

# Freeman Trends Report

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

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# Within this report

Total number of  
respondents 4,114

Total number of attendee respondents: 2,326  
Attendee margin of error: +/- 2.0%

Total number of exhibitor respondents: 1,581  
Exhibitor margin of error: +/- 2.5%

Total number of event organizer respondents: 207  
Organizer margin of error: +/- 6.7%

## Callouts you'll see



NowGen Event Goers (NGEG), aged 23-46, are shaping trends, driving innovation, and redefining what value means. This callout represents NowGen data segmentation.



Throughout this report, we've modified a few charts to highlight the top responses. When you see this callout, it means that the full dataset can be found in the appendix.

**Attendees**  
**Exhibitors**

Colors used when comparing attendee and exhibitor data side-by-side.



These callouts represent differences between conference and trade show attendees.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Meaningful connection is designed

Connection can't rely on coincidence alone. It must be designed. Without intention, networking feels random, inauthentic, and transactional—the opposite of what modern attendees crave. **Today's attendees aren't satisfied with small talk.** They want real talk, genuine connections, and fresh industry insights. In other words, they want a new kind of networking. And if they don't get it? They won't come back to your event.

Fortunately, there's a formula for meaningful networking:

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

Most event planners get close with provisions, people, and place, but they overlook the most critical variable: **purpose**. And that's where opportunities for connection fall flat. Organizers spend a lot of time and energy filling a stylish venue with great food, drinks, and people who want to connect. Then they cross their fingers and hope that connection just... happens. But without a purpose, it rarely does.

**Purpose doesn't just add to the networking equation—it multiplies it.** Purpose is the catalyst that transforms a passive crowd into an active community. Purpose gives people a reason to reach across the room, not just sip and circle. And that's exactly what event participants are asking for.

They want more than a room and an hour of free time. They want curated conversations with people they know and people they don't, centered on shared topics and challenges.

They want intentional moments with experts, peers, and potential partners. And yes, a bite to eat or a drink, too.

The bottom line is this: Hosting a gathering isn't enough. **Today's audiences need organizers to architect serendipity and, above all, connect people in meaningful ways.**

At Freeman, “**connecting people in meaningful ways**” has always been more than a tagline. It's our mission. **We're committed to providing the insights, strategies, and tools you need to design and measure meaningful networking experiences.** This report unpacks the what, why, and how of intentional networking design, so you can turn open spaces into lasting relationships and fleeting encounters into something attendees take home with them.

# XLNC Framework

If you're familiar with Freeman's previous trends reports, you're familiar with Freeman's XLNC Framework.

If you're not, allow us to catch you up. XLNC (pronounced excellence) stands for **eXperience, Learning, Networking, and Commerce**. It's an objective-based framework that examines the four main reasons folks attend (or exhibit at) events.

**This year, we're taking a different approach to our research and double-clicking on each XLNC element.**

This chapter is all about networking, and we'll explore what organizers can do to help participants meaningfully connect.



## EXPERIENCE

Have fun, feel emotionally fulfilled, enjoy the environment



## LEARNING

Be inspired, learn something new, receive training



## NETWORKING

Make connections, socialize with new and existing contacts



## COMMERCE

Evaluate vendor offerings, build awareness, discover new products/services



# Why People Network



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

# “Networking” means different things to different people

It’s easy to assume we’re all on the same page when we hear the word “networking.” As a result, event organizers often default to a single version of networking that revolves around a “networking zone” or an open bar.

But today’s audiences are intentional and diverse. They come with different goals, different comfort levels, and different definitions of the word “networking.”

For some, it’s about professional gains. For others, it’s about insight. For others still, it’s about belonging.

**Here's what attendees are saying:**

Networking  
is...



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



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



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



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



MEET THE

# Learning-focused attendees



## Why they connect

- Learn something new
- Gain valuable insights that help in their role or organization
- Discover subject matter experts



## How they connect best

- Conversations tied to professional challenges
- Connecting with experts after a session
- Guided formats over unstructured mingling



## What holds them back

- Traditional formats feel awkward or salesy
- Don't always feel prepared or confident
- Less interested in sessions labeled as “networking”
- Less likely to seek out connections in advance





MEET THE

# Networking-focused attendees



## Why they connect

- Build a sense of belonging and connection
- Form lasting professional relationships
- Collaborate on commercial opportunities
- Have a familiar face at future events



## How they connect best

- Drawn to sessions labeled as “networking”
- Connecting with attendees or exhibitors in advance
- Informal formats without agendas, topics, or structured facilitation
- Conversations around business growth and potential partnerships



## What holds them back

- Less interested in feeling enlightened
- Less likely to believe they have personal barriers to successful networking

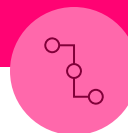
MEET THE

# Commerce-focused attendees



## Why they connect

- Stay informed about the latest products, solutions, and market trends
- Uncover commercial opportunities or potential partnerships
- Broaden their industry perspective



## How they connect best

- Expo floor or exhibitor booths
- Discussions centered on specific industry topics or commercial relevance
- Interactions focused on vendor discovery or solution sourcing



## What holds them back

- Tend to avoid sessions labeled as “networking”
- Don't prefer loosely structured mingling

ATTENDEE QUESTION

What are the most important reasons why you network at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

More data in appendix

Overall, most attendees network for new ideas and new contacts

The top reasons people attend events stand out substantially from the rest. Attendees primarily want to learn something new, make new contacts to share ideas and questions, and identify potential collaboration opportunities. **Today’s attendees come to network with a career-centric purpose**, not just to make friends and have fun.

There is a slight difference when it comes to conference and trade show attendee motives. Conference attendees prefer to learn, while trade show attendees prefer to identify new contacts. This doesn’t come as a surprise.

However, organizers must keep the top attendee motives in mind as they design networking experiences if they want to support attendee objectives.

Motivation for networking at events



# ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

How do you expect networking at in-person professional events to make you feel? Select up to 2 options.

## Attendees expect networking to make them feel in-the-know and enlightened

Unmet expectations shape how participants act on your event: their willingness to invest again, stay in touch with connections, and recommend it to others.

That's why it's so important to understand how event participants want to feel.

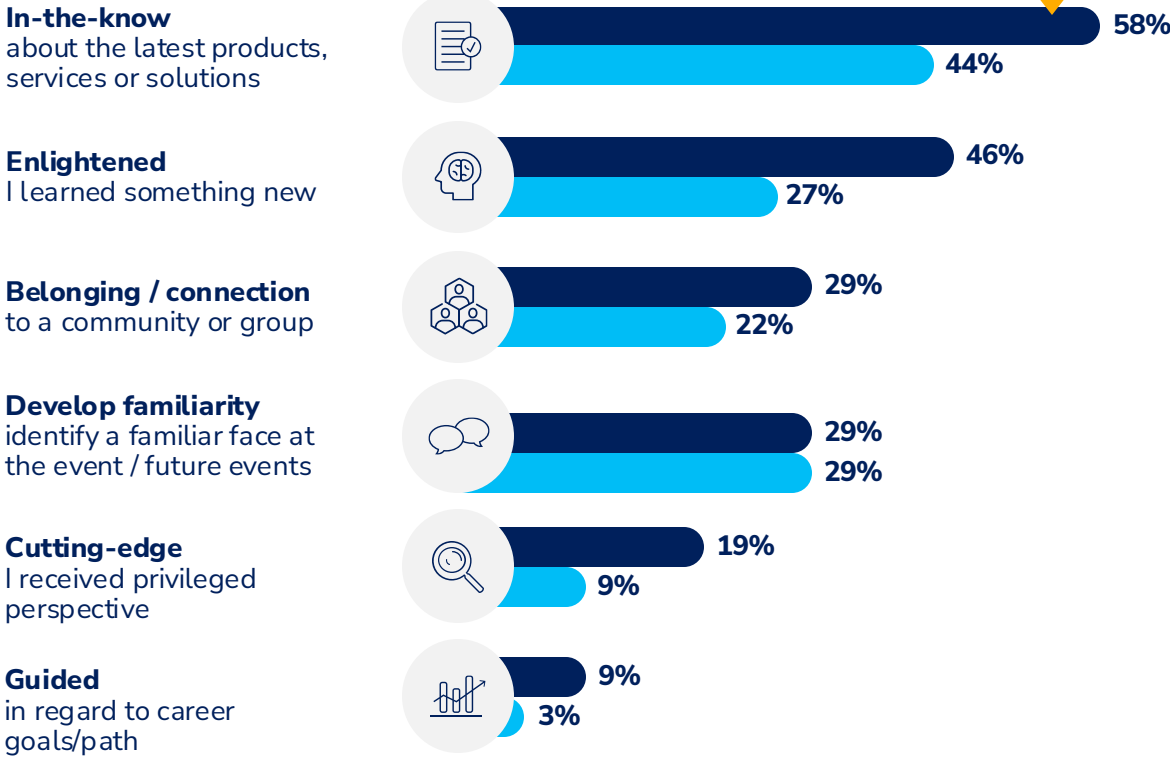
More than half of exhibitors want to walk away from an event feeling like they made connections to advance sales.

More than half of attendees, on the other hand, expect to leave feeling like they learned something. 58% want to feel in-the-know about products and solutions, and 46% want to feel enlightened by ideas.

But there's a problem...

More data in appendix

### Expected feeling from networking at events



ORGANIZER QUESTION

What do you believe are the top 3 reasons why attendees and exhibitors network at your organization’s largest event?



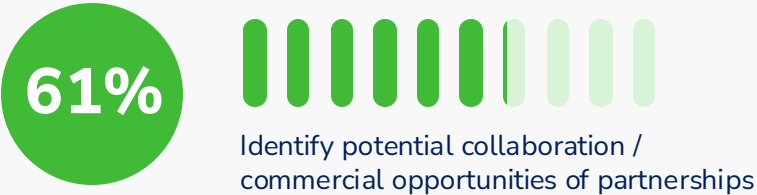
Organizers aren’t quite aligned with attendee networking motives

Organizers believe that the top two reasons attendees network are to identify commercial opportunities and reconnect with acquaintances.

Although this may be true for some, we know that most attendees actually prefer to gain new ideas and / or new contacts.

 More data in appendix

Organizers’ perception of why attendees network at events





## EXHIBITOR QUESTION

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

# Exhibitors network for commercial gains

It's no surprise that most exhibitors measure networking success by the number of new leads and prospects they acquired.

But as we've said before, exhibitors should focus less on collecting one-off leads and more on fostering lifetime value. This means treating in-person events as avenues for relationship-building. **They're not just a touchpoint, but a turning point. After all, many attendees want to be seen, not sold to.**

## How exhibitors measure networking success

**59%** Number of new leads I (or my company) acquired

**50%** Number of new prospects discovered

**43%** Number of existing leads I (or my company) was able to advance in the pipeline

**43%** Number of existing customers I (or my company) reconnected with

**41%** I gained new ideas for addressing professional priorities / challenges

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

Do you feel you experience any of the following barriers to networking at in-person professional events? Select all that apply.

### 1 in 3 attendees consider networking “too salesy”

A third of attendees feel like they’re being overtly sold to, and they don’t want to be.

When exhibitors connect first and pitch later, they have a much better chance of establishing the relationships that lead to long-term brand trust and loyalty.

#### Barriers to networking



**34%** Feel it's  
“too salesy”

ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

Successful networking is the reason attendees will return to your event

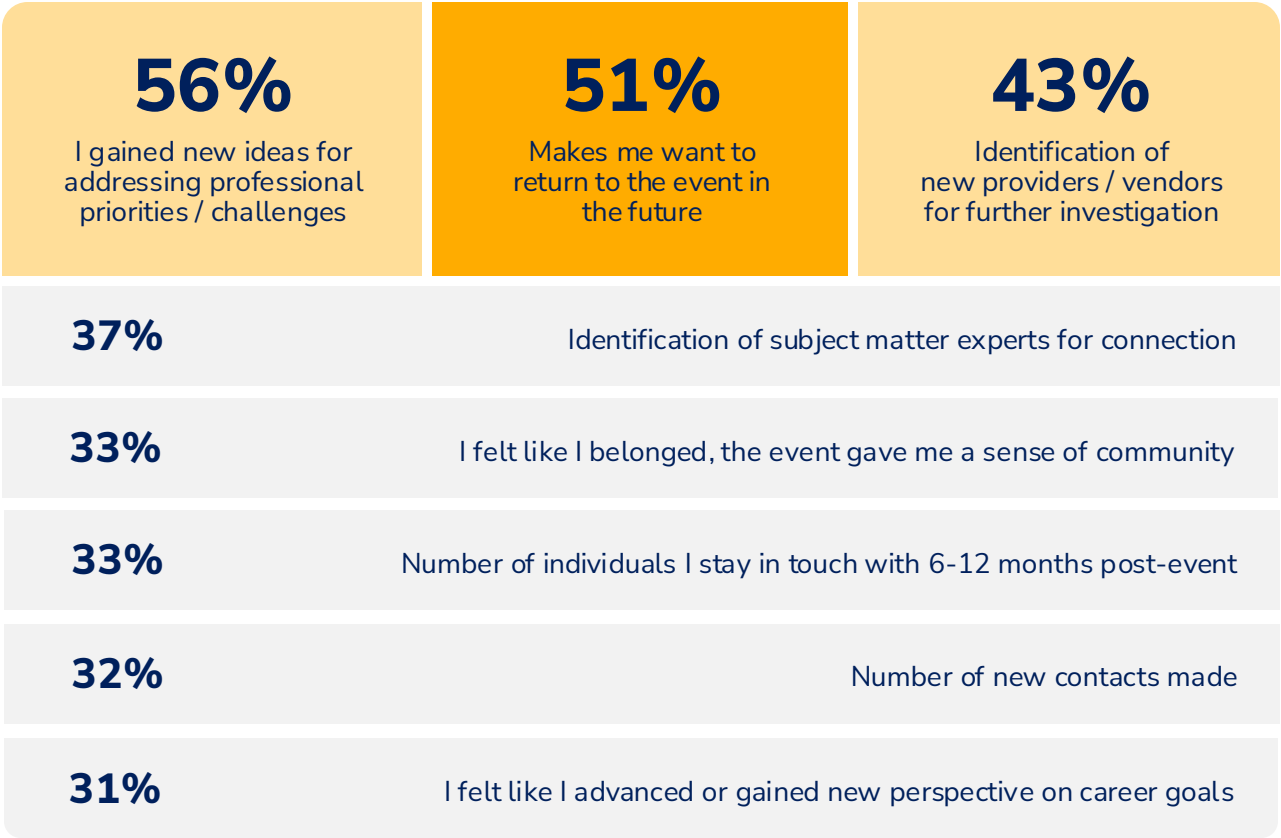
How do attendees determine whether networking experiences met their expectations? Most (56%) see networking as a success if they walk away with new ideas.

But you may be wondering, “Can networking really make or break an attendee’s event experience?”

Well, 51% say that successful networking is reason enough to return to an event. Poor networking experiences can drive attendees away, but if they make solid connections, it is the #1 reason they will return!

So, let’s determine how to ensure networking is a success.

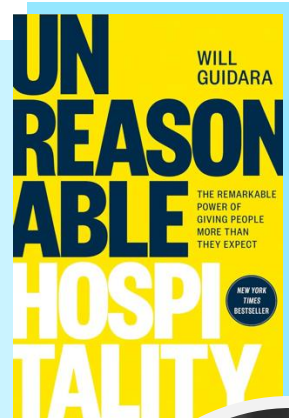
Attendees’ measure of networking success





# What Makes Networking Work



**WILL  
GUIDARA**

# “The Extraordinary Power of Intention”

In *Unreasonable Hospitality*, Will Guidara shares the story of how Eleven Madison Park went from a struggling fine-dining restaurant to the best in the world. And one of the secrets? **Intentionality.**

Guidara explains how easy it is for businesses and teams to operate on autopilot, offering “**what’s always been**” rather than “**what could be.**” But when leaders operate with intention, every decision becomes a chance to elevate the experience.

Intentionality means refusing to do something simply because it’s always been done that way. It means asking: What do we want people to feel? And what choices can we make to ensure people walk away with that feeling?

The same is true for networking events. While name tags, open bars, and unstructured mingling have historically been the model, there’s no guarantee those things (on their own) will create feelings of belonging or enlightenment. But when you think intentionally about the tone you want to set, the format you want to architect, and the spaces you use to bring it to life, you create the kind of meaningful moments people remember.

The status quo is easy to pull off, no doubt. But **in a world full of default settings, intentionality stands out.** It signals care. It says: Your experiences matter. And that’s what keeps attendees coming back.

ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

Attendees want to connect over provisions and purpose

According to attendees, food and drink make networking more valuable. After all, food is fuel, free time is limited, and convenience is key. However, after provisions, 49% of attendees believe that industry-related prompts make networking more valuable. In other words, **they want to discuss a common purpose**.

We found that more NowGen attendees (38%) see value in a mentor or ambassador who can help them connect with others on-site, likely because early career individuals are more open to mentorship.

While attendees want to be served an appetizer, they also want to be served a reason to connect and keep conversations flowing.

More data in appendix

Activities / aspects that make networking valuable to attendees





## CASE STUDY

# Tell Me You're Networking Without Telling Me You're Networking

## “Camp Buck” – A Freeman Company Experience

In 2023, organizers of the Freeman Company's annual leadership conference, “Camp Buck,” fostered serendipity and shied away from traditional networking formats.

One specific dinner brought executives and stakeholders together in an impactful and memorable way by mixing and matching colleagues whose professional paths wouldn't have normally crossed.

Organizers reserved several restaurants within a few blocks' radius and grouped attendees by mixing up departments and teams in groups of six to eight. They assigned different venues, and throughout the evening, executive leaders stopped at each venue for impromptu chats with each group.

The goal was to curate opportunities for stakeholders to interact with executive leadership while also wining, dining, and creating new shared experiences—from the appetizers to the after-dinner drinks.

The result struck a balance that made networking seem effortless while also normalizing inter-departmental collaboration and organic conversation that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

By ditching the old way of “networking” and intentionally designing something new, organizers created a moment that attendees didn't just rave about ... they remembered.



ATTENDEE QUESTION

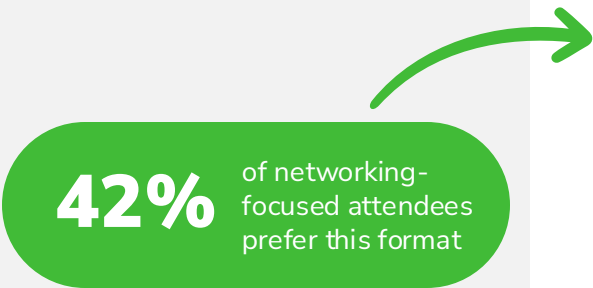
What are your most preferred formats for networking with attendees and / or exhibitors at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

Attendees have a clear preference for industry-specific topic discussions

More than half of attendees prefer topic-specific discussions over generic networking formats.

This affirms, once again, that attendees want to go beyond small talk and exchange ideas with those who understand their world.

35% of attendees rank informal gatherings as a preferred format, but many of these respondents are networking-focused attendees (42%).



 More data in appendix

Networking format preferences

51%

Industry topic-specific discussions

37%

Themed receptions, parties, or concerts

34%

Professional challenges discussions

35%

Informal—no topic, guidance, or specific subject matter for discussion

34%

Discussions with speaker(s) / SMEs following general / education sessions



ATTENDEE QUESTION

What type of professional or industry challenges are you most interested in discussing during networking at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

When attendees say they want to talk industry, here’s what they mean

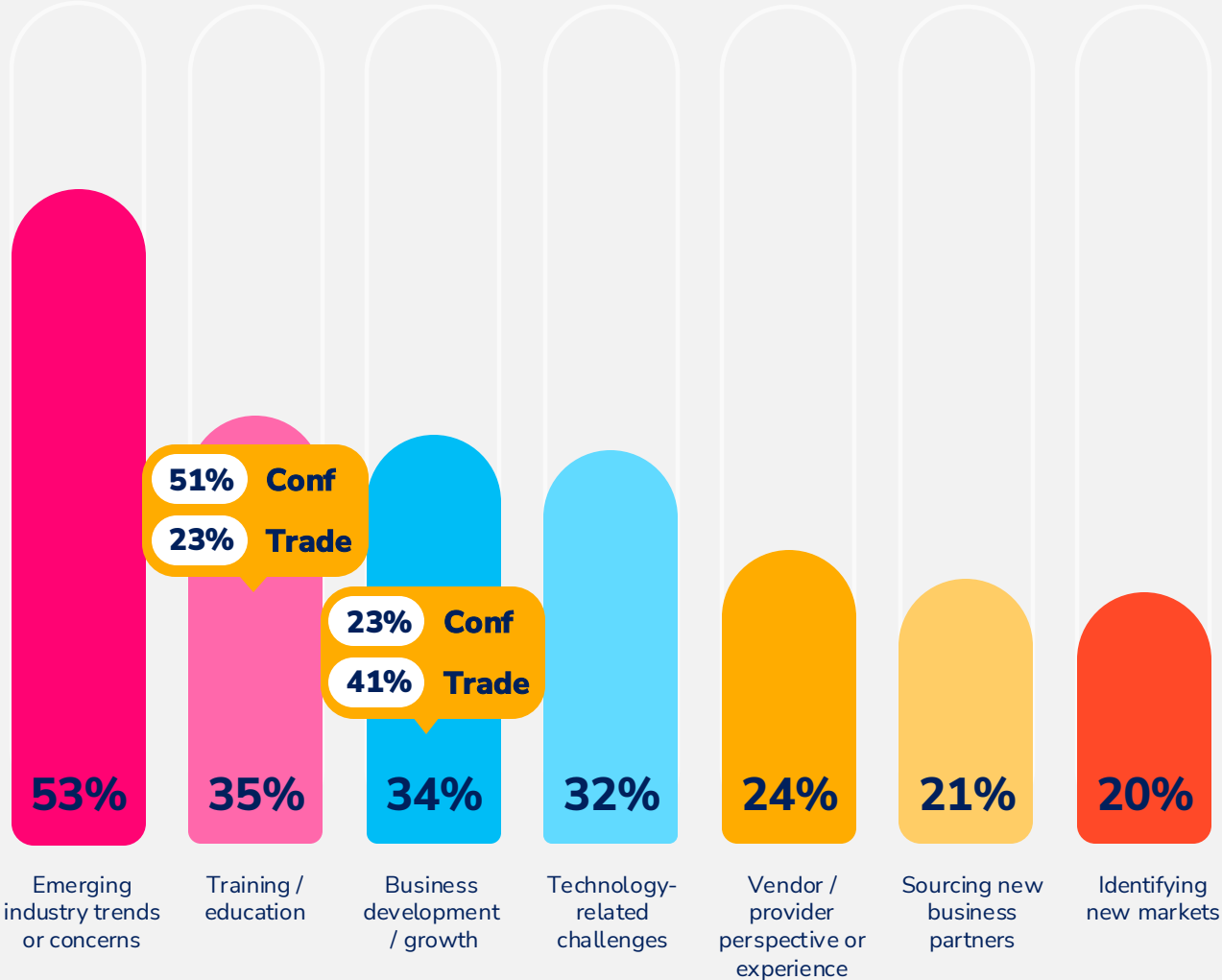
We know attendees crave conversations rooted in their industry. But which topics are most relevant when networking?

The top answer: Emerging trends (no matter the event type). Runners-up include training and business growth, where conference-goers prioritize discussions around professional development opportunities, and trade show attendees would rather discuss business development opportunities.

Organizers must stay on top of the latest trends, best practices, and the business landscape in order to facilitate purposeful, industry-driven networking opportunities that make participants want to share with their organization.

 More data in appendix

Networking topic preferences—professional or industry challenges





## ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

## Experts help anchor networking in what matters most

Whether you call them key opinion leaders, thought leaders, or subject matter experts, 63% of attendees see these experts as the most important contributors to a successful networking experience.

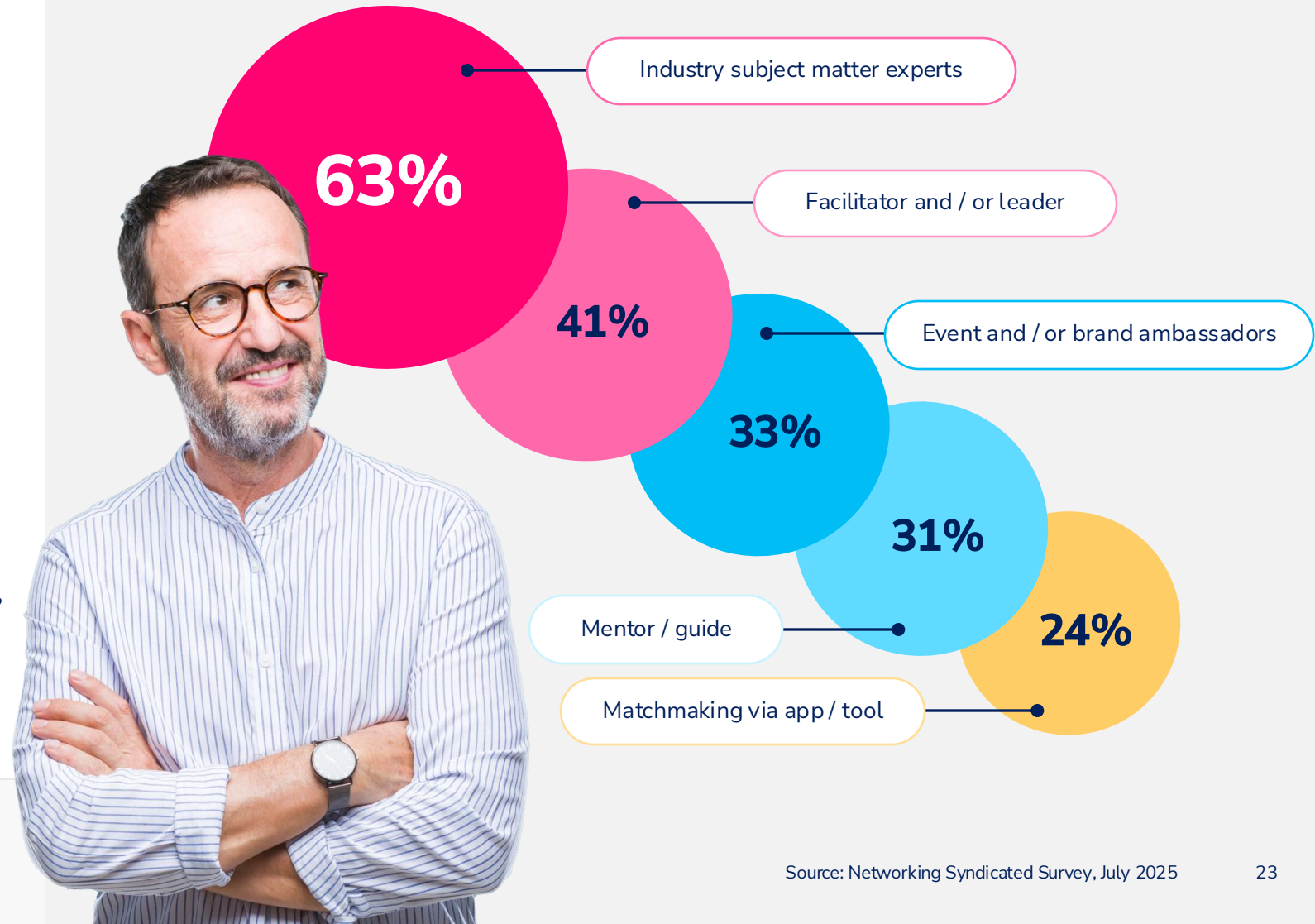
**This is because SMEs bring purpose to the conversation,** offering credibility, insight, and direction that help participants surpass surface-level conversations.

Aside from SMEs, some attendees report that facilitators and brand ambassadors help curate connections, too. So, how do the right attendees find the right thought leaders in the room? That's up to organizers, their understanding of participants' core objectives, and their willingness to act on it.



More data  
in appendix

## Groups contributing to a successful networking environment



# What Gets in the Way





ORGANIZER QUESTION

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

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

Very few organizers believe it's their job to determine networking topics or bring in subject matter experts (14% and 10%, respectively).

We know how hard it is to orchestrate every event detail, but this is a clear miss, as attendees make their desire to discuss industry topics and connect with experts clear.

Organizers have an opportunity to redefine their role and improve attendee outcomes.



Organizers' perception of their responsibility in facilitating networking



## ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

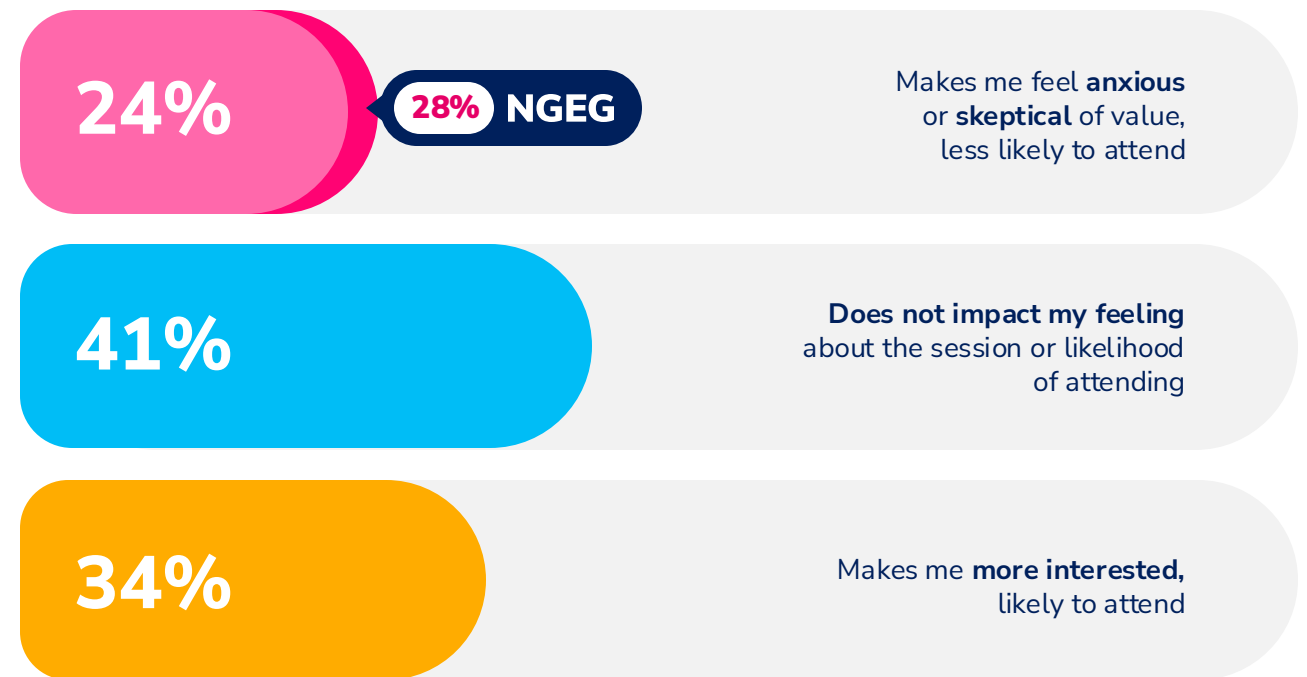
# Networking still evokes anxiety for some, despite those who gravitate toward it

“Networking” can trigger discomfort for attendees. It’s not the word itself that’s the problem. It’s the associations that come with it: awkward activities, vague formats, or experiences that feel forced and unproductive.

Nearly 1 in 4 feel anxious or skeptical when an activity is labeled as “networking,” and it’s even higher among NowGen attendees (28%). **When networking lacks purpose or relevance, the label becomes a red flag instead of a draw.**

Take this as your sign to stop labeling networking as “networking” (goodbye, “networking receptions”). Instead, highlight the activities and outcomes participants seek, like industry connection, expert-led learning, and commercial collaboration.

## Perception of the label “networking”



ATTENDEE QUESTION

Do you feel you experience any of the following barriers to networking at in-person professional events? Select all that apply.

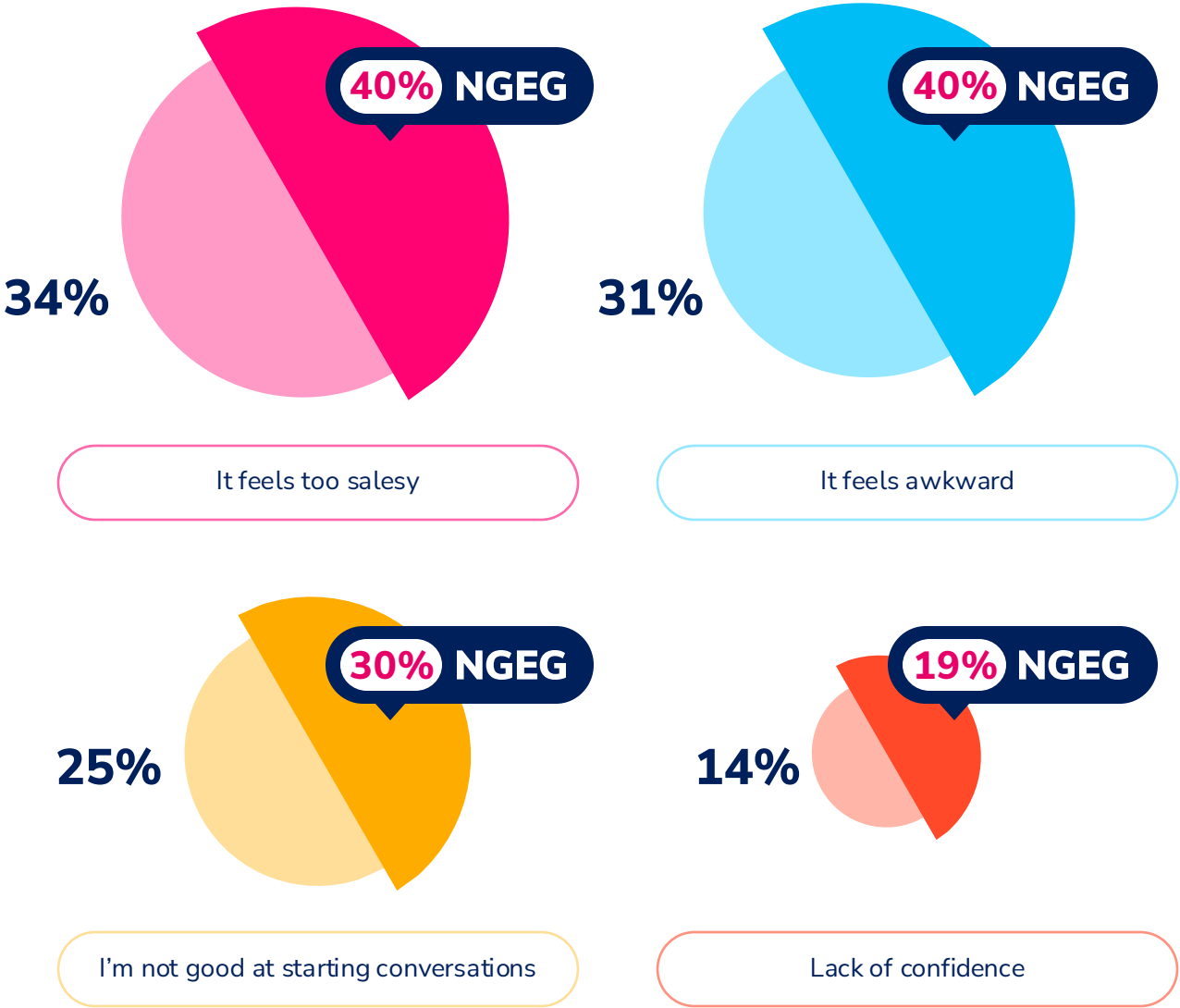
Not all attendees feel comfortable connecting

At least one-third of respondents report barriers to networking, and those numbers climb even higher for NowGen attendees.

Despite craving real-world connection, 40% of NowGen attendees say networking feels too salesy, another 40% say it's just plain awkward, and 30% believe they're not good at starting conversations. Although this generation is eager to connect, a surprising number are unsure how.

**Organizers can help by curating purposeful networking experiences**, whether it's through industry-specific prompts, personalized mentorship opportunities, or skills development workshops. When organizers approach networking activities intentionally, attendees (and specifically NowGen) will be more likely to associate your event with career advantages instead of cringeworthy conversations.

Barriers to networking





# The Connection Conundrum

The NowGen might be the most connected generation in history, but not necessarily in the ways that matter most. They've grown up building relationships through screens, yet they crave real, face-to-face connection.

The challenge is that many haven't had much practice. According to [AllWork](#), a surprising number (nearly 1 in 5) have never worked in a traditional office, and it shows: They're entering professional spaces without the muscle memory of hallway chats or water cooler banter.

Layer on the reality that NowGen reports some of the highest levels of loneliness (according to [Newsweek](#)) and anxiety (according to [NSAC](#)), and it's no wonder that connection feels complicated. They want to show up, build relationships, and feel a part of something, but they may not always know how or feel comfortable doing so organically.

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

**1 in 5 have  
never worked  
in a traditional  
office**

**Craving  
face-to-face  
connection**

**Connection  
feels  
complicated**



ORGANIZER QUESTION

What are the most preferred formats for how attendees and / or exhibitors network at your largest in-person event? Select up to 3 options.

Do you consider any of these networking formats to be challenging to incorporate as part of your event? Select all that apply.

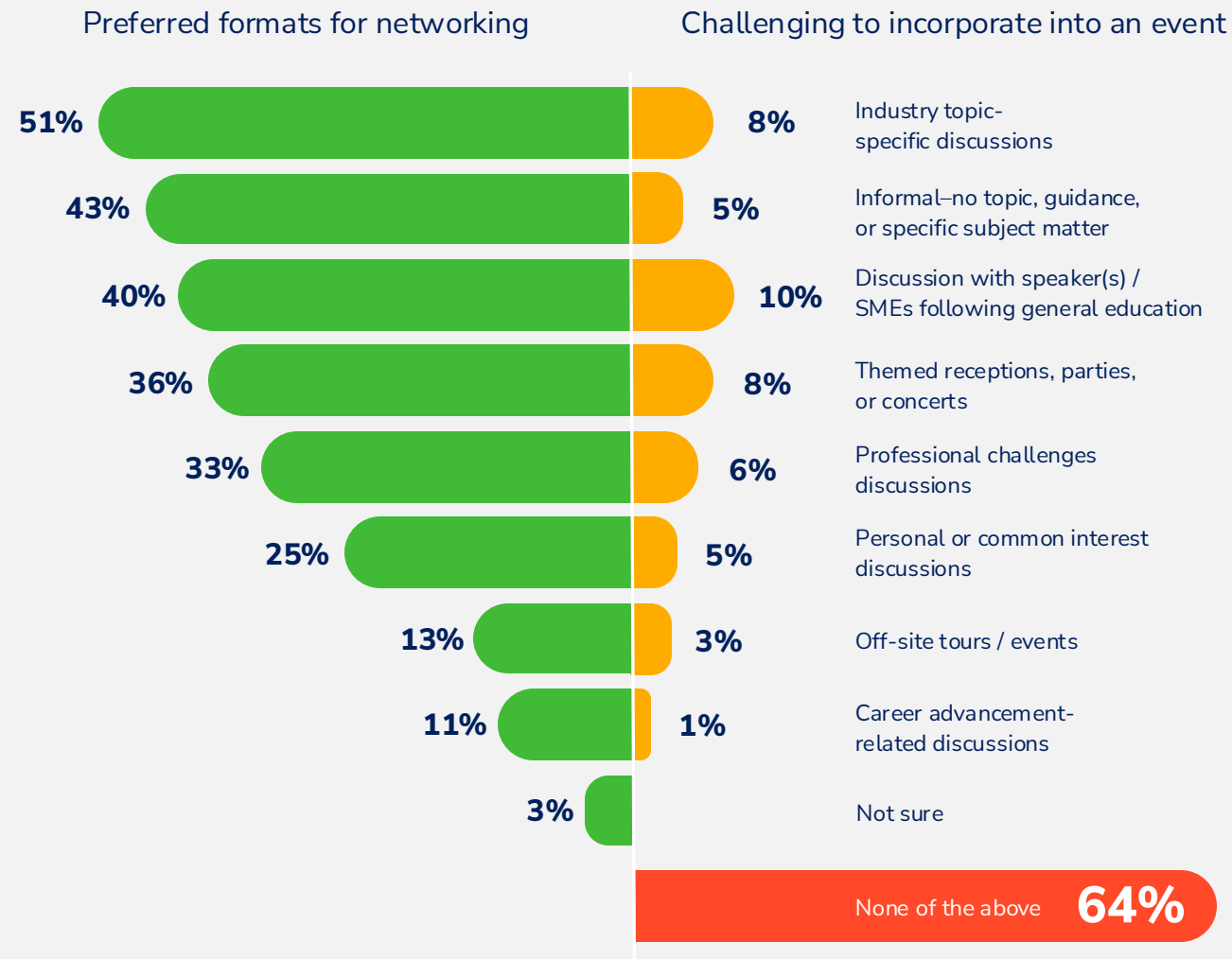
Organizers underestimate networking challenges for top networking formats

Many organizers recognize the importance of networking formats like industry topic discussions and discussions with SMEs, but **64% report that they face no challenges when incorporating such formats.** (Perhaps this is because, [as we saw earlier](#), most organizers aren't taking responsibility for these types of networking activities at all.)

**Regardless of the reason, this is cause for concern.** After all, excellent networking is not easy to pull off. From topic-driven discussions to expert-led breakouts, designing purposeful networking activities is more challenging than organizers think, and they demand intentional effort.

Underestimating that effort is part of why attendee expectations aren't always met.

Perception of most preferred networking formats



## ORGANIZER QUESTION

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

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

Many organizers believe it's up to attendees to make the most out of networking experiences.

In other words, organizers see their job as providing the people, the place, and the provisions, but not the purpose. It's no wonder that so few report networking-related challenges.

**Here's what organizers are saying:**



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



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



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



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





## ATTENDEE QUESTION

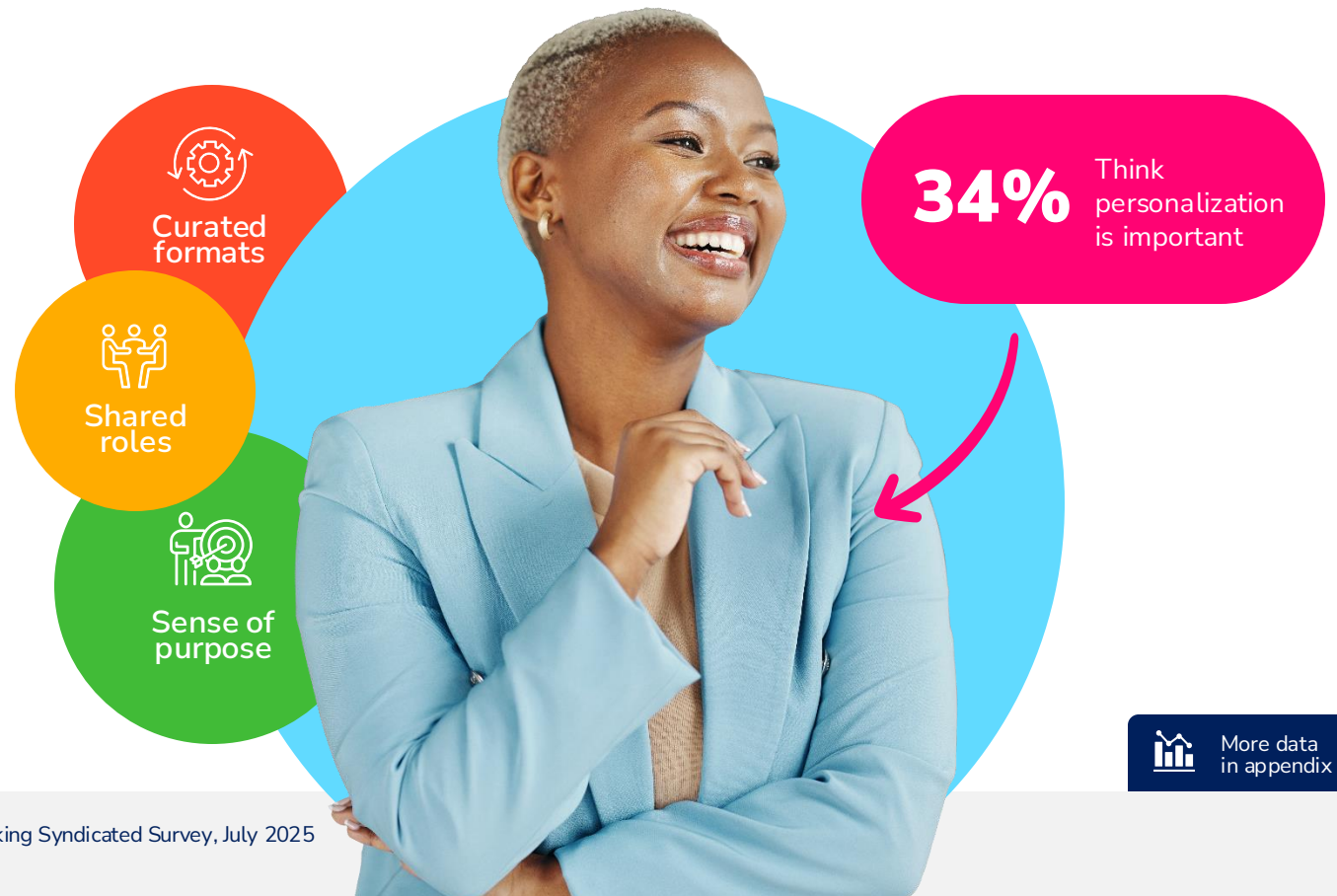
How important is it that your networking experience at in-person professional events feels personalized (i.e., curated or specific to whom you may want to meet, sessions or meet-ups you may want to attend)?

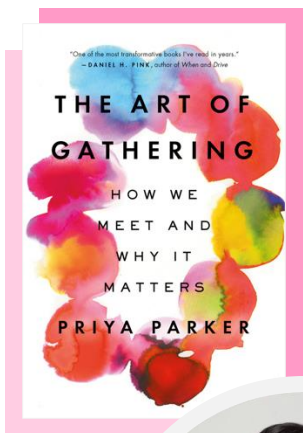
## More than 1/3 of attendees want purposeful, personalized experiences

Despite the unstructured formats that many organizers deliver, attendees want networking to feel relevant, not random.

More than a third say personalization is key to a successful networking experience. They want more than free time or casual mixers. They're looking for curated formats that connect them with the right people, based on shared roles, interests, and a sense of purpose.

Importance of personalization to attendee networking experience





PRIYA  
PARKER

## “Don’t Be a Chill Host”

In *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker dismantles the myth that great hosts should be relaxed, hands-off, and neutral. She calls them the “chill host.” This mindset, while well-intentioned, often leads to forgettable or disconnected gatherings where people default to small talk, cluster with who they already know, or leave early without ever engaging meaningfully.

Parker’s core argument is that **gatherings are too important to leave to chance**. Every gathering—whether a dinner party, conference, or networking event—is a chance to transform, connect, and spark something new. But that only happens when someone takes responsibility for **shaping the experience**. That’s the role of a host (or an organizer), and it requires intention, courage, and a willingness to guide.

Parker reminds us that people want to be led. They want someone to set the context, hold the space, and help them go deeper. And in professional settings like networking events, where vulnerability can be high and stakes can feel ambiguous, strong hosting becomes even more crucial.

By contrast, when hosts step back too far, they miss the opportunity to create a transformative moment. The result? Another awkward cocktail hour where nothing memorable happens.

Parker’s message to organizers is clear: **Stop confusing neutrality with hospitality**. If you’re the one calling the gathering, you have the power, and responsibility, to shape it into something meaningful.

**Don’t be chill. Be purposeful.**



ATTENDEE QUESTION

What types of personal information would you be willing to share at an in-person event assuming you receive a more personalized networking experience? Select all that apply.

 More data in appendix

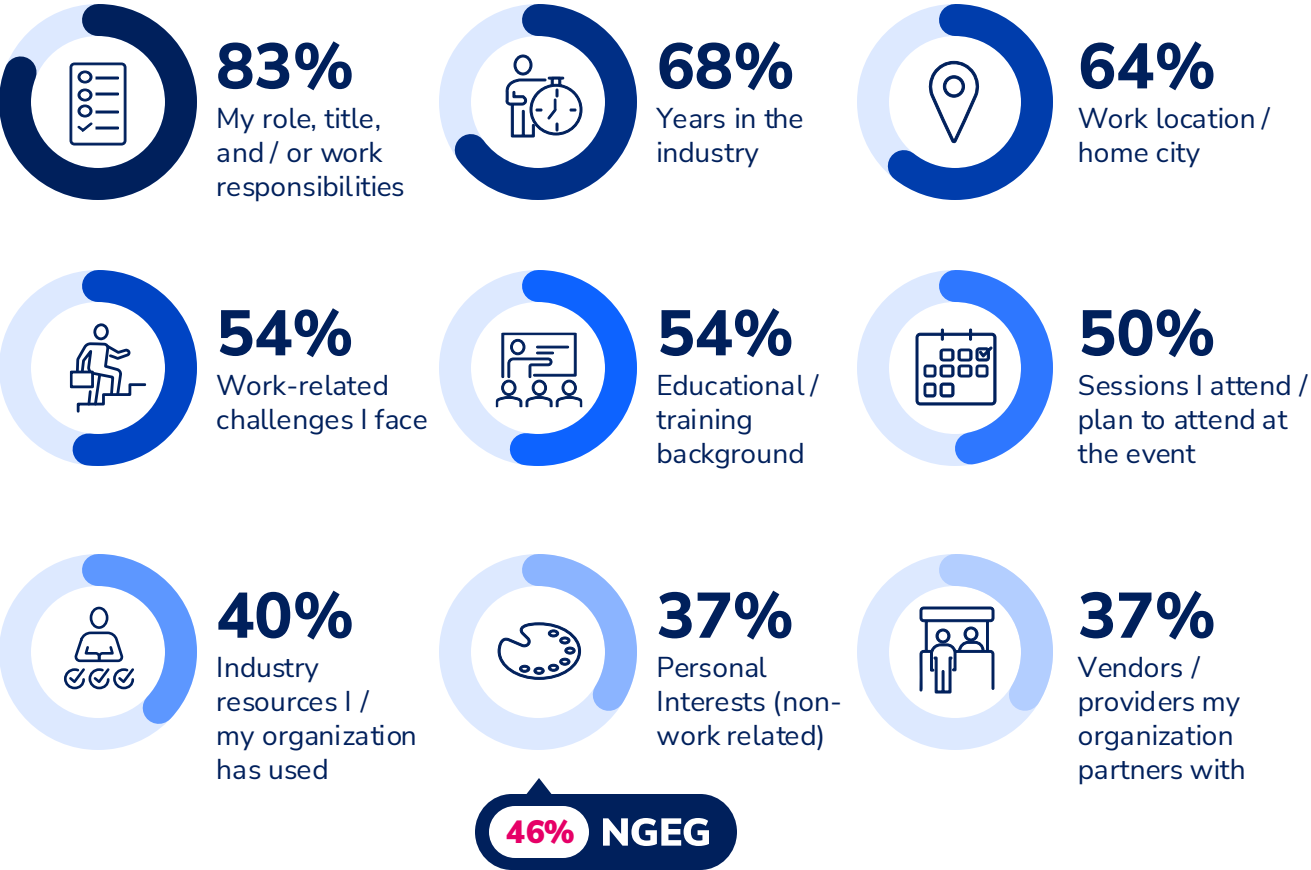
Attendees are willing to help organizers personalize networking experiences by sharing their information

Personalization doesn't have to start from scratch. Attendees are ready to share meaningful details like their roles, tenure, location, and industry challenges, which can help make curated networking more doable.

46% of NowGen attendees are even willing to share details about their personal interests, which shows just how important personalized experiences are to our younger attendees. (Baby Boomers would never!)

This gives organizers a strong foundation to build from, even if the path isn't always simple.

Attendee willingness to share types of personal information





# Take Advantage of the Opt-In (Tastefully)

You might be thinking: “Participants don’t want to be profiled, pushed, or spammed.” And you’re right, they don’t.

But **intentional connection isn’t intrusive communication**. Attendees are willing to share context (like their role, goals, or challenges) *when it leads to more meaningful experiences*.

Personalization doesn’t have to mean invasive data capture. It can be as simple as:

- Letting attendees opt in to share what topics they’re interested in
- Matching them with others facing similar challenges, *without sharing personal info*
- Using color-coded badges or roundtable themes to guide interaction organically
- Sending one thoughtful email: “Here are three people or sessions we think you’d value, based on what you told us.”

It’s not about more messages, it’s about **the right ones**, delivered with transparency. **As we’ve said before, in-person events are the ultimate opt-in.** People come to connect. When communication is authentic, helpful, and easy to opt out of, attendees welcome it.



Opt-in

Connect

# How Organizers Can Connect People in Meaningful Ways



## ORGANIZER QUESTION

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

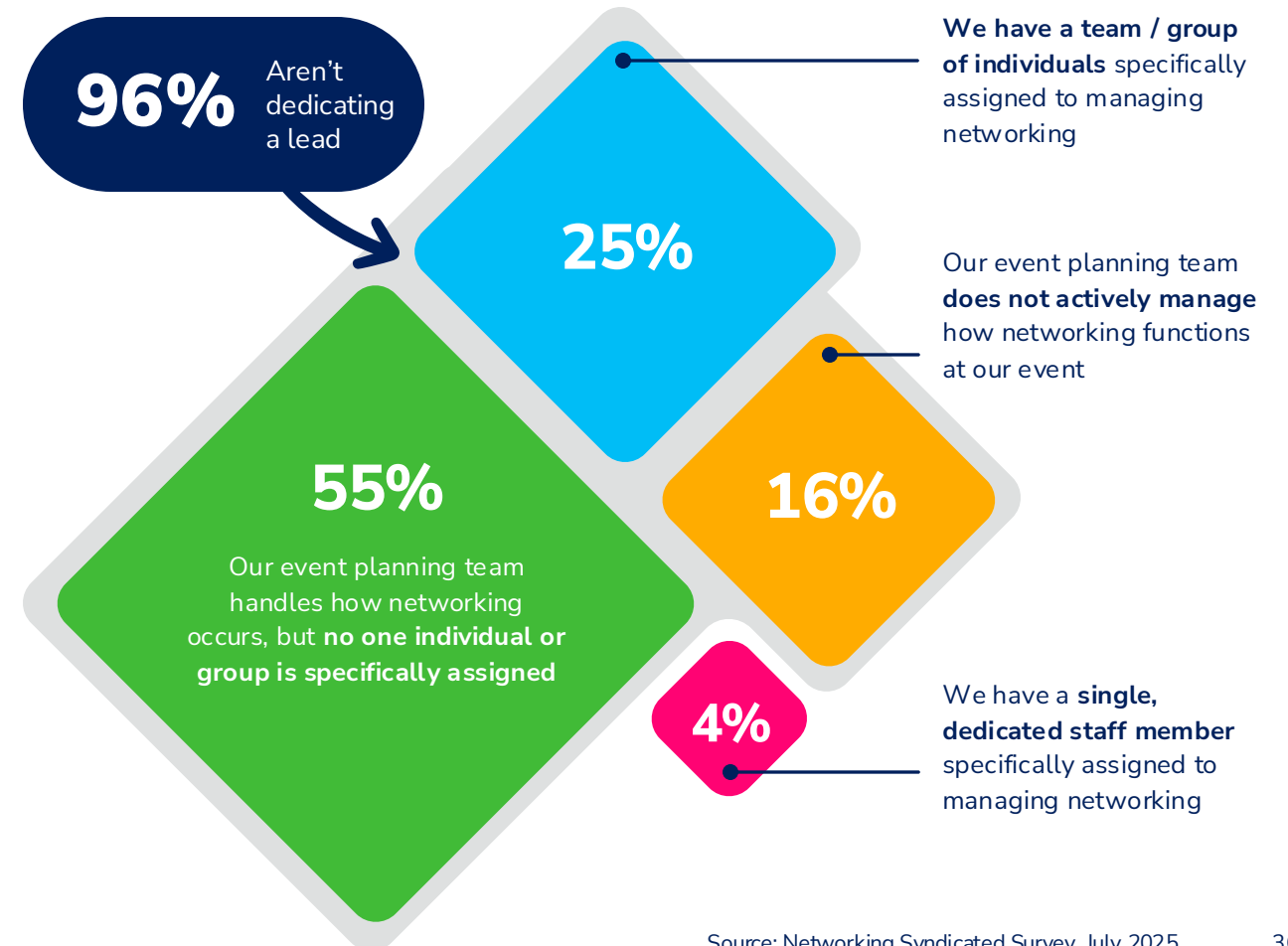
# According to organizers, networking often lacks a clear owner

96% of organizers do not have a dedicated staff member responsible for networking. Let that sink in.

**Without clear accountability, it's easy for networking to default to unstructured time instead of a designed, purposeful experience.**

It's time to elevate this critical objective and define the roles, training, measurement, and monetization of networking.

## How event organizers manage networking





# Action Item



## Devote a single person to your networking strategy + operations

Step number one? Make networking someone's job, not everyone's afterthought. We know that when "everyone is responsible," no one is responsible.

So, designate a dedicated owner to research attendee preferences, align networking strategies with those preferences, and define measurable outcomes to evaluate against.

When someone owns it, it gets better.

ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What would improve how you could make the most of networking prior to when you arrive at a professional event? Select all that apply.

Event participants want to connect and prepare before event day

Attendees want to know who will be in the room in advance, especially which experts will be available to meet.

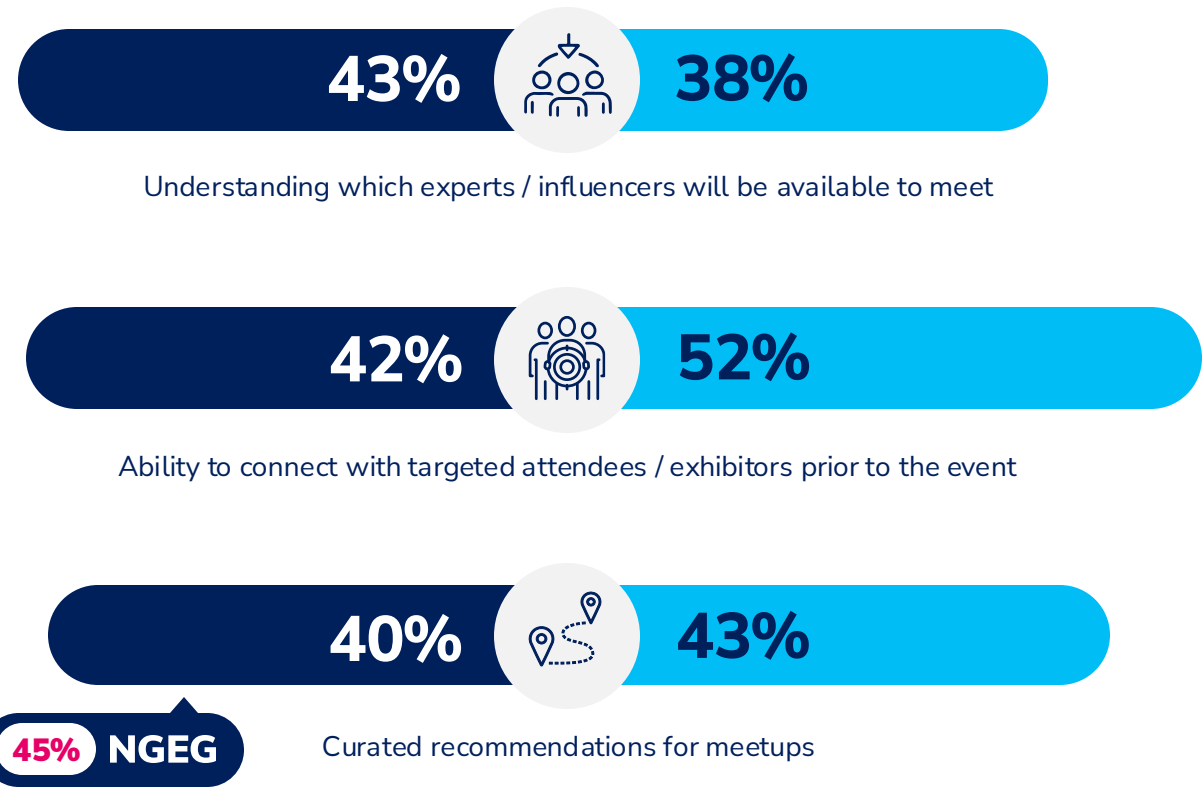
Exhibitors continue to prioritize connecting with prospects in advance.

And among NowGen attendees, the demand for curated meetup recommendations is even higher than the general population (45%).

Organizers' takeaway? Networking should start well before the event.

More data in appendix

Factors to improve networking prior to events



# Action Item



**Architect purposeful, pre-event experiences that help attendees and exhibitors connect in advance and prepare to make the most of the event**

Give attendees and exhibitors a networking head start. Share who's attending (with permission), spotlight key experts, and offer curated match suggestions before anyone arrives at your event. You can use apps, emails, lookbooks, or forums—just don't wait until day one. Pre-event connection drives on-site momentum.

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What skills would improve how effective you are at connecting with others at in-person professional events? Select all that apply.

## Attendees want help building real-world networking skills

We asked attendees what would improve their ability to connect at in-person events, and most want support with skills like remembering names, active listening, and building rapport.

Although it's not necessarily an event organizer's job to deliver networking training, providing guidance can help your event stand apart and your attendees gain more value. Especially considering that [Gen Z reports](#) the lowest amount of confidence when networking with those in their industry.

### Required skills to improve networking





A photograph of three women at a conference booth. The woman on the left is smiling and looking at the woman in the middle. The woman in the middle is also smiling and looking at the woman on the right. They are standing next to a black box with a gold faucet and a showerhead, which is spraying water. The woman in the middle is holding a smartphone and a brochure. The woman on the right is holding a smartphone and a brochure. The background is a blue wall with a large image of a person.

# Action Item



## Help attendees practice the skills that make networking stick

Provide attendees with actionable resources to enhance their networking skills before an event. For example:

- **Listening Tools:** Share resources that cover active and [Adaptive Listening™](#) so that attendees can brush up on their technique.
- **Networking Best Practices:** Distribute [concise guides](#) highlighting dos and don'ts of professional networking.
- **Interactive Workshops:** Offer pre-event sessions or webinars focusing on building rapport and effective communication strategies.

By proactively providing these resources, organizers can foster a more confident and connected attendee experience.

## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What types of connections do you target at in-person professional events? Select your top 2 options.

# Attendees prioritize connecting with those who can broaden their perspective

75% of attendees prioritize connections that broaden their view of the industry, outranking even connections that support performance goals (64%) or career advancement (32%). Since attendees want to learn new things and network with industry experts, it's clear **that they prioritize fresh thinking over professional gain.**

For NowGen attendees, the picture shifts slightly: 42% want to make connections that help them advance their careers. However, regardless of age, **attendees put business first. Most seek professional connections, not personal ones.**

## Target connection types at events

**75%** Professional connections that can provide broader perspectives on my industry

**64%** Professional connections that may help me reach professional performance objective

**32%** Professional connections that can help me advance my career

**42% NGEG**

**13%** Personal / social connections outside of my professional life

# Action Item



## Design networking experiences that encourage idea-sharing and cultivate professional common ground

Create opportunities that go beyond mingling. Design interactions that help attendees share ideas, tackle challenges, and build relationships rooted in purpose, whether that's elevating their industry, advancing their careers, or solving shared problems.

Think challenge-based roundtables, SME-led sessions, or organized industry interest zones.

To do so, organizers must collect and use attendee data as a guide to prompt attendees with topics they care about and involve the right experts.

## ORGANIZER QUESTION

Approximately what percentage of your organization's budget for your largest event is allocated to networking aspects or activities?

Are either of the below items included in the expenditures your organization factors into the budget dedicated to networking?

## Networking gets 20% of an event budget on average, but not much is allocated to the strategy behind it

While the average organizer allocates 20% of their event budget to networking, very few invest in the audience insights or measurement needed to make it meaningful.

Only 1 in 3 includes funds to analyze what their audience wants or measure what's working.

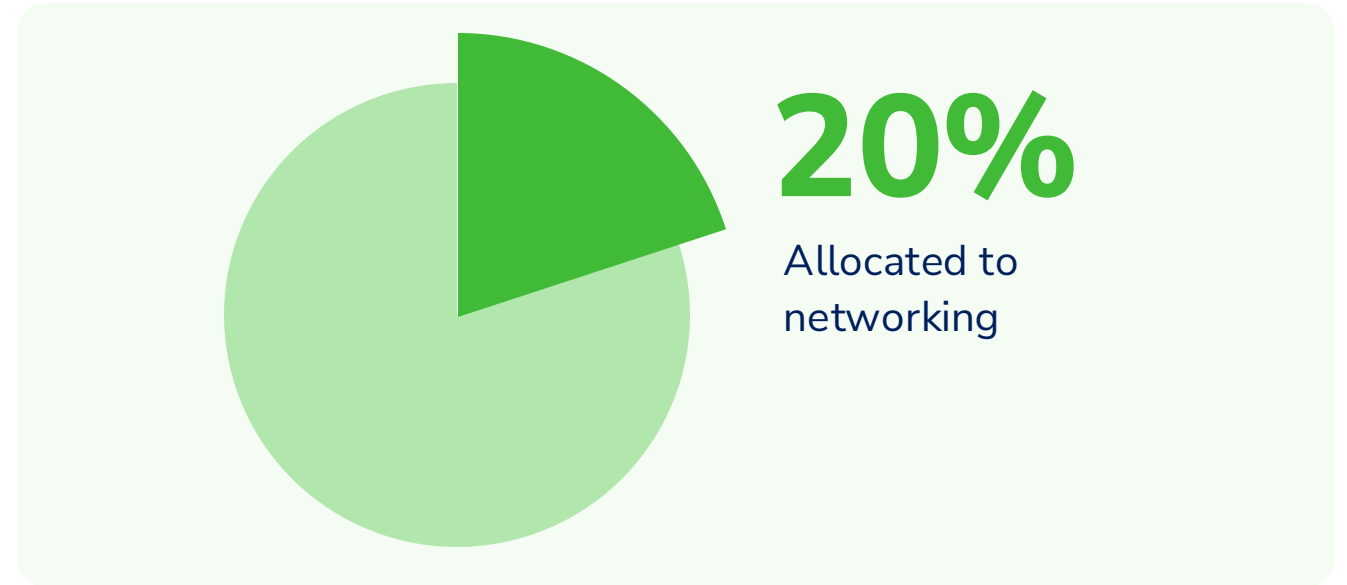
Allocating budget for purpose-driven networking design shouldn't be a luxury; it's the foundation for real connection.



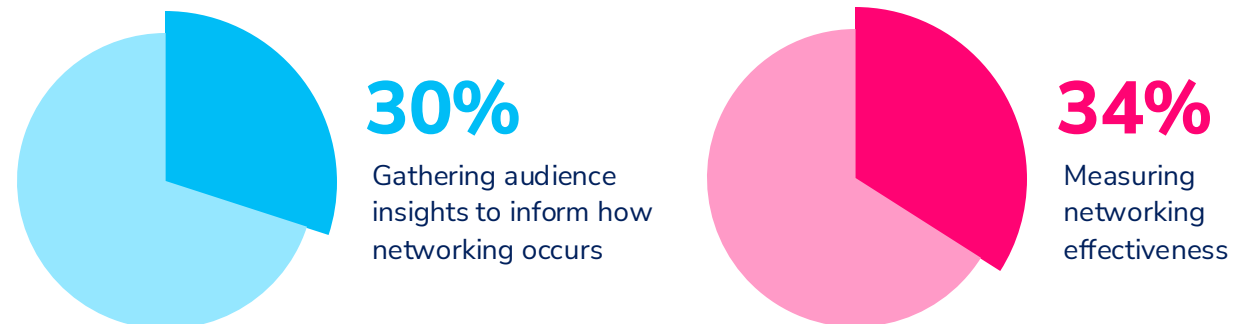
More data  
in appendix

Freeman<sup>1</sup>

### Percentage of event budget allocated to networking



### Activities included in networking budget





# Action Item



## Invest in insights before anything else

Shift a portion of your networking budget upstream. Use it to survey your audience, identify key segments, and test what drives real connection. Effective networking doesn't start with selecting formats—it starts with knowing who your audience is and what they're hoping to walk away with.

Without insights, everything becomes a guess. And purpose-driven networking demands more than guesswork.

# Imagine an event where...

Jasmine lands at her destination for a major conference. Her event app pings: “You’re one of 38 product marketers in healthcare. Here are three people you might want to meet.” One of them was on her flight.

At baggage claim, she joins a “rolling meetup” rideshare with two fellow event-goers, matched by shared interests. That evening, she attends a curated dinner. Not a mixer, but a facilitated table discussion on cross-functional collaboration. Prompts were sent ahead of time to warm up the group.

The next morning, she joins a post-keynote breakout that was pre-selected based on questions she submitted in advance. At lunch, a color-coded tag on her badge signals she’s open to peer mentorship, sparking two meaningful conversations with role models she wouldn’t have known were in attendance otherwise.

By the time Jasmine heads home, she’s made real, relevant connections. The next day, a follow-up email reminds her who she met and how to stay in touch.

Not luck. Not chance. **Just intentional design from start to finish.**



# So, What Now?





## ATTENDEE QUESTION

What would improve how you could make the most of networking prior to when you arrive at a professional event?  
Select all that apply.

# There's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to networking

There's no getting around it: Different networking experiences stand out to different people for different reasons. When you understand who's attending your event and what they're most interested in, networking experiences will be remembered (and for good reasons, not poor ones). Here's what some attendees are saying about their most memorable networking moments.



"Joining a hands-on workshop that encouraged small group collaboration. Instead of the typical business card exchange, we worked together to solve a real-world problem, which naturally sparked conversation and built rapport."



"Doing a guided activity—most recently mini golf—where casual conversation is encouraged in an environment that isn't a 'party.'"



"Getting a hands-on demonstration of a product application I was curious about from subject matter experts."

Design for  
why they  
came

Know  
who's in  
the room

# Don't Let Purpose Be the Missing Piece

In a world where time, attention, and resources are more selective than ever, attendees are making it clear: They show up for what they can't get at home. Purposeful face-to-face connection is at the top of that list. When it's done right, it turns moments into momentum. When it's done wrong, it may turn event-goers away.

And here's the thing: **Everyone networks for different reasons.** For some, it's about inspiration. For others, it's opportunity, learning, or a sense of belonging. **Purpose is personal.** That means organizers need to understand who's in the room and what they're hoping to get out of it.

The good news? You already have the foundation. When you layer a clear purpose on top of the right people, places, and provisions, you create more than a networking activity. You connect people in meaningful ways.

This is your chance to stop hoping connections happen and start architecting serendipity by curating the topics, formats, and environments that make real connections more likely to spark.

And you can do it responsibly: with structure, intention, and permission from all who opt in to the conversations they want to have, in the ways they want to have them.

**When we design for purpose, we don't just fill rooms—we build relationships. And that's what keeps people coming back.**

# Action Items



## **Devote a single person / team to your networking strategy**

Make networking someone's job, not everyone's afterthought. A dedicated owner ensures strategy, structure, and accountability.



## **Architect purposeful, pre-event experiences**

Architect pre-event experiences that give attendees and exhibitors a head start—through expert spotlights, curated recommendations, and opt-in visibility.



## **Design networking around idea-sharing and common ground**

Build formats that go beyond mingling. Research top-of-mind industry topics, and invite SMEs to connect with attendees and facilitate industry-specific discussions.



## **Help attendees practice the skills that make networking stick**

Help attendees (especially NowGen attendees) build the confidence and tools to connect. Share resources on listening, conversation-starting, and real-world networking.



## **Invest in insights before anything else**

Shift part of your budget upstream to understand your audience. Great networking starts with knowing who's in the room and what they care about.

# Connect with Freeman

**Whether you need data-fueled direction or on-the-ground expertise, Freeman Strategy equips you with the tools to lead successful events.**

**For details, reach out to:**

**Annie Malone**

[annie.malone@freeman.com](mailto:annie.malone@freeman.com)

**Ken Holsinger**

[ken.holsinger@freeman.com](mailto:ken.holsinger@freeman.com)

## **Insight-to-Action Strategy Session**

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

## **Community Needs Discovery**

Uncover unmet networking needs among past and current event participants through targeted surveys, helping you design networking experiences that align with what your community wants.

## **Maximize Value Drivers**

Pinpoint what matters most to existing and prospective attendees and exhibitors. Use this data to challenge assumptions and align your event more closely with everyone's goals.

## **Performance Benchmarking and Analysis**

Evaluate your event across key performance indicators and compare against industry benchmarks to uncover misalignments and help close the gap between offerings and expectations.

## **On-site Event Assessment**

Evaluate your attendees' unique motivators and uncover where your event meets (or misses) the mark using our proprietary XLNC assessment tools.

## **Sponsorship Analysis and Strategy**

Help sponsors define event objectives, uncover new activations, and create sponsorship opportunities that can optimize engagement between sponsors and attendees.

# Appendix

Methodology and complete dataset



# Attendee Demographics

# Attendee Demographics

## Job Title / Function

Corporate Management	35%
C-level	6%
Owner / Partner / President	14%
VP / SVP	3%
Director / Manager	13%
Healthcare	12%
Sales / Business Development	10%
Technical	9%
Consultant	5%
Government	3%
Buyer / Purchasing	3%
Marketing / Advertising	3%
R&D	2%
Other	7%

## Industry

Medical / Healthcare	17%
Government	9%
Building / Construction / Home and Repair	9%
Business Services	8%
Consumer Goods	7%
Technology / Communications / IT	6%
Raw Materials / Agriculture / Utilities	5%
Education	5%
Retail	5%
Industrial / Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs	4%
Food / Beverage	3%
Financial, Legal, and Real Estate	3%
Transportation	2%
Other	18%

# Attendee Demographics (Continued)

## Purchase Decision-Making Status

Key / sole decision-maker	33%
Significant influence	34%
Some influence	25%
No influence / end user	9%

## Type of Event Attended

Conference	42%
Trade show	58%

## Decision-Making Status on Event Attendance

Sole decision-maker	39%
Significant influence	32%
Some influence	21%
No influence	8%

# Attendee Demographics (Continued)

## Organization FTEs

1-100	52%
101-500	16%
501-2,000	10%
2,001-5,000	5%
More than 5,000	18%

## Gender

Male	57%
Female	40%
Choose not to specify	3%

## Generation

Gen Z	6%
Millennials	35%
Gen X	40%
Boomers	17%
Silent	0.4%

## Location

United States	90%
International	10%

# Exhibitor Demographics



# Exhibitor Demographics

## Job Title / Function

President, Partner, Owner	12%
VP / SVP / EVP	10%
Director	23%
Manager	25%
Coordinator	8%
Sales	12%
Other	9%

## Industry

Technology / Communications / IT	14%
Consumer Goods	13%
Industrial / Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs	11%
Building / Construction / Home and Repair	8%
Business Services	8%
Food / Beverage	7%
Raw Materials / Agriculture / Utilities	5%
Medical / Healthcare	5%
Government	3%
Transportation	3%
Financial, Legal, and Real Estate	2%
Other	19%

# Exhibitor Demographics (Continued)

## Organization FTEs

1-100	52%
101-500	19%
501-2,000	10%
2,001-5,000	6%
More than 5,000	13%

## Gender

Male	58%
Female	37%
Choose not to specify	5%

## Generation

Gen Z	7%
Millennials	37%
Gen X	39%
Boomers	15%
Silent	0.3%

# Organizer Demographics

# Event Organizer Demographics

## Organization Type

Association / society / not-for-profit exhibition or event organizer	62%
For-profit exhibition or event organizer	12%
Organizer of corporate events for my company	15%
Third-party event management company	8%
Other	2%
Not applicable	2%

## Association Type

Trade	30%
Professional	60%
Both trade and professional members	6%
Other	4%

## Organization Scope

International	49%
National (US only)	33%
National (outside the US)	8%
Regional (within the US)	10%

## Frequency of Hosting Most Important Event

Annually	87%
More than once per year	7%
Once every two years	5%
Once every three years or less	2%

# Event Organizer Demographics (Continued)

## Industry

Medical / Healthcare	26%
Technology / Communications / IT	9%
Education	8%
Business Services	7%
Building / Construction / Home and Repair	6%
Food / Beverage	5%
Financial, Legal and Real Estate	5%
Transportation	4%
Raw Materials / Agriculture / Utilities	3%
Other	28%

## Purchase Decision-Making Status

Key / sole decision-maker	25%
Significant influence	46%
Some influence	26%
No influence / end user	3%



# Event Organizer Demographics (Continued)

Level	
C-suite / President	9%
VP / SVP / EVP	16%
Director / Senior Director	32%
Manager / Senior Manager	32%
Other	11%

Generation	
Gen Z	5%
Millennials	27%
Gen X	48%
Boomers	16%

Gender	
Male	28%
Female	68%
Choose not to specify	4%

Location	
United States	92%
International	8%

# Full Data Slides

ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What are the most important reasons why you network at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

Motivation for networking at events



**ORGANIZER QUESTION**

What do you believe are the top 3 reasons why attendees and exhibitors network at your organization’s largest event?

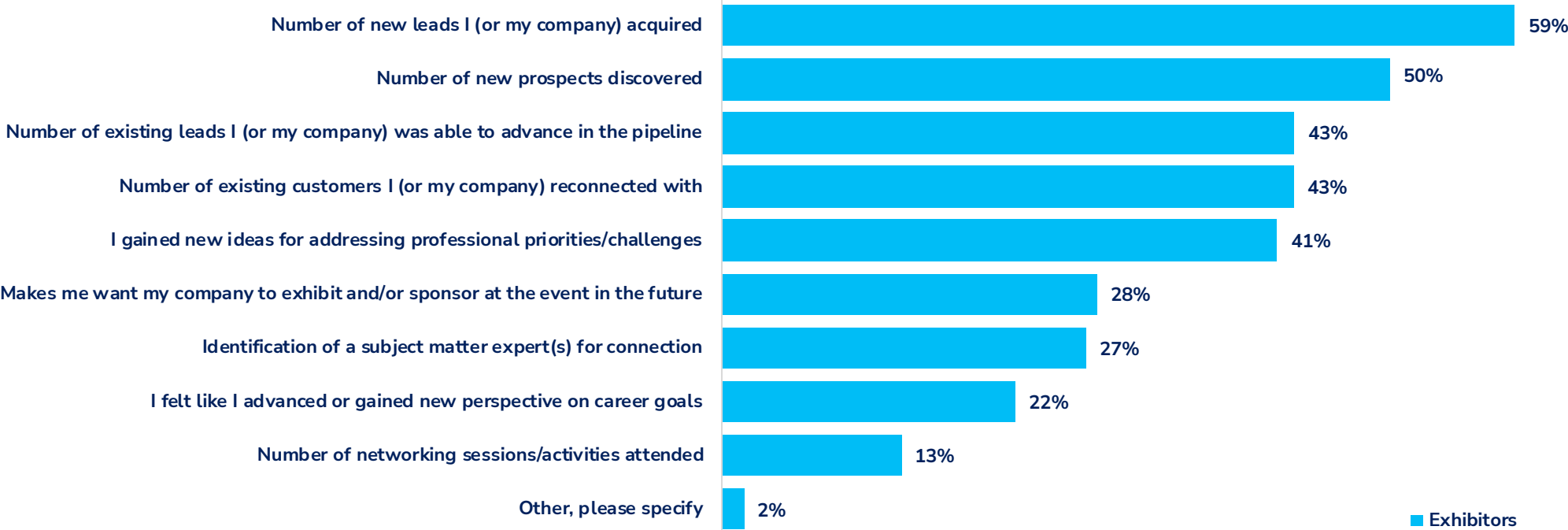
**Organizers’ perception of why attendees network at events**



**EXHIBITOR QUESTION**

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

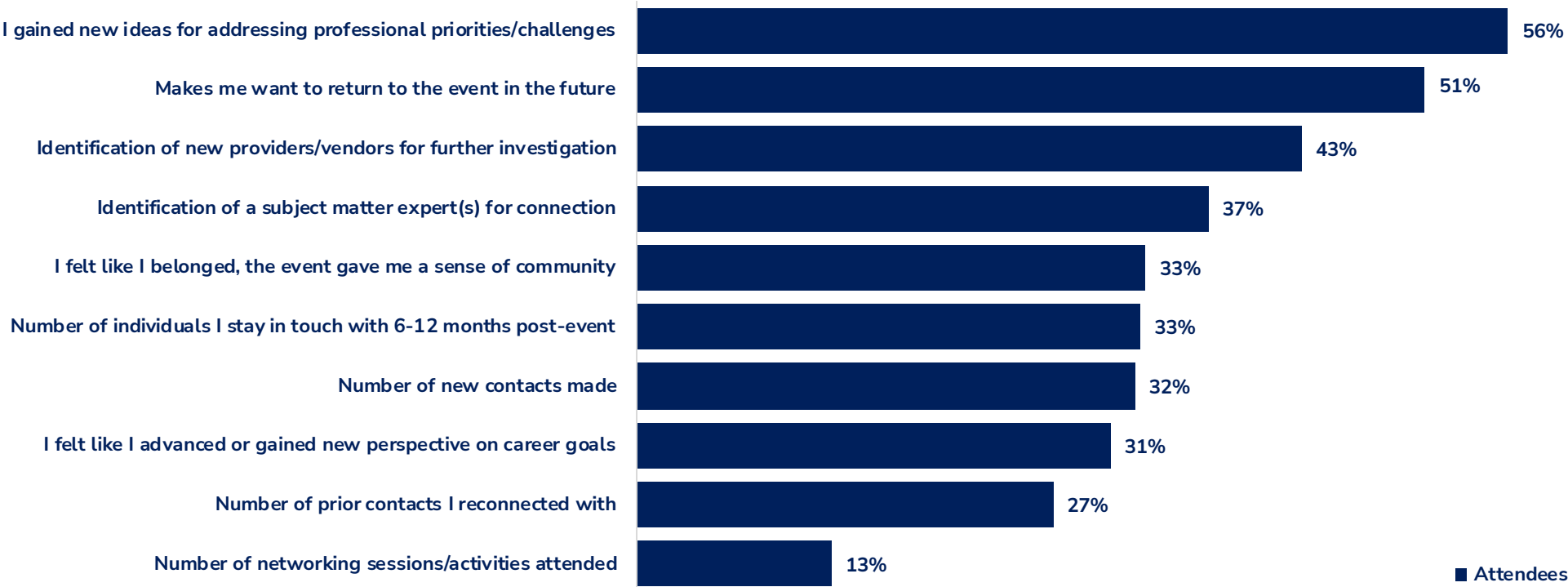
**How exhibitors measure networking success**



ATTENDEE QUESTION

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

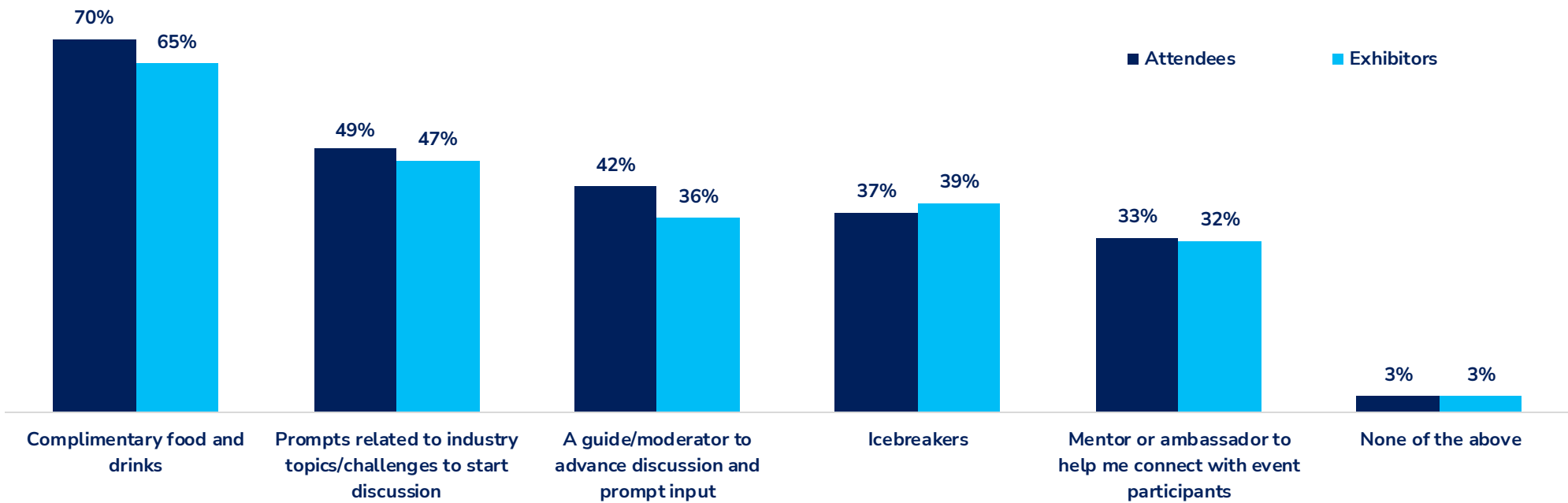
Attendees' measure of networking success



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

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

Activities / aspects that make networking valuable to attendees

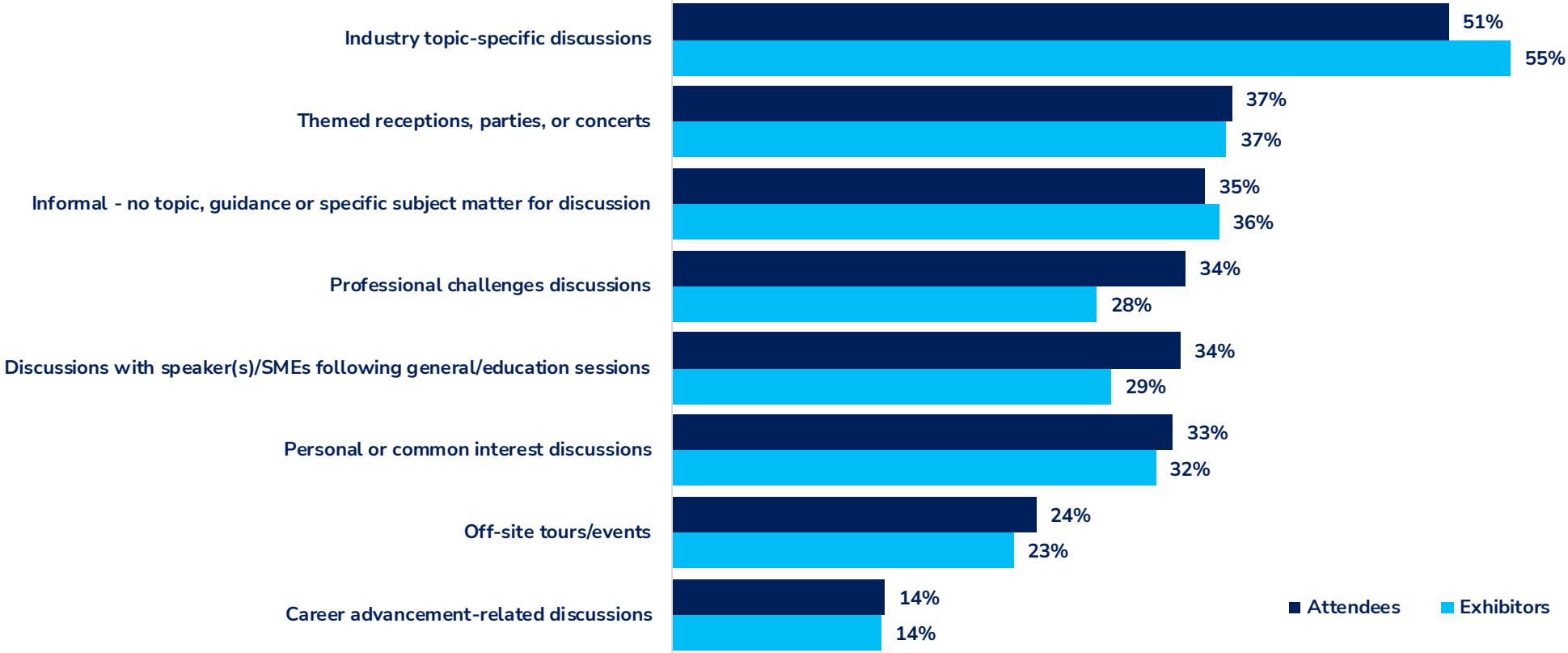




ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What are your most preferred formats for networking with attendees and / or exhibitors at in-person professional events?  
Select up to 3 options.

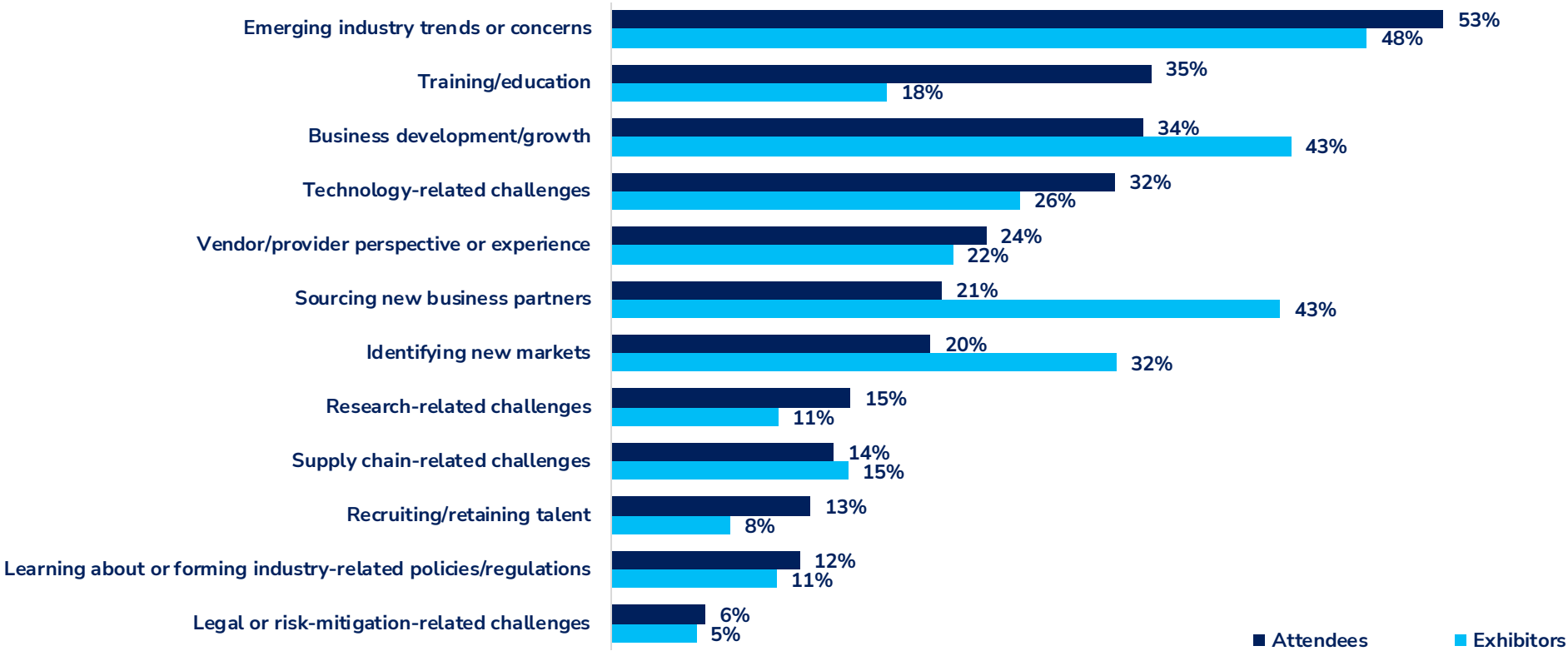
Networking format preferences



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What type of professional or industry challenges are you most interested in discussing during networking at in-person professional events? Select up to 3 options.

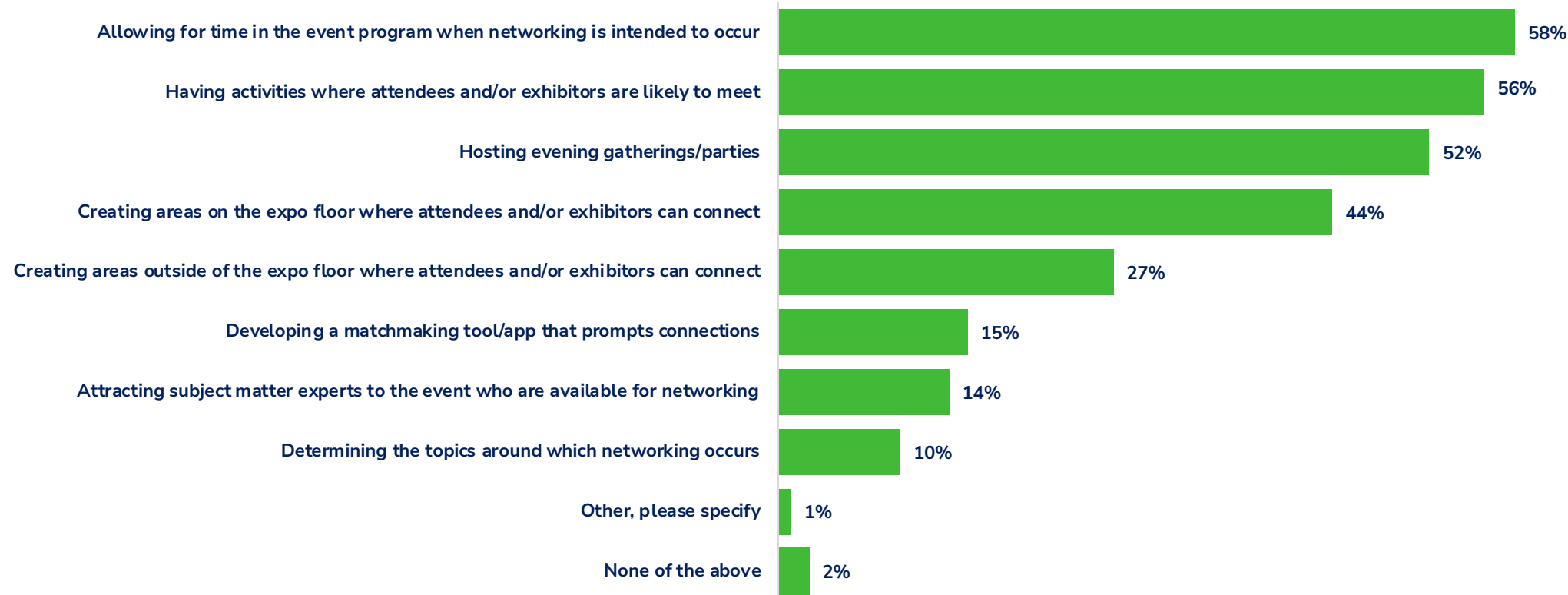
Networking type preferences – professional or industry challenges



**ORGANIZER QUESTION**

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

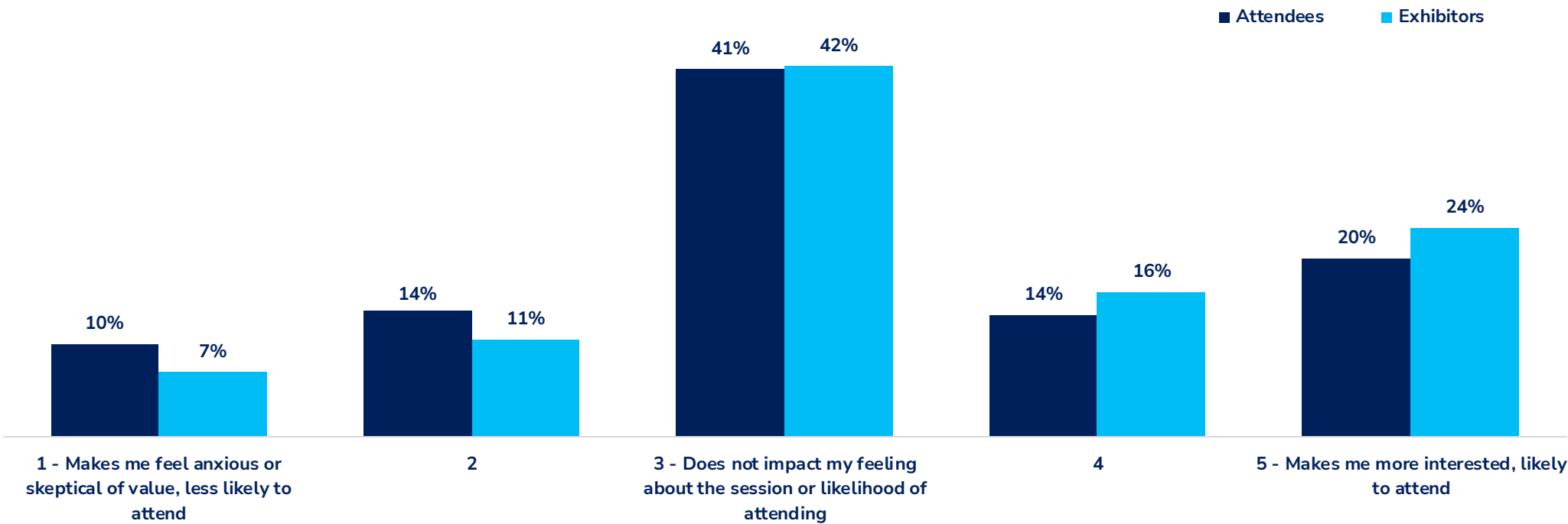
**Organizers’ perception of their responsibility in facilitating networking**



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

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

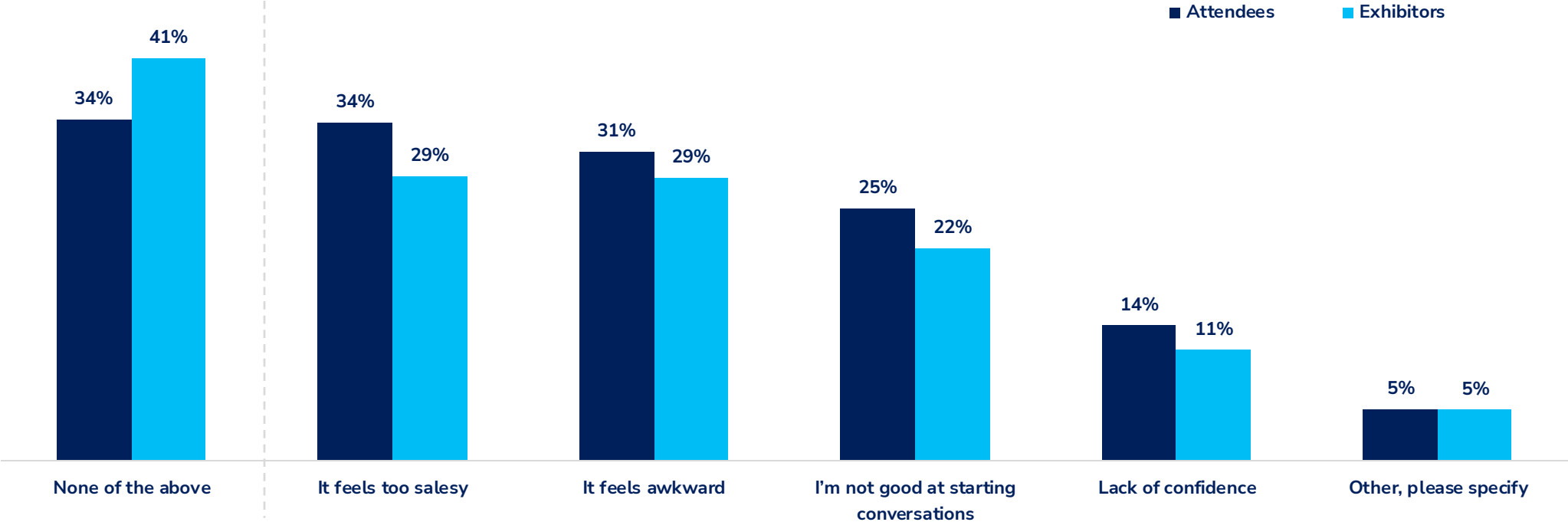
Perception of the label “networking”



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

Do you feel you experience any of the following barriers to networking at in-person professional events? Select all that apply.

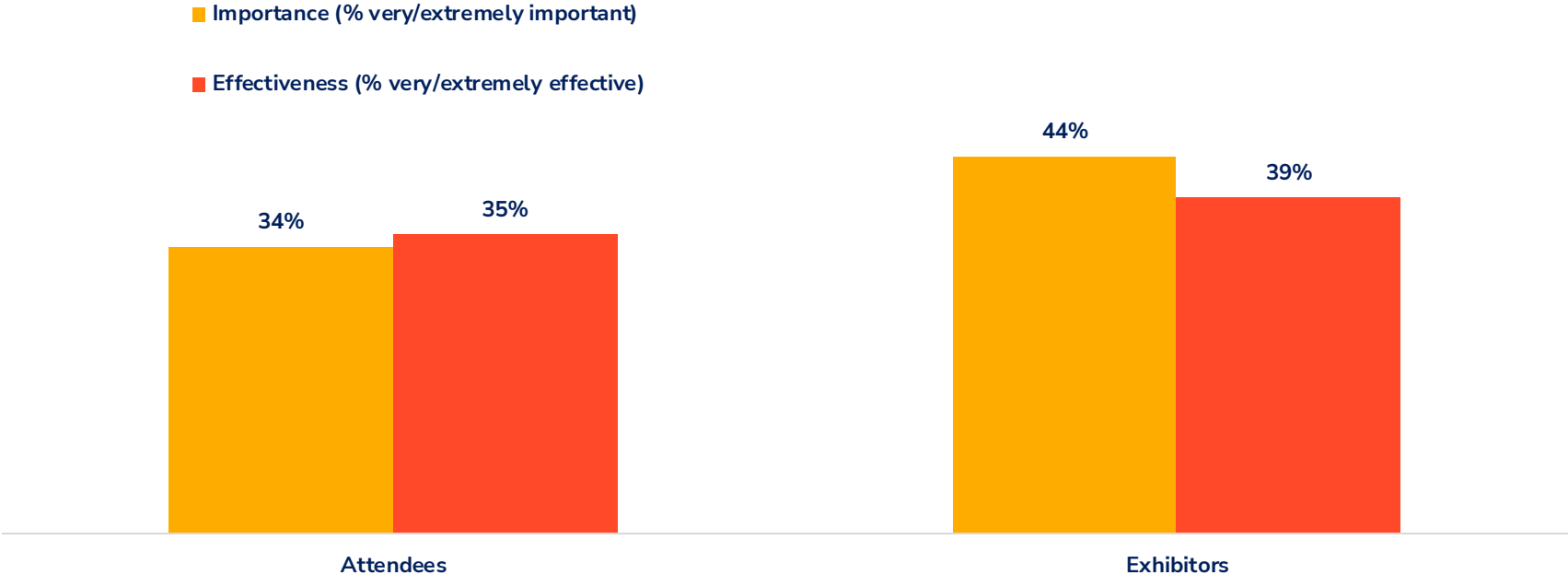
Barriers to networking



**ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION**

How important is it that your networking experience at in-person professional events feels personalized (i.e., curated or specific to whom you may want to meet, sessions or meet-ups you may want to attend)?

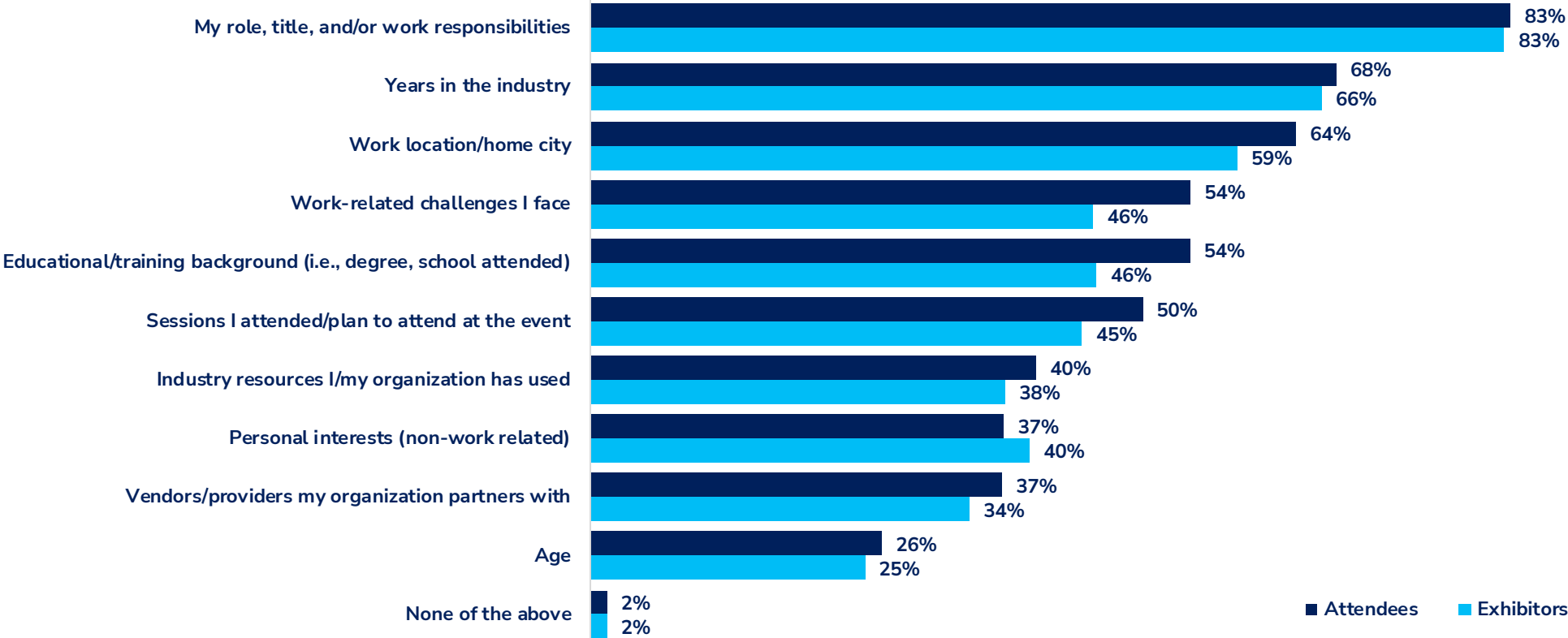
**Importance of personalization to attendee networking experience**



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What types of personal information would you be willing to share at an in-person event assuming you receive a more personalized networking experience? Select all that apply

Willingness to share types of personal information

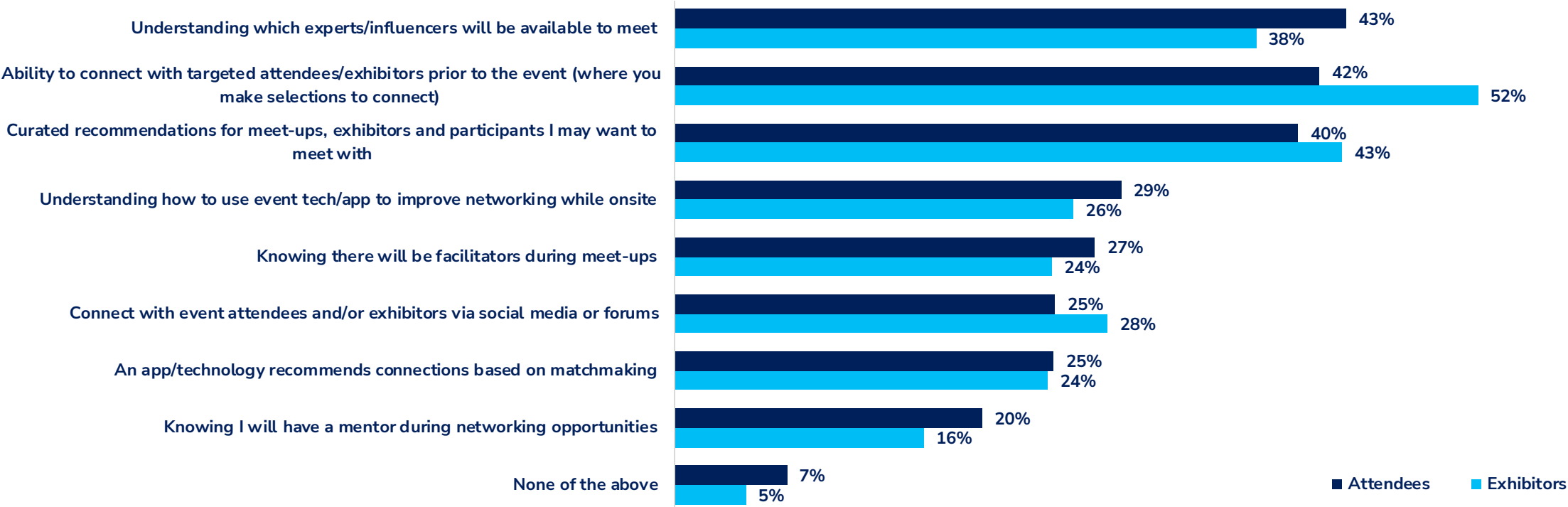




ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What would improve how you could make the most of networking prior to when you arrive at a professional event?  
Select all that apply.

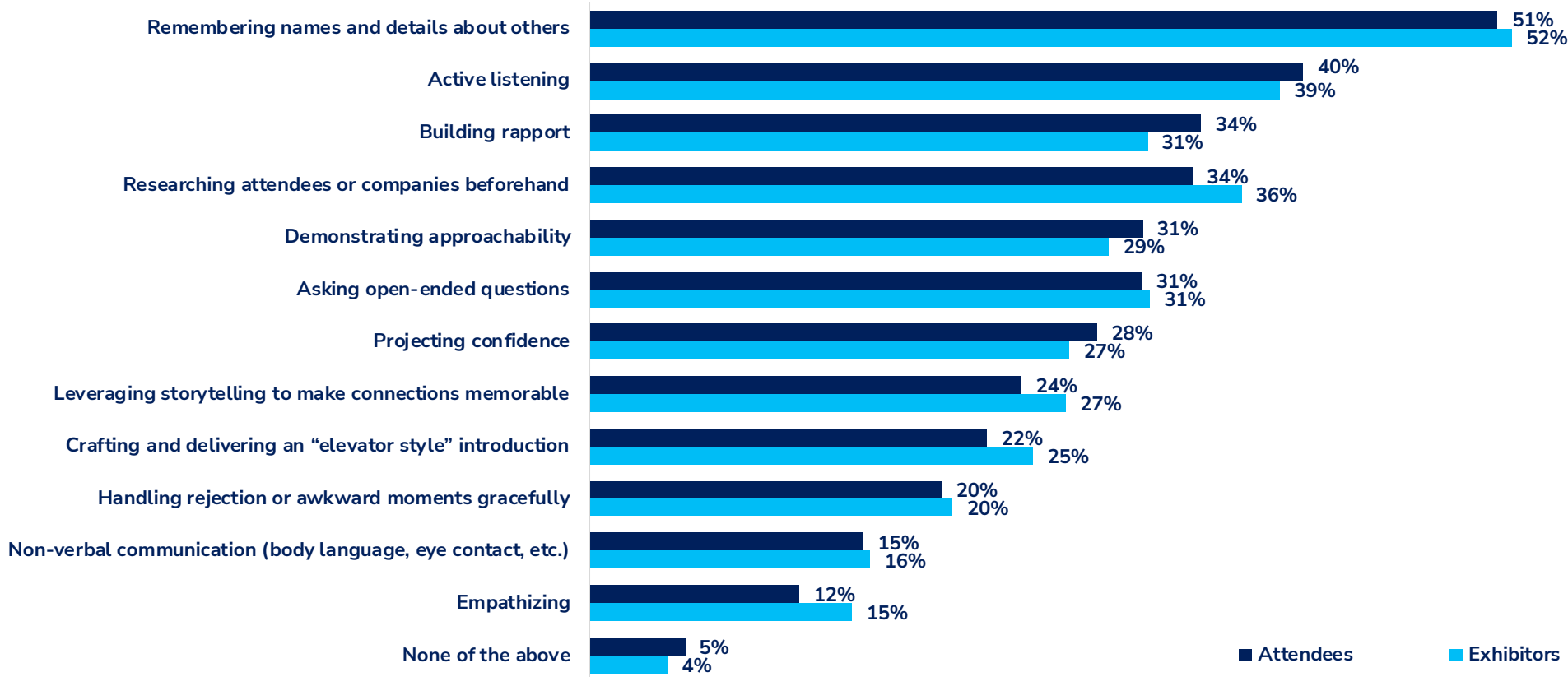
Factors to improve networking prior to events



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What skills would improve how effective you are at connecting with others at in-person professional events? Select all that apply.

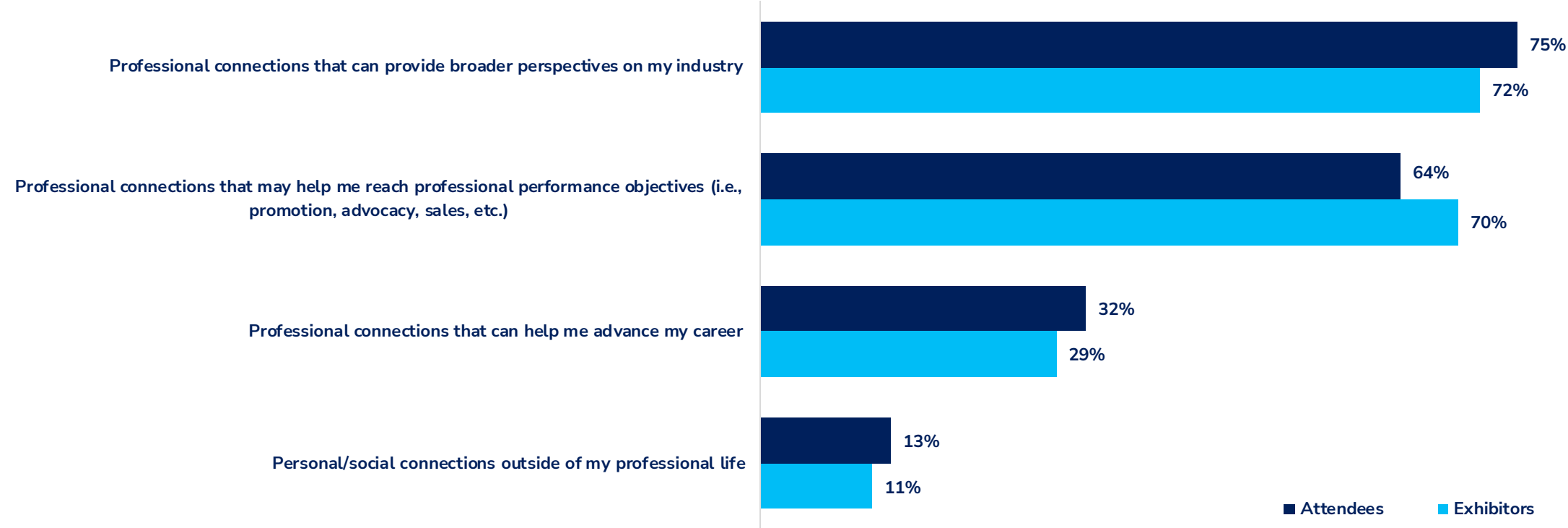
Required skills to improve networking



ATTENDEE AND EXHIBITOR QUESTION

What types of connections do you target at in-person professional events? Select your top 2 options.

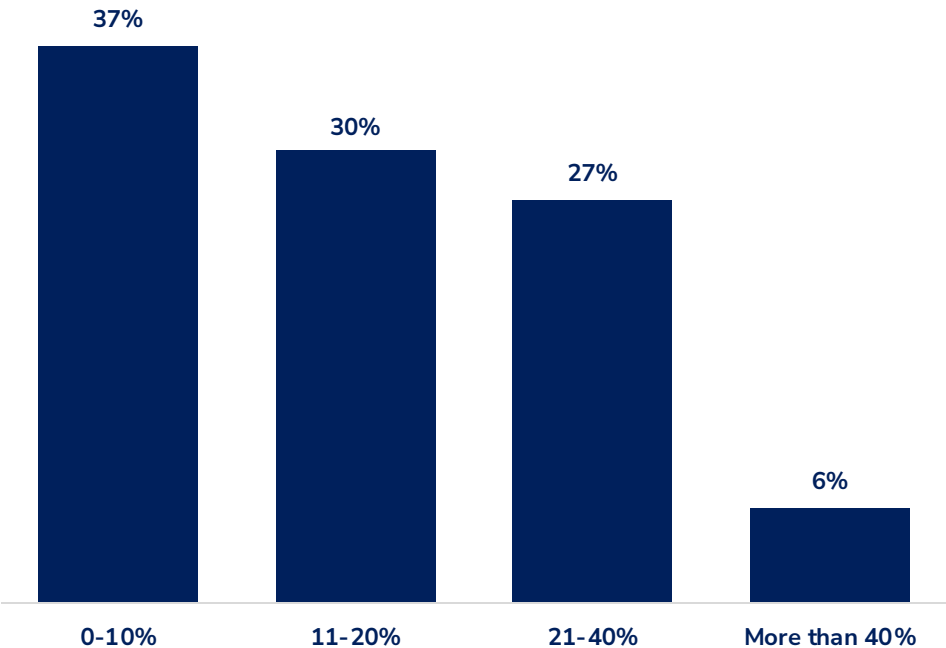
Target connection types at events



QUESTION

Approximately what percentage of your organization’s budget for your largest event is allocated to networking aspects or activities?  
Are either of the below items included in the expenditures your organization factors into the budget dedicated to networking?

Percentage of event budget allocated to networking



Included in networking budget

