Event Data Pro | Research & Insights

A REPORT FOR PEOPLE WHO RUN ANNUAL CONFERENCES

The Return Rate

Why only three in ten attendees come back the next year, by Freeman's count, and what your own data already knows about it.



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About 25 minutes

WRITTEN FOR
Directors of meetings, association leaders, and conference and sponsorship teams

CONTENTS

What is in this report

Nine short sections, about 25 minutes to read.

- **Most of the people at your last conference will not be at your next one.**
  - Five findings
  - One ask

1 **Retention is the 2026 growth problem**
  - 1.1 The number nobody puts on the board slide
  - 1.2 Acquisition is not coming to the rescue
  - 1.3 The generational clock

2 **What the data says about who comes back**
  - 2.1 Objectives, not spectacle
  - 2.2 Connection is the return signal
  - 2.3 Sessions are shrinking, meetings are growing
  - 2.4 Personalization is welcome, if it is honest

3 **Collected, but not connected**
  - 3.1 Most organizers do not measure retention
  - 3.2 The data exists, in pieces
  - 3.3 Proof of value is improving, from a low base
  - 3.4 What "connected" actually means for a conference

4 **The second retention: sponsors and exhibitors**
  - 4.1 Sponsors are buying audience intelligence now
  - 4.2 The first-year cliff
  - 4.3 The report that arrives in month three

5 **In their own words**
  - Four things the comments have in common

6 **The playbook**
  - 6.1 Put retention on the KPI sheet, before anything else
  - 6.2 Capture the return signals you already have
  - 6.3 The first 90 days
  - 6.4 The data minimum
  - 6.5 Design moves the data will tell you to make

7 **A decision guide for technology and data**
  - 7.1 Consolidation is real, and it changes who owns your connectors
  - 7.2 Bring your own AI is emerging
  - 7.3 AI on dirty data
  - 7.4 The privacy count keeps climbing
  - 7.5 Ten questions to ask before signing

8 **Methodology, timeliness and sources**
  - How this report was made
  - How fresh each number is
  - A note on where this comes from
  - Sources
  - Appendix: chart data

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most of the people at your last conference will not be at your next one.

That is not a guess. It is Freeman's industry average, measured across the events it has served since 2008, and nobody has published a better number for association conferences. This report pulls together the research published in the last year on who returns to recurring events, why they do, and what stands between organizers and the answer. The short version: the signals that predict a return are already being collected at almost every conference. They are just sitting in systems that do not agree with each other.

Attendees who return the following year

30 to 35%

Average across Freeman events, January 2026

Organizers who track attendee retention

Fewer than half

Every show-size category, CEIR, September 2026

Sponsorship teams that measure ROI inconsistently

Nearly 60%

Showcare, 2026

Five findings

1. **Most attendees do not return.** Freeman puts year-over-year attendee retention at 30 to 35 percent across the events it serves, most of them trade shows. In plain terms, organizers rebuild about 70 percent of the room every year. No published figure exists for association conferences on their own.[1,3]

2. **Retention is now the growth lever, because acquisition has stalled.** Half of events ran behind their registration pace in 2025. Thirty-nine percent of association CEOs report financial decline, with meetings the most affected revenue line. The share of associations reporting membership growth fell from 49 percent in 2023 to 39 percent in 2026.[1,7,8,10]

3. **The signals that predict a return are already captured.** Attendees who hit a "peak moment" say they are far more likely to come back (Freeman puts it at 85 percent more likely), yet only 40 percent had one. Half say one meaningful connection would bring them back. On one large event platform, sessions attended per person fell from 5.3 to 4.2 in a year while scheduled meetings rose as much as threefold. Every one of those things leaves a trace in a registration system, an app or a badge scan.[27,3,29]

4. **Few organizers measure retention, and the ones who connect the data are happier.** Fewer than half of organizers track individual attendee retention, and only about a third of small and midsize shows do. Two thirds of enterprises have now connected their main event platform to their marketing systems, up from one in five two years earlier, and the connected ones are far more satisfied with their events. Marketers at large companies use about half of the software capability they pay for.[4,14,32]

5. **Sponsors face the same measurement gap.** Nearly 60 percent of sponsorship teams measure ROI inconsistently, 40 percent say they lack consolidated reporting, and 56 percent of those teams are two or three people. In the last published study, from 2015, first-year exhibitors were the most likely to disappear.[5,35]

One ask

Put retention on the KPI sheet next to registrations, and get the five records that predict a return into one place within 30 days of the event. Section 6 shows what those five records are and how small teams do it.

SECTION 1

Retention is the 2026 growth problem

1.1 The number nobody puts on the board slide

Every conference has a moment, a few weeks after close, when someone opens last year's attendee list next to this year's registrations. The names that are missing do not explain themselves. As Freeman's January 2026 recap puts it: "First-time attendees don't always complain. They don't fill out a form explaining why they're not coming back. They simply disappear from the next year's list."[1]

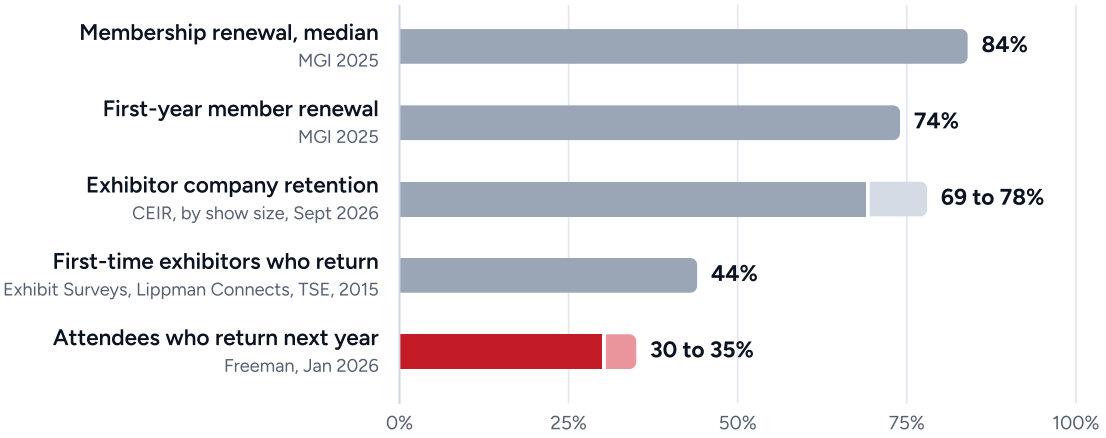
The same report gives the industry its number. "Attendee retirement is currently outpacing attendee retention (industry average of only 30-35% YOY), and this balance must shift."[1] Freeman's chief strategist, writing in PCMA Convene in April 2026, said it more bluntly: only about 30 percent of an audience returns from one year to the next, so organizations must replace roughly 70 percent of their attendees every cycle.[3]

It is worth knowing what that number is. It is Freeman's own, blended across the events it has served since 2008, including shows that rotate cities, and most of those events are trade shows. The best figure Freeman could find anywhere was in the low 40s.[2] Nobody has published a retention benchmark for association annual meetings. That is one reason this report ends with how to build your own.

Put that beside the numbers associations already watch. The median membership renewal rate is 84 percent. First-year members renew at 74 percent, and Higher Logic, summarizing MGI's data, says nearly half of associations report first-year renewal below 60 percent.[9,11] Exhibitor company retention runs 69 to 78 percent depending on show size.[4] The comparison is not exact. Membership renewal is a paid decision that often renews itself, attendance is a discretionary trip, and exhibitor retention counts companies while attendee retention counts people. Even so, set side by side, the conference is where the most people fall away each year, and it is the part with the least measurement behind it.

FIGURE 1 **Three kinds of retention, one organization**

Share who come back the following year. Bars show the published range where a range was given. Exhibitor figures count companies; the rest count people.



Source: MGI 2025 benchmarking report; CEIR 2026 Performance Benchmarking Playbook Series (September 2026); Exhibit Surveys, Lippman Connects and Trade Show Executive (2015, the most recent published figure for first-time exhibitors); Freeman End-of-Year Trends Recap (January 2026).[9,4,35,1]

THE RETENTION MATH

At 35 percent retention, a 5,000-person conference has to find 3,250 new registrants just to stand still. Every five points of retention is 250 people you do not have to buy with marketing. Most organizers know their cost per new registrant. Very few know their cost per lost one, even though it is the same number: a lost attendee costs whatever it takes to recruit the replacement.

1.2 Acquisition is not coming to the rescue

For years the answer to a soft return rate was simple: market harder. That answer is getting more expensive and less reliable.

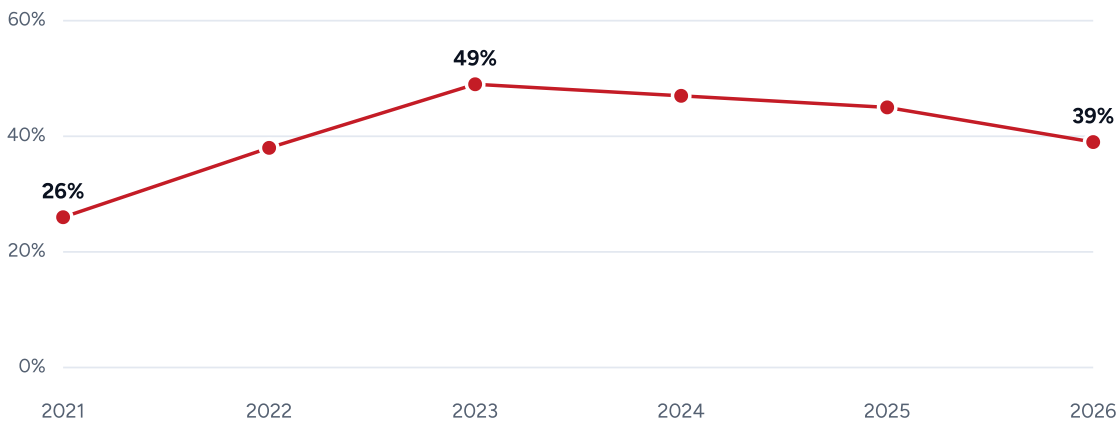
- **Registrations arrive late and behind.** Half of events tracked behind their regular registration pace in 2025. Freeman calls late registration "stable behavior, not an anomaly," and notes that on-site registration is dropping too, so the day-of bump organizers used to count on is shrinking.[1]
- **Budgets are flat for most teams.** Forrester found event budgets flat or down for two thirds of B2B event teams for the second year running. Only 19 percent saw an increase, and event satisfaction fell 8 percent between 2024 and 2025.[12]
- **Association meetings are under real pressure.** ASAE's first State of Associations report, published in March 2026, found 39 percent of CEOs reporting financial decline against 10 percent reporting

improvement. Meetings were the most affected revenue stream, with attendance declining and international participation down.[7] A year earlier, ASAE's April 2025 pulse of 210 association CEOs found half reporting lower attendance at their meetings, with the drop most visible among attendees from Canada and Europe.[6] In PCMA Convene's annual survey of 80 planners, published in December 2025, 13 percent expected attendance to fall in 2026, up from 3 percent the year before. More than a third said their outlook "depends on the day."[15]

- **More money buys the same event.** The picture is not all gloom. American Express Global Business Travel's survey of 601 meeting professionals found 85 percent optimistic about 2026, the highest reading in five years, and 88 percent expecting budgets to rise. But cost per participant is rising about 6 percent, and cost is the top planning challenge for 38 percent of them.[16] The Northstar and Cvent PULSE survey of 825 planners found 64 percent expecting budgets up 5 to 14 percent, and 58 percent expecting costs to rise by about the same.[17] The budget increase and the cost increase cancel out.

FIGURE 2 **Fewer associations are growing**

Share of associations reporting membership growth in the past year, by report year.

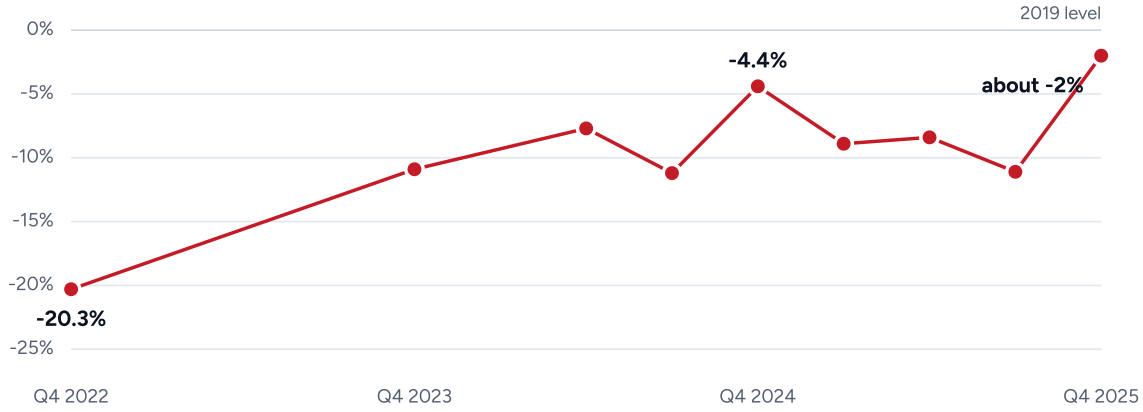


Source: Marketing General Incorporated, Membership Marketing Benchmarking Reports. The 2024 report (n = 695) publishes the trend through 2024; 2025 (45 percent) and 2026 (39 percent, with 30 percent reporting declines and 31 percent flat) from MGI's 2025 and 2026 releases.[8,9,10]

The membership trend matters for anyone who runs an association conference, because the conference is where members decide whether the association is still worth it. MGI's 2026 report, drawn from nearly 500 association professionals, is the third year in a row that the share of growing associations has slipped.[10]

FIGURE 3 **Trade shows are close to 2019 again, attendance is not**

CEIR Total Index for US business-to-business exhibitions, percent below the same quarter of 2019. The horizontal axis is to scale; quarters without a point were not read for this report.



Source: CEIR Index quarterly releases, values as revised in later releases. Attendees were the slowest component to recover: 17.8 percent below 2019 in Q3 2024 and 12.3 percent below in Q3 2025. In Q4 2025 the total index came within about 2 percent of 2019 while attendance was still about 6 percent below, as Skift Meetings reported from CEIR's 2026 Index Report. CEIR forecasts 2.1 percent growth in the total index for 2026.[18,19,20,21,22,23,24]

1.3 The generational clock

There is a second force underneath the numbers. Freeman's recap says Millennials and Gen Z were 58 percent of the workforce in 2025 and projects about 75 percent by 2030. Its argument is that Gen X and Boomer attendees are leaving the workforce faster than younger professionals are arriving at events designed for them.[1] Some churn is structural, then: retirements, job changes, budgets that vanish. Nobody has published how much. Your own list can tell you, because a person who left the industry looks different in the CRM from a member who renewed and still stayed home. Nearly a third of professionals aged 23 to 46 say current networking formats reduce the value of an event or create anxiety. Forty percent say networking feels awkward. Almost half want curated suggestions of who to meet before they arrive.[25] Skift Meetings lists the talent and knowledge gap as one of its six megatrends for 2026, alongside the shift to smaller curated events and compressed planning windows.[26]

None of this is a reason to panic. It is a reason to stop treating this year's attendee list as a marketing asset and start treating it as the most valuable thing the event owns.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Pull last year's attendee list and this year's registrations into one sheet. Count the overlap. Whatever the number is, it is now your baseline, and it belongs on the same slide as registrations.

SECTION 2

What the data says about who comes back

2.1 Objectives, not spectacle

Ask an organizer what makes an event memorable and the answer usually involves the keynote, the party, the venue. Ask attendees and the answer is simpler: did I get what I came for.

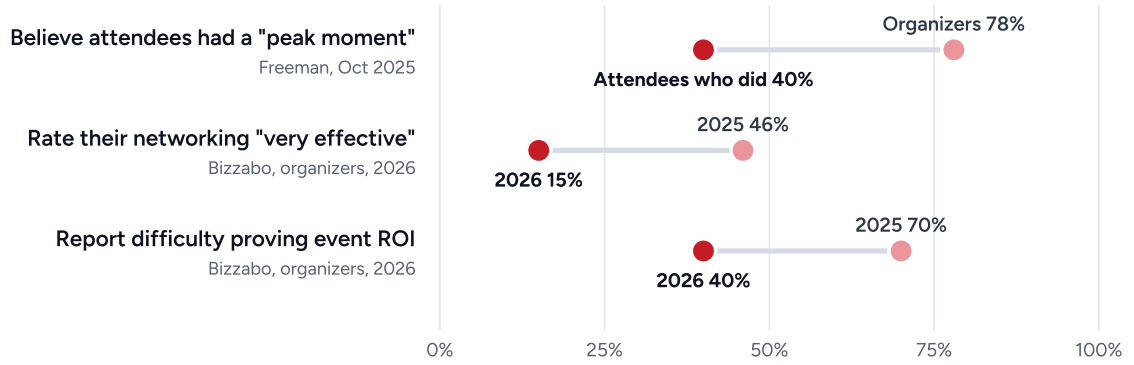
Freeman's October 2025 study of more than 2,600 attendees and organizers found that attendees who experienced a "peak moment" were far more likely to say they would return. Freeman states it two ways: its press release says such attendees are 85 percent more likely to return, and its year-end recap says 85 percent of them are likely to return. Either way it is stated intent, not observed behavior. Only 40 percent said they had one. Meanwhile 78 percent of organizers believed they were delivering them.[27] When attendees were asked what those moments were, the answers were not entertainment. They were vendor relationships (41 percent), learning (20 percent) and networking (19 percent).[27]

Freeman's year-end recap describes the organizer side of this gap without sparing anyone. Investment dollars "targeted early registration numbers, treating them as a reliable predictor of success." Programming "followed suit, with energy directed toward celebrity talent and after-hours experiences designed to generate buzz." Attendee behavior "showed that progress toward their objectives during the event, not the spectacle around them, is what drove their satisfaction and return intent."[1] One in five attendees does not believe the event is meeting their objectives at all.[1]

Freeman also asked the people who stayed home. Its May 2026 study of nearly 20,000 respondents found that most non-attendees named value for the cost as their main reason to miss an event. Sixty percent said education on topics they care about, available only in person, would be enough to bring them, and 51 percent said the same of top experts being there to meet.[31] The people who did not come are asking for the same two things as the people who did.

FIGURE 4 **The expectation gap**

Three gaps organizers have measured in the last year.



Source: Freeman, October 2025 (2,600+ respondents); Bizzabo, 2026 State of Events Benchmark Report, organizer survey, with 2025 comparison values from the same series.[27,28]

2.2 Connection is the return signal

If one number should sit on the wall of every conference office, it is this one: 51 percent of attendees name effective networking as a reason to return.[25] About half say a single meaningful connection would be enough to bring them back.[3] Eighty-four percent rate connecting with subject-matter experts as extremely or very important, and 63 percent say those experts are the most important ingredient in networking that works.[1]

Here is the uncomfortable part. Organizers know their networking is not landing. In Bizzabo's 2026 survey, only 15 percent of organizers rated their networking as very effective, down from 46 percent a year earlier. Sixty percent settled for "somewhat effective."[28] Attendees are telling organizers what would bring them back, and organizers are telling researchers they are not delivering it.

2.3 Sessions are shrinking, meetings are growing

The clearest behavioral shift of the year comes from RainFocus, whose mid-year report compared spring 2025 with spring 2026. The report does not describe its sample, and RainFocus's customers skew to large corporate and technology events, so read the direction as the finding and the decimals as theirs. Average sessions attended per person fell from 5.3 to 4.2. Participation in scheduled meetings rose as much as threefold. At smaller events, attendance was up 6.4 percent and meeting participation up 69 percent.[29] RainFocus's chief executive put it simply: "Attendees want conversations, not just presentations."[29]

Sessions attended per person

5.3 to 4.2

Spring 2025 to spring 2026, RainFocus

Scheduled meeting participation at smaller events

+69%

Year over year, RainFocus

Learning time attendees want outside session rooms

54%

64% at trade shows, Freeman, July 2026

Freeman's learning research points the same way. Seventy percent of attendees rank in-person events as their top source of professional learning, but they would ideally spend 54 percent of that learning time outside the session room, and 64 percent at trade shows. Only about half attend keynotes. Fewer than one in five names continuing-education credit as a top goal.[30]

This changes what counts as an engagement signal. A session scan alone now undercounts the people who were most engaged. Meeting requests, app messages, time on the expo floor and a simple "did you get what you came for" question are retention signals too, and most of them are already being recorded somewhere.

2.4 Personalization is welcome, if it is honest

Attendees are not shy about sharing what would help. Over a third say curated matching is essential to networking, and Freeman reports they are willing to share data that enables grouping by interest.[25] Fifty-four percent would share their on-the-job challenges to get better networking.[1] Among association members, 84 percent say personalization is important and 94 percent are comfortable with AI being used, provided it is transparent and human-centered.[11]

The price of that trust is care. Twenty US states had comprehensive privacy laws in effect at the start of 2026, and four more passed laws in the first half of the year.[43,42] Using last year's attendance to recommend this year's sessions is first-party use of your own data. Sharing it with a sponsor is something else, and needs plain consent language at registration. Section 7 comes back to this.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Add one question to your post-event survey: "Did you accomplish what you came to do?" Freeman recommends measuring outcomes, not satisfaction. It is the cheapest retention predictor you can collect.

SECTION 3

Collected, but not connected

3.1 Most organizers do not measure retention

CEIR's 2026 Performance Benchmarking Playbook Series, published on September 22, 2026, is the most recent look at how exhibitions actually run their numbers. It found that fewer than half of organizers in every show-size category track individual attendee retention. For small and midsize shows it is only about a third. Fewer than half track new attendees at all. Exhibitor retention gets more attention: roughly six in ten organizers track it, and more than three quarters of the largest shows track new exhibiting companies.[4]

The same report shows why the measurement matters commercially. Exhibit sales make up 60 percent of gross revenue across show sizes, and net margins range from 32 percent for the smallest shows to 55 percent for the largest. CEIR's own headline for the series: stronger shows measure more.[4] Freeman's third recommendation for 2026 says the same thing in five words: "Count retention in your KPIs."[1]

FIGURE 5 **What organizers actually track**

CEIR reports these as ranges, so they are shown as words rather than bars.

METRIC	SHARE OF ORGANIZERS WHO TRACK IT
Individual attendee retention	Fewer than half, in every show-size category. About one third of small and midsize shows.
New attendees	Fewer than half, across all three size categories.
Exhibitor company retention	Roughly six in ten.
New exhibiting companies	More than three quarters of the largest shows.

Source: CEIR, 2026 Performance Benchmarking Playbook Series, September 22, 2026.[4]

3.2 The data exists, in pieces

The reason retention goes unmeasured is rarely that nobody cares. It is that the answer lives in four places. Registration knows who paid and at what member rate. The badge or app knows who walked into which room and who booked a meeting. The survey tool knows who felt it was worth it. The CRM or membership system knows whether they renewed. Each of those systems is fine on its own. Together, they do not agree.

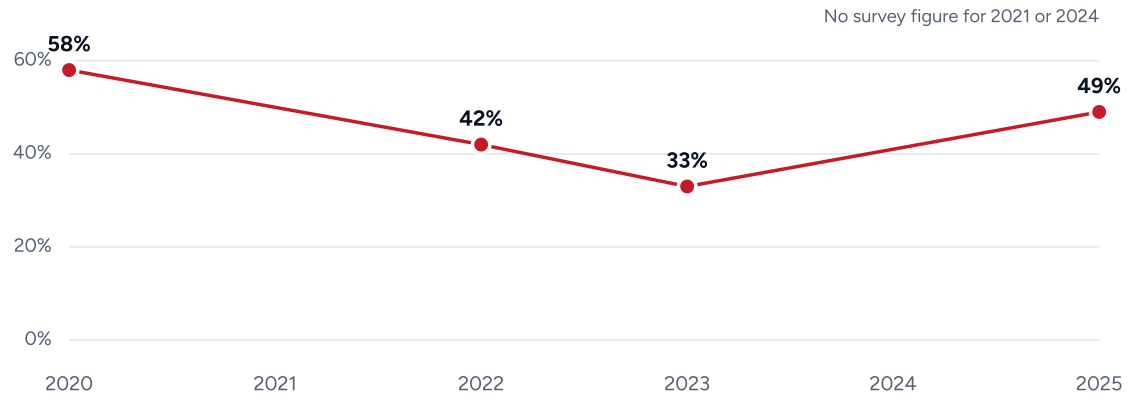
Forrester has tracked this for three years. In its 2024 survey, only one in five enterprises had integrated its primary B2B event platform with its wider marketing technology.[13] By its Q1 2026 survey of more than 400 event decision-makers, two thirds had, a 44 percent rise in a year, and the payoff was visible: 62 percent of those with a deep integration were satisfied with their events, against 37 percent of those without one.[14] Twenty-eight percent of the largest organizations still run six or more event platforms.[12] Forrester's earlier diagnosis is worth quoting because it is not about software. Teams treated event technology as a tactical asset, "frequently lacking the experience and/or skills to drive integration projects," and were "too focused on 'at-event' execution to maximize the value of the data being captured."[13]

Bizzabo's 2026 report points the same way: 79 percent of the organizers it surveyed have their event platform connected to a CRM or marketing automation tool.[28] Both samples deserve care. Forrester surveys event decision-makers at enterprises, and Bizzabo, which does not publish its sample size, describes its respondents as mature, multi-event marketing teams. For a lean association or conference team, the honest picture is probably behind both numbers, and the Cvent Community thread in Section 5 shows what closing the gap looks like with no IT department.

Zoom out to marketing technology as a whole and the pattern holds. Gartner's 2025 survey of marketing leaders, mostly at large companies, found them using 49 percent of the capabilities in their technology stack. That is a recovery from 33 percent in 2023 and 42 percent in 2022, but still below the 58 percent of 2020. Only 15 percent of organizations qualify as high performers, meaning they meet their strategic goals and show positive return on the technology.[32] In October 2025, 45 percent of martech leaders told Gartner that the AI agents their vendors offer fail to meet the business performance they were promised.[33]

FIGURE 6 **Tools bought versus tools used**

Share of marketing technology stack capabilities in use, Gartner marketing technology surveys.



Source: Gartner, 2025 Marketing Technology Survey and prior editions as reported by Gartner and MarTech. Gartner did not publish a comparable figure for every year.[32]

3.3 Proof of value is improving, from a low base

Some things are getting better. In Bizzabo's 2025 survey, 70 percent of organizers said they struggled to prove the return on their events. In 2026 that fell to 40 percent. Both years, the root cause named most often was the same: fragmented data and disconnected systems.[28] The Amex GBT forecast shows how thin the habit still is: only 26 percent of meeting professionals said their policy requires a post-event survey and 24 percent said it includes ROI metrics, though 36 percent plan to use data and ROI tools in 2026.[16]

Associations are adopting AI quickly, but unevenly. ASAE found 87.5 percent using AI for content and only 44.3 percent using it for data, with what the report calls readiness gaps in expertise and privacy.[7] MGI's benchmarks put association AI use at 18 percent, with 13 percent implementing.[11] The order of operations matters here. AI layered on top of disconnected data produces confident, polished nonsense. The plumbing comes first.

3.4 What "connected" actually means for a conference

Strip away the vendor language and a connected conference means five records about the same person can be looked at together:

1. The registration record, including member type or ticket type.
2. Check-in and what they did on site: sessions, meetings, booths.
3. How they used the app: messages, meeting requests, saved sessions.
4. What they said afterward: objective met or not, and one satisfaction measure.
5. What happened in the 30 days after: a call, an email, a renewal, or nothing.

A practitioner on r/CRM offered a test that is better than any feature checklist: "Test one awkward scenario: member buys 3 tickets, one guest is already in your CRM, one is new, one no-shows. If the system handles that cleanly without spreadsheet cleanup, it is probably good enough."[36] If your systems pass that test, they will support a retention program. If they do not, no dashboard will save you.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Write down where each of the five records lives today and who has the login. If the answer for any of them is "a spreadsheet on someone's laptop," you have found the first thing to fix.

SECTION 4

The second retention: sponsors and exhibitors

4.1 Sponsors are buying audience intelligence now

Everything in the previous sections has a mirror image on the sponsor side, and the stakes are higher because exhibit sales are 60 percent of gross revenue for a typical show.[4]

Showcare's 2026 Pulse survey of association sponsorship teams (Showcare does not publish its sample size) found that targeted, personalized opportunities have become the top emerging sponsor expectation, ahead of traditional volume-based exposure. Audience quality is now prioritized over audience size. Forty percent of teams report sponsor retention between 51 and 75 percent. Nearly 60 percent measure sponsorship ROI inconsistently, and 40 percent name the lack of consolidated reporting tools as their biggest barrier to proving value. Over half say winning new sponsors is their biggest challenge, and most rely on inbound interest rather than systematic prospecting.[5]

Now the constraint. Fifty-six percent of those sponsorship teams are two or three people. Only 22 percent use dedicated sponsorship software. Nearly two thirds still expect revenue to grow.[5] That is a lot of expectation resting on a very small number of people and a spreadsheet.

Sponsors, for their part, have money and rising expectations. Event Marketer's EventTrack 2026 study of more than a thousand marketers found 86 percent of B2B marketers planning to increase event spend, with lead generation still their top measure of success.[34] Forrester found 77 percent of B2B event teams building year-round attendee engagement rather than one-off activations, and more than 90 percent prioritizing audience quality, proving return, and post-event follow-up.[13,12] Sponsors are going to ask harder questions. The organizers who can answer them with their own first-party data will keep the sponsors.

4.2 The first-year cliff

CEIR's September 2026 benchmarks put exhibitor company retention at 73 percent for small shows, 78 percent for midsize, and 69 percent for the largest.[4] The most-cited figure for first-time exhibitors is older and deserves its date: a 2015 survey of 206 exhibit and sponsorship sales professionals by Exhibit Surveys, Lippman Connects and Trade Show Executive found that only 44 percent of first-time exhibitors were satisfied enough to sign up for the next edition, against overall exhibitor retention of 76 percent in the same study.[35] Nobody has published a better number since, and the industry still quotes it, which says something about how rarely the first-year cohort is studied.

The pattern is the same as first-year members, who renew at 74 percent against a median of 84 percent.[9,11] Year one is where the relationship is decided. It is also the year when the sponsor has the least history with you and the most need for proof.

WHAT SPONSORS ARE ACTUALLY ASKING FOR

Sponsors and exhibitors in 2026 want to know who visited, who engaged, who booked a meeting, and which leads were worth following up. A badge-scan count does not answer any of those. A sponsor report that combines attendance, session and booth engagement, and lead quality does. The difference between the two is whether the data was connected before the report was due.

4.3 The report that arrives in month three

Ask organizers when the sponsor report goes out and the honest answer is often "when we get to it." A workable standard is a preliminary report within two weeks and a full report within 30 days. That is this report's recommendation rather than a published benchmark; the reasoning is that anything later misses the renewal window while the event is fresh. If you sell next year's space on site, the preliminary report still matters, because it is what the sponsors who did not rebook on the floor will ask for.

The practitioner view is sharper. From a conference operations lead on Reddit: "Sponsor reports go out late or not at all. Attendee data sits in a spreadsheet nobody opens." And from a reply in the same thread: "A report that arrives in month three reads like an apology."[36]

The data point behind those quotes is structural. A sponsor report is only fast if attendance, lead scans and app engagement land in one place without a person exporting three files and reconciling them. If reconciliation is manual, the report is late by design, and it is late in the exact weeks a team of two is also closing out the venue, chasing invoices and starting next year's plan.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Look at last year's sponsor report dates. Count the days from event close to delivery. Then list the exports someone had to do by hand to produce it. That list is your renewal risk.

SECTION 5

In their own words

Surveys tell you how many. Forums tell you how it feels. These comments come from public practitioner communities, quoted verbatim, with posters identified by role rather than name. One of them discloses that they build software; that is noted where it applies.

"Data goes into black hole after event ends, then sales team complains six months later they can't remember who was actually interested versus who just wanted free drinks."

B2B marketer, r/b2bmarketing[36]

"Marketing ran the event, sales owns the follow-up, and the data ends up belonging to neither."

B2B field marketer, r/b2bmarketing[36]

"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[36]

"The 'update it in three places' problem is real."

Experienced planner, r/EventProduction[36]

"Our speakers also register as attendees but the profiles were unable to talk with one another. That meant speakers doing double the work."

Nonprofit planner, 725 attendees and 200 speakers, r/EventProduction[36]

"It's me and my boss on Events."

Planner, r/EventProduction[36]

"Only I know this from my team, no one else goes in the back end."

Planner, r/EventPlanners[36]

"Sponsor reports go out late or not at all. Attendee data sits in a spreadsheet nobody opens."

Conference operations lead, r/EventProduction (the poster discloses that they build software)[36]

The association world has its own version of this conversation, mostly on vendor community forums rather than Reddit. In a Cvent Community thread that ran from March 2025 to April 2026, an events lead at a national housing association described building a connection between the association's membership database and the event platform with no in-house IT support and unresponsive vendor support on the database side. The build was, in their word, "bumpy." Once it was live, registrants flowed automatically into the attendee hub, which let the team open it earlier and tailor it more. The budget for the work was won by framing it as protecting the investment in the existing membership system, not replacing it.[37] In March 2026, an association coordinator and event technologist opened

another thread asking peers whether their biggest 2026 hurdle was "automation, reporting, staffing, hybrid events, integrations, or something else." When it was read for this report, nobody had replied.[38]

Four things the comments have in common

1. **Nobody says "integration."** They say spreadsheet, export, re-key, black hole, "three places," and "the systems don't talk." The problem is described by its symptoms because that is where it hurts.
2. **Ownership is the real gap.** The event team collects, marketing sends, sales follows up, membership renews, and the data belongs to no one. Retention falls between departments the way the follow-up does.
3. **It is usually one person.** The person who knows the back end is a single named human, and retention programs that depend on that person's spare time do not survive show week.
4. **Attendees notice the data errors first.** The wrong member price, a speaker re-keying their own profile, guests invisible in the records. Each is small, and none of the posters says anyone left over it. Each is still a quiet reason not to come back.

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Read the comments from your last post-event survey and the support inbox from show week. Sort every complaint into one of the four buckets above. The biggest bucket is next year's first fix.

SECTION 6

The playbook

What organizers who retain well are doing differently, sized for a team of two. None of it requires a new platform. All of it requires the data to be in one place.

6.1 Put retention on the KPI sheet, before anything else

Define it plainly: the share of people who attended this year and register for next year. Split it by first-time versus returning, member versus non-member, and by sponsor and exhibitor. Freeman's 2026 recommendations and CEIR's benchmarking both land here: retention belongs beside recruitment on the leadership scorecard, not in a report nobody reads.[1,4]

A DEFINITION THAT SURVIVES A BOARD MEETING

- **Count** people who checked in this year and have registered for next year, divided by everyone who checked in this year. Registrations are not the denominator; no-shows never came.
- **Leave out** staff, speakers who only spoke, and exhibitor booth staff. Count those groups separately, or they flatter the number.
- **Match** people on email first, then on name plus organization, and keep the list of matches so next year's figure is built the same way. A job change is a new email and the same person.
- **Report separately** members and non-members, in-person and virtual, paid and free. Each behaves differently and a blended number hides all of them.
- **If the event moves cities or runs every two years,** compare with the last edition, expect a lower number when the city changes, and say so on the slide. Freeman's own average includes rotating shows.

RETENTION KPI SHEET	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE, WITH THE SOURCE
Overall attendee return rate	30 to 35 percent is Freeman's average across its events, and the low 40s is the best it has found. No published figure for association meetings, so your first year is the benchmark.[2]
First-time attendee return rate	No published benchmark. Expect it to be lower than overall; Freeman's retirement argument and MGI's first-year renewal gap both point that way.
Sponsor and exhibitor renewal rate	69 to 78 percent for exhibiting companies (CEIR). 51 to 75 percent is the range most sponsorship teams report (Showcare).[4,5]
First-year exhibitor return rate	44 percent, against 76 percent overall, in the last published study (2015). The study is old; measure your own.[3,5]
Share of attendees with a recorded objective	Aim for all of them; one registration question does it.
Share followed up within 30 days	Track it before you set a target.
Days from event close to sponsor report	Preliminary within 14 days, full within 30. This report's recommendation; there is no published benchmark.

6.2 Capture the return signals you already have

- **One objective question at registration.** "What do you most want to get done at this event?" Pick from four options. This is the seed for personalization and the denominator for "objective met."

- **Session and meeting activity from the badge or app.** You are already recording it. Make sure it is recorded against the same person record as the registration.
- **One outcome question after.** "Did you get what you came for?" Freeman's advice is to measure outcomes rather than satisfaction alone.[3]
- **Meetings and messages.** Given the shift from sessions to meetings, count meeting requests and app conversations as engagement, not just scans.[29]
- **Speakers and sponsors are attendees too.** One profile per person, whatever their roles, so nobody re-keys their own details and no guest is "invisible in the records."

6.3 The first 90 days

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT HAS TO BE TRUE IN THE SYSTEMS
Day 0 to 2	Attendance and session or meeting activity are visible to sales or membership. The people who were in the room get a note while they still remember the room.	Attendance is written to the CRM or membership system automatically, not exported.
Day 3 to 14	Preliminary sponsor report: verified attendance, session and booth engagement, lead counts.	Lead scans and app engagement can be pulled per sponsor without reconciliation.
Day 14 to 30	Full sponsor report and the renewal conversation. First-timers get content tied to the sessions they actually attended.	Session history is queryable per person; consent to use it was captured at registration.
Day 30 to 90	Next year's retention forecast. Split this year's attendees by objective met or not, and by engagement (top, middle and bottom third for sessions plus meetings). Apply last year's return rate for each group, or a best guess until you have one, and add them up.	The five records are in one place and can be joined.

Freeman's warning about registration pace is worth repeating here: early registration numbers were treated "as a reliable predictor of success," and they were not.[1] A forecast built on engagement will be less flattering in October and more accurate in March.

6.4 The data minimum

Five things have to be true for any of the above to work. Treat this as a checklist, and be honest about each line.

- [ ] One person, one record, across registration, app, and CRM or membership system.
- [ ] Member type and ticket type match everywhere, so nobody sees the wrong price and nobody's access is wrong in the app.

- [ ] Attendance and session or meeting activity are written back automatically, not exported by a person.
- [ ] Sponsor lead and engagement data reach the sponsor report without a spreadsheet in between.
- [ ] Consent to use past attendance for personalization is captured at registration, and consent to share with sponsors is separate and explicit.

There are three honest ways to get there, and the right one depends on your rules, not on the vendor.

- **Built-in connectors** that ship with your platforms. Right when the data is simple and someone on staff will watch it: one ticket type, contacts flowing one way, a membership system the event platform already lists as a partner. Many associations need nothing more. Wrong when member types, multi-ticket purchases or session-level write-back are involved, because most built-in connectors stop at the contact record.
- **General automation tools.** Right when a staff member genuinely owns them and has time to maintain them. Wrong when that person is the same one who runs the event, because nobody maintains an automation during show week, which is when it matters.
- **A specialist build**, in-house or outside. Right when the rules are specific to your event, the timeline is show week, and nobody on staff can own it. Wrong when a simple connector would have done the job; pay for complexity only when you have it.

6.5 Design moves the data will tell you to make

Once the five records are together, the design decisions get easier because they stop being opinions. Freeman's six adjustments for 2026 are a reasonable starting menu. Show people what they will take home, tied to their stated objective. Prioritize hands-on participation: 57 percent of attendees find demos the most useful way to evaluate products, and more than 90 percent say hands-on matters. Count retention in your KPIs. Design facilitated networking around shared challenges and roles. Plan for late registration rather than fighting it. Organize the exhibit floor by community or problem space so people find relevance faster.[1] Add curated meeting suggestions for first-timers and younger attendees, since nearly half of them ask for exactly that.[25] And consider fewer, better sessions with more structured meetings, because sessions per attendee are falling anyway.[29]

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Pick one first-timer cohort from your last event, 50 people is enough, and audit the first 90 days above by hand: what was recorded where, and when. What you could not find is your integration requirement. What you could is your process.

SECTION 7

A decision guide for technology and data

For the reader about to buy, renew or consolidate. Dated, neutral, and explicit about what may change.

7.1 Consolidation is real, and it changes who owns your connectors

Cvent spent about $700 million on two acquisitions in December 2025, Goldcast and ON24, after buying Splash and Reposite in 2024.[40] In April 2026, Gartner published its third Magic Quadrant for event technology, assessing nine vendors, down from 13 in the 2024 edition; this report does not repeat the placements, because a ranking is not the point.[39] Consolidation is not bad for organizers. It does mean that a connector you rely on can change owner, roadmap and price without you being asked. Get a written commitment on data export and API access from every vendor, and read the clause about what happens on acquisition.

7.2 Bring your own AI is emerging

Skift Meetings' 2026 coverage describes vendors opening their data to the AI tools planners already use, and some adopting bring-your-own-AI policies so organizers keep interaction data in their own systems instead of handing it to the platform.[41] Its "AI & the Future of Events" report lists the new risks plainly: hidden compute costs, black-box vendor demos, attendee data used to train third-party models, and agentic tools making decisions without an audit trail.[41] Ask where attendee data is stored, whether it is used to train anyone else's models, what pricing that rises with use looks like at your volumes, and whether every automated action leaves a log.

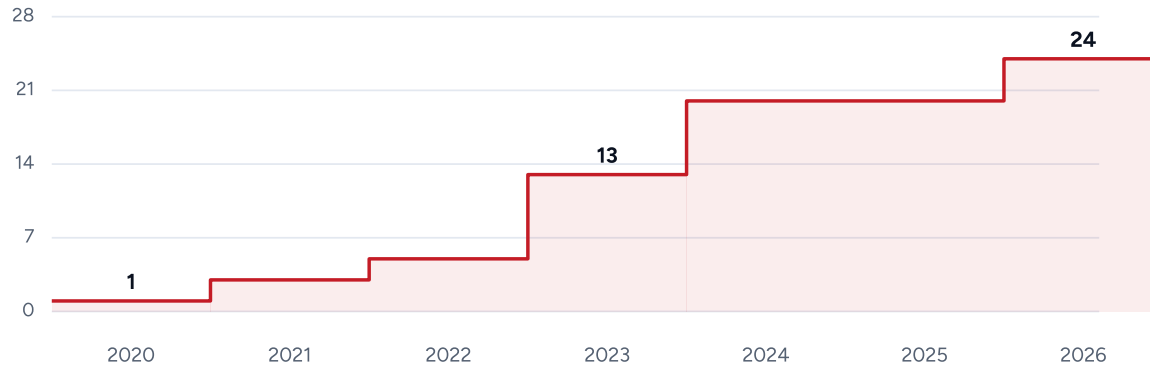
7.3 AI on dirty data

Ninety-five percent of organizers in Bizzabo's survey expect their use of AI in events to grow.[28] Forty-five percent of martech leaders told Gartner that vendor AI agents under-deliver on their promised business performance.[33] Associations use AI for content twice as often as for data.[7] The sequence that avoids disappointment is: one person, one record, and automatic write-back first; then personalization; then AI assistants. A recommendation engine that thinks a member is a non-member because the systems disagree is worse than no recommendation.

7.4 The privacy count keeps climbing

FIGURE 7 **US states with comprehensive privacy laws**

Cumulative count of states that have enacted one, by year. 2026 is as of June.



Source: MultiState, February 2026 (20 laws in effect in 2026, counting Florida's 2023 law, which IAPP leaves out); Byte Back, June 2026 (Oklahoma, Alabama, Louisiana and Vermont enacted laws in 2026 that are not yet in force). Indiana, Kentucky and Rhode Island took effect January 1, 2026.[43,42]

Most of these laws require explicit opt-in consent for sensitive personal data, honor a browser's "do not sell my data" signal, and expect a written risk assessment where processing carries higher risk.[43] For a conference, the practical implications are three: capture consent for personalization at registration; treat sharing attendee data with sponsors as a separate, explicit consent; and know which state's rules apply to which attendees. This report is not legal advice. It is a reason to have the conversation before next year's registration opens.

7.5 Ten questions to ask before signing

1. What formats can we export, can we export everything, and what happens to our data when the contract ends?
2. How much data can we pull through the API, how fast, at our volume, and does that access cost extra?
3. Can attendance and session activity be written back to our CRM or membership system, not just contacts?
4. How is member type or ticket type kept in sync, in both directions?
5. How do you match a person who already exists in our CRM, what happens on a conflict, and can we test it before we sign?
6. Who owns sponsor lead data, and how is it shared?
7. Where is consent captured and stored, and can we prove it later?
8. Is there a log of every automated change?
9. What happens to our data and our contract if you are acquired?
10. Who is on call during our event, by name?

SOMETHING TO DO ON MONDAY

Send questions 1, 3 and 9 to your current vendors by email. The answers, or the silence, tell you what the renewal negotiation will be about.

SECTION 8

Methodology, timeliness and sources

How this report was made

This is a desk-research report. It draws on industry research published between 2024 and September 2026, plus two older figures dated in the sentence (a 2015 exhibitor study and Gartner's 2020 utilization figure), read in the original where the publisher makes it public and otherwise through the trade press that reported it. Practitioner comments come from public forums and 55 Reddit threads read in full; quotes are verbatim and attributed by role. No vendor was interviewed or paid, and no vendor reviewed the text. No Event Data Pro client data was used. Where two credible sources disagree, both are shown with the reason they differ. Where a widely repeated figure could not be traced to a dated primary source, it was left out. Bizzabo, Showcare and RainFocus do not publish their sample sizes, and the text says so where their numbers appear. Before publication, the full draft was checked against every source a second time by a reviewer briefed to argue against it, and the text was corrected where the argument held.

One limit deserves its own sentence. No study in this report shows that organizers who connect their data retain more attendees or sponsors. Forrester links integration to organizer satisfaction, not to attendee return. The case made here is narrower: retention cannot be measured, or acted on inside the 30 days that matter, until the records are in one place.

Two commonly cited numbers were deliberately excluded: the claim that "80 percent of trade show leads are never followed up," which is attributed to CEIR but could not be traced to a dated study, and several statistics about follow-up speed and conversion that circulate without a primary source.

How fresh each number is

Every statistic in this report is dated in the text or in the source list. The table below shows when the main sources refresh, so a reader can judge what may have moved since September 22, 2026.

SOURCE	EDITION USED	REFRESHES	NEXT EXPECTED
Freeman End-of-Year Trends Recap	January 2026	Annual, January	January 2027
Freeman quarterly trends reports	October 2025, April, May and July 2026	Roughly quarterly	Autumn 2026

SOURCE	EDITION USED	REFRESHES	NEXT EXPECTED
CEIR Performance Benchmarking Playbook Series	September 22, 2026	Annual	2027
CEIR Index	Quarterly releases through Q3 2025; Q4 2025 via the 2026 Index Report, May 2026	Quarterly	Q1 and Q2 2026 releases are likely out; check before quoting
ASAE State of Associations and Insight Updates	March 2026; April 2025 pulse	Annual, with pulses	March 2027
MGI Membership Marketing Benchmarking	2026 (released mid-2026)	Annual, summer	Summer 2027
Forrester State of B2B Events	Q1 2026 (published June 2026), with 2024 and 2025 for the trend	Annual, fielded Q1	Mid-2027
Bizzabo State of Events	2026	Annual, early in the year	Early 2027
Showcare Sponsorship Pulse	2026	Annual	2027
RainFocus Mid-Year State of Events	2026	Twice a year	Early 2027
Amex GBT Global Meetings and Events Forecast	2026 edition (autumn 2025)	Annual, autumn	2027 edition due around now
Northstar and Cvent PULSE	2026	Quarterly	Ongoing
Gartner marketing technology survey	2025	Annual	Late 2026
State privacy law trackers	February and June 2026	Continuous	Recount before acting; the four 2026 laws take effect later

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 see the five records from Section 3 every week, usually in four places. That is the bias to be aware of. It is also why the report is about what to measure and not about what to buy. If you would like a second pair of eyes on where your attendee data goes after the event, we offer a free consultation and will tell you honestly if a built-in connector is enough. Write to contact@eventdata.pro.

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Appendix: chart data

Figure 1. Retention rates compared (percent)

MEASURE	VALUE	SOURCE
Membership renewal, median	84	MGI 2025
First-year member renewal	74	MGI 2025
Exhibitor company retention	69 to 78 by show size (73 small, 78 midsize, 69 largest)	CEIR, September 2026
First-time exhibitors who return	44	Exhibit Surveys, Lippman Connects, TSE, 2015
Attendees who return next year	30 to 35	Freeman, January 2026

Figure 2. Share of associations reporting membership growth, by MGI report year (percent)

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
26	38	49	47	45	39

Figure 3. CEIR Total Index, percent versus the same quarter of 2019

Q4 2022	Q4 2023	Q2 2024	Q3 2024	Q4 2024	Q1 2025	Q2 2025	Q3 2025	Q4 2025
-20.3	-10.9	-7.7	-11.2	-4.4	-8.9	-8.4	-11.1	about -2

Values as revised in later CEIR releases. Q1 2025 is derived from the Q2 2025 release (Q2 gained 0.5 points on Q1). Q4 2025 is "just 2 percent shy" of 2019, per Skift Meetings' report of the 2026 CEIR Index Report.

Figure 4. Expectation gaps (percent)

MEASURE	FIRST VALUE	SECOND VALUE
Peak moment: organizers who believe they deliver one versus attendees who had one	78	40
Organizers rating networking "very effective," 2025 versus 2026	46	15
Organizers reporting difficulty proving ROI, 2025 versus 2026	70	40

Figure 6. Share of martech stack capabilities in use, Gartner (percent)

2020	2022	2023	2025
58	42	33	49

Figure 7. US states that have enacted a comprehensive privacy law, cumulative (Florida counted)

2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026 (JUNE)
1	3	5	13	20	20	24