



# The Attendee Acquisition Reality Gap

Why More Marketing Is Not Enough To Build The Right Audience

A comprehensive look at the forces reshaping how events attract, convert, and retain their audiences.

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Research conducted by



Trade Show Executive

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Acquisition Environment

Attendee acquisition remains essential, but the conditions around it are more complex than they appear on the surface. 53% of respondents say registration fees have increased over the last two years, with the average increase hovering around 10%. Registration behavior is concentrated late in the cycle as 55% of attendees register within four weeks of the event. These patterns frame acquisition as a compressed, higher-friction process where the margin for error is shrinking.

## Purpose of this Research

This report translates these findings into a clear picture of what is changing in attendee acquisition, where the strain points are surfacing, and what the current data suggests about the direction attendee acquisition is heading. The focus is firmly on operator reality, not abstract theory. Every insight here is grounded in how senior event professionals are managing their programs right now.



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# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## The Acquisition Landscape at a Glance

The study surfaces eight interconnected findings that together define the current state of attendee acquisition. No single finding tells the full story; the picture emerges from how these themes reinforce and complement each other. The data reveals a market that is tactically active but strategically strained. Here is what the findings show at the highest level before diving deeper.

### 1. QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Attendee quality is the top challenge. Audience fit, not just audience size, is the defining concern for event professionals today.

### 2. UNEVEN GROWTH

First-time attendee growth is stronger than repeat-attendance growth, indicating a top-of-funnel gain that is not yet translating deeper into the relationship.

### 3. MULTI CHANNEL REALITY

Attendee acquisition is highly multi-channel, with teams running email, social, digital ads, paid social, and relationship-based tactics simultaneously.

### 4. EMAIL TENSION

Email remains central to acquisition campaigns but faces significant friction with delivery issues, generational reach concerns, and reported fatigue.

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# KEY TAKEAWAYS (continued)

## 5. KNOWN AUDIENCE STRENGTH

Prospecting is strongest in known and relationship-based audiences, reinforcing the value of owned lists and professional networks.

## 6. LATE REGISTRATION PATTERN

Registration remains late and influenced by early bird pricing, compressing the decision window and increasing pressure to convert quickly.

## 7. DATA PERSONALIZATION GAP

Detailed audience data is collected at registration, but the data reveals personalization measures are more limited — a potential activation gap.

## 8. AI: EARLY-STAGE ADOPTION

AI adoption and maturity are still mixed but most often used for content, marketing, and analysis rather than full acquisition strategy.

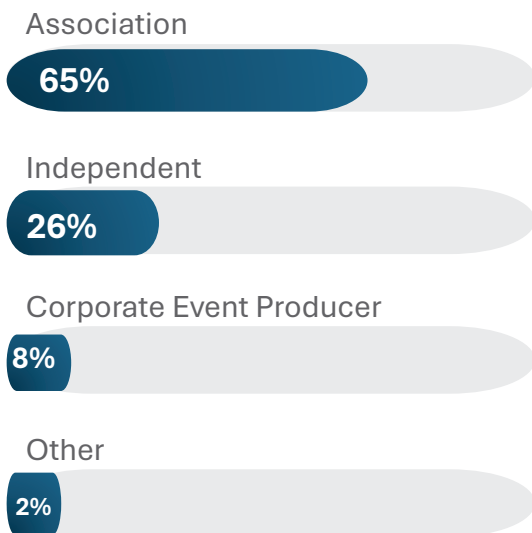


# RESPONDENT PROFILE

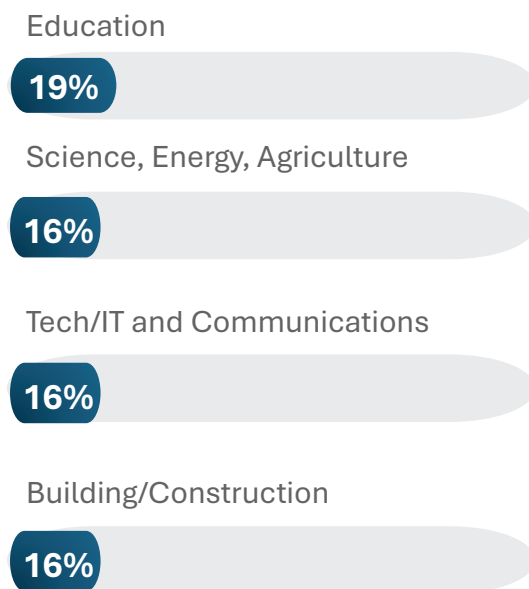
This research reflects perspectives of highly experienced practitioners in the industry managing sizeable programs.

A select group of senior leaders from mid-size and large B2B tradeshows were invited to participate in this study. 106 professionals completed the survey, representing a diverse cross-section of industries and responsibilities. These respondents are seasoned professionals, indicating that the insights captured reflect long-term industry knowledge and informed perspective.

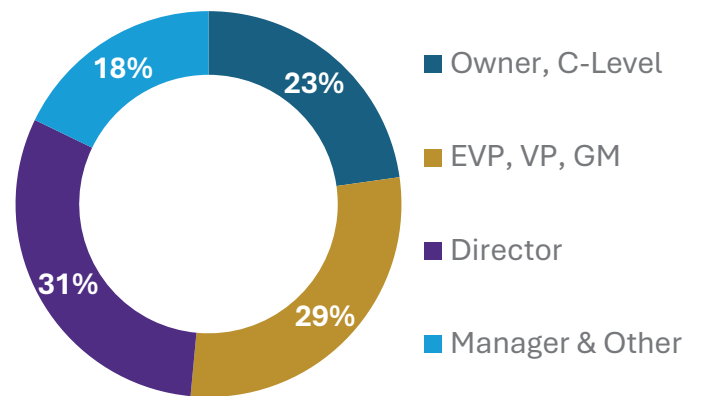
## ORGANIZATION TYPE



## TOP INDUSTRIES



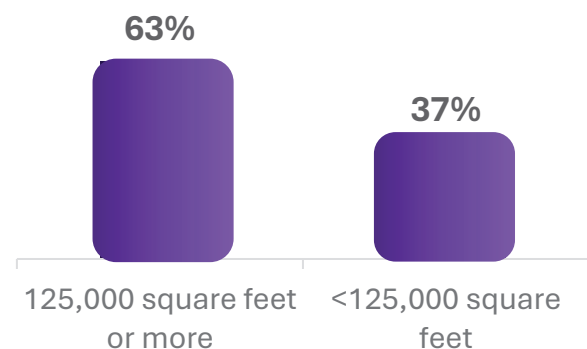
## JOB LEVEL



## 20+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

50%

## SIZE OF LARGEST EVENT



# ATTENDANCE SHIFTS

## Growth in new attendees does not automatically translate into loyalty.

At first glance, the data appears encouraging: 48% of respondents report an increase in first-time attendees. However, that momentum does not carry evenly across the attendee funnel. While first-time attendance is growing, repeat attendance is more likely to be flat, and the number of attendees sent per organization is more likely to be declining than growing. This pattern suggests that bringing new attendees into the funnel may be proving easier than deepening participation among returning audiences or existing accounts.

For event professionals, this creates a compounding challenge. Recruiting first-time attendees is expensive. If those attendees do not return, acquisition costs must be absorbed repeatedly. A market where new attendance grows but repeat attendance stagnates is a market where acquisition is becoming structurally more expensive over time.

The divergence between first-time growth and repeat/organizational depth is one of the clearest tensions found in the data.



This challenge is amplified at scale: 44% of respondents with large shows (>125k sq. ft.) report a decrease in attendees per organization, compared with just 17% of smaller shows.

## CHANGE IN ATTENDEE METRICS IN PAST 2 YEARS

### First Time Attendees

**48%**  
increased

**8%**  
decreased

### Repeat Attendees

**22%**  
increased

**22%**  
decreased

### Attendees Per Organization

**11%**  
increased

**38%**  
decreased

### Registration Fees

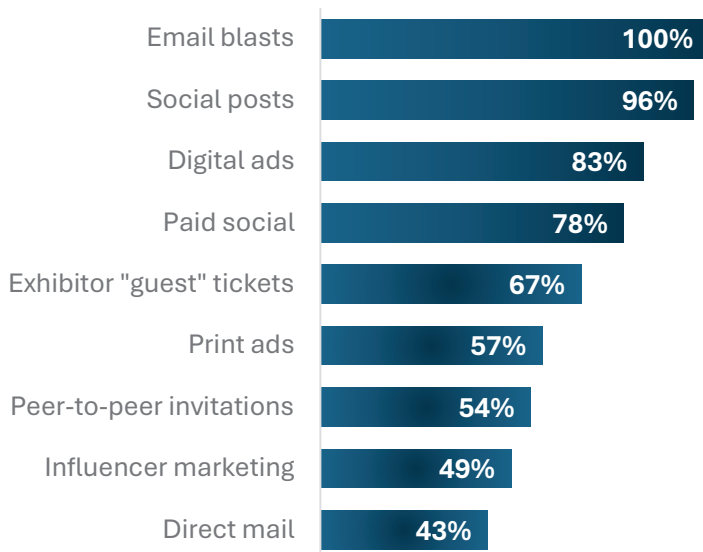
**53%**  
increased

**7%**  
decreased

# ATTENDEE ACQUISITION TACTICS

Attendee acquisition campaigns use a wide mix of channels, led by email, social media, digital ads, and paid social. When respondents were asked to choose one single most effective tactic, email was named most often but comes with challenges.

## TACTICS MOST UTILIZED FOR ATTENDEE ACQUISITION



**50%** consider email to be the most effective tactic, but challenges with email exist:

- **70%** corporate firewalls blocking delivery
- **48%** poor reach to younger generations
- **45%** issues with accurate reporting



Large events are significantly more likely to use digital ads and consider them to be the most effective tactic.

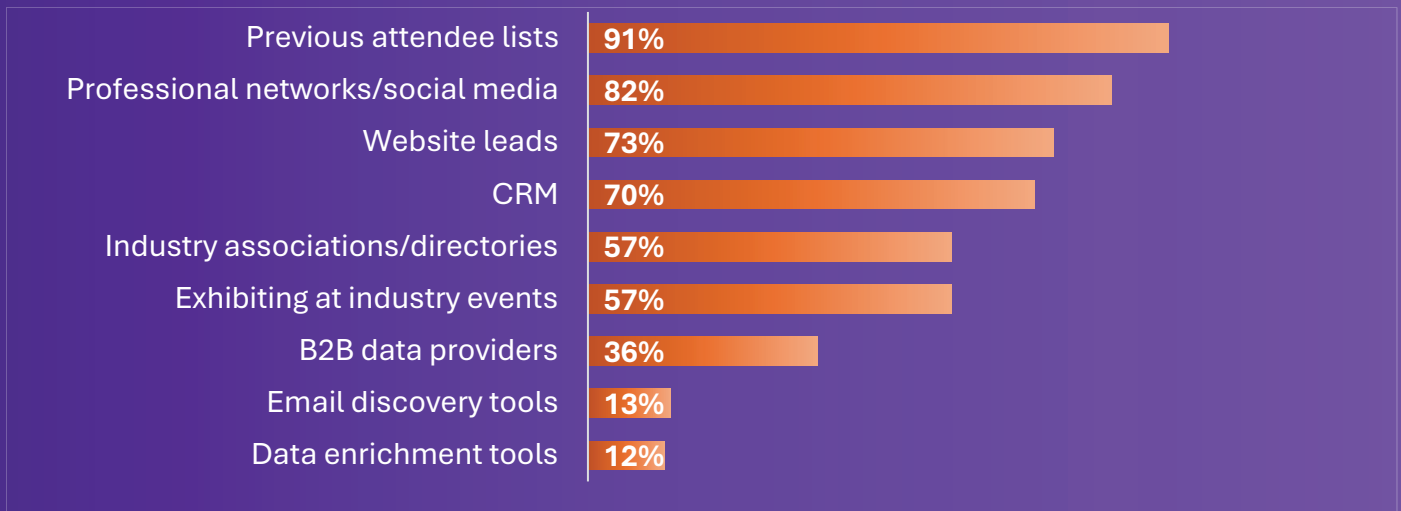
	<125,000 sq. ft.	125,000+ sq. ft.
Use digital ads	65%	95% ↑
Digital ads are the most effective tactic	0%	15% ↑

# ATTENDEE PROSPECT SOURCES

Prospecting remains rooted in a mix of known-audience and relationship-based sources. The challenge is in building loyal attendees that benefit from attending year after year.

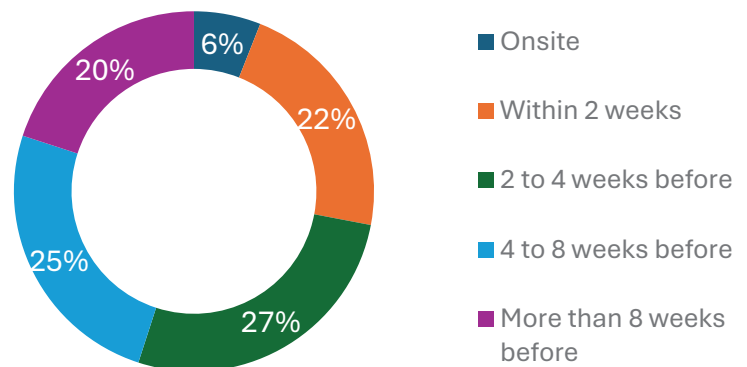
The top 4 most relied-upon prospecting sources suggest that event teams are finding the greatest traction with audiences they already know, can identify, or have some relationship with. The opportunity is to treat these sources as strategic infrastructure: keep them clean, current, segmented, and actively nurtured rather than using them only as campaign inputs.

## PROSPECTING SOURCES



## WHEN ATTENDEES REGISTER FOR EVENTS

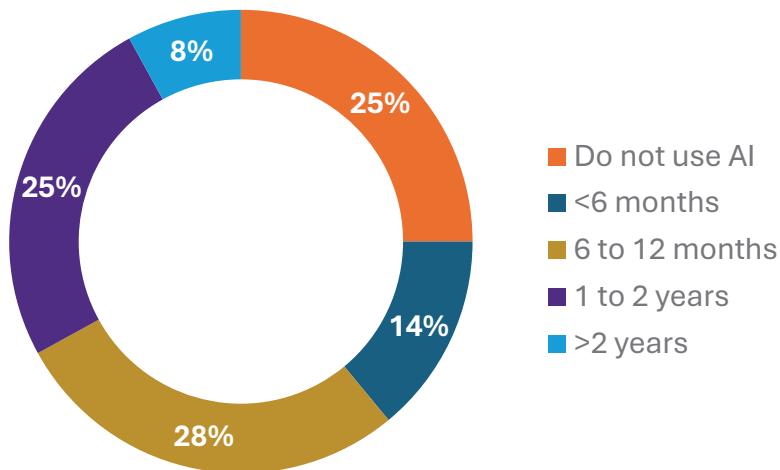
With over half of attendees registering within four weeks of the event, acquisition success depends heavily on late-stage conversion. Early awareness still matters, but the decisive period is closer to the event, when urgency, pricing deadlines, peer influence, exhibitor promotion, and personalized reminders can turn interest into action. Event teams should plan the final stretch as a distinct conversion phase, not simply the end of the campaign.



**40% of attendees take advantage of early bird discounts**

# USING AI TO AID IN EVENTS

## HOW LONG AI HAS BEEN USED TO AID IN EVENTS




**26%**  
reduction in weekly time  
spent on certain tasks due  
to AI

**AI is mostly being used as executional support, not strategic acquisition transformation.**

AI is entering event workflows, but adoption is still mixed. One quarter say they do not use AI at all, and most current usage appears centered on content, marketing, analysis, support, and design. Respondents also report meaningful time savings, but many still say it is too soon to tell what event-level improvements AI is producing.

## TOP USE CASES FOR AI

- 85%** writing & content creation
- 67%** marketing, including digital, social media, PR
- 46%** feedback collection & analysis
- 41%** support & customer service
- 41%** design & graphics

  
Only 46% of ‘newer’ event professionals (up to 10 years in the industry) are using AI compared with 82% of those with more than 10 years. This challenges the assumption that newer/younger professionals are automatically leading AI adoption.

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# FINAL THOUGHTS

**The friction is less about missing tactics and more about alignment, activation, and consistency. The tools exist. The gap is how sharply they are being deployed.**

The data reveals not just what event teams are doing, but where the gaps between effort and outcome are widening. Six friction zones stand out as the most consequential for strategic decision-making.

## **Loyalty Lags Behind Acquisition**

First-time growth is not translating into repeat depth or organizational breadth. New attendees are arriving, but retention and multi-person participation from organizations are slipping. This is the data's clearest finding.

## **High Adoption, Low Differentiation**

Many acquisition tactics are nearly universally used, but only a small number are named as most effective. Print, lookalike programs, and influencer marketing show the starkest adoption-effectiveness gaps. Presence is not performance.

## **Prospecting Is Strongest Where Familiarity Exists**

Confidence in acquisition is highest when working with known audiences. This is efficient — but may constrain broader diversification. The question is whether familiarity is supporting conversion or limiting reach.

## **Most Are Not Maximizing Use of Collected Data**

Extensive registration data — role, interest, industry, purchasing authority — is being collected but not visibly translated into personalized outreach. This represents one of the clearest untapped assets in the current system.

## **AI: Momentum Without Full Confidence**

25% don't use AI. 33% of users say it's too soon to realize improvements due to AI. Top barriers: accuracy/hallucinations (67%), learning curve (63%), and data privacy (39%).

## **Younger Audience Reach: Real But Not Ranked**

48% say email doesn't reach younger generations well. Yet only 3% rank it as their top challenge. It's a real friction point nested inside broader channel effectiveness concerns.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This research was conducted as a collaborative effort between Lippman Connects, Trade Show Executive, and EVOLIO Marketing. Together, we are committed to advancing the events industry through data-driven insights and community building.



EVOLIO provides event and exhibit strategy and measurement services that help turn moments into powerful brand experiences with meaningful feedback and actionable insights. Make data-driven decisions with EVOLIO. Measure what matters and let our data storytelling help shape your event strategy and planning.

Visit [www.evoliomarketing.com](http://www.evoliomarketing.com) to learn more.

Lippman Connects owns and produces Exhibition and Convention Executives Forum (ECEFF), Attendee Acquisition Roundtable (AAR) Exhibit Sales Roundtable (ESR), and Large Show Roundtable (LSR). Sam Lippman is a certified facilitator, expertly keeping every Lippman Connects experience engaging and on topic.



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