trade press that reported it. The two studies that carry most of the weight were read in full as PDFs: the 2026 Attendee Acquisition Roundtable study and Freeman's Pre-Event Edition. Practitioner comments come from a corpus of 55 Reddit threads read in September 2026, quoted verbatim by role, and from one vendor community thread, paraphrased. No vendor was interviewed or paid, and no vendor reviewed the text. No Event Data Pro client data was used. Before publication the draft was checked against its sources a second time by a reviewer briefed to argue against it, and corrected where the argument held.

Four limits deserve their own sentences. First, the evidence is mostly about trade shows. The roundtable study is an invited sample of 106 trade show organizers, small enough that its subgroups are a few dozen people, and Freeman describes its respondents as 70 percent trade show. No comparable study of association conference marketing exists. Second, almost everything here is what organizers and attendees say, not what registration systems recorded. No published study measures registrations by channel across events. Third, the cost figures come from one agency and the conversion figures from one platform, each describing its own customers. Fourth, that agency, mdg, is owned by Freeman, so the cost data and the largest attendee survey here come from one corporate family.

These were left out on purpose:

- The claim that in-person events have "30 to 55 percent net-new registrations," which has no source.
- Any figure for the size, pay, commission or output of attendee sales teams. None has a public primary source. Recruitment listings for delegate sales roles were seen in search results and could not be opened, so nothing is taken from them.
- The share of registrations that come from referrals, which circulates as a vendor's model, and an often-quoted 2017 survey ranking word of mouth first, which is too old to use and which Freeman's 2026 data replaces.

- The "95 to 5" rule that only 5 percent of business buyers are in the market at once, a 2021 rule of thumb about purchases and not a measurement of event audiences.
- A vendor audit of AI visibility across 12 event websites, and a vendor-commissioned survey on live events in an AI-saturated world whose sample is not disclosed.
- General email open-rate figures with no traceable primary source, and two Naylor figures its release does not define: associations communicating 11 or more times a month, and a rise in text messaging given without a unit.
- The share of associations reporting membership growth in 2026, where more than one value is in circulation and the full report sits behind a form that was not filled in. CEIR's paid study of exhibit and sponsorship sales approaches was not bought.

How fresh each number is

Every statistic is dated in the text or the figure caption, except where the text says the publisher gives no date. The table shows when the main sources refresh, so a reader can judge what may have moved since November 14, 2026.

SOURCE	EDITION USED	REFRESHES	NEXT EXPECTED
Attendee Acquisition Roundtable study	Fielded March to April 2026; 2025 edition for tactics rated effective	Annual, spring	Spring 2027
Freeman Trends Report, Pre-Event Edition	2026 Q4 (survey September 2026)	Roughly quarterly, topics vary	End-of-year recap, January 2027
Freeman End-of-Year Recap and non-attendee study	January and May 2026	Annual	January and spring 2027
mdg Event Industry Trend Report	June 2026 (2025 campaigns)	Annual	Mid-2027
Forrester State of B2B Events	Q1 2026 (published June 2026)	Annual, fielded Q1	June 2027
Higher Logic email benchmark; Naylor benchmarking report	March 2026; August 2026	Annual	Early 2027; August 2027
Bizzabo State of Events Benchmark	2026 (March 2026, 2025 data)	Annual, early in the year	Early 2027
CEIR benchmarking playbooks	August and September 2026	Annual	2027
Search and AI traffic studies (SparkToro, Chartbeat, SE Ranking)	Data to April and July 2026	Irregular; Chartbeat quarterly	Unknown; SE Ranking's 2026 point is four months

SOURCE	EDITION USED	REFRESHES	NEXT EXPECTED
Amex GBT Meetings and Events Forecast	2027 edition (October 2026)	Annual, autumn	Autumn 2027
State privacy law count	October 28, 2026	Continuous	Recount before acting; Massachusetts has a bill in conference

A note on where this comes from

Event Data Pro connects registration systems, event apps, CRMs and membership systems for conferences, and the people who wrote this spend their weeks on the records in Section 6: the source field, the person matched across years, the employer on the badge. That is the bias to be aware of. It is also why the report is about what to count before what to spend. If you would like a second pair of eyes on where your registrations come from, we offer a free consultation and will tell you honestly if a tracked link and a weekly export are enough. Write to contact@eventdata.pro.

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Appendix: chart data

Figure 1. Change over two years, share of organizers (percent)

MEASURE	INCREASED	DECREASED
First-time attendees	48	8
Repeat attendees	22	22
Attendees per organization	11	38

Figure 2. Where attendees learn about events (percent, up to five of 16 choices)

SOURCE	SHARE
Colleagues and peers at my organization	45
Vendors, suppliers and partners	45
Professional and trade organizations	45
Other in-person events	39
The event's own website	29
LinkedIn	29
Journals and trade publications	21
Online search	21

Figure 2, continued

SOURCE	SHARE
Industry event directories	20
Online events (webinars, livestreams)	20
Other social sites (YouTube, TikTok, X, Reddit)	18
Online ads on professional sites	14
AI search results and recommendations	10
Academic institutions	9
Online ads on unrelated sites	7
Podcasts	6

Figure 3. Tactics used and named among the three most effective, 2025 (percent of organizers)

TACTIC	USED	NAMED
Email to the internal database	99	75
Social media posts	96	37
Digital ads in trade publications	68	19
Digital ads on third-party sites	65	14
Print ads in trade publications	62	6
Paid social ads	61	26
Influencer marketing	55	9
Peer-to-peer invitations	53	28
Direct mail	52	17
Lookalike programs	49	12

Figure 4. Cost per conversion by campaign goal, one agency's 2025 campaigns (US dollars)

GOAL	COST
Brand awareness	43.02
Exhibitor promotion	31.08
Paid delegate	24.17
Free registration	10.73 to 12.58

Figure 5. Prospecting sources, 2026 (percent of organizers)

SOURCE	SHARE
Previous attendee lists	91
Professional networks and social media	82
Website leads	73
CRM	70
Industry associations and directories	57
Exhibiting at industry events	57
B2B data providers	36
Email discovery tools	13
Data enrichment tools	12

Figure 6. What started the decision to attend (percent of attendees)

ANSWER	SHARE
I chose to go and paid out of pocket	25
I made the pitch to my manager	25
My manager or leadership asked me to attend	25
It was required for my profession	15
Other	10

Figures 1 and 5: Attendee Acquisition Roundtable study, 106 respondents, March to April 2026. Figure 3: the 2025 edition, 149 responses. Figures 2 and 6: Freeman, 2,272 attendees, September 2026. Figure 4: mdg, as reported by Conference News.