

Freeman Trends Report

Unpacking XLNC: The future of commerce for trade shows and conferences

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Within this report

Sample Characteristics

- Total number of attendee respondents: 1,022
Conference respondents: 55%
Trade show respondents: 45%
- Total number of exhibitor respondents: 969
- Margin of error: +/- 3.1%
- Attendee purchase decision making status:
32% final decision-makers
68% significant/some influence

Callouts You'll See



The NowGen Event Goers (NGEG) are shaping trends, driving innovation, and redefining what value means. This callout represents NowGen data segmentation.



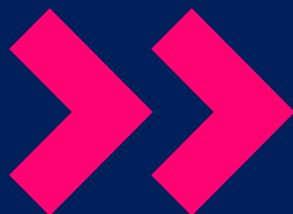
Throughout this report, we've modified a few charts to highlight the top responses. When you see this callout, it means that the full dataset can be found in the appendix.



Key slide to share with exhibitors

Attendees
Exhibitors

Colors used when comparing attendee and exhibitor data side-by-side



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Own it

The space is yours... what you do with it matters

Event organizers are the gatekeepers to the most valuable channel in the marketing ecosystem: **face-to-face interaction**.

You read that right. The data shows that in-person events remain the most trusted channel for product discovery and commercial decision-making. And you... have the market cornered.

Although commerce might feel like the domain of trade shows or expositions, **the truth is that business happens at every event**. Whether you're running a conference, a customer summit, or a brand experience, business needs to happen. People show up to discover, test, and buy.

The challenge is that, too often, value gets left on the table; exhibitor returns become secondary, and shifts in attendance get noticed but go unaddressed. This isn't a new message, but it is a renewed call to act.

You're not just coordinating logistics—you're shaping the environment where discovery happens, brand loyalty is built, and real connections are made. **That requires rethinking how commerce is developed on your floor, so it's not just "eh," it's excellent.** A place where industry partners see real returns, not just foot traffic. And a place where attendees walk away with inspiration and information, not just swag bags.

This report is your lens into both the state of event commerce today—and what it could become. It's a guide to developing commercial excellence. A look at what's working now—and what's next—so you can create experiences that deliver real business value for your stakeholders.

You already own the space. Now it's time to own what it delivers.

XLNC Framework

If you're familiar with [Freeman's previous trends reports](#), you're familiar with Freeman's XLNC Framework.

If you're not, allow us to catch you up. XLNC (pronounced excellence) stands for **eXperience, Learning, Networking, and Commerce**. It's an objective-based framework that examines the four main reasons folks attend (or exhibit at) events.

This year, we're taking a different approach to our research and double-clicking on each XLNC element.

We're starting with commerce, exploring what organizers can do to drive excellent commercial experiences for attendees and industry partners alike.



EXPERIENCE

Have fun, feel emotionally fulfilled, enjoy the environment



LEARNING

Be inspired, learn something new, receive training



NETWORKING

Make connections, socialize with new and existing contacts



COMMERCE

Evaluate vendor offerings, build awareness, discover new products/services

The **Now Generation** is reshaping in-person events and commercial expectations

In [past Freeman reports](#), we explored the rise of the Next Generation Event Goer, but they're no longer emerging. The Now Generation (**NowGen**) is here, and they're already reshaping in-person events and commercial expectations. **Digitally native, socially conscious, and driven by authentic connection**, they bring new values to every interaction.

And when it comes to commerce, they're more selective than ever. With endless choices at their fingertips, **they expect authenticity, relevance, transparency, and experiences that align with their priorities**. Their presence is redefining how commerce happens—and what it takes to earn their attention.

Our workforce will only continue to shift (and rapidly). Any events that don't shift accordingly risk a forced retirement.



QUESTION

Looking ahead to the next 12 months, how many in-person events do you expect to attend?

Attendees are getting more selective with event attendance

Remember when we said, “If your event isn’t a must-go, it’s a no-go?” That’s still true, and more urgent than ever.

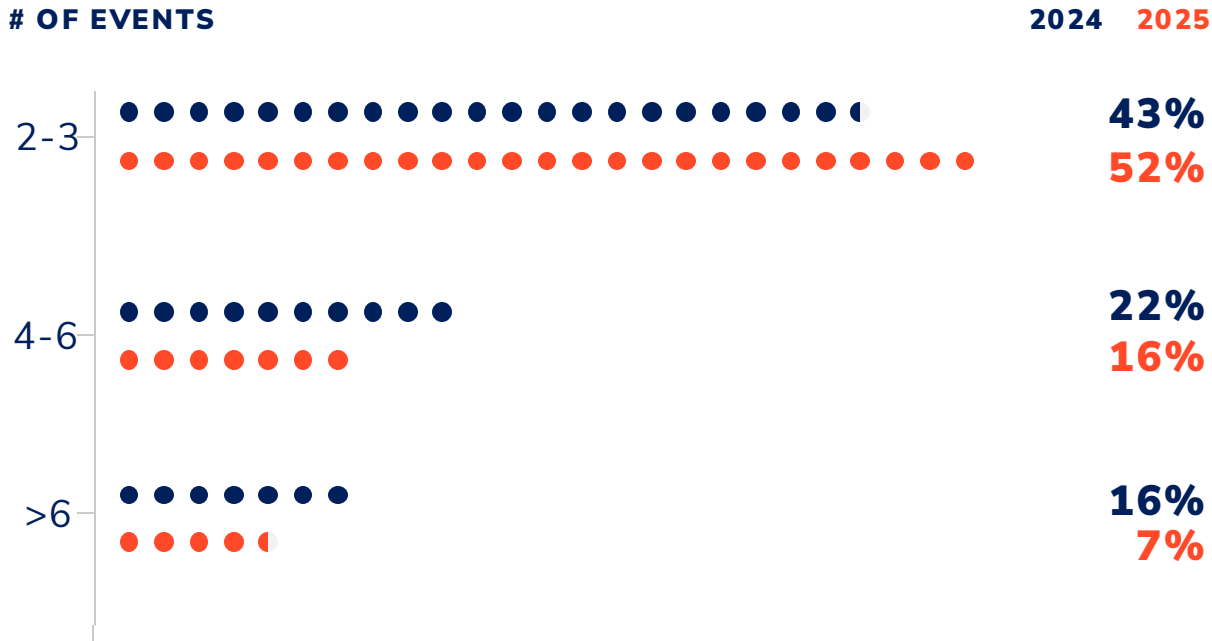
More attendees plan to attend fewer events (2-3) over the next 12 months compared to last year.

Tighter budgets, leaner teams, and limited time mean attendees are only getting more selective. Even for flagship events, logistical friction can deter attendees.

It’s not just about cost or capacity, it’s about value. If an event doesn’t offer user-friendly experiences, meaningful opportunities, or tangible ROI, it’s easy to skip.

Creating a must-go event starts with delivering what attendees care about most. And today, commerce is at the top of that list.

Projected event attendance in next 12 months



Commerce is Key



QUESTION

Imagine you are attending an in-person business event, allocate a total of 100 points across the below areas based on how important each component is to your overall experience.

Commerce is a critical part of the event experience

It's a tight race, but **attendees rank commerce as the most important event component**. This aligns with [last year's attendee report](#), where respondents ranked exhibits as the most important event element.

While you may believe commerce isn't a central component of your event, **all events support commerce in some way**. After all, someone may attend your networking-centric event to develop a potential client list. Those looking to learn are doing so to gain insight that drives their business or career forward. **You are in the business of doing business.**

But we're not suggesting you should forget about experience, learning, and networking.

35% of key decision makers

XLNC components evaluation



Experience 16%

Have fun, feel emotionally fulfilled, enjoy the environment



Learning 26%

Be inspired, learn something new, receive training



Networking 28%

Make connections, socialize with new and existing contacts



Commerce 30%

Evaluate vendor offerings, build awareness, discover new products/services

QUESTION

What are your top priorities in your work/career? (Select top 3)

Top priorities in work/career

Discovering new products / solutions **52%**

Training / technical competency **42%**

Building my network **39%**

Professional advancement **38%**

Expanding my business / clientele **32%**

Building / staffing team or organization **27%**

Mentoring / being mentored **21%**

Building my personal brand reputation **18%**

Discovering new products and solutions is a top career priority

We asked attendees to rate their top career priorities, and the message is clear: discovery matters.

Today's professionals see product and solution exploration as key to staying ahead, identifying trends, and bringing new thinking back to their teams. It's not only about hitting business goals; it's how they grow and advance professionally.

QUESTION

What are the top 2 commercial objectives you had for being at the most important business event you attended last year?



More data
in appendix

Attendee's career priorities align with their commercial priorities

Since discovering new products is a top career priority, it's no surprise it's also attendees' top commercial objective at business events. **This is true even when we look solely at conference attendees** (removing tradeshow attendees from the mix).

But among all commercial objectives, from meeting with existing providers to making purchase decisions, why does product discovery stand out?

It's because **attendees aren't looking to validate what they already know, they want to uncover what they don't**. That exploratory value is what draws people in: the chance to expand their thinking, surface inspiration, and identify unexpected possibilities.

For organizers, this reinforces the need to create environments where discovery isn't just possible—it's inevitable.

Top commercial objectives

58% Discover new products/solutions

32% Meet with existing providers to further a relationship or see what is new

29% Speak with subject matter experts from providers I was exploring

23% Identify individuals at provider organizations to further discussions with after

20% Compare provider offerings with one another

18% Test/experience products/solutions my organization has been investigating

6% Make a decision on a purchase



QUESTION

Where do you go to discover new products and services? (Select all that apply)

Freeman¹

Attendees say in-person events are the best place for new product discovery

We know attendees prioritize product discovery. We also know they prefer to do it in person, not online. Websites are a good starting point, but **there's no substitute for seeing, touching, and asking questions in real life.**

Interestingly, even among NowGen attendees, 32% of whom use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook to discover new products, the desire for IRL discovery still wins out. (And for any of you asking yourself what IRL means, it's NowGen speak for "in real life.")

Top sources for product/service discovery



74%
In-person
events



56%
Company
websites



55%
Professional
and trade orgs



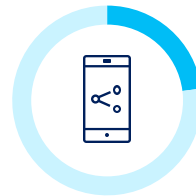
42%
Search Engine
or GenAI
(Google, ChatGPT)



41%
Journals/trade
publications



40%
Online events
(Livestreams,
webinars)



23%
Social Websites
(TikTok, Instagram, X,
Facebook, Reddit, etc.)

32% NGEN





Today's Buying Dilemma

Today's buyers are caught in a paradox. **Online, they're surrounded by endless options:** ads, discounts, and one-click convenience. The algorithm says, "You'll love this," **but what shows up at your door tells a different story.** That shirt is half the size you expected. And that software demo might look great online, but it's hard to know how it integrates with your existing systems.

Even the best brands can't provide the full picture with digital experiences alone. E-commerce is a major part of the buyer journey, but in-person interactions complete it.

That's why in-person discovery still wins. Seeing, touching, testing—these sensory moments create trust in a way digital can't. For sellers, it's a reminder that presence matters.

In a world full of noise and scroll fatigue, the real opportunity is in showing up and **creating environments where buyers can see what they're getting.** That's the value events bring, and what continues to set them apart in today's commercial landscape.





Action Item



Expand your thinking

It can be tempting for organizers to look to their left and right and copy what they see working at similar events.

But that doesn't usually lead to innovation.

To create an event that truly stands out, look outside of your industry. Pull inspiration from places like retail, sports venues, public pop-ups, and festivals instead.

Commercial Excellence Hinges on Hands-On Experiences



QUESTION

Which of the following options are most likely to negatively impact your experience evaluating products/services at a business event or prevent you from achieving your commercial objectives? (Select up to 3)

Limited hands-on exposure can prevent attendees from achieving their commercial objectives

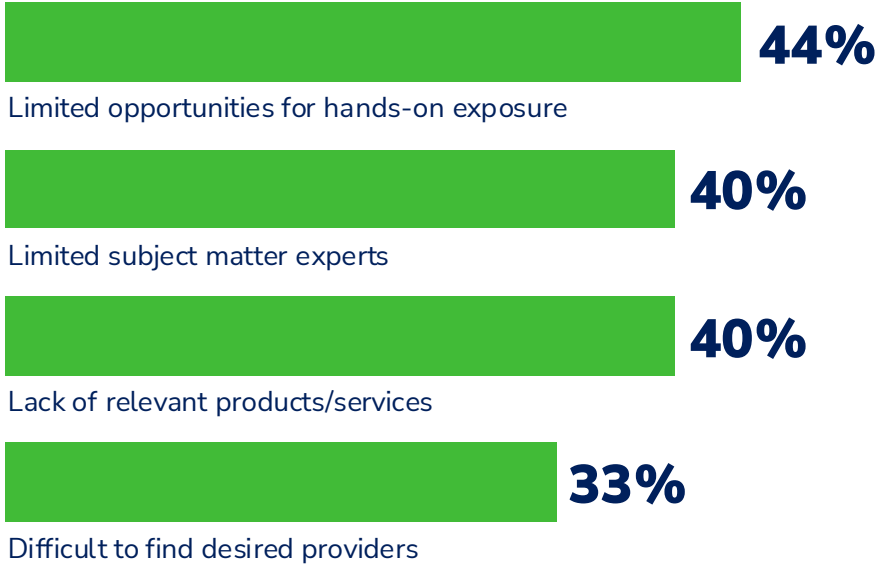


Event aspects preventing attendees from achieving commercial objectives

We asked attendees what most negatively impacts their product evaluation experience.

It's a clear miss when attendees don't get hands-on product and service interactions.

Without tactile experience, it's harder to evaluate solutions, ask meaningful questions, or make confident decisions. Add in limited access to subject matter experts, irrelevant offerings, or logistical barriers and the entire commercial experience starts to fall short.



QUESTION

At the most important in-person business event you attended last year, did you have hands-on experience/exposure with any product/service offered by an exhibitor?



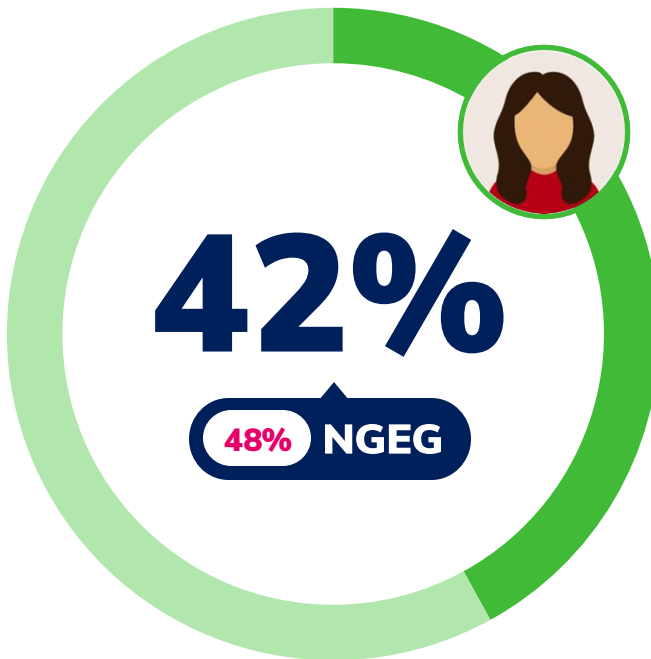
Nearly 1 in 4 attendees didn't experience hands-on interaction at their most important event

Nearly a quarter of potential buyers (24%) missed out on the opportunity to fully evaluate, engage, or build confidence in what was offered.

Want to know the implications? Keep reading.

QUESTION

To what extent did the lack of hands-on experience with a product/service impact your perception of a brand/company? (1-5 scale)



Attendees who don't receive hands-on experiences are likely to prioritize other vendors instead

Lack of hands-on interaction doesn't just hinder attendees' commercial goals... **it hurts how they perceive a brand.**

About 25% of attendees reported that they didn't experience hands-on interaction at their most important event. Of this population, **42% say they're more likely to shift their attention—and their preference—to other vendors as a result.**

This is especially true for the **NowGen attendees (48%)**, whose brand loyalty is shaped less by legacy and more by experience, relevance, and choice in an increasingly crowded landscape.

QUESTION

Please select your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the hands-on experience. The hands-on experience... (% agree/strongly agree)



Top attendee benefits from hands-on experiences

96%

Made it easier for me to **advocate for the purchase** of a product / service

95%

Made it easier to determine if the product/service would be a **good fit** for my organization

93%

Helped **improve my awareness of or evaluate** an offering

Alleviated concerns around making a potential purchase

79%

Accelerated how quickly I/my organization could **make a purchase decision**

70%

Helped my organization's stakeholders **achieve consensus** on a decision

68%

Hands-on exposure turns attendees into product advocates

So, what's the difference between an attendee thinking, "I won't even consider your company" and "I want to tell folks at home about this"?

A hands-on experience.

Hands-on experiences don't just help attendees understand a product—they turn them into advocates. **When people can experience offerings firsthand, they're more likely to champion those solutions within their organizations.**

In fact, nearly all attendees (96%) agree that hands-on exposure makes it easier to advocate for a product—alongside helping them assess organizational fit (95%) and build awareness (93%). The more tangible the experience, the more confident—and vocal—attendees become.

QUESTION

Think of the most important in-person business event you attended last year. Select your level of agreement with the following statements.

Event organizers' role in helping attendees achieve commercial objectives



Hands-on experiences improve attendees' overall event perceptions

Hands-on experiences (or lack thereof) not only impact products, solutions, and brands—**they also impact overall event perceptions.**

Attendees who had hands-on experiences were more likely to say the event was well-structured, thoughtfully designed, and effective in helping them meet their commercial goals.

Those who *didn't* get hands-on experiences were *less* likely to believe that the event was organized with their objectives in mind.

The takeaway? **Whether or not your event has hands-on experiences will elevate or impair how attendees see it.**

QUESTION

Please provide a brief description of the hands-on experience.

What attendees are saying about hands-on experiences



"I was able to look at and climb around—in order to customize it more to our needs prior to purchase."



"I was able to touch, hold and try on the equipment, instead of watching videos and looking at photos."



"I got to experience the platform using my own contextual information rather than generic data."



"It allowed me to try the product (with a rep there to answer questions) at my own pace."

QUESTION

What was the form of the most important hands-on exposure you experienced?

Freeman¹

You don't need a physical product to offer hands-on interaction

Let's state the obvious: most hands-on interactions involve physically consuming a product or trying a digital product (like software demos and service simulations).

However, if you logistically cannot offer a hands-on product/service experience, you can still offer other hands-on experiences. Consider a game, a whiteboard activity, or an interactive Q&A instead.

It's not about what you're selling, it's about how you invite people to engage.

With a little creativity, every exhibitor can offer the interactive experiences that attendees desire.



Types of hands-on experience received



Physical

I consumed or tried a product / service, interacted with a product using my hands



Digital

I used a computer or interactive tool to try the software or experience



Freeman¹



CASE STUDY

SleepScore: Show, don't sell.

It's one thing to be told that sleep matters. It's another to see the difference firsthand. That's exactly what SleepScore Labs delivered at CES.

Rather than relying on traditional sales messaging, they invited attendees into an immersive, quiz-based experience that revealed personalized insights about their own sleep habits. When attendees see the value for themselves, the path to purchase becomes much shorter.

sparks.
A Freeman Company

[Get the full case study here!](#)

QUESTIONS

Attendee: When thinking about how you build awareness of and evaluate products/services at any in-person event, what are the top 3 factors that most positively influence how you go about the evaluation?

Exhibitor: When thinking about how you interact with customers/prospects at any in-person event, what are the top 3 factors that most positively influence your company’s commercial interactions at in-person events?

Exhibitors undervalue the impact of hands-on experiences

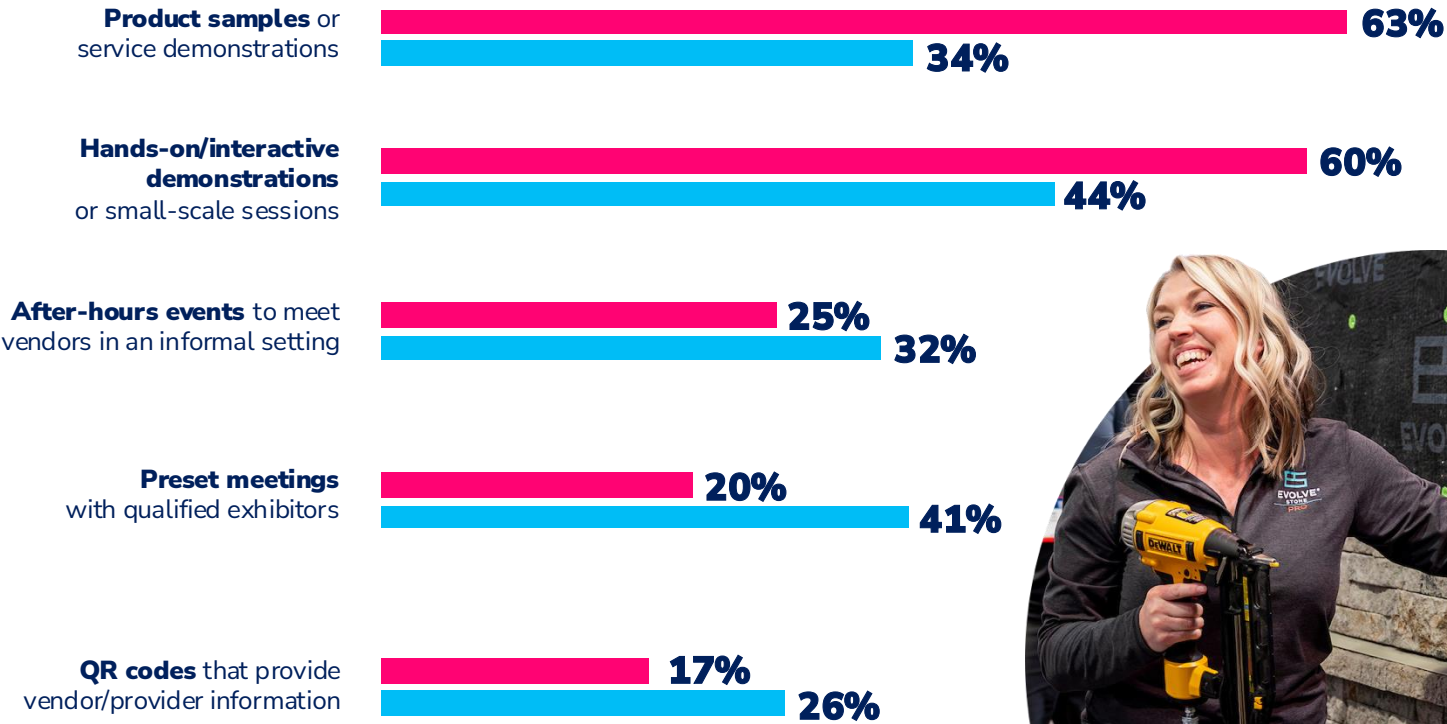
Interestingly, many exhibitors undervalue the impact of hands-on demonstrations.

While 60% of attendees say these experiences shape how they recognize and evaluate offerings, only 44% of exhibitors report that hands-on interactions positively impact their customer interactions.

That gap in perception means **exhibitors are underestimating one of their most influential tools, and overestimating things like QR codes and after-hours events.**

Factors most positively influencing commercial interactions

Attendees Exhibitors

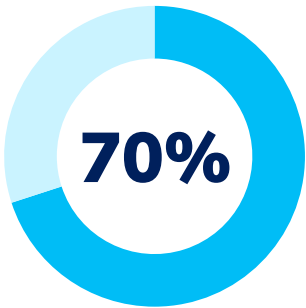


QUESTION

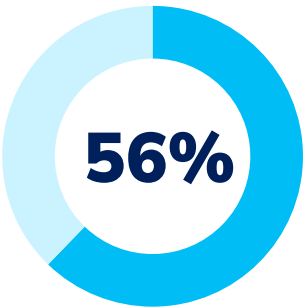
Did providing the hands-on experience for attendees improve any of the following outcomes for your organization? (Select all that apply)

Benefit to exhibitors from offering hands-on product/service experience

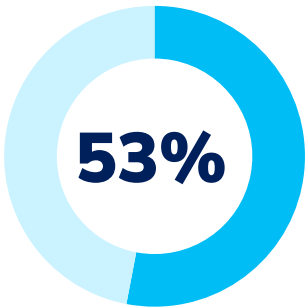
Exhibitors



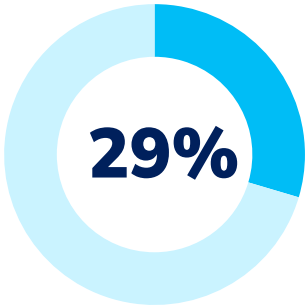
Built awareness of our products /services



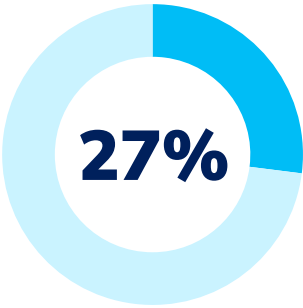
Increased foot traffic to our booth



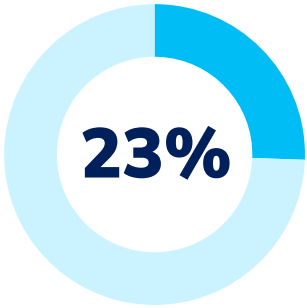
Increased net new leads captured



Increased upsell/cross-sell from existing customers



Contributed to closing more deals onsite



Generated increased web traffic to our site

Exhibitors believe the main benefit of providing hands-on interactions is **generating awareness**

Exhibitors largely see hands-on experiences as a way to boost brand awareness and increase foot traffic. They're not wrong.

Hands-on demos and product showcases do help generate awareness and drive traffic on the show floor.

However, those measures don't align with exhibitor behavior, or how attendees perceive the impact of hands-on experiences. (Ahem, keep reading.)



QUESTIONS

Attendee: Select the top 3 in-person event options that would be most useful for helping you/your organization come to a decision on a potential purchase more quickly and/or with more certainty.

Exhibitor: Select the top 3 options that you consider most useful for helping attendees/the attendee’s organization come to a decision on a potential purchase with more certainty/more quickly.

More data in appendix

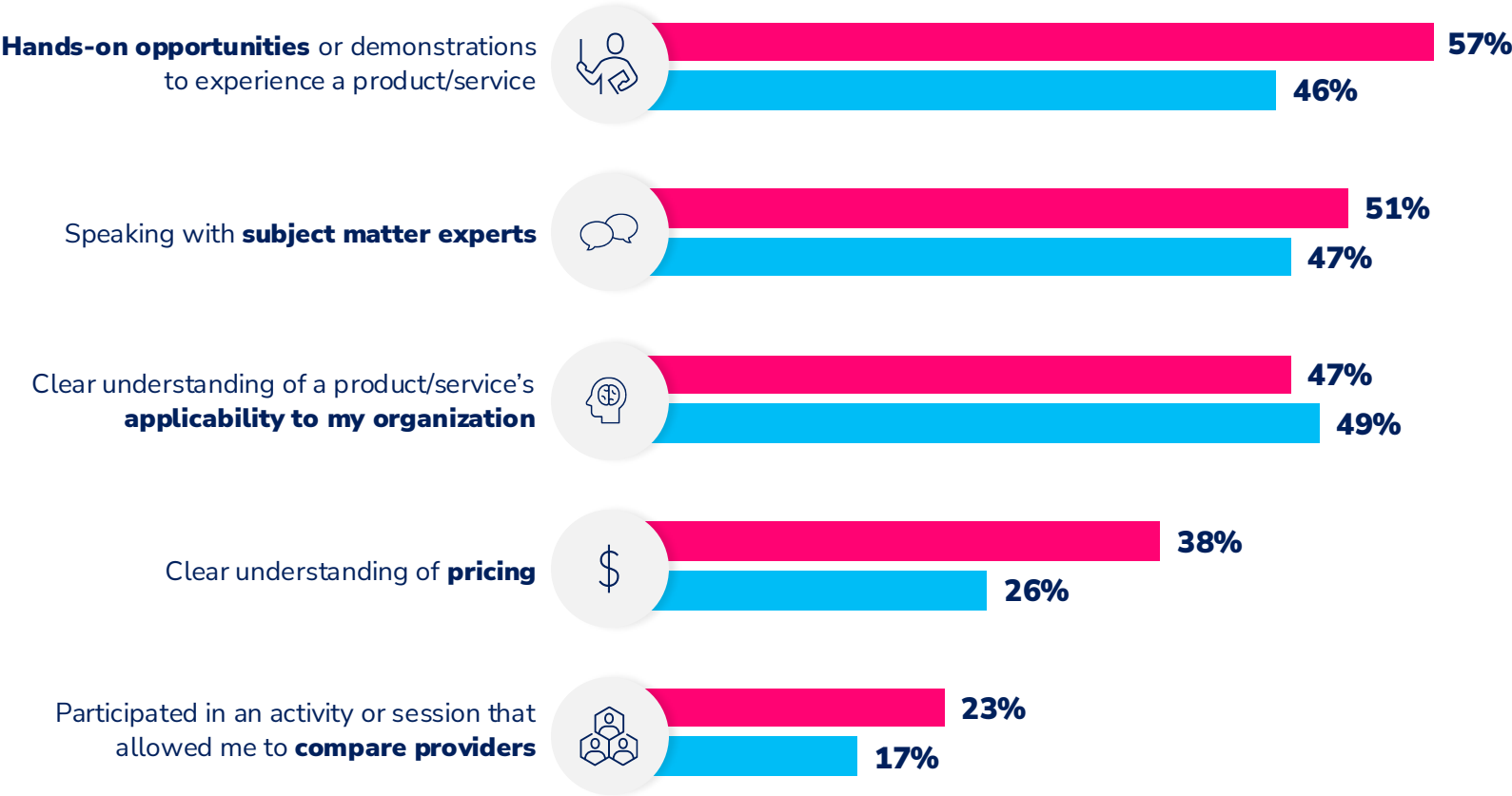
More than half of attendees say hands-on interactions solidify purchase decisions

More than half of attendees say hands-on opportunities play a key role in solidifying their purchase decisions—**yet less than half of exhibitors (46%) recognize that influence on decision-making.** This consistent disconnect leaves value on the table.

While hands-on engagement leads the way, it’s closely followed by subject-matter expert interaction as the second top driver of purchase confidence. More on that to come.

Aspects that improve attendee purchase decision certainty

Attendees Exhibitors



Action Item



Highlight and incentivize interactive opportunities

Design your floor plan and traffic flow to support tactile interactions or demos, so hands-on isn't an afterthought—it's built into the experience.

You can also highlight those exhibitors offering interactive experiences on your wayfinding app using a particular icon or label.

To ensure exhibitors come prepared, incentivize them in advance.



Expert-led, Quality Conversations Outweigh the Quantity of Leads



QUESTION

At the most important in-person business event you attended last year, how important was it that you achieved each of the following? (% very/extremely important)



Attendees want to connect with subject matter experts

Attendees aren't just looking for information—they're looking for expertise. **That's why 84% say connecting with subject matter experts is extremely or very important.**

This reflects what we've seen across [past research](#): **attendees want content of substance, not swag bags and marketing fluff. SMEs help build confidence that generic marketing materials or QR codes simply can't.**

In an environment where trust and clarity drive commercial outcomes, access to expertise has become a critical differentiator.

84%



See the full data set on the next page!



QUESTION

At the most important in-person business event you attended last year, how important was it that you achieved each of the following? (% very/extremely important)



Importance of event objectives



Key decision makers have buying on their mind

Beyond speaking with subject matter experts, most attendees are focused on product discovery: gathering information, connecting with product users, and building a case for future purchases.

Key decision-makers, however, are looking for more. They place greater value on over coming purchase concerns and accelerating purchase decisions. This suggests that they aren't just exploring, **they're ready to buy.**

When the right experiences are in place, **events can move decision-makers from interest to action right on the show floor.**

QUESTIONS

How **important** are each of the following areas as they relate to the booth staff at events you attend? (% very/extremely important)

In general, how **effective** were booth staff across exhibitors for each of the following areas at the most important event you attended last year? (% very/extremely effective)

Attendees want to feel like booth staff can answer their questions, but don't always believe they are effective at doing so

Most important exhibitor capabilities



Now, you can't give an entry-level sales rep a badge that says "expert" and call it a day. Attendees are looking for every staffer to answer questions thoroughly and clearly.

Attendees value insights they can't find online, timely access to the right people, and conversations that build trust. Yet while 93% say capable booth staff are extremely important, only 78% feel exhibitors are delivering.

There's clear room to improve.

Notably, attendees who reported having hands-on experiences rated booth staff as more effective across the board—proving that hands-on interaction strengthens attendee perception.

Notice how effectiveness rates jump when we isolate attendees who had hands-on experiences!



QUESTION

Select the top 3 options that would be most effective in helping you interact and/or engage with exhibitors/attendees at in-person events.

Exhibitors undervalue the impact that subject matter experts have on attendees, and over-value badge scans and emails

Once again, exhibitors aren't fully aligned with attendee needs.

More than half of attendees say that speaking with subject matter experts would improve their booth interactions—yet only 26% of exhibitors see it the same way.

Instead, exhibitors say what would help most is scanning attendees and sending follow-up emails about products and services.

That's a problem. **Too many booths are functioning like 3D websites**—missing the unique value of live, in-person engagement.

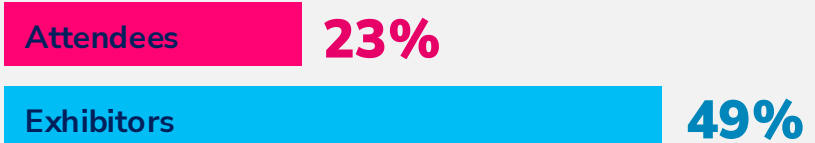
Top expectations for improved interactions: **attendees** vs **exhibitors**



Speaking with subject matter experts from exhibiting companies



Being scanned and emailed afterwards about products and services



See more data from this set on the next page!



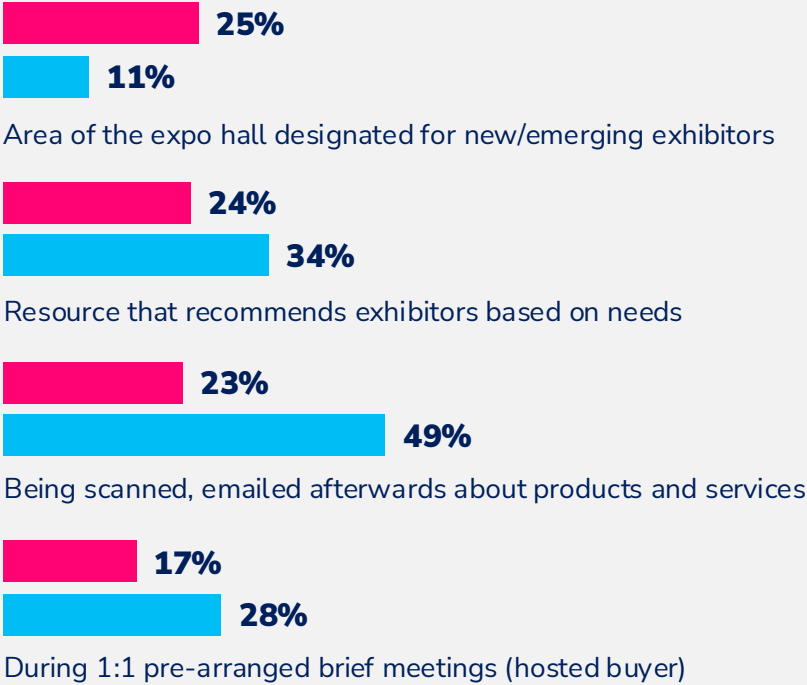
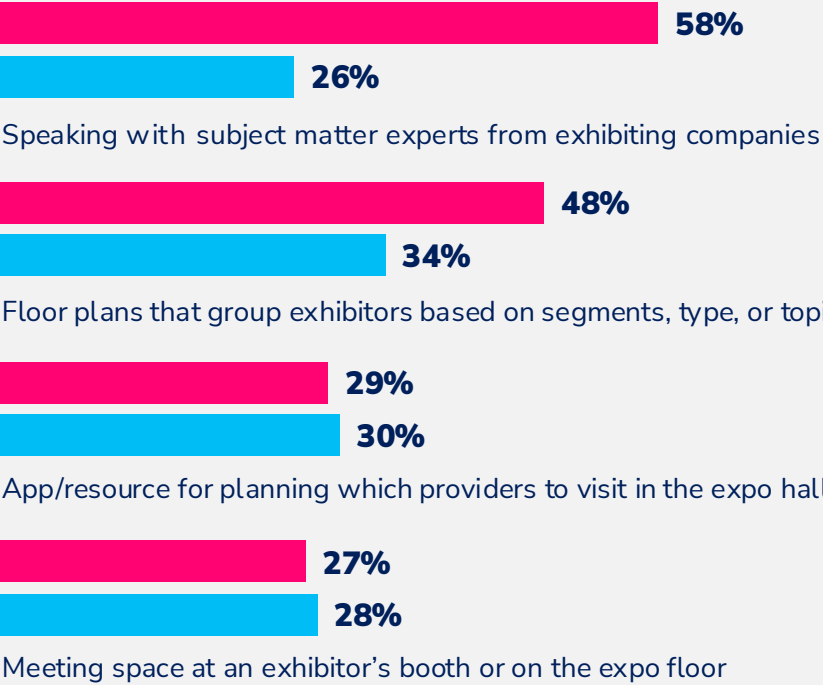
QUESTION

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Exhibitors undervalue the impact that subject matter experts have on attendees, and overvalue badge scans and emails

 More data in appendix

Top expectations for improved interactions: attendees vs exhibitors



SIEMENS

CASE STUDY

Siemens: More expertise, less pitch.

At CES, Siemens let their experts lead. Their hybrid experience featured six immersive customer zones, each showcasing real-world applications of their tech.

Instead of sales reps, subject matter experts guided attendees through personalized journeys, sparking deeper, more meaningful conversations.

By putting expertise front and center, Siemens proved that attendees don't want to feel sold to – they want to feel fully informed.

🏆 Gold – Siemens CES: Best Trade Show Exhibit – Event Marketer EX Awards 2025

sparks.
A Freeman Company

[Get the full case study here!](#)

Enhancing Sales Rep Effectiveness

Let's be real...sales reps aren't going away. They play a critical role in the booth experience: drawing people in, starting conversations, scanning badges, and keeping the energy up.

Their enthusiasm, charisma, and hustle help take someone from a passerby to a prospect.

But while sales reps are great at opening the door, **attendees increasingly expect someone who can go deeper once they step inside.**

That's where subject matter experts come in—bringing the credibility, technical insight, and nuanced answers that today's buyers are looking for. It's not about choosing one over the other; it's about balance.

When sales pros and experts work in tandem, the result is a richer, more trust-building experience—one that engages attendees from start to finish.



Improving Attendee Value



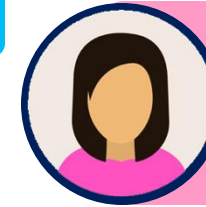
QUESTION

What could the event organizer or exhibitors have done better to help you achieve your commercial objectives?

What attendees are saying about opportunities for improvement



"I think booth design should encourage conversation."



"I'd like an improved app to help me quickly get to the right spot."



"Better organization of expo area into zones or areas of similar offerings / businesses."



"Better signage and booth markings, please!"



"I wish the exhibit hall was set up in a systematic way. My time in the vendor hall wasn't maximized."



QUESTION

Select the top 2 options you consider most useful for determining how you discover or evaluate products and services at an in-person event prior to arriving onsite.

Before arriving on-site, attendees could benefit from proactive planning tools

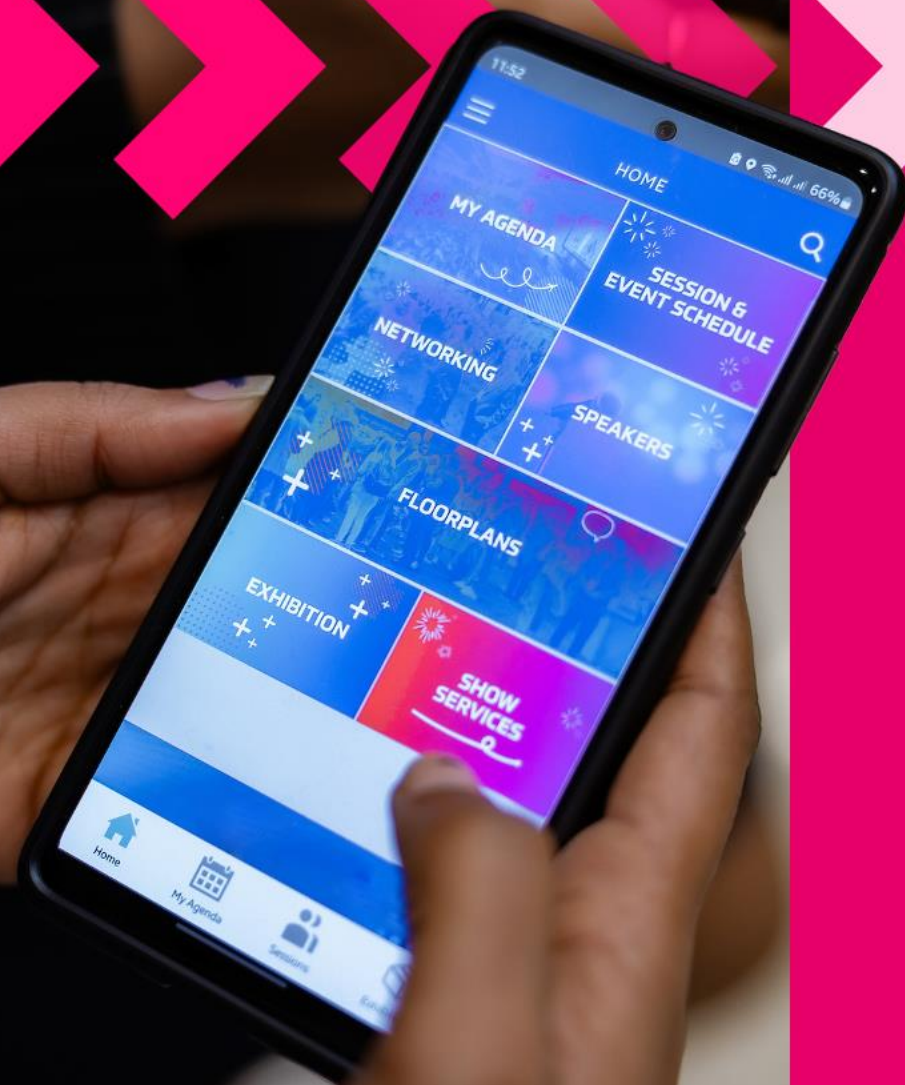
Attendees value their time more than anything—especially the NowGen. That’s why proactive planning matters. By providing tools like maps and product listings in advance, organizers help attendees navigate efficiently and make the most of their time. **In a landscape where every minute counts, purposeful experiences must start early.**

 More data in appendix

Most useful pre-event offerings for attendee evaluation / discovery

	Map that allows me to plan a path for what vendors I will visit	61%
	Online listing of exhibitor products and services	57%
	Understanding how vendors on the expo floor are segmented	24%
	Email/communication from exhibiting companies regarding new products/solutions	21%
	Tool that allows for setting up meetings with vendors in advance	20%

Action Items



Give attendees tools to plan with purpose

Help attendees spend less time searching and more time engaging by offering simple, pre-event tools that surface the most relevant exhibitors for their needs.

When planning is intuitive, time on the floor becomes more intentional—and more valuable for everyone.



Group communities of exhibitors together

We know this is a tall order, but attendees have spoken. They want to compare apples to apples without traversing the show floor. If competing pharmacies, gas stations, and grocery stores can exist next door, your vendors can, too. By designing the expo hall with attendee objectives in mind, everyone wins.

CASE STUDY

NAB Show: Designing the floor around the attendee journey.

To meet the needs of today's content creators, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) partnered with Freeman to rethink its show floor. Data revealed a clear opportunity: reorganize the space around how attendees were creating, managing, and delivering media.

The team restructured the expo into zones aligned with key content behaviors—*Create*, *Connect*, *Capitalize*, and *Intelligent Content*—making it easier for attendees to navigate and engage. The result? A smarter, more intuitive experience that boosted exhibitor value, increased global attendance and exceeded event goals.

[**Get the full case study here!**](#)

QUESTIONS

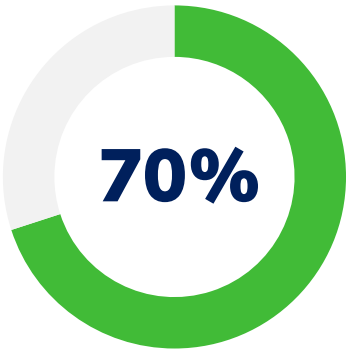
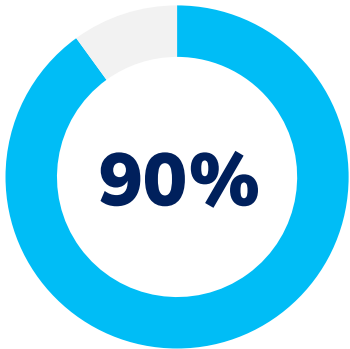
How **important** is it for each of the following to provide an experience that improves how you evaluate products/services when onsite at a business event?
How **effective** are each of the following at providing an experience that improves how you evaluate products/services when onsite at a business event?

Interestingly, attendees think **exhibitors** are more responsible for event experiences than organizers (and believe both could be more effective)

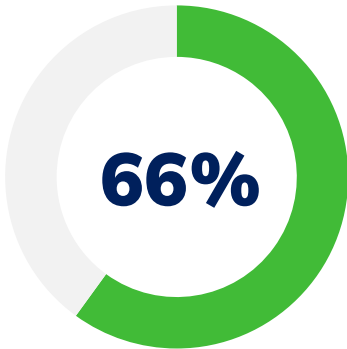
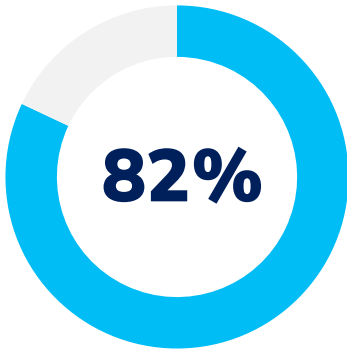
This one may come as a surprise:
Exhibitors carry more responsibility in attendees’ eyes compared to organizers. In other words, attendees place more importance on exhibitors when it comes to the product evaluation experience.
Despite that perception, we all know that event organizers are just as critical. Both organizers and exhibitors shape the commercial experience, and both have room to grow. Since exhibitors look to organizers for support, organizers are in a powerful position to enable better outcomes on the show floor.

Attendee perception of organizer and exhibitor role/effectiveness

Exhibitor Organizer



Importance



Effectiveness

Supporting Exhibitor Outcomes



QUESTIONS

Thinking about the most important event you exhibit at, please rate the **importance** of each of the following objectives. (% very/extremely important)

Now rate your **satisfaction** with that same event in meeting those objectives that were highly important to you. (% very/extremely satisfied)

Exhibitors believe that organizers could be more effective helping them reach their most important goals

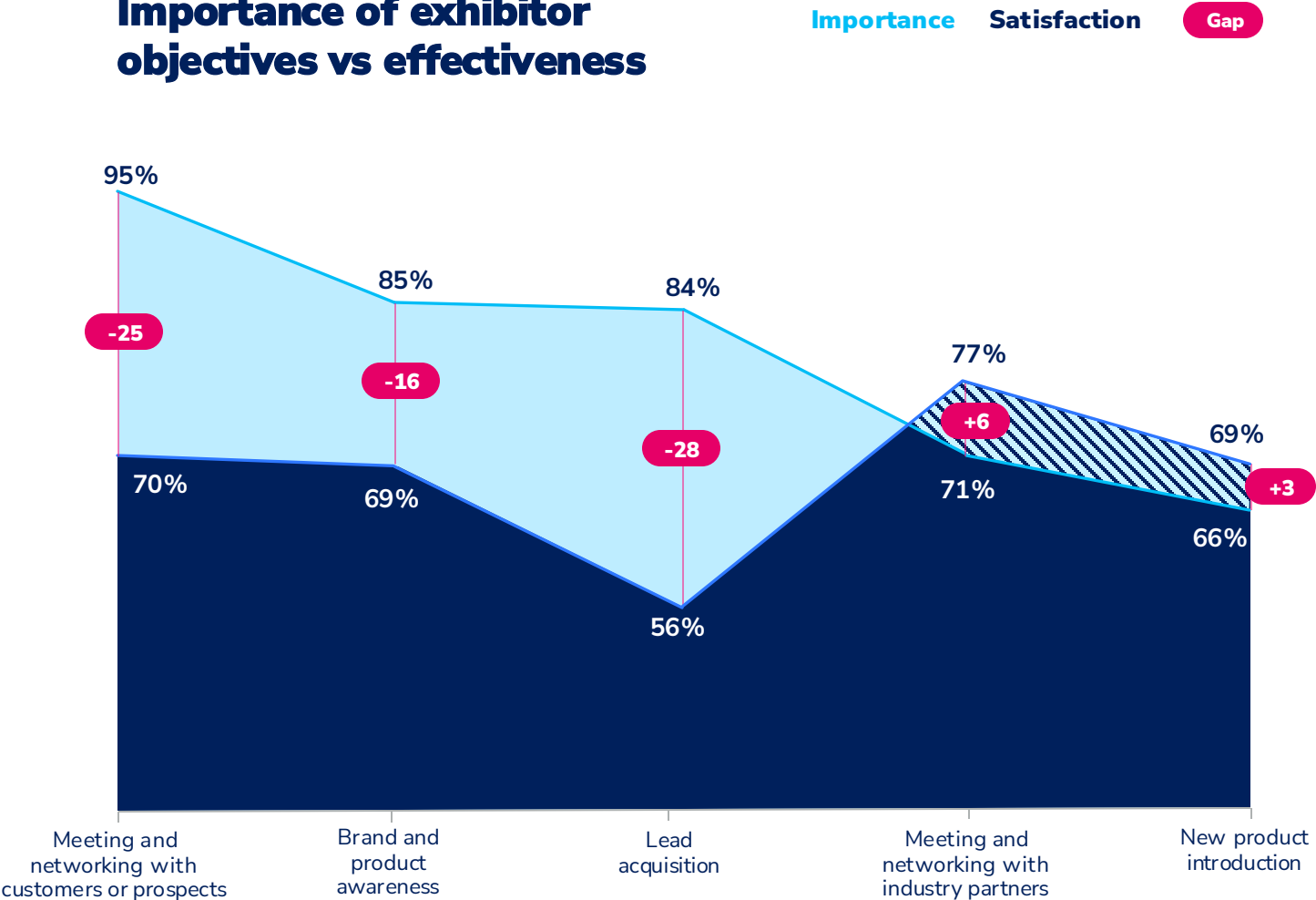
Expectations are everything. And exhibitors have voiced a **significant gap** between what they expect to accomplish at an event and the ability of an organizer to help them hit their goals.

That's not to say, however, that **exhibitors view organizers as ineffective**. Exhibitors simply see organizers as being most effective at the things they don't care as much about.

To bridge this gap, **event organizers must align their offerings with exhibitor expectations**—focusing more on facilitating high-value networking, brand visibility, and quality lead generation.

Exhibitors who close this expectation gap will create more successful, mutually beneficial events.

Importance of exhibitor objectives vs effectiveness



QUESTION

Please allocate 100 points across the following areas based on how much each one contributes to your reason for exhibiting at your most important event.

Lead generation remains the most important reason for exhibiting

Lead generation remains a top goal for many exhibitors, and for smaller booths, that often makes sense.

However, **not every exhibitor should focus solely on collecting new leads.** Mid-sized and large companies can achieve more by using the face-to-face channel to accelerate the funnel, build relationships, and defend existing business.

This is where organizers play a critical role. Encourage exhibitors to step back and assess their broader goals. Is lead volume truly the best measure of success for their brand? Or is it more about expanding influence, building trust, and engaging the right buyers at the right moment?

Lead gen has its place, but it's not the primary benefit of in-person events. **Help exhibitors see events as a strategic opportunity to do what digital cannot:** connect meaningfully, demonstrate value, and move prospects further, faster.

Reasons for exhibiting

Lead generation

34%

Includes marketing campaigns, consumer research, events, etc.

Lead nurture

18%

Includes engagement and introduction to positioning, emails, etc.

Sales

21%

Includes product demos & shopping carts, completing sales, etc.

Brand Impact/ Awareness

27%

Includes new product launch, competitive awareness, etc.

QUESTION

Think of the most important event where your organization exhibited in 2024. Select your level of agreement with the following statements. The event organizer.... (% agree/strongly agree)

Exhibitor perspective on event organizer's role in achieving commercial objectives

65%

Structured the event program and designed the expo hall so that my organization could achieve its commercial objectives

63%

Created opportunities for my organization to **interact with attendees off the expo floor**

55%

Creates commercial opportunities for **exhibitors off the expo floor**

49%

Understands and helps my organization **measure the commercial impact of exhibiting**

49%

Helped guide attendees to my organization's booth based on attendee needs and interests

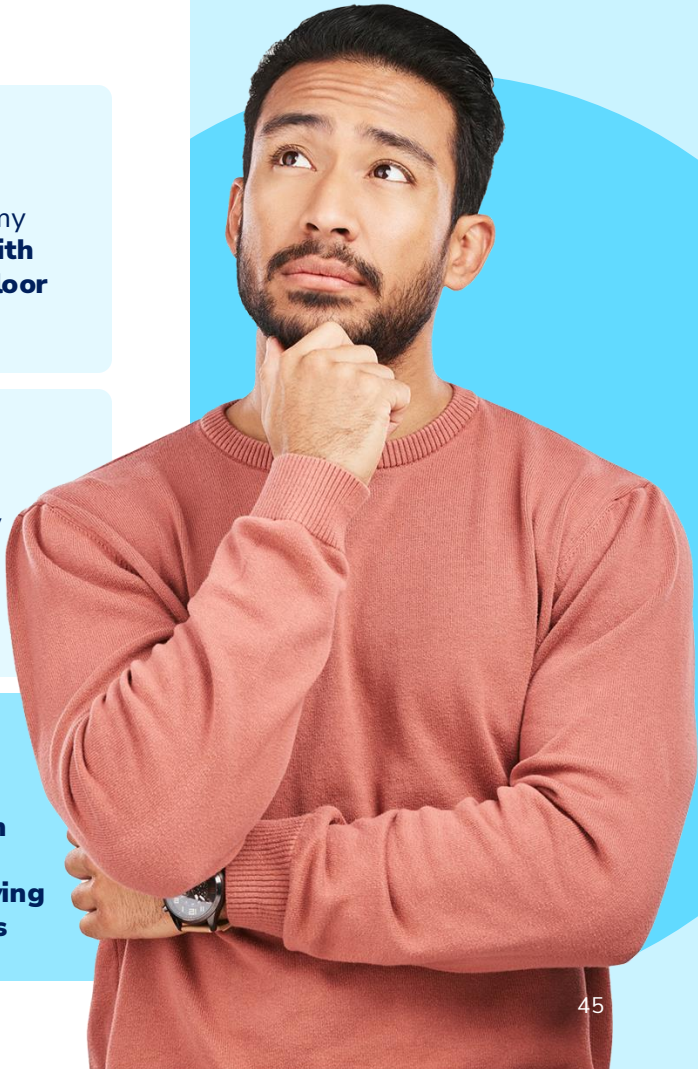
32%

Has rules / regulations in place that prevents my organization from achieving its commercial objectives

One-third of exhibitors feel hindered by event organizers

Exhibitors don't just feel unsupported, they feel actively hindered. With only 65% seeing event design as commercially beneficial and a third feeling obstructed by regulations, organizers must rethink how they structure events.

An exhibitor-centric approach that prioritizes commercial outcomes over rules will unlock greater success for everyone.

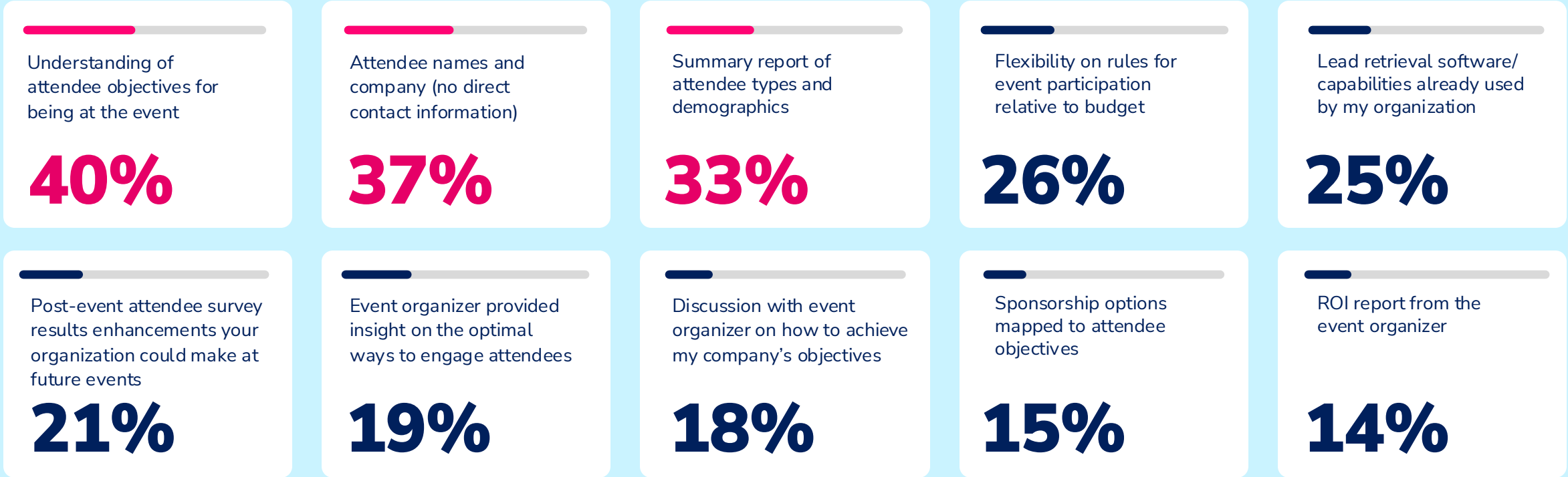


QUESTION

Which of the following options would make it more likely that your company would exhibit and/or sponsor at an event? (Select up to 3 options)

Exhibitors want a better understanding of attendee objectives and demographics

Factors influencing likelihood of exhibiting



Demographics drive exhibitor buy-in. When asked what would make an exhibitor more likely to exhibit or sponsor an event, it came down to their ability to understand who was attending the event. **Without solid attendee insights, exhibitors will struggle to justify the investment to their marketing team.**

Organizers who provide audience insights can help secure that spend in a world where marketing budgets are dwindling fast.



Action Item



Offer exhibitors a peek into attendee demographics

Share regional snapshots and attendee demographics with registered exhibitors (and those still deciding whether to exhibit).

That way, exhibitors can come prepared with the people, products, and messaging that align with the interests of each attendee.

QUESTION

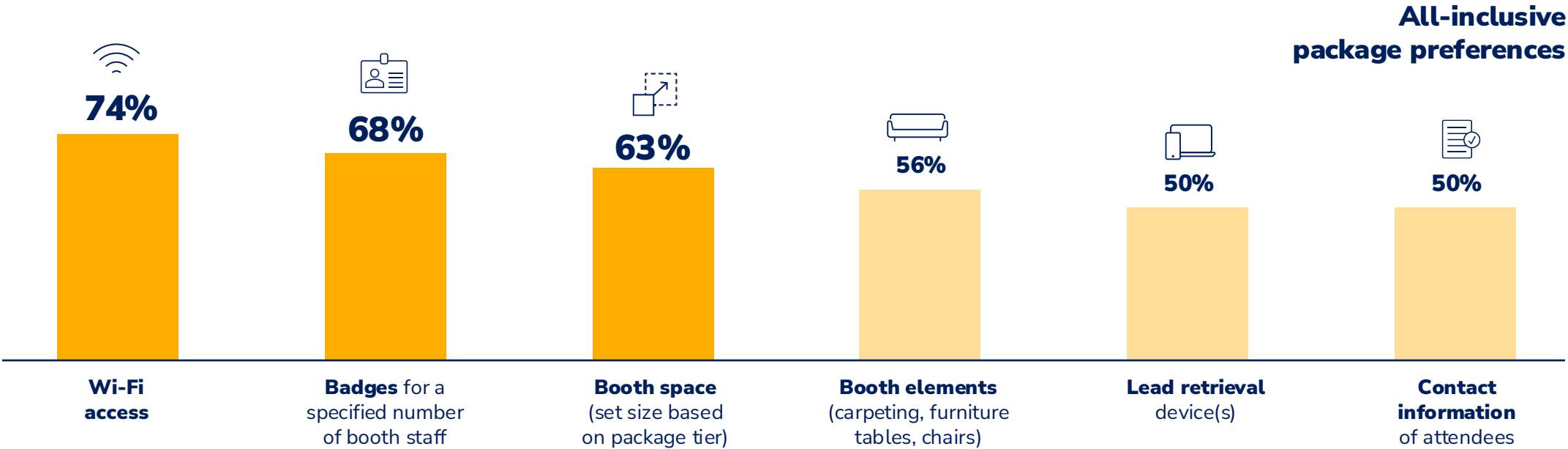
Which of the following options would you most expect in an all-inclusive package for your company’s participation at an in-person business event?
(Select all that apply)

Take note:
When it comes to all-inclusive packages, exhibitors expect Wi-Fi, badges, and packaged booth space

You asked. So, we asked: If exhibitors want all-inclusive packages, what should that package entail?

At a bare minimum exhibitors want **Wi-Fi access, badges for booth staff, and set booth space.**

If you *really* want to roll out the red carpet, throw in lead retrieval devices and attendee contact information before the event.





Action Item



Conduct an “exhibitor excellence” webinar

Make “exhibitor excellence” webinars a standard offering for every exhibitor. This isn’t solely for first-time exhibitors: Even longstanding exhibitors need a refresh on best practices. This isn’t your standard, “know before you go” webinar, either. This session must go beyond basic logistics and inform exhibitors how the F2F channel has evolved and prepare them to connect meaningfully with attendees.

A strong webinar should include:

Attendee insights: Who’s coming, what they care about, and how they plan to engage

Hands-on best practices: Real examples of interactive experiences that resonate

Smart goal setting: How to think beyond lead capture and focus on meaningful conversations

Floor strategy tips: How to stand out, encourage discovery, and drive traffic effectively

When exhibitors understand the audience and the opportunity, they show up stronger, and everyone wins.

We can help with planning and executing these sessions. See pg. 54 to connect!

So, What Now?



Action Items

➤ **Expand your thinking**

To create an event that truly stands out, look outside of your industry. Pull inspiration from places like retail, sports venues, public pop-ups, and festivals instead.

➤ **Highlight and incentivize interactive opportunities**

Design your floor plan and traffic flow to support tactile interactions or demos, so hands-on isn't an afterthought—it's built into the experience. Ensure exhibitors come prepared by incentivizing them in advance.

➤ **Give attendees tools to plan with purpose**

Help attendees spend less time searching and more time engaging by offering simple, pre-event tools that surface the most relevant exhibitors for their needs.

➤ **Group communities of exhibitors together**

Attendees want to compare apples to apples without traversing the show floor. Design the expo hall with attendee objectives in mind so that everyone wins.

➤ **Offer exhibitors a peek into attendee demographics**

Give registered exhibitors (and even exhibitors on the fence) regional snapshots of who will be at your event and what they're looking for. This way, exhibitors know who and what to bring with them in each specific region.

➤ **Conduct an “exhibitor excellence” webinar**

Make “exhibitor excellence” webinars a standard offering for every exhibitor—not just first-timers. This session must go beyond basic logistics and inform exhibitors how the F2F channel has evolved and prepare them to connect meaningfully with attendees.



Build What Events Need Next

Today's events aren't just gatherings—**they're ecosystems of commerce, connection, and discovery.** Over the past few years of research, one message remains constant: the newest generation of attendees is more selective, more intentional, and more pressed for time than ever. They seek tangible, relevant value, and industry partners seek outcomes. And both rely on organizers to make those outcomes possible (even if attendees don't know they do).

Product discovery isn't a bonus—**it's a career priority. Hands-on experiences aren't a nice-to-have—they're table stakes.** Subject matter expertise, proactive planning tools, and intentional event design all play a role in helping attendees make better decisions and exhibitors generate better returns.

Organizers, it's time to recognize how powerful your role is. You're not just real estate agents selling space, or HOA boards enforcing rules—you're the community developers, designing the environment and the ecosystem where business happens. The way you design that experience—through structure, support, and strategy—determines whether everyone's business thrives.

So as expectations rise and commerce continues to evolve, the challenge, and the opportunity, is clear: Don't just host an event. **Develop a marketplace. Nurture the stakeholders. Build what events need next.**

Be the **Case Study** You Want to See

We know it's hard to take risks and try something new—especially without a playbook or proven examples to follow. But that's exactly your opportunity. Instead of waiting for social proof, **be the case study you want to see**. Set a new standard, take a smart risk, and design with purpose.

The industry doesn't need repetition, it needs reinvention. And **your next event could be proof of what's possible**.

Email strategy@freeman.com to submit your very own case study. We want to see how you develop excellent commerce for attendees and partners alike. And who knows...your event might even get featured in the next Freeman Trends Report.



strategy@freeman.com

Connect with Freeman

Whether you need data-fueled direction or on-the-ground expertise, Freeman Strategy equips you with the tools to lead successful events.

For details, reach out to:

Annie Malone

annie.malone@freeman.com

Ken Holsinger

ken.holsinger@freeman.com

Performance Benchmarking and Analysis

Evaluate your event across key performance indicators and compare against industry benchmarks to uncover misalignments—helping close the gap between exhibitor offerings and attendee expectations.

On-site Event Assessment

Evaluate your attendees' unique motivators and uncover where your event meets (or misses) the mark using our proprietary XLNC assessment tools.

Pricing Analysis and Growth Strategy

Assess the competitive alignment of your event or event portfolio pricing for attendees, exhibitors, and sponsors and develop models that drive value, simplify, and create predictability at your events.

Maximize Value Drivers

Pinpoint what matters most to existing and prospective attendees and exhibitors. Use data to challenge assumptions and align your event more closely with everyone's goals.

Develop Exhibitor Excellence Webinars

Design exhibitor excellence webinars that deliver attendee insights, engagement best practices, and floor strategy guidance—empowering every exhibitor with the tools and knowledge to connect meaningfully and drive success onsite.

Sponsorship Analysis and Strategy

Help sponsors define event objectives, uncover new activations, and create sponsorship opportunities that can optimize engagement between sponsors and attendees.

Appendix

Methodology and complete dataset

Attendee Demographics

Attendee Demographics

Job Title/ Function

Corporate Management	39%
C-level	7%
Owner/Partner/President	11%
VP/SVP	3%
Director/Manager	18%
Sales/Business Development	10%
Technical	10%
Government	7%
Consultant	5%
Healthcare	4%
Buyer/Purchasing	4%
Marketing/Advertising	3%
R&D	2%
Other	9%

Industry

Manufacturing/ Machinery/ Supply Chain/ Raw Materials	15%
Retail/ Consumer Goods	12%
Medical/Healthcare	11%
Technology/Communications/IT	11%
Government	10%
Business Services	10%
Building/Construction/Home and Repair	8%
Education	4%
Transportation	4%
Financial, Legal and Real Estate	3%
Other	12%

Attendee Demographics Continued

Purchase Decision Making Status

Key/sole decision-maker	32%
Significant influence	41%
Some influence	27%
No influence/end user	0%

Decision Making Status on Event Attendance

Sole decision-maker	36%
Significant influence	41%
Some influence	20%
No influence	3%

Attendee Demographics Continued

Organization FTEs

1-100	48%
101-500	17%
501-2,000	13%
2,001-5,000	6%
5,001-10,000	4%
More than 10,000	10%
Don't know	2%

Gender

Male	62%
Female	34%
Choose not to specify	4%

Generation

Gen Z	5%
Millennials	26%
Gen X	47%
Boomers	20%
Silent	1%

Location

United States	90%
International	10%

Exhibitor Demographics

Exhibitor Demographics

Job Title/ Function

Corporate Management	39%
C-level	7%
Owner/Partner/President	11%
VP/SVP	3%
Director/Manager	18%
Sales/Business Development	10%
Technical	10%
Government	7%
Consultant	5%
Healthcare	4%
Buyer/Purchasing	4%
Marketing/Advertising	3%
R&D	2%
Other	9%

Industry

Industrial/Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs	17%
Technology/Communications/IT	15%
Consumer Goods	10%
Building/Construction/Home and Repair	9%
Raw Materials/Agriculture/Utilities	8%
Business Services	8%
Medical/Healthcare	8%
Food/Beverage	6%
Government	3%
Transportation	2%
Financial, Legal and Real Estate	2%
Other	14%

Exhibitor Demographics Continued

Organization FTEs

1-100	45%
101-500	23%
501-2,000	12%
2,001-5,000	6%
More than 5,000	14%
Don't know	3%

Gender

Male	62%
Female	32%
Choose not to specify	6%

Generation

Gen Z	7%
Millennials	33%
Gen X	41%
Boomers	18%
Silent	0%

Location

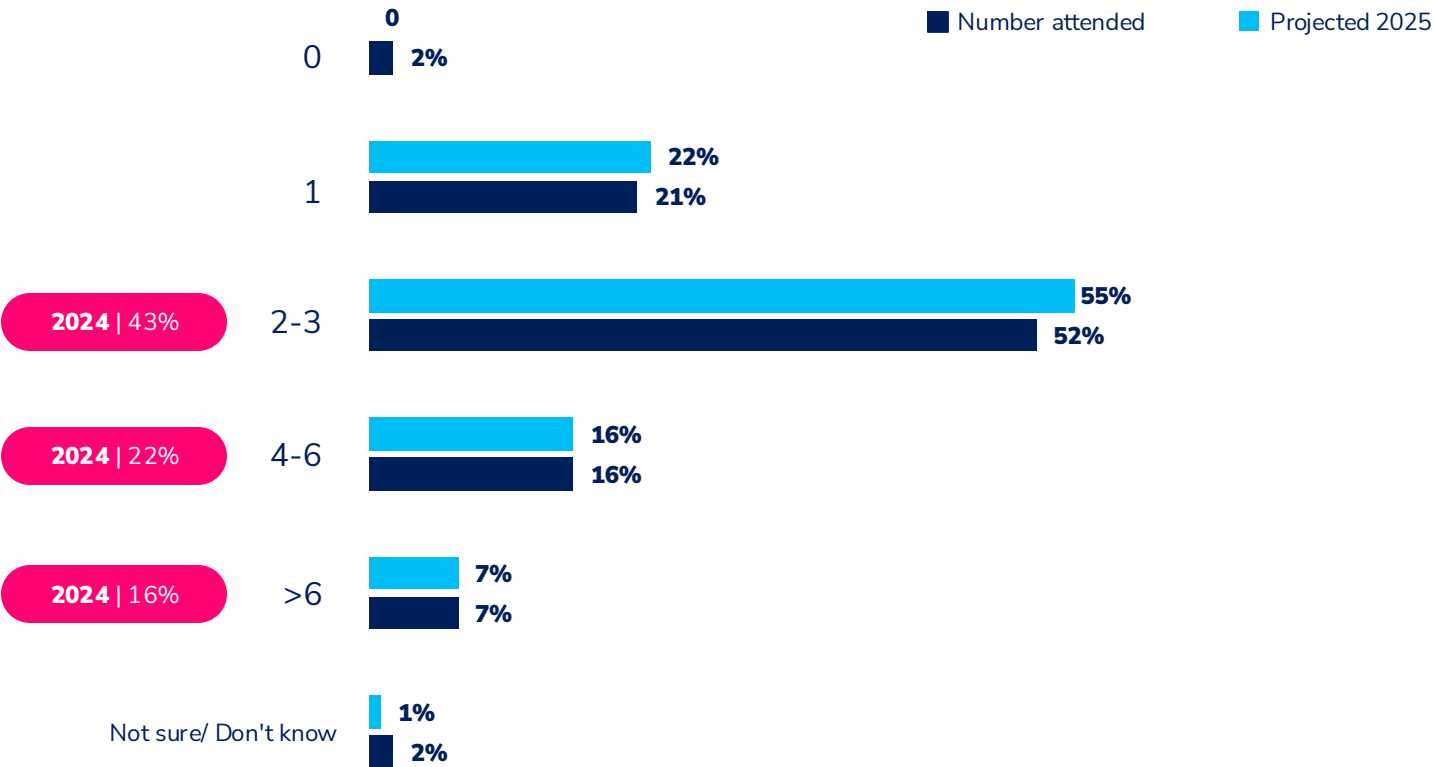
United States	84%
International	16%

Full Data Slides

QUESTION

Approximately how many in-person events did you attend in the last 12 months? Looking ahead to the next 12 months, how many in-person events do you expect to attend?

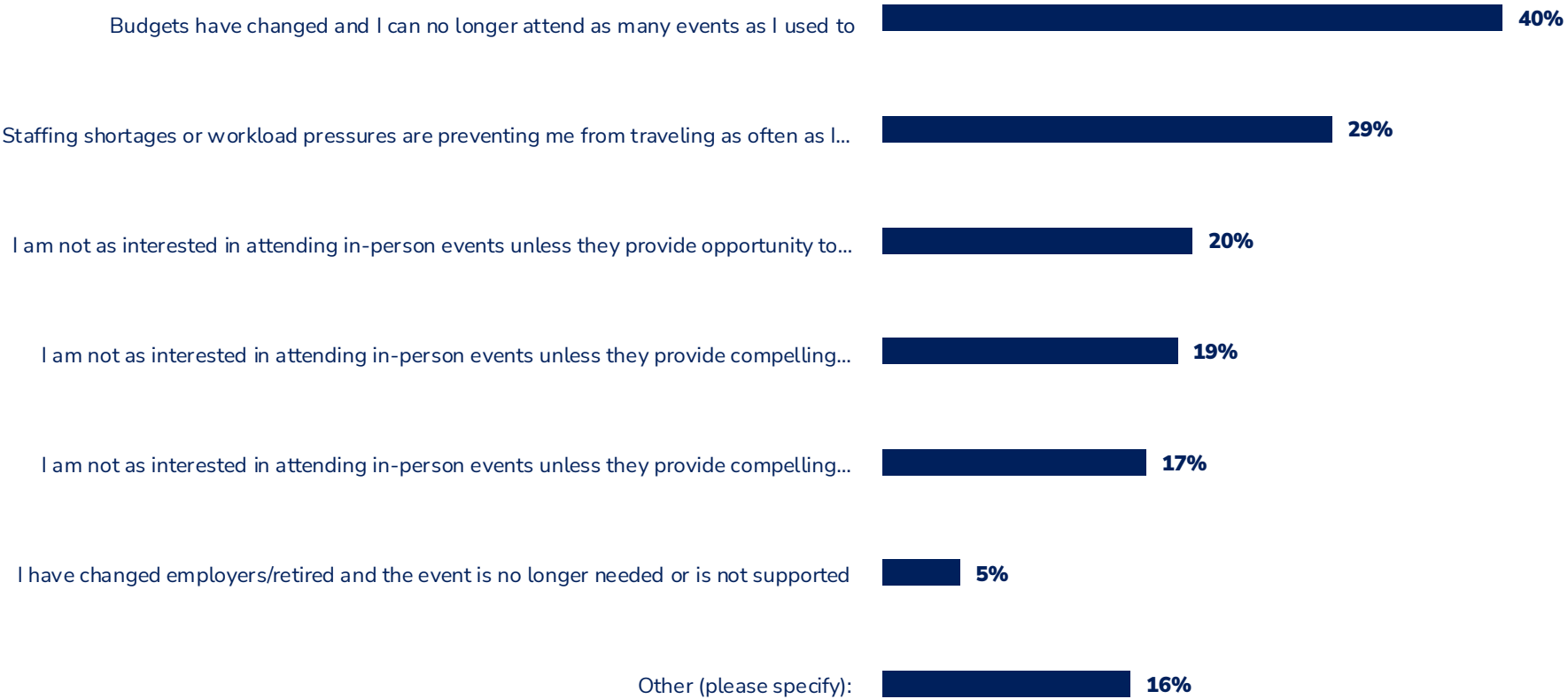
Number of Events Attended & Projected



QUESTION

You have indicated you are planning on attending fewer events in the next 12 months relative to the prior year. Please indicate all the reasons why. Select all that apply.

Reason for Expecting to Attend Fewer Events



QUESTION

What are the top 2 commercial objectives you had for being at the most important business event you attended last year?

Top Commercial Objectives



QUESTION

Where do you go to discover new products and services? (Select all that apply)

Top Sources for Product/Service Discovery



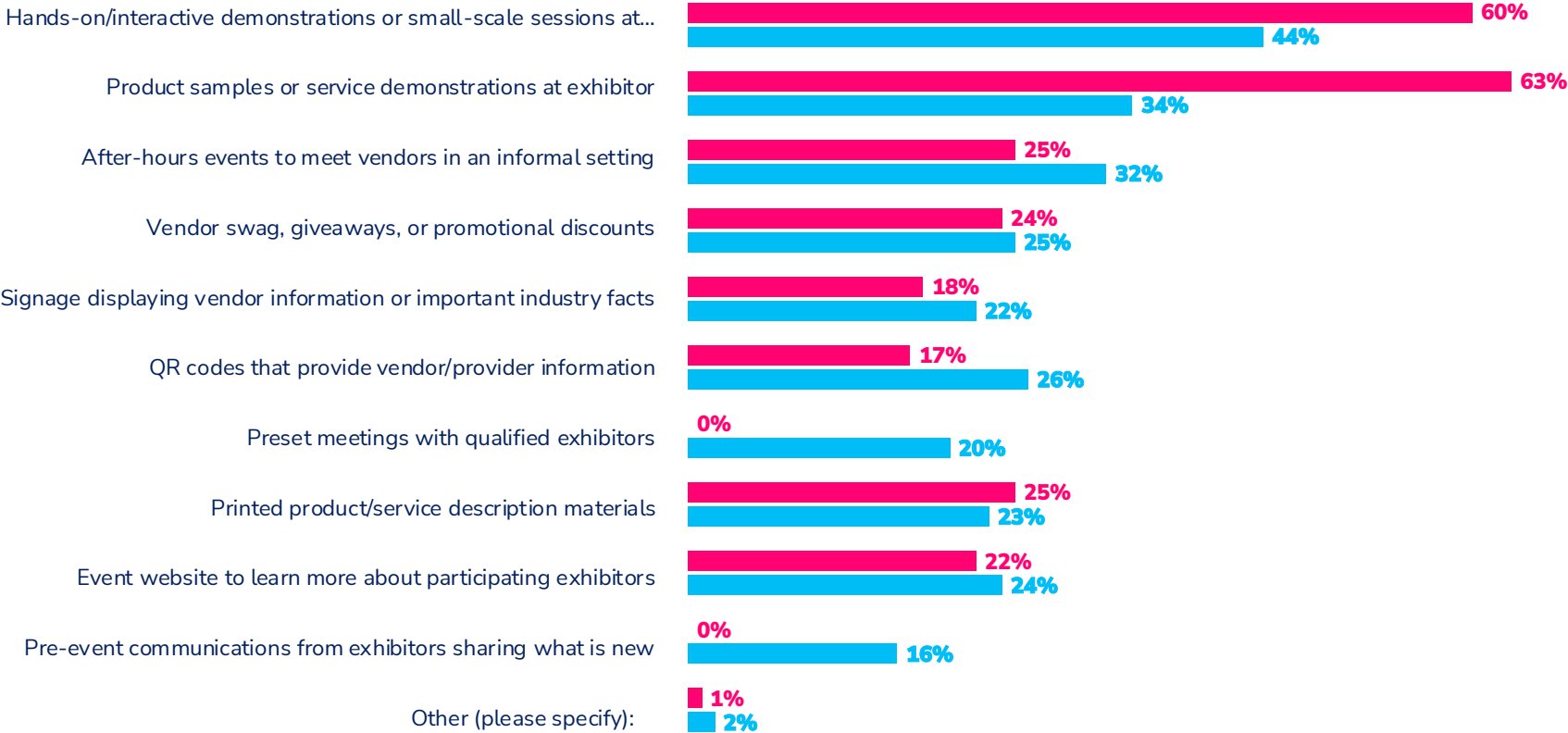
QUESTION

When thinking about how you build awareness of and evaluate products/services at any in-person event, what are the top 3 factors that most positively influence how you go about the evaluation?

When thinking about how you interact with customers/prospects at any in-person event, what are the top 3 factors that most positively influence your

Factors Most Positively Influencing Commercial Interactions

Attendees Exhibitor

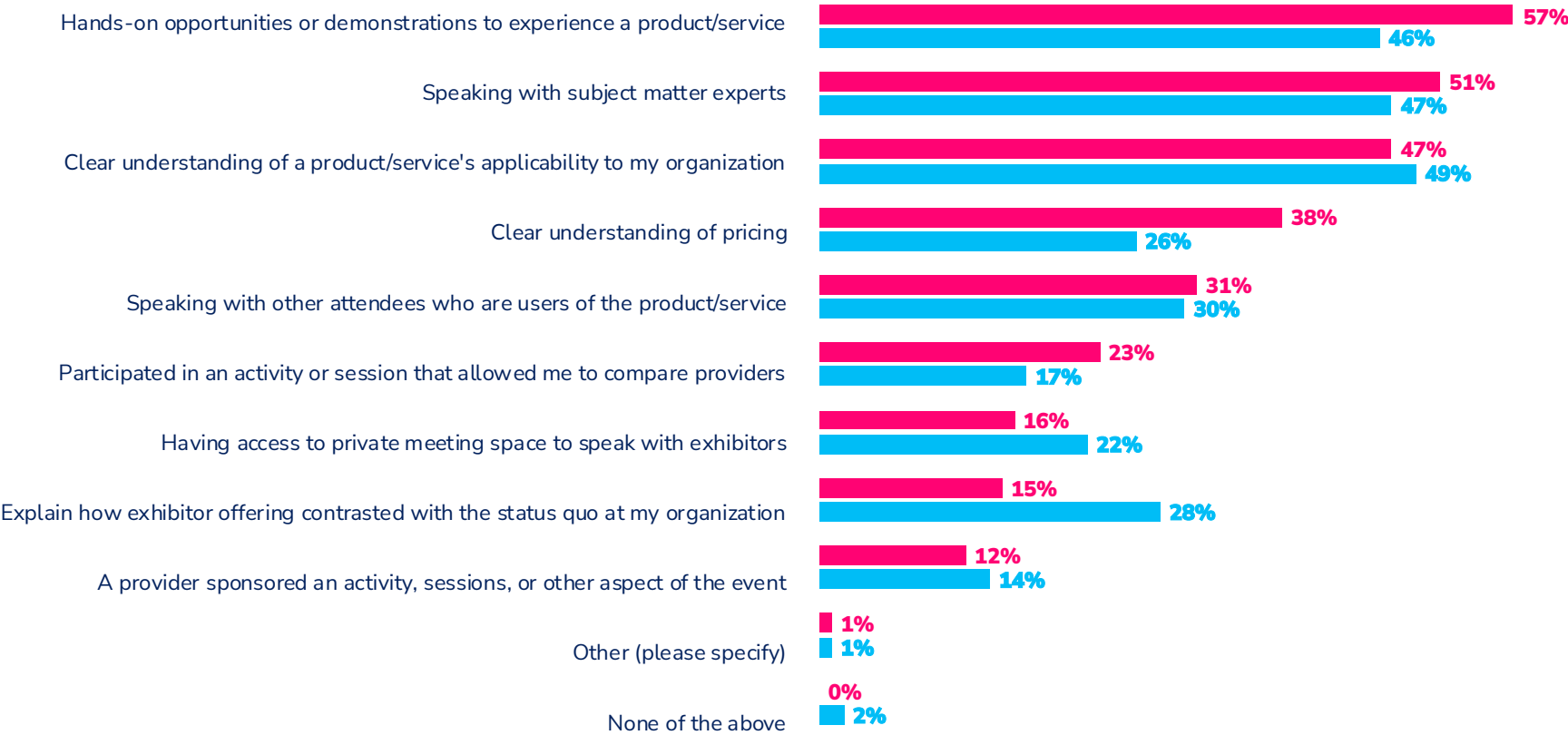


QUESTION

Select the top 3 in-person event options that would be most useful for helping you/your organization come to a decision on a potential purchase more quickly and/or with more certainty.

Aspects that Aid Attendee Purchase Decision Certainty

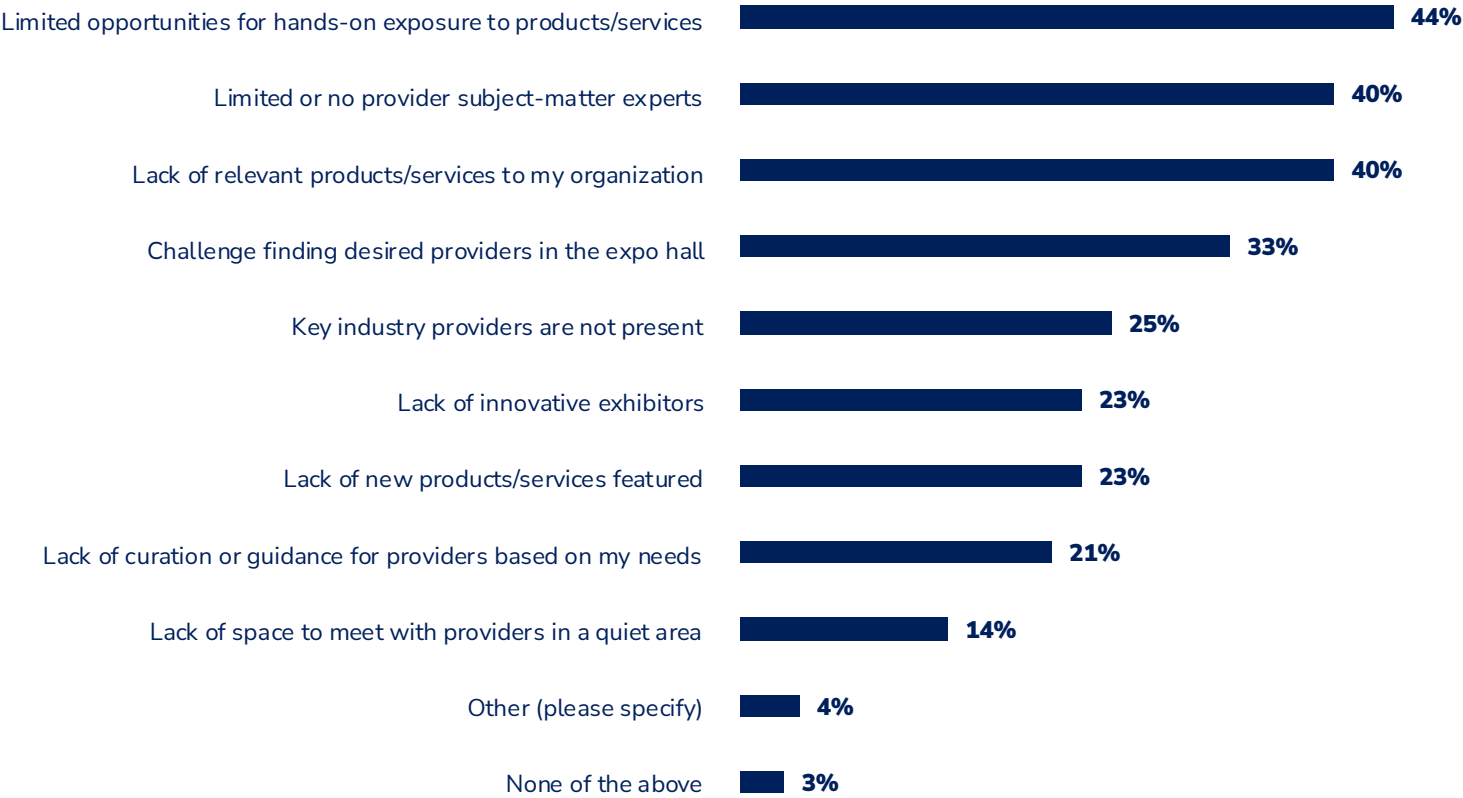
Attendees Exhibitor



QUESTION

Which of the following options are most likely to negatively impact your experience evaluating products/services at a business event or prevent you from achieving your commercial objectives? Select up to 3 options.

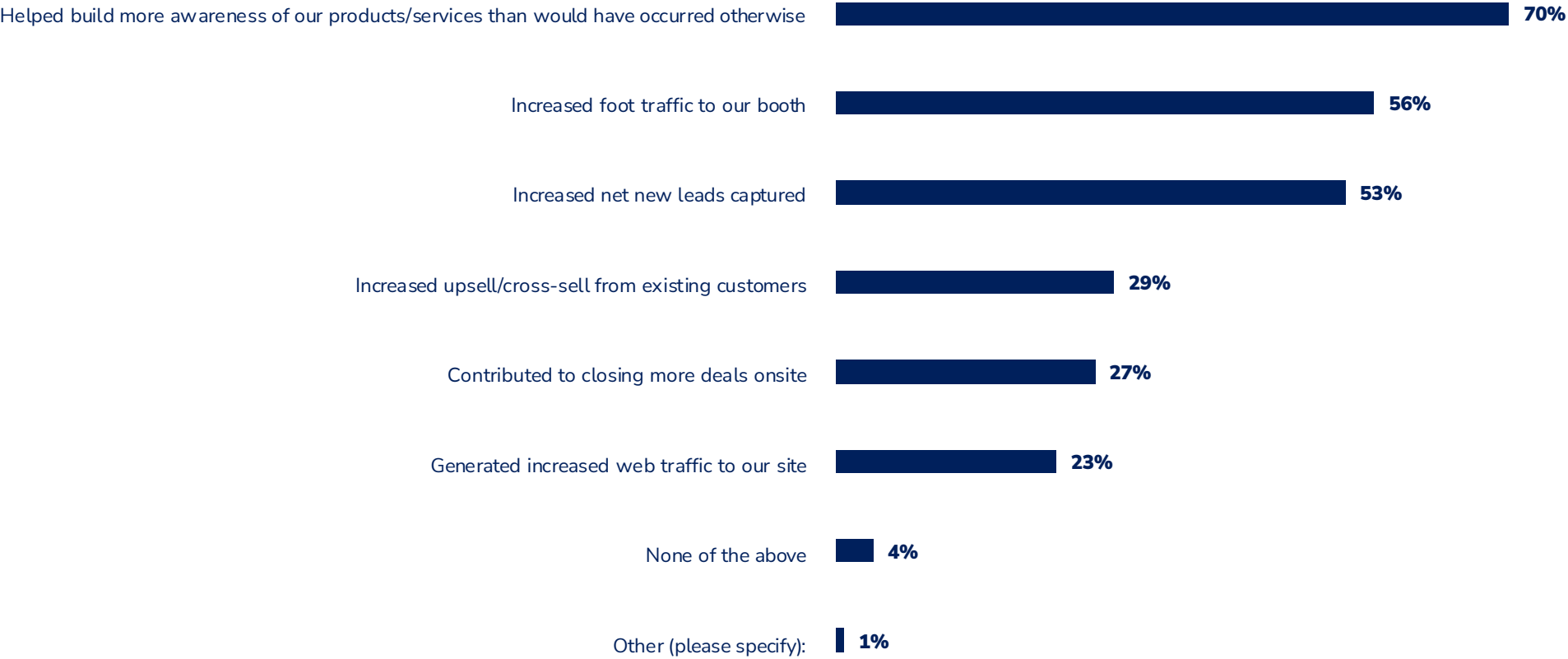
Event Aspects Preventing Attendees from Achieving Commercial Objectives



QUESTION

Did providing the hands-on experience for attendees improve any of the following outcomes for your organization?

Benefit to Exhibitors from Offering Hands-on Product/Service Experience

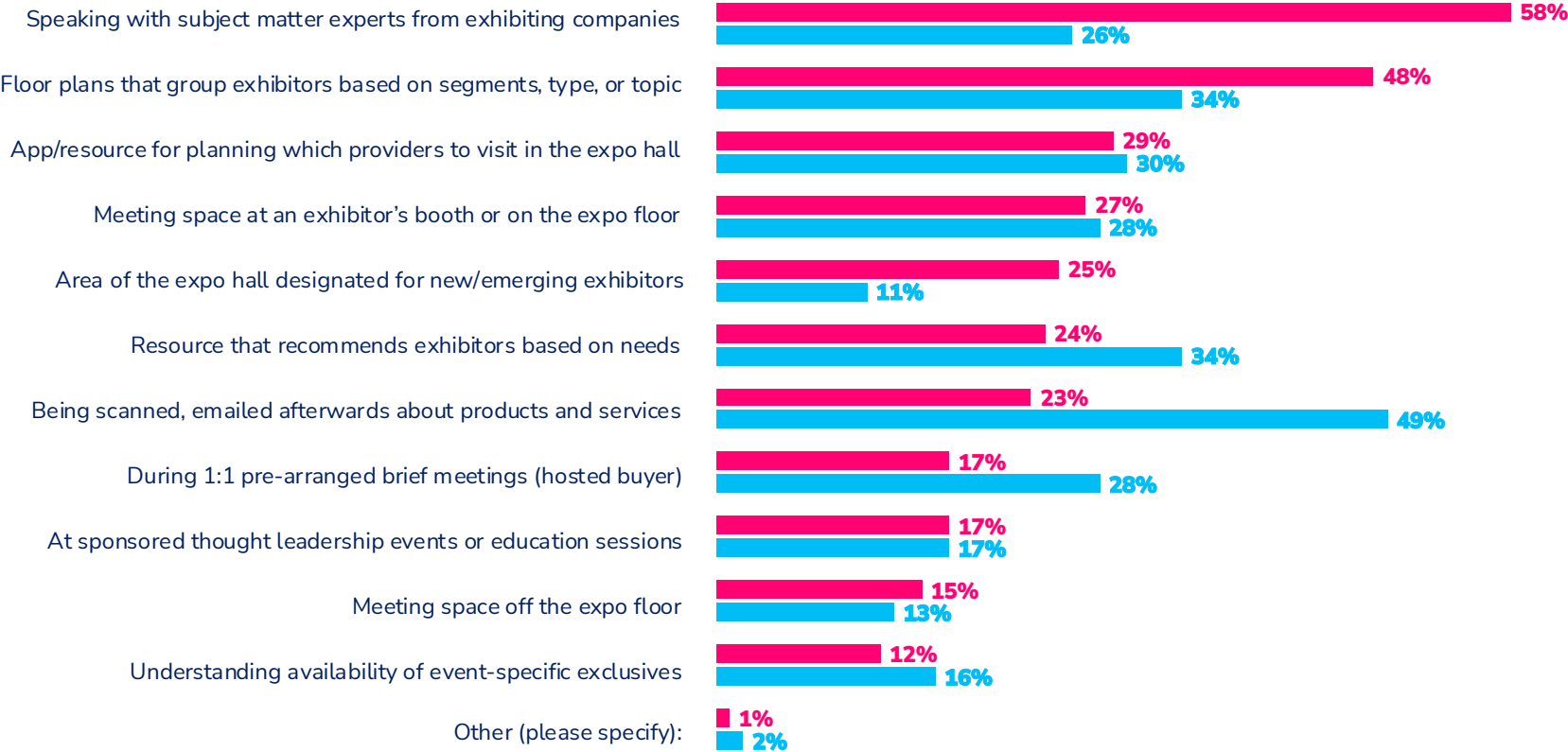


QUESTION

Select the top 3 options that would be most effective in helping you interact and/or engage with exhibitors/attendees at in-person events.

Top expectations for improved interactions: Attendees vs Exhibitors

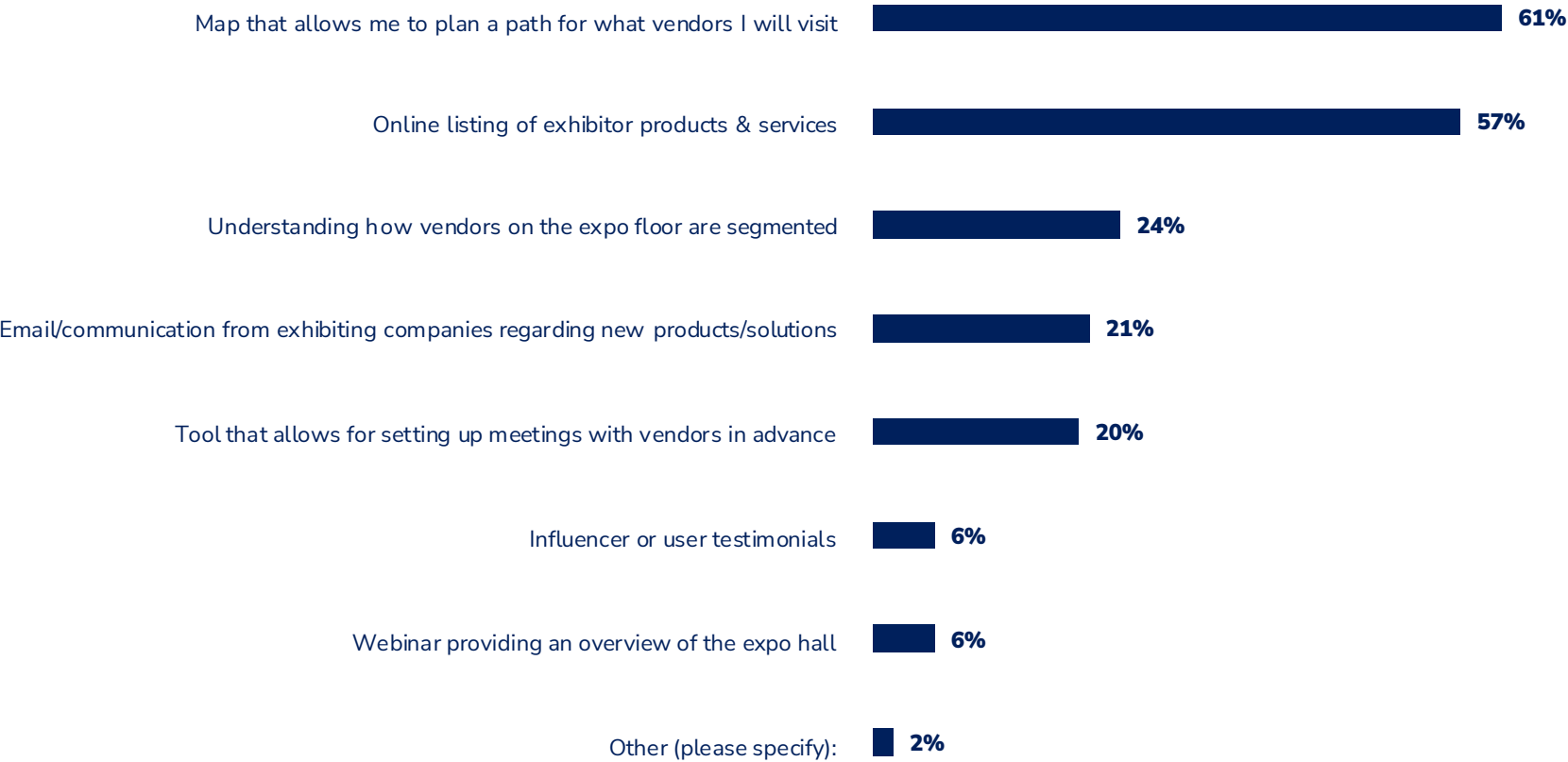
Attendees Exhibitor



QUESTION

Select the top 2 options you consider most useful for determining how you discover or evaluate products and services at an in-person event prior to arriving onsite?

Most Useful Pre-Event Offerings for Attendee Evaluation / Discovery



QUESTION

Which of the following options would you most expect in an all-inclusive package for your company’s participation at an in-person business event? Select all that apply.

All-Inclusive Package Requirements

