



Freeman Trends Report

Unpacking XLNC: Bringing the X factor to attendee experiences

IMEX Respondents Data Cut

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Within this report

Total number of
respondents: 2,619

Total number of attendee respondents: 2,198
Attendee margin of error: +/- 2.1%

Total number of IMEX event organizer respondents: 421
Organizer margin of error: +/- 4.5%

Callouts you'll see



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.

Attendees

IMEX
Organizers

Colors used when comparing attendee and organizer data side by side.



This icon signifies a standout segment of data that's worth focusing on.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The eXperience Factor

The X factor — we all know the phrase. It's that certain something you can't put your finger on, but you know it when you feel it. It's what makes a singer stand out from a hundred voices. What makes a piece of art unforgettable. And what makes a single event stand out while others fade away.

In Freeman's XLNC framework, the **"X"** represents **eXperience**; the chance to have fun and feel emotionally fulfilled. It sits alongside Learning, Networking, and Commerce as one of the four primary reasons people attend events.

Organizers often think of experience as multi-sensory moments, striking décor, or high-tech activations — the flash that's supposed to create the X factor. But our research shows that these experiential elements aren't always the ways to deliver an experience to remember.

Attendees rarely come to an event for the vibes alone. They come with tangible objectives tied to learning, networking, and commerce. And they've made it clear: production pizzazz doesn't matter unless those foundational goals are met.

In other words, **the X factor only comes to life when experience is intentionally designed with attendee objectives in mind.**

This report explores how attendees and organizers define event experience, what impacts those experiences for better and for worse, and how organizers should proceed.





Here's What Matters

We're not here to discredit the importance of immersive activations and production elements that bring events to life. Photo ops, sensory enhancements, and high-tech activations will absolutely elevate an event in the right context. But **there are some key differences between associations hosting professional society conferences and trade shows vs. corporate brands hosting user conferences and employee events.**

At brand events, high-end production, immersive experiences, and over-the-top hospitality often play starring roles. At association events, our research clearly shows that attendees' experiential expectations center more around achieving their core learning, networking, and commerce objectives.

What we found doesn't mean you should throw away the flash and flourishes.

It means you must make sure you're right-sizing them to the audience and their objectives, so they amplify the experience instead of overshadow it.

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.

This chapter is all about experience. We'll explore what experience means, to attendees and to organizers, so that organizers can design experiences that align with attendee expectations.



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



What Exactly Is Experience?



QUESTION

Organizers: At your organization's most important in-person event, when you think of the "experience" at that event what does that mean to you?

Organizers define experience in hard-to-measure terms

Historically, it's been challenging to pin down what experience really means. So, we asked organizers for their thoughts. Their answers lean toward the intangible: vibes, energy, inspiration, and atmosphere. The emphasis is on what can be felt over what can be measured.

Organizers' perception of event experience

"Creating a seamless, memorable environment where every attendee feels valued, engaged, and connected."



"It means for my attendees to leave the conferences with new information and great experience that keep them coming back!"



"An outlet for attendees to mingle amongst one another in a safe place with fun activities."



"We want every attendee to experience something completely different from anything they've seen before, leaving them with positive and unique memories."



QUESTION

Attendees: At the most important in-person professional event you attend, when you think of the "experience" at that event what does that mean to you?

Attendees' perception of event experience



"How many new contacts I can make and how many people I can connect with in my network."

"Being able to find new products, get information and network with people in the industry."



"The sessions are on-point for the purposes I am attending and the vendors compliment those sessions with products that support the industry."

"How the event shapes you and your thinking, from the time you arrive through the point you return."



"Was it worth my time and did I find it educational and enjoyable."

For attendees, experience is more about objectives than atmosphere

For attendees, experience is measured by their specific objectives. Did they connect with the right people? Walk away with new knowledge? Discover useful solutions? Experience, in their eyes, isn't just about the setting or the vibe, it's about the results the event delivered.

Top 3 comment categories

28% Networking and making connections

25% Product and service exploration

25% Learning and inspiration

QUESTION 1

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

QUESTION 2

Attendees/Organizers: 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

When executed poorly, location and food can take away from someone's experience, but they're rarely the main experiential drivers.

Nevertheless, it's worth understanding the top food and location-related factors that influence attendee experience.

Where it comes to location, attendees prioritize hotel availability and transportation access above factors like venue, local weather, or leisure options. Organizers were on the same page.

But when it comes to food, attendees emphasized the importance of timing and variety, while organizers placed more weight on accommodating dietary restrictions.

For dietary restrictions, be sure to accommodate without overcompensating. Offer a few gluten-free and vegan choices, but don't design the whole menu around them.

Location-related factors

● Attendees ● IMEX Organizers

 More data in appendix

Hotel/accommodation options

42%

40%

Easy airlift, train or drive to the event location

39%

48%

Food-related factors

Range of available options

50%

41%



Options that adhere to dietary restrictions

9%

38%



Action Item

Consider experience through the lenses of learning, networking, and commerce

Don't treat experience as if it's in a silo. Instead, ask:

- Does the environment support the learning attendees expect?
- Are there clear, intentional spaces for connection?
- Can people easily discover and engage with solutions?

Experience isn't separate from learning, networking, and commerce. It's how these core goals come to life.

What Impairs Experience?



QUESTIONS

Attendees: 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?

Organizers: 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

Attendees and organizers identified the top friction points that result in negative event experiences.

Both groups agreed: poor wayfinding takes away from the attendee experience most. But that’s where the alignment ends.

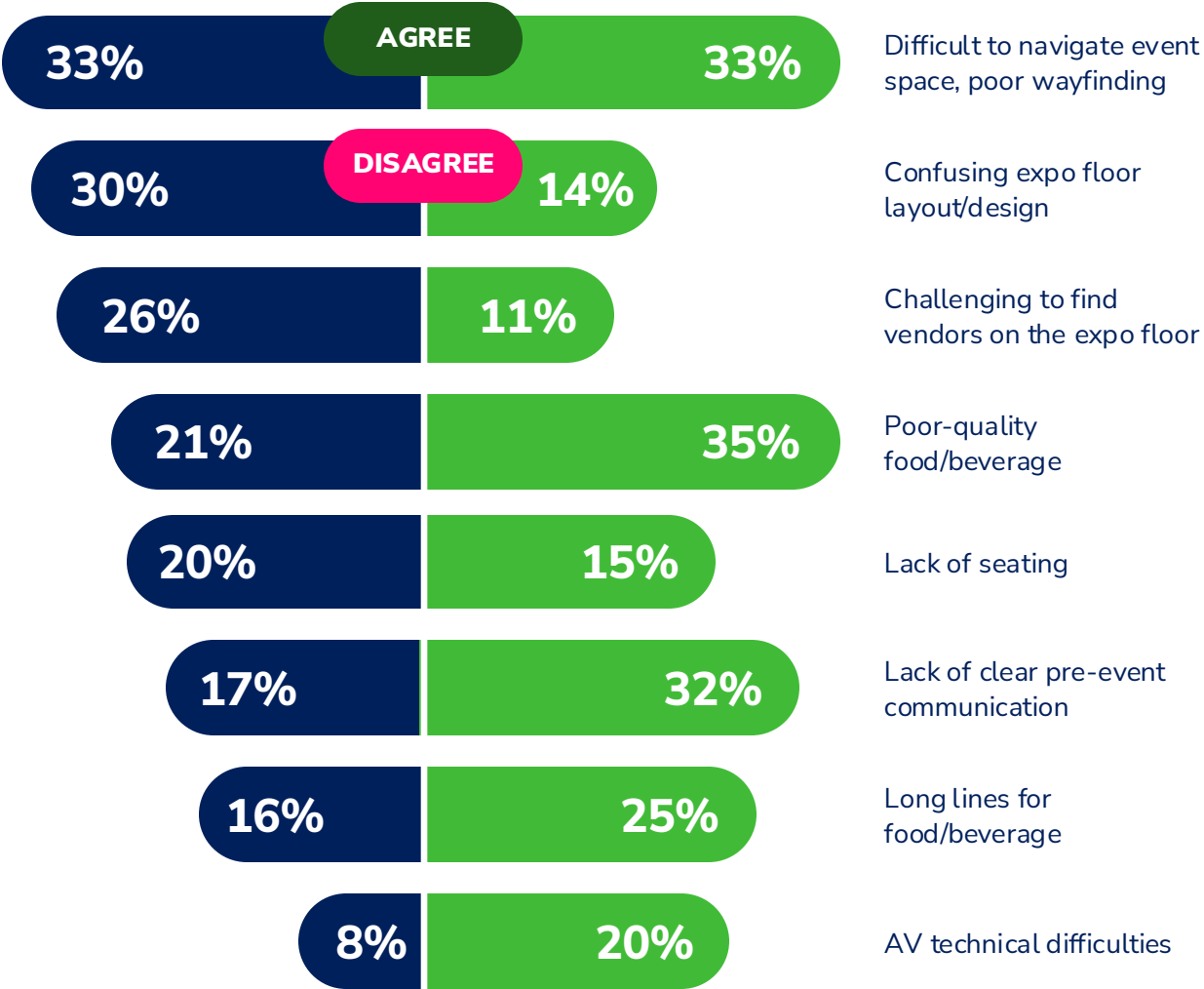
Attendees ranked “confusing expo floor layout” and “challenges finding vendors” as their second and third biggest sources of frustration. Organizers barely flagged them.

Instead, organizers pointed to poor-quality food and lack of pre-event communication as top friction points — **both issues that didn’t rank highly for attendees.**

Don’t fret, there are ways to reduce this friction.

Sources of attendee friction

● Attendees ● IMEX Organizers



QUESTIONS

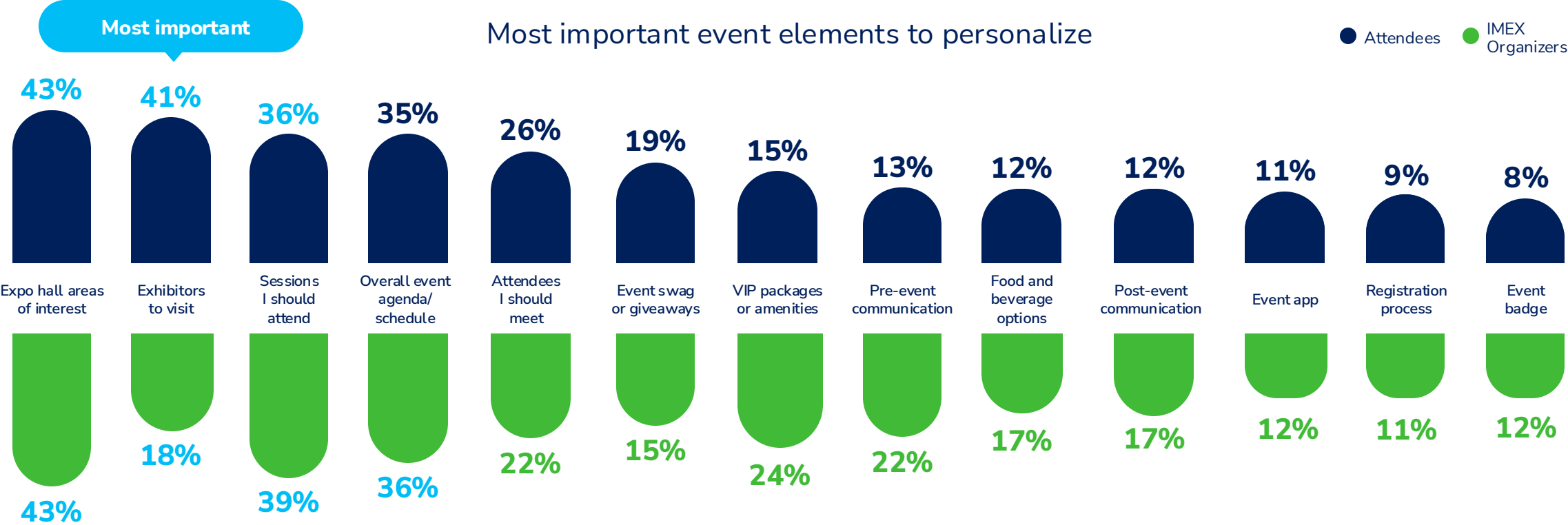
Attendees: Of the following aspects of in-person professional events, which are most important for you to have personalized? Select up to 3 options.

Organizers: Of the following aspects of in-person professional events, which do you think are most important for attendees to have personalized? Select up to 3 options.

Personalized recommendations can reduce friction

Attendees want more than a clear map of the expo hall; they want help finding the right exhibitors to meet their needs. A personalized expo floor guide is key to removing wayfinding friction and making product discovery — [a top attendee priority](#) — effortless. In addition to the expo hall, attendees want personalized guidance around what sessions to attend and what event-goers to meet.

Contrary to organizers' beliefs, attendees don't care as much about personalized amenities, pre-event communication, or food and beverage options.



QUESTIONS

Attendee: How effective was the most important in-person professional event you attended at personalizing the aspects you selected in the prior question?

Organizer: How effective is your organization's most important in-person professional event at personalizing the aspects you selected in the prior question?

Organizers have room to improve when it comes to personalizing what's important to attendees

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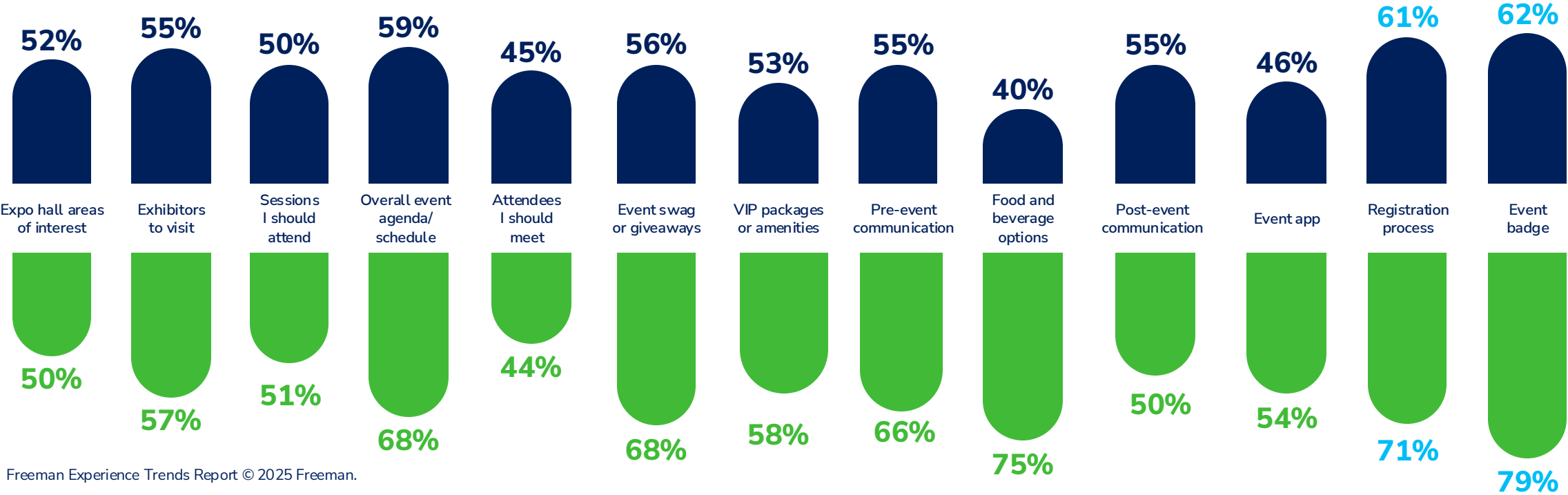
It seems that organizers are best at personalizing the aspects that attendees rank as **least important**, like **event badges, registration, and food**. Although these are core event components, attendees would prefer **personalized exhibitor recommendations, session guidance, and agendas**.

It's not a lack of organizer effort, but a misalignment of focus. And it echoes what we've seen in past reports: organizers might invest in the wrong things, leaving the biggest attendee needs unmet.

Attendees IMEX Organizers

Most effective personalized event elements

Most effective



Action Item



Bring the X factor by personalizing aspects of the attendee experience

Personalization can make the X factor come to life across commerce, networking, and learning. Use data you already have — registration info, interest tags, past session choices, or app behavior — to help attendees achieve their goals. You can deliver recommendations via event apps, digital directories, or at check-in.

For example:

- "Here are three fellow marketers to meet"
- "We think this session will fit your interests"
- "These exhibitors match your goals"

Even small nudges will transform a one-size-fits all experience into a purposeful experience.

Want more inspiration? Check out our [guide to personalizing live events](#).

QUESTIONS

Attendees: Did you experience a “peak moment” at the most important in-person professional event you attend?

Organizers: Do you believe attendees experience a “peak moment” at your organization’s most important in-person professional event?

IMEX organizers believe attendees are experiencing peak moments, attendees are less in agreement

We asked attendees if they experienced a “peak moment,” a **standout experience that was immediately memorable**, at their most important in-person event.

We also asked organizers if they believed attendees experienced a peak moment at their event. **IMEX organizers overwhelmingly said yes (80%), but only 40% of attendees agreed.**

Clearly, what feels like a highlight to organizers isn’t always experienced as such by attendees.

The lesson is one we’ve shared in some form again and again: **Experiences of all kinds must be designed with the audience in mind.**

Did attendees experience a peak moment?



60% of attendees said no



81% of IMEX organizers said yes

QUESTIONS

Attendees: Please describe the “peak moment” you experienced and what made it memorable for you.

Organizers: Please describe the “peak moment” attendees experience at your event and what makes it memorable for them.

Organizers and attendees classify peak moments differently

Organizers tend to classify peak moments as large, shared productions. Keynotes, celebrations, and surprises accounted for roughly a quarter of organizer responses each.

Attendees, in contrast, describe peak moments as more hands-on, personal, and practical, like building vendor relationships (41%), learning (20%), and making connections (19%).

That's good news: fostering peak moments doesn't require a massive budget or an over-the-top atmosphere. Instead, it requires attendee-centric, active opportunities.



Attendee top 3 comment categories

41%



Building vendor relationships

Through new product and innovation discovery, technology demonstrations, hands-on product experience

20%



Learning & development

Inspirational keynote speakers, gaining new perspectives, workshops

19%



Making connections

Meeting key industry contacts, speaking with experts, connecting with someone unexpectedly

Organizer top 3 comment categories

28%



Keynote speakers

Keynotes delivered by industry leaders, celebrities, inspirational, or motivational speakers

24%



Opening/closing celebrations

Social events and signature/ themed parties, gala dinners, concerts

23%



Unique/surprise elements

Unexpected experiences, activities that are unique to the event's location or theme, such as offsite excursions, impromptu entertainment or surprise guest appearances

QUESTIONS

Attendees: Please describe the “peak moment” you experienced and what made it memorable for you.

Organizers: Please describe the “peak moment” attendees experience at your event and what makes it memorable for them.

In their own words

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Organizers describe peak moments as large productions and attendees describe them as personalized, objective-driven experiences.

How attendees define a peak moment



“Instead of sitting at the same table for the whole event, the organizer assigned each attendee a number, rotated the tables and provided discussion topics for each round.”

“Seeing new solutions in action and discussing them directly with suppliers, because it connected innovation with real-world application for my projects.”



“A specifically great presentation by a keynote presenter with market data, product information and challenges.”

“Connecting with the owner/creator of a product and sharing the behind-the-scenes stories.”



How organizers define a peak moment



“When they feel that they have received the most out of their attendance at an event.”

“The moment where the culmination of immersion and message meet, invoking emotion.”



“A Peak Moment could be a memorable immersive experience either through a keynote speaker session as well as through best food & beverage experience.”

“The general session that provides excitement and inspiration.”



QUESTION

Attendees: 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?

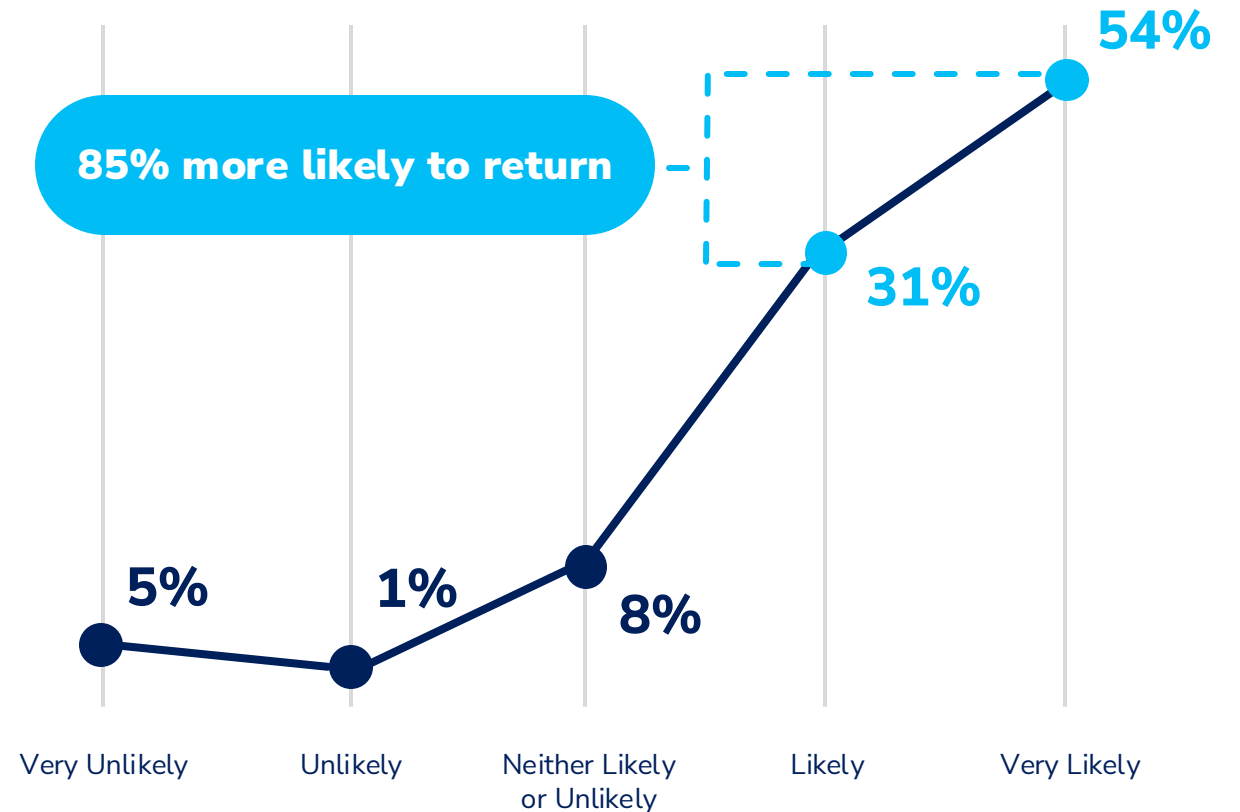
Peak moments that matter drive 85% of attendees back to an event

More than half of attendees aren't experiencing peak moments. That's a problem, because when they do **85% are more likely to return.**

In a climate where rising costs are squeezing margins, retention is the number one way to protect your bottom line.

Hands-on moments aren't optional. They're a proven lever for loyalty. Until they're designed through the eyes of attendees, organizers will keep leaving that 85% on the table.

Likelihood of returning to an event after experiencing a peak moment





Organizers, Stop Looking in the Mirror

A mirror only shows you the surface: your own reflection. Too many event experiences are still designed that way: around what you think is inspiring, impressive, or fun.

If you're an event organizer, chances are that big parties, elaborate ceremonies, and on-stage productions energize you. But **most of your attendees aren't wired that way**. They're not looking for spectacle, they're looking for substance.

Consider this a reminder: **you can't design your events based on what you think matters**. Your attendees bring their own objectives, priorities, and measures of success.

Our research makes it clear: **friction happens when you plan for what matters most to you**, instead of what your attendees actually need.



How Do Immersive Experiences and Active Participation Come into Play?



QUESTION

Attendees: What aspects of in-person professional events are most likely to make you feel like an active, rather than passive, participant?

Hands-on interactions make attendees feel like active participants instead of passive bystanders

Hands-on interactions change how attendees see themselves at an event.

When they're trying out a product, solving a problem with peers, or adding their voices to a discussion, they feel like active participants with a stake in the experience, not passive observers.

That shift matters. Intentional, active engagement brings the X factor. It's also the foundation of how attendees define immersive experiences (keep reading to learn more).

Attendees' definition of active participation at events



"Makes me feel like I'm part of the conversation."



"Keeps me more invested in the event."



"Keeps me engaged and helps me connect more deeply with the material and the people."



"Makes me feel like I'm contributing, not just listening."



"Allows me to share my perspective and learn from peers rather than just listen passively."

QUESTIONS

Attendees: Which descriptions do you consider most representative of “immersive” experiences at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

Organizers: Which descriptions do you consider most representative of “immersive” experiences at your organization’s most important in-person event? Select up to 3 options.

Immersive experiences are hands-on experiences

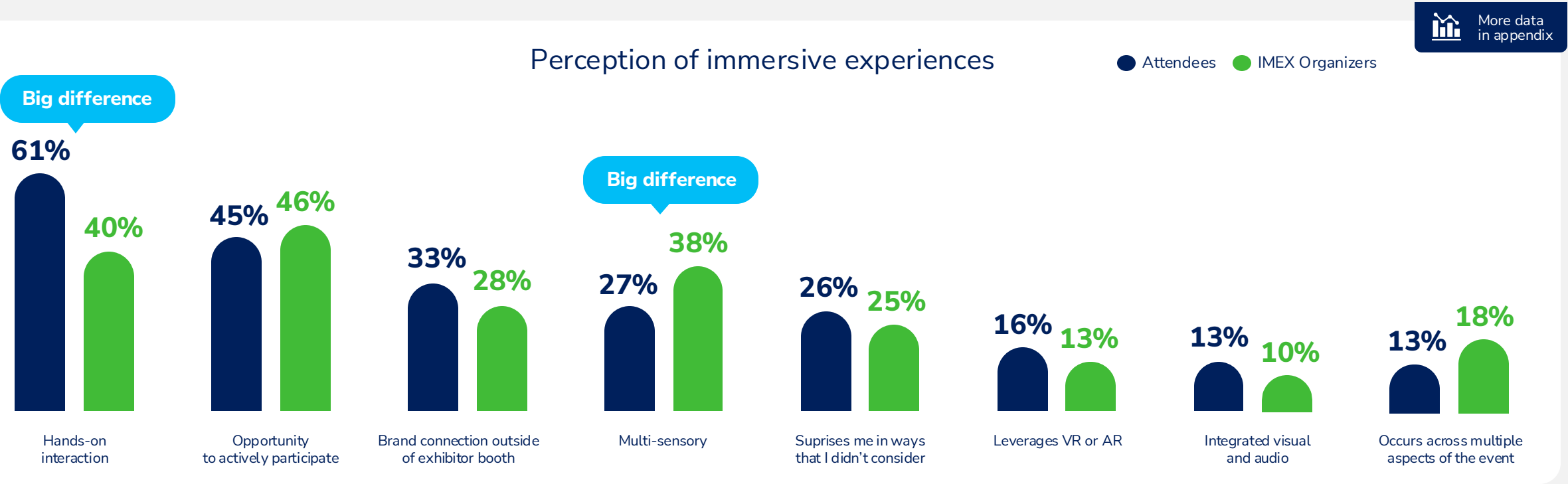
Attendees have [long prioritized](#) immersive experiences. Now we know what that really means. **More than 6 in 10 attendees define immersive experiences as hands-on interaction.**

That answer lines up with what we saw in the [2025 Commerce Report](#): Commercial excellence hinges on

hands-on experiences. Now we see that attendees want that same level of interaction across learning, networking, and commerce.

Once again, organizers can breathe a sigh of relief: immersive experiences don’t require breaking the bank for multi-sensory, high-tech elements. They just require thought and creativity.

Perception of immersive experiences



QUESTION

Attendees: What type of experience(s) at in-person professional events would you characterize as “immersive”?

Immersive experiences are objective-driven experiences

When attendees describe immersive in their own words, we see that immersive experiences aren't just hands-on – they're tied to objectives. Some attendees highlight product demos, others call out educational sessions, and others point to peer discussions.

Just like experience overall, attendees want immersive experiences to align with why they showed up in the first place, whether that be to learn, network, or do business. Organizers bring the X factor when they create experiences designed to meet those objectives.

Top 3 comment categories

38% Product interaction

25% Learning and development

23% Networking

Attendees' characterization of immersive experiences



“Hands-on demonstrations (trying out new tools, technology, or methods yourself).”



“Ability to mingle with/meet new industry contacts to help grow professionally.”



“An event where you are able to move from one conversation or session that is continuously engaging, educational, and meaningful.”



“Not just attending but participating in some of the experiences.”



“Learning something new or coming up with new ideas. We came up with a new product idea that was needed in the market.”

QUESTIONS

Attendees: How do you measure the value of “immersive” experiences at in-person professional events? Select up to 2 options.

Organizers: How do you believe attendees measure the value of “immersive” experiences at in-person professional events? Select up to 2 options.

Immersive value is measured through outcomes

Attendees link immersive experiences directly to their goals, so it makes sense that they measure success by what those goals produce.

Nearly half (47%) say value comes from discovering new products and 44% point to learning that benefits their company.

Organizers, on the other hand, often assume value is measured by memorability alone.

Here's the distinction: **memorability doesn't always come from big-budget staging, flashy builds, or surface-level showpieces. It comes from experiences that help people achieve what they came to do.**

That's the X factor. Not just being remembered – being remembered because it mattered.

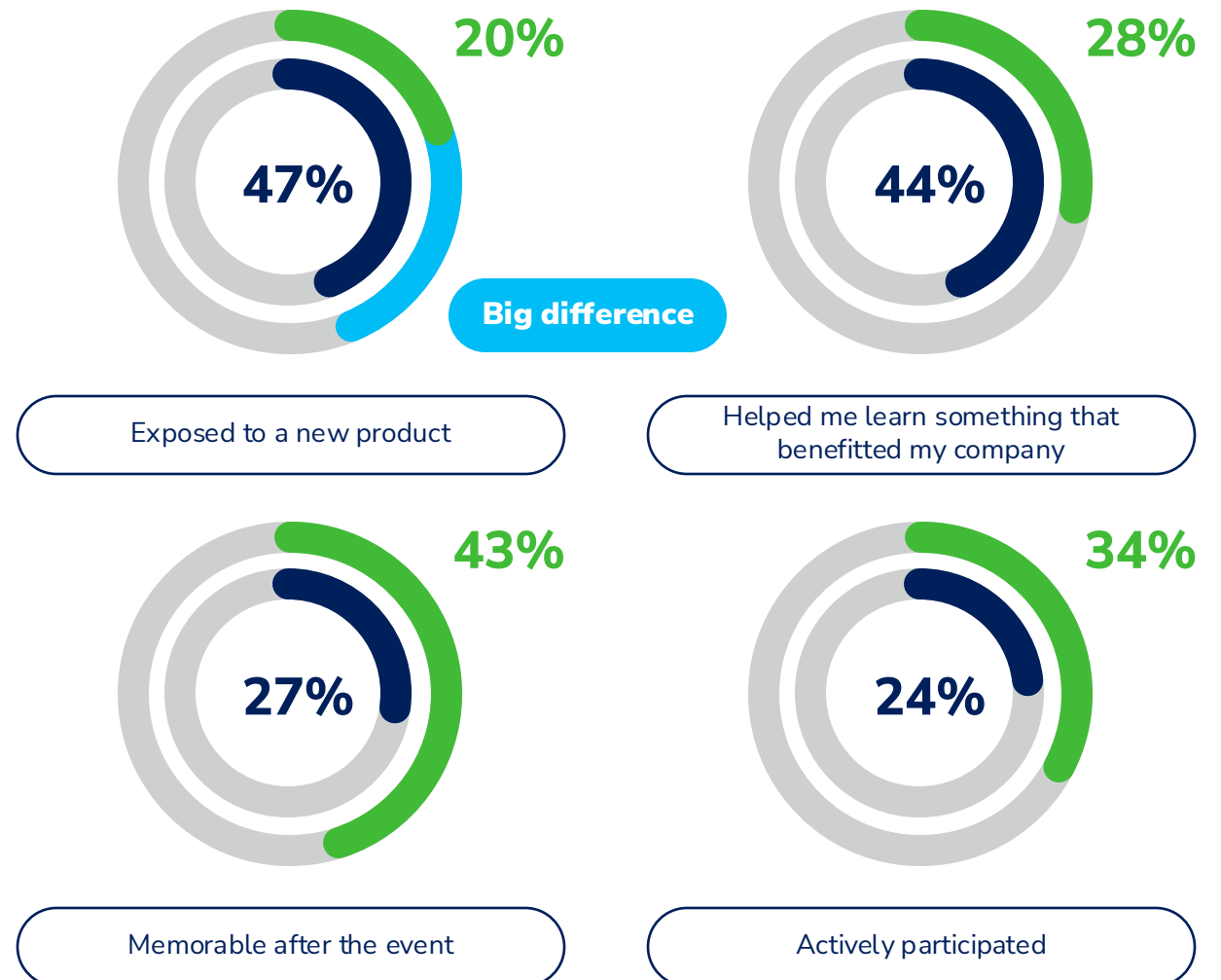


More data
in appendix

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Attendees' and organizers' measure of immersive experience value

● Attendees ● IMEX Organizers



Action Items



Reframe immersive experiences as active experiences

Stop equating immersive with multisensory staging alone. Attendees have spoken: Immersive experiences are defined by doing. Redefine immersive in your strategy decks, RFPs, and planning conversations as hands-on participation that helps people achieve their goals. And demand that your exhibitors support this by bringing active and engaging experiences to the expo floor.



Embrace new opportunities for active, hands-on interaction

Think beyond the demo booth. Build in small-group problem-solving, interactive trainings, or topic-specific roundtables. If attendees can test, participate, or share, you're delivering the kind of immersive experience they value most.



So, What Now?



Experience Must Revolve Around Attendee Goals

Freeman has always been committed to making moments (and experiences) that matter. This round of research shows what that really takes.

Many attendees don't define a meaningful experience the way organizers often think. They don't come back because of a big gala, a VR activation, or a flashy entrance unit.

They come back when the experience helps them do what they came for: learning something new, making valuable connections, or discovering the right solutions.

That means rethinking how experience is defined. It means designing more tangible, measurable peak moments. It means personalizing the expo hall so people can find what matters to them. And it means shifting focus toward learning, networking, and commercial objectives...the primary reasons attendees show up in the first place.

That's how experiences create the X factor that keeps attendees coming back.

Active
peak
moments

Tangible
outcomes

Learning

Personalized
expo hall
experiences

Relates to
commercial
objectives



Action Items



Consider experience through the lens of learning, networking, and commerce.



Bring the X factor by personalizing aspects of the attendee experience.



Reframe immersive experiences as active experiences.



Embrace new opportunities for active, hands-on interaction.

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

Maximize Value Drivers

Pinpoint what matters most to existing and prospective attendees and exhibitors through attendee and non-attendee research. Use this data to challenge assumptions and align your event more closely with everyone's goals. Experience should help people reach their objectives, not distract from them.

Insight-to-Action Strategy Session

Facilitate a focused discussion with your team to translate participant insights into actionable event design strategies that deliver purposeful experiences.

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.

Sponsor and Exhibitor Strategy

Use data-driven insights about your audiences to help sponsors and exhibitors define event objectives, uncover new activations, and create immersive opportunities that can optimize engagement between exhibitors, sponsors, and attendees.

[Check out our strategy page for more info >](#)