

The Experience Design Report

What's Shaping Live
Experiences in **2026**

About Encore

Encore is a global leader in B2B live event production, supporting meeting and event professionals with event technology and production. Committed to delivering a high-quality customer experience, the company is guided by its purpose to connect and inspire, supporting more than 2,200 venues, including hotels, convention centers and corporate campuses worldwide.

Encore is one of the 2026 Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® and has been a certified Great Place To Work™ in 13 countries. Headquartered in Schiller Park, Illinois, Encore operates in 23 countries across North America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and Asia Pacific.

2,220+
global venues

23
countries

FORTUNE
100
Best Companies to
Work For® 2026

**All figures above are as of 2025.*



About Boldpush

Boldpush is a media, research, and consulting firm for the event industry.

Founded by **Julius Solaris** in 2022, [Boldpush](#) brings industry-focused insights and consulting to companies across the globe.

Boldpush is also a [newsletter](#) with 40,000 subscribers, and an advanced intelligence platform for industry insights: [Boldpush+](#).

Introduction

Events are changing faster than the playbooks used to plan them. What attendees expect from connection, content, personalization, and production has shifted.

This report surveys 447 event professionals to map where the industry actually stands across the core dimensions of experience design: programming, connection, technology, and trust.

The goal is to give event leaders, experience designers, and their partners a data-grounded view of what's working, what isn't, and where the biggest gaps remain.

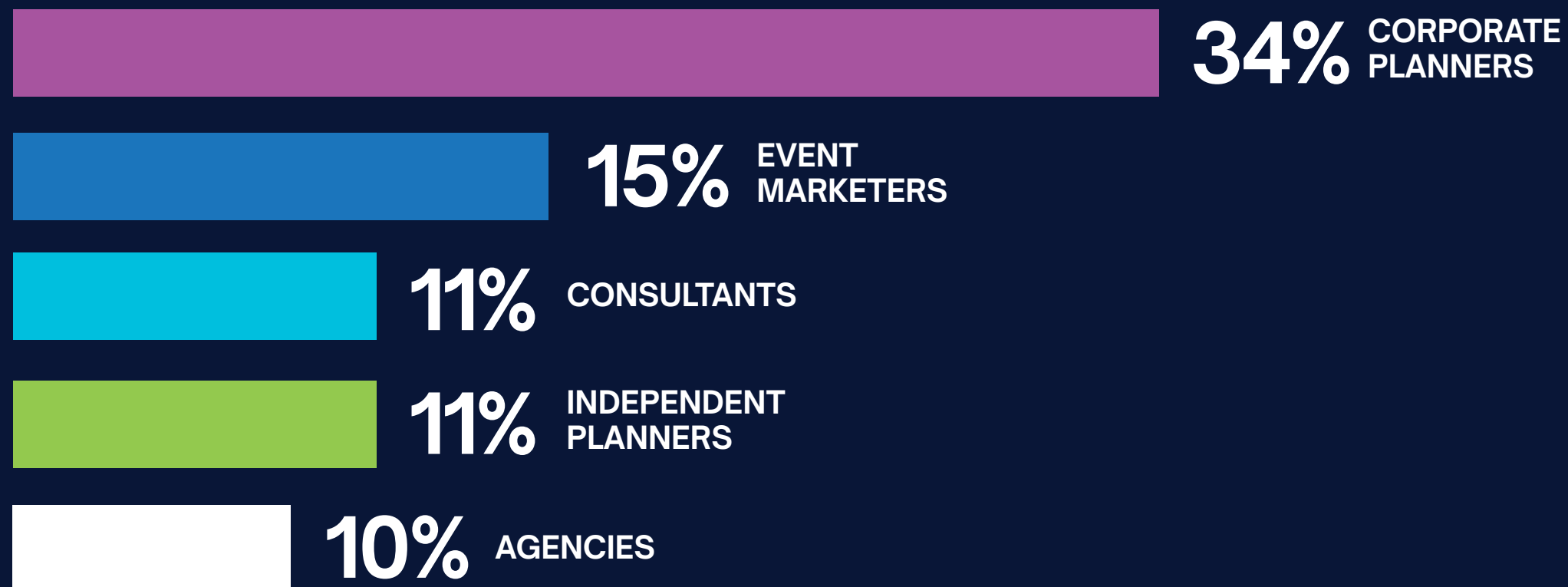
Inside this report

- ▶ Programming & Content
- ▶ Connection & Personalization
- ▶ Technology & AI
- ▶ Venues & Production
- ▶ Events as Trust Generators
- ▶ Appendix with full research

About the Research

Respondent profile at a glance

This report draws from the expertise of 447 event professionals surveyed in February 2026. They cover a spectrum of low-to-high volume planners in a range of specializations.



75%

plan events for under 2,000 attendees

<5 to 50+

range of events/year

EVENT TYPES

conferences • trade shows
user conferences • association meetings • field marketing incentives

Executive Summary

4 Key findings

1 Connection is #1, but programming hasn't caught up

Planners rank peer networking as the most important element of event success, but few dedicate enough programming to structured connection.

2 Participatory formats outperform

Roundtables and hands-on workshops lead satisfaction. Keynotes take only 7% of the vote. The highest satisfaction comes from interactive formats.

3 The keynote isn't dying. It's evolving

Nearly half see keynotes as a secondary factor. Formats are shifting toward shorter, multi-perspective, interactive sessions.

4 Trust is built through human interaction first

Face-to-face networking is the #1 trust builder. Shared peer experiences follow. Human connection is vital, and organizers need to design for it.

01 Programming & Content

How the industry is reinventing keynotes, what content formats are most popular, and why it's a mistake to skip microevents and side programming.

Programming & Content

What the data says: Keynotes

- **Still relevant:** 48% see keynotes as a secondary factor in driving registrations. Only 2.7% have eliminated them.
- **Three-way format split:** Format changes lean toward shorter, multi-perspective, and interactive.

Top 3 Keynote Format Changes



 **17%**

see **keynotes** as a primary registration driver

48%

see them as a **secondary** registration driver

2.7%

have **eliminated** them entirely

Programming & Content

What the data says:

Microevents & side experiences

Microevents deliver

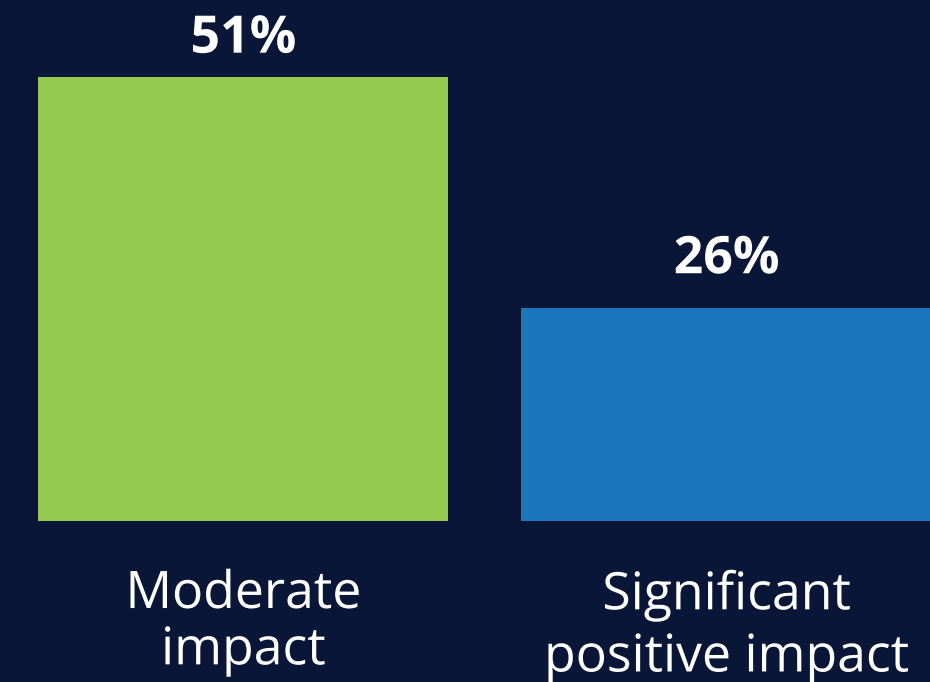
76%+ of those who offer microevents see a positive registration impact.

25% don't offer them at all.

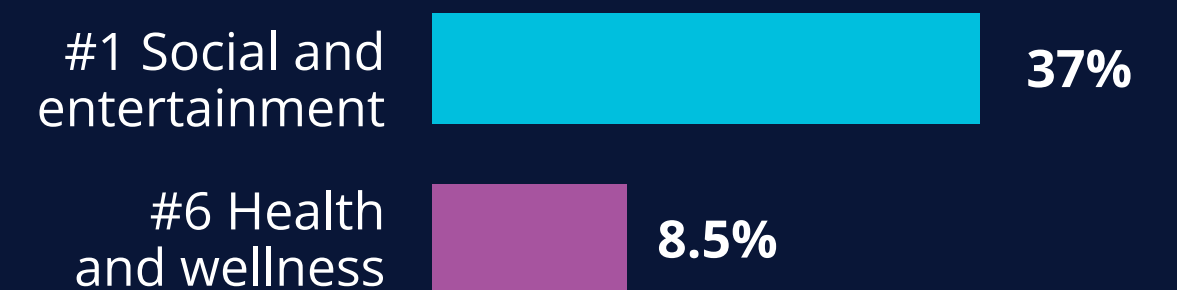
Classic side events win

Social and entertainment experiences are the most in-demand type of side event, while **health and wellness** activities take last place.

Microevent registration impact*



Most and least in-demand side experiences



*Excluding respondents who don't offer microevents

Programming & Content

No more buzzwords, **what the market says**



MISCONCEPTION

The keynote is dead.



REALITY

It's being restructured, not eliminated. Nearly half the industry still counts on it.



MISCONCEPTION

Small group formats are always an attendee favorite.



REALITY

Interactivity boosts satisfaction, but structure is essential. Surprisingly, attendee-led sessions score low. **Hands-on for attendees doesn't mean hands-off for planners.** Planners need to give attendees structure.



MISCONCEPTION

Panels are not effective.



REALITY

In events with more than 10,000 attendees, **panels drive the most satisfaction.**



MISCONCEPTION

Health and wellness activities are some of the most in-demand side experiences.



REALITY

There is a place for wellness at events, but the **buzz may be overblown.** They came in last, with only 8.5% of planners identifying them as a favorite.

Programming & Content

What we discovered:

Microevent success and format effectiveness vary by event size

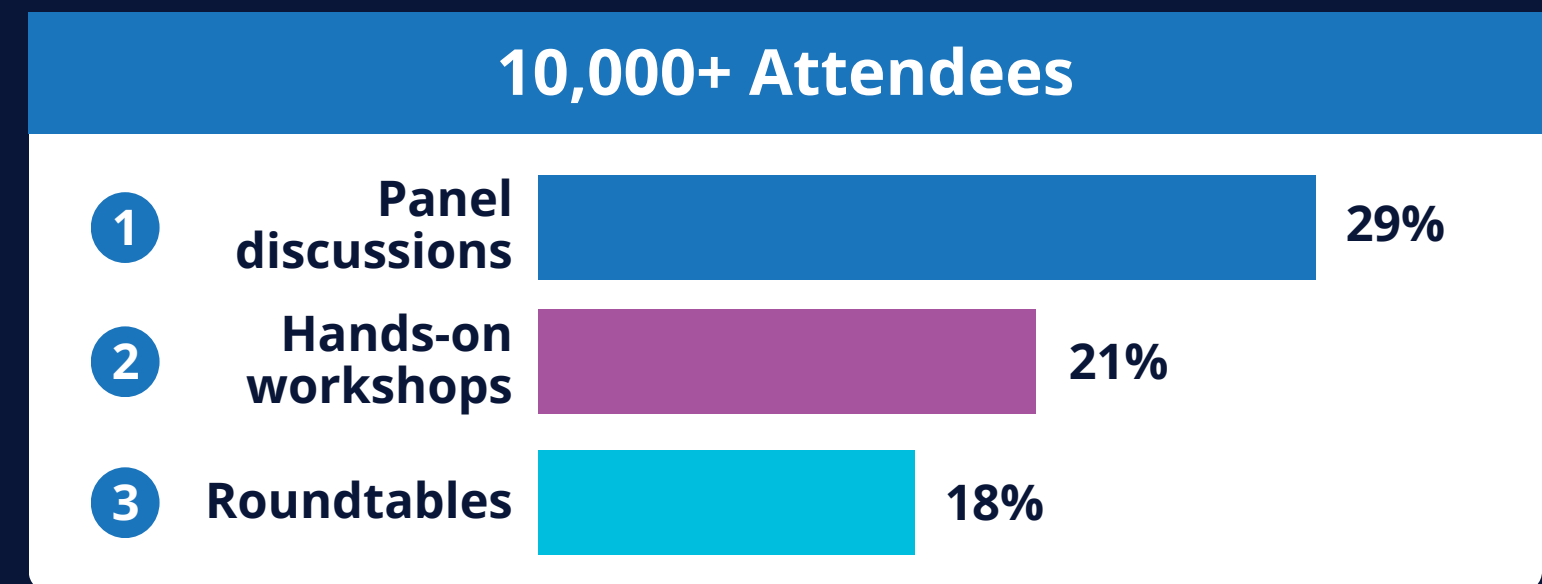
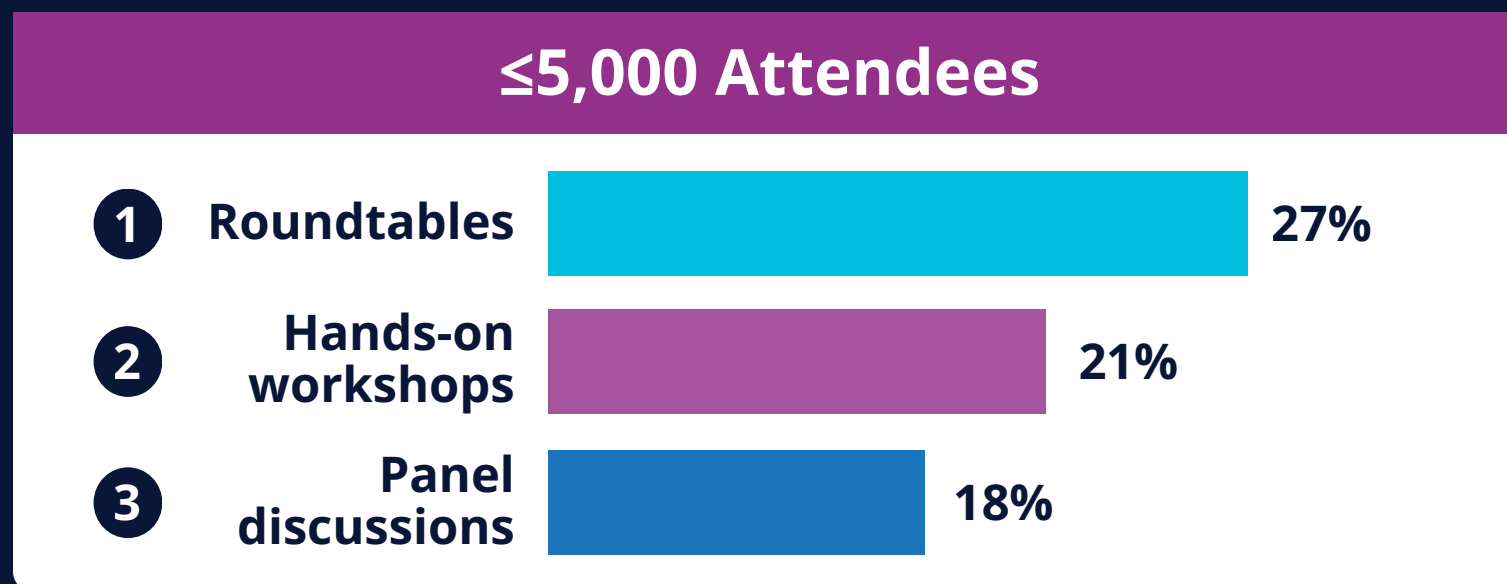
■ **MICROEVENTS**

At 5,000-10,000 attendees, **38%** rate microevents as a key selling point. Under 500, that drops to **21%**.

■ **FORMAT**

At 10,000+ attendees, panels become the **#1 driver** of satisfaction, and roundtables drop.

TOP 3 FORMATS BY EVENT SIZE



Programming & Content

What we discovered:

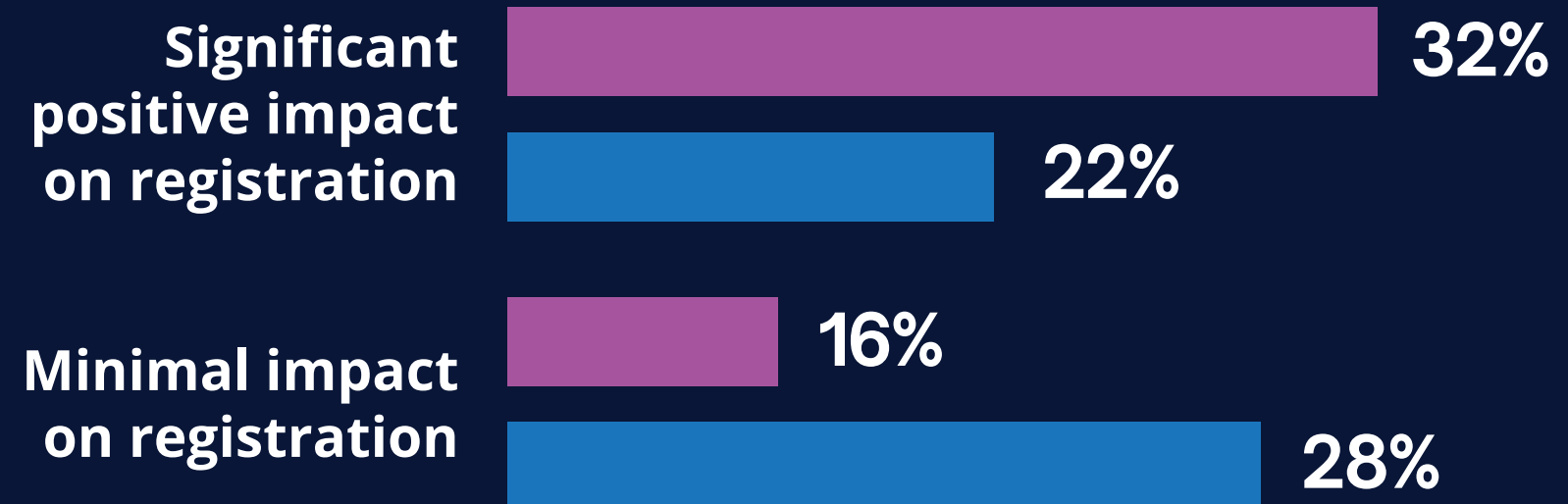
More structured networking → more impactful microevents

- Structured networking and microevent impact move together
Planners investing 26%+ in connection programming are roughly **1.5x** more likely to see microevents drive registration.

1.5x more likely to see microevents drive registration.
When planners invest 26%+ in connection programming

Microevent Impact vs. Connection Programming*

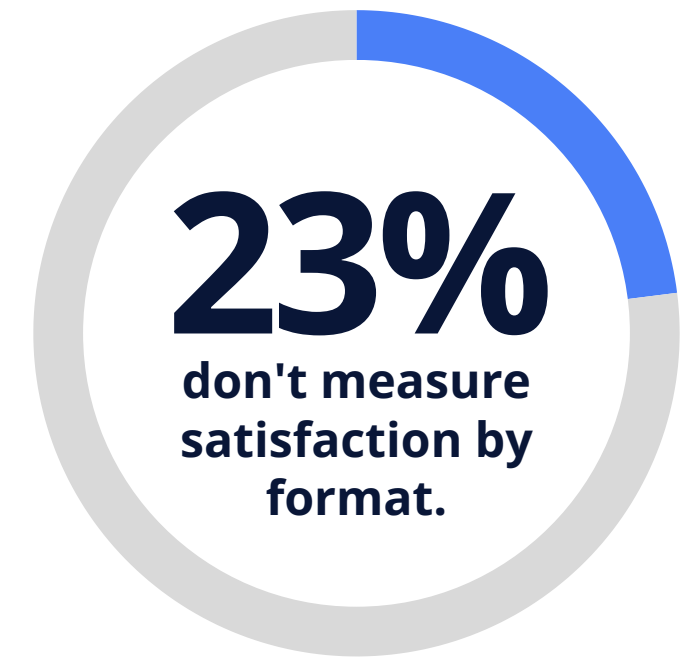
- Respondents dedicating 26%+ of programming to connection
- Respondents dedicating less than ≤25% of programming to connection



*Excluding respondents who don't offer microevents

Programming & Content

What the data says: FORMATS



- Attendees prefer structured interactivity

Participatory formats lead satisfaction, and only 7% see keynotes as the most popular format.

- There's a gap in the data

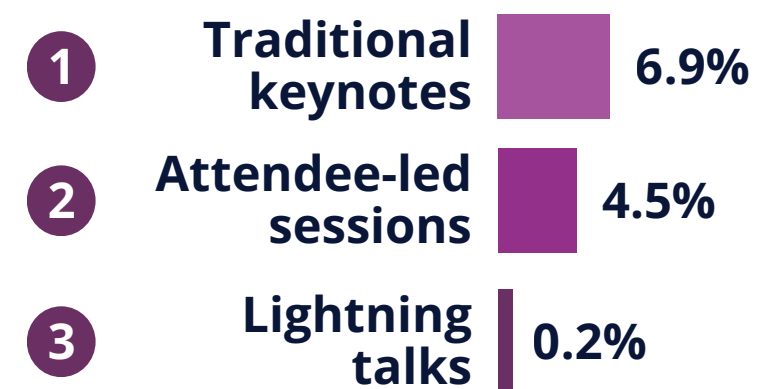
23% don't even measure satisfaction by format.



Highest Satisfaction Formats



Lowest Satisfaction Formats



Programming & Content

SO WHAT:

Keynotes

Redesign the keynote slot. Don't just book a speaker. **Experiment with shorter, multi-voice, and interactive formats.** The data shows the industry is already moving this way.

Microevents

Add microevents and side programming. Most who offer them see **an impact on registration.** Especially if you deal with more than 5,000 attendees.

Side events

Social and entertainment-led side events are where attendee **demand is strongest.** Pick the right type of side experiences for your events.

Sponsors

Side events and microevents can become **powerful monetization strategies** if controlled and offered to sponsors.

Format

Roundtables, workshops, and panels are the most popular formats, and in that order. Start designing events accordingly.

Event size

Match your format strategy to your event size. Roundtables work best under 5,000. **Above 10,000, panels outperform.**

Data

Start measuring satisfaction by format. 23% of the industry doesn't. That means **nearly a quarter of planners are guessing what works.**

02 Connection & Personalization

Connection is the biggest driver of modern events.

Are event professionals allocating resources to support it?

CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

What the data says:

CONNECTION VALUE

▪ **Peer-to-peer connection is the top priority:**

- ✔ **49%** rank peer networking #1 for event success.
- ✔ Content follows at **43%**.

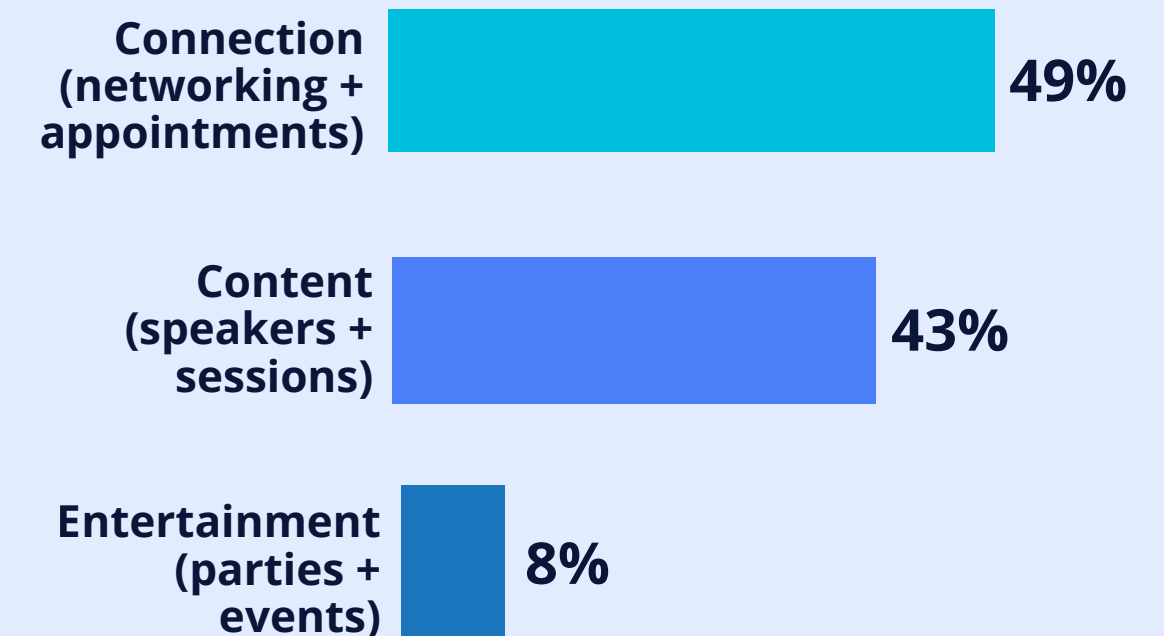
▪ **Structured networking hasn't caught up:**

- ✔ Only **8%** dedicate more programming to structured connection.
- ✔ **16%** leave networking entirely to chance.



This is confirmed by earlier Boldpush research

What drives event attendance?*



*Research from the 2026 Event Industry Outlook, ©Boldpush

CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

What the data says:

CONNECTION VALUE

What's most important for event success?



CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

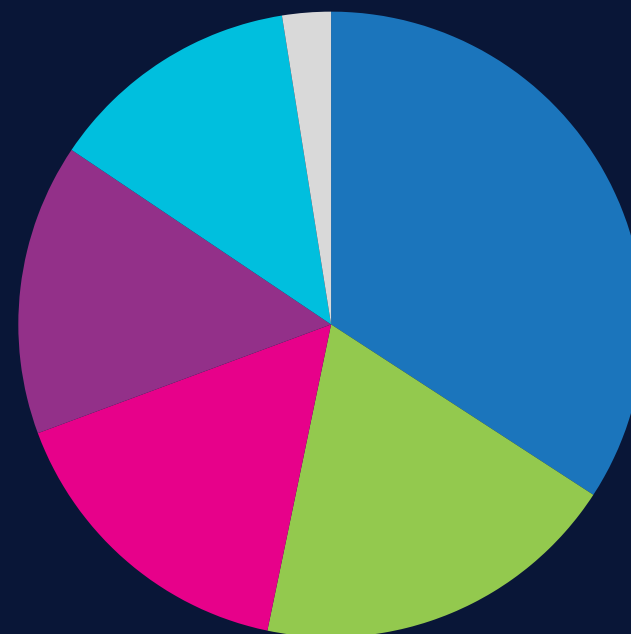
What the data says:

PERSONALIZATION

53% **Personalization is largely basic:** 53% offer only basic personalization (e.g. dietary needs, accessibility) or minimal beyond that.

2.5% **Advanced personalization lags:** 2.5% deliver AI-powered individualized journeys. **13%** offer customizable schedules.

What type of personalization do you offer?



Basic	34%
Minimal beyond basics	19%
Personalized networking	16%
Session recommendations	15%
Customizable schedules	13%
AI-powered journeys	2.5%

CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

No more buzzwords, what the market says



MISCONCEPTION

The industry has embraced connection-first design.



REALITY

The industry understands the importance but does not make it happen. 49% say it's #1, 8% build for it.



MISCONCEPTION

Personalization is advancing.



REALITY

53% are still at baseline. The conversation about personalization has run far ahead of what the industry actually does.



MISCONCEPTION

Content is king.



REALITY

Attendee-to-attendee connection actually comes out narrowly ahead of content. Two other sets of data reinforce this signal: planners are more likely to reallocate keynote budgets to connection (small group discussions) over content (workshops).

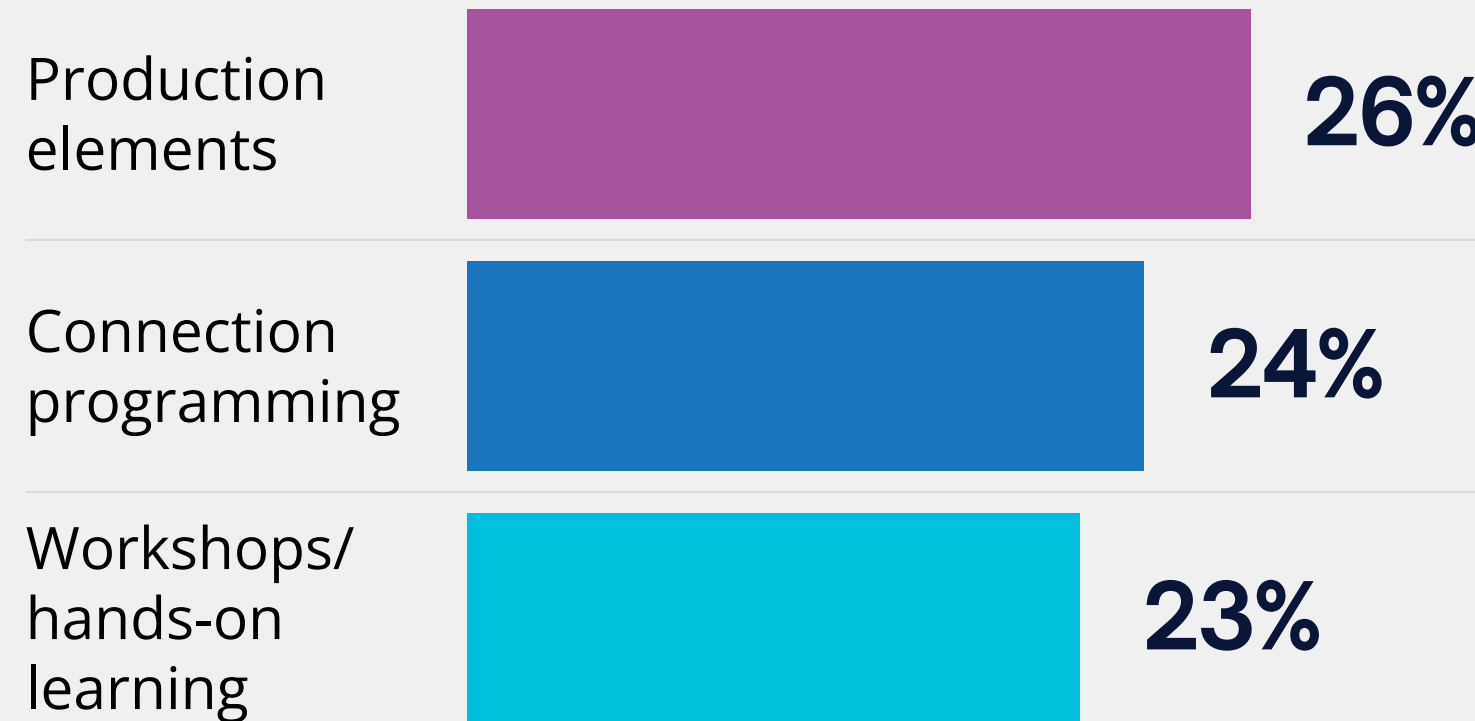
CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

What we discovered:

Keynotes still matter, but experience investment is shifting



How would you redirect keynote budgets?



Production elements are still preferred should more budget be made available. This signals constraints on budgets.

CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

What we discovered:

Large events prioritize sponsors over peer connections

- **SPONSOR IMPORTANCE RISES WITH EVENT SIZE**

For events of over 10,000 attendees, the relationship between sponsors and attendees becomes key.

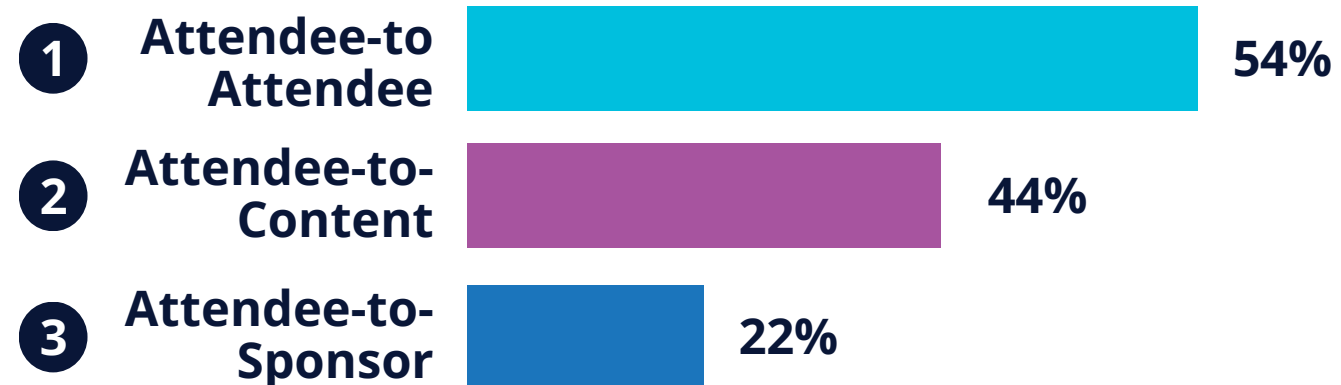
This signals the move from the industry to not leave sponsorship ROI to chance

- **PERSONALIZED NETWORKING ↔ SPONSORSHIP VALUE**

Planners who rank sponsor connection #1 also have nearly double the average rate of personalized networking.

WHAT TYPE OF CONNECTION IS MOST IMPORTANT TO EVENT SUCCESS?

≤ 5,000 Attendees



> 10,000+ Attendees



CONNECTION & PERSONALIZATION

SO WHAT:

Design programs for connection

Allocate generous programming time to structured connection. The gap between "we say it matters" and "we build for it" is the single biggest disconnect in the data and offers **an untapped opportunity for differentiation.**

Differentiate with personalization

Any event that offers **curated agendas, matchmaking, or session recommendations** is operating in **substantial competitive space.** The bar to differentiate is low.

Match priorities to event size

Your strategic priorities vary by size. Smaller events should prioritize connection. Larger events should facilitate connections between sponsors and attendees.

Sponsor value & personalization

Is connecting attendees with **sponsors your #1 priority?** If you haven't already, consider adding **matchmaking recommendations to keep up with your competitors.**

03 Technology & AI

Where technology delivers measurable value for connection, where it doesn't yet, and how AI is starting to reshape the perceived value of live events.

TECHNOLOGY & AI

What the data says:

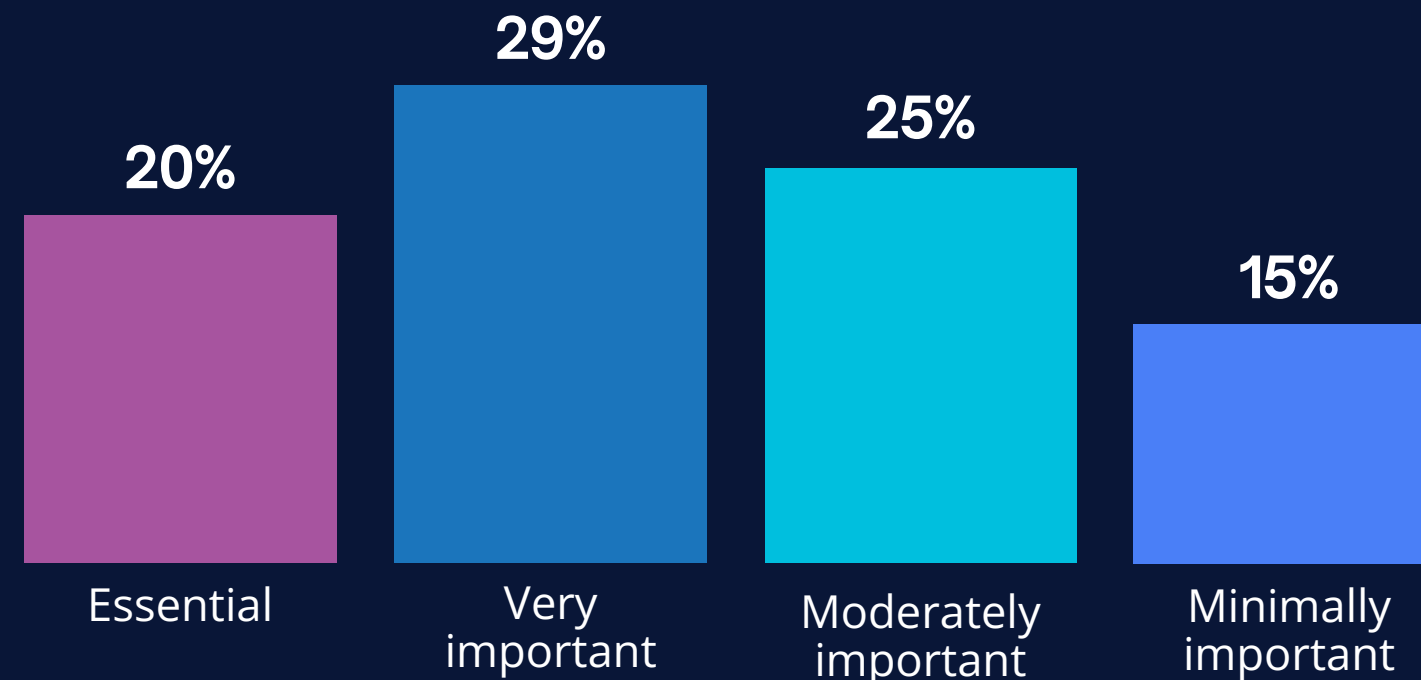
The ROI & Value of Event Tech

- **Mobile apps remain reliable tech tools to deliver connection:**
33% say that mobile apps provide the highest ROI for connection, while only 10% choose AI matchmaking.

- **Confidence gap:**
22% think no technology has delivered measurable connection ROI, but 49% identify it as very important or essential for connection.

49%
say tech is very important or essential

How important is event tech for connection?



TECHNOLOGY & AI

What the data says:

The Rise of AI & In-Person Value

■ **Emerging signal**

35% observe AI changing why people attend in-person events, either by driving demand for authenticity or for live interaction.

■ **Volume → greater AI impact**

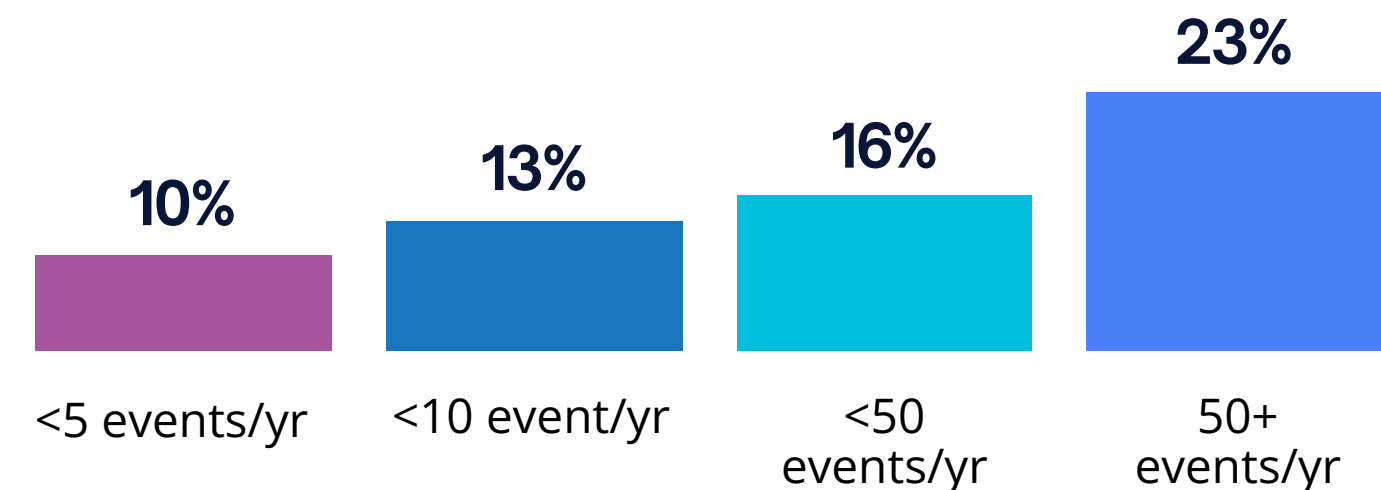
Among high-volume planners (50+/year), the AI signal is stronger. **23%** report attendees citing authenticity as a reason to attend.

Is AI changing why people attend in-person events?



■ No Change Observed	35%
■ Somewhat - Not Primary	30%
■ Yes - Demand for Live Moments	20%
■ Yes - Attendees cite authenticity	15%

Effect of AI - broken down by event volume (% citing authenticity as attendance reason)



TECHNOLOGY & AI

What we discovered:

Innovative programming gives tech more value



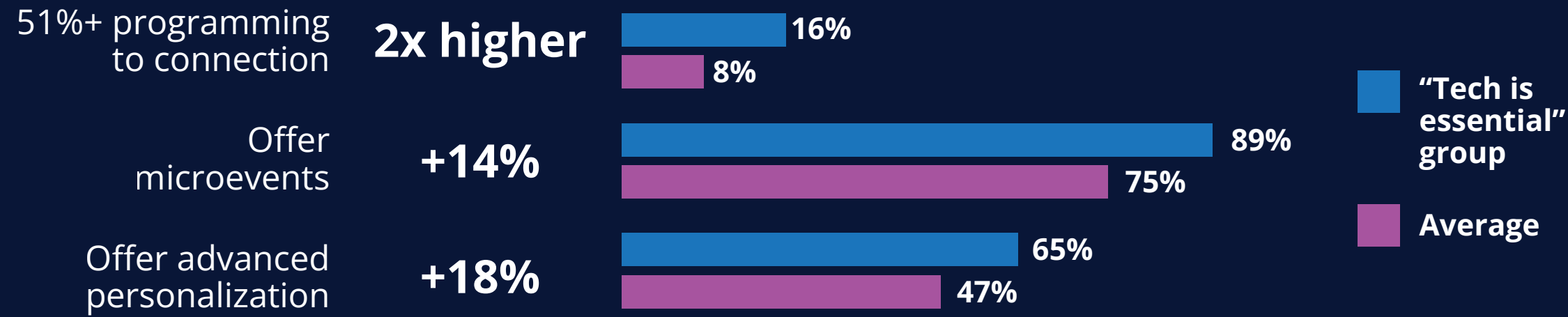
MISCONCEPTION
Technology can solve the connection problem on its own.

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REALITY
Those seeing the most benefits from connection technology are also **leading the pack in intentional design.**

Innovation: group that says "tech is essential" vs. average



TECHNOLOGY & AI

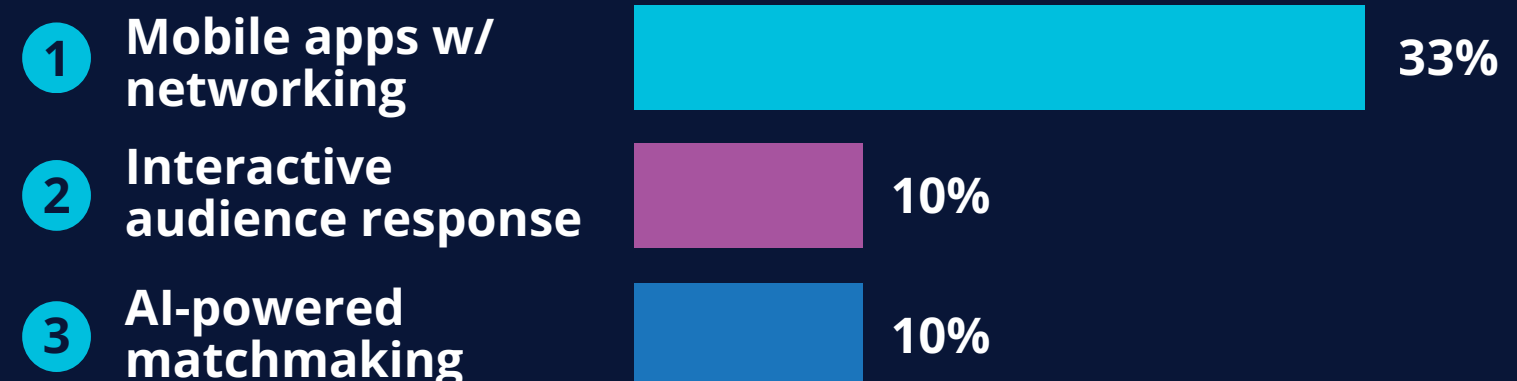
What we discovered:

Where event tech needs work, and where it's working best

- **Unproven ROI**
Few think that technology hinders connection. But **22%** can't point to measurable ROI from any technology. **The industry still has an opportunity to better measure the value technology can deliver.**

- **Adoption rates vs. Approval ratings**
Mobile apps lead for measurable ROI, but as the most widely used technology, they may simply be winning by default.

Top 3 tech tools for delivering measurable ROI



TECHNOLOGY & AI

SO WHAT:

Small to Midsize Events

If you run events for under 2,000 attendees, **invest in mobile apps with networking features.** That's where your competitors are already proving ROI.

Large Events

AI matchmaking pays off for events with over 5,000 attendees.

Programming

The biggest impact comes when **technology works hand-in-hand with an intentional experience design strategy.**

Leverage Suppliers

Ask your tech provider how their tools provide built-in proof of their effectiveness. 22% of planners can't point to **measurable proof of ROI** from connection tech, but **that means 78% can.**

Tech Providers

For event tech vendors and sponsors: **the connection tech market is in a pre-proof phase.** The opportunity is in being the first to deliver measurable ROI, not in selling the promise of it.

04 Venues & Production

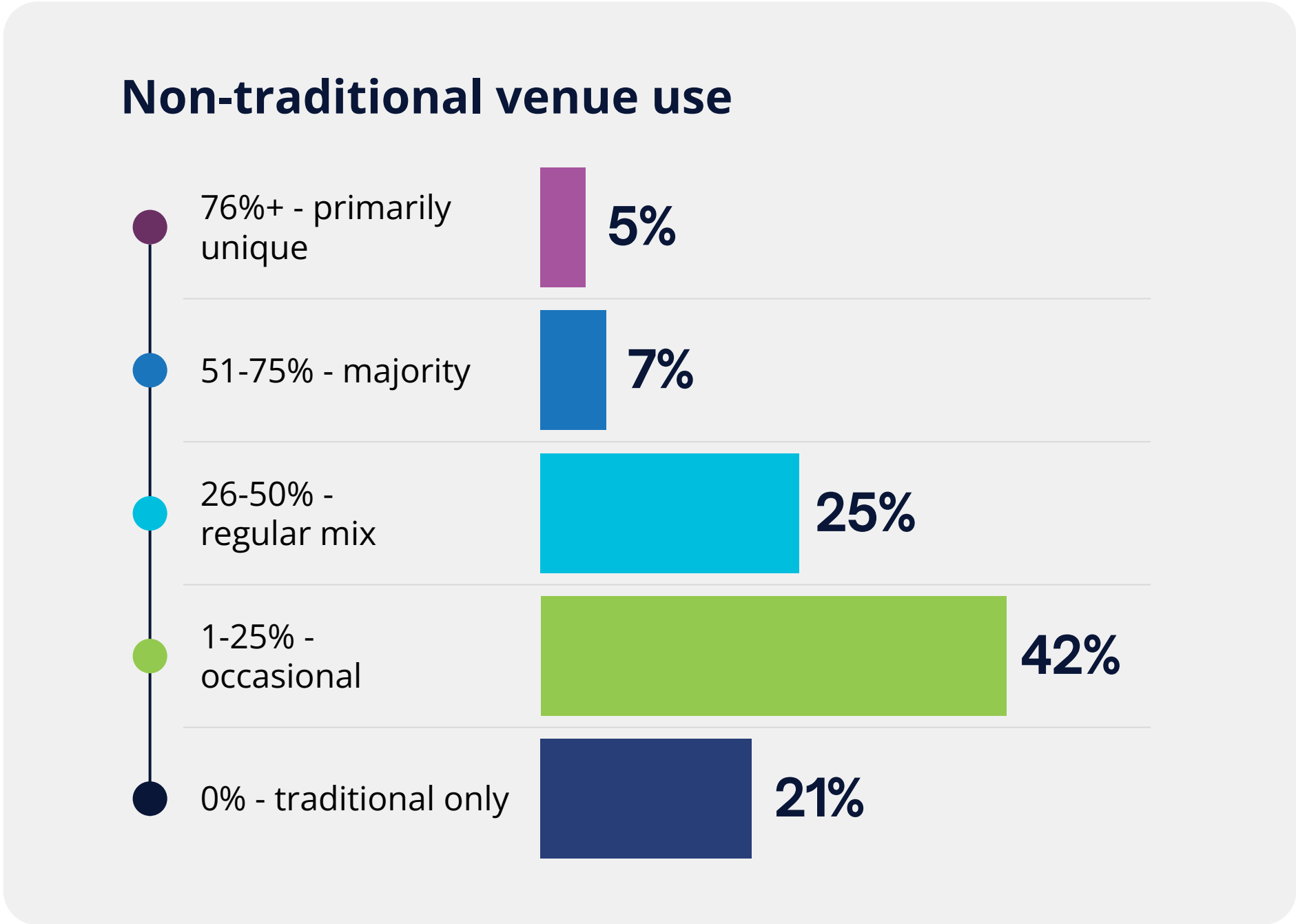
How the physical environment and production partnerships shape experiences.

VENUES & PRODUCTION

What the data says:

VENUES

- High priority**
78% rate venue selection as very important or critical.
- Low experimentation**
42% use non-traditional venues only occasionally, and **21%** use traditional exclusively. Just **5%** primarily seek unique venues.
- Limitations**
 The top barriers are budget (**29%**), infrastructure (**27%**), and logistics (**26%**).



78%
rate venues as very important or critical

21%
use traditional venues exclusively

5%
primarily seek unique venues

VENUES & PRODUCTION

What the data says:

PRODUCTION PARTNERS

▪ **Relationship type**

49% view production partners as strategic or creative. **30%** as vendors or necessary expenses.

▪ **Involvement stage**

Only **21%** bring production in at the concept stage. **66%** involve them after the concept is set.

Early **involvement stage** is correlated with innovation in formats. Work with your partners earlier.

Production partner relationship

Strategic or creative



49%

Vendor or necessary expense



30%

VENUES & PRODUCTION

What we discovered:

Venues & Production Partners

<p>MISCONCEPTION Planners are using unconventional venues as experience platforms.</p>	<p>REALITY 78% say venues are critical, but 63% default to traditional or mostly traditional venues. Creative planners can turn any place into an experience platform, but few are experimenting with venues that add novelty right out of the box.</p>
<p>MISCONCEPTION Production partners are treated as order-takers.</p>	<p>REALITY It's more nuanced. 49% already value them as strategic or creative. The real gap is timing. Late involvement makes the relationship transactional regardless of intent.</p>

Timing creates the relationship

Concept-stage involvement	 <p>40% see partners as strategic.</p>	Execution-stage involvement	 <p>17% only do.</p>
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VENUES & PRODUCTION

SO WHAT:

Partner involvement stage

Bring production partners in at the concept stage. **Early involvement leads to strategic relationships, not transactional ones.**

Venue as experience

Want to **experiment with outside-the-box venues?** Bring production partners into the picture earlier to figure out solutions for infrastructure and logistical barriers at the concept stage.

Barriers

Only 3.4% of planners see no value in non-traditional venues, yet 21% use traditional venues exclusively. That's more than 6x as many. To tap into this unmet demand, providers need to find workarounds for the top 3 barriers: cost, infrastructure, and logistics.

05 Events as Trust Generators

What actually builds trust with attendees, and where the industry's instincts conflict with the evidence.

EVENTS AS TRUST GENERATORS

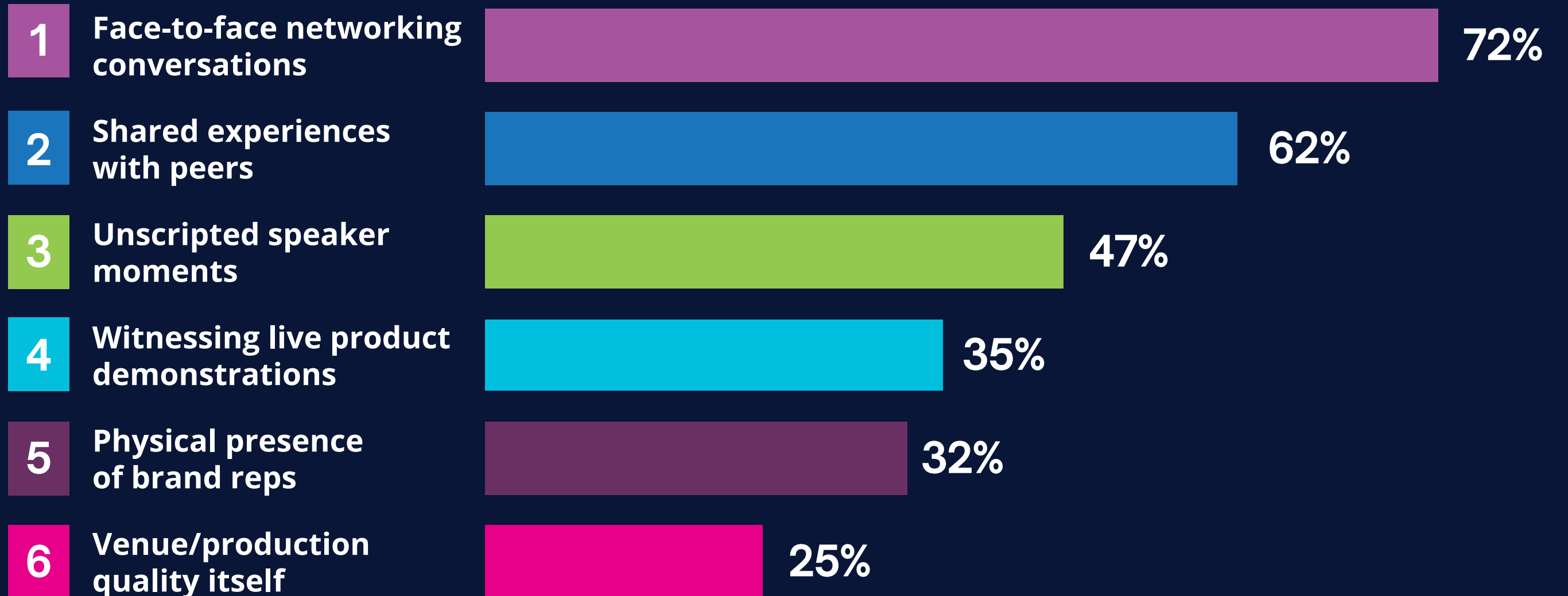
What the data says:

TRUST

The trust factor only reinforces the **value of connection.**



The trust hierarchy:
What event elements build the most trust?



EVENTS AS TRUST GENERATORS

What we discovered:

Trust grows from human connection

- **Intentionality matters more than budgets**

The top three trust builders are all human-driven (face-to-face networking, shared peer experiences, and unscripted speaker moments). None of them require large budgets. They require programming time and format design.

- **Authenticity wins**

Unscripted speaker moments rank third, ahead of live demos and brand rep presence. Audiences trust speakers more when they go off-script. This reinforces the shift toward interactive and multi-voice keynote formats.

1 face-to-face networking

2 shared peer experiences

3 unscripted moments

EVENTS AS TRUST GENERATORS

SO WHAT?

Prioritize structured connection

When budgets are tight, your biggest spend should be driving human proximity. Face-to-face interaction builds trust at 72%. Production quality builds it at 25%. But true mastery comes when the two work hand in hand. Production design shouldn't just be about polish, but enhancing human connectivity.

The ROI of trust

The trust hierarchy should inform budget decisions. If the goal is repeat attendance and word-of-mouth, **spend on connection infrastructure and peer experiences first**, with production designed around these priorities.

Design for spontaneity

Build unscripted moments into programming deliberately. Q&A, live reactions, panel debates, audience-driven content. The third-strongest trust builder costs nothing but format design.

Key Recommendations

Programming

The **keynote** is evolving into **shorter, multi-voice, interactive formats**. Measure by format. Calibrate to event size.

Technology

Mobile apps are the proven option for most event sizes. AI matchmaking is relevant at scale. And 35% say AI is already driving attendance. They're also the most likely to be innovating. How? Investing more in the experiences that put human connections first.

Connection

Dedicated time, structured formats, and facilitated connection are where the biggest gains are. The gap between stated priority and actual programming is the industry's biggest disconnect.

Venues & Production

Earlier **production involvement** leads to better partnerships and more innovative programming.

Personalization

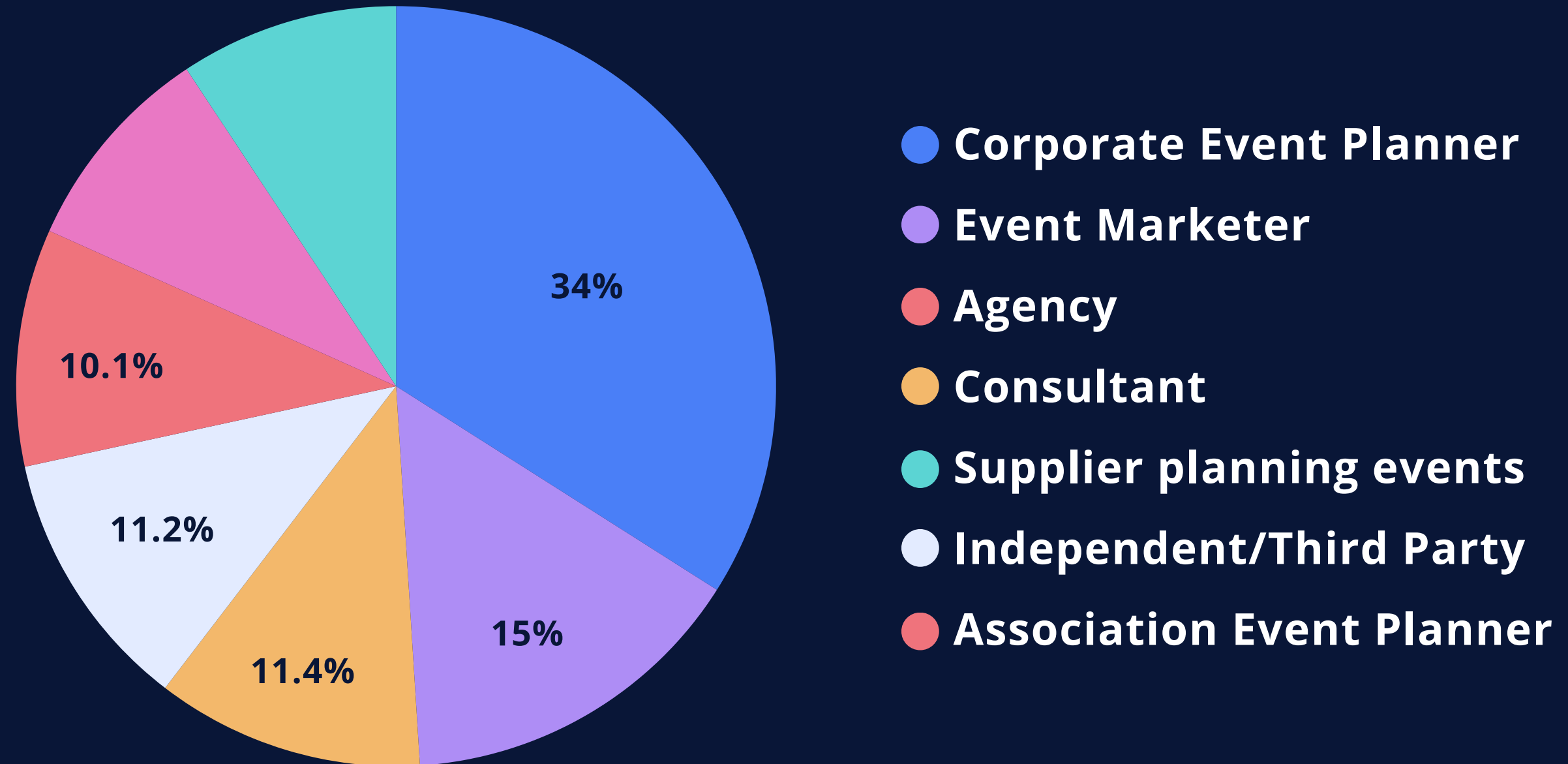
Most of the industry is at baseline. Start with known audience segments. AI-powered solutions may not yet be available at every scale.

Trust

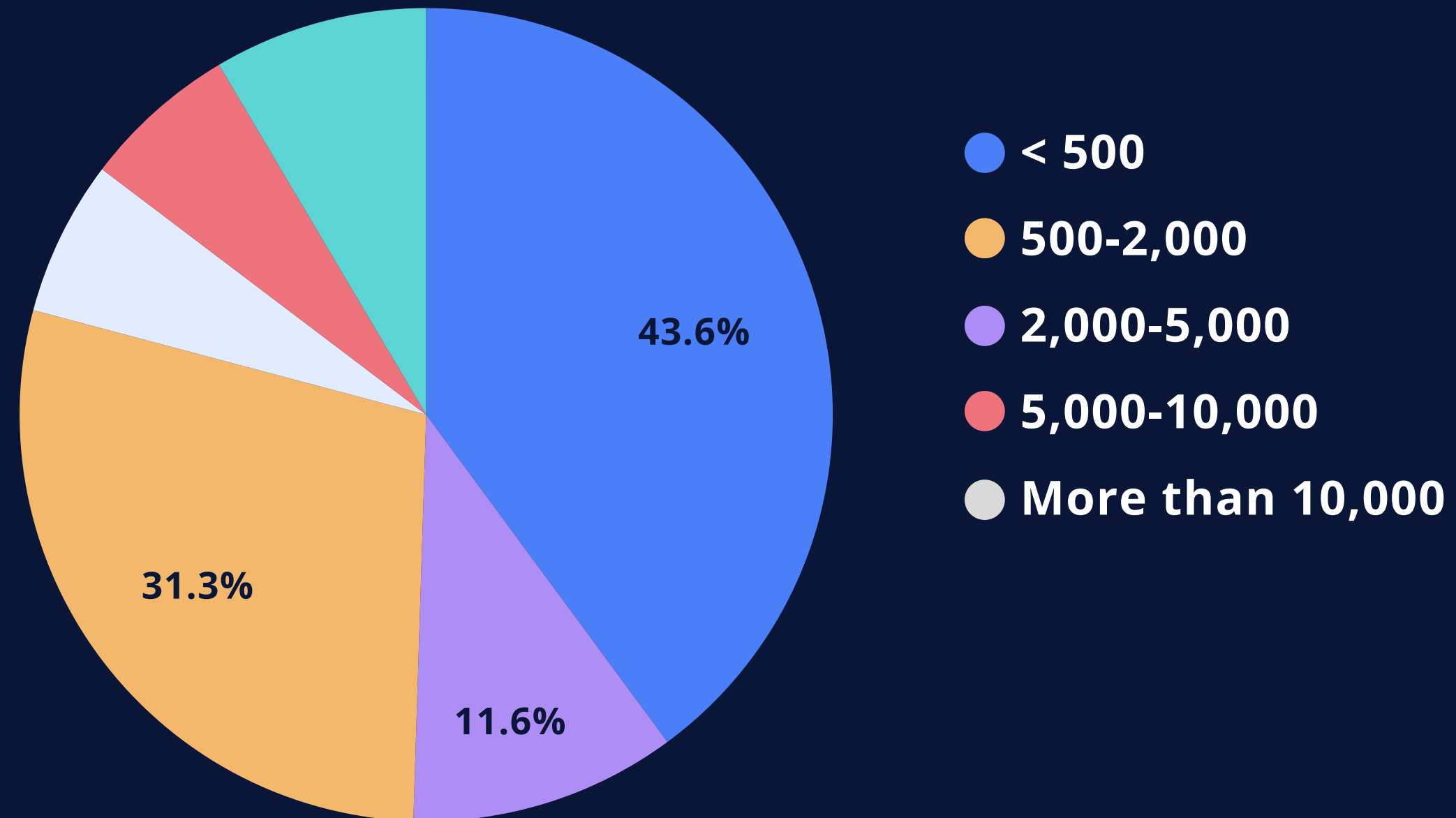
The evidence favors human interaction over production value. Face-to-face networking, shared peer experiences, and unscripted moments are the top three trust builders. None require large budgets.

Appendix

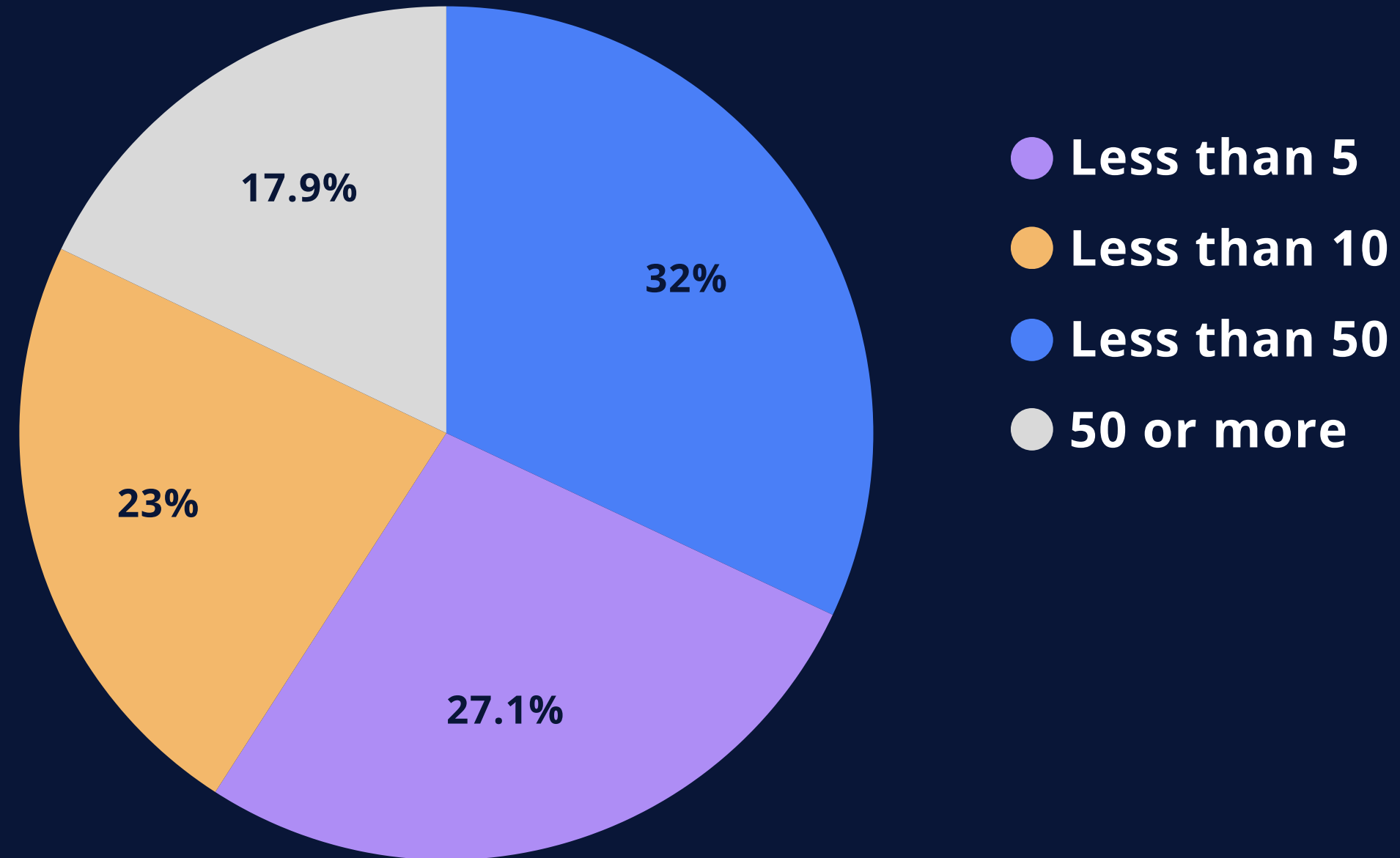
Are you a:



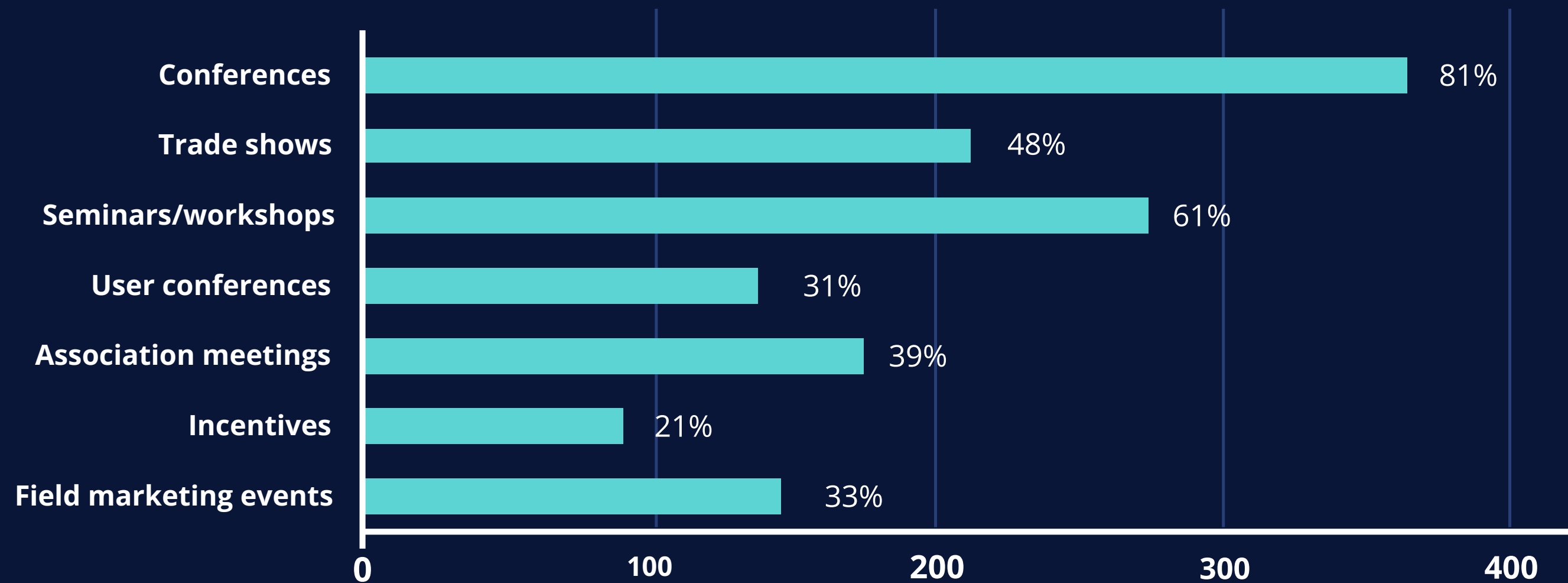
What is the typical attendee size of the events you plan?



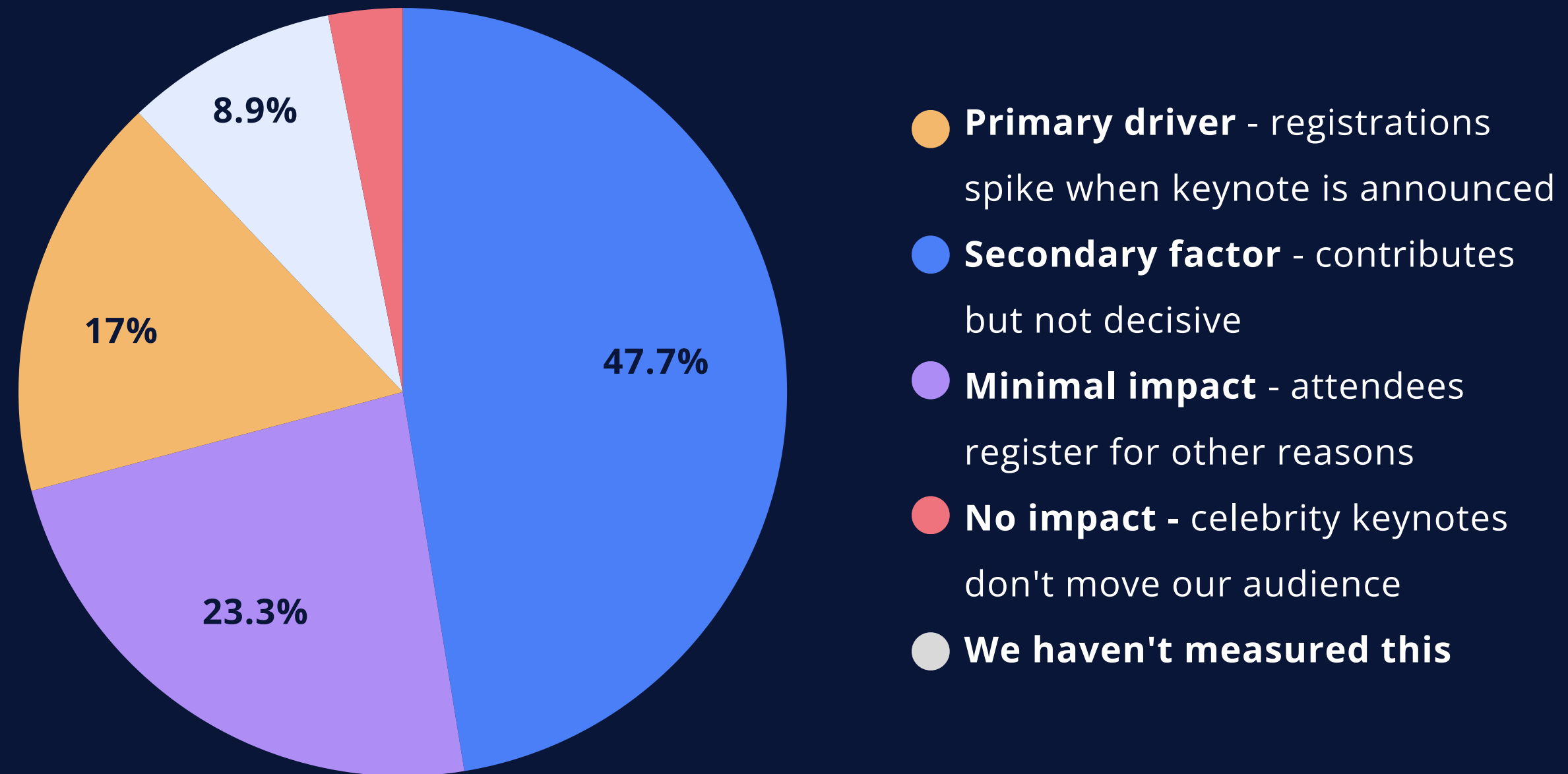
How many events do you plan per year?



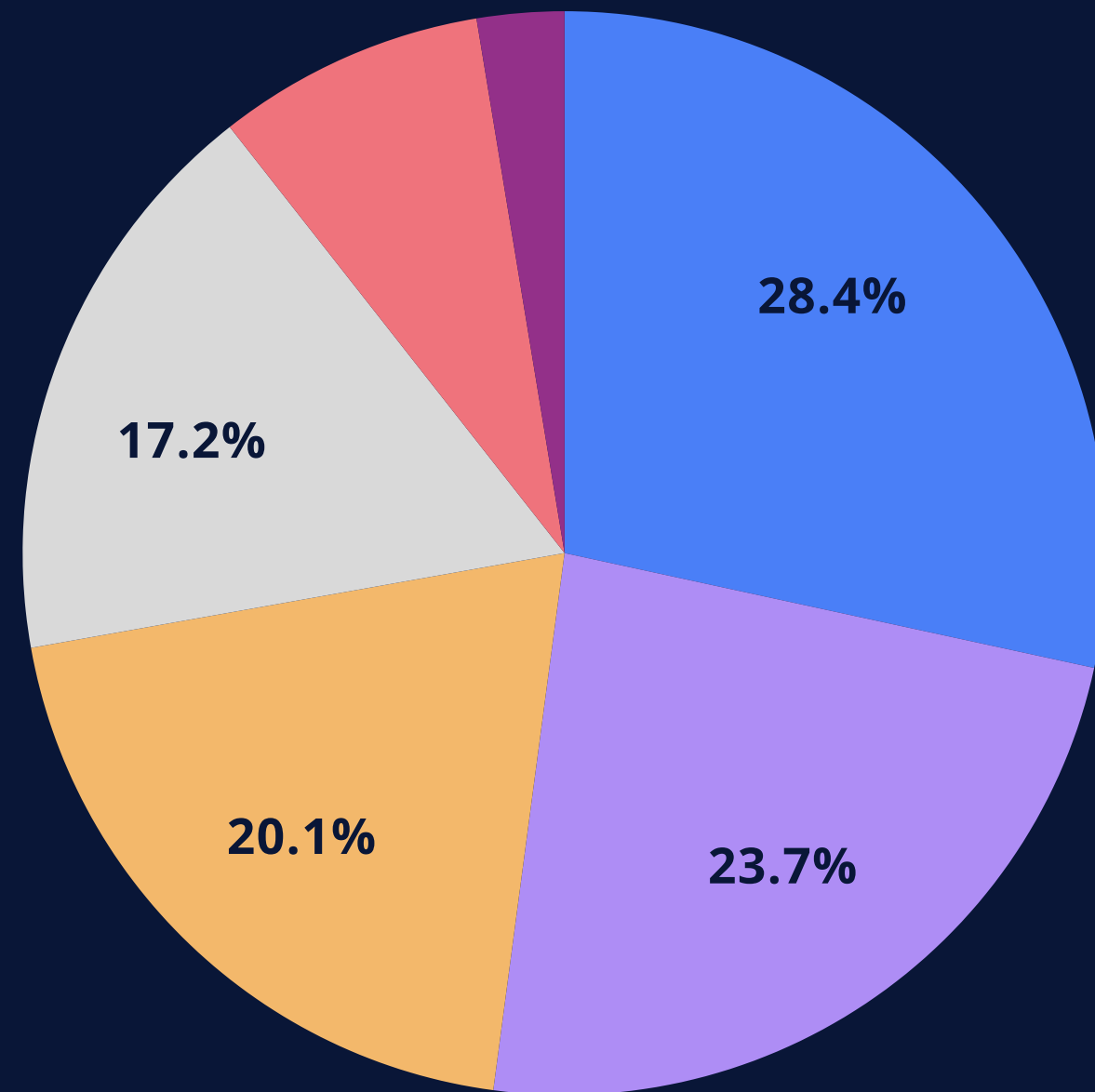
What type of events do you plan?



In your experience, what impact do keynote speakers have on event registration decisions?

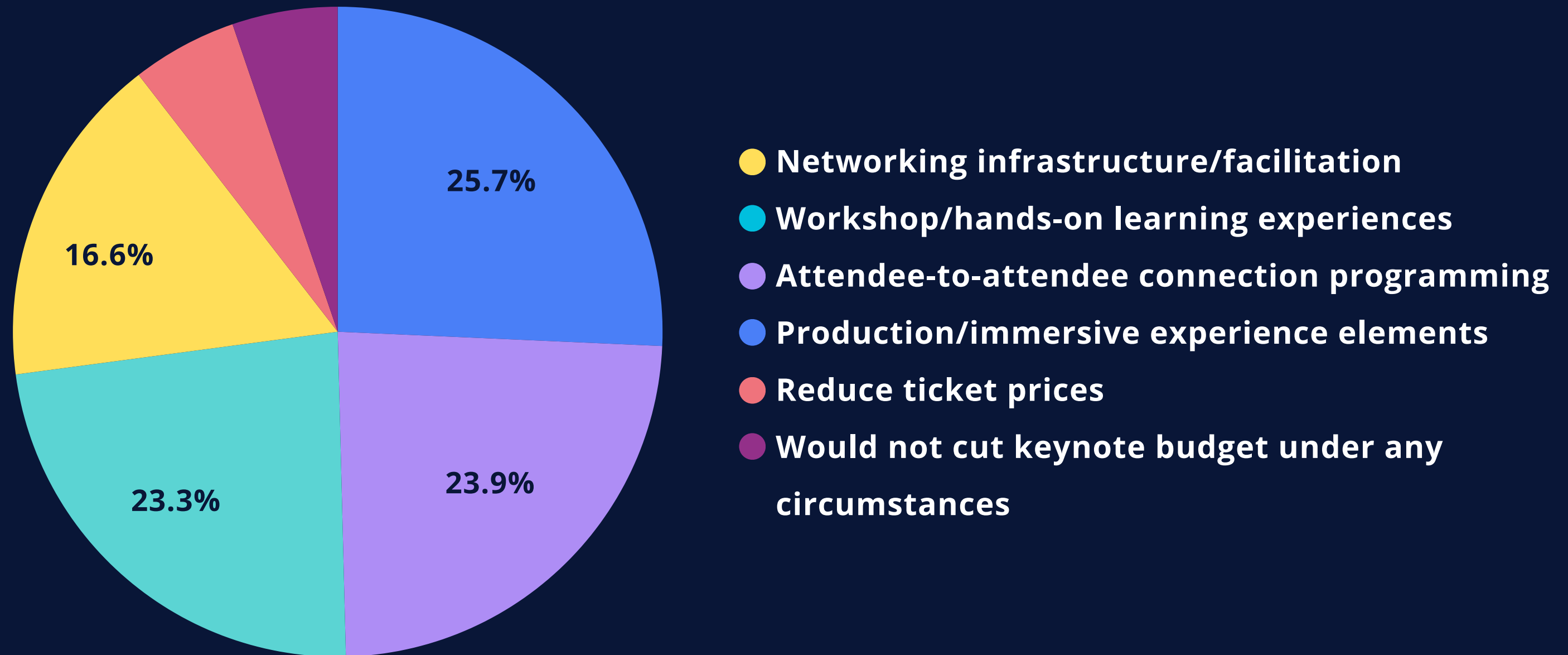


How has your approach to keynote content changed in the past 2 years?



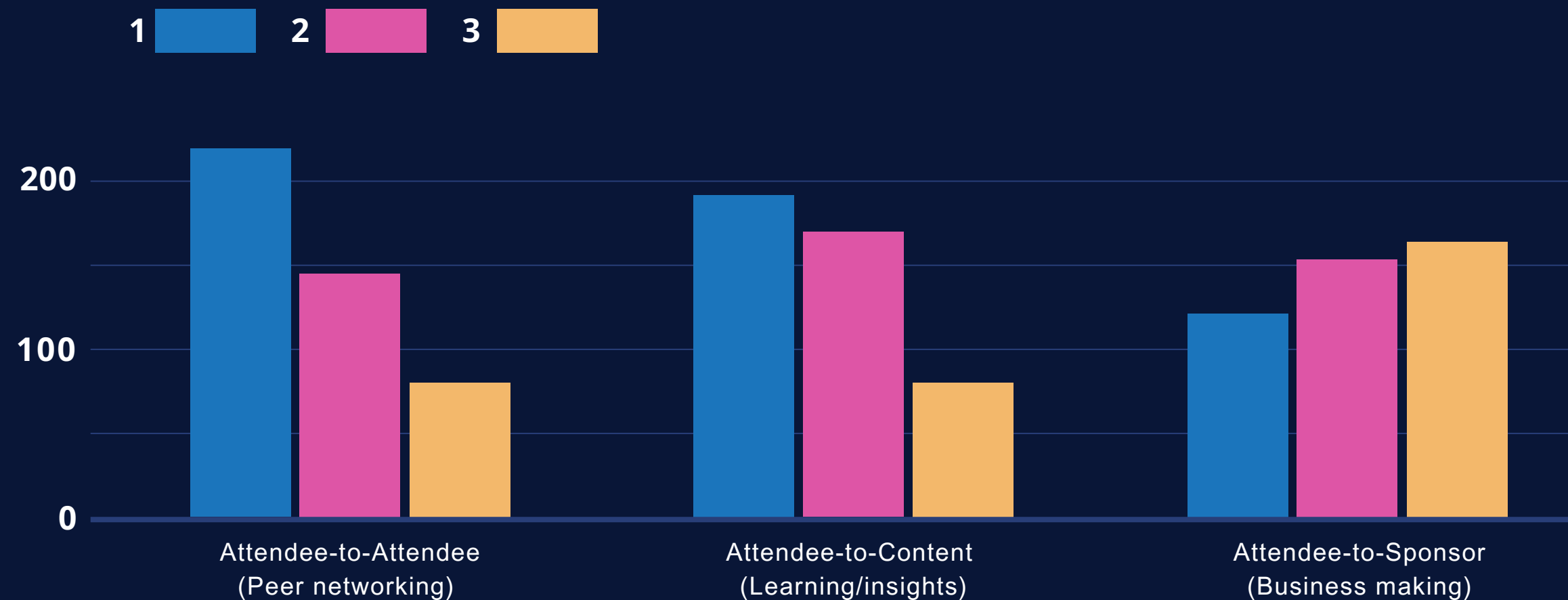
- **More interactive/Q&A driven**
- **Shorter formats (under 30 minutes)**
- **Multiple perspectives vs. single speaker**
- **Shifted budget to breakouts/workshops**
- **No significant change**
- **Eliminated traditional keynotes entirely**

If you had to cut your keynote budget by 50%, where would you reallocate those funds?

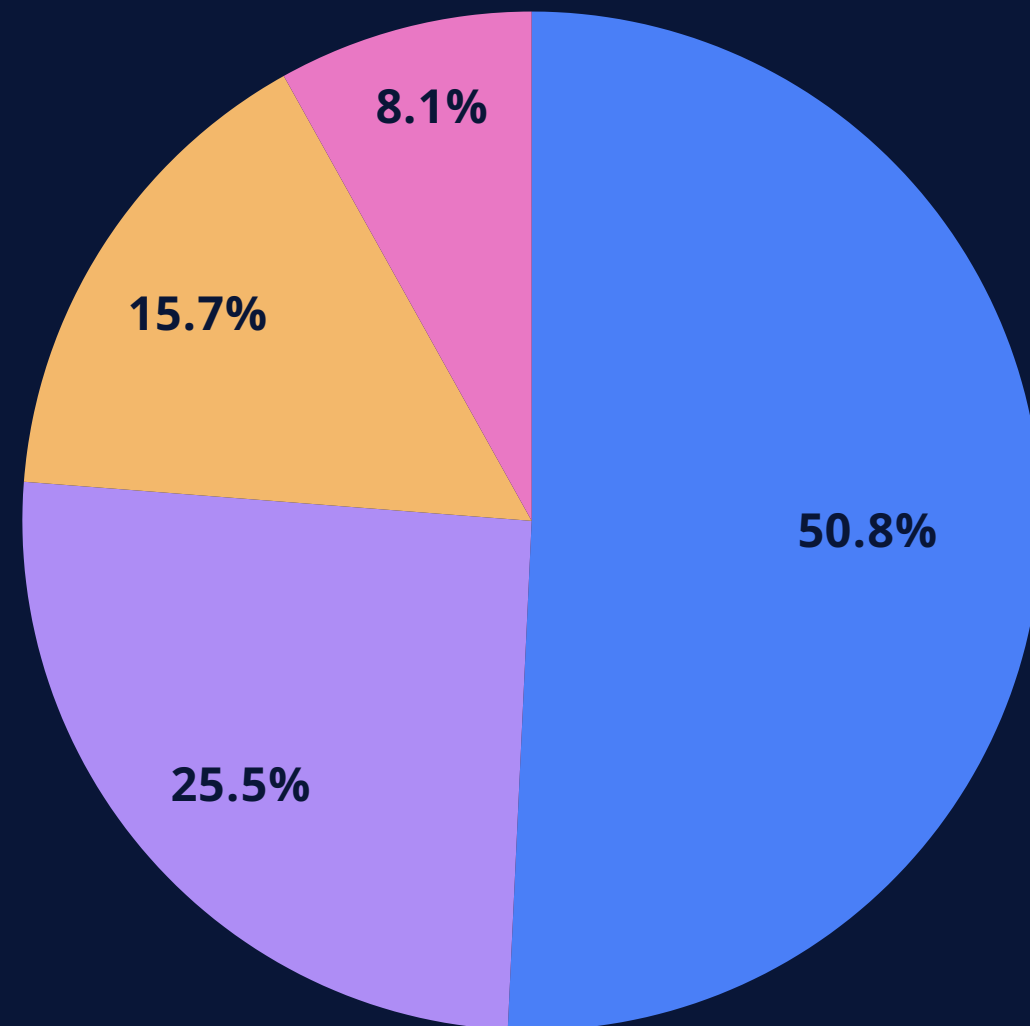


Rate the following connection types by their level of importance to your event's success

(1 = most important, 3 = least important):

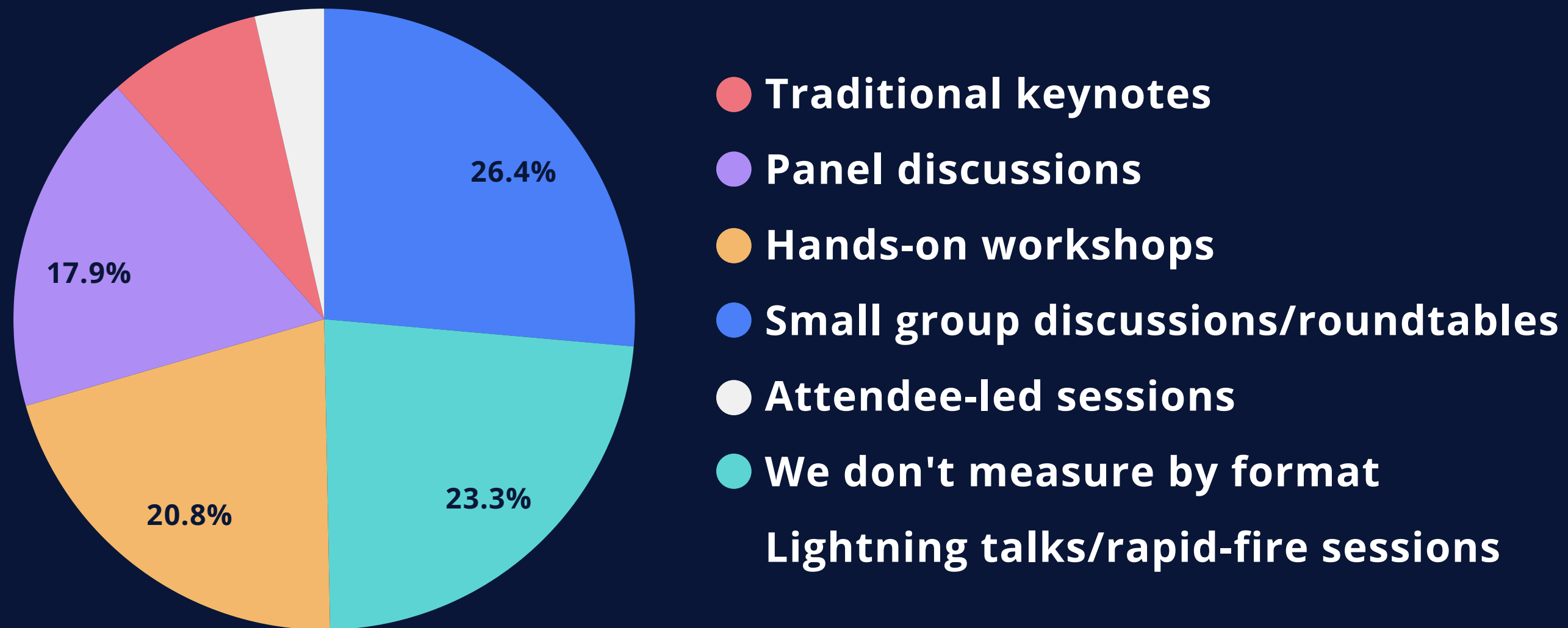


What percentage of your event programming is explicitly designed for attendee-to-attendee connection *(not organic networking breaks)*?

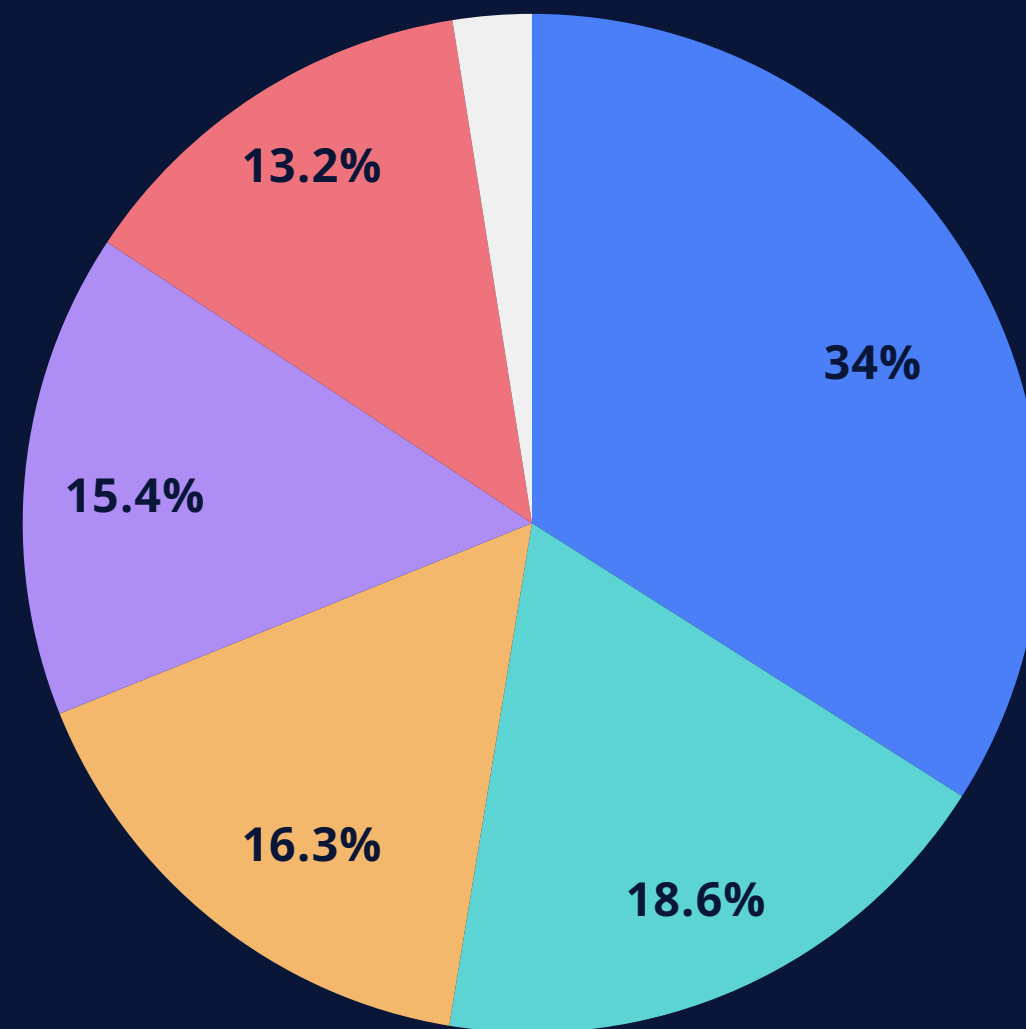


- 0-10% - Networking happens naturally
- 11-25% - Some structured networking
- 26-50% - Significant connection programming
- 51%+ - Connection is our primary design principle

Which content format generates the highest attendee satisfaction scores at your events?

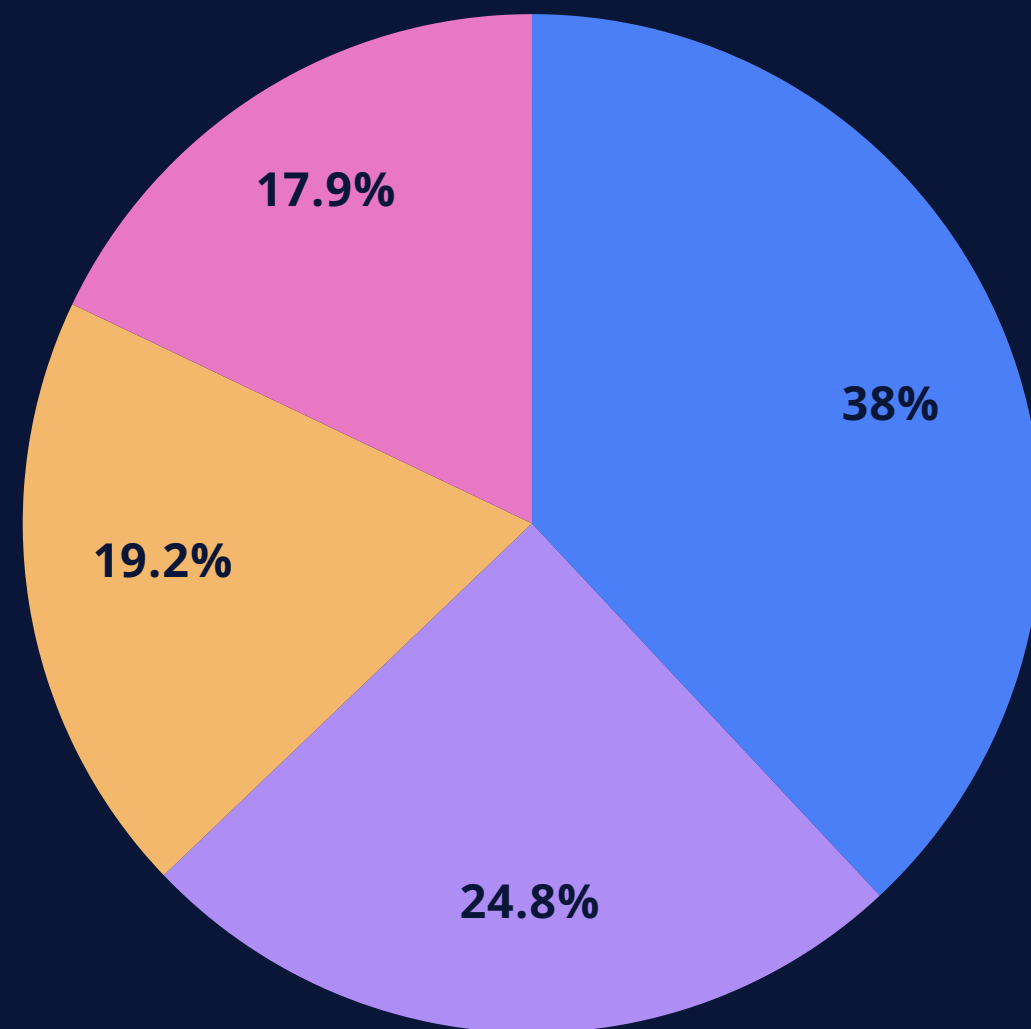


What level of personalization do you currently offer attendees?



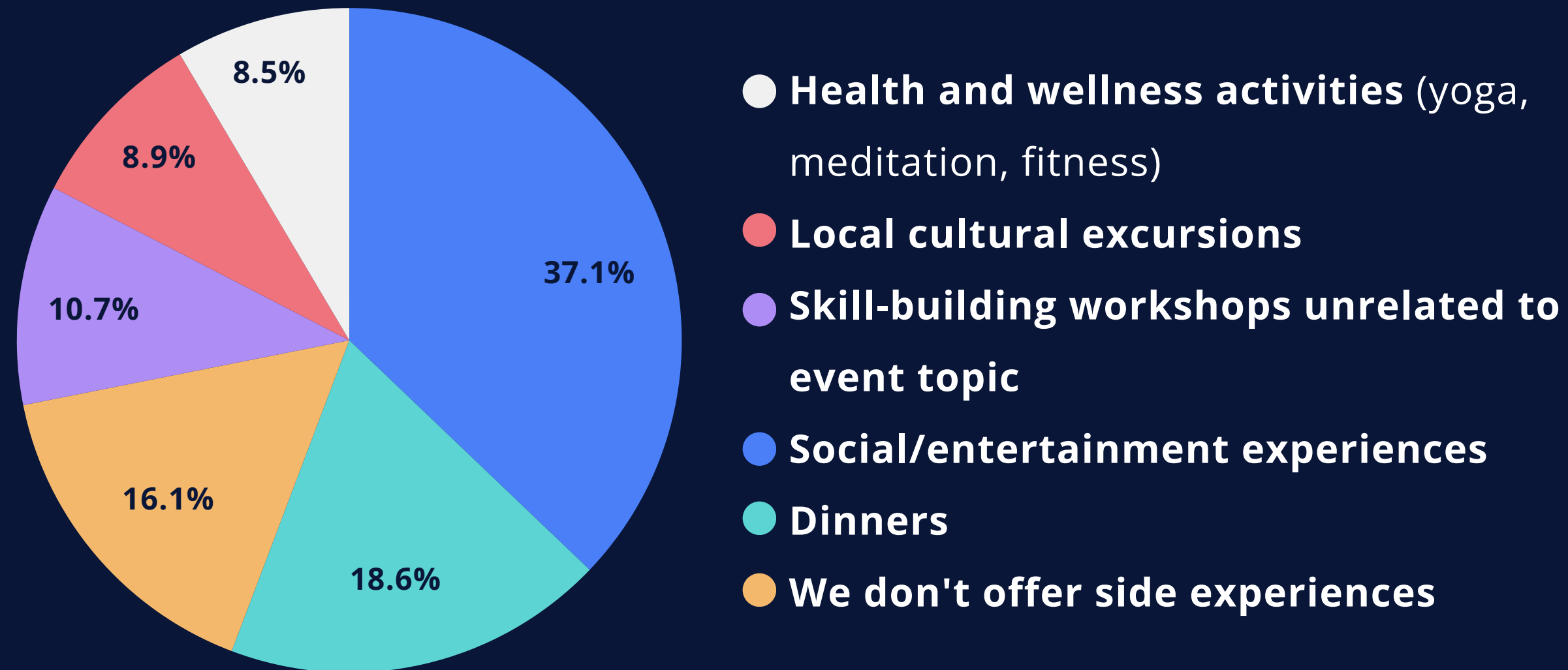
- **Basic** (dietary, accessibility needs)
- **Session recommendations based on registration data**
- **Personalized networking/matchmaking**
- **Customizable schedules with micro-event options**
- **Fully individualized journeys with AI-powered recommendations**
- **We offer minimal personalization beyond basics**

How do microevents (small, curated experiences within your main event) impact registration?

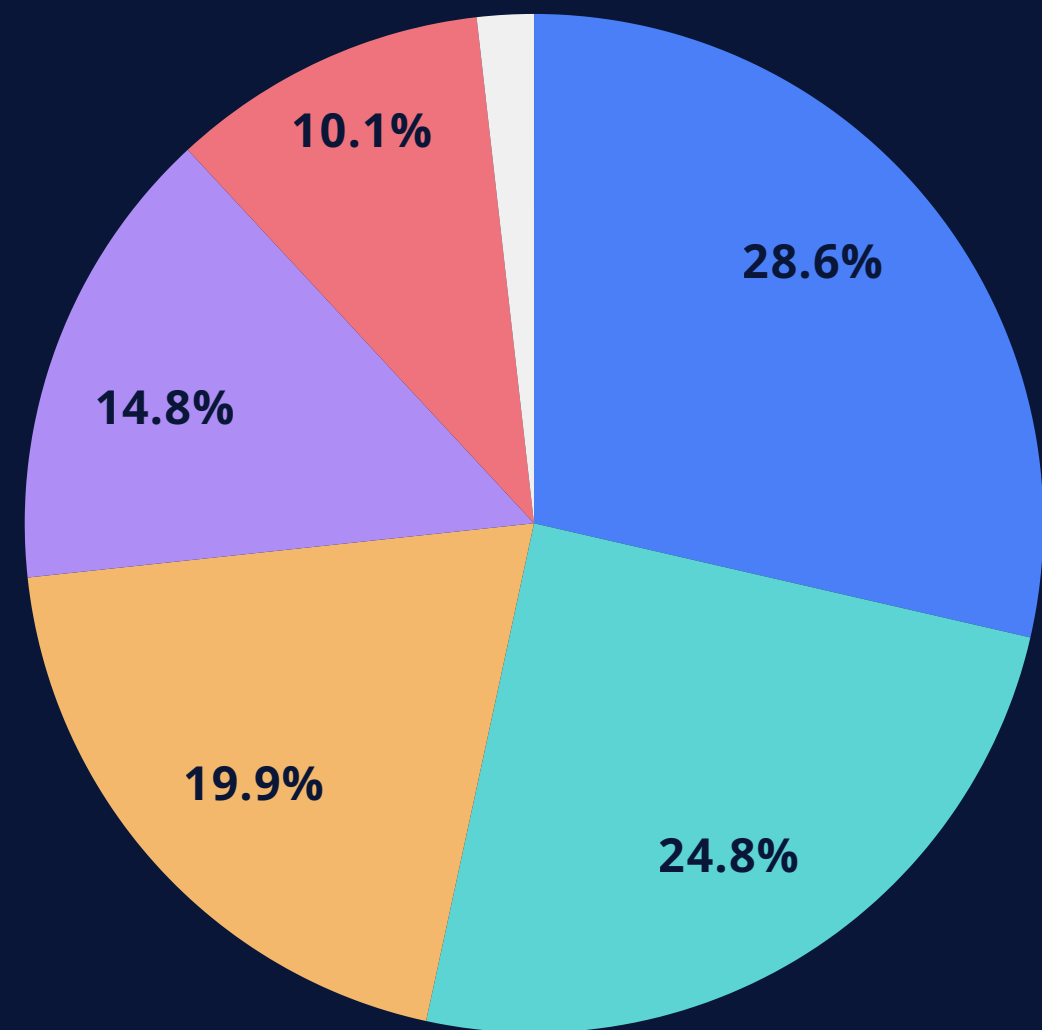


- **Significant positive impact** — key selling point
- **Moderate impact** - adds value but not decisive
- **Minimal impact** - most register for main programming
- **We don't offer microevents**

What types of side events/experiences generate the most demand from your attendees?

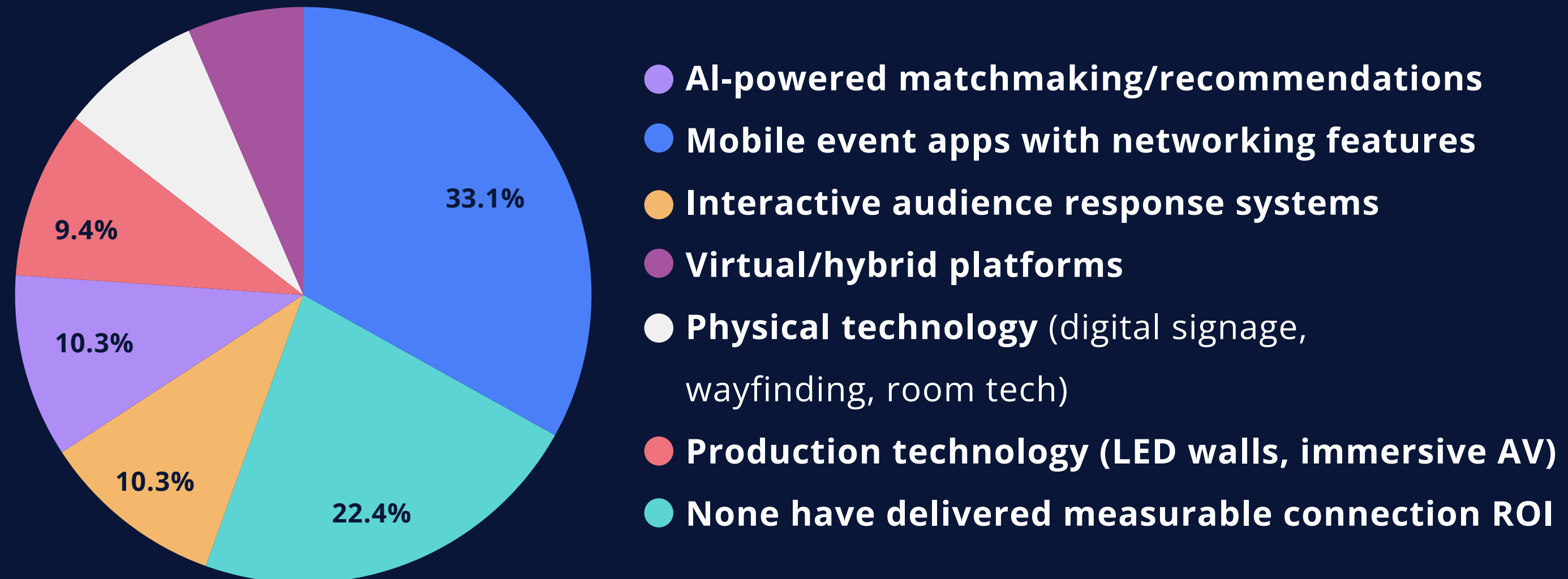


How important is technology in facilitating meaningful connections at your events?

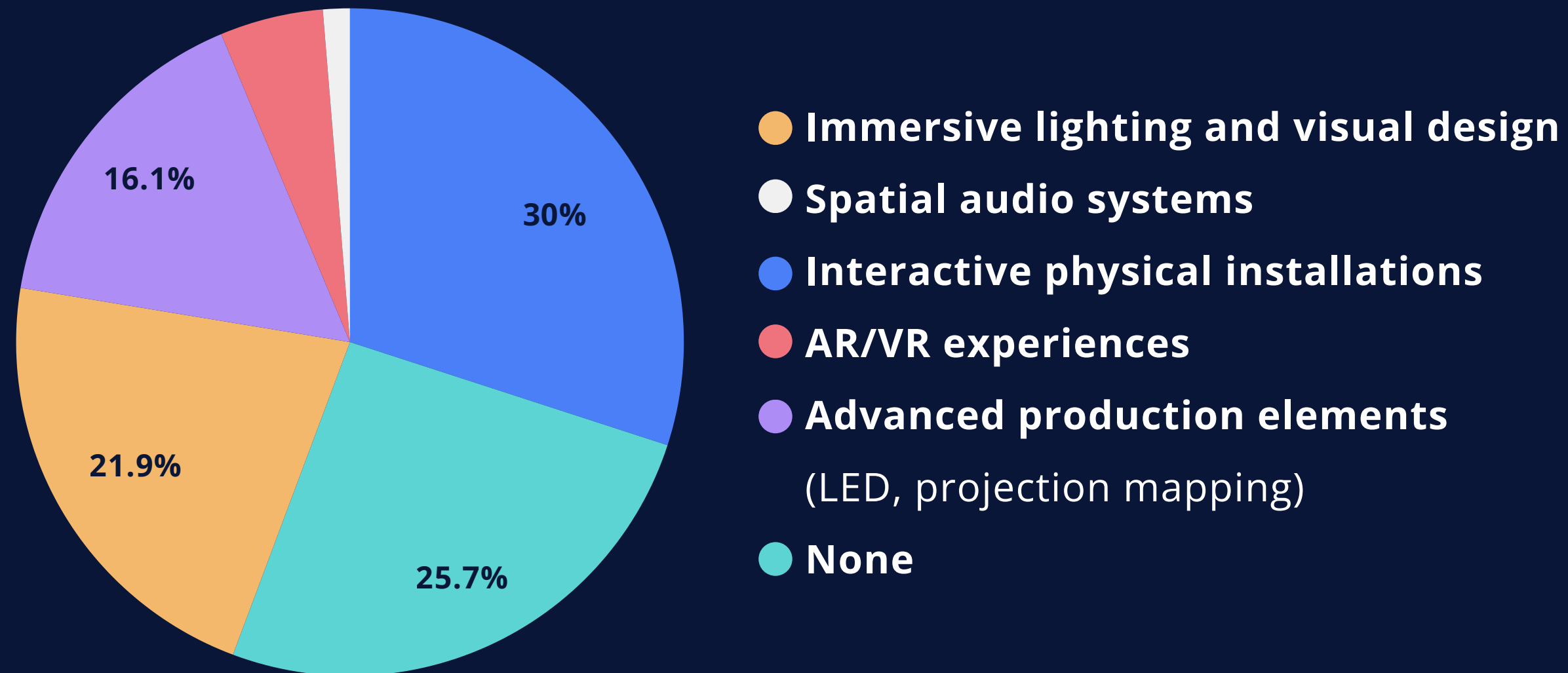


- **Essential** — couldn't achieve our connection goals without it
- **Very important** — significantly enhances outcomes
- **Moderately important** — helpful but not critical
- **Minimally important** — human facilitation matters more
- **Technology often hinders organic connection**
- **We're not sure**

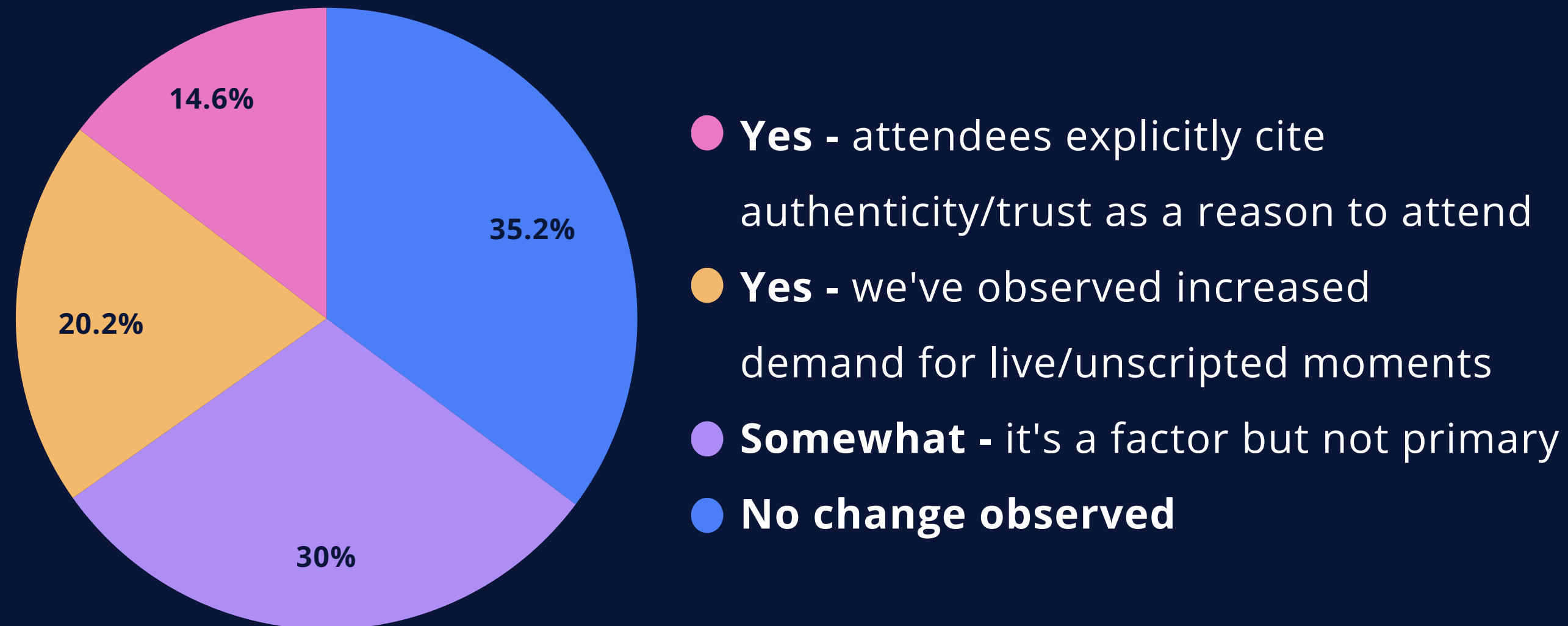
Which technology investments have delivered the highest ROI for attendee connection?



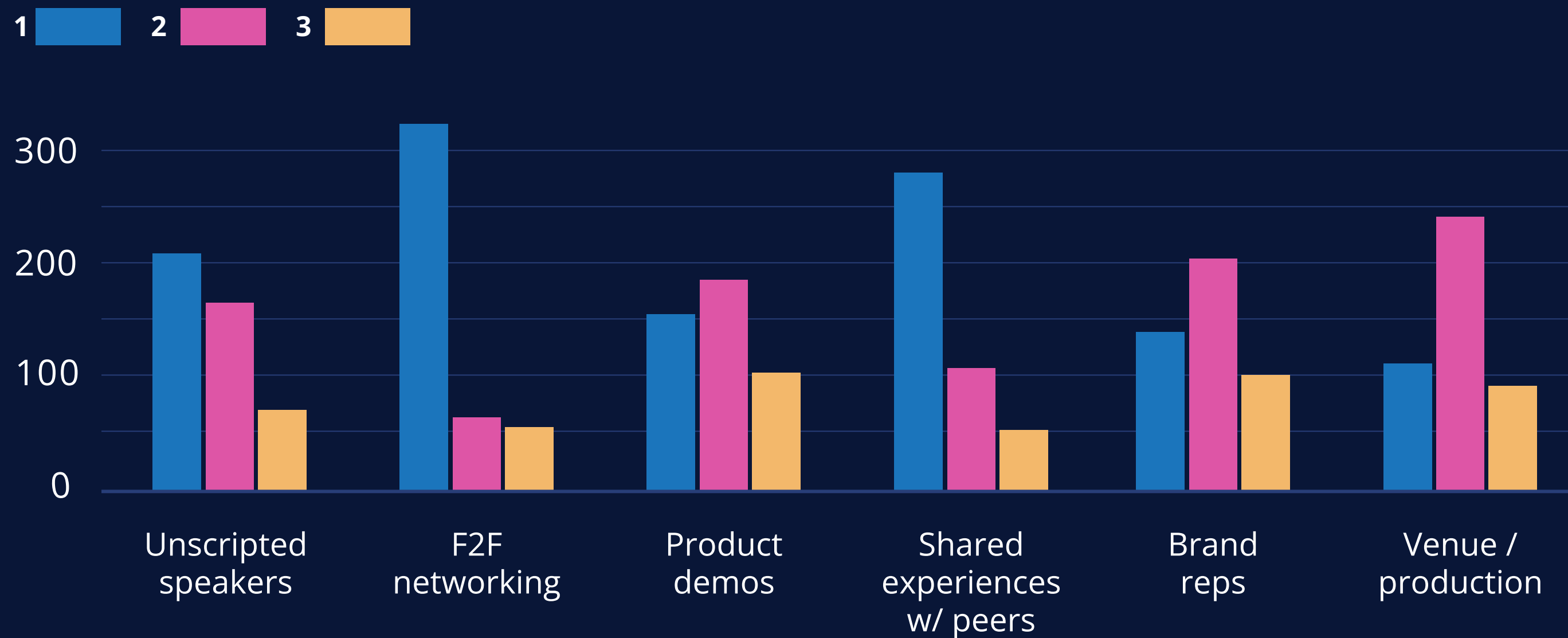
What non-software technologies most enhance the attendee experience?



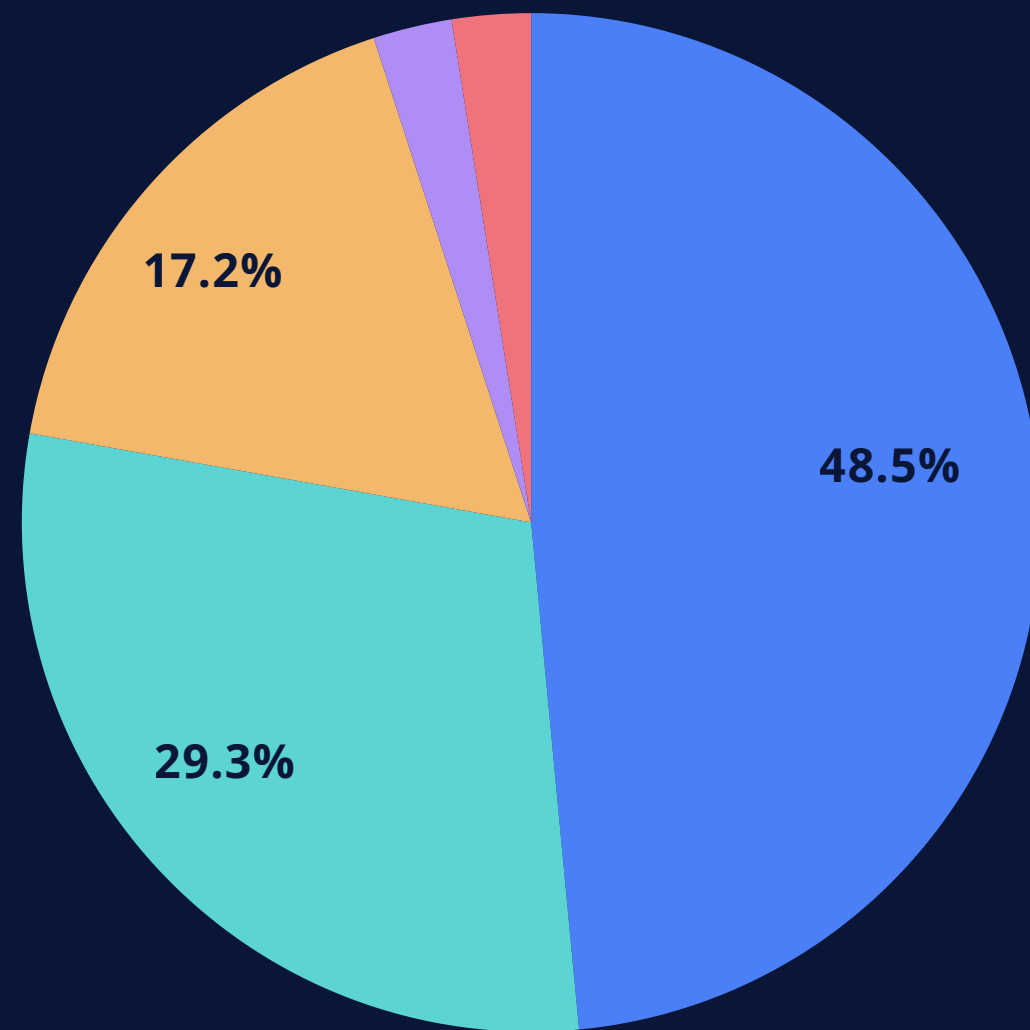
Has the rise of AI-generated content changed why your attendees value in-person events?



Rank the following aspects of in-person events that build the most trust (1 = most trust building)

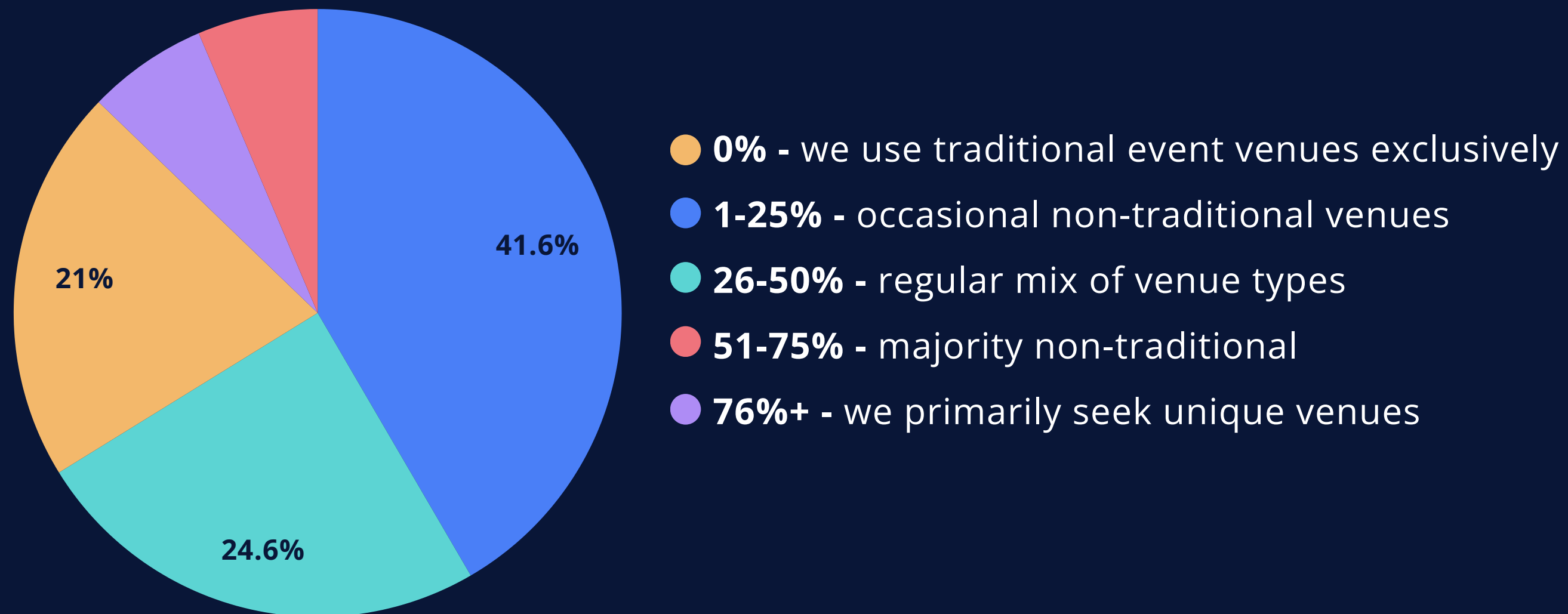


How important is venue selection to your overall event experience strategy?

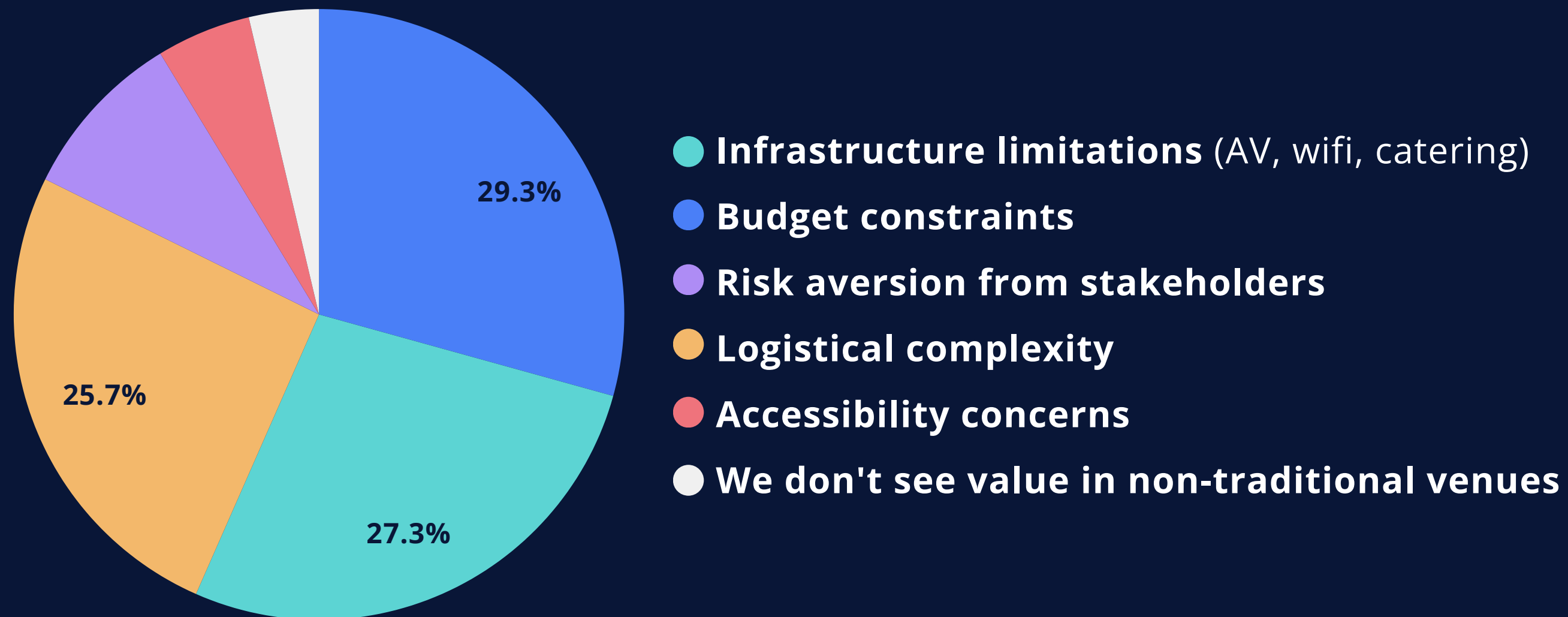


- **Critical** — venue is the foundation of our experience design
- **Very important** — significantly influences attendee perception
- **Moderately important** — one factor among many
- **Minimally important** — content and connections matter more
- **Venue is primarily a logistics/cost decision**

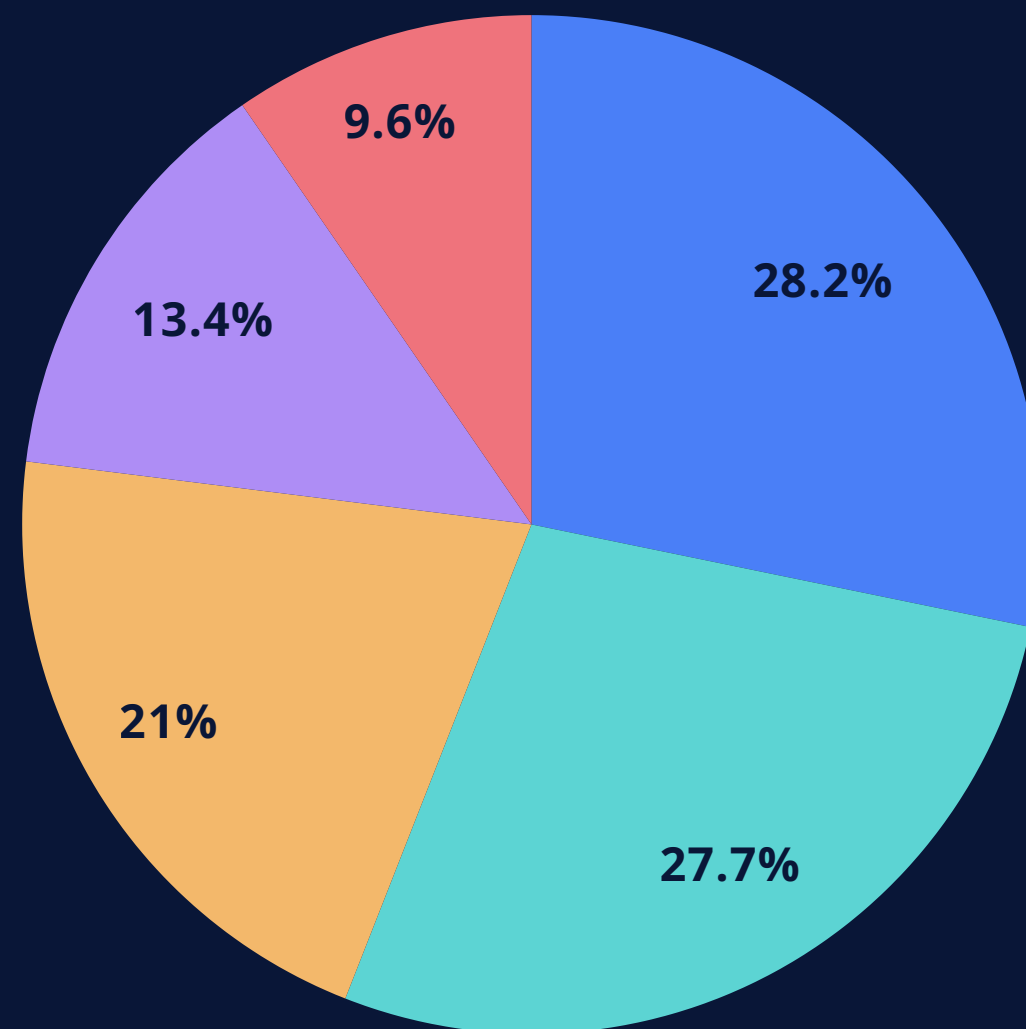
What percentage of your events use non-traditional venues (museums, warehouses, outdoor spaces, etc.)?



What barriers prevent you from using more non-traditional venues?

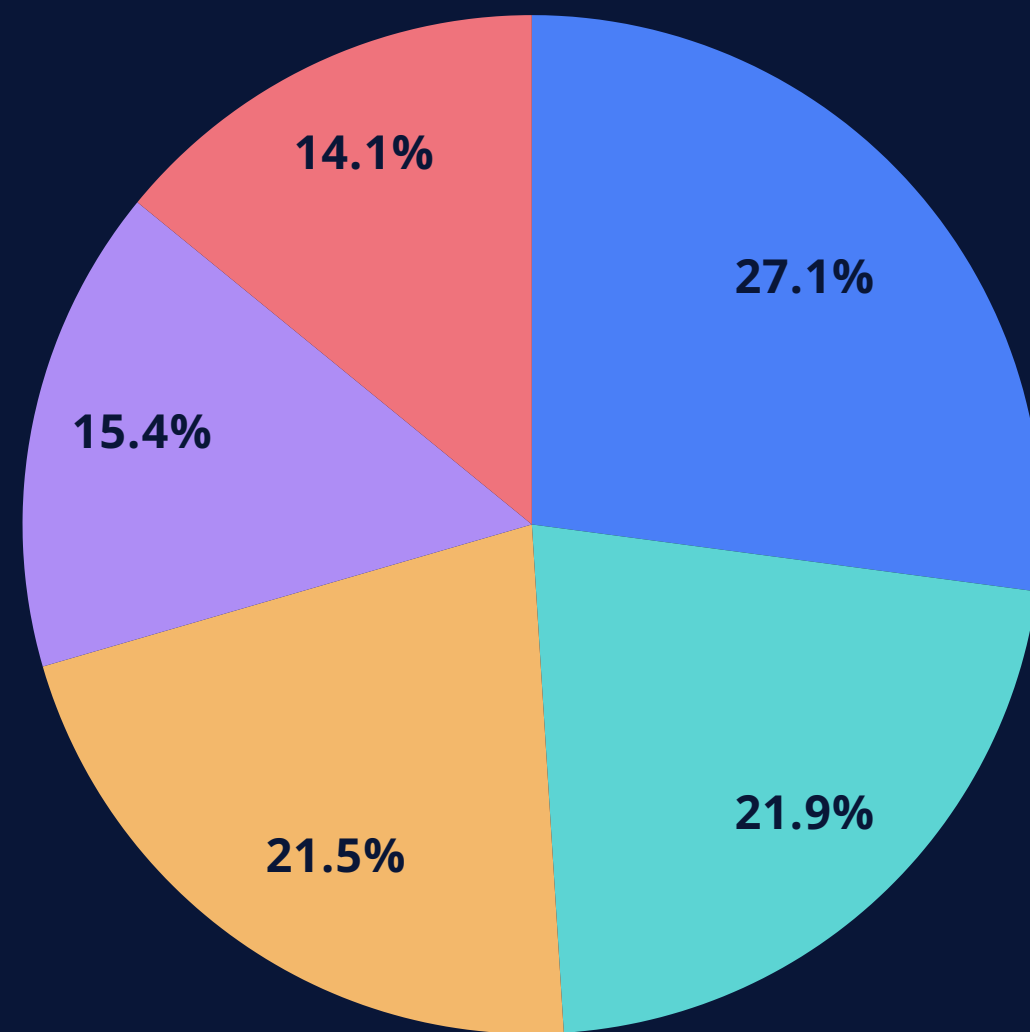


At what stage do you typically involve production/experience partners?



- **Concept development** — they help shape the vision
- **Design phase** — after initial concept is set
- **Planning phase** — when we're defining logistics
- **Execution phase** — primarily for delivery
- **We don't involve external partners**

How do you view your relationship with production/AV partners?



- **Strategic partner** — involved in experience strategy
- **Creative collaborator** — contributes ideas within scope
- **Execution partner** — delivers our vision reliably
- **Vendor** — provides services as specified
- **Necessary expense** — minimized where possible

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Please refer all pertinent questions to the author at Carmen@boldpush.com

The Experience Design Report



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