Beyond the Booth: The New Rules of Exhibit & Sponsorship Sales

How event organizers are growing revenue, proving value, and adapting to a more demanding exhibitor and sponsor marketplace

Conducted May-June 2026

Research conducted by

EVOLIO marketing

Lippman Connects

Trade Show Executive

INTRODUCTION

The exhibit and sponsorship sales environment is showing momentum, but it requires some level of shift in strategy. Event organizers are seeing growth in exhibit revenue, sponsorship revenue, pricing, and future expectations. At the same time, exhibitors and sponsors are asking harder questions about value, ROI, audience quality, customization, and whether their dollars should shift to options that provide better outcomes. Growth is available, but it increasingly requires organizers to move beyond selling inventory and toward selling measurable business value.

To understand how, and if, organizers are adapting, this research surveyed event professionals responsible for selling exhibit space and sponsorship opportunities. The study spans current performance, revenue outlook, pricing pressure, proof of value, sponsorship demand, sales strategy, AI adoption, and competitive pressure, identifying the shifts that matter most and where organizers should focus next.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Growth is real but no longer automatic. Organizers are winning on price and momentum today, but sustaining it means selling proven outcomes, not inventory

1. Exhibit revenue is growing due to price increases, not expansion

64% report higher exhibit revenue, and 64% also report raising cost per square foot, well ahead of gains in space sold (50%) or exhibitor count (53%).

2. Sponsorship growth is more balanced

58% grew sponsorship revenue on roughly even gains in sponsor count (48%) and price (52%), signaling real demand rather than rate hikes alone.

3. Exhibitors and sponsors are buying outcomes, not just booths

Demand now centers on thought leadership (78%), exclusivity (48%), and custom programs (43%), and 78% of organizers successfully accommodate the custom requests they receive.

4. Organizers' confidence in proving value outruns the evidence

79% feel they demonstrate value, yet most stop at demographics and attendance while engagement and ROI proof stays thin. 69% face pricing pushback from their exhibitors/sponsors, but 48% are unlikely to negotiate pricing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (continued)

5. Exhibit and sponsor dollars are relocating

85% see dollars shifting, most notably toward custom packages, proprietary events, and sponsorships, led by the move from standard to custom packages (43%).

6. Budgets are the dominant pressure point

78% name exhibitor and sponsor budget cuts their greatest threat, but the pressure extends beyond competitive events as 56% see dollars migrating to non-event marketing channels.

7. Prospecting is where sales teams need the most support

Just 60% feel confident finding new business, the lowest of any skill measured, even though email outreach is near universal (98%) and most-cited for effectiveness (38%).

8. AI is in the workflow but not the strategy

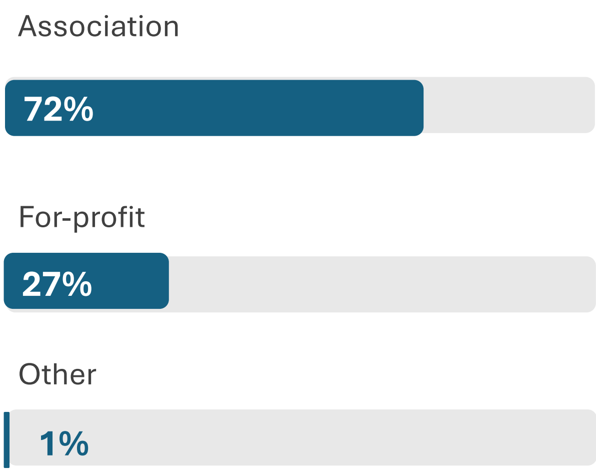
78% now use AI, mostly for prospecting and proposals, while high-value uses like pricing and forecasting (23%) and coaching (13%) remain far less common.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

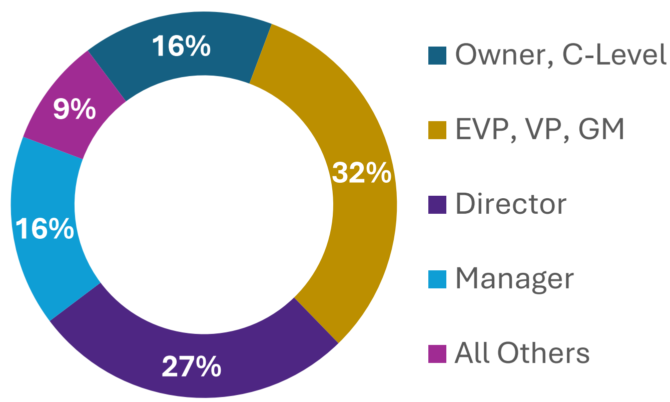
The respondent base is senior, experienced, and weighted toward larger events and associations

128 senior professionals responsible for selling exhibit space and sponsorships completed an online survey in May and June 2026, across a broad cross-section of industries. These are experienced insiders, not casual observers, which makes the findings a clear view into how organizers themselves see the sales model changing.

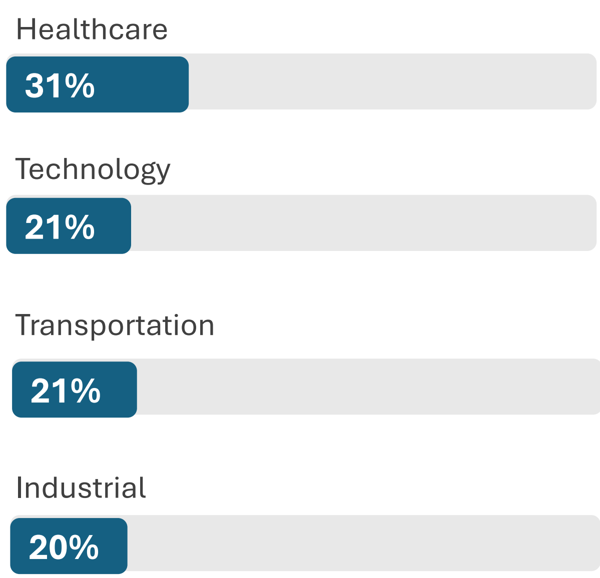
ORGANIZATION TYPE



JOB LEVEL



LEADING INDUSTRIES



20+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

59%

SIZE OF LARGEST EVENT

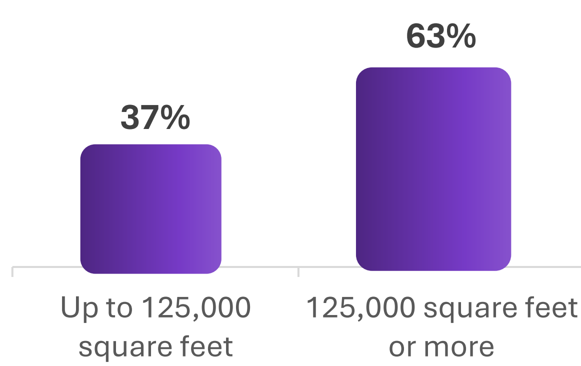


EXHIBIT SALES SHIFTS

Growth is in large part due to price increases, not expansion

Two-thirds of organizers report increases in exhibit revenue and cost per square foot from their most recent event. However, fewer increases are recognized in the amount of space sold and the number of exhibiting companies. This indicates that much of the growth is due to price increases, not to events growing.

CHANGES IN EXHIBIT SALES METRICS FROM MOST RECENT EVENT

Exhibit Revenue

64% increased

15% decreased

Average Cost Per Square Foot

64% increased

4% decreased

Net Square Feet of Space Sold

50% increased

20% decreased

Number of Exhibiting Companies

53% increased

20% decreased

Most expect exhibit revenue to increase again in the next year

68%

Simply raising prices will not be sustainable. As exhibitors' budgets continue to be scrutinized, organizers need to focus on selling value, not just space, as competition from other marketing channels comes into the mix.

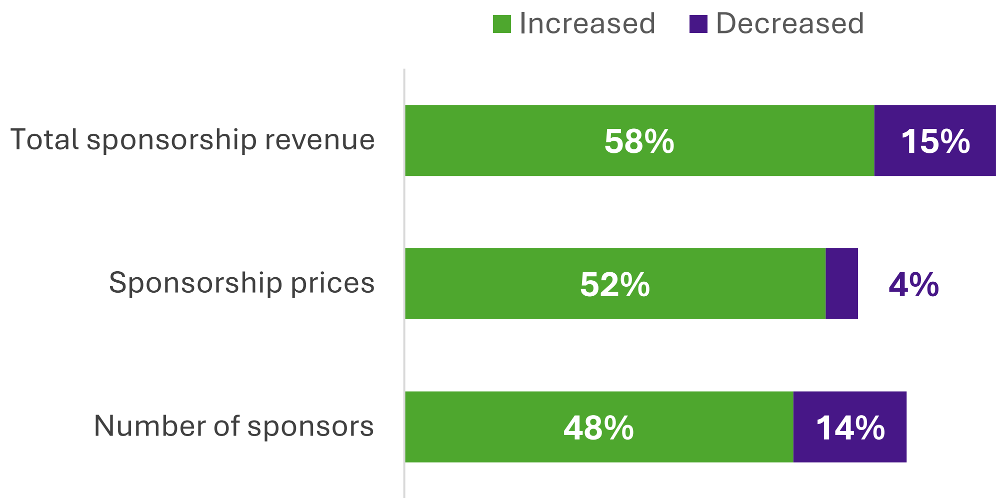
SPONSORSHIP SALES SHIFTS

Sponsorship growth follows the price-led exhibit pattern but is less dramatic

Sponsorship revenue is climbing, and 58% of organizers report higher total sponsorship revenue versus their most recent event. As with exhibit sales, price is the firmer driver as 52% raised prices while 48% added sponsors; here the two are much closer together.

It's the same story as exhibit sales, just less dramatic. Growth still leans on pricing, but the volume gap is far narrower with a 4 point spread between price and sponsor gains, versus the double-digit gap among exhibits. Organizers are charging more, and adding sponsors on balance, which points to some actual demand rather than rate hikes alone. Pricing power looks especially firm, with just 4% reporting lower prices, though the 15% who saw revenue slip show the gains aren't universal.

CHANGES IN SPONSORSHIP SALES METRICS FROM MOST RECENT EVENT



EXPECTATIONS ON SPONSORSHIP REVENUE IN THE NEXT YEAR

59%

expect sponsorship revenue to increase in the next year

The outlook stays positive, with 59% expecting sponsorship revenue to rise again next year. The opportunity and the risk are the same lesson the exhibit data teaches: as budgets stay under scrutiny, sustaining this growth will depend on selling measurable value, not just more inventory at higher prices. Organizers who can package sponsorships around proven outcomes are best positioned to convert this confidence into another year of gains.

WHAT SPONSORS WANT

Sponsors are buying outcomes, not booths

The most frequent requests that sponsorship sales teams are receiving center on thought leadership, exclusivity, and custom programs, rather than standard exhibit space. Because these requests are frequent and often granted, the organizers who win are those who can scope, price, and prove the ROI of bespoke packages built around a sponsor's goals.

SPONSORSHIP TYPES INCREASINGLY IN DEMAND

78%
Thought leadership and speaking opportunities

48%
Exclusive sponsorships

43%
Custom sponsorships

41%
Networking events and receptions

ACTIVE DEMAND, RATHER THAN PASSIVE

38% often receive custom sponsorship requests and 78% accommodate them while remaining operationally profitable.

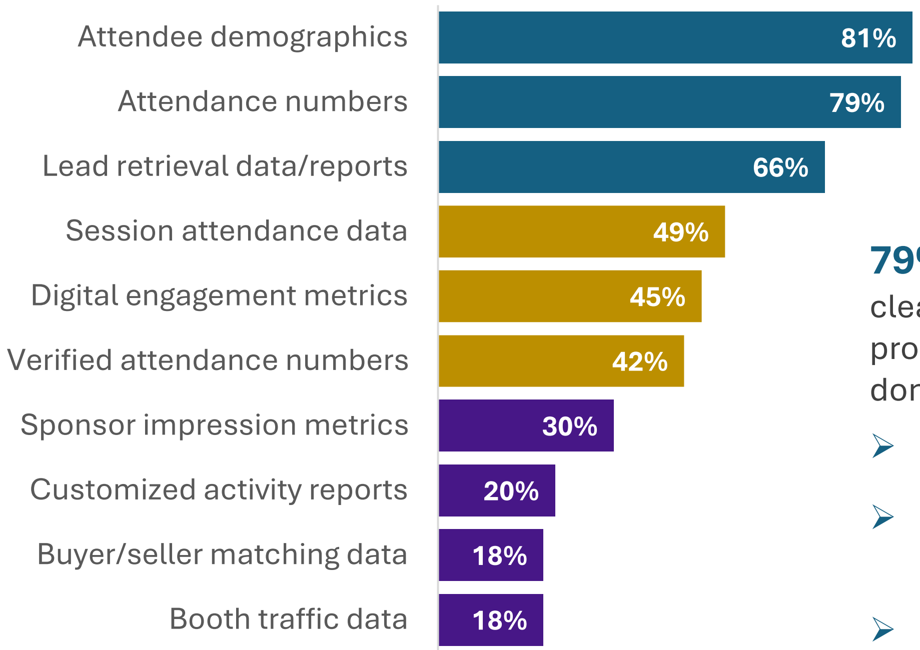
Organizers who can scope, price, and prove ROI on custom programs are the most successful; this shift will likely continue as more pivot toward consultative sales strategies.

THE VALUE MANDATE

Organizers are sharing who attends, but not what it's worth

Organizers' confidence in demonstrating value to exhibitors and sponsors is high, but the proof behind it is mixed. Most organizers can show who attends and how many, which is critical to ensure exhibitors have the opportunity to reach their ICPs (ideal customer profiles). Fewer can show engagement, ROI, or business outcomes, which is the evidence exhibitors and sponsors increasingly need. While some organizers describe a balanced or consultative approach to selling, the shift needs to continue to successfully sell valuable outcomes. Larger events provide richer evidence of value.

PROOF POINTS PROVIDED TO JUSTIFY PARTICIPATION



79% of organizers are confident they clearly demonstrate event value. The proof points behind that confidence don't necessarily agree:

- **69%** face pricing pushback
- **48%** are unlikely to negotiate pricing
- **55%** of exhibitors feel organizers align with their objectives*

Larger events hold a proof advantage, equipping exhibitors and sponsors with richer evidence of value.

	<125,000 square feet	125,000+ square feet
Provide attendee demographics	70%	88% ↑
Provide lead retrieval data	53%	74% ↑
Provide digital engagement metrics	32%	53% ↑
Provide sponsor impression metrics	18%	35% ↑

*based on a separate study of exhibitors conducted by EVOLIO and The Exhibitor Advocate

SPENDING TRENDS

Exhibit and sponsor dollars are shifting

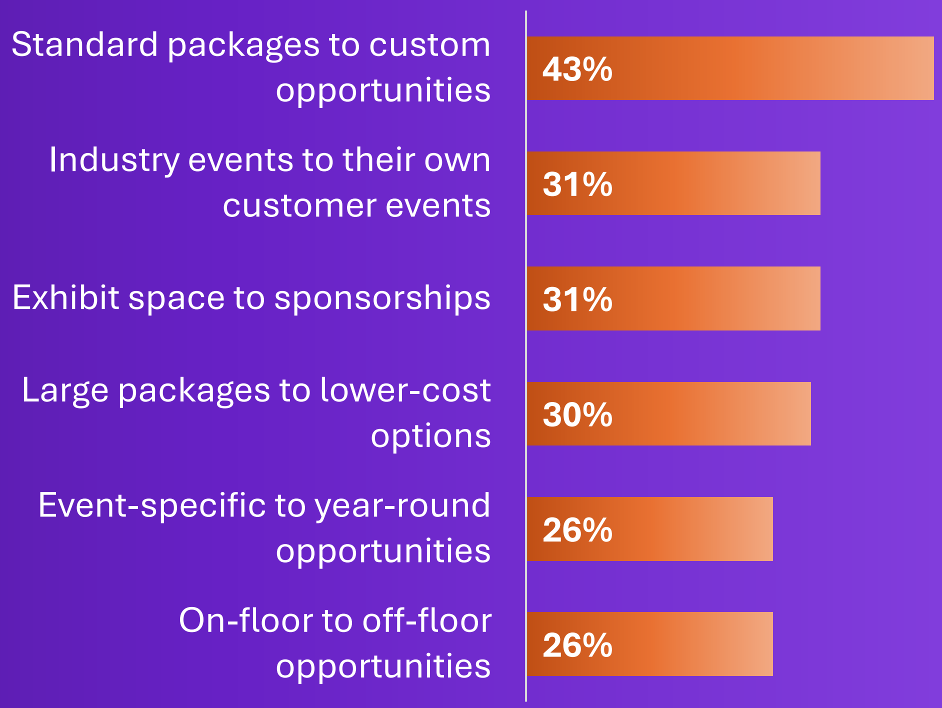
With 85% of organizers reporting a shift, exhibitor demand is moving off the floor and toward custom packages, sponsorships, and lower-cost options. In some cases, dollars are moving to proprietary events. For sales teams, the highest-value conversations are no longer about booth space; they are about building tailored, outcome-focused programs that justify a premium and deliver a return.

WHERE DOLLARS ARE SHIFTING

85%

of organizers are seeing exhibitors' and sponsors' dollars shifting

Larger events with more than 125,000 square feet are far more likely to see dollars move to exhibitors' own private events (37% vs 19% of smaller events).



PRESSURE POINTS

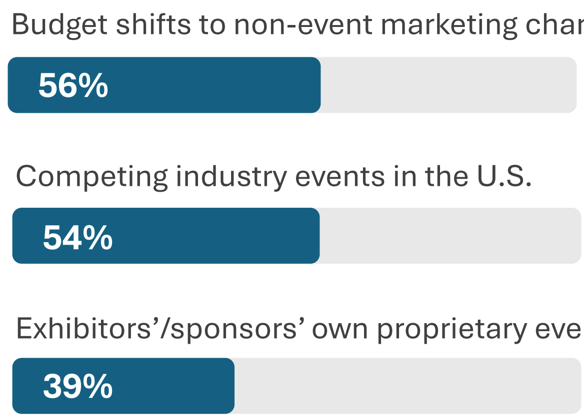
The fight is to prove that event dollars outperform alternative options

The biggest threat organizers feel isn't always a rival event; it's the budget itself. 78% point to exhibitor and sponsor budget cuts as their greatest source of pressure. Reinforcing that financial squeeze, 56% see dollars migrating to non-event marketing channels, meaning organizers are increasingly defending their share of the marketing budget, along with their share of the event calendar.

WHERE ORGANIZERS ARE FEELING THE GREATEST PRESSURE

78%

Of organizers are pressured by exhibitors' and sponsors' budget cuts



HOW ORGANIZERS RESPOND TO OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES AROUND THEIR EVENT

58% monitor/track them

45% engage them in partnership discussions

37% attend/observe

33% restrict conflicting activity

32% discourage conflicting activity

30% create official opportunities to bring them in

How organizers respond to private activity around their events reveals that many are watchful: 58% monitor such activity, and 37% attend or observe them. Others act decisively by engaging these players in partnership discussions (45%) and creating official opportunities to bring them inside the event (30%). The organizers who lean into the latter approach are best positioned to convert surrounding activity into revenue instead of loss. Discouraging or restricting conflicting activity could lead to attrition.

STRATEGIES & STRUGGLES

Email is the most used sales channel and considered the most effective

Sales teams use a broad mix of channels for their sales outreach strategy, but when forced to name a single most effective channel, email, in-person conversations at events, and phone calls capture the lion's share.

Across the industry, sellers blend the transactional and the consultative: 46% describe their approach as balanced, the single largest group. Confidence runs highest at the table, where 84% feel equipped to communicate the value of exhibiting and 75% believe they sell against a customer's exhibiting or sponsoring objectives.

But the funnel tells a tougher story. 68% are confident in converting prospects once they are found, but finding new prospects is the hardest part of the job. Just 60% feel confident sourcing new business, the lowest score of any skill measured. Top-of-funnel prospecting is where teams need the most support.

98%

use email, the #1 most effective channel

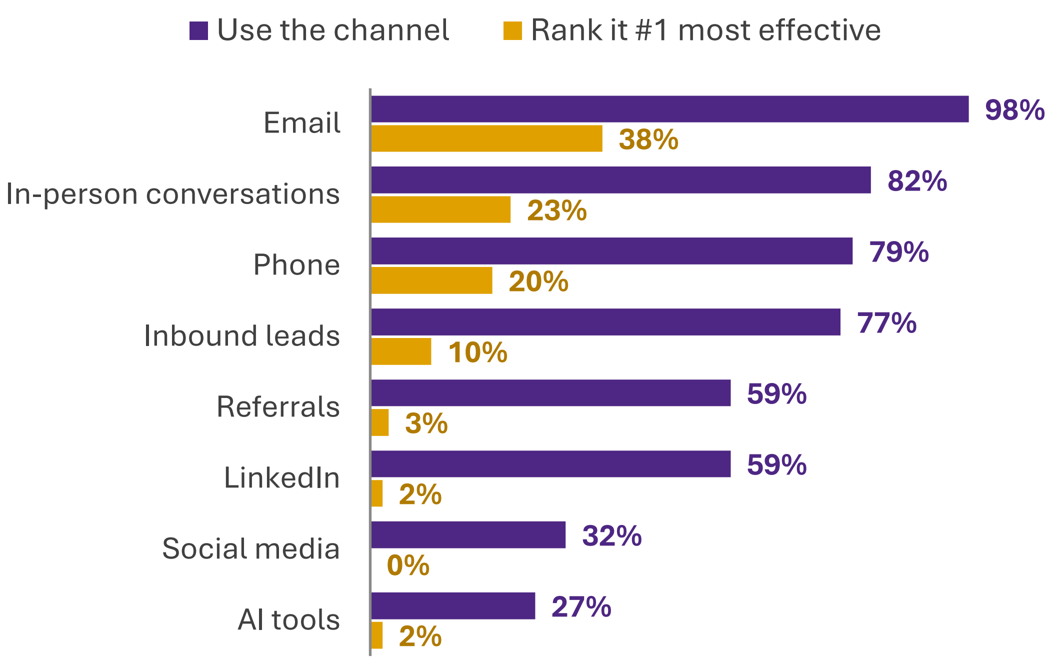
46%

use a balanced transactional + consultative sales approach

60%

are confident finding new prospects, the lowest skill

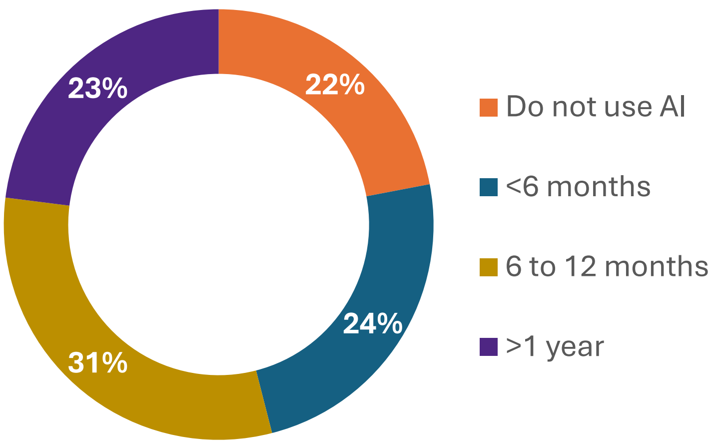
OUTREACH CHANNELS: WIDELY USED vs. MOST EFFECTIVE



Effectiveness is concentrated, not spread. Email, conversations at in-person events, and phone calls claim 81% of the "single most effective" vote.

AI IN EXHIBIT & SPONSORSHIP SALES

HOW LONG AI HAS BEEN USED



78%
of organizers now use AI in their event efforts

AI EVENT-RELATED USE CASES

AI is mostly used for executional support, not strategic decision-making

AI is now embedded in most sales operations, but largely as executional support. Current use centers on prospecting, proposals, demand generation, and communications, where it saves time and adds capacity. Judgment-intensive work such as pricing, forecasting, and revenue strategy sees far less use, and investment in training and coaching lags even further behind, suggesting capability-building hasn't kept pace with tool adoption.

FINAL THOUGHTS

GROWTH IS REAL BUT CONDITIONAL

Revenue, pricing, and outlook all point up, yet every gain is shadowed by exhibitor and sponsor budget scrutiny and harder questions about value. Continuing to raise prices without providing strong business outcomes will not be sustainable.

PROOF IS THE NEXT COMPETITIVE EDGE

Confidence is not enough when buyers want engagement and ROI evidence, and larger events are already pulling ahead on richer proof.

THE NEED IS TO SELL OUTCOMES, NOT INVENTORY

As exhibitor and sponsor demand shifts toward customization and year-round programs, the organizers who can scope, price, and demonstrate ROI for bespoke packages will capture the premium.

THE BIGGEST GAPS ARE PROSPECTING AND STRATEGIC AI

Strengthening the ability to find new prospects and applying AI to pricing and revenue strategy are the clearest near-term opportunities to convert momentum into durable growth.

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 to learn more.

Lippman Connects owns and produces Exhibition and Convention Executives Forum (ECEF), 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.

Check out https://www.lippmanconnects.com

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