

The Evolving Value of Events

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Introduction

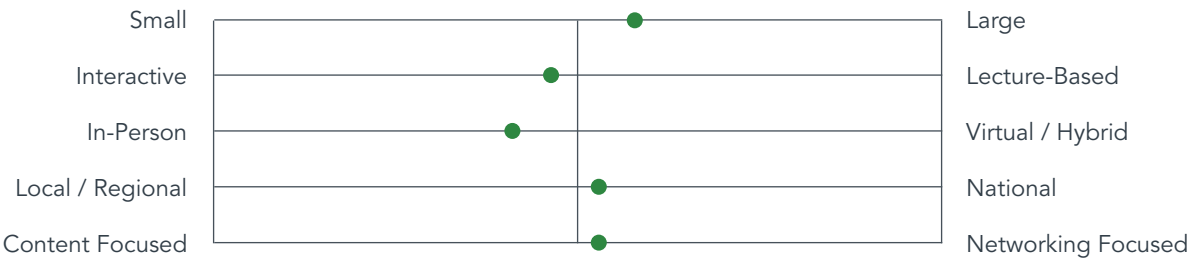
In-person events are at a crossroads. Budgets are tight. Time is scarce. Remote work is the default. What is it that makes people prioritize in-person events?

At Smithbucklin and 360 Live Media, we set out to understand what draws professionals to in-person events and what makes them return. Our latest study with Hanover Research dives deep into what today’s audiences expect, what builds trust, and how to deliver events that truly matter.

Our survey of 383 professionals revealed that **88% view in-person events as extremely valuable** — despite rising costs and packed schedules. Why? Because live experiences deliver something digital can’t: trust, which comes from real connection, credible content, and career-defining moments. Live experiences give you more.

In fact, more than 70% said they trust the content from live events more than what they read in emails, online, or even hear from colleagues.

Event Preferences



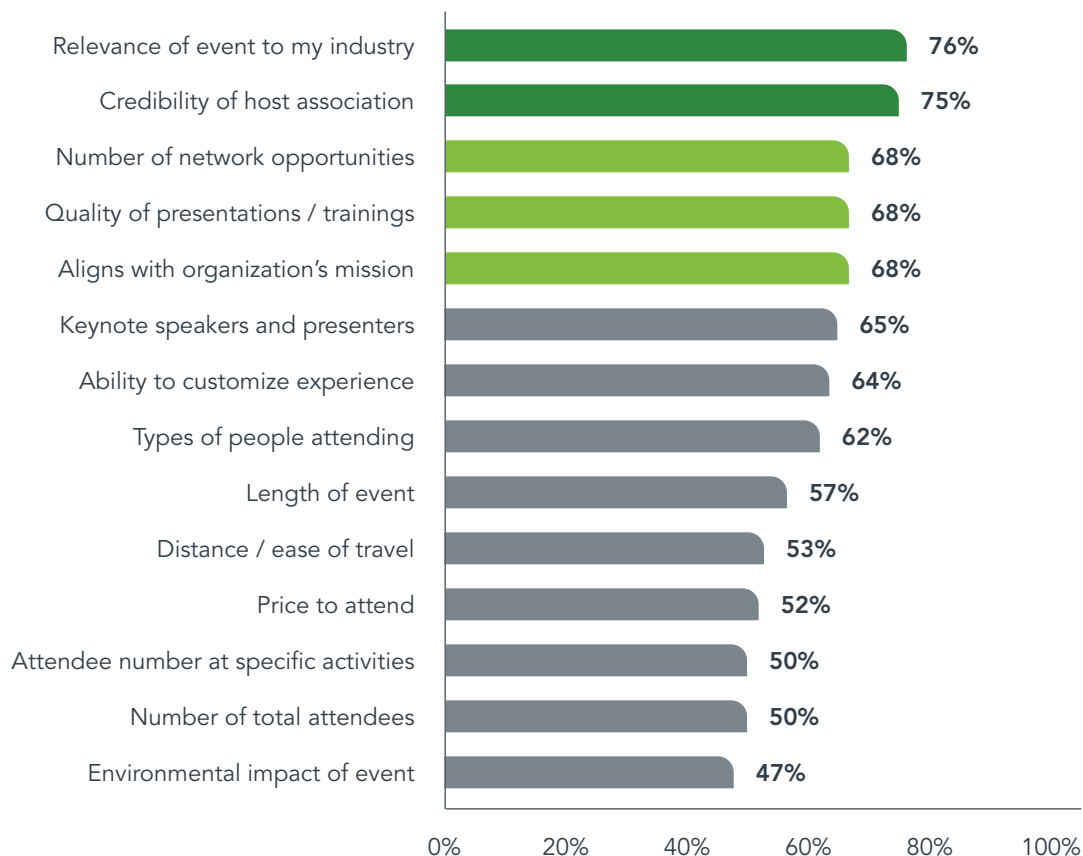
Large national events remain the preferred format, particularly when they’re interactive and focused on networking. And while hybrid options don’t rank as highly, they still play a role—especially in expanding access and inclusion for people who may not have the time, funding, or resources to be away from work to attend in-person.

What Attendees Want Most

Professionals primarily attend conferences and events to stay current, build their network, and advance professionally. According to respondents, the top five drivers are:

- **Relevance to their industry** (76%)
- **Credibility of the host** (75%)
- **Networking opportunities** (68%)
- **Training and presentation quality** (68%)
- **Alignment with their organization's mission** (68%)

Importance of Factors for Attending



Event-goers want more than the traditional format. They want substance, strategic alignment, and experiences they can apply directly to their work. And their bosses want to know they are sending them to something that will improve the bottom line.

What separates a must-attend experience from one that fades into the background? It comes down to **intentional design**: In an era where every moment matters, **events must earn their place** not with flashy gimmicks, but with substance, strategy, and soul.

5 Strategies to Boost Event Value

1

Design to Elevate Trust

Trust in event content is already high and it's a major driver of attendance. Organizers can build on this by selecting sector-relevant speakers with real-world credibility, backing up ideas with data, and using formats that invite dialogue rather than deliver lectures. The more transparent and thoughtful the experience, the more trust you earn.

2

Spotlight the Future

Attendees want a glimpse of what's next. The biggest draw includes product demos (83%) and opportunities to explore emerging tools (40%). Innovation hubs, startup spotlights, and immersive technology like AR/VR experiences can energize your audience and position your event as a launchpad for what's ahead.

3

Make It Interactive

Today's attendees expect to participate, not just observe. Hands-on learning (32%) and interactivity (22%) are critical. Build engagement through live polling, breakout discussions, skill-building labs, or immersive exhibits that make learning personal and memorable.

4

Make it Easy for Attendees to Share the Experience

What happens after the event matters just as much as what happens on-site. Nearly half of attendees share what they learned with others, whether informally or through structured debriefs.

Make it easy to amplify the experience by providing:

- Visual recaps, summaries, and "what to tell your boss" briefs
- Slides and recordings after the event
- Social media prompts and Instagram-worthy visuals

5

Facilitate Meaningful Connections

Connection is the heartbeat of in-person events. In fact, more than 80% of attendees rank networking as one of the most valuable aspects of showing up in person.

Go beyond generic cocktail hours and create intentional moments that foster real relationships. This could mean curating 1:1 problem-solving meetups with industry leaders, facilitating topic-based roundtables, organizing speed networking sessions, or hosting small-group receptions tailored to shared interests or professional goals.

When attendees leave with new contacts, trusted collaborators, or even future mentors, they don't just remember your event — they remember it as the place to come for inspiration, improvement, and innovation. And that connection becomes loyalty to your organization.

What's Getting in the Way of Attendance?

Even when events deliver value, many professionals still can't make it. The top barriers?

- High travel and accommodation costs (33%)
- Time away from work or family (27%)
- Long travel time (27%)
- Irrelevant content
- Lack of employer support or time

The takeaway? Even the most well-designed event must overcome real-world obstacles. To remove friction:

- Offer virtual passes or hybrid options to expand access
- Align programming closely to job roles, personas, and emerging needs
- Make it easy for attendees to justify ROI to their organizations
- Consider regional formats or satellite experiences to reduce travel costs

When events meet people where they are — financially, professionally, and logistically — they earn attention, trust, and attendance.

Conclusion: Create Events That Earn Their Place

Professionals see in-person events as uniquely valuable, and there's opportunity to increase that value even more. Trust, relevance, interactivity, and connection are essential. When events are designed with intention, they become more than just a gathering. They become a catalyst for growth, learning, and community.

Is your event reaching its full potential?

Take our 3-minute quiz and we'll reach out for a free event strategy consultation.



About Us

Smithbucklin is a professional services firm advancing the missions of nonprofits and associations through association management, events, education, and more.

360 Live Media is a full-service events agency on a mission to make association events more valuable.

Let's Grow Together!

Have questions or want to learn more about how we support associations? We'd love to hear from you.

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