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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EVENT ATTENDANCE
OCTOBER 2020
ATTENDEE RESULTS

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findings

From lockdowns to layoffs, attendees have existed in a state of flux as the economic and social impacts of the pandemic have yet to fully manifest. As we continue to inhabit an extended period of adjustment, for the first time in this latest wave of our attendee study, **we see a glimpse of positivity and optimism.**

Attendees are cautiously optimistic while also balancing their realities. This optimism is perhaps a result of their worries dissipating thanks to the increase in reliable information they have — more information may translate to more confidence. In fact, the confidence index and positive sentiment are highest to date. The return-to-events outlook has also stabilized since the previous waves and we see the highest percentage saying ‘highly likely’ to return to events post-COVID to date.

While there is no denying that uncertainty still looms, attendees are ready to get back to live events in a safe and prepared way.

Meanwhile in the absence of live events, participation in online events remains strong. Digital events are; however, more about convenience than connecting people and commerce. Regarding commerce a sizable number of attendees indicate their budgets are maintaining or decreasing.

This most recent survey makes clear that attendees are balancing the here and now with a long-term view that carries a thread of optimism. Whether this positive attitude fades out or lasts into the next wave depends on the ongoing updates we receive. For now attendees have made their views crystal clear — **they are ready to get back to live events by Fall 2021.**

Attendees are cautiously optimistic while also balancing their realities

key survey stats

HIGHEST CONFIDENCE INDEX AND POSITIVE SENTIMENT TO DATE

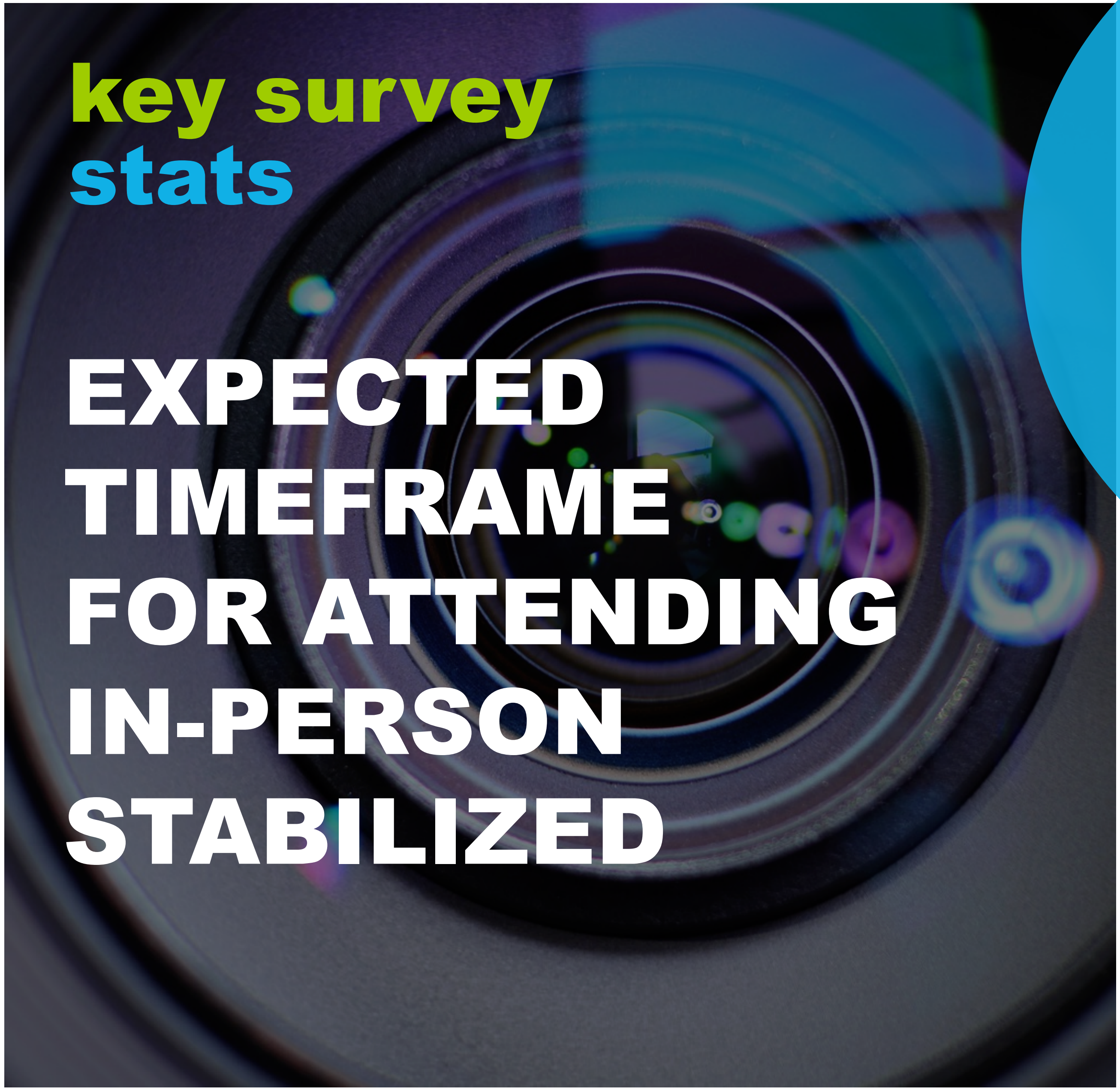
Overall negative sentiment decreased from 64% to 50% and positive sentiment increased from 18% to 29%. **Largest shift to date.**

Confidence Index increased from .62 to .70.

Most influencing factors:

‘Concern’ is less dominant, ‘Cautious’ still top of mind but **‘Ready’ and ‘Fine’ are surfacing more prominently.**

Increase in ‘enough reliable information available to make attendance decision’.



key survey stats

EXPECTED TIMEFRAME FOR ATTENDING IN-PERSON STABILIZED

Expected timeframe to return to in-person stabilized until end of Summer 2021 — we are no longer seeing the dramatic declines we saw in the previous waves.

We see a crossover in Fall 2021 where the outlook to attend increases and continues to increase into 2022.

Confidence up but **FALL 2021 still timeframe for most to return.**

Likelihood to attend in-person events highest to date — **70% extremely/very likely** compared to 58% previously.

Double-digit decrease across all concerns — from the US Economy, Uncertainty, Safety, and Social Distancing.

key survey stats

DIGITAL DELIVERS CONTENT AND CONVENIENCE BUT STRUGGLES WITH HUMAN CONNECTION

31%

Only 31% of attendees believe digital events have helped them meet their goals. 41% disagree and 28% are neutral.

'Online content is not a substitute for in-person learning' climbs to #1 from the #2 position. This sentiment reinforces the fact that digital is not helping attendees meet their goals.

'Access to learning/content' still the primary value received from digital events followed by 'Overall ease/convenience". 3rd is 'Connecting with Exhibitors/Sponsors', which increased by 4% in this wave — whereas the previous two elements slightly decreased.

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key survey stats

SALES CYCLES HAVE STALLED OR REMAIN STATIC

35%

35% noted their budgets ‘decreased’ and 42% ‘stayed the same’.

13%

purchased products after visiting the exhibitor/sponsor.

In the absence of live events — 49% are ‘working with existing reps via phone/email.’ 17% are relying on digital events and only 9% ‘not shopping due to budget restrictions.’

A great deal of activity is taking place across the digital platform but more in the form of websites and web searches…less via digital events.

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what's ahead

NOW

Fall 2020 – Spring 2021

Will be digital focused

NEAR

Spring 2021 – Fall 2021

Combination of digital focused and smaller in-person events

NEXT

Fall 2021 - Beyond

Combination of in-person events and digital

For **NOW,** we must aim to design our digital events to be more engaging and impactful. Instead of building websites for one-off events, resources and investments should be made in community platforms that keep the conversation going year-round. Digital events have tremendous potential to build the pipeline (top of funnel) and generate brand awareness. We need to leverage the power of digital to direct attendees down their appropriate paths while identifying key decision-makers.

For the **NEAR** phase, the live event component will most likely attract far fewer attendees than before COVID—19 — due to social distancing requirements that cap attendance as well as attendee fears. This means to drive revenues; event organizers will need to focus on identifying their most high-value attendees. Identifying the top 20% high-value attendees puts the show organizer in the position to transition the live event component into an invitation-only, VIP, curated experience that delivers strong perceived value among both attendees and exhibitors. These deeper engagements are where we start to accelerate the pipeline and drive people further down the funnel.

As we approach the **NEXT** phase, our mindset needs to be more holistic. It's no longer just thinking virtual or in-person; rather it's about planning and designing for online and in-person attendees, speakers and other key audiences as equal entities. This phase is an extension of the previous but leans in more on inspiring and activating audiences for pipeline acceleration.

about the data solutions team

Freeman's Data Solutions team and expertise has been built on the foundation of Freeman's 2016 acquisition of Exhibit Surveys, Inc. (ESI), a company established in 1963 with the vision of conducting research and measurement exclusively for event marketing activities and for all major industry constituents including event organizers, attendees, exhibitors, venues and CVBs.

Freeman continues to invest heavily in its Data Solutions team's capabilities to maintain its position as the premier research and measurement source in our industry and provide deeper analytics and insights for its clients as well as for the industry as a whole.

The Data Solutions team works closely with our strategy team to ensure our strategic recommendations are rooted in data and insights.

Our foundation and approach put us in an enviable and unmatched position to guide the event industry as we navigate through this difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

want to explore and learn more?

The full report is available for purchase at go.freeman.com/research

We have additional resources that will help your organization conquer the **NOW**, **NEAR** and **NEXT** for live events.

Freeman strategy and data expertise spans across four primary areas, including business, experiential, marketing and content, and digital and data. Learn more about our strategy offerings.

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Have questions about the research? Contact our strategy and data teams at **research@freeman.com.**

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IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EVENT ATTENDANCE SEPTEMBER 2020

ATTENDEE RESULTS
SEPTEMBER 17, 2020

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thank you