



Association Conference Attendee Study Provides Insights for 2021

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Prospective association conference attendees had their say in a study that was used in "The Conference Roadmap to Recovery."

As we flipped our calendars to 2021, the events industry's optimism for a recovery brought about by COVID-19 vaccines was tempered by concerns over their distribution and a hesitancy among people to get the vaccines once they became eligible, concerns that since have somewhat lessened.

In January, association conference organizers were considering their format options for 2021. To inform their decisions, some turned to their prospective conference participants for insights into their propensity to attend 2021 conferences, whether online or in-person.

Twenty-six associations representing 11 industries jointly conducted one [survey](https://ricochetadvice.com/insights/the-conference-roadmap-to-recovery/) of their respective prospective conference participants in collaboration with conference consulting companies Bruce Rosenthal Associates LLC, HPN Global, and Ricochet Advice. The survey was conducted in mid-January and 8,525 individuals — 88 percent of whom are U.S.-based — participated.

Any survey or poll is a snapshot in time, and in the nearly three months since the survey was conducted, "The Battle of the Vs" (vaccines vs. virus/variants) continues to be waged, with increasing hope in the U.S. and some other countries that it will be possible to safely convene in-person events this year. But at the same time, the financial and budgetary die may already be cast for many organizations' 2021 travel and conference reimbursement.

January's survey data provided to the 26 associations offered a better understanding of optional paths forward. And it allowed each organization to compare the responses of their respective constituency with those of the other 25 as aggregated. Some of those associations have conducted follow-up surveys centered around certain specific questions to provide fresher data.

The following recaps the survey's key findings from "[The Conference Roadmap to Recovery](https://ricochetadvice.com/insights/the-conference-roadmap-to-recovery/)," (<https://ricochetadvice.com/insights/the-conference-roadmap-to-recovery/>) which is available for download.

Virtual Platforms Mainstreamed

Most conference stakeholders, including those who previously resisted online content delivery and consumption, had little choice but take the (sometimes hasty) plunge in 2020.

Successes included record registration numbers, worldwide participation, and some innovative delivery. Challenges included inconsistent participant engagement and a lack of worthwhile ROI on the part of virtual exhibitors and sponsors.

Across-the-Board Conference Format Preferences

"Virtual" and "in-person" were of equal interest as 2021 conference formats, with hybrid not far behind. Whether this balance shifts as the vaccine/virus battle progresses and the economy improves might be reflected with additional surveying and analyzing registration numbers.

For associations hoping to strengthen the breadth and depth of relationships within their community (including sponsors), offering only one conference format may translate into lost opportunities — specifically with customer loyalty and revenue generation.

Employers Reduce Financial Support

A significant number of respondents may not be reimbursed for conference participation — more than one-quarter said their employer has eliminated or reduced reimbursement. Offering a virtual/hybrid path for participants and sponsors may be necessary for associations who don't want to risk losing another year of engaging with a significant portion of their community and revenue sources.

Vaccination and Safety Policies Affect In-Person Attendance

Vaccination levels will be the largest factor in determining in-person conference participation interest. The survey revealed that only three in 10 respondents would consider attending an in-person conference before being vaccinated. Enhanced safety protocols put in place by the organizer and venue will, to varying degrees, also be considered by many prospective participants.

Organizers should weigh the costs and benefits of implementing new protocols and requirements (e.g., requiring proof of vaccination and the wearing of masks). Imposing such measures may increase participation confidence for some, while alienating others.

Hybrid Hub-and-Spoke an Emerging Format Model

Regional gatherings (spokes), tied to each other and a main conference location (hub) via virtual platforms, offer opportunities to address safety with smaller numbers accommodated in larger spaces providing the benefits of in-person connections.

Such an event has cost and staff time considerations. Possible solutions include unique sponsor collaboration to address cost concerns and asking volunteer leaders for help and/or hiring outsourced support to supplement staff efforts.

Moving Forward



"The Conference Roadmap to Recovery" demonstrates that by addressing uncertainty, organizations can increase their chance of success in 2021. Uncertainty can be mitigated by acknowledging evolving realities of the association's own community, learning from other associations that are also charting new paths, and enlisting support from association and conference industry experts.

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