THE VIRTUAL EVENTS REPORT

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published by Tagoras

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Executive Summary

This report continues the work of three prior publications—*Association Virtual Events 2014*, *Association Virtual Events 2012*, and *Association Virtual Conferences 2011*—in assessing the role of virtual conferences, trade shows, and other events and providing insight into how these events may evolve.

At the core of the report is an online non-statistical survey. Of the 229 survey responses recorded between June 11 and July 2, 2018, 215 qualified and are included in the results presented here.

The State of Virtual Events

Of the qualifying responses, 43.7 percent indicate their organization has previously offered a virtual event. Another 24.7 percent indicate they plan to offer a virtual event in the coming 12 months, putting us on the cusp of virtual events being offered by a majority of organizations.

> **Of the qualified survey respondents, 43.7 percent have previously offered a virtual event.**

We asked the 31.6 percent of organizations that haven't yet offered a virtual event and without plans to offer one in the coming year why they haven't yet tried a virtual event. About a sixth (16.4 percent) have plans for a virtual event, but it won't be offered in the next 12 months. Just over a third (34.3 percent) say that, while they offer meetings or other events, a virtual event doesn't make sense for their organization. Another 32.8 percent see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual event, and we asked that group to identify up to three concerns about offering a virtual event.

Cited by over three-quarters (76.2 percent) of that group, complexity of the technology tops the list. Costs and concerns they won't achieve the hoped-for level of attendance, each cited by 52.4 percent, are the other top reasons organizations are yet to have plans to offer a virtual event.

The Operational Perspective

The field of virtual event technology is crowded and fragmented. Of 19 named providers and platforms, only four were chosen by more than a tenth of respondents: Zoom (23.7 percent), WebEx (15.8 percent), GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar (14.5 percent), and Adobe Connect (14.5 percent). The largest segment of respondents (31.6 percent) chose the catch-all "other" option.

A majority of organizations that have offered a virtual event report including these four components:

- Archives after the virtual event ends (73.3 percent)
- Live streaming video or Webcast sessions (70.9 percent)
- Live Webinar sessions (69.8 percent)
- Real-time text communication between participants (61.6 percent)

At least a third of respondents also include these three elements:

- On-demand Webinar sessions (47.7 percent)
- On-demand video or Webcast sessions (45.3 percent)
- Discussion boards (39.5 percent)

Just over half (51.8 percent) of organizations that have already offered a virtual event held it as a standalone, not associated with a place-based event. Not quite a third (31.8 percent) pegged it to the same time as a place-based event. Most respondents opted to keep their virtual events short: 42.4 percent say their virtual event lasted less than a single day.

The Business Perspective

Over a third (38.3 percent) of respondents who have previously held a virtual event have a formal, documented strategy for virtual events, but a noteworthy 48.9 percent have no strategy, and 12.8 percent say they aren't sure whether they have a strategy, meaning 61.7 percent effectively have no strategy.

"To reach customers or members who could not otherwise attend place-based events," cited by 81.6 percent of respondents, is the primary reason organizations have held a virtual event. "To be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving customers or members" (59.8 percent) and "to support an overall strategy to deliver more services online" (55.2 percent) come second and third and are the only other reasons selected by a majority of respondents, though reducing costs for attendees comes close (47.1 percent).

Over three-quarters (78.8 percent) report that registrations for their virtual event either met or exceeded expectations. Respondents report an average attendance rate of 64.3 percent of registrations, and over half (57.5 percent) characterize attendance at the virtual event as lower than attendance at a comparable place-based event.

The overwhelming majority (88.3 percent) of survey respondents that have previously held a virtual event indicate the virtual event had to be at least self-sustaining, and 61.0 percent needed it to be profitable.

To generate revenue, 69.2 percent charged registrants directly, but a sizable slice (19.2 percent) did not charge registrants to attend. The majority charged significantly less (31.6 percent) or somewhat less (28.1 percent) for their virtual event than for a comparable place-based event. Nearly three-quarters (72.7 percent) of organizations that have previously held virtual events have not collected sponsorship or exhibitor fees.

A majority (51.3 percent) of respondents report offering continuing education (CE) for some or all parts of their virtual event, but 39.7 percent report not offering any CE.

The Performance Perspective

The vast majority (78.8 percent) of organizations that have previously held a virtual event collected formal evaluations, and the majority of those evaluated the virtual event overall (88.9 percent) as well as each session (66.7 percent).

Almost three-quarters (74.2 percent) report attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores to the virtual event as to a comparable place-based event.

Of the 78.8 percent of respondents who collected formal evaluations, just under a third (32.5 percent) measured whether learning occurred at their virtual event, whether through evaluation questions tied to learning objectives (the most common approach, used by 76.0 percent of those measuring learning), post-session or post-meeting assessments or follow-ups, a combination of pre- and post-event assessment, or other means.

Over two-fifths rate their virtual events very successful.

A majority (51.3 percent) of organizations report being very satisfied with their virtual events; another 33.3 percent report being somewhat satisfied. The areas of highest satisfaction deal with connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by the leadership (48.7 percent), attendance (43.6 percent), and feedback from attendees (42.3 percent).

Over two-fifths (43.6 percent) rate their virtual events as very successful, and another 43.6 percent rate them as somewhat successful. Only 10.3 percent characterize their virtual events as very unsuccessful.

Organizations that consider themselves very successful are significantly more likely than all respondents who have previously held a virtual event to do these things:

- Make archives available after the virtual event (82.4 percent versus 73.3 percent).
- Hold the virtual event as a standalone event not associated with a place-based event (64.7 percent versus 51.8 percent).
- Report that the number of registrations exceeded expectations (38.2 percent versus 25.9 percent) and that their attendance is higher—among the very satisfied, on average, 74.8 percent of registrants attend, compared to 64.3 percent for all respondents who have held at least one virtual event.
- Measure whether learning occurs at their virtual event (41.2 percent versus 32.5 percent).
- Identify themselves as very satisfied with their virtual event overall (91.2 percent versus 51.3 percent) and very satisfied in all six specific categories the survey probed, with attendance (73.5 percent versus 43.6 percent), feedback from attendees (67.6 percent versus 42.3 percent), and

connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by leadership (76.5 percent versus 48.7 percent) showing the widest variance.

Of all organizations that have held a virtual event in the past, only 3.8 percent plan to abandon the format, another 3.8 percent are unsure if they will offer another, and an overwhelming 92.3 percent say they will offer another.

While many organizations are yet to try a virtual event, the use of the format across a diverse range of organizations—and plans for its continued use by most who have tried it—suggests a bright future for virtual events. ▶

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Introduction

The Virtual Events Report 2018 represents an ongoing effort to assess the role of virtual conferences, trade shows, and other online events and to provide insight into how these events may evolve. This report builds on three prior Tagoras publications: *Association Virtual Events 2014*, *Association Virtual Events 2012*, and *Association Virtual Conferences 2011*. While this report continues the work of the three reports, it also broadens the scope.

This year's respondents include not only those working for membership organizations but those working for any organization that might be a candidate for offering a virtual event, regardless of whether they have offered one. Respondents represent charitable and philanthropic organizations, trade associations, professional societies, educational institutions, for-profit corporations, and other types of organizations. This significant change is reflected in the new title, *The Virtual Events Report*, which does not specifically mention associations.

The broadening of the scope reflects a conviction that organizations can share and learn from one another across a wide range of topics, from strategy and high-level goals to specific operational choices around virtual events, even when—and perhaps especially when—they are structured and run differently.

We (the two authors of this report) have together worked in the field of technology-enabled and technology-enhanced learning for more than 35 years, and we've worked specifically with associations, training firms, and other learning businesses for the better part of that time. We've also designed and hosted our own annual virtual event. Throughout the report we provide our analysis of the information collected through the online survey, and we draw on our experience to offer perspectives that may not be readily apparent from the data. Our approach is relatively conservative, in keeping with the limitations imposed by a non-statistical survey and an understanding that the range of organizations represented in the responses is wide; broad conclusions should be offered with caution.

The Organization of the Report

In the remainder of this report, we look at the rate of adoption of virtual events, barriers to adoption, the core components that make up virtual events, and key decisions about how to structure a virtual event. We also provide our top takeaways, including success and satisfaction among organizations that have offered a virtual event. For organizations that have offered more than one virtual event previously, we asked them to respond to the survey questions with a typical virtual event in mind.

The report is structured into the following sections:

1. The executive summary
2. This introduction
3. A look at the state of virtual events, their adoption, and barriers to adoption

4. A look at the survey respondents' demographic data
5. A section on the operational aspects of virtual events, including their core components, their connection to place-based events, their duration, and the technology platforms used to deliver them
6. A section that takes the business perspective, looking at the strategy and goals that drive the use of virtual events, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education
7. A section that looks at performance, including evaluations, self-reported satisfaction, common characteristics of organizations successful in their use of virtual events, and what survey respondents have to say about the future of virtual events
8. Information about Tagoras (publisher of this report) and us (Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele, authors of this report)
9. Information about Community Brands, who is sponsoring this report so it can be made free of charge to you, and a thought-leader contribution from Tristan Jordan, executive vice president and general manager for Careers & Education at Community Brands
10. An appendix with the raw online survey data (parts of which are cited throughout the report)

We hope this resource proves useful to you and your organization as you assess your existing efforts or contemplate launching a virtual event. ▸

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The State of Virtual Events

At the core of this report is a non-statistical online survey conducted from June 11 to July 2, 2018. We received 229 responses to this survey, of which 215 qualified and are included in this report. We offered this definition of *virtual event* at the beginning of the survey to normalize responses:

> *A virtual event is a Web-based event that replicates many aspects of a traditional place-based conference, membership meeting, or trade show. It may take place on a standalone basis or in conjunction with a place-based conference (i.e., a "hybrid" event).*

> *Virtual events feature multiple sessions (not just a single Webinar or Webcast) and may include keynote presentations, training and education workshops, discussion areas, social networking opportunities, exhibit areas for vendors, and various other features. Activities in a virtual event may take place in real time (synchronously), on demand (asynchronously), or some combination of the two.*

Has your organization previously offered a virtual event? (215 responses)

31.6%

43.7%

24.7%

● **Yes**
● **No but plan to in next 12 months**
● **No and don't plan to in next 12 months**
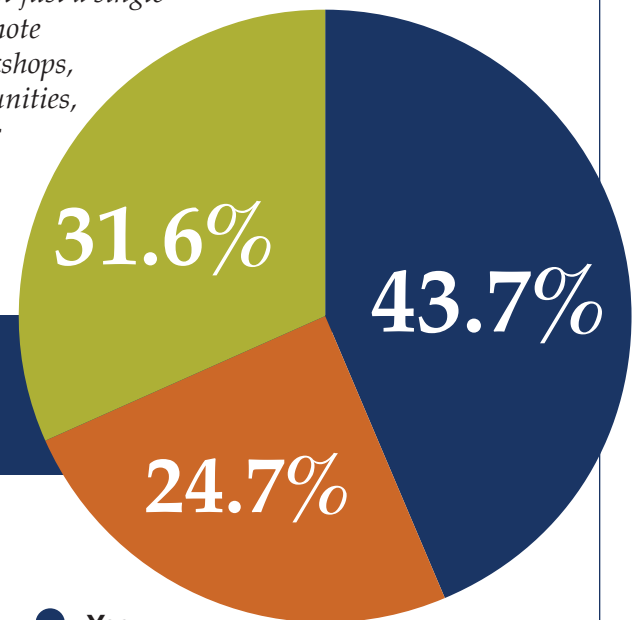
Adoption of Virtual Events

Of 215 respondents, 43.7 percent indicate their organization has previously offered a virtual event. An additional 24.7 percent indicate they plan to offer a virtual event in the coming 12 months.

The most common length of time organizations have offered virtual events (the mode) is two calendar years, and the median is four years. While virtual events are new to some, there are veterans of the form among the survey respondents.

Not surprisingly, respondents are more than twice as likely to offer place-based events than to offer a virtual event: 88.8 percent of responding organizations have previously offered a place-based conference, meeting, or trade show as part of the value they offer to customers or members.

Though not on par with place-based events, virtual events are on the rise. Compared to our previous surveys, this year shows a significant uptick in virtual events. In 2010, 18.8 percent of respondents indicated their organization had offered a virtual event. In 2011, the number rose to 38.0 percent and remained in that range in 2014 (33.0 percent) before rising again in 2018. While some of the uptick may be attributable to the broadened scope of organizations qualified to

participate, all four surveys include data from trade associations and professional societies, and that data demonstrates growing adoption. In 2010, 19.0 percent of responding trade associations and professional societies had previously held a virtual event. In 2011, the number rose to 35.2 percent and plateaued in 2014 (31.7 percent). This year the rise resumes with 41.8 percent of trade associations and professional societies reporting virtual event experience.

Top Barriers: Complexity of Technology, Cost, Attendance

We asked organizations that haven't yet offered a virtual event and without plans to offer one in the coming year why they haven't yet tried a virtual event. About a sixth (16.4 percent) do have plans for a virtual event, but it won't be offered in the next 12 months. Just over a third (34.3 percent) say that, while they offer meetings or other events, a virtual event doesn't make sense for their organization. Another 32.8 percent see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual event, and we asked that group to identify up to three concerns about

What are the biggest concerns your organization sees in offering a virtual event? Please check no more than three that your organization considers most important.
(21 responses)

Concern	Percentage
We're concerned about the cost of offering a virtual event.	52.4%
We're concerned about the complexity of the technology.	76.2%
We're concerned we won't get the level of attendance we hope for.	52.4%
We're concerned it will hurt attendance at our place-based events.	19.0%
We're concerned about the quality of the learning experience.	23.8%
We don't think our customers or members want a virtual event.	23.8%
Offering a virtual event doesn't make sense for our type of organization.	4.8%
Other	19.0%
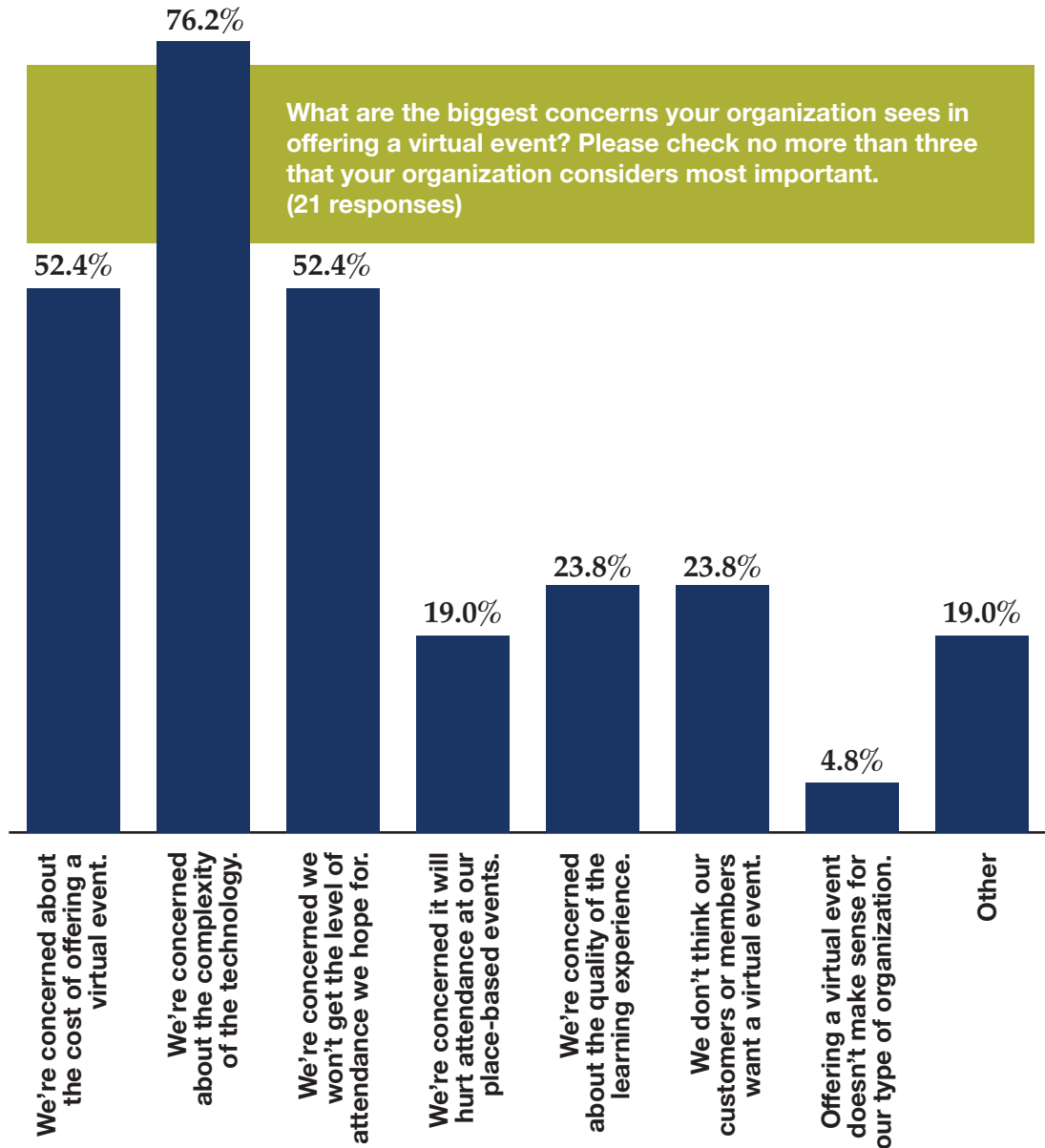
offering a virtual event. Cited by over three-quarters (76.2 percent), complexity of the technology tops the list of concerns. The technology market for virtual events is wildly fragmented, and organizations are right to not underestimate the effort required to identify an appropriate platform or service provider. (See "The Operational Perspective" for more on technology providers and platforms for virtual events.)

Costs and concerns they won't achieve the hoped-for level of attendance are mentioned by a majority of the group (each cited by 52.4 percent) as a reason they're yet to have plans to offer a virtual event.

As a counterpoint to the top concerns, we'll note some of what organizations that have offered a virtual event say about their satisfaction. (See "The Performance Perspective" for a fuller discussion of satisfaction.)

- While 76.2 percent of those who haven't undertaken a virtual event because of perceived barriers cite technology concerns, 86.8 percent of respondents who have held a virtual event describe themselves as very or somewhat satisfied with the ease of use of the technology.
- Some 52.4 percent of those who haven't held a virtual event because of perceived barriers cite concerns about attendance, but 80.8 percent of those who have held a virtual describe themselves as very or somewhat satisfied with attendance.
- Some 52.4 percent of those who haven't held a virtual event because of perceived barriers cite concerns about costs, but 71.8 percent of those who have held a virtual event describe themselves as very or somewhat satisfied with the cost of the technology, and 67.6 percent characterize themselves as very or somewhat satisfied with the revenue generated by the virtual event.

Digital events technology and the market itself are maturing and growing, and we expect that to drive prices down, at least in terms of commodities like software. But there are other costs, such as hands-on services, that can only come down so much, and organizations should be careful to fully understand the costs of doing virtual events right. Over time, we think organizations will grow more adept at estimating realistic costs and determining a plan for covering those costs, whether through registration fees, sponsorships, or other avenues. As the prevalence of virtual events grows, the associated expenses may come to be viewed as part of the cost of doing business and delivering value to customers and so be spread across the organization, relieving virtual events of the need to produce positive cash flow in isolated situations.

Just under a quarter (23.8 percent) of respondents who haven't held a virtual event because of perceived barriers say they're concerned about the quality of the learning experience. We don't question the importance of the learning experience—and we're glad respondents are thinking about virtual events in terms of learning—but research has shown a fear of the effectiveness of online learning is misplaced. Whether content is delivered via a virtual event doesn't matter; what matters are the instructional methods. As instructional design experts Ruth Colvin Clark and Richard E. Mayer put it:

From all the media comparison research, we have learned that it's not the delivery medium, but rather the instructional methods that cause learning. When the instructional methods remain essentially the same, so does the learning, no matter how the instruction is delivered. When a course uses effective instructional methods, learning will be better, no matter what delivery medium is used. *

Just under a quarter (23.8 percent) of respondents who haven't held a virtual event because of perceived barriers aren't convinced customers or members want a virtual event. While that may be true (one respondent shares, "Many of our members are aging and at retirement age and prefer fax over e-mail."), 81.6 percent of those who have held a virtual event cite reaching customers and members who could not otherwise attend place-based events as a reason. While we don't believe virtual events are necessarily right for every organization, we encourage organizations that believe their customers and members don't want a virtual event to question that assumption and look for the evidence to support— or refute—it.

As for the concern about a virtual event hurting attendance at place-based events (cited by 19.0 percent of respondents who haven't held a virtual event because of perceived barriers), anecdotal evidence from both vendors and organizations offering digital events suggests the objection is unwarranted. Our expectation is that this fear will fade as more organizations gain experience with virtual events and as more data is collected to make the case against cannibalization.

Respondents selecting "other" as one of their areas of biggest concern mention, among other things, limited budget and staff. Time and money are limited; this is unquestionable. But we believe it's better to think of time and money as resources rather than constraints—it comes down to determining whether a virtual event is the right move for your organization. If it is, allocating staff and budget becomes incontestable.

Summary

Having looked at virtual event adoption and the general state of virtual events, we continue with survey respondents' demographics before turning to how virtual events are held and the results they achieve. ▶

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* From *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2008), 21.

Extending the Life of Onsite Learning Events

Thoughts from Community Brands' Tristan Jordan

We're starting to see a foundational shift in what motivates members to join professional member organizations. Based on findings from Community Brands' recent *Member Education and Career Development Report*, more than half of members now join organizations for benefits such as continuing education and networking opportunities, rather than out of a sense of professional obligation to support the industry.

Members are increasingly motivated by an organization's ability to help them advance through learning, networking, and even job placement opportunities. Not only is there increasing importance put on learning programs, members and learners are also becoming multimodal.

Learners want to see diverse learning opportunities that better fit their needs and lifestyle, and we're starting to see broad consumption of and hunger for many different types of learning formats, both long and short form as well as live and on-demand options, from learners of every generation. Virtual events play an important role in bridging the gap between powerful and valuable live experiences and self-serve online convenience.

Based on further findings from the *Member Education and Career Development Report*, 47 percent of members have participated in a virtual conference during the last two years, and 59 percent are interested in participating in one in the near future. Virtual events allow organizations to exponentially capitalize on efforts and increase their return by extending the reach of onsite events. This is done by capturing audiences unable to attend onsite, extending the life of event content, and repurposing and packaging on-demand courses that then carry a longer shelf life.

Having a plan or strategy around how your organization will offer up virtual events is key. Setting appropriate expectations on attendance, understanding content mix and pricing models, and considering creative ways and tools to engage virtual audiences all contribute to a sustainable, and oftentimes profitable, member offering.

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Technology is also a key tool in orchestrating successful virtual events, whether standalone or in conjunction with an in-person event or conference. Traditional Webinar tools allow for ease in live Webinars and Webcasting, but more purpose-built platforms, such as many learning management systems, allow organizations to drive greater engagement and track and test learner activity for appropriate assignment of credits and certifications. Working with providers that offer the ability to seamlessly deliver a trifecta of learning—in-person event capture, live online Webcasting and streaming, and post-event production for on-demand course catalogs—in one simple swoop will result in much greater efficiency.

By offering virtual events and understanding the move toward a multimodal way of learning, organizations can reach more members, attract new members, support member learning goals, and extend their recognition as the cutting-edge authority within their industry. ▶

Tristan Jordan, Executive Vice President and General Manager,
Careers & Education, Community Brands
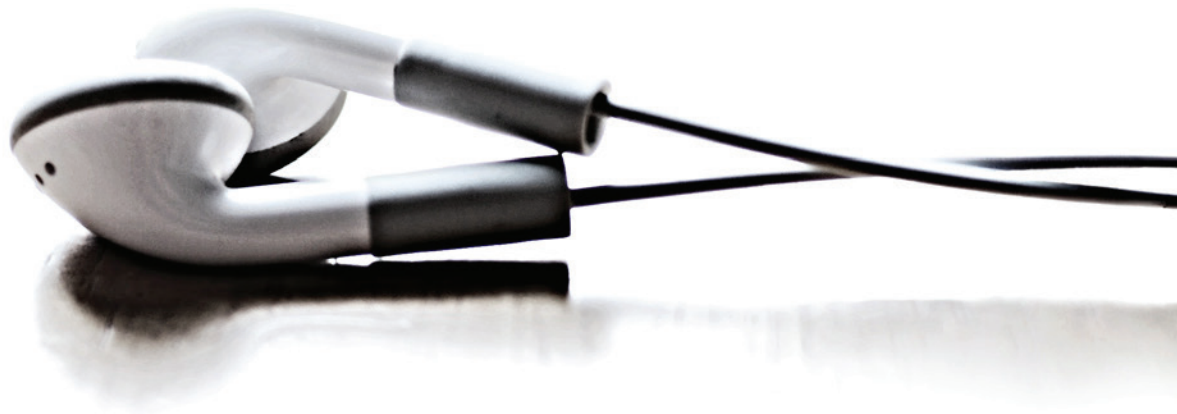
![Tristan Jordan]

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Demographics

Responses to the survey come from a broad range of organizations—from those with no paid staff and annual revenue under $500,000 to those with 46,000 paid staff and annual revenue of more than $1 billion.

The largest clusters of survey respondents are nationally focused organizations (50.5 percent) with annual budgets between $1 million and $5 million (33.5 percent).

Respondents average 507.2 paid staff (median 14.0). Professional societies (44.7 percent) and trade associations (20.9 percent) make up the lion's share of the organizations surveyed, but respondents also represent for-profit corporations, sole proprietorships (including single-person LLCs), educational institutions, and more.

What is your organization's annual revenue (in U.S. dollars)? (179 responses)

- 1.7%
- 0.6%
- 1.1%
- 2.2%
- 21.8%
- 15.6%
- 12.3%
- 11.2%
- 33.5%

- ● Less than $500,000
- ● $500,001 to $1 million
- ● $1,000,001 to $5 million
- ● $5,000,001 to $10 million
- ● $10,000,001 to $50 million
- ● $50,000,001 to $250 million
- ● $250,000,001 to $500 million
- ● $500,000,001 to $1 billion
- ● More than $1 billion

- ● Single-community or municipality focus
- ● Multiple-community focus within one state
- ● Single-state or province focus
- ● Multi-state or multi-province focus
- ● National focus
- ● International focus

Which best describes the geographic focus of your organization (i.e., which best indicates the areas in which you actively solicit members or customers)? (194 responses)
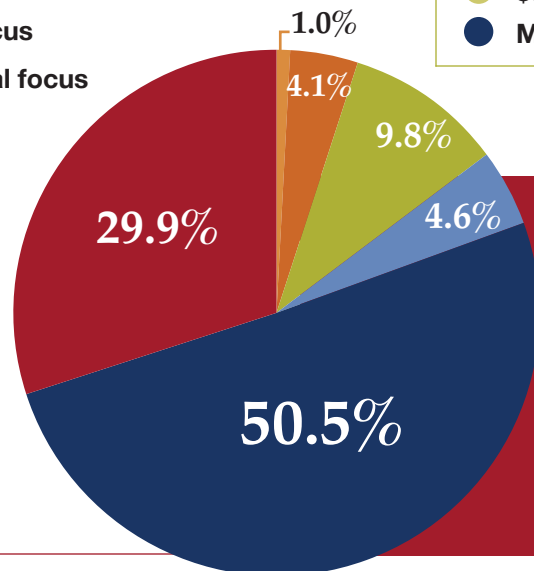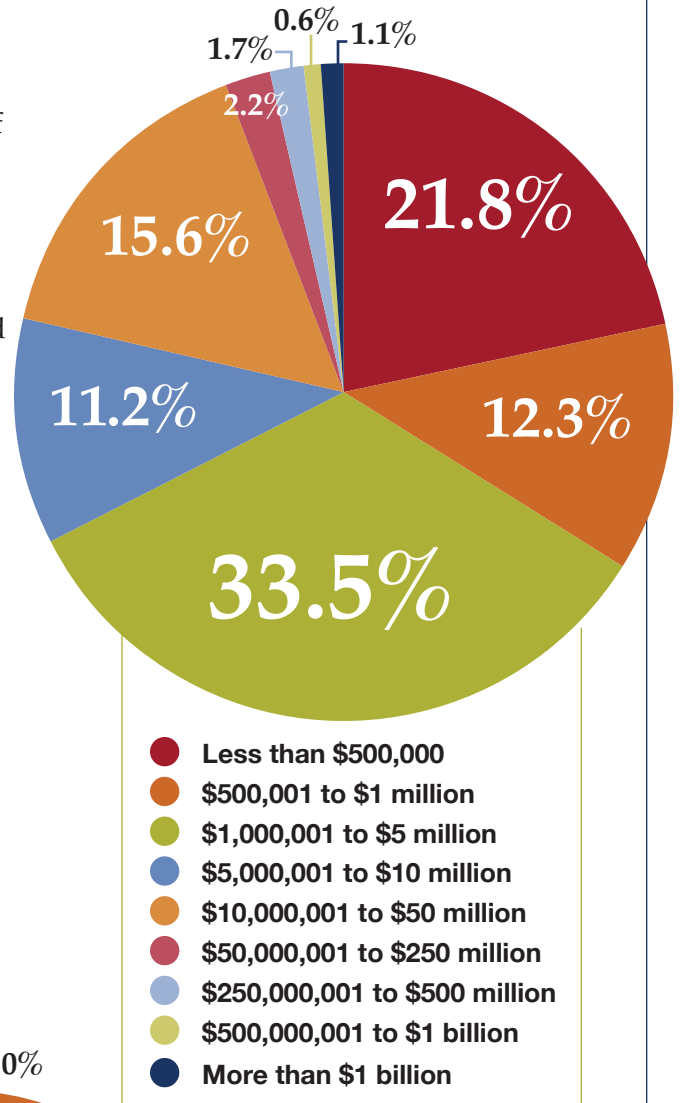
- 1.0%
- 4.1%
- 9.8%
- 4.6%
- 29.9%
- 50.5%

Which of the following best characterizes your organization? (215 responses)

1.9%
6.0%
9.3%
10.2%
0.5%
6.5%
20.9%
44.7%

- Charitable or philanthropic organization
- Trade association
- Professional society
- Educational institution
- User group or customer community
- For-profit corporation
- Sole proprietorship
- Other
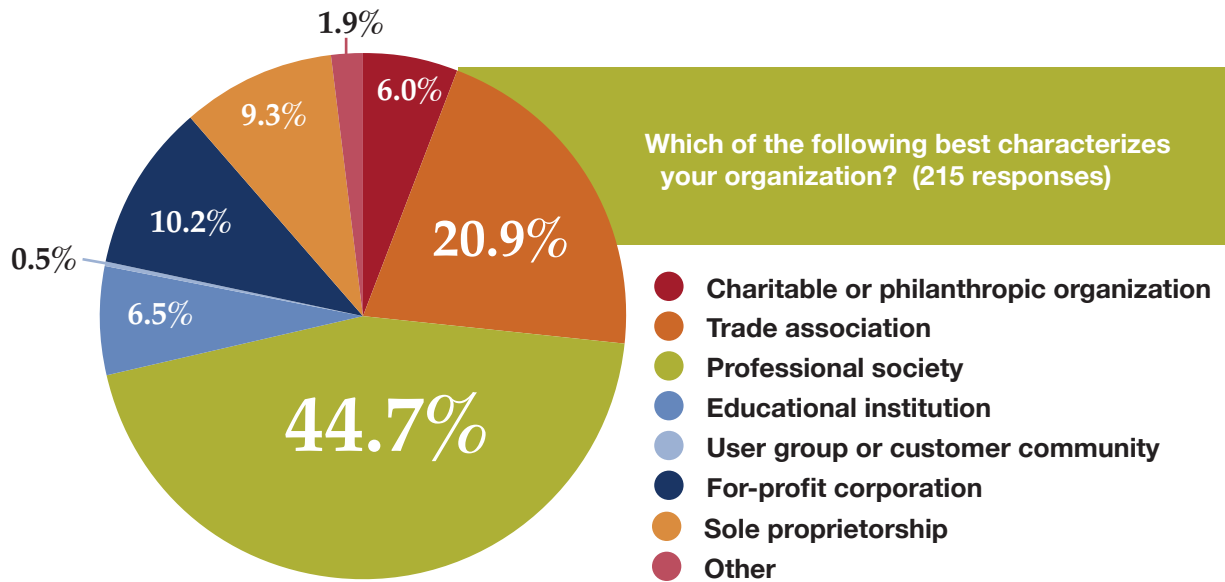
Survey participants represent truly diverse industries. Of the twenty top-level categories drawn from the North American Industry Classification System (the standard used by federal statistical agencies in the United States of America to classify business establishments), survey respondents represent all but three. Three classifications were chosen by at least a fifth of respondents: educational services (21.4 percent); professional, scientific, and technical services (20.8 percent); and health care and social assistance (20.3 percent). "Other" was the next most common response (14.1 percent), and all other classifications were selected by under 5 percent of respondents.

Having looked at the demographics of the survey respondents, we now delve deeper into operations, the business view, and performance. ▶

Which of the following best describes your organization's industry? (192 responses)
The options are based on the North American Industry Classification System.

Educational services	21.4%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	20.8%
Health care and social assistance	20.3%
Other	14.1%

The Operational Perspective

In this section, we delve into the decisions made by organizations that have offered at least one virtual event: the core components of the virtual events, the technology platforms they use to deliver them, their connection to a place-based event, and their duration.

Core Components of Virtual Events

While the options for creating and delivering a virtual event can feel overwhelming, a standard set of technologies have emerged as core components of most events. These include the following:

- **Webinar and/or Webcasts tools** to deliver audio and video content presented by experts, facilitators, sponsors, and exhibitors

  It's common for virtual events to include multiple real-time presentations, and most organizations also archive these presentations for on-demand access. Additionally, organizations may develop the virtual event experience based entirely on pre-recorded presentations. These can be enhanced by the use of various communication tools to enable attendees to ask questions and interact with experts and facilitators in real time.

- **Communication tools** to allow for interaction among attendees, subject matter experts, and exhibitors

  These tools range from the text chat features included in most Webinar platforms to integrated discussion board capabilities in virtual event platforms to social media tools such as Twitter. Use of social media tools is particularly prevalent in hybrid events as they allow for the free flow of communication among online participants and attendees at the face-to-face portion of the event.

- **Document- and resource-sharing** to provide attendees with information that complements and supports presentations from subject matter experts

  These documents and resources may include articles, case studies, checklists, and copies of presenters' slides—in short, the same types of materials an attendee at a place-based event would typically receive. For events with sponsors and exhibitors, the materials may also include white papers, brochures, and other marketing materials.

WHAT SURVEY RESPONDENTS ARE OFFERING

A majority of organizations that have offered a virtual event report incorporating these four components:

- Archives after the virtual event ends (73.3 percent)
- Live streaming video or Webcast sessions (70.9 percent)
- Live Webinar sessions (69.8 percent)
- Real-time text communication between participants (61.6 percent)

At least a third of respondents report incorporating three more elements:

- On-demand Webinar sessions (47.7 percent)
- On-demand video or Webcast sessions (45.3 percent)
- Discussion boards (39.5 percent)

Roughly a fifth of respondents report incorporating virtual exhibit halls (19.8 percent) and real-time voice communication between participants (20.9 percent) into their virtual events. While virtual exhibit halls remain far from mainstream, this is an area we think might grow. Success so far with virtual exhibits may be mixed, but some form of connecting users with appropriate products and

**Which of the following elements did your virtual event include?
(86 responses)**

Element	Percent
Archives after the virtual event ends	73.3%
Live streaming video or Webcast sessions	70.9%
Live Webinar sessions (e.g., audio plus slides)	69.8%
Real-time text communication between participants	61.6%
On-demand Webinar sessions (e.g., audio plus slides)	47.7%
On-demand video or Webcast sessions	45.3%
Discussion boards	39.5%
Real-time voice communication between participants	20.9%
Virtual exhibit hall	19.8%
Avatars for participants	8.1%
3D environment	2.3%
Other	2.3%

services will persist—and it will be interesting to see how virtual exhibits develop. Real-time voice communication between participants also seems ripe for growth, as it represents a way to support engagement and social learning. Two survey respondents, when asked about lessons learned from their virtual event experience, cite peer interaction. "Be sure to emphasize the interactivity and networking capability of the event," writes one. Another urges, "Be sure to make it interactive. Ask the audience questions to chat over in your discussion. Draw those comments into your presentations."

Avatars (simulated versions of event participants) and 3D environments fall at the tail end of the elements asked about in the survey. While we don't expect it to happen quickly, we can imagine the growth of virtual reality (VR) impacting virtual events and bringing a more realistic, 3D feel complete with avatars to the experience.

Technology Platforms for Virtual Events

We asked survey respondents which technologies they have used to deliver their virtual events, and, of 19 named providers and platforms, only four have been used by a more than a tenth of respondents: Zoom (23.7 percent), WebEx (15.8 percent), GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar (14.5 percent), and Adobe Connect (14.5 percent). The largest segment of respondents, 31.6 percent, fall under the catch-all "other" option—and there are no duplicates among the provider and platform names entered by those respondents.

The field is clearly fragmented. One survey respondent shares their experience:

> *We initially thought that all of the virtual event platforms were the same. But, after performing the due diligence on the various platforms, we found that there is a huge difference in the various virtual conference companies. Some were based overseas with a skeleton staff. Be sure to do your homework when vetting providers. Test calling their customer service department. Ask lots of questions about the hosting, data security, reliability, redundancy, etc.*

In this burgeoning hodgepodge of pure software companies that align with a more do-it-yourself approach and value-add service providers, organizations have to work to find the right partner and platform—or partners and platforms—to meet their virtual event needs.

Most Virtual Events Standalones

Once an organization decides to offer a virtual event, a key decision is how to schedule it in relation to existing place-based events. Options range from offering virtual activities that extend and enhance an existing conference or workshop to creating an entirely new, distinct event scheduled at a different time.

Just over half (51.8 percent) of organizations that have already offered a virtual event held it as a standalone, not associated with a place-based event. Not quite a third (31.8 percent) pegged it to the same time as a place-based event.

51.8%

31.8%

9.4%

7.1%
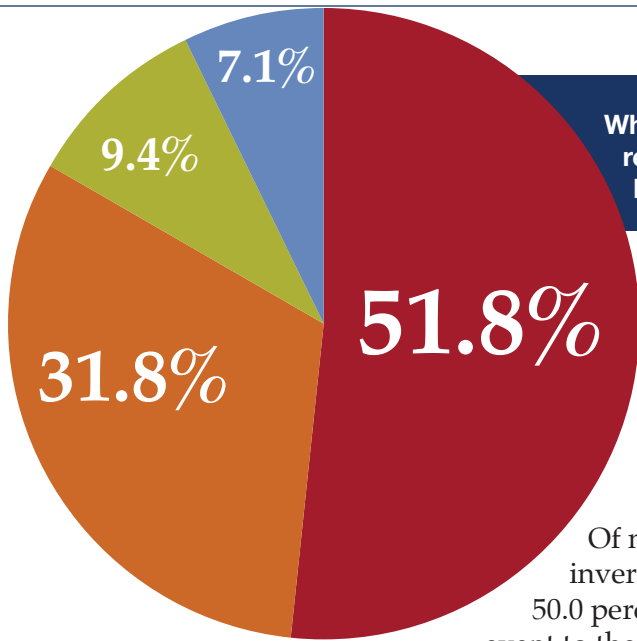
Which of the following best describes the relationship of your virtual event to a place-based event? (85 responses)

- ● **Standalone, not associated with a place-based event**
- ● **Associated with a place-based event and held at the same time**
- ● **Associated with a place-based event but held at a different time**
- ● **Other**

Of note, these numbers are almost the exact inverse of the 2104 survey results, which showed 50.0 percent of respondents pegging a virtual event to the same time as a place-based event, and 38.2 percent offering the digital event as a standalone. We take this inversion as further evidence of the growing acceptance of digital events; they no longer need the connection to a place-based event to be seen as a legitimate, appealing options.

One survey respondent, from a university with staff and students spread over significant distances, notes they untethered their virtual events from place-based ones: "Experience has taught us that synchronous face-to-face and virtual events are not as effective.... Increasingly, where appropriate, we use one medium, and it tends to be virtual."

Most Virtual Events Short

Another important operational decision is how long a virtual event should last, and choices are limitless, ranging from a single day to sessions staggered over days, weeks, even months.

42.4%

15.3%

10.6%

4.7%

7.1%

8.2%

11.8%

How long did your virtual event last, not including any time after the event when archives were accessible? (85 responses)

- ● **Less than one day**
- ● **One to one and a half days**
- ● **More than one and a half to two days**
- ● **More than two to two and a half days**
- ● **More than two and a half to three days**
- ● **More than three days**
- ● **Other**
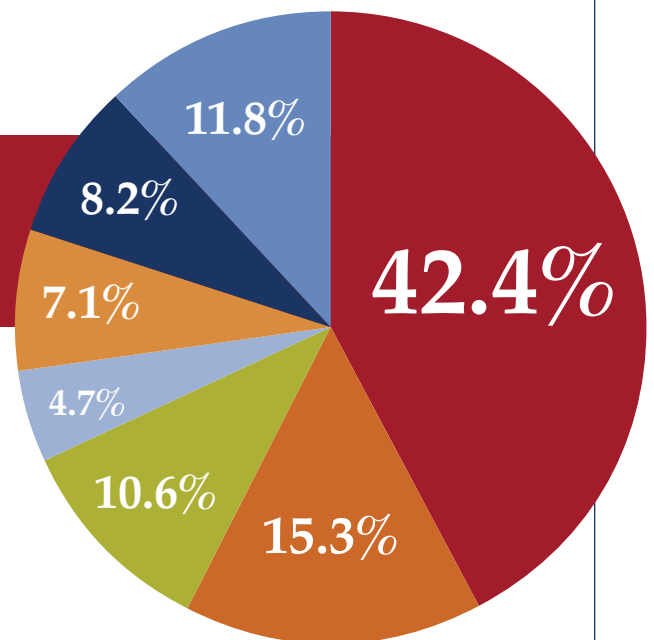
We asked survey respondents whose organizations have previously held at least one virtual event how long the event lasted, not including any time after the event when archives might be accessible. While most respondents opted to keep their virtual events short and sweet (42.4 percent of respondents report their virtual event lasted less than a single day), the text comments submitted by those selecting "other" indicate that several organizations are testing the waters at the other end of the spectrum. One organization offers monthly sessions that span seven months.

Virtual events aren't limited by the travel expense and facility logistics that place-based events are subject to. Those travel and facility constraints often make both very short and very long place-based events impractical or cost-prohibitive. We expect the lack of consensus around a common length for virtual events (even among those indicating their virtual event lasted less than a day, there is variance) to continue as organizations offering virtual events take advantage of the benefits of the format to fit the length to the content and goals of the event rather than letting other factors dictate duration.

Summary

This section looked at some of the myriad operational questions faced by organizations offering virtual events and highlighted how respondents are answering those questions: what features and functionalities to include, which platform or platforms will power the event, whether to tie the virtual event to a place-based event, and how long to run the event.

In the next section, we move from operations to a business perspective. ▶

Content is king.

Learning and events go hand in hand, and the numbers reveal the trend – 68% of organizations currently offer or plan to offer a virtual event in the next 12 months*.

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The Business Perspective

We concentrate in this section on the business perspective of virtual events: the strategy and goals that drive the use of virtual events, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education.

Majority of Virtual Events Not Strategic

While over a third of respondents (38.3 percent) have a formal, documented strategy for virtual events, a noteworthy 48.9 percent have no strategy, and 12.8 percent say they aren't sure whether they have a strategy—which, in our book, translates to 61.7 percent effectively having no strategy.

Does your organization have a formal, documented strategy for virtual events?
(94 responses)

12.8%

38.3%

48.9%

● **Formal strategy**　● **No formal strategy**　● **Not sure**
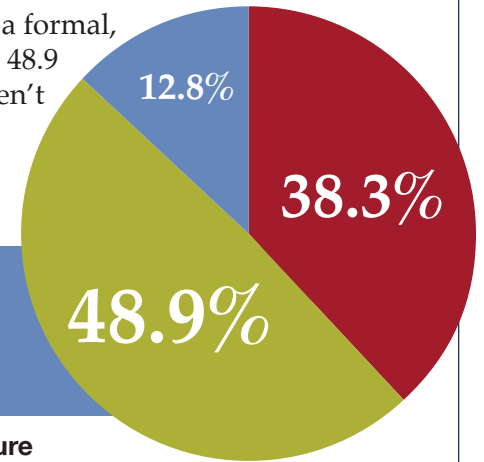
Our personal bias is that strategies are important, as they serve to unite an organization around common goals, contextualize investments (of time and money) in terms of the value expected in return, and provide insight into what to pursue and what to lay aside.

There are thousands of decisions when it comes to offering a virtual event—how long should it be, should it be part of your annual conference or its own beast, what should you charge, how do you find sponsors, and so on. You need a strategy for your virtual events so you and others in your organization can translate that strategy into the right answers to the myriad questions.

Strategy is a "framework which guides those choices that determine the nature and direction of an organization." [*] In the case of virtual events, a strategy is the framework for making the decisions that determine the nature and direction of an organization's virtual conferences, trade shows, and other digital events.

But there also needs to be an organization-wide strategy that derives from its mission, vision, and values. A virtual events strategy without the other layer is pointless, likely to be ignored, and might send you in the wrong direction and lead to a series of unwise decisions.

Assuming an organizational strategy exists, the following questions can get you started on a virtual events framework, or strategy:

- Do you want to use virtual events to expand or improve the products and services you offer?

---

* From *Top Management Strategy* by Benjamin B. Tregoe and John W. Zimmerman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 17.

- Do you want to use virtual events to expand beyond the markets you target or improve how you serve your current markets?
- Are you focused on increasing revenue through virtual events?
- Are you focused on growing the organization and the customers or members you serve through virtual events?

Choose the single goal—e.g., reaching a specific new market—that is most important to your organization, and use that goal to focus your virtual events and to inform your decisions about the virtual events.

While virtual events may not be right for every organization, every organization that delves into virtual events should have a strategy leading the way.

81.6% Reach customers/members who would not otherwise attend place-based events

24.1% Compensate for declining attendance at place-based events

26.4% Reduce costs for organization to offer a conference

47.1% Reduce costs for customers/members to attend a conference

59.8% Be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving customers/members

28.7% Help familiarize customers/members with online education and meeting technologies

55.2% Support an overall goal of delivering more services online

11.5% Be first to market and offer a virtual event before the competition

11.5% Be environmentally friendly

21.8% Other

Why did your organization decide to offer a virtual event? Check all that apply. (87 responses)

Going Virtual Expands Reach

"To reach customers or members who could not otherwise attend place-based events," cited by 81.6 percent of respondents, is the primary reason organizations have held a virtual event. "To be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving customers or members" (59.8 percent) and "to support an overall strategy to deliver more services online" (55.2 percent) come second and third and are the only other reasons selected by a majority of respondents, though reducing costs for attendees comes close (47.1 percent).

These motivations reflect necessity—organizations see a need to provide more options as travel budgets are trimmed and time becomes an increasingly precious commodity for customers and members—but they also reflect a willingness to experiment. Many organizations are embracing virtual events even before their customers and members ask for them, and they're doing so as part of an overall strategy built on online service.

Several survey respondents comment on other ways virtual events benefit attendees. In one case, the virtual format protects privacy by enabling anonymity: "Some of our topics are highly sensitive, and people do not want to be seen attending a live event." In another case, the virtual format makes the content more accessible: "Disabled members of our community experience better access to events when we provide a virtual option or have the entire conference or event delivered online."

Virtual events can also allow the organizations offering them to "offer specialized content that may not have wide appeal" and therefore doesn't warrant the expense of a place-based event. And, finally, one respondent notes that virtual events eliminate some of the wasted time of place-based events (e.g., travel time): "People's time is valuable. All of the time [with our virtual event] is devoted to content."

Registrations Meet or Exceed Expectations

To help gauge the appeal of virtual events, we asked organizations that have held a virtual event to tell us how actual registrations compared to what they expected. Over three-quarters (78.8 percent) report that registrations either met or exceeded expectations.

Knowing that actual attendance is often well below registration levels, especially for free offerings, we also asked what percentage of registrants actually attended a typical virtual event. Respondents report an average attendance rate of

How did registrations for your virtual event compare to your expectations?
(85 responses)

25.9%
21.2%
52.9%

- ● Higher than expected
- ● Met expectations
- ● Lower than expected

64.3% **75.0%**

Mean **Median**
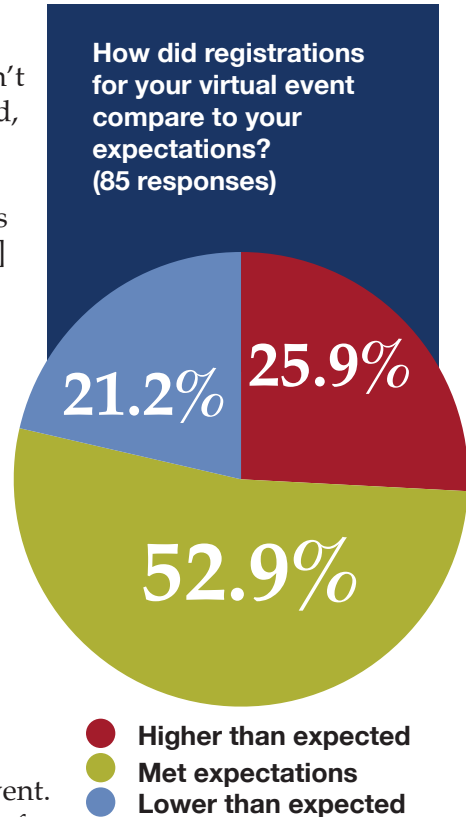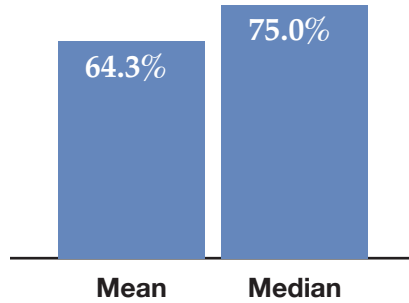
Approximately what percentage of registrants actually attended your virtual event? (74 responses)

64.3 percent of registrations and a median of 75.0 percent, putting these virtual events above the rule of thumb of 50 percent no-shows for Webinars.

Over half (57.5 percent) reported a lower level of attendance at the virtual event than a comparable place-based event, but 26.3 percent said attendance was higher or the same.

While some organizations are enjoying success, 21.2 percent are seeing lower registrations than expected, and over half are seeing lower turnout than for a similar in-person event. So there's clearly room to improve in the areas of registration and attendance. One survey respondent emphasizes marketing's role in driving attendance: "Invite people on different platforms, and use the various platforms to increase attendees. Always have a hashtag, and sign up for the various social media platforms related to events…. When doing a free event, remind people via text message to improve attendance."

Savvy marketing focused on the value for attendees—and, of course, then delivering that value—will be a major factor for organizations that ultimately make virtual events a successful part of their portfolio.
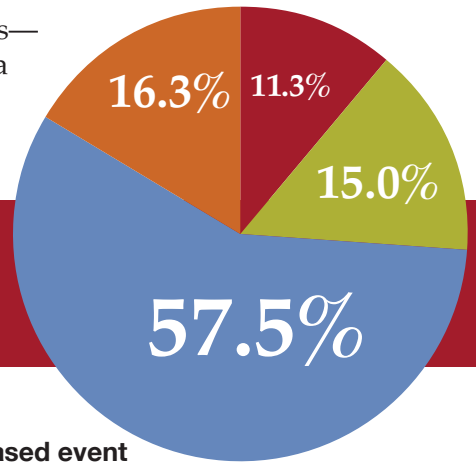
16.3% **11.3%**

15.0%

57.5%

How did attendance at your virtual event compare to typical attendance for a comparable place-based event? (80 responses)

● **Greater attendance** ● **Same attendance**
● **Less attendance** ● **No comparable place-based event**

Registration Fees Drive Financial Sustainability

Whether a virtual event must generate revenue and, if so, how much are key questions organizations must answer. The overwhelming majority (88.3 percent) of survey respondents indicate the virtual event had to be at least self-sustaining, and 61.0 percent needed it to be profitable. Just over a tenth of respondents (11.7 percent) were willing to underwrite the expense of the virtual event.

Which statement best describes the financial goals of your virtual event? (77 responses)

- 🔴 Self-sustaining
- 🟢 Profitable
- 🔵 No need to be self-sustaining

11.7%

27.3%

61.0%

Did you charge registrants for the virtual event? (78 responses)

- 🟠 Charged registrants directly
- 🟢 Charged registrants indirectly by including access as part of a larger purchase
- 🔵 Charged some registrants directly and some indirectly
- 🔵 Didn't charge
- 🔴 Other

6.4%

19.2%

3.8%

1.3%

69.2%

Which of the following best describes the amount you charged for the virtual event? (57 responses)

- 🟠 Significantly less
- 🟢 Somewhat less
- 🔵 The same
- 🔵 Somewhat more
- 🟠 Significantly more
- 🔴 No comparable place-based event

1.8%

10.5%

31.6%

28.1%

28.1%

Did your virtual event generate revenue from sponsorships or exhibitor fees? (77 responses)

- 🔵 Both sponsor and exhibitor fees
- 🔵 Sponsorships only
- 🟢 Exhibitor fees only
- 🔴 No revenue from sponsors or exhibitors

7.8%

18.2%

1.3%

72.7%

To generate revenue, 69.2 percent of the organizations that previously offered a virtual event charged registrants directly, but a sizable slice (19.2 percent) did not charge registrants to attend. At least one respondent's organization has experimented with a donation model and used those funds for additional programming: "Typical events were free. The most successful events had a charge based on profitability, but some were based on donations, which we then used to cover costs of delivering the program to our disabled sub-community."

The Majority Charge Less for Virtual Than Place-Based

Because the dollar amount attendees are charged for an event can vary dramatically, we focused the survey on how fees for virtual events compare to those charged for face-to-face events.

The majority of respondents who have already offered a virtual event charged significantly less (31.6 percent) or somewhat less (28.1 percent) for their virtual event. Another 28.1 percent charged about the same for the virtual event and a similar place-based event. Only a single organization reported charging somewhat more for a virtual event than for a comparable place-based event, and no respondents charged significantly more.

That 59.7 percent of respondents charge less for their virtual event than a comparable-place based event is consistent with the response given by 47.1 percent of respondents when asked why their organizations decided to offer a virtual event: reducing costs for customers or members to attend a conference. But people tend to associate price with value, so organizations that price virtual events low may unintentionally send the message that the value is low too.

A slice of organizations (10.5 percent) that have offered a virtual event say they held no comparable place-based event by which to measure. We may see this slice grow as more organizations expand their digital offerings and begin to roll out events dedicated to topics or segments not previously addressed.

Sponsor and Exhibitor Revenue Largely Untapped

Registration fees paid by participants are not, of course, the only way to generate revenue from a virtual event. Sponsors and exhibitors can contribute too. But nearly three-quarters (72.7 percent) of organizations that have previously held virtual events have not collected sponsorship or exhibitor fees.

Among the organizations that are capitalizing on non-registration revenue, sponsorships have a much stronger foothold than exhibitor fees: 18.2 percent of respondents report using sponsorships alone, 7.8 percent collect both exhibitor and sponsor fees, and a single respondent uses exhibitor fees alone.

Given the clear emphasis on financial sustainability, if not profitability, we expect to see organizations continue to charge registrants for virtual events, raise pricing for their virtual events to an amount closer to place-based pricing, and grow the revenue from sponsors and exhibitors, especially as the technology platforms evolve to offer effective trade show capabilities that rival—and perhaps surpass—the concrete exhibit hall floor for connecting vendors with prospects.

Two-Fifths Offer No CE

Another key strategic question for organizations planning to offer a virtual event is whether to provide continuing education (CE), if they serve customers or members who need such credit. In our research and consulting practice, we see the availability of continuing education credit as one of the most important drivers for enrollments—one that's equally important in the specific venue of virtual events.

A majority of respondents report offering continuing education (CE) for some (9.0 percent) or all (42.3 percent) parts of their virtual event, but 39.7 percent report not offering any CE. Continuing education doesn't apply to all fields and professionals, which undoubtedly explains some of the nos. (Among all surveyed organizations, some 28.4 percent don't offer a credential or provide education in support of a credential in the field or industry they serve.) For other organizations, the decision to not offer credit may reflect requirements of an accrediting body that are more difficult to satisfy in an online environment or may stem from the nature of some components of the virtual event—e.g., discussion boards and chat—that aren't commonly awarded CE.

Given its overall importance as a demand driver for educational activities, our expectation is that the availability of continuing education credit at virtual events will increase over time. However, because events often focus on hot topics that members may need information about regardless of credit and because attendees will become more and more adept over time at getting networking value out of virtual events, those that do not offer continuing education credit will remain viable. And they may employ other ways to help attendees demonstrate the value of the event; one respondent shares, "We offer a certificate and/or digital badge, but not true CE credit."

Did you offer continuing education credit for attending your virtual event?
(78 responses)

9.0%

39.7%

42.3%

7.7%

1.3%

● Yes, for all parts
● Yes, for synchronous sessions only
● Yes, for asynchronous sessions only
● No
● Other

Summary

In this section we considered issues important to managing virtual events as a line of business, including strategy and goals for virtual events, registration and attendance, revenue expectations, and the role of continuing education.

In the next section we look at performance and the results organizations are seeing from virtual events. ▶
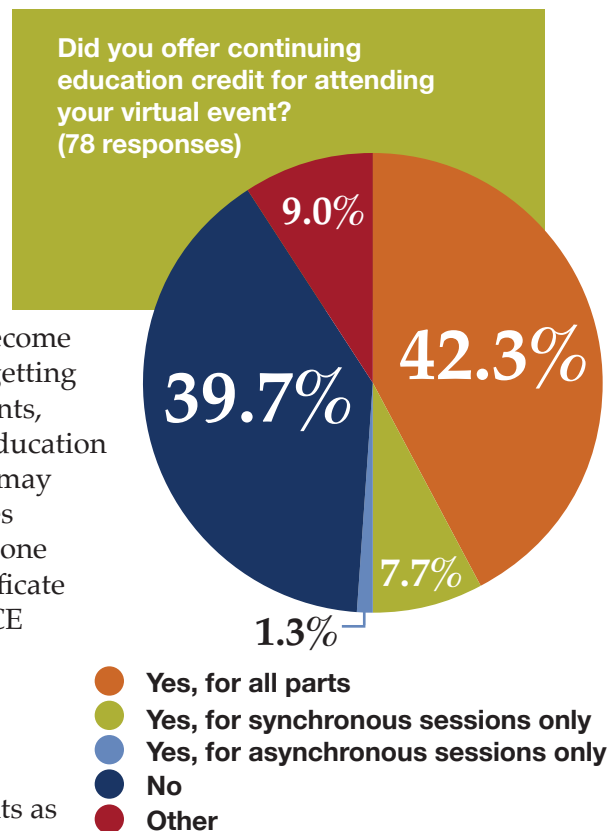
Over 60 percent of organizations that have offered a virtual event have no formal, documented strategy for virtual events.

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TOPICS WE COVER

Initial Strategic Planning

Session Content and Speakers

Partners and Sponsors

Creating a Marketing Buzz

Video Production

The Performance Perspective

Even given the level of statistical error that may be present in a non-probability survey, the survey results behind this report and the four previous versions make it clear that virtual events are growing in popularity and are on the road to becoming mainstream.

But offering a virtual event is not the same as achieving the desired results.

In this final core section, we look at organizations' assessment of the results achieved with virtual events: evaluations, self-reported success and satisfaction, and what they have to say about the future.

Evaluations Show Decent Success

One common success measure for any event, whether virtual or place-based, is the evaluation scores from attendees. The vast majority (78.8 percent) of organizations that have previously held a virtual event collected formal valuations, and the majority of those evaluated the virtual event overall (88.9 percent) and each session (66.7 percent). A smaller subset (47.6 percent) collected evaluations for each speaker.
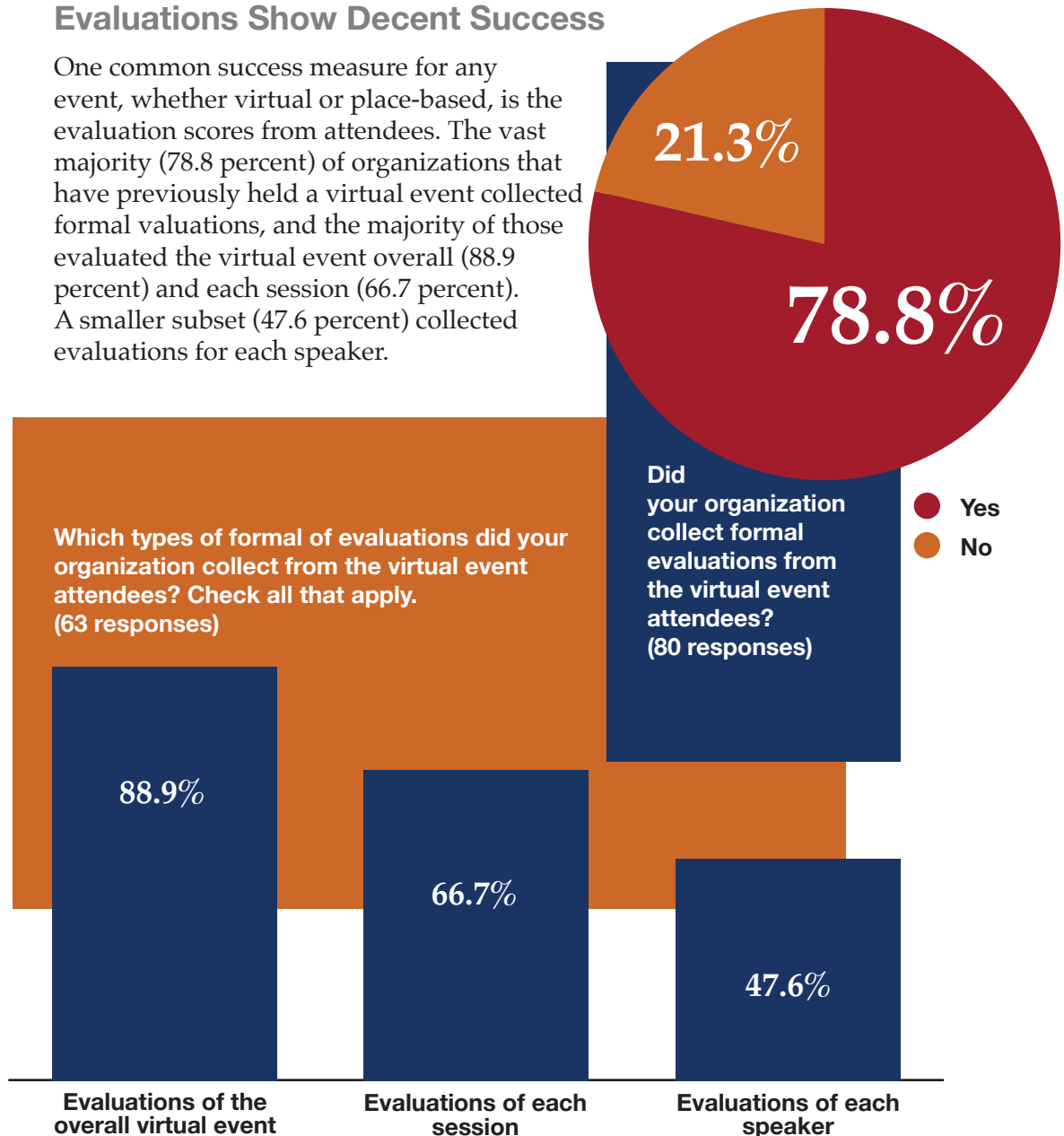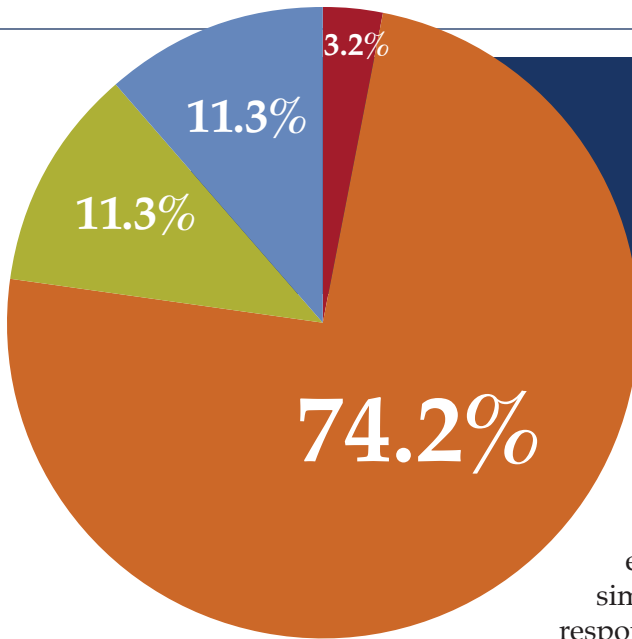
21.3%

78.8%

Did your organization collect formal evaluations from the virtual event attendees?
(80 responses)

● Yes
● No

Which types of formal of evaluations did your organization collect from the virtual event attendees? Check all that apply.
(63 responses)

88.9%

66.7%

47.6%

Evaluations of the overall virtual event

Evaluations of each session

Evaluations of each speaker

3.2%

11.3%

11.3%

74.2%

How did evaluations for the virtual event compare to evaluations you typically receive for a comparable place-based event? (62 responses)

- Higher scores for virtual event
- Same or similar scores for virtual event
- Lower scores for virtual event
- No comparable place-based event

We also asked organizations that collected formal evaluations to tell us how the evaluations for the virtual event compared to similar place-based events. Only 3.2 percent of respondents who have previously held a virtual event report attendees gave higher evaluation scores to the virtual event, but 74.2 percent indicate attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores to the virtual event. These results make it clear that the goal of delivering a virtual experience attendees value is achievable.

In our work, we interview, formally and informally, many professionals working in learning businesses of all kinds. When talking about barriers to online education in general, we hear over and over that learners fear losing the ancillary benefits of place-based events: the impromptu conversations in hallways and over lunch and the more structured networking opportunities built into many sessions. We believe virtual events that are architected to support peer-to-peer and informal learning will garner higher evaluation scores—because they're providing what attendees value.

MEASURING LEARNING NOT A PRIORITY

Of the 78.8 percent of respondents who collected formal evaluations, only a third (32.5 percent) measured whether learning occurred at their virtual event, whether through evaluation questions tied to learning objectives (the most common approach, used by 76.0 percent of those measuring learning), post-session

Did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual event (e.g, through assessments or evaluation questions tied to learning objectives)? (80 responses)
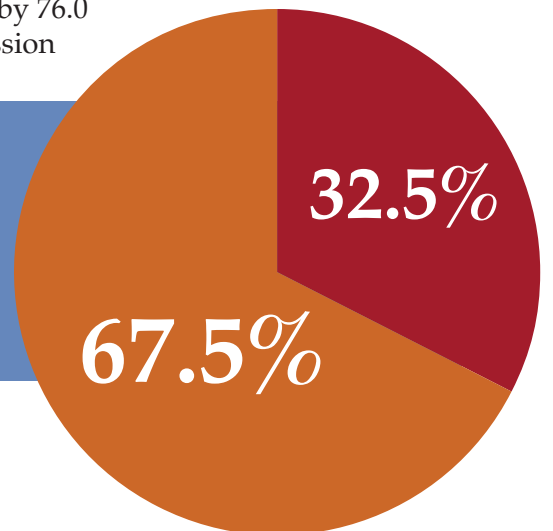
32.5%

67.5%

- Yes
- No

or post-meeting assessments or follow-ups, a combination of pre- and post-event assessment, or other means.

The organizations not measuring whether learning occurs are missing out on an opportunity not only to evaluate the effectiveness of their virtual events but to gather data that could be leveraged to show the value of the virtual event to would-be attendees.

How did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual event? Check all that apply. (25 responses)

Through evaluation questions that align with learning objectives	76.0%
Through post-event assessments or follow-ups	48.0%
Through post-session assessments or follow-ups	28.0%
Through a combination of pre- and post-event assessments	28.0%
Through evaluations conducted a month or more after the event	20.0%
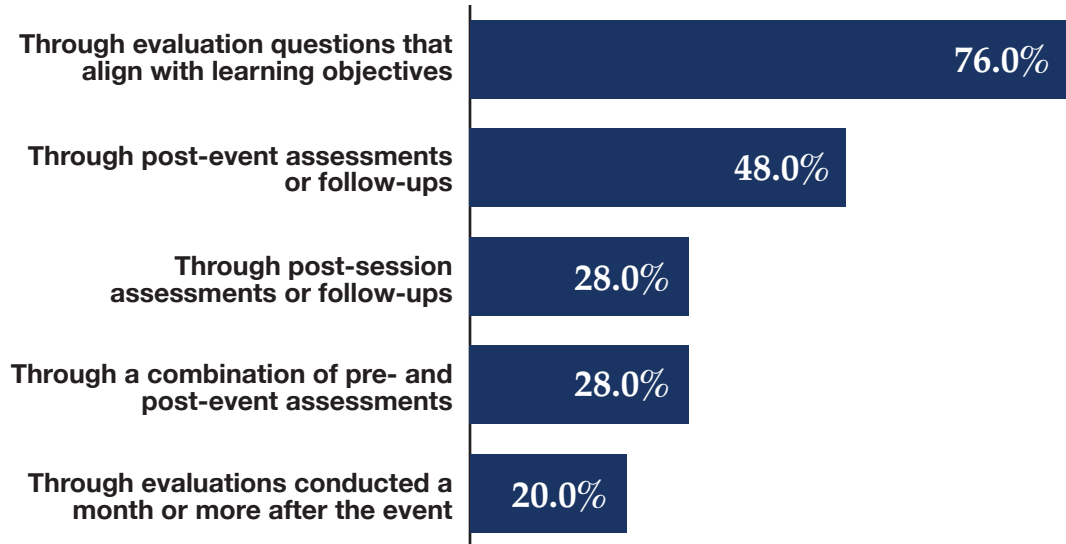
Satisfaction with Virtual Events High

We asked organizations how satisfied they are with their virtual events, and a majority (51.3 percent) report being very satisfied. Another 33.3 percent report being somewhat satisfied.

Overall, how satisfied was your organization with its virtual event? (78 responses)

- 51.3% Very satisfied
- 33.3% Somewhat satisfied
- 6.4% Somewhat dissatisfied
- 9.0% Very dissatisfied
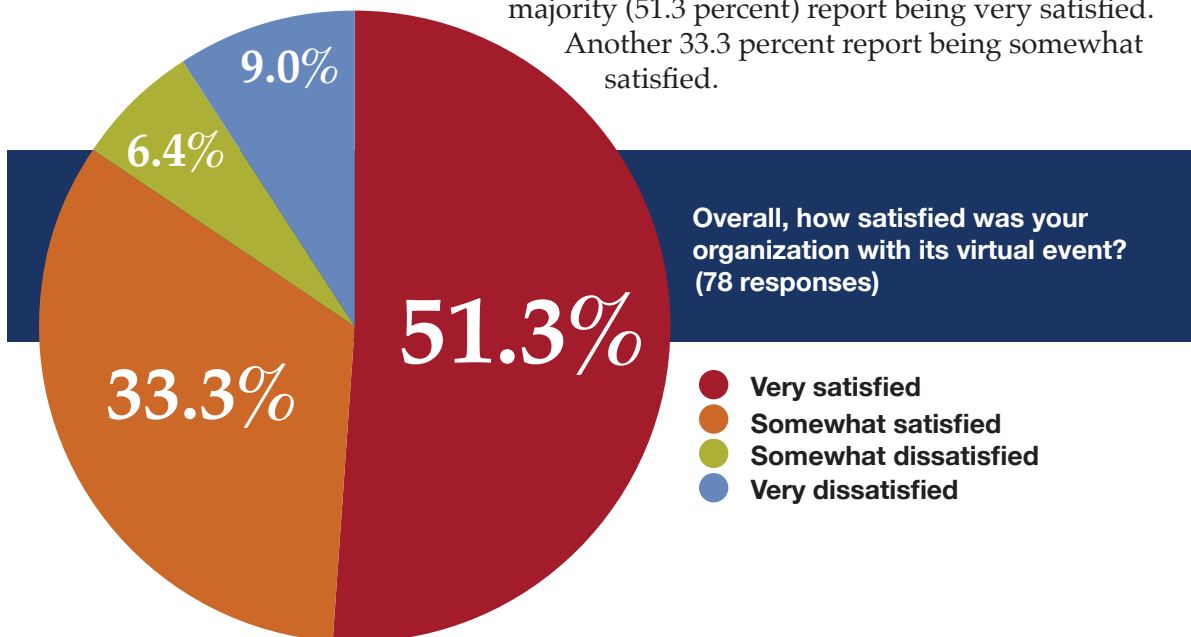
When it comes to satisfaction with the specific aspects of virtual events probed by the survey, the very satisfied group is at least marginally smaller than the very-satisfied-overall group for every item.

The areas of highest satisfaction deal with connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by the leadership (48.7 percent), attendance (43.6 percent), and feedback from attendees (42.3 percent).

A majority of respondents are very satisfied or somewhat satisfied in all six areas specifically asked about in the survey.

How satisfied or dissatisfied was your organization with its virtual event in terms of the specific items below? (78 responses)

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Not applicable
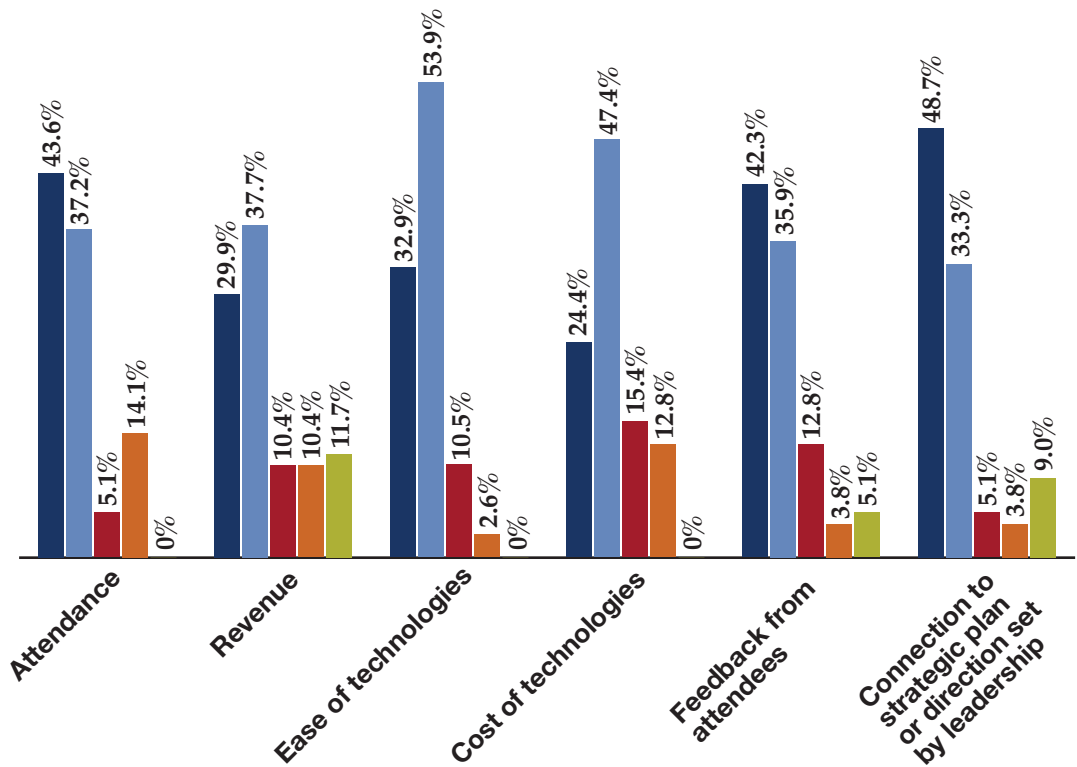
Virtual Events Characterized As Successful

Over two-fifths (43.6 percent) rate their virtual events as very successful, and another 43.6 percent rate them as somewhat successful. Only 10.3 percent characterize their virtual events as very unsuccessful.

Overall, how would you rate the success of your organization's virtual event? (78 responses)
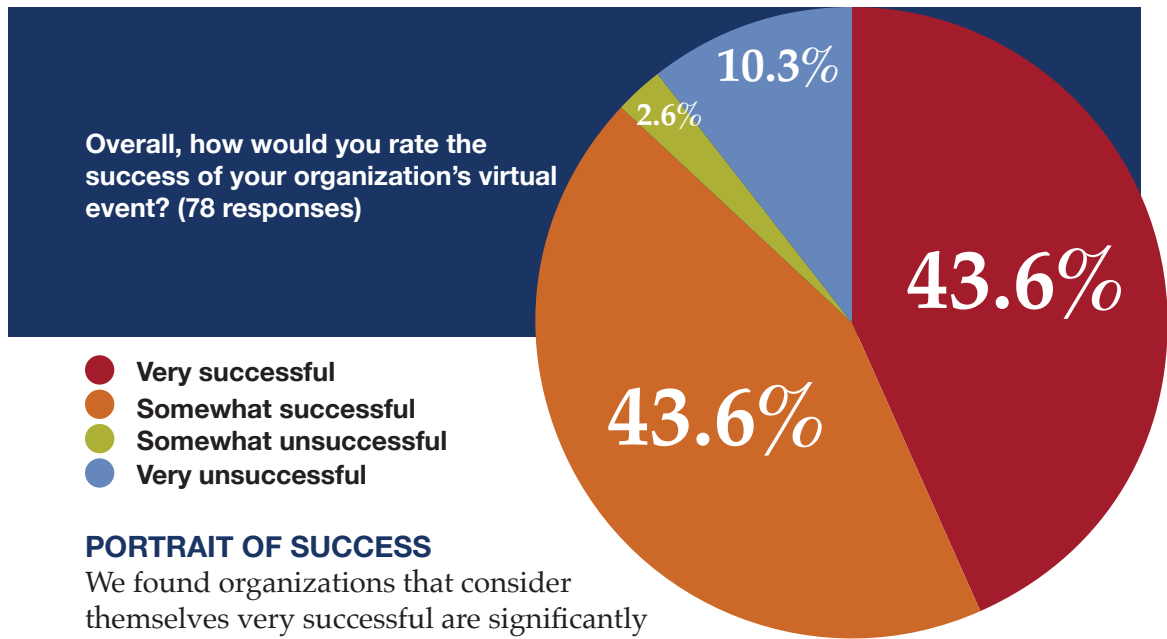
- 🔴 **Very successful**
- 🟠 **Somewhat successful**
- 🟢 **Somewhat unsuccessful**
- 🔵 **Very unsuccessful**

43.6% **43.6%** **2.6%** **10.3%**

PORTRAIT OF SUCCESS

We found organizations that consider themselves very successful are significantly more likely than all respondents who have previously held a virtual event to do these things:

- Make archives available after the virtual event (82.4 percent versus 73.3 percent).
- Hold the virtual event as a standalone event not associated with a place-based event (64.7 percent versus 51.8 percent).
- Report that the number of registrations exceeded expectations (38.2 percent versus 25.9 percent) and that their attendance is higher—among the very satisfied, on average, 74.8 percent of registrants attend, compared to 64.3 percent for all respondents who have held at least one virtual event.
- Measure whether learning occurs at their virtual event (41.2 percent versus 32.5 percent).
- Identify themselves as very satisfied with their virtual event overall (91.2 percent versus 51.3 percent) and very satisfied in all six specific categories we probed, with attendance (73.5 percent versus 43.6 percent), feedback from attendees (67.6 percent versus 42.3 percent), and connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by leadership (76.5 percent versus 48.7 percent) showing the widest variance.

The geographic focus of the organizations that self-identified as very successful is more likely to be international than all respondents (45.5 percent compared to 29.9 percent), but organizations with budgets of all sizes are very successful, and 43.3 percent of the very successful respondents have annual revenue under $1 million.

Lessons Learned: Market Well, Over-Prepare, Start Small

We asked survey respondents who have previously held at least one virtual event to share any lessons learned. Most lessons shared fall into three buckets: marketing, preparation, and a phased approach.

MARKETING

The marketing comments ran the gamut from ensuring big-picture objectives are in place ("Understand why you are offering virtual events, and set expectations accordingly.") to more tactical advice:

- "We use virtual seminars and workshops to give a preliminary view of our topics in key areas of personal and professional development and offer practical and immediately actionable tools and strategies. Once this is accomplished, we invite [virtual participants] to a live event or course."
- "Do not discount registration."
- "Start marketing to your current client base, which is much easier than trying to find new markets. You can do that once you see attendees are happy with what they experience. Current clients are also typically more generous if you mess up from time to time."
- "Offer online topics that are slightly different than live in-place offerings, to distinguish a little from what you do in place. Or you can offer something that goes more in depth on a particular topic. This way you can get return clients who may have attended an in-place event."
- "Just because you can capture a lot of content from a live event, be strategic about what you include in your virtual event. Focus on your audience's primary needs and learning goals to drive this selection. Also, many of our learners are interested in accessing the content only and not in the continuing education credit—this has influenced how we structure the online access."

Some respondents note how they've been burned by a lack of marketing or bad marketing:

- "Clear marketing...was our biggest negative feedback for our virtual event so far. We have learned that, if you are going to do a virtual event in conjunction with a placed-based event, it is important to market this option at the same time you open live registration; otherwise you lose your audience...."
- A virtual event "takes a lot of lead time and marketing that we just didn't have the resources for; it is very expensive."

PREPARATION

Many respondents emphasize the need to prepare, test, and have contingency plans and good support in place for the virtual event:

- "Work closely with instructors when simulcasting so that they recognize both the in-person and virtual audiences."
- "Make sure that presenters are comfortable presenting in front of a camera but with little to no audience in front of them."
- "Virtual events are all about pre-production and making sure that all speakers and those involved are well prepared for the format that you are providing."
- "Getting people comfortable with the platform/technology remains crucial. And people do NOT like turning on their cameras for live video conferencing!"
- "Prepare more than very well, and test, test, test with participants."

- "Be sure to have a test run of the entire virtual event prior to it going live with at least one user not associated with your organization as a way to perform a way to uncover major usability or experience issues before your virtual event actually goes live. Similarly, do a dry run with each presenter, and set clear expectations (how to start the session, how to end it, and what plan B for the most common technical issues). Don't over-complicate the experience, meaning don't enable any and all features because they are there. Be very deliberate about selecting tools that will create the user/learner experience you are seeking to create. The technology should be as invisible as it can be and should be there to help facilitate the learning experience. Don't expect that presenters that are great in person will be equally great online. That is not always the case. In a nutshell, don't make assumptions about your presenters or learners. Test it all."
- "Organizations should ensure [platform] providers have a written plan for how the virtual event will function, as well redundancy plans if technology fails.... For our virtual event, we stream live and then put content online within 24 hours (up to 30 days). This creates a redundancy if technology fails on site and provides leisurely access to content."
- "Be sure to have a strong technical support team in place. This is especially important at the beginning of the event when learners are becoming familiar with the virtual event system."

PHASED APPROACH

Multiple respondents stress the importance taking a phased approach. One advises, "Start small, expecting four to six attendees, in order to practice before trying to get larger audiences."

Even with a phased approach, though, doing a good job can be daunting. One respondent warns, "If you want to do it effectively, it's way more work than you think!"

The advice of another respondent speaks equally to organizations debating whether to try a virtual event and those that have already offered one: "Think of it as a work in progress." A work-in-progress mindset—akin to a minimum viable product approach, which we often preach—both makes it less daunting to get started with virtual events and encourages organizations to seek to continuously improve what they offer once they have one or more under their belt.

"Think of it as a work in progress."

The Future of Virtual Events

One indicator of the future of virtual events is whether the organizations that have held one plan to do so again.

Of organizations that have held a virtual event in the past, only 3.8 percent plan to abandon the format. Another 3.8 percent are unsure if they will offer another. An overwhelming 92.3 percent say they will offer another.

While many organizations are yet to try a virtual event, the use of the format across a diverse range of organizations—and its continued use by most who have tried it—suggests that, in the not-too-distant future, virtual events will become a mainstay of organizations' offerings. ▶◀

Do you plan to offer another virtual event in the future? (78 responses)

● **Yes** ● **No** ● **Not sure**

3.8%
3.8%
92.3%
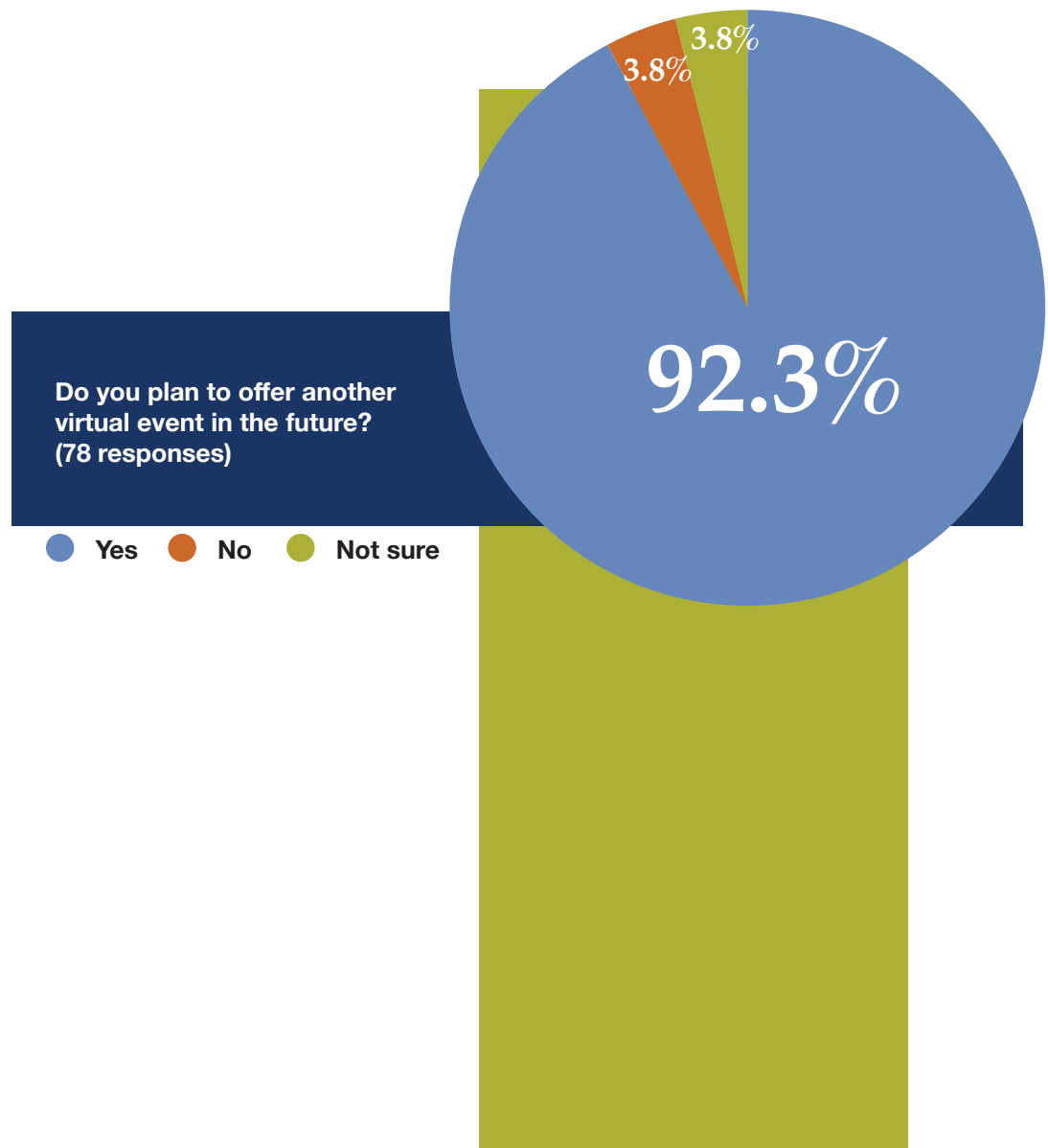
About Tagoras
Publisher of the Report

This report is published by Tagoras, Inc. (www.tagoras.com), which was cofounded by Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele.

Through a combination of independent research, educational events, and strategic advisory services, Tagoras helps organizations in the business of lifelong learning maximize the reach, revenue, and impact of their offerings. We are the founders and hosts of the annual Learning • Technology • Design™ (LTD) virtual conference (ltd.tagoras.com) and hosts of the weekly Leading Learning Podcast (www.leadinglearning.com). Other Tagoras reports include *Association Learning + Technology*.

Celisa Steele

Celisa has led the development of successful online education sites with smaller groups like the Frameworks Institute and the Alliance of Chicago Community Health Services and large national and multinational organizations like the American Red Cross, the American College of Radiology, the Society for Human Resource Management, and WebJunction, an initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Celisa is a managing director at Tagoras, where she serves as editor-in-chief of the company's research publications. She was cofounder and COO of Isoph, one of the leading providers of e-learning services to the nonprofit sector. She also served as vice president of operations at LearnSomething. Prior to Isoph, she worked in creative services at Quisic, a developer of high-end online course content for major universities and Global 2000 companies. Before joining Quisic, Celisa worked in curriculum development for the not-for-profit Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A veteran of the e-learning world, Celisa served on the research committee of the eLearning Guild and has served multiple times as a judge in Brandon Hall's annual e-learning awards.

Celisa is a published poet (www.celisasteele.com) and served as the poet laureate of Carrboro, North Carolina, from 2013 to 2016.

Jeff Cobb

A managing director at Tagoras, Jeff has spent nearly two decades immersed in the global market for adult lifelong learning as an entrepreneur, consultant, teacher, and author. He was cofounder and CEO of Isoph, a leading provider of e-learning technologies and services to associations. He has also served as senior vice president of business development for Quisic, an e-learning partner to top-tier business schools and Fortune 500 companies, and as vice president of business development for LearnSomething.

Jeff is a respected expert on the global market for lifelong learning and author of *Leading the Learning Revolution*. He currently serves on the governing board of NIGP: The Institute for Public Procurement, to which he was specifically appointed as an education thought leader. He has previously served on the Professional Development Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives, the research committee of the eLearning Guild, and the editorial board of Innovate.

Jeff is also a keynote speaker focused on the critical role that lifelong learning plays for leaders and organizations in our rapidly changing world. More information about his speaking is available on his personal Web site at www.jeffthomascobb.com/speaking. ▶

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About Community Brands
Sponsor of the Report

Community Brands is the leading provider of cloud-based software to associations, nonprofits, K-12 schools and faith-based groups. Through innovation and technology, the company empowers more than 100,000 clients and partners to succeed faster, grow stronger and achieve social good. Organizations adopt Community Brands software to manage memberships, career centers, learning, accounting, mobile giving, peer-to-peer fundraising, donations, admissions, enrollments and events. Using these engagement platforms, customers of all sizes create meaningful and lasting experiences for their members, donors, volunteers and families. Headquartered in St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, Community Brands serves the social good community in more than 30 countries.

Through two world-class online learning platforms, Crowd Wisdom™ and Freestone™, Community Brands allows organizations to foster engagement, transform online learning and professional education, track completions and certificates and provide seamless, personalized learner experiences. Crowd Wisdom is an adaptive and intuitive, award-winning full-service learning management system that powers the world's most advanced professional education and development programs, small to enterprise. Freestone is an industry-leading platform and tool for live event capture, webinars, webcasts and on-demand streaming, all as part of a comprehensive continuing education program. ▶

Appendix: Survey Data

We're grateful to the hundreds of organizations that took the time between June 11 to July 2, 2018, to participate in the online survey about virtual events. Of the 229 survey responses recorded, 215 qualified and are included in the results presented in this appendix. Note that is a non-statistical survey.

All Respondents

The following questions were asked of all respondents.

EXPERIENCE WITH VIRTUAL EVENTS

A virtual event is a Web-based event that replicates many aspects of a traditional place-based conference, meeting, or trade show. It may take place on a standalone basis or in conjunction with a place-based conference (i.e., a "hybrid" event). Virtual events feature multiple sessions (not just a single Webinar or Webcast) and may include keynote presentations, training and education workshops, discussion areas, social networking opportunities, exhibit areas for vendors, and various other features. Activities in a virtual event may take place in real time (synchronously), on demand (asynchronously), or some combination of the two. Has your organization previously offered a virtual event? (215 responses)

Yes	43.7%
No, but plan to in the next 12 months	24.7%
No, and don't plan to in the next 12 months	31.6%

EXPERIENCE WITH PLACE-BASED EVENTS

Has your organization previously offered a place-based conference, meeting, or trade show as part of the value it offers to customers or members? (215 responses)

Yes	88.8%
No	11.2%

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

Which of the following best characterizes your organization? (215 responses)

Charitable or philanthropic organization	6.0%
Trade association	20.9%
Professional society	44.7%
Educational institution	6.5%
User group or customer community	0.5%
For-profit corporation	10.2%
Sole proprietorship (including single-person LLC)	9.3%
Other	1.9%

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP

This question was asked only of respondents identifying their organization as a trade association, professional society, or user group or customer community.

How many active individual members does your organization currently have? (135 responses)

1,000 or less	11.1%
1,001 to 5,000	20.7%
5,001 to 10,000	20.7%
10,001 to 25,000	21.5%
25,001 to 50,000	10.4%
50,001 to 100,000	1.5%
More than 100,000	5.9%
We have only organizational members.	8.1%

ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

This question was asked only of respondents identifying their organization as a trade association, professional society, or user group or customer community.

How many active organizational members does your organization currently have? (134 responses)

Less than 100	20.1%
101 to 200	10.4%
201 to 500	11.2%
501 to 1,000	11.2%
1,001 to 5,000	8.2%
More than 5,000	2.2%
We have only individual members.	36.6%

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

Which best describes the geographic focus of your organization (i.e., which best indicates the areas in which you actively solicit members or customers)? (194 responses)

Single-community or municipality focus	1.0%
Multiple-community focus within one state	4.1%
Single-state or province focus	9.8%
Multi-state or multi-province focus	4.6%
National focus	50.5%
International focus	29.9%

INDUSTRY

Which of the following best describes your organization's industry? (The options are based on the North American Industry Classification System.) (192 responses)

Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	1.6%
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	0.0%
Utilities	1.0%
Construction	1.0%
Manufacturing	0.5%
Wholesale trade	0.0%
Retail trade	2.1%
Transportation and warehousing	0.5%
Information	2.6%
Finance and insurance	2.1%
Real estate and rental and leasing	0.5%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	20.8%
Management of companies and enterprises	4.2%
Administrative and support and waste management and remediation services	0.0%
Educational services	21.4%
Health care and social assistance	20.3%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	1.6%
Accommodation and food services	0.5%
Other services (except public administration)	3.1%
Public administration	2.1%
Other	14.1%

CREDENTIALS

Does your organization offer a credential or provide education in support of a credential in the field or industry you serve? Credentials include licensure, certification, accreditation, recognition designations, and certificates. (190 responses)

Yes, and the credential is required	16.8%
Yes, but the credential is not required	44.7%
No	28.4%
Not sure	0.5%
Other	9.5%

STAFF SIZE

How many paid staff does your organization currently have? (187 responses)

Mean	507.2
Median	14.0

ANNUAL REVENUE

What is your organization's annual revenue (in U.S. dollars)? (179 responses)

Less than $500,000	21.8%
$500,001 to $1 million	12.3%
$1,000,001 to $5 million	33.5%
$5,000,001 to $10 million	11.2%
$10,000,001 to $50 million	15.6%
$50,000,001 to $250 million	2.2%
$250,000,001 to $500 million	1.7%
$500,000,001 to $1 billion	0.6%
More than $1 billion	1.1%

Respondents Who Have Not Held a Virtual Event and Have No Near-Term Plans for One

The following questions were asked only of respondents indicating their organizations have not previously held a virtual event and have no plans to offer one in the next 12 months.

REASON FOR NO VIRTUAL EVENT YET AND NO NEAR-TERM PLANS

Which of the following statements best reflects why you have not offered a virtual event and do not plan to offer one in the next 12 months? (67 responses)

We currently offer meetings and/or other types of events, but a virtual event doesn't make sense for our organization.	34.3%
We don't currently offer meetings and/or other types of events, and a virtual event doesn't make sense for our organization.	0.0%
We have plans to offer a virtual event, but it will not be offered in the next 12 months.	16.4%
We see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual event.	32.8%
Other	16.4%

CONCERNS ABOUT OFFERING A VIRTUAL EVENT

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they see one or more significant barriers to offering a virtual event.

What are the biggest concerns your organization sees in offering a virtual event? Please check no more than three that your organization considers most important. (21 responses)

We're concerned about the cost of offering a virtual event.	52.4%
We're concerned about the complexity of the technology.	76.2%
We're concerned we won't get the level of attendance we hope for.	52.4%
We're concerned it will hurt attendance at our place-based events.	19.0%
We're concerned about the quality of the learning experience.	23.8%
We don't think our customers or members want a virtual event.	23.8%
Offering a virtual event doesn't make sense for our type of organization.	4.8%
Other	19.0%

Respondents Who Have Held a Virtual Event

The following questions were asked of respondents indicating their organizations have previously held a virtual event.

STRATEGY FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS

Does your organization have a formal, documented strategy for virtual events? (94 responses)

Yes	38.3%
No	48.9%
Not sure	12.8%

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE WITH VIRTUAL EVENTS

For how many calendar years has your organization offered at least one virtual event? (94 responses)

Mean	4.7
Median	4.0
Mode	2.0

REASON FOR OFFERING A VIRTUAL EVENT

Why did your organization decide to offer a virtual event? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (87 responses)

To reach customers or members who would not otherwise attend our place-based events	81.6%
To compensate for declining attendance at our place-based events	24.1%
To reduce the costs for our organization to offer a conference	26.4%
To reduce the costs for our customers or members to attend a conference	47.1%
To be perceived as embracing cutting-edge approaches to serving our members or customers	59.8%
To help familiarize our customers or members with online education and meeting technologies	28.7%
To support an overall goal of delivering more services online	55.2%
To be the first to market and offer a virtual event before the competition does	11.5%
To be environmentally friendly	11.5%
Other	21.8%

ELEMENTS OF A VIRTUAL EVENT

Which of the following elements did your virtual event include? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please indicate the elements a typical virtual event at your organization includes.) (86 responses)

Live Webinar sessions (e.g., audio plus slides)	69.8%
Live streaming video or Webcast sessions	70.9%
On-demand Webinar sessions (e.g., audio plus slides)	47.7%
On-demand video or Webcast sessions	45.3%
Discussion boards	39.5%
Real-time text communication between participants	61.6%
Real-time voice communication between participants	20.9%
Avatars for participants	8.1%
Virtual exhibit hall	19.8%
Archives after the virtual event ends	73.3%
3D environment	2.3%
Other	2.3%

RELATIONSHIP TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

Which of the following best describes the relationship of your virtual event to a place-based event? (Remember if your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical virtual event at your organization.) (85 responses)

The virtual event was a standalone event not associated with a place-based event.	51.8%
The virtual event was associated with a place-based event and held at the same time.	31.8%
The virtual event was associated with a place-based event but held at a different time.	9.4%
Other	7.1%

LENGTH OF THE VIRTUAL EVENT

How long did your virtual event last, not including any time after the event when archives were accessible? (Remember if your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical virtual event at your organization.) (85 responses)

Less than one day	42.4%
One day to one and a half days	15.3%
More than one and a half days to two days	10.6%
More than two days to two and a half days	4.7%
More than two and a half days to three days	7.1%
More than three days	8.2%
Other	11.8%

REGISTRATIONS

How did registrations for your virtual event compare to your expectations? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (85 responses)

The number of registrations exceeded our expectations.	25.9%
The number of registrations was about what we expected.	52.9%
The number of registrations was lower than we expected.	21.2%

ATTENDANCE

Approximately what percentage of registrants actually attended your virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (74 responses)

Mean	64.3%
Median	75.0%

ATTENDANCE COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

How did attendance at your virtual event compare to typical attendance for a comparable place-based event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on typical event.) (80 responses)

Attendance was greater than for a comparable place-based event.	11.3%
Attendance was the same as for a comparable place-based event.	15.0%
Attendance was less than for a comparable place-based event.	57.5%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	16.3%

EVALUATIONS

Did your organization collect formal evaluations from the virtual event attendees? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (80 responses)

Yes	78.8%
No	21.3%

TYPES OF EVALUATIONS

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they collected formal evaluations at their virtual event.

Which types of formal of evaluations did your organization collect from the virtual event attendees? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (63 responses)

Evaluations of the overall virtual event	88.9%
Evaluations of each session	66.7%
Evaluations of each speaker	47.6%

EVALUATION RESULTS COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they collected formal evaluations at their virtual event.

How did evaluations for the virtual event compare to evaluations you typically receive for a comparable place-based event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (62 responses)

Attendees gave higher evaluation scores for the virtual event.	3.2%
Attendees gave the same or very similar evaluation scores for the virtual event.	74.2%
Attendees gave lower evaluation scores for the virtual event.	11.3%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	11.3%

MEASURING LEARNING

Did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual event (e.g, through assessments or evaluation questions tied to learning objectives)? (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (80 responses)

Yes	32.5%
No	67.5%

HOW LEARNING WAS MEASURED

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they measured whether learning occurred at their virtual event.

How did you measure whether learning occurred at your virtual event? Check all that apply. (If your organization has offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (25 responses)

Through evaluation questions that align with learning objectives	76.0%
Through post-event assessments or follow-ups	48.0%
Through post-session assessments or follow-ups	28.0%
Through a combination of pre-event and post-event assessment	28.0%
Through evaluations conducted a month or more following the virtual event	20.0%

FINANCIAL GOALS

Which statement best describes the financial goals of your virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (77 responses)

Wanted it to be self-sustaining (i.e., at least break even), but profitability (positive net revenue) wasn't required	27.3%
Wanted it to be self-sustaining and profitable (positive net revenue)	61.0%
Didn't need it to be self-sustaining	11.7%

CHARGING REGISTRANTS

Did you charge registrants for the virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (78 responses)

We directly charged registrants to attend.	69.2%
We indirectly charged registrants by including access to the virtual event as part of a larger purchase (e.g., a membership fee or subscription package).	1.3%
We directly charged some registrants (e.g., non-members) and indirectly charged others (e.g., members).	3.8%
We did not charge.	19.2%
Other	6.4%

REGISTRATION FEE COMPARED TO A PLACE-BASED EVENT

This question was asked only of respondents indicating they charged registrants for the virtual event, whether directly or indirectly.

Which of the following best describes the amount you charged for the virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (57 responses)

We charged significantly less than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	31.6%
We charged somewhat less than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	28.1%
We charged the same as we charge for a comparable place-based event.	28.1%
We charged somewhat more than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	1.8%
We charged significantly more than what we charge for a comparable place-based event.	0.0%
We do not offer a comparable place-based event.	10.5%

REVENUE FROM SPONSORS AND EXHIBITORS

Did your virtual event generate revenue from sponsorships or exhibitor fees? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (77 responses)

Yes, we generated revenue from both sponsorships and exhibitor fees.	7.8%
Yes, we generated revenue from sponsorships.	18.2%
Yes, we generated revenue from exhibitor fees.	1.3%
No, we did not generate revenue from sponsorships or exhibitor fees.	72.7%

CONTINUING EDUCATION CREDIT

Did you offer continuing education credit for attending your virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on a typical event.) (78 responses)

Yes, we offered continuing education credit for all parts of the virtual event.	42.3%
Yes, we offered continuing education credit but only for the real-time (synchronous) education sessions.	7.7%
Yes, we offered continuing education credit but only for the on-demand (asynchronous) education sessions.	1.3%
No, we did not offer continuing education credit.	39.7%
Other	9.0%

USE OF SPECIFIC TECHNOLOGIES FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS

Which of the following technologies and / or service providers did you use to deliver your virtual event? Check all that apply. (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please check technologies you have used for any of your virtual events.) (76 responses)

6Connex	0.0%
Freestone (formerly Abila Freestone)	3.9%
Adobe Connect	14.5%
Blue Sky eLearn	5.3%
CommPartners	9.2%
Communique Conferencing	1.3%
Digitell	6.6%
Expos2	0.0%
GoToMeeting / Webinar	14.5%
iCohere	2.6%
Intercall	0.0%

INXPO	9.2%
Mainstream Media	0.0%
Meeting Tomorrow	0.0%
ON24	5.3%
Performedia	1.3%
vConference	0.0%
WebEx	15.8%
Zoom	23.7%
Other	31.6%

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH VIRTUAL EVENTS

Overall, how satisfied was your organization with its virtual event? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on typical event.) (78 responses)

Very satisfied	51.3%
Somewhat satisfied	33.3%
Somewhat dissatisfied	6.4%
Very dissatisfied	9.0%

SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL EVENTS

How satisfied or dissatisfied was your organization with its virtual event in terms of the specific items below? (If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on typical event.) (78 responses)

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Not applicable
Attendance	43.6%	37.2%	5.1%	14.1%	0.0%
Revenue	29.9%	37.7%	10.4%	10.4%	11.7%
Ease of the technologies used	32.9%	53.9%	10.5%	2.6%	0.0%
Cost of the technologies used	24.4%	47.4%	15.4%	12.8%	0.0%
Feedback from attendees	42.3%	35.9%	12.8%	3.8%	5.1%
Connection to the organization's strategic plan or the direction set by leadership	48.7%	33.3%	5.1%	3.8%	9.0%

SUCCESS WITH VIRTUAL EVENTS

Overall, how would you rate the success of your organization's virtual event?
(If you have offered more than one virtual event, please answer based on typical
event.) (78 responses)

Very successful	43.6%
Somewhat successful	43.6%
Somewhat unsuccessful	2.6%
Very unsuccessful	10.3%

FUTURE VIRTUAL EVENTS

Do you plan to offer another virtual event in the future? (78 responses)

Yes	92.3%
No	3.8%
Not sure	3.8%