



# Freeman Trends Report

Unpacking XLNC – How to architect serendipity and connect people in meaningful ways.

# Architecting Serendipity

# Methodology

**Total number of attendee respondents: 2,326**

Attendee margin of error: +/- 2.0%

---

**Total number of exhibitor respondents: 1,581**

Exhibitor margin of error: +/- 2.5%

---

**Total number of event organizer respondents: 207**

Organizer margin of error: +/- 6.7%

---

Trade Show – 58%

Conferences – 42%



**Total number  
of respondents**

# Overview

- **Generational Shifts Driving Changing Objectives and Professional Development/Skillsets Networking – Misunderstood & Under resourced**
- **Event Organizers Are Not Staffed/ Resourced - 96% have no one in charge of Networking**
- **Networking is the number one driver of Attendee Retention (CAC/LTV)**
- **Why, What, How – It needs staffing, monetization, & measurement**

The background is a dynamic, blue-toned scene with motion blur, suggesting speed and technology. A large, semi-transparent number '1' is centered vertically. The text 'THE WORKFORCE IS EVOLVING' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

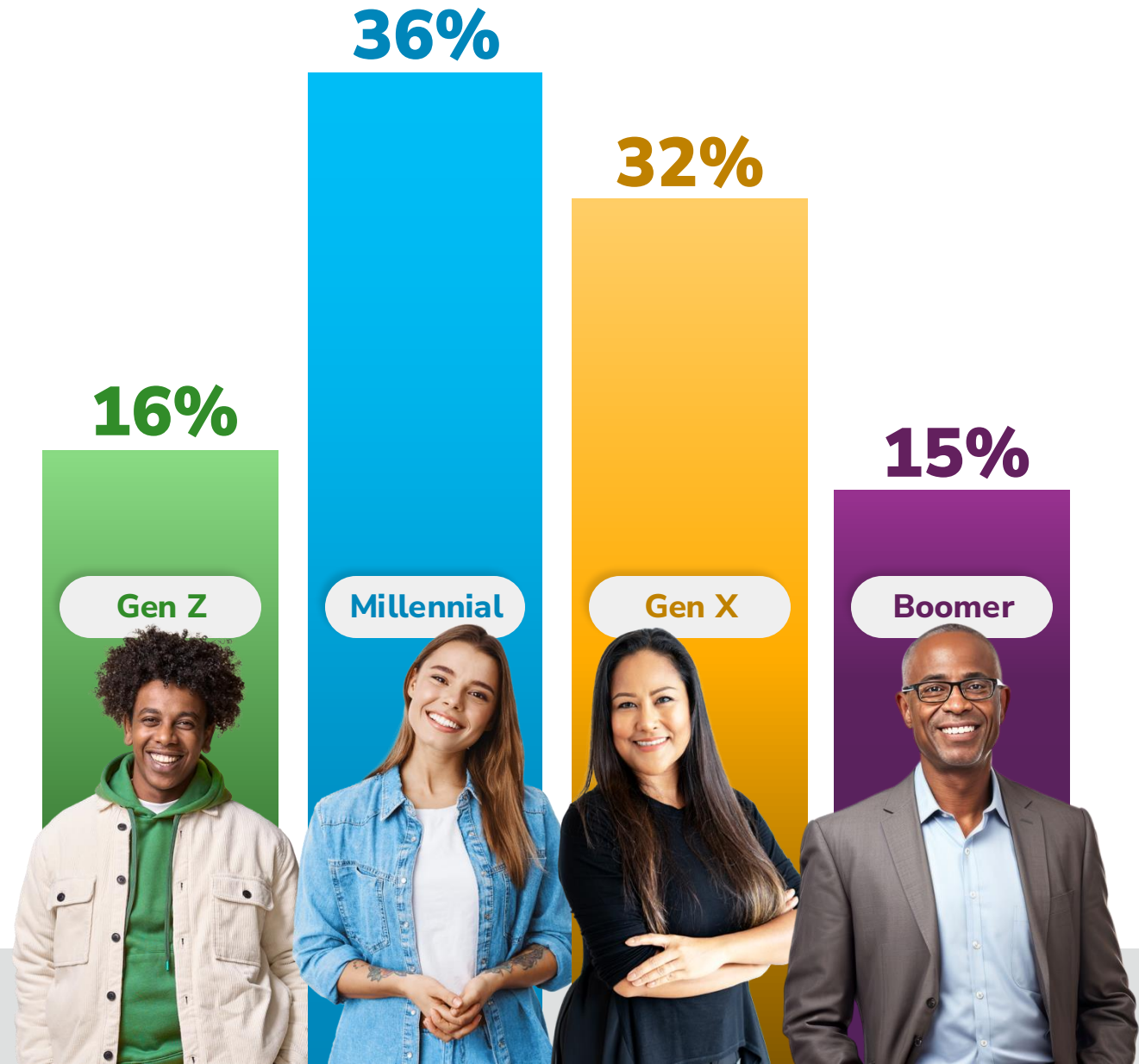
**THE WORKFORCE  
IS EVOLVING**



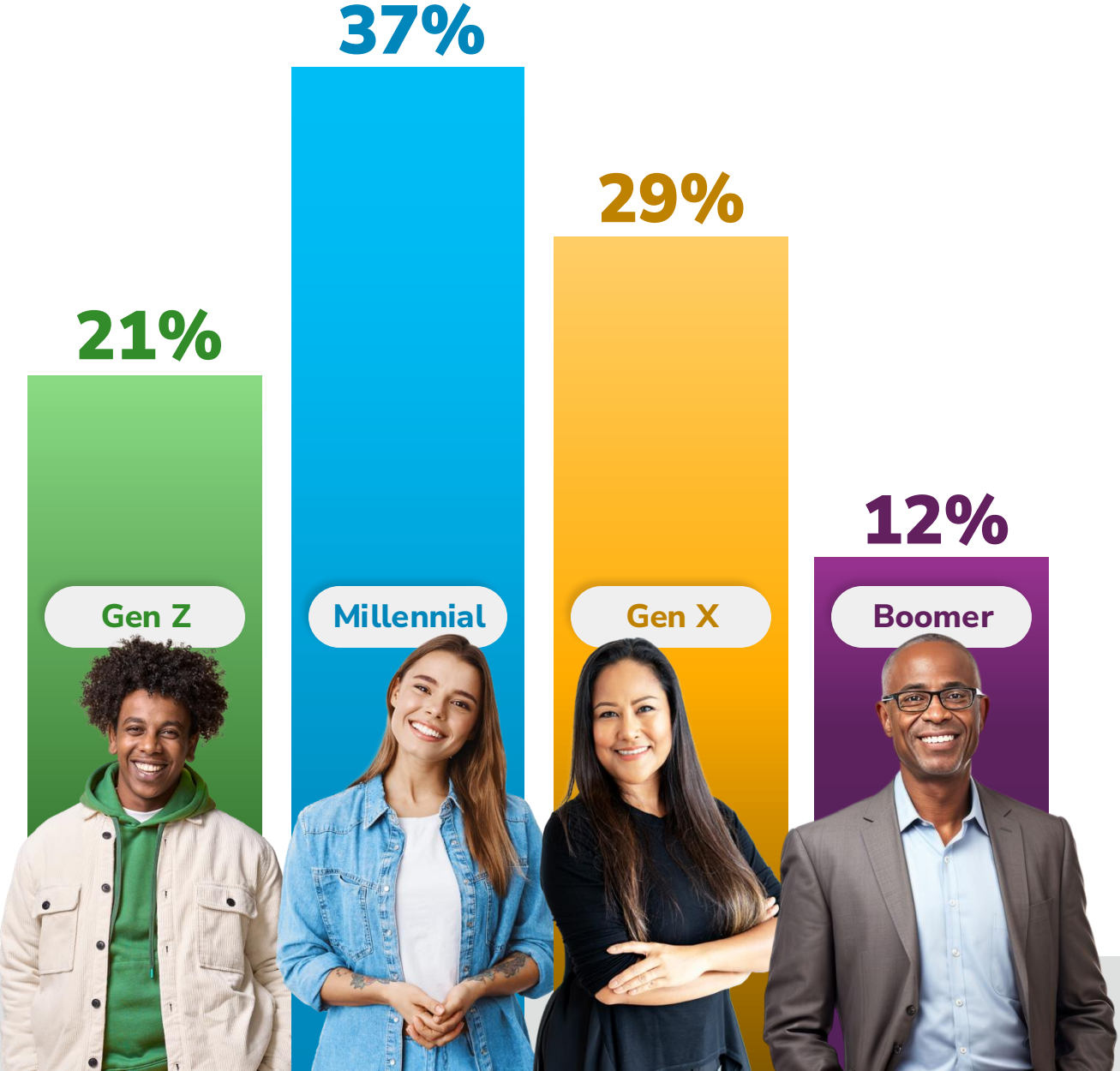
POV: You're a corporate  
gen z translator



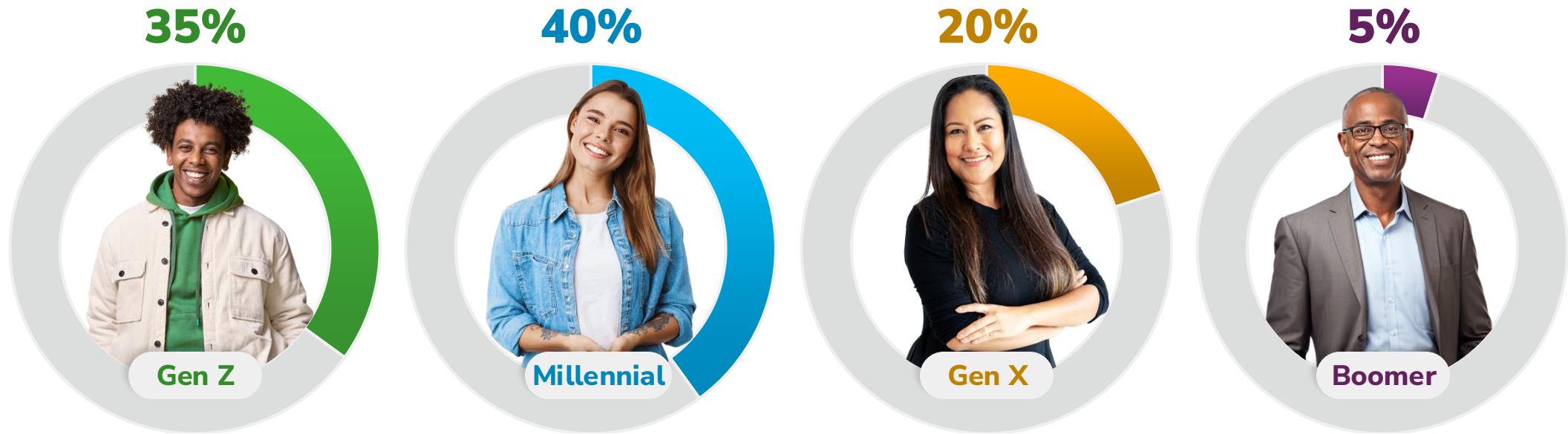
# Gen Z has Overtaken Boomers in the Workforce in 2024



# The Age Shift is Accelerating



# By 2030, Workforce Composition Will Be:

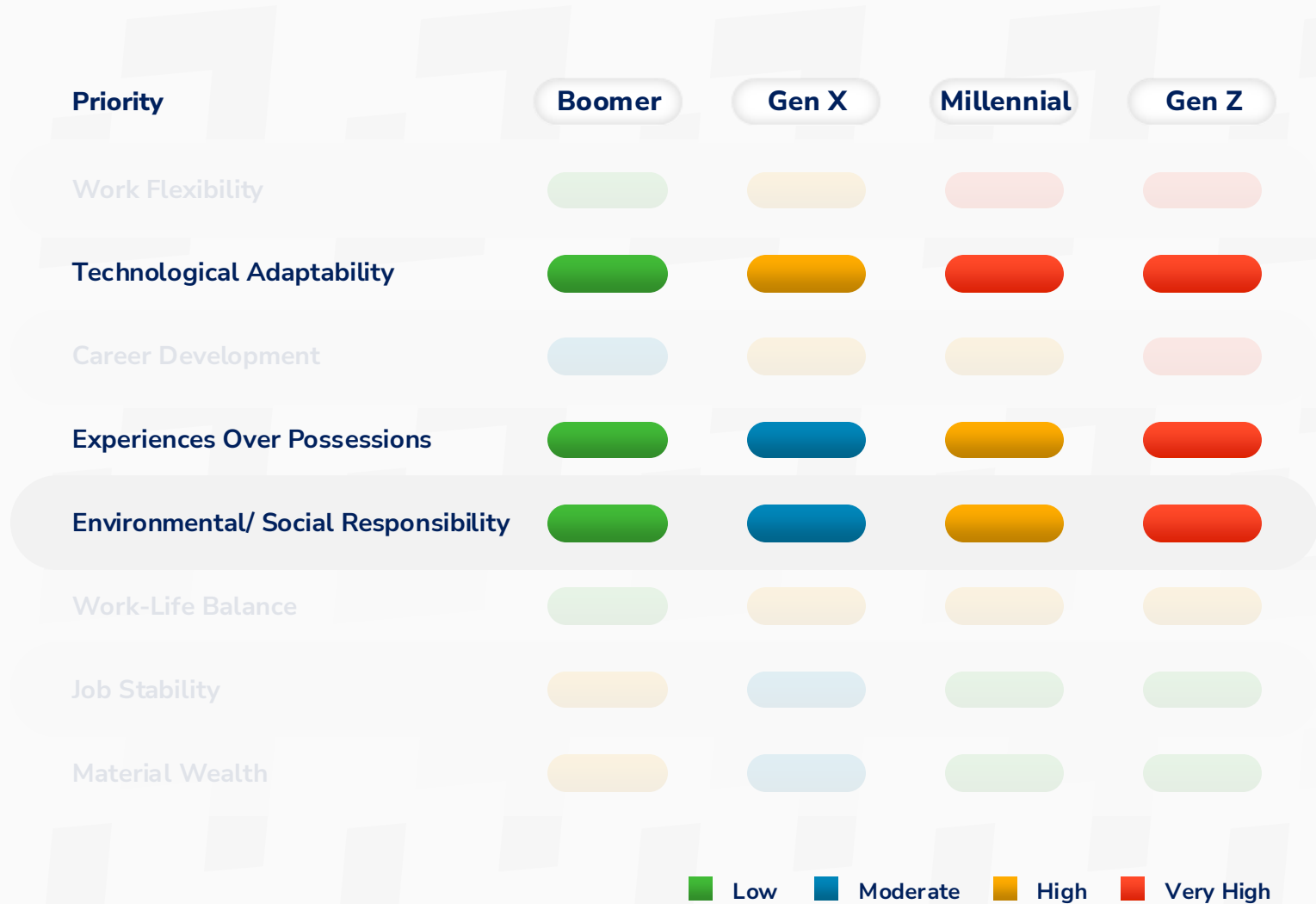


**Business Events can and will need to innovate to reach and engage emerging generations**

A futuristic blue tunnel with light trails and a large blue arrow pointing right. The text "OUR AUDIENCES HAVE DIVERSE PRIORITIES" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**OUR AUDIENCES HAVE  
DIVERSE PRIORITIES**

# Different generations, different priorities



Source: GfK a Nielsen Company

# Different generations, different priorities

## Priority

Technological Adaptability

Experiences Over Possessions

Environmental/ Social Responsibility

Boomer

Gen X

Millennial

Gen Z



■ Low ■ Moderate ■ High ■ Very High

**NowGen** is  
reshaping in-  
person events and  
commercial  
expectations



**Digitally  
native**

**Authentic  
connection**

**Socially  
conscious**

**Transparent  
value**

**22-44  
years old**





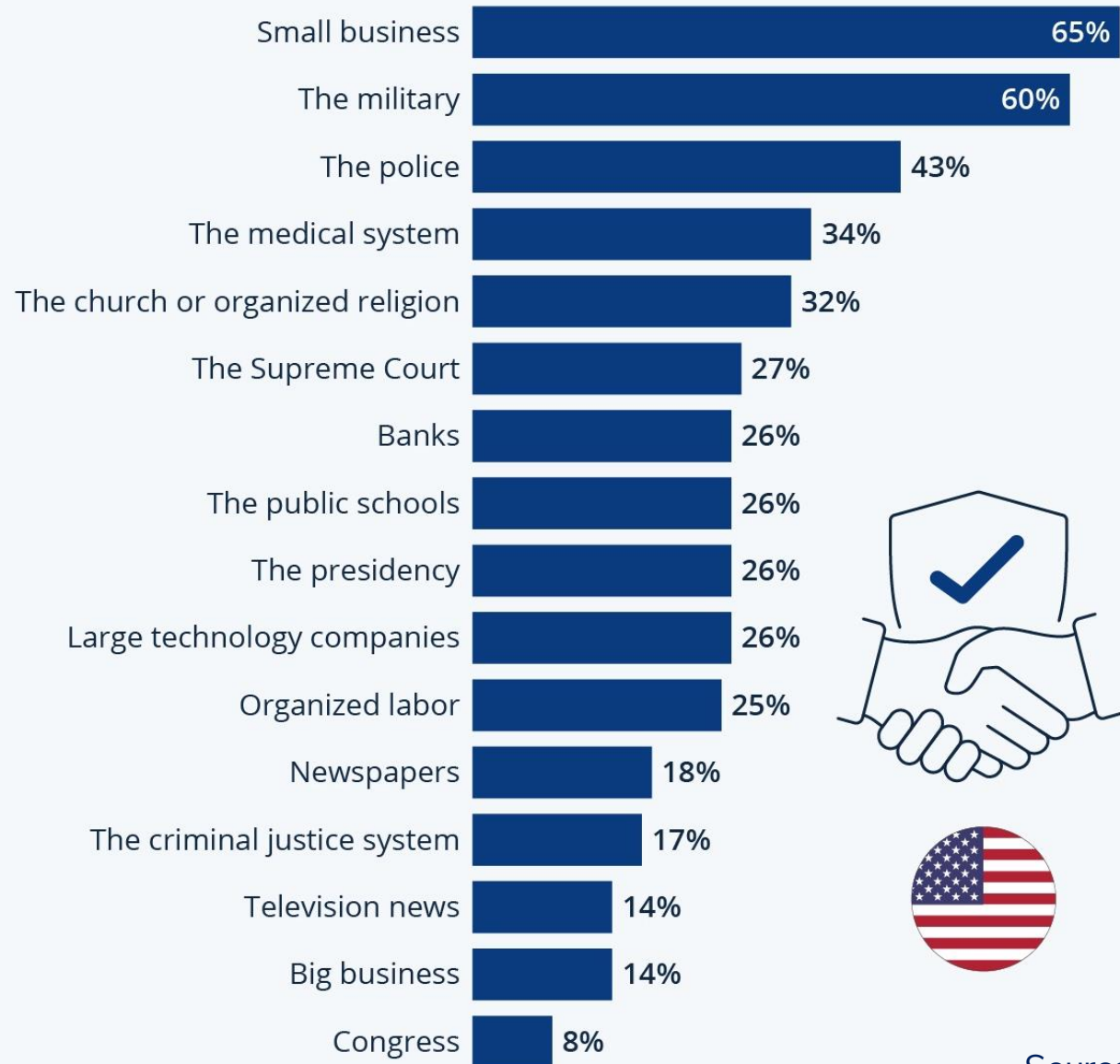
TikTok  
@b.u.p.c

The background is a dynamic, blue-toned image of a tunnel or a high-speed train track. The perspective is from the center, looking down a long, curved path that leads towards a vanishing point. The walls and ceiling of the tunnel are lined with lights, creating a sense of depth and motion. The overall color palette is various shades of blue, from deep navy to bright cyan. A large, semi-transparent blue question mark is overlaid on the center of the image, partially behind the text.

**WE HAVE A  
TRUST PROBLEM**

# The Institutions Americans Trust Most and Least

Share of U.S. respondents who say they have a great deal/quite a lot of trust in the following institutions



Source – Gallup

## QUESTION

How trustworthy are the following sources of information?

# + In-person Events are Seen as the Most Trustworthy Sources of Information

	2023	2024	
IN-PERSON EVENTS	75%	80%	▲
PROFESSIONAL TRADE ORGS	68%	68%	
ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS	65%	61%	▼
WEBINARS	48%	44%	▼
COMPANY LEADERS	45%	42%	▼
THOUGHT LEADERS	36%	31%	▼
MEDIA OUTLETS	12%	12%	
BLOG POSTS	9%	9%	
GOVERNMENT LEADERS	8%	8%	



Statistically significant difference between waves

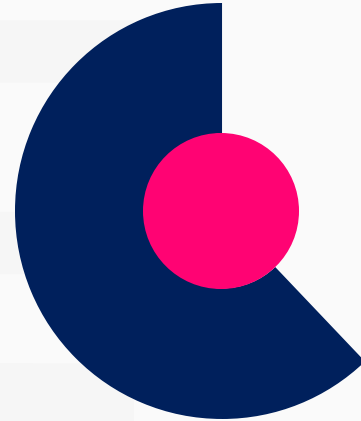
“Within the next 3 years, there will be so much AI, people won't know if what they see or hear is real. Which will lead to an explosion of face-to-face engagement, events and jobs. Call it the Milli Vanilli effect.”

*Mark Cuban*





**FOCUS ON KEY  
OBJECTIVES**





## **EXPERIENCE**

To have fun, feel emotionally fulfilled, explore, hands-on



## **LEARNING**

To be inspired, informed, discover something new



## **NETWORKING**

Connect with peers, build relationships with attendees and event partners



## **COMMERCE**

Discover products/ services, buy, build vendor relationships

## 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

**35%** of key decision makers



### 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?



Discovering new products / solutions



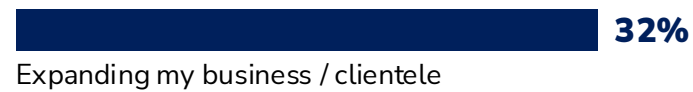
Training / technical competency



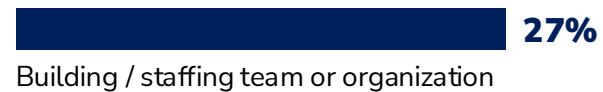
Building my network



Professional advancement



Expanding my business / clientele



Building / staffing team or organization



Mentoring / being mentored



Building my personal brand reputation

**Discovering new products and solutions is a top career priority**

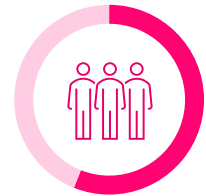


**In-person events are the best place for new product discovery**

## QUESTION

Where do you go to discover new products and services?

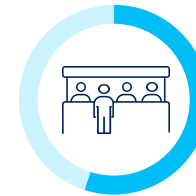
### Top sources for product/service discovery



**74%**  
In-person events



**56%**  
Company websites



**55%**  
Professional and trade orgs



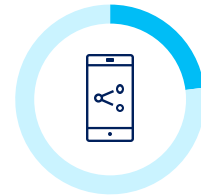
**42%**  
Search Engine or GenAI  
*(Google, ChatGPT)*



**41%**  
Journals/trade publications



**40%**  
Online events  
*(Livestreams, webinars)*



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

**32%** NREG





# High five to hands on!



# Limited hands-on exposure is most likely to prevent attendees from achieving their commercial objectives

## 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?



Limited opportunities for hands-on exposure to products/services



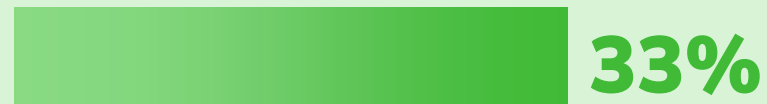
Limited or no provider subject-matter experts



Lack of relevant products/services to my organization

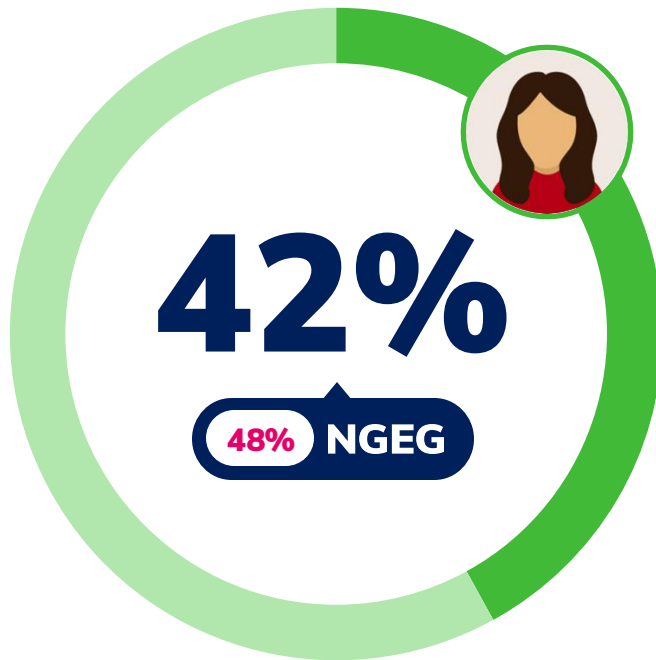


Challenge finding desired providers in the expo hall



## QUESTION

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



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

# Hands-on exposure turns attendees into product advocates



## QUESTION

Please select your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the hands-on experience

96%

95%

93%

Easier for me  
to advocate for  
the purchase of a  
product/service

Easier to  
determine if the  
product/service  
would be a good  
fit for my  
organization

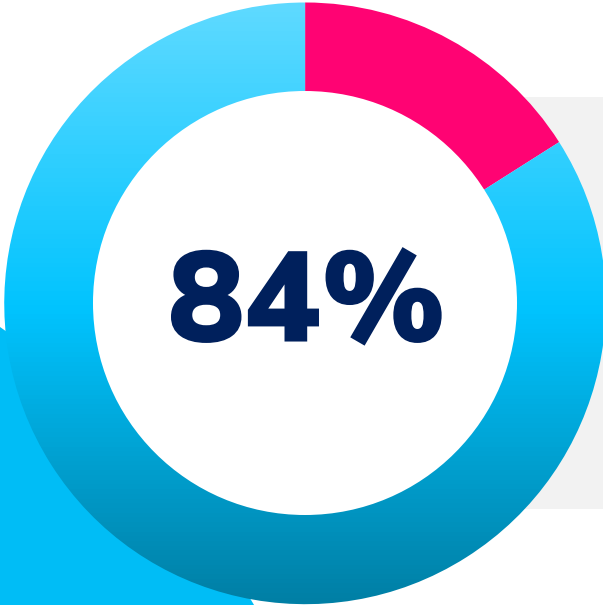
Helped improve  
my awareness  
of or evaluate  
an offering

# Prioritize SMEs!



**QUESTION**

At the most important in-person business event you attended last year, how important was it that you achieved each of the following



of attendees report that connecting with subject matter experts is extremely/very important

## 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**

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



#### Speaking with subject matter experts

from exhibiting companies

Attendees

58%

Exhibitors

26%



#### Being scanned and emailed afterwards

about products and services

Attendees

23%

Exhibitors

49%



# Why People Network



Design for  
why they  
came

Know  
who's in  
the room



# Meaningful connection is designed

People + Place + Provisions x **PURPOSE**  
= Connection

**Design for  
why they  
came**

**Know  
who's in  
the room**



**People + Place + Provisions x PURPOSE =**

**Connection**

**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

How do you measure whether networking at an in-person professional event was successful?  
Select all that apply.

**Networking is the largest factor influencing Attendee Retention (CAC/LTV)**



**51%**

**Makes me want to return to the event in the future**

**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

What does networking at in-person professional events mean to you?

**“Networking” means different things to different people**



**Networking is...**



“A rare opportunity to make connections with people outside of my normal working environment.”



“Gaining access to experts that can help guide decisions with data and experience.”



“Creating meaningful connections to advance my directives and goals for our business.”



“A way to share and learn from new perspectives and people.”

# What Makes Networking Work

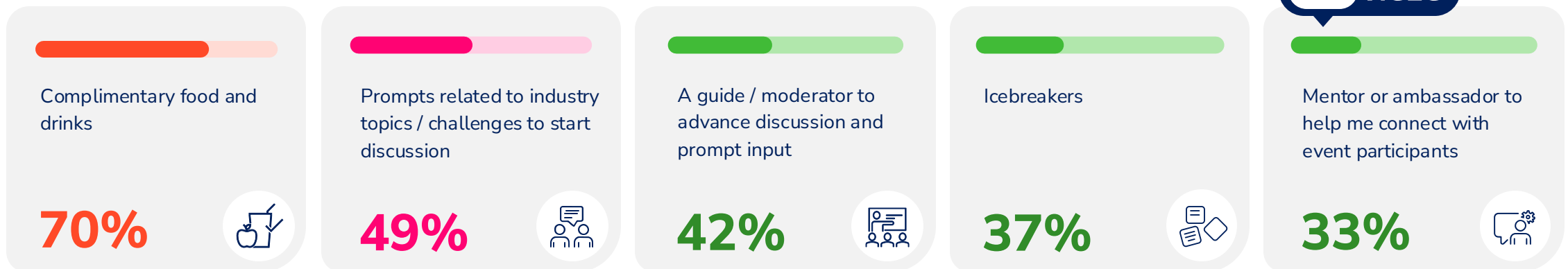


## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What are the types of activities / aspects that make networking at in-person professional events more valuable?

## Attendees want to connect over provisions and purpose

### Activities / aspects that make networking valuable to attendees

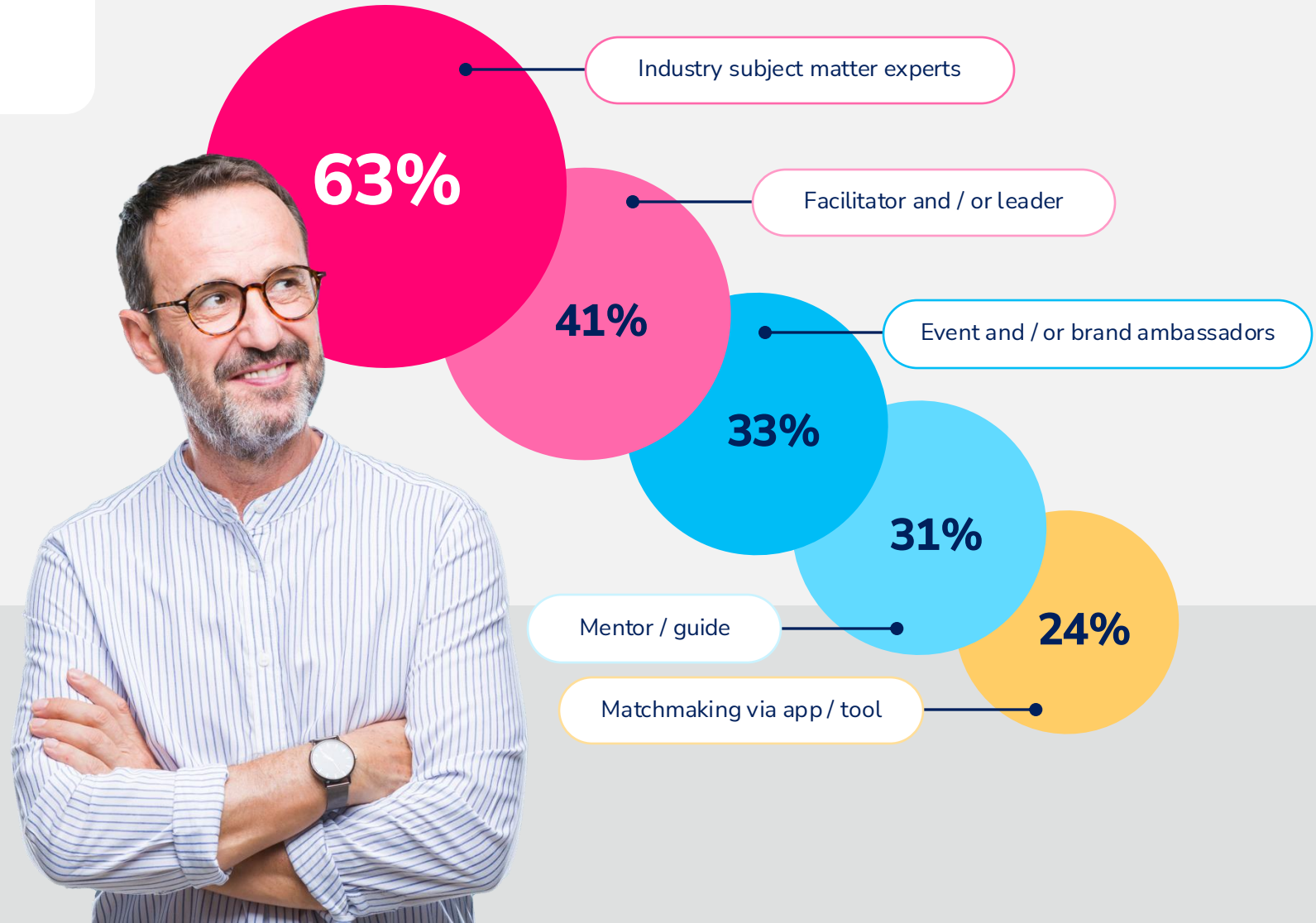


**ATTENDEE QUESTION**

How important are each of the following for helping you connect with others at in-person professional events?

**Experts help anchor networking in what matters most**

**Groups contributing to a successful networking environment**



 More data in appendix

# What Gets in the Way



## ORGANIZER QUESTION

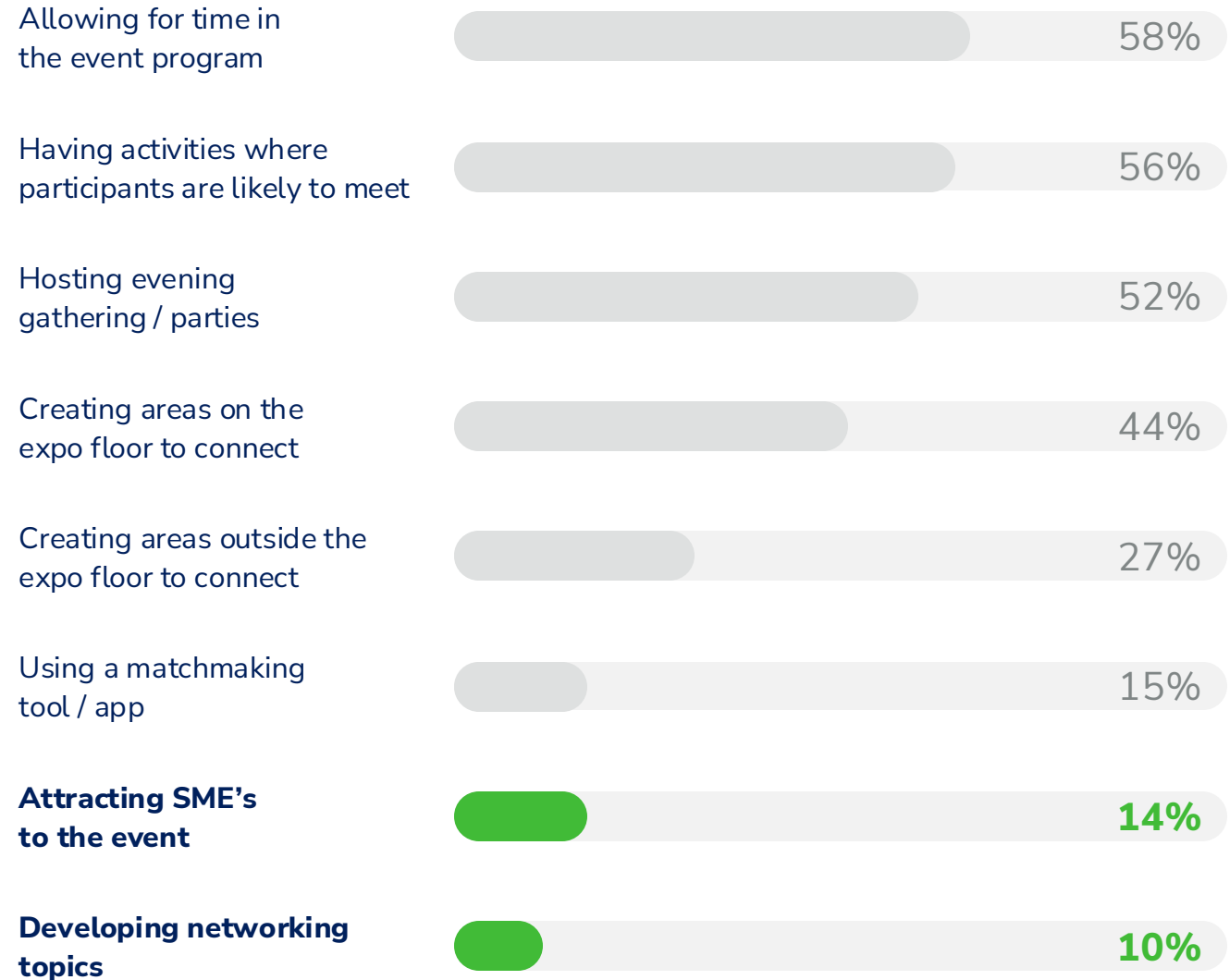
What do you believe your role is in facilitating how networking occurs at your most important in-person event? Select up to 3 options.

**Organizers don't believe it's their responsibility to facilitate the kind of networking attendees are asking for**



More data  
in appendix

## Organizers' perception of their responsibility in facilitating networking

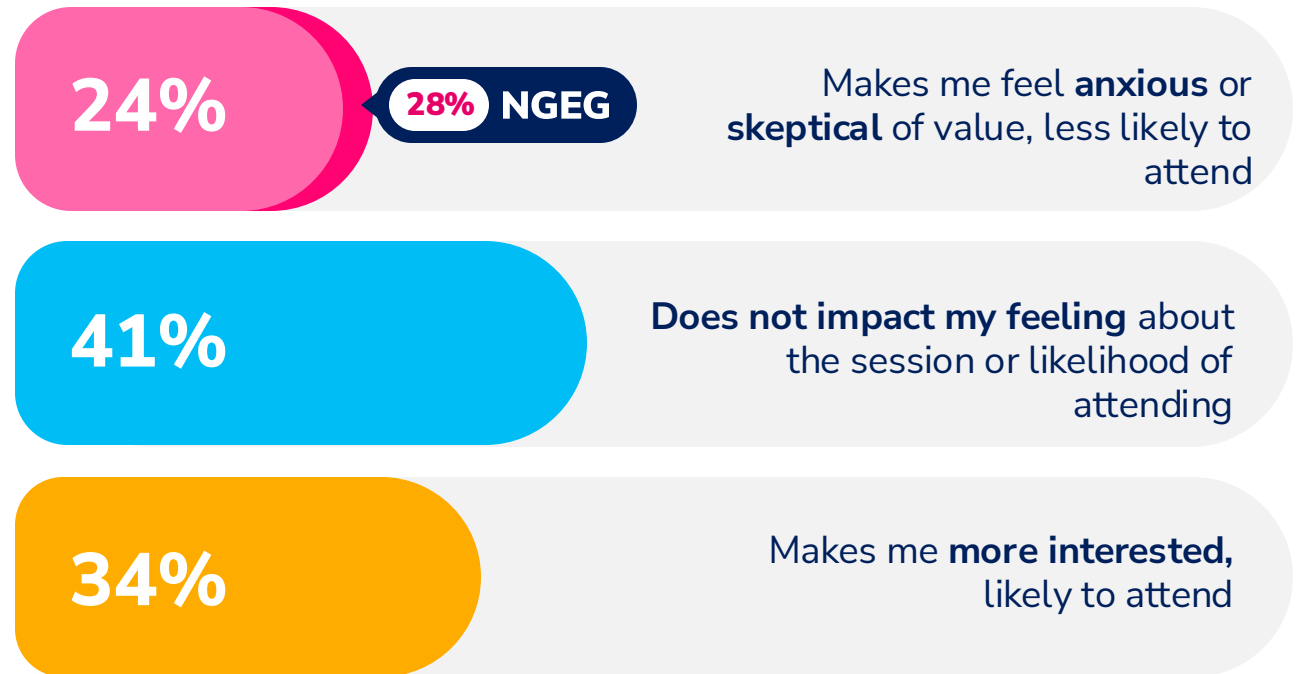


## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What is your perception when a session / event is explicitly labeled as “networking” at in-person professional events?

**Networking still evokes anxiety for some, despite those who gravitate toward it**

### Perception of the label “networking”





# The Connection Conundrum

That's the connection conundrum event organizers face, and it's one they have to design around.

1 in 5 have never worked in a traditional office

Craving face-to-face connection

Connection feels complicated



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

When you think of networking at your organization's largest event, what comes to mind or how would you characterize networking at the event?

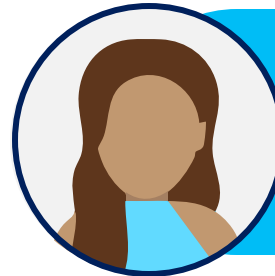
**Organizers often characterize networking as unstructured, attendee-driven free time**



“Unstructured or free time is when most of our networking takes place.”



“Networking is unstructured—we provide the space and expect them to connect on their own. There is no structure or intention.”



“We provide time and space for networking (longer breaks, receptions) but let it happen more organically.”



“Open-ended and attendee-driven instead of organized at the planner level.”

# How Organizers Can Connect People in Meaningful Ways

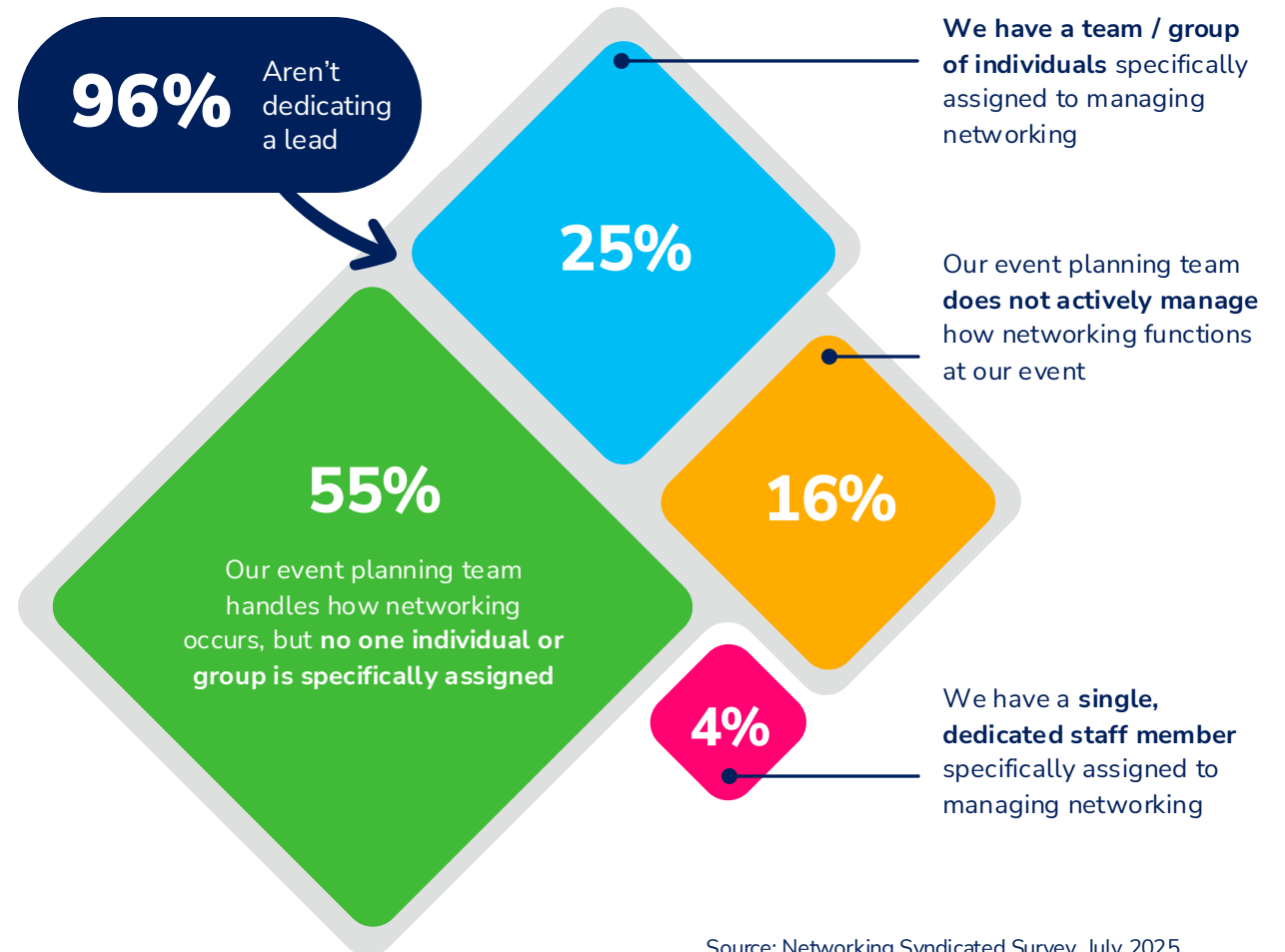


## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Select the best description for how your event manages networking at your organization's largest in-person event.

**According to organizers, networking often lacks a clear owner**

## How event organizers manage networking



Source: Networking Syndicated Survey, July 2025

# What Exactly is Experience?



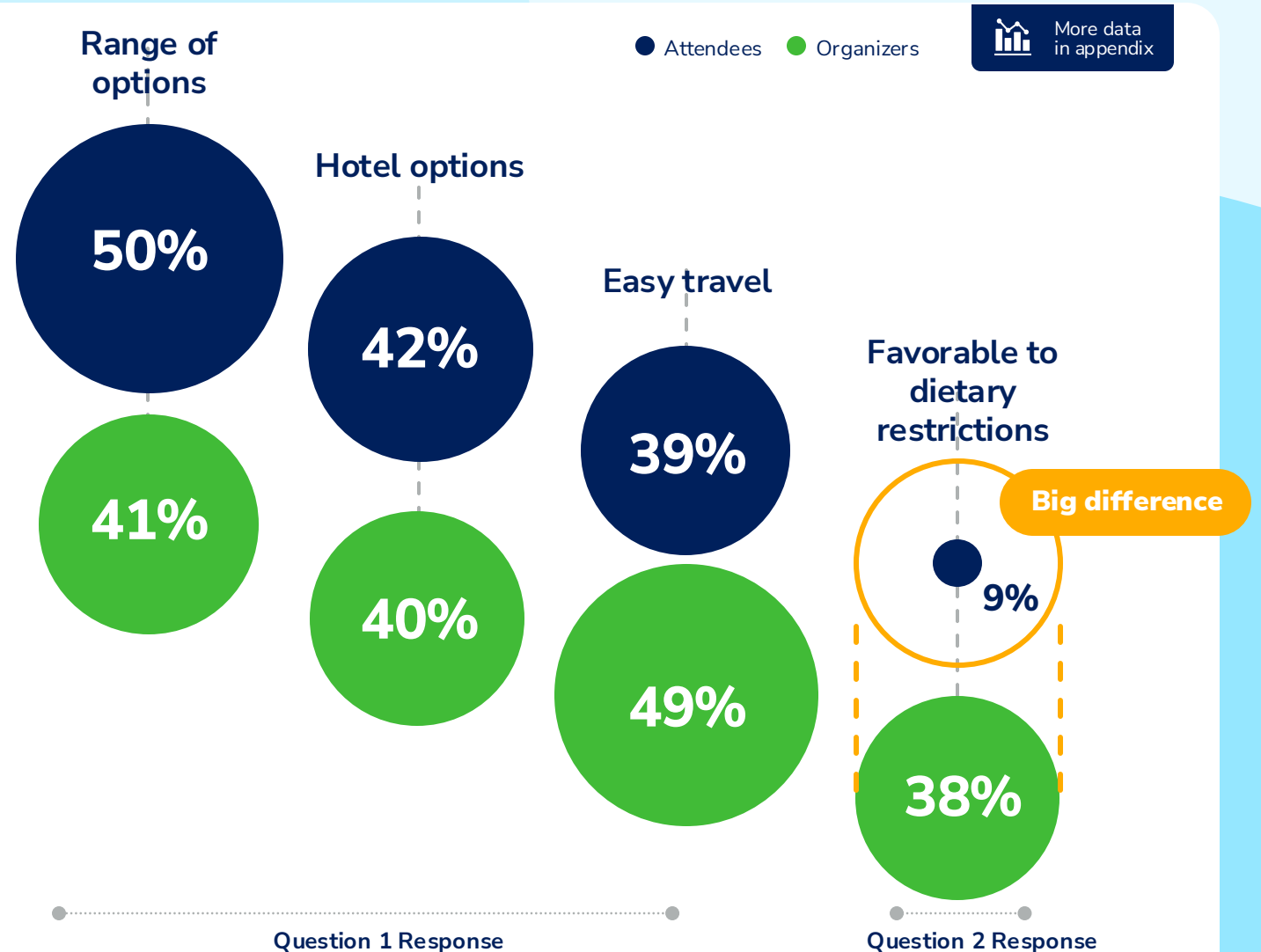
## QUESTION 1

What are the top location-related factors that influence your/attendees' experience at in-person professional events?

## QUESTION 2

When it comes to food and beverage options at in-person professional events, which factors do you consider most important/do you believe attendees consider most important?

**Location-related factors and food are a part of experience, but not the main elements**



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Which of the below options are most likely to cause friction for you and/or result in a negative experience at in-person professional events?

## ORGANIZER QUESTION

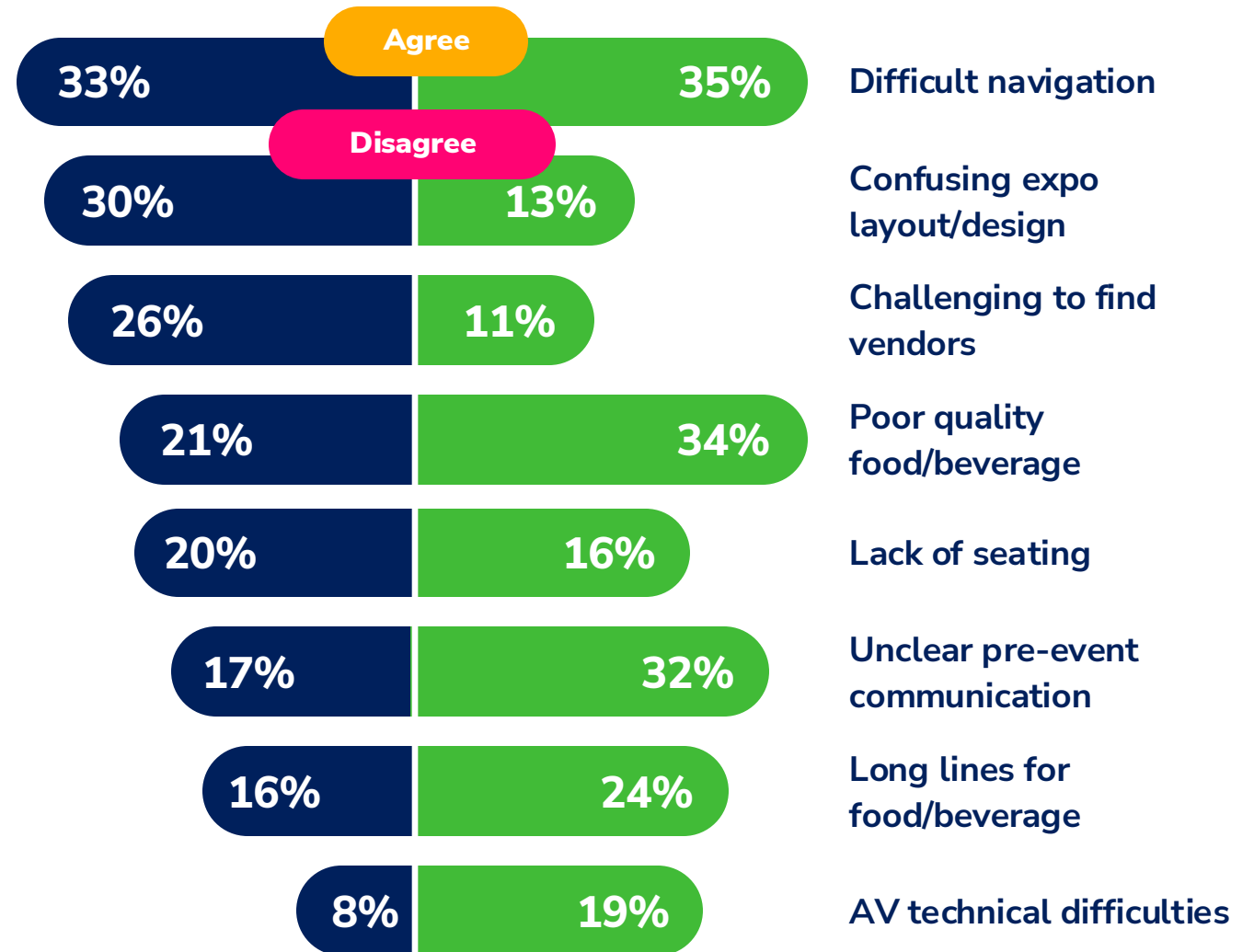
Which of the below options are most likely to cause friction for attendees and/or result in a negative experience at in-person professional events?

# Event and expo hall navigation are the top sources of attendee friction

## Sources of attendee friction

● Attendees ● Organizers

 More data in appendix



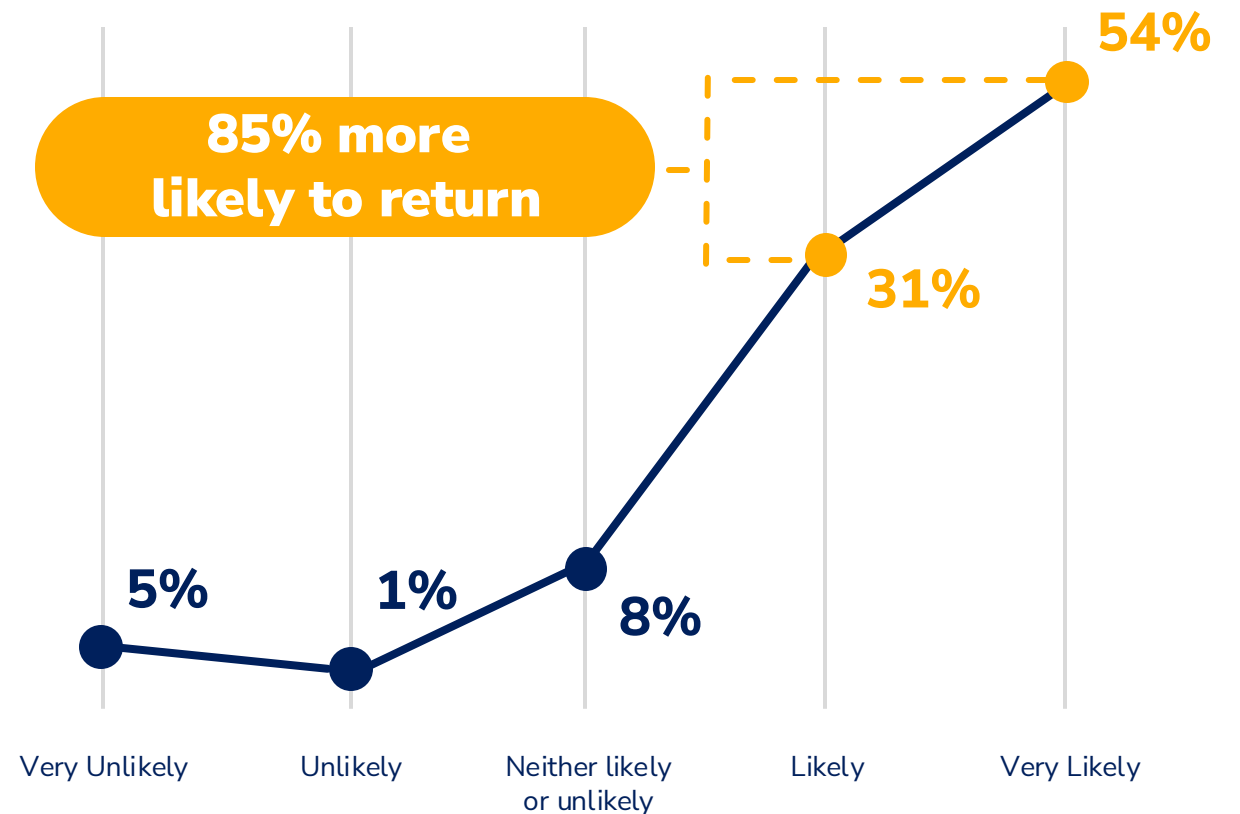
Source: Experience Syndicated Survey, September 2025

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Thinking solely about the “peak moment” you experienced, how likely is it that moment will make you want to return to the event in the future?

**“Memorable Moments” drive 85% of attendees back to an event**

Likelihood of returning to an event after experiencing a peak moment



# So, What Now?



# Unpacking XLNC



**EXPERIENCE**  
Fall 2025



**LEARNING**  
Winter 2026



**NETWORKING**  
Summer 2025



**COMMERCE**  
Spring 2025

