ON24

# The New Era of Engagement

**How Digital Engagement Has Changed and
What It Means for Your Audiences**

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# Contents

# The Digital Engagement Gap

Marketers and salespeople obsess over digital engagement, metrics and performance. But how much do they obsess over these elements and to what effect? Does digital engagement drive actual results, and are organizations getting all the information they can? Crucially, do audiences enjoy engagement on digital channels?

To find the answers to these questions and more, ON24 conducted a series of surveys. We designed these studies to better understand audience expectations for digital engagement — as well as to glean insights into how well marketing and sales are using audience engagement data in their day-to-day operations.

This report analyzes the results of our surveys, highlighting how audiences, marketers and salespeople alike perceive digital engagement, personalization and data usage.

There is a gap between what audiences expect from digital experiences and what sales and marketing teams deliver. **This is a gap that must be bridged**. And, while sales and marketing frequently discuss digital fatigue, it appears they are the ones who are fatigued — not audiences. Organizations must re-energize and reinvigorate their digital engagement initiatives to fulfill audience expectations and deliver more results.

A quick note on physical events. While a return to physical events is welcome, most audience members surveyed preferred virtual delivery formats and were more engaged in digital experiences over the past six months. Consequently, companies will have to balance their events portfolio to match audience expectations.

**Research Methodology**

ON24 worked with Heinz Marketing to commission the research and fielded three separate surveys to uncover expectations about digital experiences from sales, marketing and audiences.

The audience survey was composed of 204 respondents across a variety of industries. More than half of respondents (57.7%) were Directors, Vice Presidents or C-suite executives.

The Marketing survey was composed of 206 respondents across a variety of industries. Nearly three-quarters (74.0%) of respondents were Directors, Vice Presidents or C-suite executives.

The Sales survey was composed of 200 respondents across a variety of industries. Nearly a quarter of respondents (71.7%) were Directors, Vice Presidents or C-suite executives.
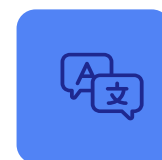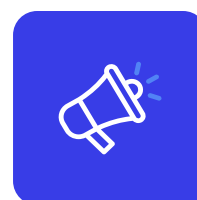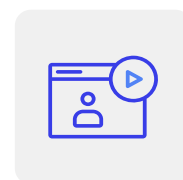
# The State of Audiences

## How Audiences Consume Virtual Events and Webinars

As a baseline, we wanted to understand how many virtual events and webinars audiences consumed on average. Of those surveys, 34.8% attended seven or more digital experiences in the previous six months. The second-largest grouping of respondents (32.4%) attended four to six digital experiences in six months.

## Audience Satisfaction

In an important signal to B2B companies, 75.5% of audience members surveyed reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the events they attended in the past year.

## Audience Goals

Most audiences attend digital experiences to expand their general knowledge, according to 67.7% of respondents, and to learn about industry trends, according to another 47.8%. Interestingly, our surveyees gave almost equal weight to our remaining responses: discovering new products/services, networking and product training at 40.3%, 43.8% and 39.8%, respectively.

This suggests that marketers must deploy experiences across all of these content types to meet audience needs.

**What is the most common reason you attend a virtual event or webinar? (Select all that apply.)**

| Reason | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Expanding my general knowledge | 67.7% |
| Learning about industry trends | 47.8% |
| Discovering new products/services | 40.3% |
| Networking with peers and industry leaders | 43.8% |
| Learning about current products, training | 39.8% |
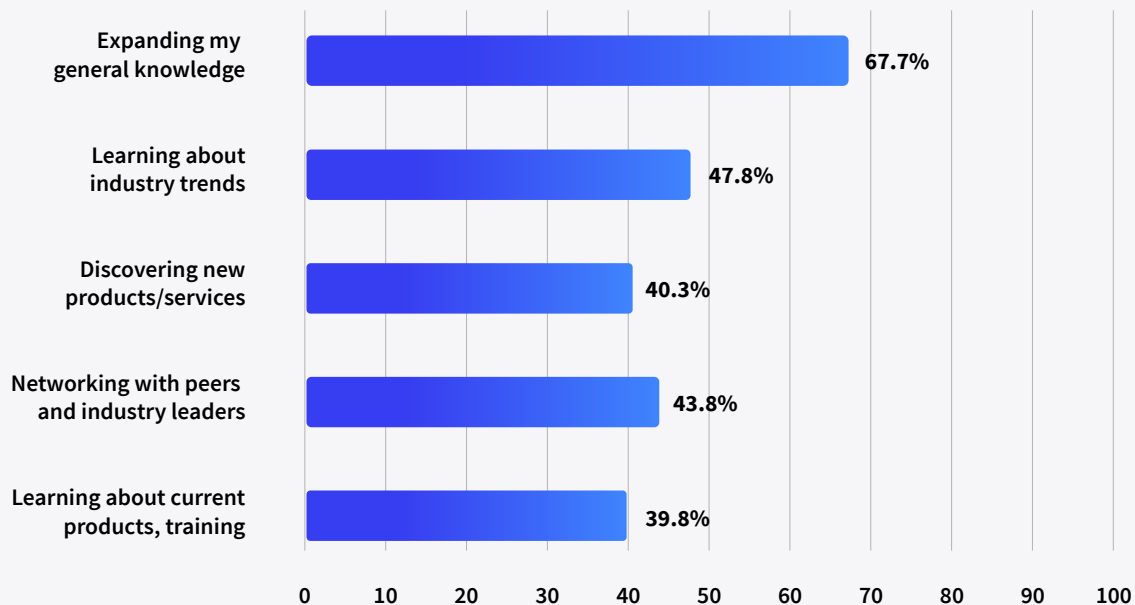
**Audience Format Preferences**

When asked about preference for event delivery mechanisms (in-person, virtual, hybrid or on-demand), most respondents (44.1%) reported they prefer virtual experiences.

Companies will return to physical events, but they cannot over-rotate towards those tactics and leave the digital formats that audiences love behind.

**Which event format is most appealing to attend?**

| Format | Percentage |
|---|---|
| In-person | 29.9% |
| Virtual | 44.1% |
| Hybrid | 22.5% |
| On-demand recording | 3.4% |
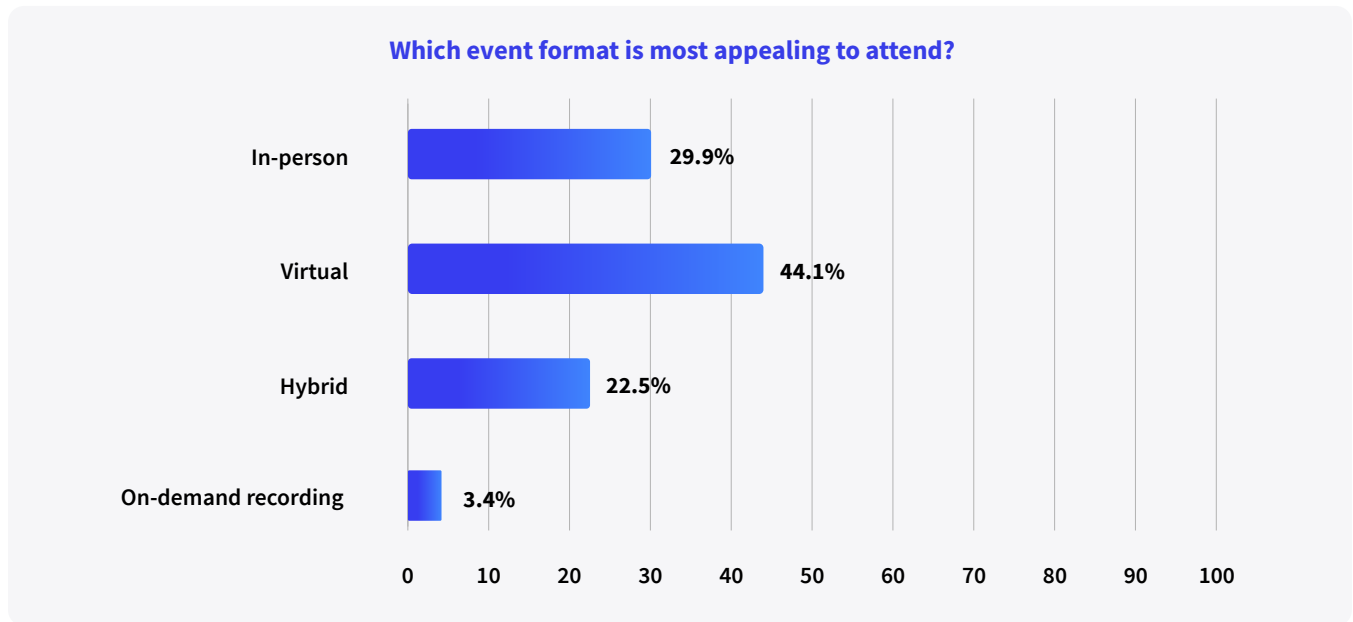
**Audience Preference on Session Length**

For single-session digital experiences, nearly two-thirds (61.3%) of attendees prefer a 60-minute format.

**Which single-session event length is most appealing to attend?**

| Length | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Short form (15 - 30 mins) | 22.5% |
| An hour | 61.3% |
| 90 minutes | 15.7% |
| Other | 0.5% |
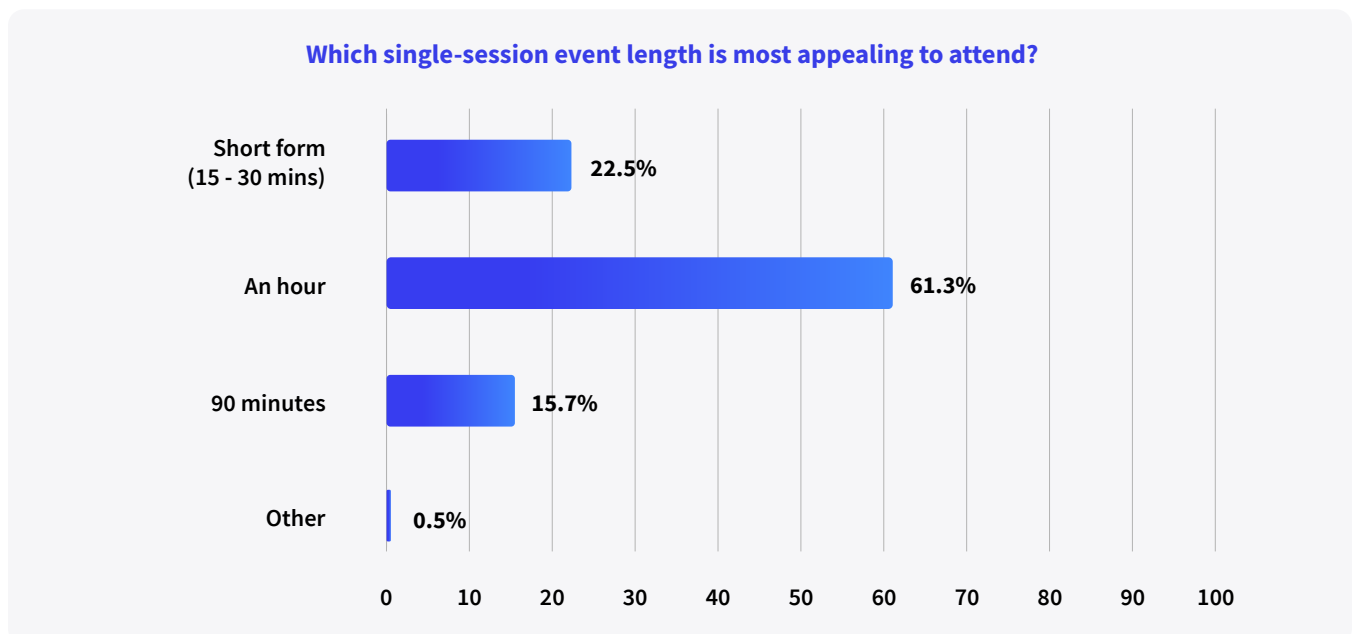
For digital events featuring multiple sessions, the preferred session length is a half-day, according to 56.2% of respondents. Again, this is critical information as marketers look to understand how to format and package the content they want to deliver to audiences.

## What multi-session event length is most appealing to attend?

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Half day | 56.2% |
| Full day | 20.2% |
| Multi-day | 18.2% |
| Multi-session events are not appealing | 5.4% |
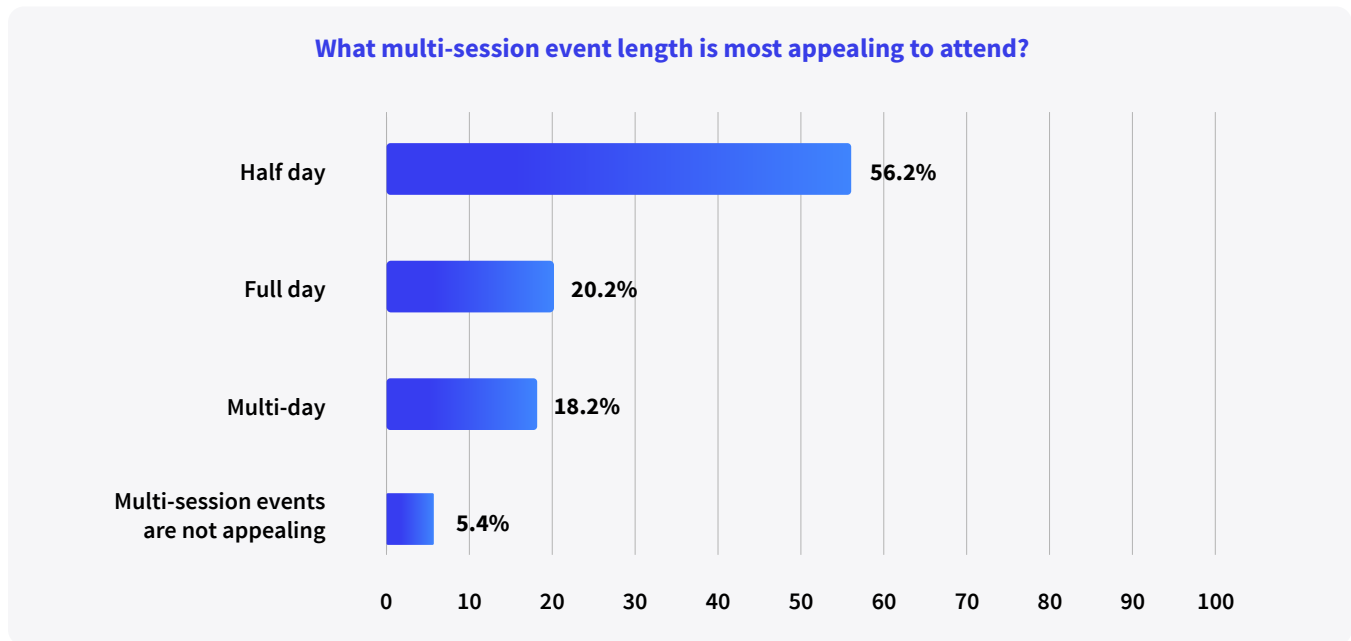
**Audience Preference for Session Formats**

According to the data, audiences prefer a variety of session formats. Therefore, a balanced mix of session formats is essential as marketers build out their digital experiences and events.

## Which session formats do you prefer to attend? (Select all that apply.)

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Product or platform training | 53.9% |
| Speaker roundtables or panel discussions | 47.5% |
| Fireside chat with industry experts | 33.3% |
| Peer networking opportunities | 43.6% |
| Industry insights or trend presentations | 48.0% |
| Other | |
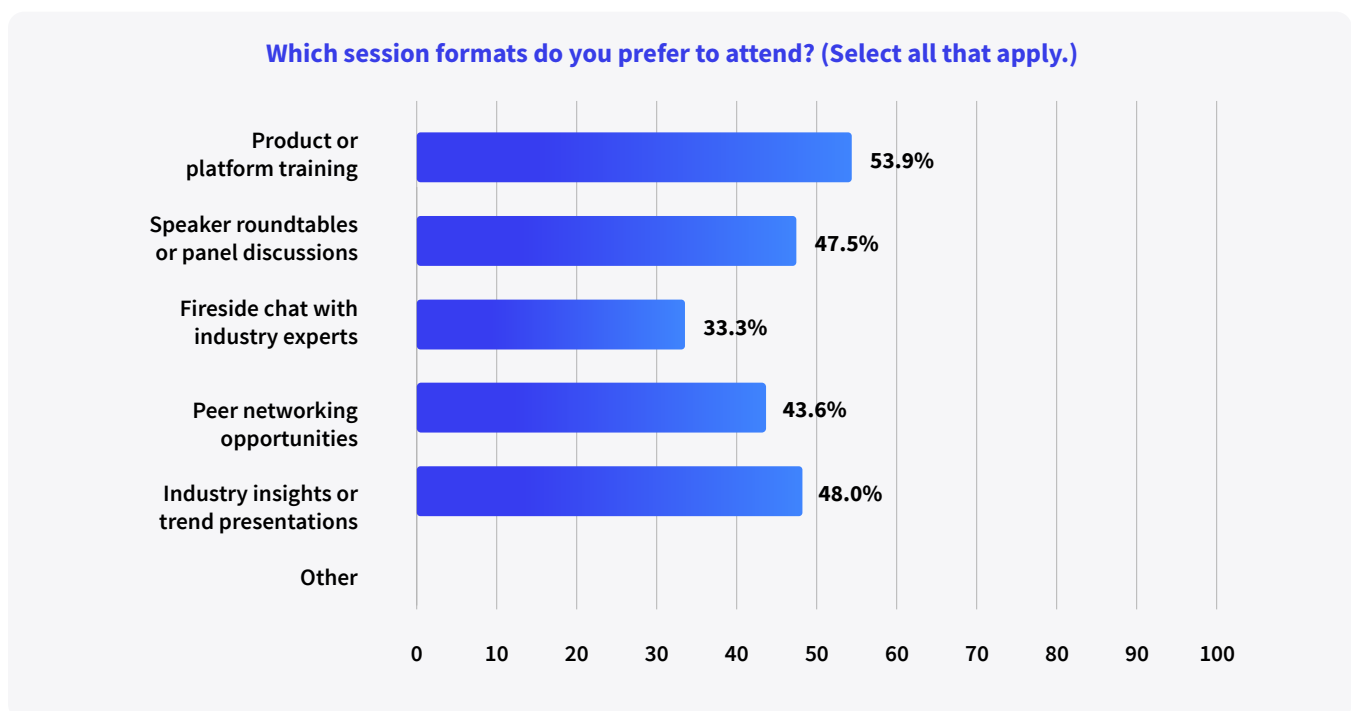
# Engagement

### Audience Engagement Trends

According to our respondents, most attendees say their engagement levels have increased during virtual events and webinars, with 88.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

### Audience Engagement Preferences

Audiences want a variety of ways to engage with content — especially when it comes to digital experiences. The most popular engagement option, according to our surveyees, is group chat.

Although marketers and event planners sometimes like to shy away from this feature, it's best to give audiences what they want. To that end, integrate chat into events and have a moderator on standby for any concerns or issues.

### Peer-to-Peer Engagement

Audiences crave engagement with one another during digital experiences. In fact, 68.6% of respondents say peer-to-peer engagement is very or somewhat important to a digital experience.

**Which engagement opportunities are you most likely to engage/participate?
(Select all that apply.)**

| Engagement opportunity | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Polls | 52.0% |
| Group chat | 54.9% |
| Networking | 52.0% |
| Emoji reactions to presenters (thumbs up, hearts, clap hands, etc.) | 26.0% |
| Breakout rooms | 32.4% |
| Q&A (via chat box or over video) | 41.2% |
| Other | 1.0% |
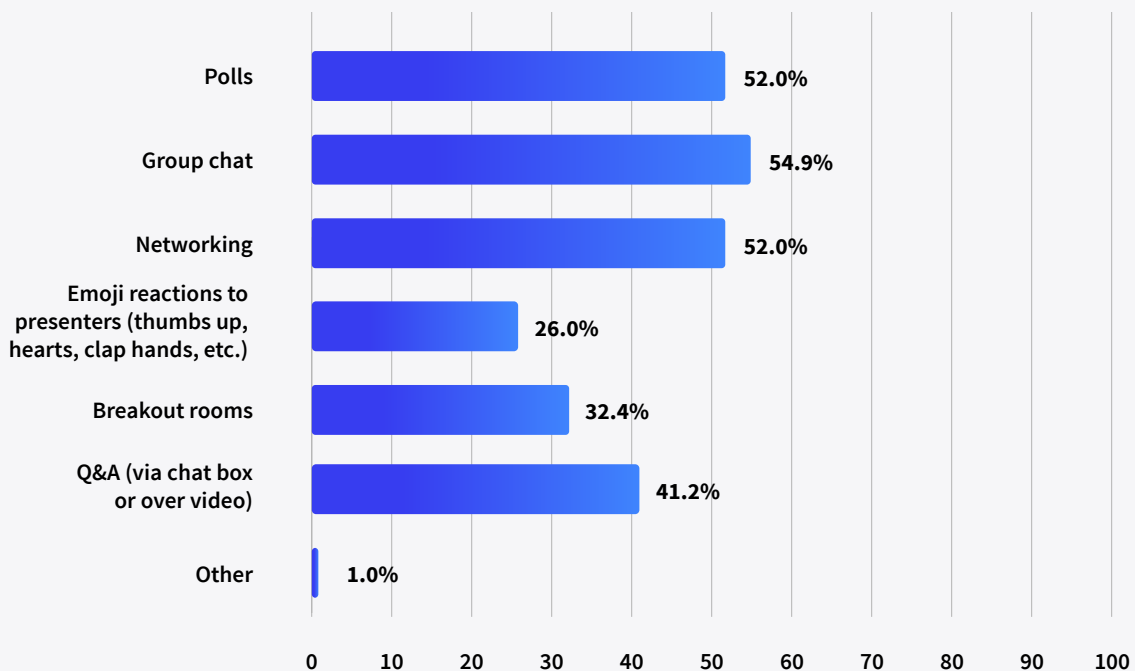
# Personalization

**Audiences Crave Personalization**

Audiences expect personalized experiences in the future, with 82.8% seeking a more white-glove touch. To underscore the importance of personalization, 64.7% of audiences expect somewhat or highly personalized experiences.

Audiences also offered up a variety of ways that they would like to see personalization within future experiences. Content provided within an experience is the more important element to consider. Marketers must incorporate a variety of content within their experiences that can address the needs of various audiences based on roles, industries and preferences. Marketers and sales teams that aren't considering personalizing activities along the digital event lifecycle, pre-, during and post-event, must jump on this opportunity.

### Which personalized experience would positively affect your event satisfaction? (Select all that apply.)

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Pre-event outreach | 33.8% |
| In-session content | 66.7% |
| Attendee engagement opportunities | 53.4% |
| Post-event follow up | 38.7% |
| Other | 1.0% |
| None of the above | 1.5% |
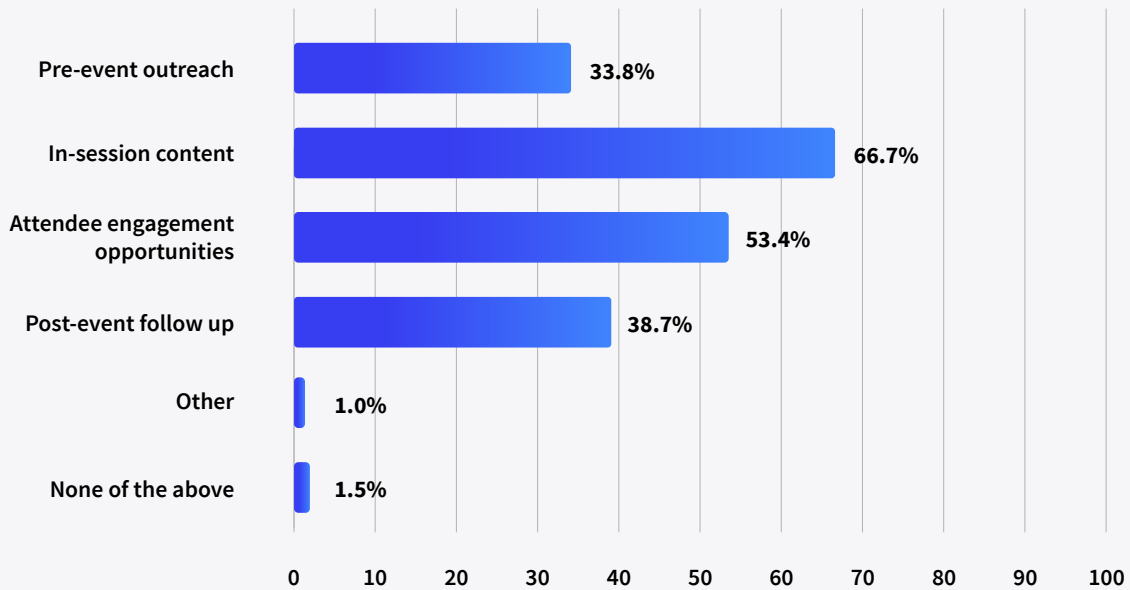
## Data

### Increased Output, Increased Audiences

More than half (51.0%) of marketers have increased the number of digital experiences they produce. Of those marketers who increased their digital experience production, 74% saw event attendance rates increase compared to 39% of teams that produced the same number of events in 2022, with only 39% seeing increased attendance.

### Event Data Value

Marketers overwhelmingly agree that event data provides valuable insights into an attendee's engagement and their customer or buyer journey stage. In fact, 88.4% of respondents agree or strongly agree with that statement.

### Engagement Data Capture

However, marketers are not capturing engagement data from events comprehensively, hindering how marketing and teams can act on the data they have at a later time.
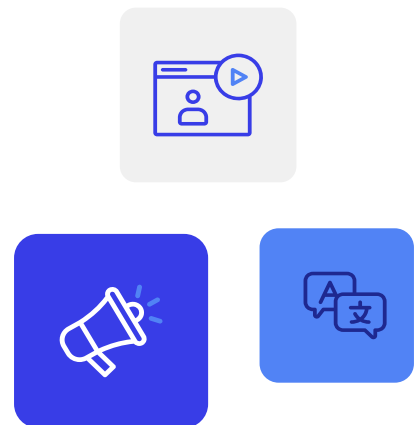
## What engagement data do you currently capture from your events?

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Attendee contact information | 51.2% |
| Length of time attended | 33.3% |
| Breakout sessions attended | 28.0% |
| Polling results | 39.6% |
| Questions asked | 39.1% |
| Content/event resources downloaded | 25.6% |
| Post-event survey results | 31.9% |
| Other | 1.4% |

But here is a crucial issue: marketers don't feel they're missing out on any valuable data. In fact, 89.9% of marketers are satisfied or extremely satisfied about the quality of data collected from events. This is a massive discrepancy between what marketers can and should capture and what they are capturing today.
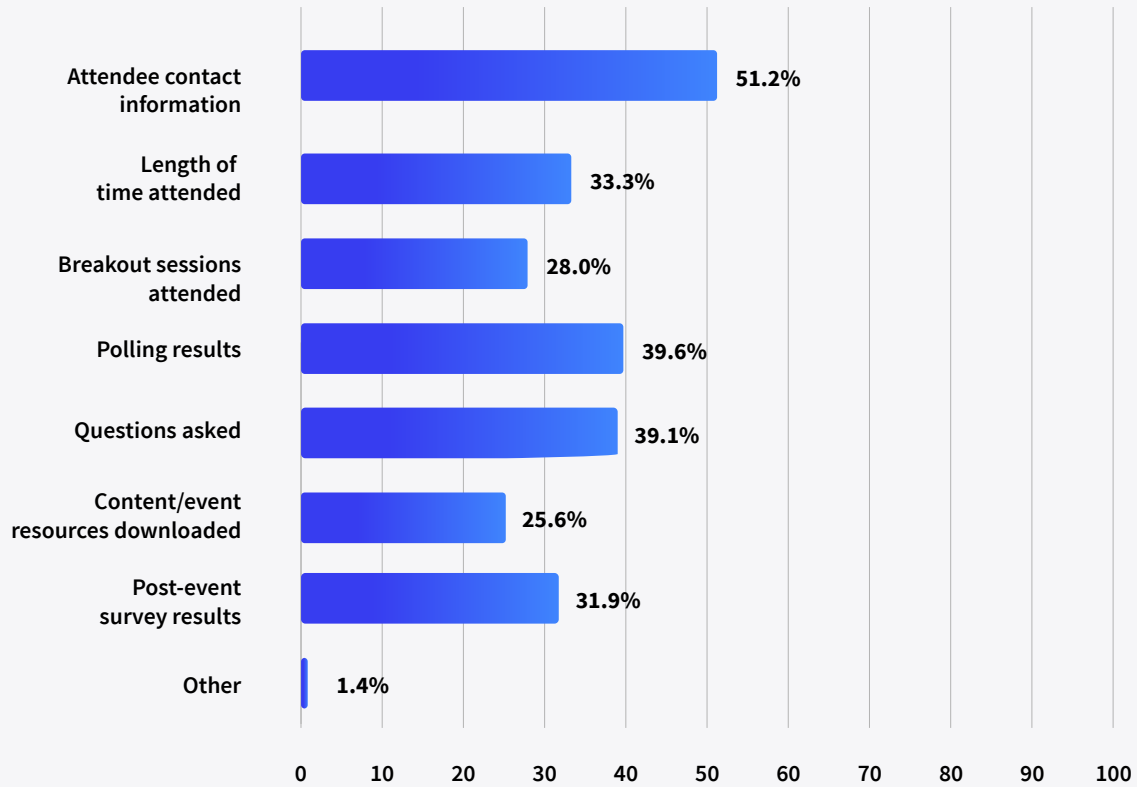
**Acting on Engagement Data**

Despite the relatively low percentage of engagement signals captured, marketers report their event data is actionable. In fact, 67% of respondents say event data inform marketing strategy and programs, and another 64% say event data informs sales strategy and programs.

**Readiness to Execute**

Marketers feel confident they have the resources, people, tools and processes to act on data from events, with 85.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

# Personalization

## Personalization Efforts Today

Most marketers (62.3%) personalize in-session content for audience members. Surprisingly, post-event follow-up is only being employed by 32.4% of marketers today. This is a massive opportunity for marketers to do more with the event data they are already capturing.

**Which parts of an event to do you personalize today?**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Pre-event outreach | 43.5% |
| In-session content | 62.3% |
| Attendee engagement opportunities | 35.7% |
| Post-event follow up | 32.4% |
| Other | 1.0% |
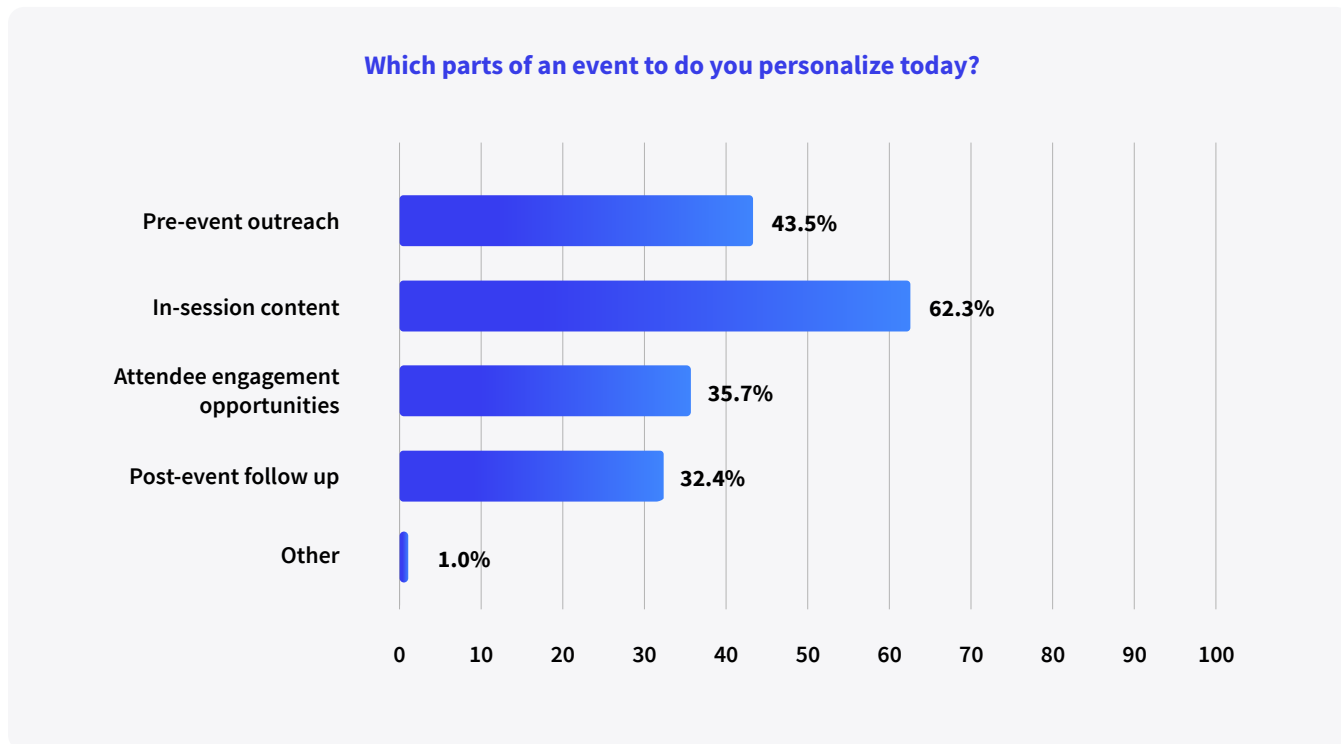
## Personalization Plans

Marketers plan to prioritize in-session content in the next year (54.6%). But to drive this personalization, marketers must look for other opportunities.

**What parts of an event are a priority to personalize in the next year?**

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Pre-event outreach | 41.5% |
| In-session content | 54.6% |
| Attendee engagement opportunities | 44.4% |
| Post-event follow up | 31.9% |
| Other | 1.0% |
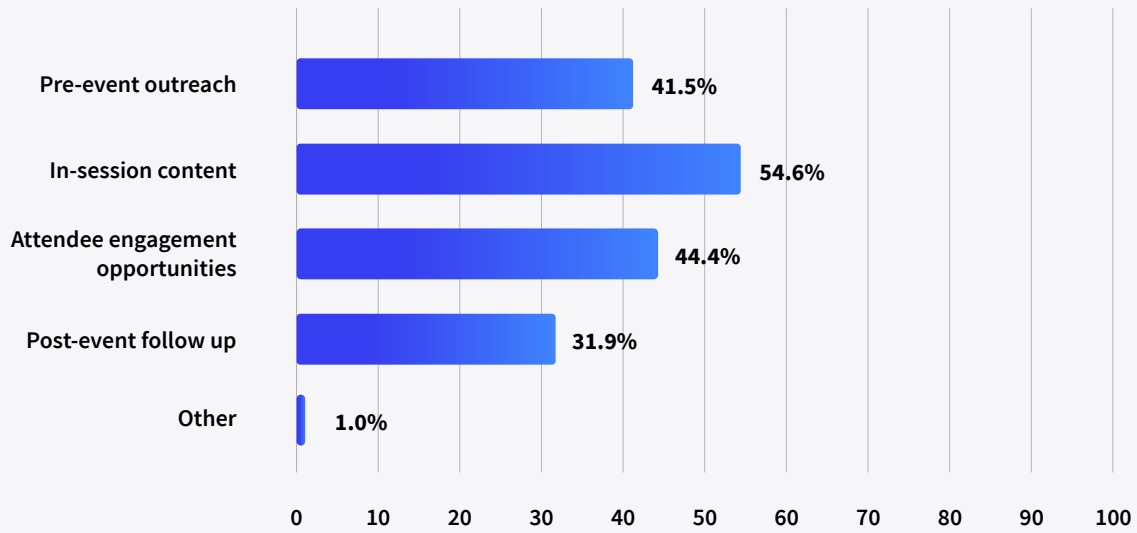
**Gaps in Personalization**

While 31.9% of marketers will prioritize post-event follow-up for personalization in the next year, respondents agree or strongly agree that event data can help sales. Specifically, these data can encourage personalization through pre-event outreach (90.8%) and post-event follow up (90.8%).

# Engagement

## Engagement Technique Utilization

Engaging events are interactive, meaning marketers need to foster audience participation. However, marketers report relatively low utilization of common engagement techniques, like Q&A, polls and group chat. This needs to change. Marketers must experiment with engagement tactics to capture audience attention and drive the data needed for sales and marketing follow-up.

### Which tactics do you use to encourage engagement at your events?

| Tactic | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Polls | 50.7% |
| Group chat | 53.1% |
| Networking | 50.7% |
| Emoji reactions to presenters (thumbs up, hearts, clap hands, etc.) | 17.4% |
| Breakout rooms | 30.9% |
| Q&A (via chat box or over video) | 36.2% |
| Other | 3.4% |
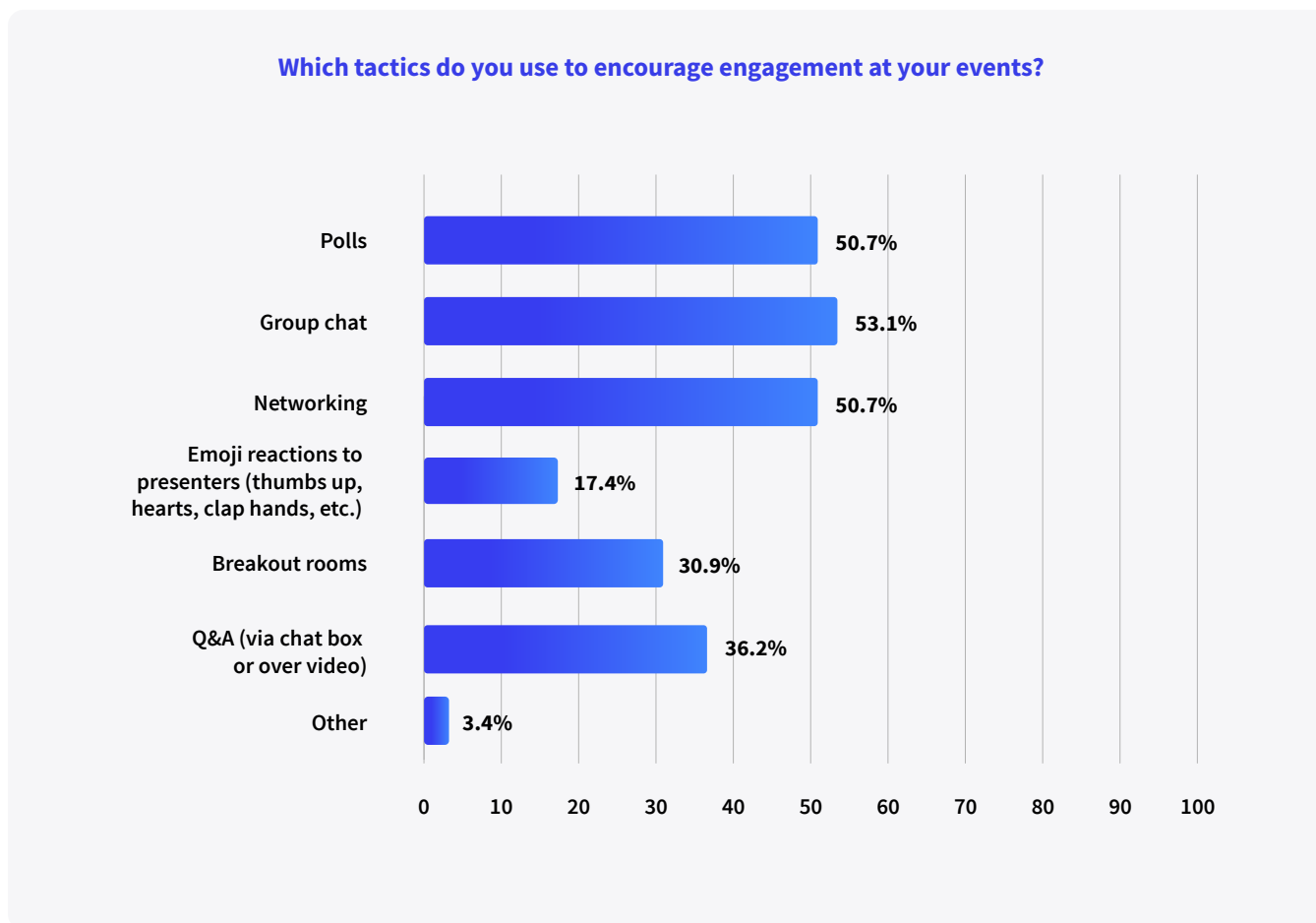
## Prioritizing Engagement For the Future

Encouragingly, most marketers (70.4%) report they are prioritizing engagement for future digital experiences.

# The State of Sales

## Data

### Ideal Outcomes

Sales professionals report that quality engagement data can benefit their activities, with 55.1% of respondents saying it improves customer retention and another 50.0% saying it improves prospecting conversations.

**What are the ideal outcomes from using quality attendee engagement data from virtual events for your sales programs? (Select all that apply).**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Better event follow-up | 43.4% |
| Better prospecting conversations | 50.0% |
| Better alignment with marketing team | 26.0% |
| Better customer retention | 55.1% |
| Higher response rate to my emails and phone calls | 30.1% |
| More quality conversations with prospects | 42.3% |
| Higher opportunity conversion rates | 34.2% |
| Better visibility to attendees' interactions with our marketing events | 13.8% |
| Other | 0.5% |

**Data Received**

Unfortunately, sales respondents say they don't get a lot of data after an event, with 57.8% of respondents saying they've at least received attendee contact information. While contact information is an essential piece of data, it is more crucial to pass engagement and behavioral data that could provide buying signals.

**Which data do you receive after an event? (Select all that apply.)**

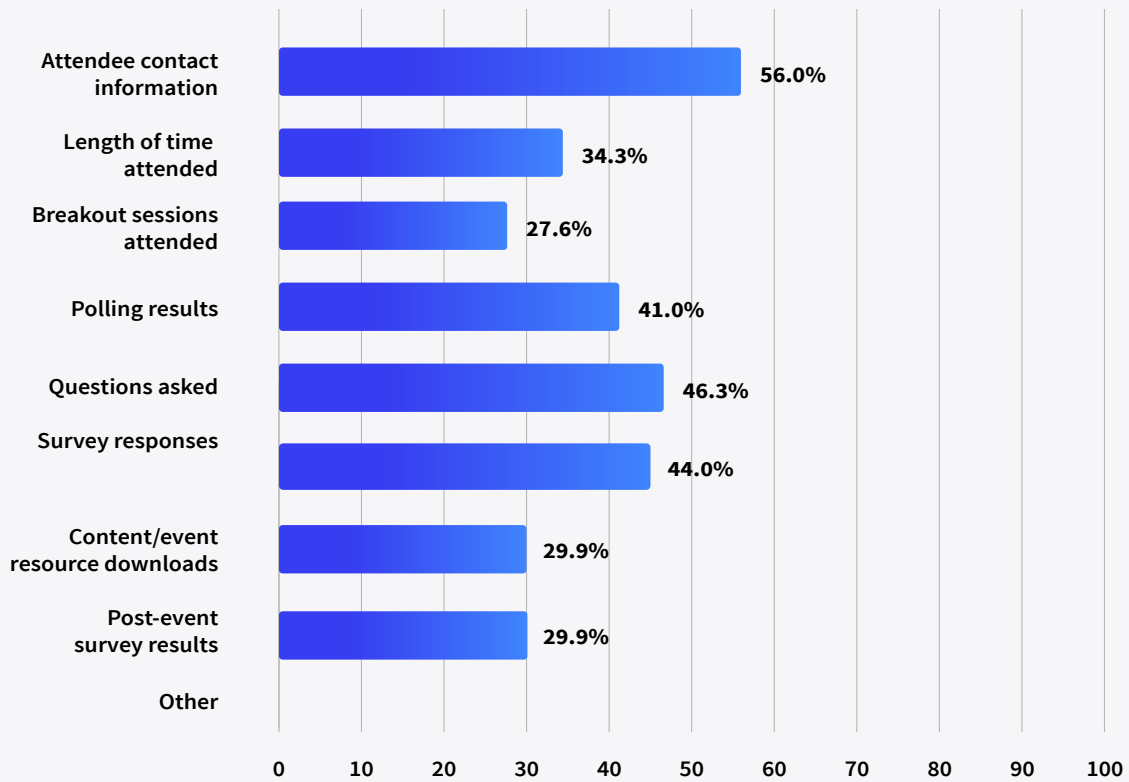| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Attendee contact information | 57.8% |
| Length of time attended | 43.3% |
| Breakout sessions attended | 31.1% |
| Polling results | 38.9% |
| Survey responses | 51.1% |
| Content or resources downloaded | 40.6% |
| Post-event survey results | 41.7% |
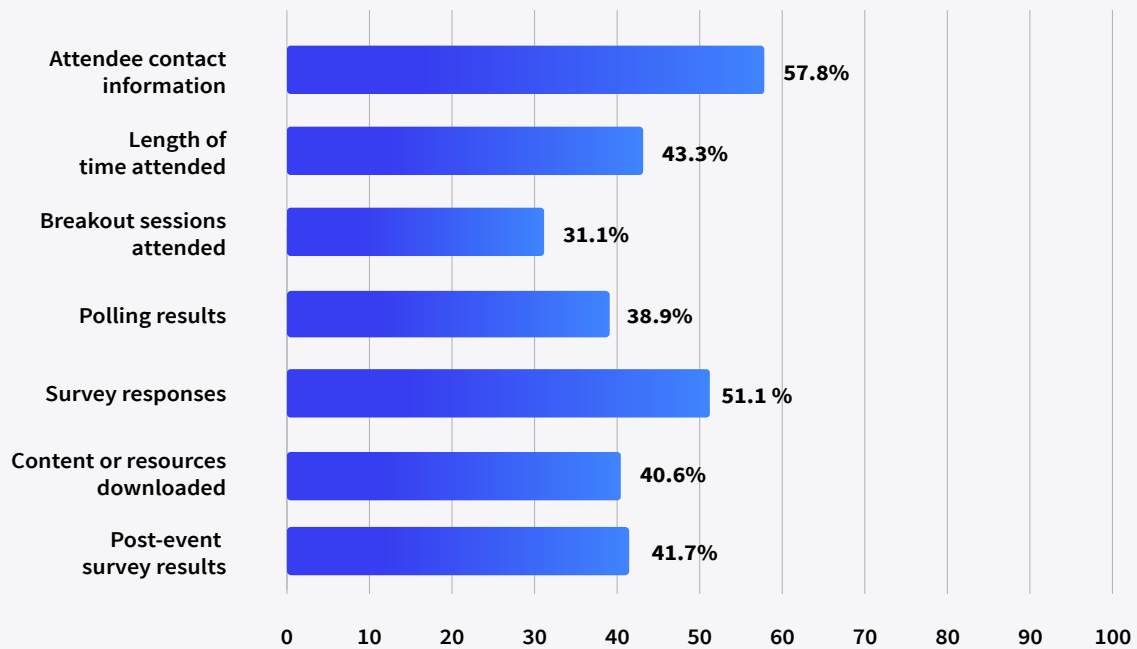
# Personalization

**Sales Utilization**

According to sales respondents, 68.4% say they personalize outreach. But what informs this personalization activity? The most commonly used event data leveraged in post-event personalizations with prospects or customers were: attendee contact information (56.0%), questions asked (46.3%) and survey responses (44.0%).

**Which event data is most useful to personalize your post-event outreach with a prospect or customer? (Select all that apply.)**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Attendee contact information | 56.0% |
| Length of time attended | 34.3% |
| Breakout sessions attended | 27.6% |
| Polling results | 41.0% |
| Questions asked | 46.3% |
| Survey responses | 44.0% |
| Content/event resource downloads | 29.9% |
| Post-event survey results | 29.9% |
| Other | |

## Difficulty Prioritizing

While personalization is powerful, sales respondents report they're wary of the tactic, saying they don't know if the extra effort is worth their time. Sales should prioritize personalization, considering audiences crave human interactions and relationships. The second most prominent challenge sales faces? Marketing is not sending event data to CRM systems (30.1%). Marketers must prioritize integrating their event and marketing solutions with their sales tech stack.

**What are your biggest challenges to personalizing your event outreach? (Select all that apply.)**

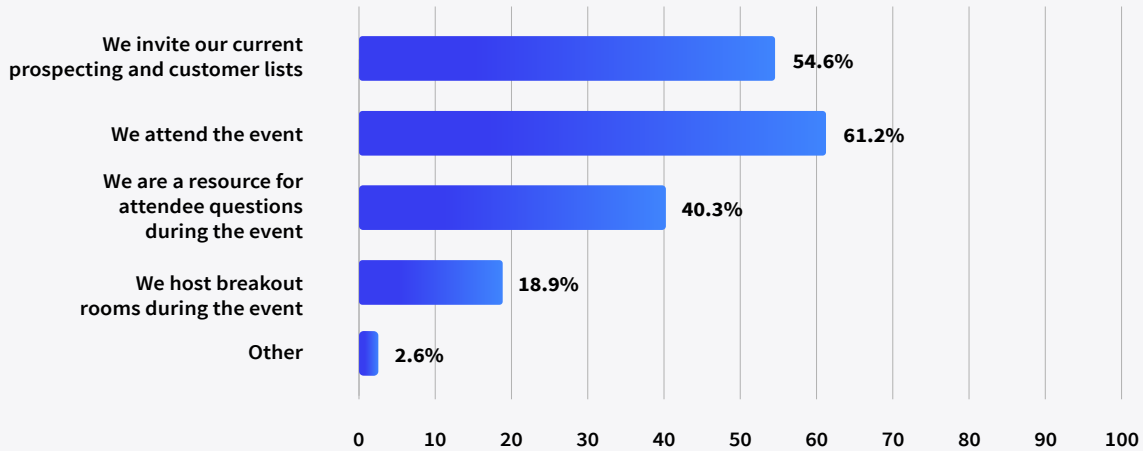| Challenge | Percentage |
|---|---|
| There is a lack of event data in my CRM | 30.1% |
| We don't know how our personalization efforts are performing | 29.1% |
| I don't know if the extra effort to personalize my outreach is worth my time | 41.3% |
| Personalization is not a priority for our team | 16.3% |
| Event data is not shared with our team | 18.4% |
| We don't know how to act on the event data we are given | 12.2% |
| Other | 2.6% |
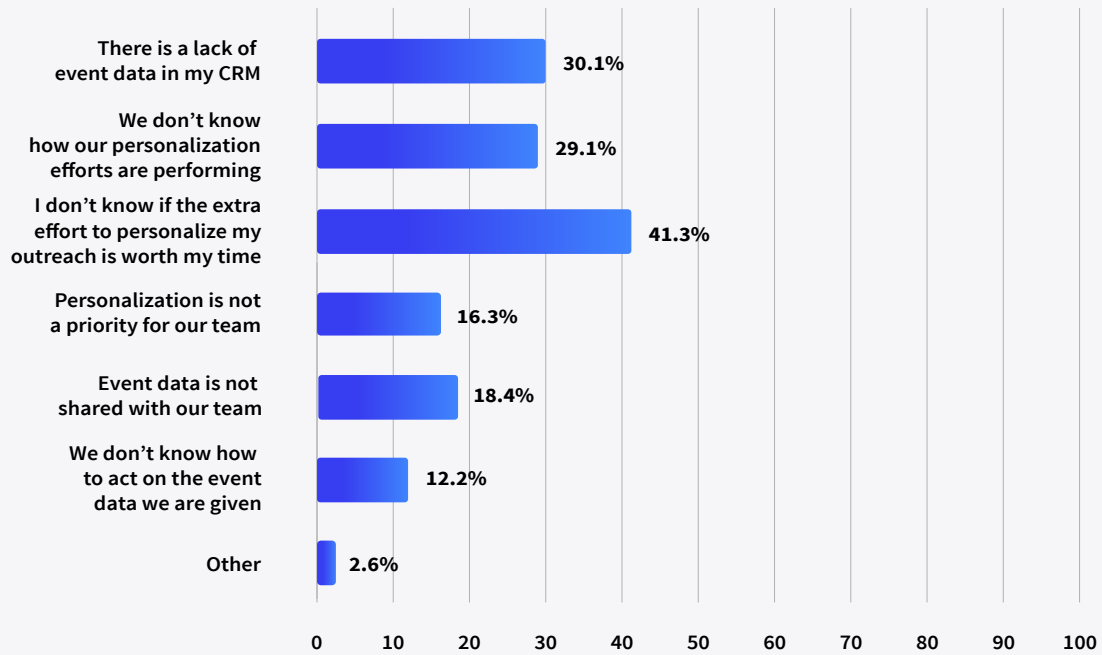
# Engagement

**Sales Values Digital Experiences**

Sales teams know that digital experiences are valuable. In fact, 95.4% of respondents agree or strongly believe their company's events resonate with customers and prospects.

**Sales Participation**

Surprisingly, fewer sales team members invite customers or prospects than attend digital experiences. While at-event participation from sales is essential, sales must also understand their role in drawing audiences into the event since event content can be valuable for their relationships.

### What is expected of your role in virtual events? (Select all that apply.)

| Role | Percentage |
|------|-----------|
| We invite our current prospecting and customer lists | 54.6% |
| We attend the event | 61.2% |
| We are a resource for attendee questions during the event | 40.3% |
| We host breakout rooms during the event | 18.9% |
| Other | 2.6% |

# What Happens Next?

While marketers have made strides in creating digital experiences, there are opportunities for improvement across several areas. It appears marketers may be overconfident when it comes to the performance and quality of their events. According to our surveyees, 90% of marketers say they are satisfied with the quality of data they collect from events. However, critically, only 26% of audience respondents report they are very satisfied, and 50% say they were somewhat satisfied with the quality of their attended events.

Audiences crave engagement opportunities, and marketers must prioritize how to activate and encourage engagement for attendees. This will result in additional data and insights that marketing and sales can prioritize to act on.

When it comes to personalization, which has been a hot topic in sales and marketing circles, audiences expect *more*. However, personalization efforts often fall flat when programs and tactics don't use the right data to drive personalization. Nowhere outside of events does marketing have the opportunity to capture so many engagement signals from audiences to inform personalization efforts.

With audiences signaling a preference for virtual events, sales and marketing must unite to create more engaging experiences for the future and take the time and effort to collect, prioritize and act on engagement data.

# The Engagement Imperative

For years, marketers believed they were in control of the buyer's journey. They had orchestrated nurtures with choreographed email sequences, adapted buyer-driven journeys and have realized that personalization, based off of behavior and engagement, results in improved outcomes.

However, most marketers still struggle to have the appropriate mechanisms in place to listen to and act on engagement data. Today's work-from-home world has increased the number of digital signals generated and proven that marketers will need to lean on digital tactics for some time.

Engagement is more important than ever. Third-party intent data isn't delivering on its promise, as teams become desensitized to too many signals or intent being flagged too late. We're also staring down a cookie-less future, impacting how marketers can analyze and understand audience behavior on the internet.

To remain relevant and outpace competitors, marketers must prioritize the creation of — and take action on — first-party data. And, increasingly, first-party data that is actionable and rich with insights is created through engagement on digital channels.
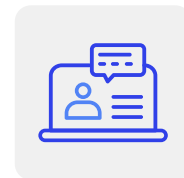
# Why B2B Organizations Need First-Party Data

Every B2B marketing organization depends on the data it collects, analyzes and acts on. This information provides an organization with insights into its audience, telling it what content connects with prospects, informs the business of which services customers love and provides both sales and marketing teams with instruction of what they ought to do next to take the business to the next level.

But the data a lot of digital marketers use today is second-hand — information provided by third-party vendors. Yes, third-party data does have its uses, but depending on this information is becoming increasingly untenable.

# Understanding Third-Party Data Today

### HOW MARKETERS USE COOKIES

Today, marketers often collect third-party data through digital trackers called "cookies."

Often, these snippets of code are used to enhance a user's experience across the internet. For example, if someone visited a website for a service, a cookie would make a record of that visit. This information can then be used to present additional content and experiences for that user elsewhere.

In the B2B world, this information can be valuable. This data can be used, for example, to create and cater digital experiences for healthcare providers, manufacturers and more.

# Why Third-Party Data Is Useful (And Why It's Falling Out of Favor)

Third-party data helps marketers identify and connect with audiences receptive to — or actively interested in — a solution on a mass scale. This information, provided by third-party data providers, can help organizations research and segment new audiences, identify new channels and fill in any gaps in first-party data profiles.

Third-party data is a map in the proverbial marketing journey. It provides teams with a big picture and a lot of information. But for a marketer to map out a successful journey, they'll need specific information on the route they should follow.

This is where first-party data comes into play. This information provides you with specific direction on how to approach an account because that account is actively communicating with your team.

The combination of first and third-party data has been a potent one, up until the last few years. But use of cookies to gather information third-party data is starting to fall out of favor. There are two primary reasons for this: privacy on the internet and government regulation.

## IT'S A PRIVACY-CENTRIC WORLD AND MARKETERS ARE JUST LIVING IN IT

In 2020, Google, the largest search engine service in the world and one of the most influential technology companies to have ever existed, announced something staggering: it would remove third-party cookies in Google Chrome — one of the most used web browsers in the world — by 2022.

In its post describing its initiative, dubbed "The Privacy Sandbox", Google outlined its goals for this shift. These goals include making ads more relevant to internet users, as well as combating several bad consequences of cookies like fingerprinting, spam, fraud and more.

And Google is not alone. Apple, too, has taken extraordinary measures to protect the privacy of iOS users and Mozilla, developer of Firefox, a popular web browser, is also offering more privacy protection for its users.

But it isn't just tech firms turning against the cookies that third-party data providers rely on.

## GOVERNMENTS ARE CRACKING DOWN AS WELL

Governments are also cracking down on what information can be collected, where and how explicit companies must be in communicating their use of cookies.

In 2018, the European Union passed the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR. This law regulates how companies collect, process and control personal data for European citizens, and has levied fines on the scale of millions of Euros while also inspiring other regulations like the California Consumer Privacy Act and more.

# The Rise of First-Party Data

So the crackdown on cookies is going to impact how B2B marketers — and digital marketers in general — connect with and communicate to audiences. But there is a solution: first-party data.

First-party data cuts out the middleman and gives marketers direct access to audiences. Armed with this information, marketers can more accurately understand and create content that resonates with their audiences.

Often, this means creating quality branded experiences like **webinars**.

## FIRST-PARTY DATA 101: UNDERSTANDING THE THEORY

If we think about each marketing tactic we create as an experience – one where we have to gather an audience through a promotional strategy – we can then think about two critical elements essential for collecting actionable first-party data. These are:

- How we interact with and keep audiences engaged

- The Call to Action we want our audience to take after the experience

This also gets back to the fact that not all measurement or data is created equal. In fact, it helps to classify metrics under three categories:

### WHAT FIRST-PARTY DATA IS

First-party data is any information collected by a company directly from a source. There is no third party involved. For example, a user responding to a company's survey can be considered first party data. Conversely, a survey ran through a service that then shares the results of that survey is considered third-party data.

**Activity metrics** — where we look after counts of actions taken

**Impact metrics** — that are the result of the actions we took

**Business metrics** — where we show how our contributions help the overall organization

The Impact category provides us with the first-party data that will reveal behavioral insights into our audiences.

## HOW MARKETERS CAN COLLECT ACTIONABLE FIRST-PARTY DATA

A webinar attendee is a signal to a marketer. That signal: that a visitor is interested in what you have to say. But that is a very weak signal. What's more important is the behavior of attendees during that experience.

That's why it's important to set up experiences designed to collect data on how attendees interact with your experience.

**Polling is a great example**. It captures first-party data and provides contextualized information for sales and marketing to act on.

Here's an illustrative hypothetical. Let's say you created an experience where benchmarking research is shown. It is natural, during the course of that event, to ask attendees how they compare to the industry benchmark.

Based on the information attendees provide, you can action at least three separate plays.

For example, if someone responds that they are doing better than average, we could invite them to **apply for an award**, invite them to speak on an upcoming webinar or participate in a local roundtable.

Additionally, if someone says they are doing about the same as the industry benchmark, a sales follow-up could focus on how to take their program to the next level. This could be an important signal for a product or service you offer designed for those scenarios.

Finally, an audience member who reports that they are below industry average could receive an empathetic message filled with content related to how to remove roadblocks and help them achieve the benchmark standard.

## FROM FIRST-PARTY TO PERSONALIZATION

### Better First-party Data

Traditional first-party data would include form fills, but augmenting this type of information with behavior signals, like time on event or questions asked, can provide deeper insights.

### Engagement-aligned Programs

Moving from a focus on the delivery mechanism or tactic for marketing will allow marketers to think about the type of engagement they are trying to create instead. By focusing on this, programs can include a diverse mix of tactics.

### Personalization Promise

Many personalization programs have failed because tactics are personalized off of poor quality data. By improving data quality, personalized tactics will be more relevant.

# Four Steps to Drive First-Party Engagement

Driving first-party data is a matter of understanding how audiences engage with digital content. Let's break these steps down.

### 1. Understand Engagement Data

The first step is to understand what engagement data is. There are three core data categories we capture in marketing:

- **Activity Metrics.** These are counts of actions taken and include metrics like number of emails sent, number of programs run, e-books written.

- **Impact Metrics.** These are results of the actions taken and include metrics like length of attendance, engagement score, survey responses and content downloads.

- **Business Metrics.** These demonstrate the business impact of a series of activities and include metrics like pipeline generated, new opportunities and account impact.

Not all metrics and data are created equal, but all of these data categories play an important role in how you measure the effectiveness of your marketing.

For the purposes of engagement, impact metrics are prioritized. Aside from the count of the actions itself, it is these behavior signals that show us how audiences engaged with the marketing tactics.

**2. Set up Sensors**

With an understanding of the different types of data categories, it is important to translate this into how to have the appropriate sensors set up to capture the signals. To do this, you must separate out the tactic or delivery mechanism being used and think about what engagement techniques will be used during the experience.

For example, if a landing page is being created, an engagement technique could be to deploy a chatbot to help guide the prospect to share information or recommend additional content. In a webinar, engagement techniques could include Q&A with the presenter or polling.

Plotting out the engagement techniques that will be used is most critical in this step. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that audience engagement techniques will vary by the persona being marketed to. For example, how you would engage a C-suite executive in marketing would be different than a software developer. Leveraging persona research can help to inform these decisions.

**3. Listen for Signals**

With sensors deployed and tuned to looking at impact data categories, marketers must now tune to what they are gathering. BANT serves as a guiding principle (Budget, Authority, Need, Timing) and is one of the best signals to look out for.

For example, polling questions used in a webinar can be used to understand where a company falls in its maturity level of deploying new tactics. The information here can also be used to decipher which of your products would be appropriate for a potential buyer — information that is critical for marketing to this person again or for sales to follow up on.

Additionally, "Timing" can be uncovered with questions related to how the topic is prioritized for annual planning.

### 4. Act on Engagement Data

The best way to act on engagement data is to act on it in the moment. Consider how to personalize CTAs in experiences based on behavior during an event. In a webinar, a presenter can verbally present next best actions for audience members based on polling responses or direct them to the appropriate content included in the experience.

With sales, sharing this information with them immediately is critical, but more important is having playbooks prepared for them to be able to act on this data. For example, simply sharing with a sales team member that one of their prospects asked a question might not lead to action from the sales team member. Instead, be more prescriptive- baked on the question that this person asked, it is recommended that content related to this topic be shared.

# Taking Engagement to The Next Level

Engagement is the currency of marketing.

It is up to you to understand how to earn and spend this currency, as well as make smart investment decisions. Risky moves can lead to eroded trust and a lack of funds.

Marketers must also share engagement with sales and make sure that they are informed about how to act on the data. Sales must treat the result with the same level of respect and empathy as marketing.

**Learn how ON24 can help you connect the dots between audience, marketing and sales.**

**Register for a live demo of ON24 today.**

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