

2025 Association Data Research Findings

The Blank Badge: Turning Missed Attendance Into Event Growth



INTRODUCTION

Closing the Member-to-Attendee Gap

At [MemberClicks](#), we know that events are often the lifeblood of associations. They bring members together to learn, connect and advance their careers. Yet attendance is not keeping pace with expectations.

Industry data shows that attendee participation remains below pre-pandemic levels. The Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) found in its [Q4 2024 Index](#) that attendance was 12.9% lower than in 2019, the weakest recovery among all exhibition metrics. Even by [Q2 2025](#), attendance was still 3.7% below pre-pandemic levels.

While these numbers suggest progress, they also point to a lingering challenge: audience engagement has not fully returned. Many associations are still struggling to convert member interest into actual event participation.

Picture this: your annual conference is approaching, registrations are steady but not climbing, and the same familiar names keep appearing on the attendee list. Members say they value the content and networking yet many still do not show up. It is not that they have lost interest. They are facing new barriers in time, budget and workplace support that marketing alone cannot fix.

“Attendance was 12.9% lower than in 2019. Even by Q2 2025, attendance was still 3.7% below pre-pandemic levels.”

To explore what's behind this ongoing gap, we surveyed 758 association and event professionals. What we found revealed opportunities to rethink how associations drive attendance.

Who We Heard From

Respondents represented a wide range of organizations, with most working at associations serving between 1,000 and 50,000 members. Nearly two-thirds were in leadership or event management roles and industries spanned healthcare, education, professional societies and trade groups. This breadth of perspectives makes the findings highly relevant across the association landscape.

Members say they value events. Associations believe they are delivering value. But attendance is inconsistent, and too many seats are staying empty. **We call this the member-to-attendee disconnect.**

This guide unpacks the disconnect by exploring what members say about barriers and motivators, what associations assume and what strategies actually work. The data reveals a clear picture. The problem is not lack of interest. It is cost, workload and employer approvals. Associations are trying to solve the problem with marketing and programming, but these efforts miss the heart of the issue.

In the following pages, you will find survey results, our insights and actionable recommendations to help you remove barriers and grow attendance.

What You Need to Know

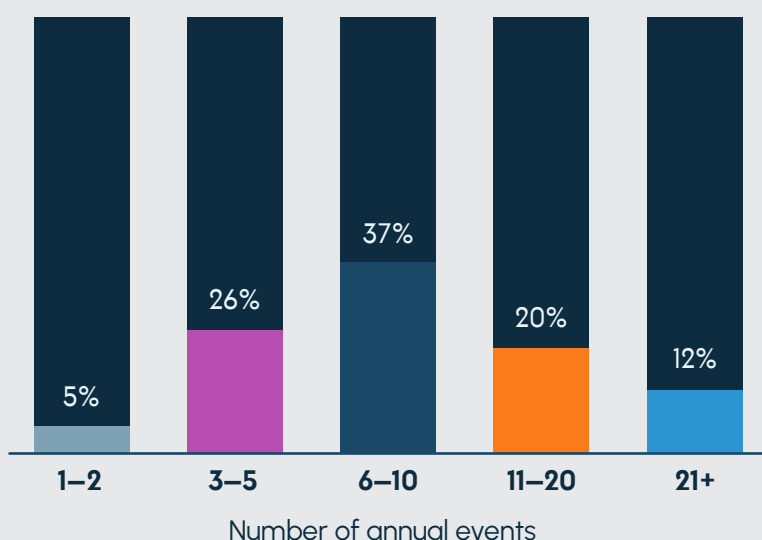
Events Hosted: Mid-Range Frequency Dominates

- **37%** of associations host 6 to 10 events each year.
- **26%** host 3 to 5 events.
- **12%** host 21 or more events.
- **5%** host only 1 to 2 events.

Key Takeaway

Most associations are not “mega-event” organizations. They rely on a moderate number of events to engage members. This means every event must carry significant weight. If attendance is weak, the opportunity to connect may be lost for months. Associations running only a handful of events a year are especially vulnerable. Even though most associations host several events a year, members are not attending all of them. This gap points to deeper challenges that go beyond the number of events offered.

How Many Events Do Associations Host Each Year?



“Each event must pull double duty on value and engagement. Missed attendance has a bigger impact because there are not endless chances to connect.”

The data that follows uncovers how these attendance patterns connect directly to the challenges and motivators shaping the member experience.

Member Attendance Patterns

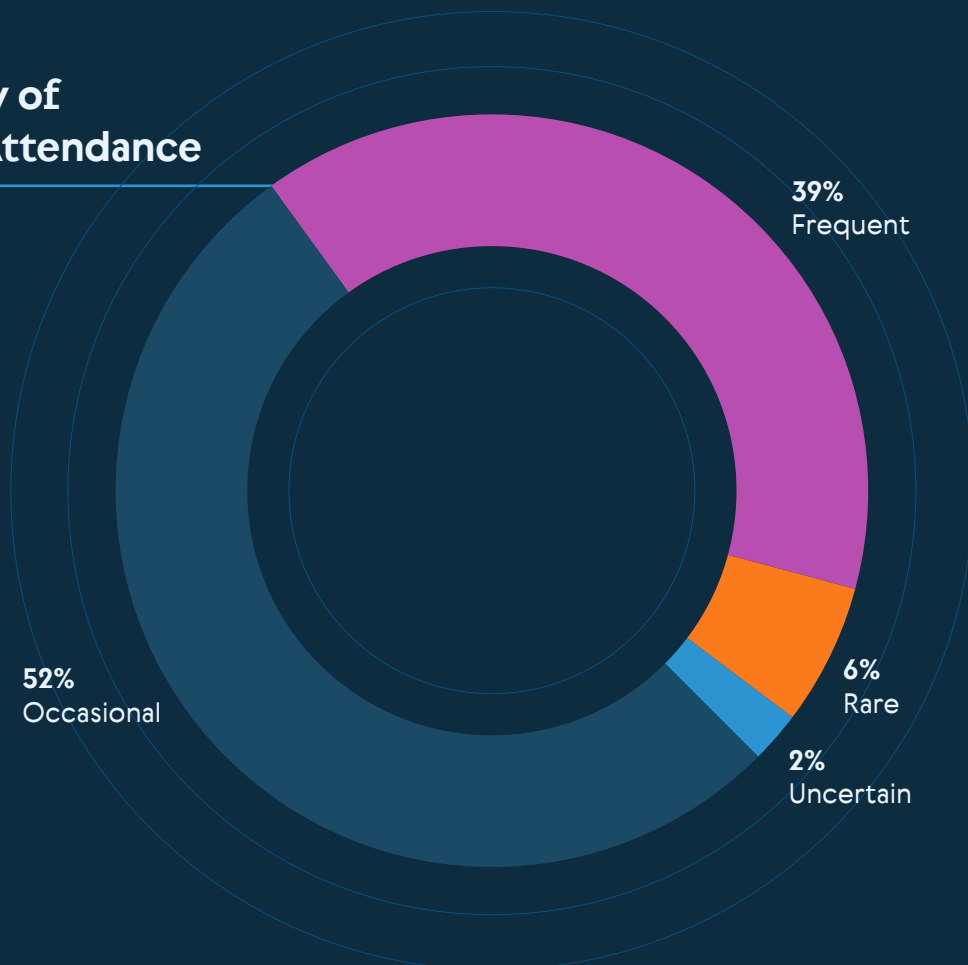
- **52%** of associations say members attend events only occasionally.
- **39%** say members attend frequently.
- **6%** say attendance is rare.
- **2%** are not sure.

“Occasional attendance also means each event has to be positioned as must-attend, not optional.”

Our Take

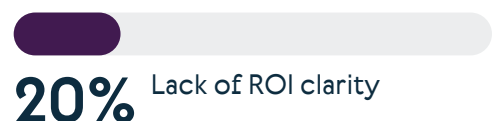
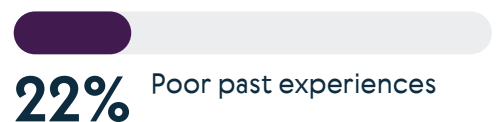
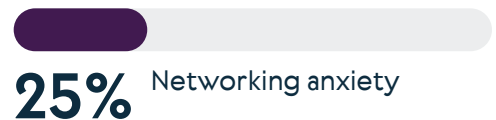
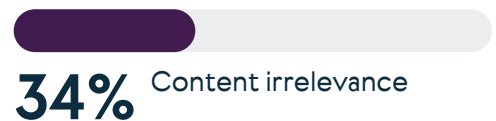
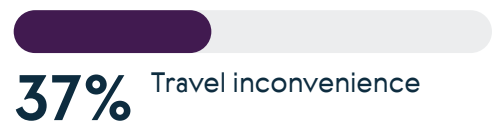
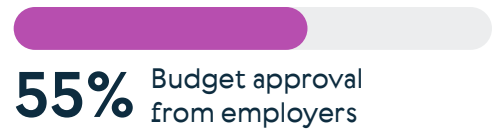
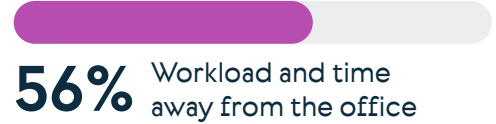
Even when associations put on multiple events, members are not attending all of them. Interest exists, but actual participation lags. Occasional attendance means each event has to be positioned as essential. The attendance gap is less about whether members like events and more about whether they can justify the time and money to attend.

Frequency of Member Attendance



The Top Barriers to Attendance

- **Workload and time away from the office** (56%)
- **Budget approval from employers** (55%)
- **Cost of attendance** (49%)
- **Travel inconvenience** (37%)
- **Content irrelevance** (34%)
- **Networking anxiety** (25%)
- **Poor past experiences** (22%)
- **Lack of ROI clarity** (20%)



Why It Matters

- **Budget and time are the real twin barriers.** Members want to attend, but employers restrict budgets or will not approve the time. This places the decision outside of members' control.
- **Content is not the first hurdle.** Only one in three cite irrelevant programming. This suggests associations may be solving the wrong problem. Programming improvements do little if members cannot clear budget or workload hurdles.
- **Experience barriers matter.** One in four cite networking discomfort or negative past experiences, reminding us that inclusivity, session design and first-time attendee support can play a role in winning people back.

Understanding what keeps members away is only half the equation. The next step is to look at what actually draws them in.

“Our members do not skip events because they do not see value. They skip because their boss will not approve the time or budget.”

Understanding the Disconnect

Motivators for Attendance

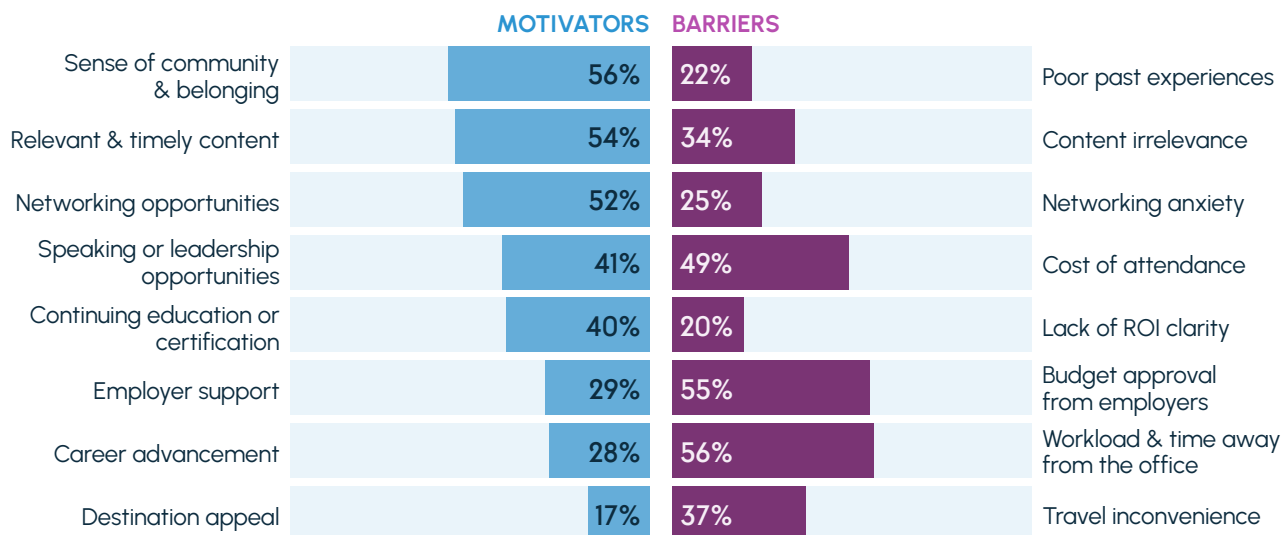
- Sense of community and belonging (56%)
- Relevant and timely content (54%)
- Networking opportunities (52%)
- Speaking or leadership opportunities (41%)
- Continuing education or certification (40%)
- Employer support (29%)
- Career advancement (28%)
- Destination appeal (17%)

“Community and content drive attendance. Discounts and gimmicks do not.”

Our Take

Members attend for connection and content. Employer support is a weaker motivator, even though employer approval is one of the top barriers. This highlights a disconnect. Members want belonging and learning, but their employers need ROI justification. Destination appeal is low. Flashy locations will not save attendance if structural barriers remain.

Top Motivators vs. Top Barriers



While members' motivations are clear, many associations assume they already know them. The next section reveals how this assumption can create blind spots.

The Overconfidence Problem

- **53%** of associations say they understand why members attend "somewhat well."
- **31%** say "very well."
- **11%** admit "not very well."
- **5%** have not explored the issue.

Our Take

Associations think they have a decent read on member motivations, but "somewhat well" suggests only a surface understanding. When paired with the question on how confident they are in their assumptions, a clearer picture emerges. Associations are building strategies on shaky ground. For example, an organization may believe that networking is the top reason members attend, when many members actually prioritize certification credits or leadership opportunities.

"Most organizations think they understand members, but only at the surface level."

% of associations that say they understand why members attend...



Somewhat well



Very well



Not very well



Have not explored the issue

Confidence on Wobbly Ground

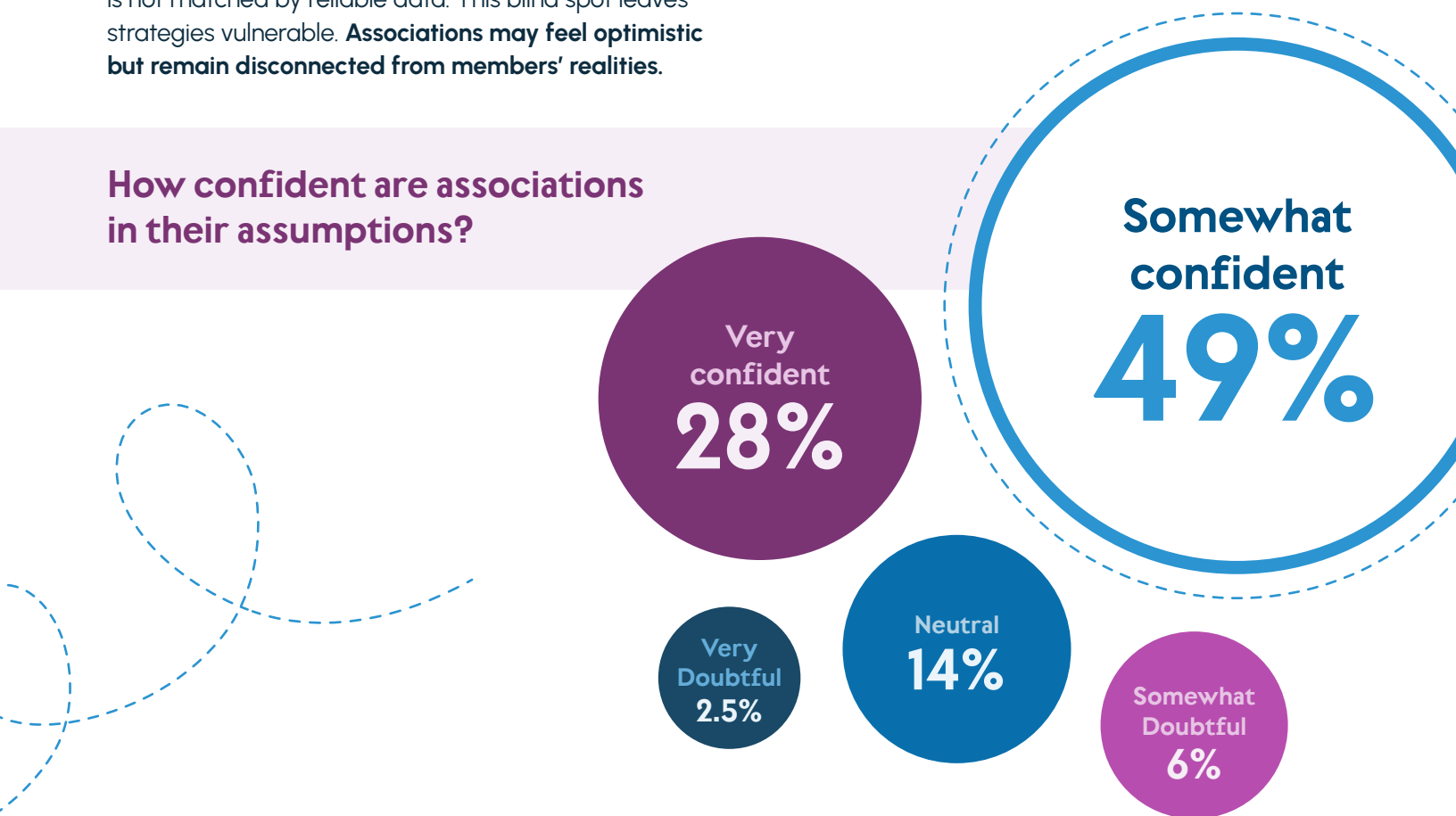
- 49% are "somewhat confident" in their assumptions.
- 28% are "very confident."
- 14% are neutral.
- 6% are somewhat doubtful.
- 2.5% are very doubtful.



Our Take

This creates a confidence bubble. Associations believe they know what drives attendance, but their confidence is not matched by reliable data. This blind spot leaves strategies vulnerable. **Associations may feel optimistic but remain disconnected from members' realities.**

How confident are associations in their assumptions?



"We think we know why our members attend, but most of us only somewhat understand their reality."

Turning Barriers into Claimed Badges

These findings show that associations often overestimate their understanding of members while underestimating the structural barriers that hold them back. To move forward, we need to look at those barriers directly and consider how each one can be turned into a solution. Barriers will always exist, but they do not have to remain blank spots on the attendance map. With the right strategies, every barrier can become a claimed badge that supports stronger participation and event growth.

The following examples show how common barriers can be turned into practical solutions that strengthen engagement and attendance.

Claimed Badge *Solutions*

Smart Pricing

Tiered passes, day passes, scholarships and employer justification tools that show clear ROI.

Respect for Time

Shorter events, weekend options and flexible formats that respect professional demands.

Easier Access

Regional meetings that reduce both cost and travel time.

Member Voice

Consistent feedback loops using short surveys, pulse checks and advisory groups.

Clear ROI

Market outcomes that matter most: networking, CE credits and career growth.



Blank Badge *Barriers*

Cost

Nearly 50% of members cite cost as a top barrier (registration, lodging, travel).

Time Away from Work

More than half of members say leaving work is a major hurdle.

Travel Logistics

37% say travel prevents attendance.

Lack of Feedback

Only 40% of associations collect feedback regularly.

Unclear Value

One in three members is not sure events are worth the investment.

Each claimed badge moves associations closer to their members' realities and helps transform obstacles into momentum for event growth.

“Remove barriers first. Strong programming only works if people can afford to attend and have the time to get there.”

Why Familiar Tactics Fall Short

Even though associations know the barriers, most are still leaning on familiar tactics that do not address them directly. This gap explains why progress has been slow.

Strategies Tried

- Personalized email and content (53%)
- Updated sessions (47%)
- Discounted registration (47%)
- First-timer outreach (41%)
- Event apps and engagement tools (40%)
- Flexible formats (34%)
- Speaker refresh (33%)

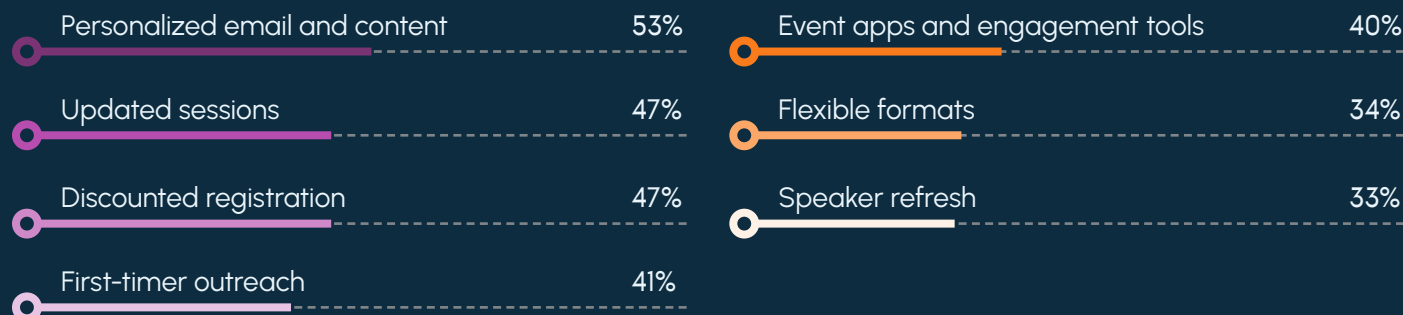
“Associations optimize event design and marketing. Members struggle with barriers outside that design.”

Our Take

Associations are trying a mix of marketing and programming updates, but most of these efforts stop short of tackling the real obstacles. Personalized emails and content refreshes can spark interest but do little to overcome time, travel or budget constraints. Discounts help at the margins, yet they rarely change who attends. Engagement tools and new session formats improve the experience for those already registered, not for those still on the fence. The result is incremental progress rather than meaningful growth.

One respondent summarized it well:

“We keep adjusting our marketing, but our members’ time and budgets are still the problem.”



Challenges for Associations

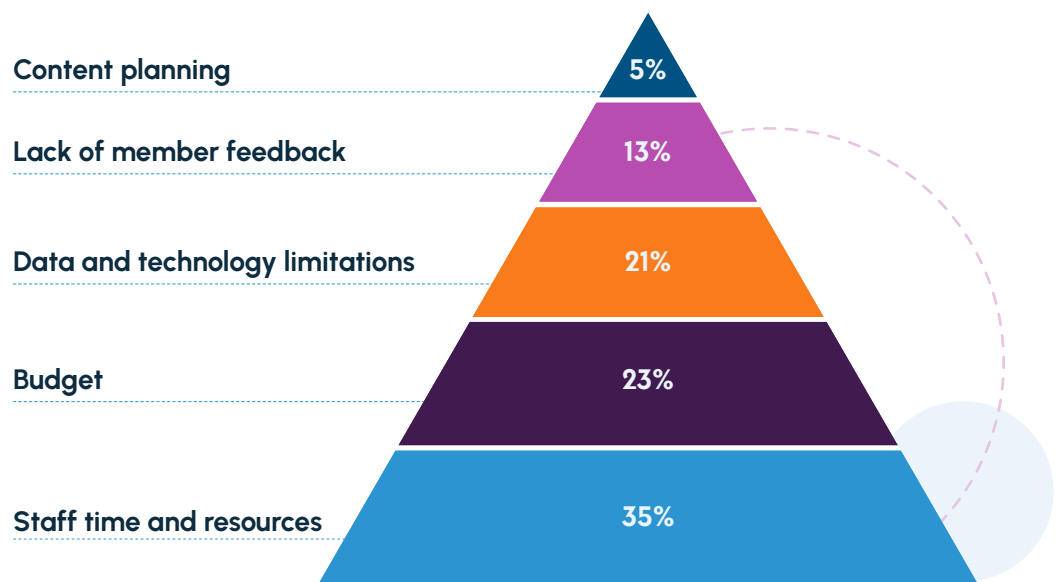
- Staff time and resources (35%)
- Budget (23%)
- Data and technology limitations (21%)
- Lack of member feedback (13%)
- Content planning (5%)



Our Take

Associations face the same limits as their members. Members do not attend because they lack time and money. Associations cannot easily fix attendance because they often lack the staff, tools and data needed to understand and address the problem.

Many teams do not have systems that make it easy to collect and use feedback. Even when they recognize what needs to change, they may not have the time or authority to act on it. Without that insight and support, they rely on short-term fixes instead of long-term solutions. These internal barriers are not visible to members but they limit how innovative and responsive an association can be. Recognizing these constraints is the first step toward building the tools and processes that lead to lasting improvement.



“The top challenge to growing attendance is not content or marketing. It is that our teams do not have the staff or resources to do more.”

5 Actionable Steps You Can Take

Members are not asking for more marketing. They are asking for roadblocks to be removed. Each claimed badge can be tied directly to an action that makes attendance possible. To close the member-to-attendee gap, associations should focus on removing barriers before adding new marketing tactics.



1. Develop Employer Advocacy Tools

Equip members with resources that remove friction at the approval stage: ROI calculators that quantify takeaways like networking, CE credits and career growth; budget justification templates and manager request letters; and post-event reports members can share with supervisors. Some associations also publish case studies that show how past attendees delivered measurable value back to their organizations.

Result: Fewer approval bottlenecks, more members able to say yes to attending.



2. Respect Member Time

Workload is the number one barrier, so design events that fit into busy schedules. Host regional gatherings to reduce travel and overnight stays. Streamline agendas by cutting filler and focusing on sessions that deliver the greatest value. Offer half-day or one-day formats that make participation possible without major disruption to work or personal commitments.

Use online communities and digital tools to keep engagement strong between events. Year-round discussions, quick polls and resource sharing help members stay connected and informed. This makes in-person time more focused on collaboration, networking and solving key challenges together.

Result: Attendance improves because members can participate in ways that respect their time and add clear value.



3. Highlight Outcomes, Not Features

Move marketing away from what you are offering toward what attendees will gain. Connect programming directly to certifications, CE credits or leadership advancement. Market networking as a professional asset rather than a social benefit. Use testimonials that highlight promotions, solved challenges or organizational impact tied to event attendance.

Also show how your exhibitors and sponsors play a role in these outcomes. Position them as partners who help attendees solve real-world challenges through products, expertise and collaboration. This shifts the perception from sales to solutions and strengthens the event's overall value.

Result: Events feel essential instead of optional because the connection to career growth and practical outcomes is clear and tangible.

5 Actionable Steps You Can Take



4. Build Ongoing Feedback Loops

Feedback must be continuous, not episodic. Use live polls and one-question pulse checks at events. Collect quick feedback throughout the year through email or member apps. Form advisory groups that represent different member segments and always close the loop by sharing "You said, we did" updates.

Result: Associations stay in sync with members as expectations evolve. Members want more personalization, faster responses, and proof that their input drives action. Continuous feedback helps associations spot these shifts early and adjust before gaps grow.



5. Support First-Timers with Barrier Reduction

Orientation and buddy programs are helpful, but retention requires structural fixes: lower entry costs through travel stipends or scaled pricing; provide flexible access such as recordings, on-demand modules and virtual tracks; pair first-timers with advocates who can guide them on how to secure employer approval in future years; and consider discounted second-year attendance to encourage return.

Result: More first-time attendees convert to repeat participants, strengthening long-term growth.

Each claimed badge moves associations closer to their members' realities and helps transform obstacles into momentum for event growth.

"Discounts alone will not close the gap. Structural fixes will."



Provocative Questions for Strategy Teams

?

Are you marketing your events to members' managers and employers as much as to members themselves?

?

What would happen if you shifted investment from discounts to employer endorsements and structural fixes?

?

What advocacy tools can you create to help members get employer approval faster?

?

How could your event formats evolve if your number one design principle was "respect member time"?

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If staff time is your top internal barrier, where could partnerships, automation or event management tools help free up capacity?

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What is one bold change you could pilot in the next 12 months to prove you can break the cycle?

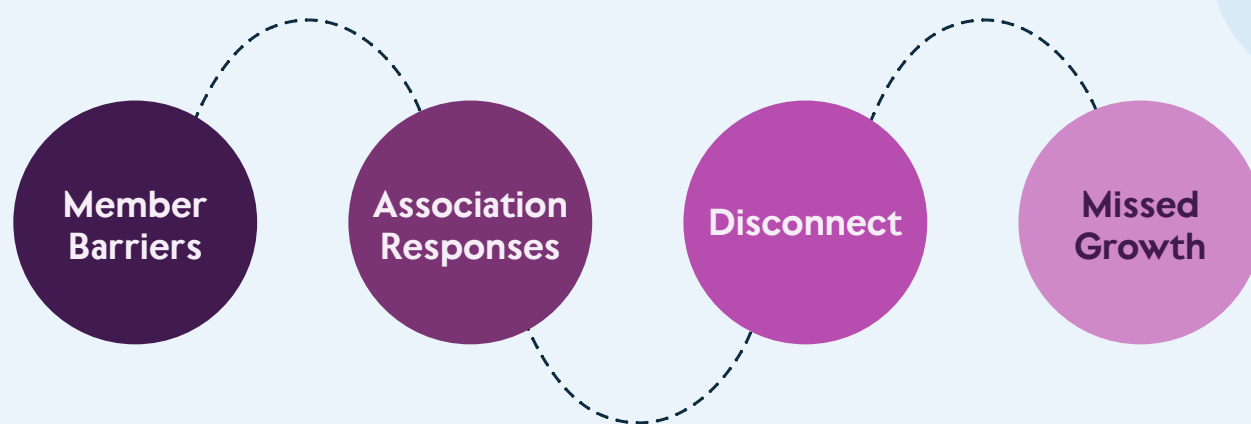
CLOSING THOUGHTS

Executive Insights

Our research reveals a repeating cycle that keeps associations and members stuck. Members want community and content. They skip events due to workload, cost and employer approvals. Associations respond with discounts, content tweaks and more marketing. This cycle fails to address the core blockers. Nearly six in ten associations expect attendance to rise in the next two years but optimism without structural fixes risks disappointment.

The future belongs to associations willing to confront the systemic barriers directly by building employer partnerships, reducing time burdens and proving ROI at every step. Those who take this path will be the ones to transform today's blank badges into tomorrow's claimed badges and turn missed attendance into lasting growth.

Associations that remove these barriers will not only **boost attendance** but also **strengthen community connection and long-term member loyalty**.



“Nearly six in ten associations expect attendance to grow in the next two years. But members keep telling us that workload and approvals are still the roadblocks.”

Survey Profile

In the third quarter of 2025, Personify surveyed 758 association and event professionals to better understand event attendance. Respondents included membership staff, event planners, marketers and executives. Organizations ranged from those hosting one or two events annually to those managing more than 20. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions and captured a diverse cross-section of the association sector. Percentages throughout this report may not total 100% due to rounding.

Deeper Insights from the Survey (Q3–Q15)

Q3–Q4 Events and Attendance: Most associations host between 3 and 10 events annually, yet over half of members attend only occasionally. Implication: each event must be positioned as essential because there are limited chances to engage.

Q5 Barriers: Workload (56%), budget approval (55%), cost (49%) and travel (37%) are the top hurdles. Content irrelevance (34%) and networking anxiety (25%) matter but are secondary. Implication: associations must solve for structural barriers first.

Q6 Motivators: Belonging (56%), content (54%) and networking (52%) lead the list. CE (40%) and leadership opportunities (41%) also rank highly. Destination appeal (17%) is low. Implication: flashy destinations do not drive attendance; community and relevance do.

Q7–Q8 Understanding Motivations: 53% say they understand motivations "somewhat well," while 49% are only "somewhat confident" in their assumptions. Implication: associations are building strategies on assumptions, not data.

Q9 Feedback Collection: 40% gather feedback regularly, 42% occasionally, 18% rarely or never. Implication: inconsistent feedback leads to overconfidence and blind spots.

Q10 Strategies: Most associations try emails, content updates, discounts and first-timer programs. Only one-third emphasize hybrid formats, even though time away is the leading barrier. Implication: strategies are mismatched to barriers.

Q11 Challenges: Staff resources (35%) and budgets (23%) limit associations. Data and tech gaps (21%) prevent robust insights. Implication: associations mirror the constraints of their members.

Q12 Open-Ended Strategies: Most responses clustered around marketing tweaks, new formats or discounts. Few mentioned structural fixes like employer advocacy. Implication: associations may be treating attendance as a design problem rather than a systemic one.

Q13 Support Programs: 77% say they offer support, but most focus on scholarships or discounts. These help with cost but not workload or approvals. Implication: support may be an "illusion" if it doesn't address the real blockers.

Q14 First-Timer Conversion: Most use onboarding, buddy programs and follow-up. Only 25% use discounted future pricing, even though cost is a major barrier. Implication: first-timer retention tactics miss the structural issues.

Q15 Future Outlook: 58% expect attendance to increase, 36% expect it to stay the same, 4% expect decline. Implication: associations are optimistic, but barriers remain, suggesting possible wishful thinking.



Thanks for reading!

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