

Q4 2020

splash

Online, Shorter, and Here to Stay

An Outlook on Virtual &
Hybrid Events in 2021

A Splash Research Report

A Transformative Era for Events

2020 has been a case study in how professionals have adapted to massive disruption — and equally so, how event marketers have begun reshaping the future of events.

The shift from in-person events to virtual and hybrid was sudden and unplanned. It revealed both fundamental strengths and shortcomings in the way companies approach business events.

In October 2020, we surveyed event professionals and attendees across various industries in the U.S. to understand how they are dealing with new challenges, technologies, and a changing industry.

Our data revealed an events landscape that's resilient, but unrecognizable from a year ago. Events that weren't canceled have become virtual, indefinitely. Teams are spread thin, but they're scrappy and resourceful. Events are becoming smaller, too, with more focus on effectiveness and intimacy. Attendees are cautious with their time, but still showing up. And as companies adjust to a new reality, a new type of event format (hybrid events) is emerging.

Marketers Made a Swift Shift to Virtual

32% of companies canceled all in-person events in 2020 and converted them to virtual, rather than postponing them

In-Person Events Will Never be the Same

79% of companies expect to host hybrid events (that include an online component) even once in-person events resume

Resourceful Event Teams Still Need New Tools

66% of event professionals are creating virtual events using the same event marketing tools as they used before COVID-19

Everyone is Pitching In

The number of people with non-marketing titles now creating events compared to before COVID-19 has increased by 29%

Shorter (and Smaller) is Better

Fewer than 7% of event attendees believe virtual events should be longer than an hour

3 Key Trends



28%

postponed in-person events until 2021

Virtual Events are Our New Reality

As work-from-home policies are extended and business travel is cut, companies recognize that virtual events are not a stopgap solution.

Are you ready for this permanent transition to virtual?




57%

are using the same processes to create, design, and market events as before the crisis

The Trouble with Event Tech

The technology teams rely on to create and market their events were never built for this new virtual and hybrid era. Many companies are making do with what they have, while others are planning new investments in event technology even as they reduce event staff.

Are your current processes and platforms stretched too thin to meet attendee expectations?



30%

cite revenue and sales growth as the most important six- to 12-month goal

Events Driving Business Growth

After three quarters of dealing with the ever-changing realities of a global pandemic, companies across sectors are coping in their own ways and already making plans for 2021 and beyond. This year, events helped companies stay relevant. Next year, they need to deliver revenue, sales, and new customers.

Are your events versatile enough to adapt to post-pandemic goals?

What Did We Learn in Q4 2020?



32%

of companies have moved all their events to virtual, rather than postponing them



55%

of attendees say the ideal length for a virtual business event is 20-30 minutes



79%

of companies expect to host hybrid events that incorporate an online component, even once in-person events resume

Everything is Virtual

And that's a good thing

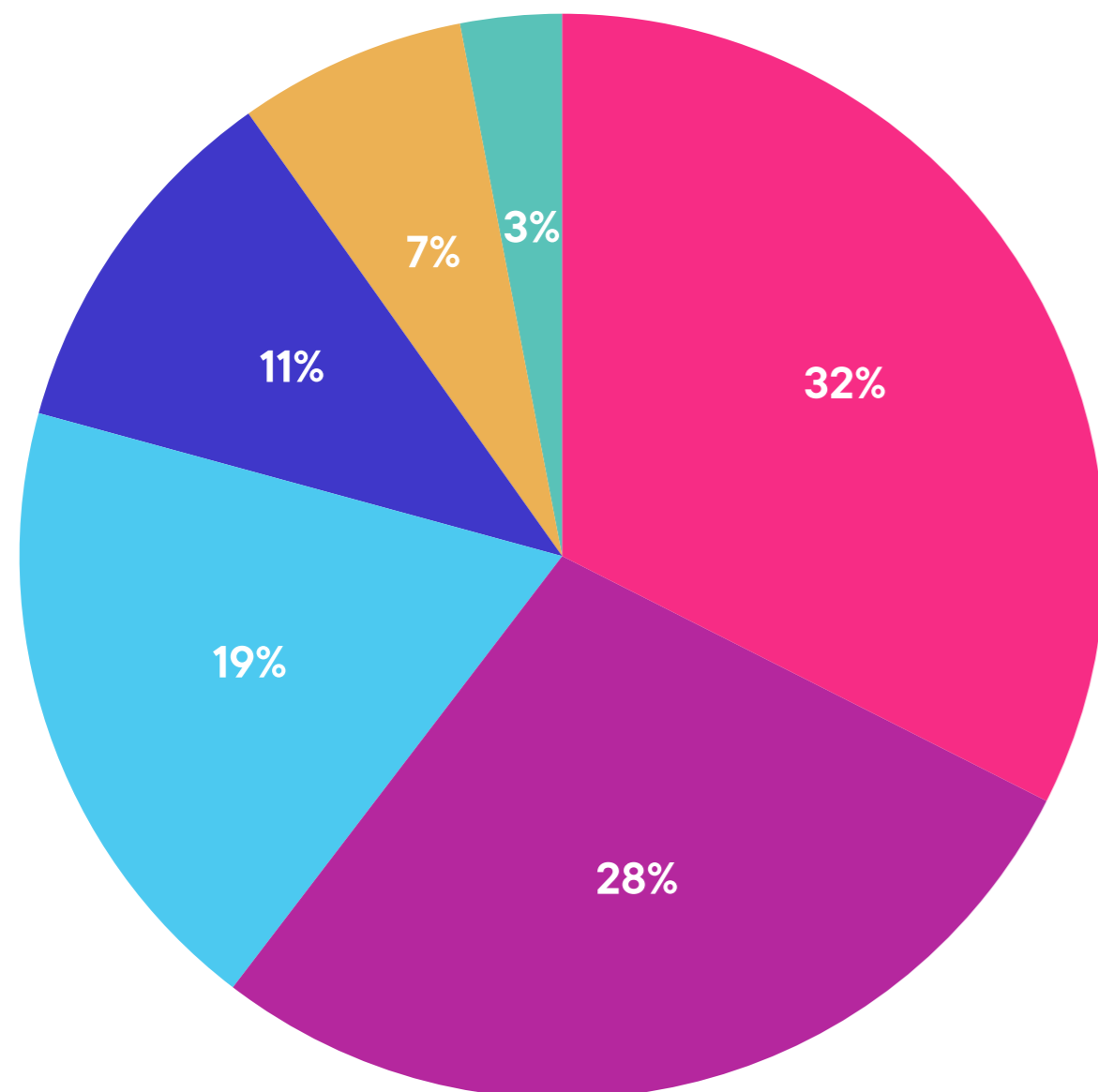
The most obvious change to events in 2020 is the move to virtual. What's more surprising is how quickly companies made the leap. Rescheduling events might have signaled a wait-and-see approach. But the fact that many companies immediately converted their planned events to virtual indicates that companies were ready.

60%

of companies canceled all in-person events in 2020

32%

converted all in-person events to virtual this year



Event Plans in 2020

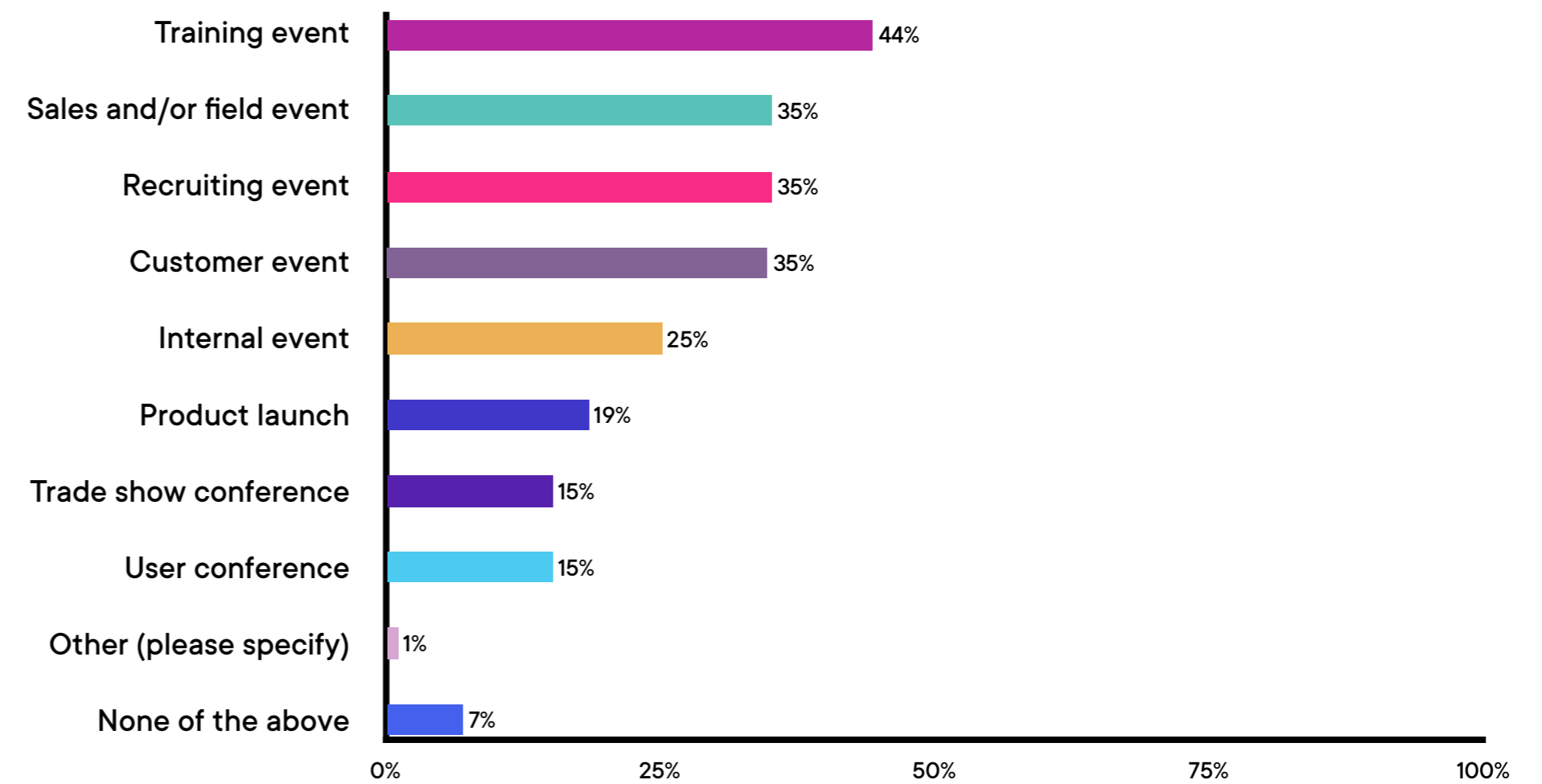
- Canceled in-person events and moved them all to virtual
- Canceled all in-person events in 2020 and rescheduled them to 2021 when we can do physical events again
- Still doing events but scaled back and doing fewer virtual events than originally planned
- Hosting more virtual events than originally planned
- Canceled all events
- There's no change as we already hosted virtual events before the crisis

Event Types: Then and Now

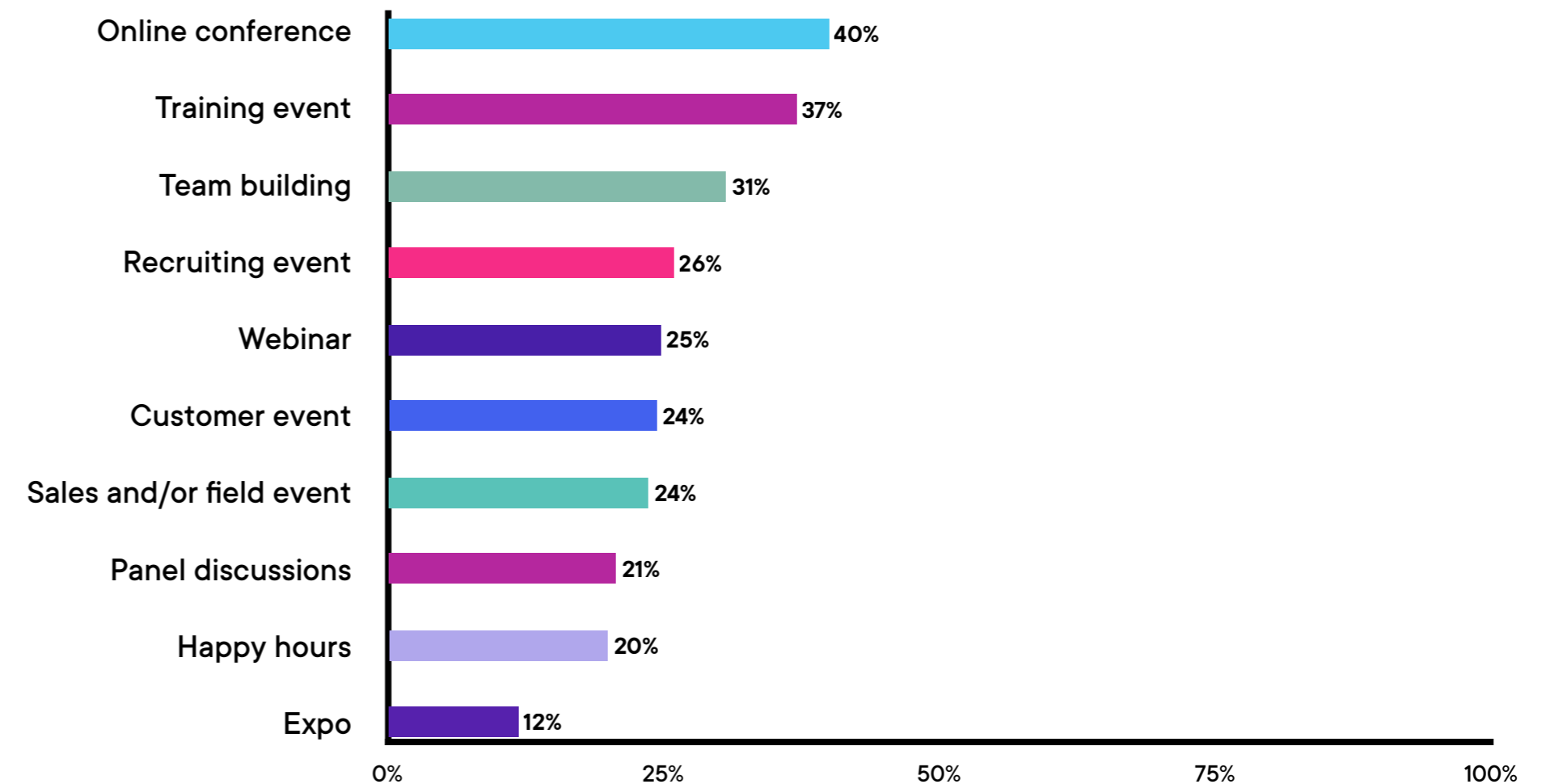
In 2019, training events were the most popular event format. Today, online conferences (40%) are more common.

But in the overnight switch to virtual, some kinds of events are proving to be more digitally friendly than others. Training events are most common among companies of all sizes as they are usually smaller in terms of attendees and often hosted by human resources professionals. Other events, like trade shows (15% in 2019), don't translate as well to online formats.

Common Event Types in 2019



Common Event Types in 2020



A Closer Look

Snapshot of different industries

Respondents from **advertising & media**, **healthcare**, and **retail & wholesale** companies have each approached virtual events in different ways this year.

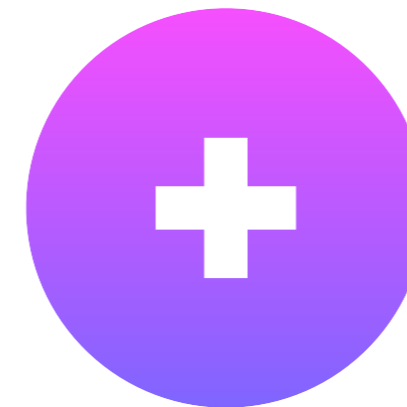
Advertising & media (38%) and **healthcare** (37%) primarily canceled in-person events this year and converted them all to virtual.

Retail & wholesale companies were more likely to postpone events and reschedule them for 2021 in hopes of hosting in-person events again (29%).

Advertising & media companies and **retail & wholesale** companies measure event success by impact on revenue, while **healthcare** companies use attendance as their primary success metric.



Advertising & media was most impacted by reduced budgets (48%)



Healthcare worried about driving same level of attendance as in-person events (49%)



Retail & wholesale struggled with learning new skills to produce virtual events (35%)

A Closer Look

Event goals change over time



What's important today?

- All agree that **keeping in touch with customers** is most important right now

What's important in six months?

- **Finding new customers** is the focus for advertising & media (31%)
- **Keeping their brand visible** is key for healthcare (29%)
- **Revenue growth and sales** is the driver for retail & wholesale (35%)

What's important in 12 months?

- **Revenue growth and sales** is the primary goal for both advertising & media (46%) and retail & wholesale (44%)
- **Finding new customers** is essential for healthcare (29%)

Size Matters

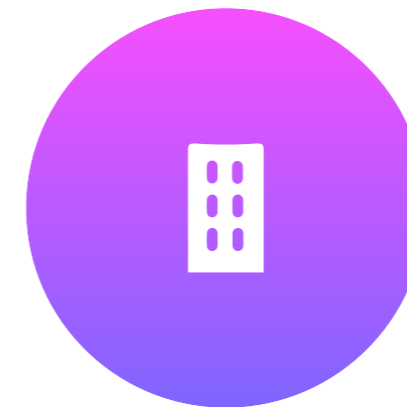
Large companies (1,000 – 10,000 employees) are more likely to have bigger online conferences (53%) and host online panel discussions (30%) or virtual town halls (19%) than smaller companies (fewer than 100 employees).

What does this tell us? For one thing, larger companies have the resources to host bigger, more sophisticated virtual events, replicating or replacing the big trade shows and conferences originally planned for this year.

Younger and smaller companies, on the other hand, are more likely to use virtual events to directly connect with customers, prospects, and future employees. This showcases their agility and familiarity with online event formats and platforms.



Larger companies are more likely to host online conferences, virtual town halls, or online panel discussions



Smaller companies are more likely to host sales and field events (30%)



Younger companies host more virtual happy hours

Size Matters for Attendees, Too

Traditional keynote addresses have become targeted webinars. Fireside chats evolved into virtual roundtable discussions. Expo hall live demos are now personalized product walkthroughs.

More companies are quickly discovering the benefits of smaller events: higher attendance rates for tailored programs that strengthen relationships and drive business impact.

How are companies measuring event success?

- Attendance (52%)
- Impact on revenue (43%)
- Registrations (38%)
- New leads (34%)
- Sign-ups for future events (32%)
- Content downloads (22%)
- Don't measure (2%)

Comparing Attendance Rate by Event Size

Event Size	Events	RSVPs per Event	Check-Ins per Event	Attendance Rate
Fewer than 10 RSVPs	3,671	7	6	85.7%
Fewer than 25 RSVPs	16,996	17	13	79.5%
Fewer than 50 RSVPs	16,975	33	24	72.7%
Fewer than 100 RSVPs	7,855	70	41	58.6%
100+ RSVPs	11,348	388	169	43.6%

How are Attendees Feeling?

Quite well, all things considered

With most professional face-to-face interactions now happening virtually, it's easy to assume that all online events are indistinguishable from "regular" video-conference meetings or perceived as a nuisance. But while Zoom fatigue and webinar burnout are real — 84% of us experience it at some point — the appetite for events has held steady, and attendance hasn't suffered.



44%

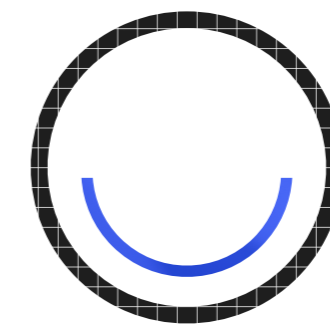
of attendees can commit to one hour of virtual events per week

51%

believe their managers are very or extremely supportive of them attending virtual events

46%

of respondents have registered for and attended 1 – 5 virtual events since March

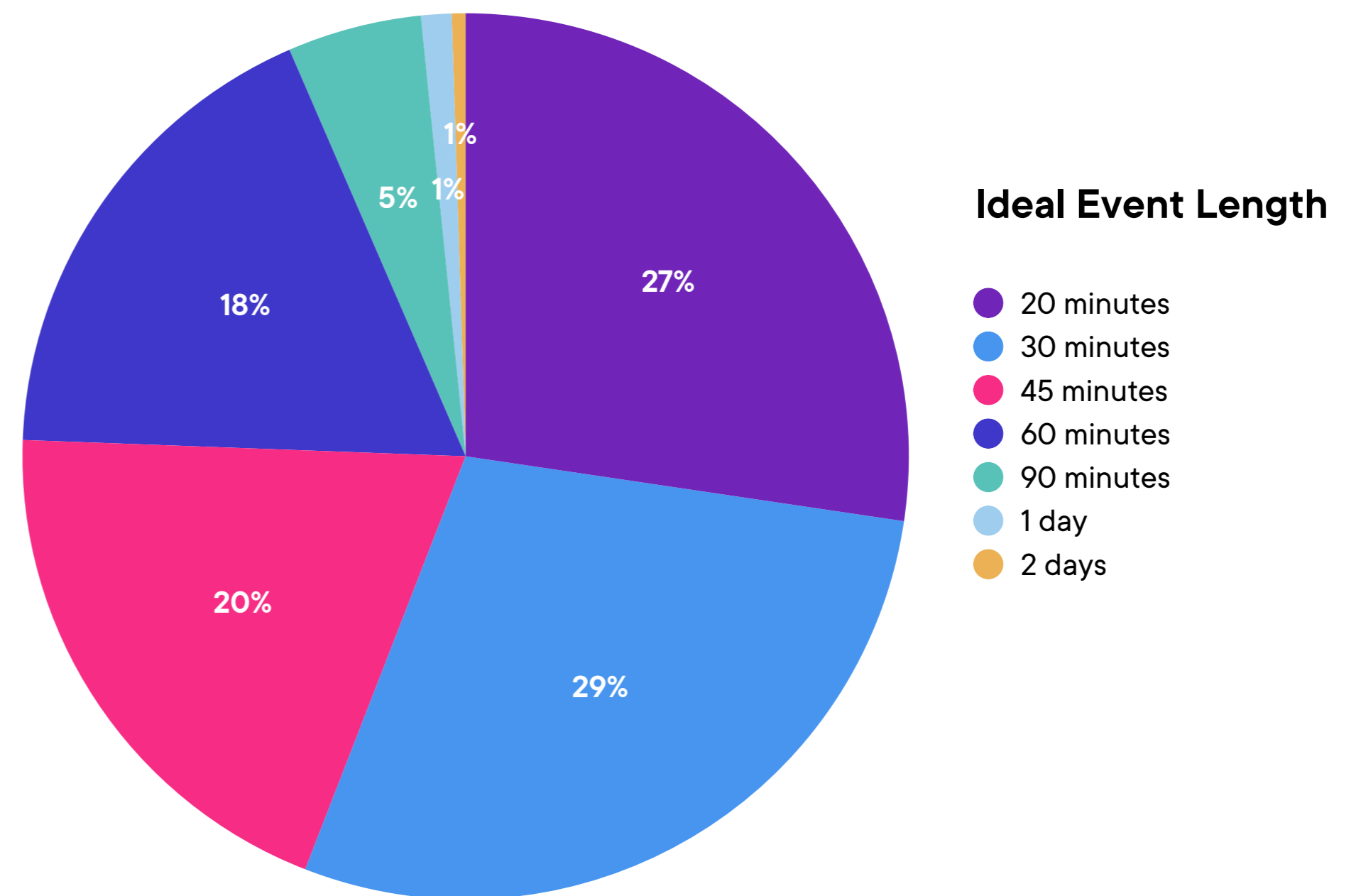


Keep it Short and Sweet

Event attendees prefer shorter events. Who doesn't? The ideal length for a virtual event, according to our survey, is 30 minutes or less. Fewer than 7% of respondents believe virtual events should be longer than an hour. We couldn't agree more.

55%

of attendees believe virtual events should be 30 minutes or less



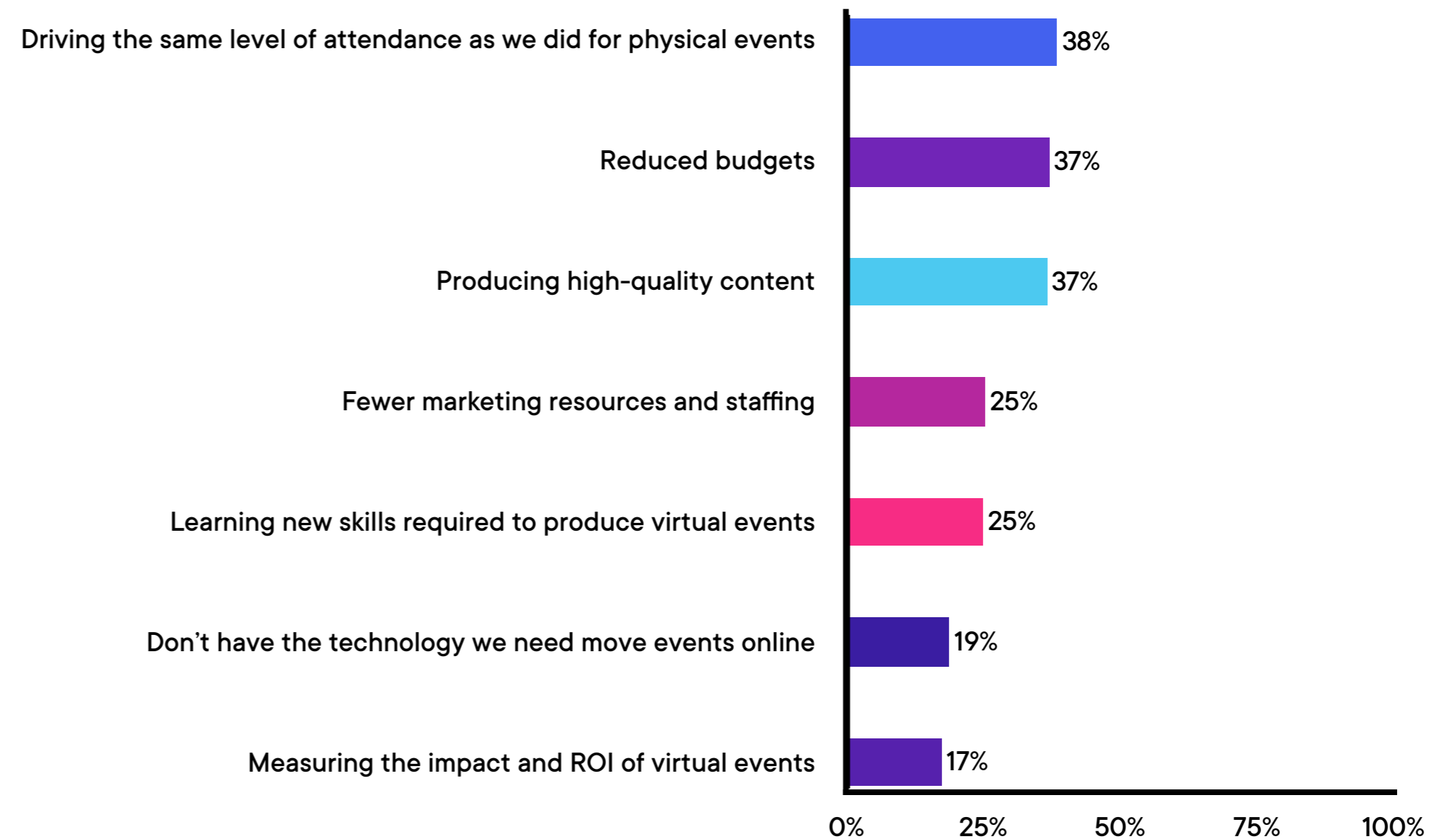
Event Teams Get Scrappy

"Doing more with less"
is 2020's tagline

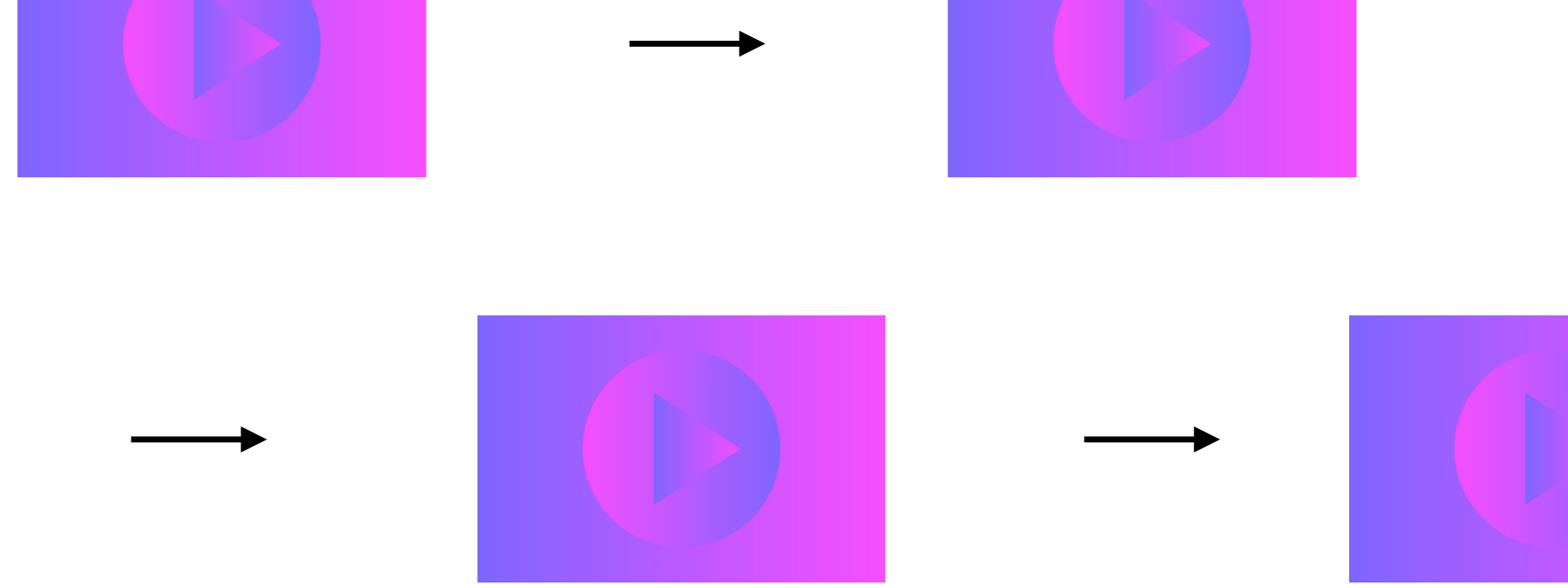
The top three main challenges for event professionals as they transition to hybrid and virtual events were driving the same **level of attendance** as they did for physical events (38%), coping with **reduced event budgets** (37%), and producing **high-quality content** (37%).

Because most events teams decreased in size in 2020, more non-marketing employees are getting involved and dealing with these challenges as well.

Today's Event Challenges



Move Over, Marketers



29%

report that non-marketing staff are now more involved in creating events than pre-pandemic

88%

say that brand consistency is extremely or very important to the company today

With event responsibility spread out across an organization, does that mean sales managers, operations, and admins need to be cross-trained as event marketers?

No — but they will need the tools to create and manage events in consistent ways.

Finding ways to maintain brand consistency will be a priority as event marketing responsibilities continue expanding among non-marketing roles.

A company's brand must remain true no matter who is organizing a live, virtual, or hybrid event. Nearly every company surveyed **agrees that brand consistency remains extremely important (46%) or very important (42%).**

Tools (and Tech) of the Trade

Zoom is the most popular event technology, used by the majority of respondents (62%). But to ensure virtual guest experiences are engaging and translate into business impact, teams need more than video-conferencing tools.

Traditional live-streaming and webinar technologies don't provide immersive, branded guest experiences or connect and automate important event data.

66%

are using the same event marketing tools as before COVID-19 to create virtual events

78%

are using traditional webinar tools to create and host virtual events



Through such rapid change, companies are struggling to maintain brand consistency and capture the event data they need. Traditional webinar platforms were never built to support the evolving and sophisticated design and data needs of today's market. More than ever, companies have to deliver engaging online experiences that make a positive impression and drive measurable outcomes."



Ben Hindman
CEO of Splash

Turning Adaptation into Investment

While event professionals have been adapting to unprecedented disruption, not enough companies are investing in the systems and processes needed to make virtual and hybrid events work long-term.

57% of events teams still use the same processes to create, design, and market events as before the crisis, adapting them to the current remote environment.

If companies want to continue broadening their ability to create and host events across their organization — and they should — they also need to invest in the technology to make this possible.

A decorative graphic on the right side of the slide consists of several circles in shades of purple, blue, and grey, connected by thin black lines. One line runs diagonally from the top right towards the center, connecting a grey circle to a purple circle. Another line runs horizontally from the right edge towards a purple circle. A third line runs vertically from a purple circle down to a grey circle. There are also several isolated circles scattered around.

43%

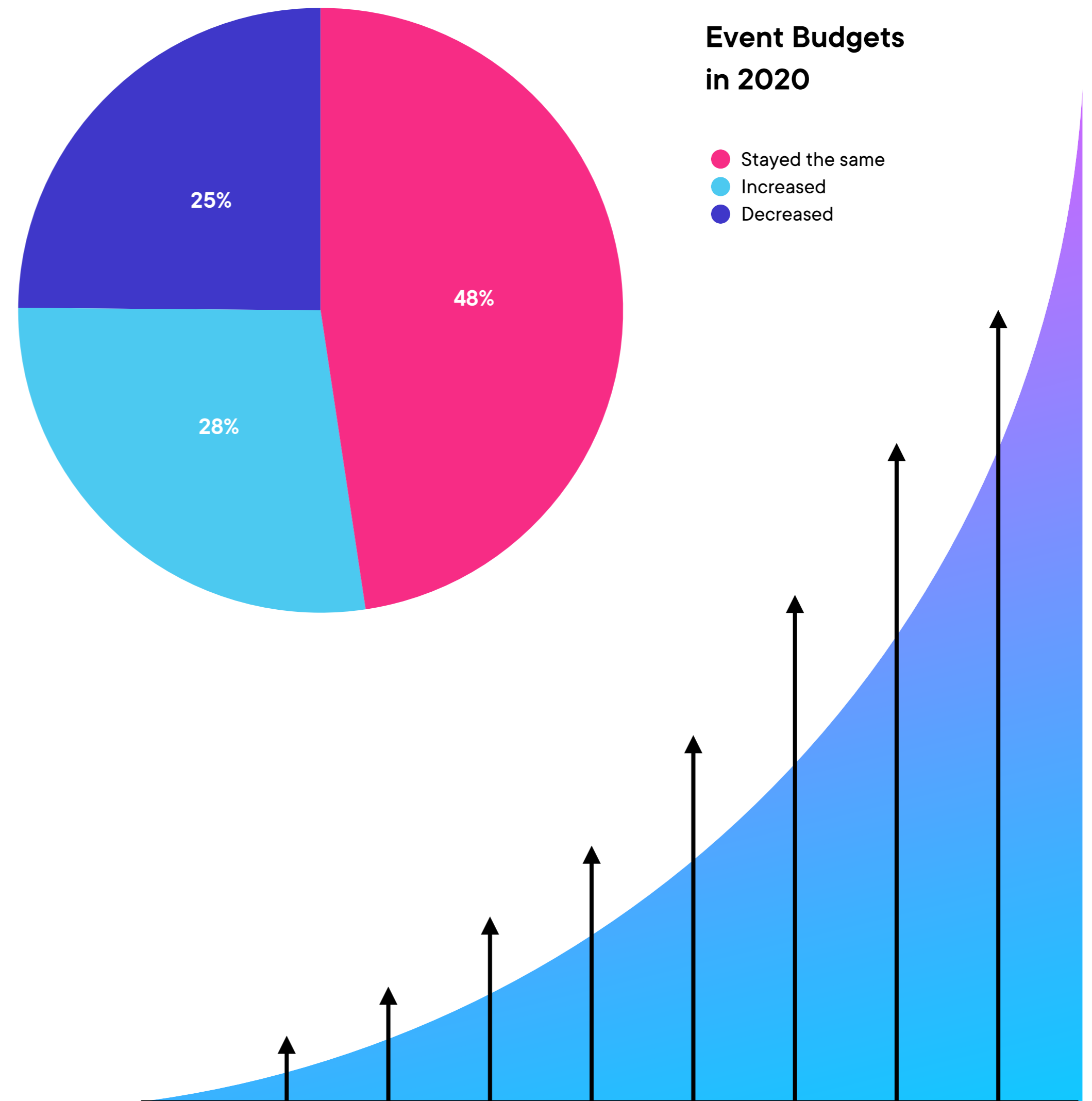
of event
professionals are
investing in new
solutions for remote
teams

Event Budgets on the Rise

The good news is most companies are allocating more resources to event marketing programs.

In the second half of 2020, more than 75% of event marketing budgets either increased or stayed the same.

More companies expect to increase their event marketing spend in 2021. Virtual and hybrid events will play an important role in the transition back to in-person, so expect a larger portion of event marketing budgets to go to investments in event technology.



Looking Ahead to 2021

The recovery won't instantly commence once the calendar clicks over to 2021, and the events landscape won't magically snap back to its pre-COVID shape. Event audiences will be different, for one thing.

Most virtual event programs currently target employees (68%), customers (58%), and prospects (34%). The focus will need to shift to prospects in 2021 to support revenue growth and sales goals.

Event programs must also evolve from today's band-aid "replicate and replace" approach using existing tech to a sustainable, long-term solution that supports business growth goals.



What's Important Today

What's Important in Six Months

What's Important in 12 Months

- Because all our competitors are doing virtual events
- We can collect data we weren't able to before
- Revenue growth and sales
- Keeping our brand visible
- Finding new customers
- Keeping in touch with customers so they know we're still around and relevant

A Hybrid Future

Like so many physical-to-digital trends, COVID-19 has accelerated the evolution of events. In-person events will eventually return, but they won't be the same. Hybrid events — those with both in-person and online components — will flourish, but they will need to achieve the same business results that executives and investors expect from traditional events.

Event marketers will also need the right technology and resources to create both virtual and hybrid events that are marketable, measurable, and scalable.

79%

expect to host hybrid events that incorporate an online component, even once in-person events resume

21%

will host in-person events only, without an online component

What Does it All Mean?

An outlook on virtual and hybrid events for 2021 and beyond

Are virtual and hybrid events the new normal? Have event teams proven themselves to be adaptable and resilient? Is the state of events today stronger than we expected?

Yes, yes, and yes.

Is there a proven path going forward, and have companies made the necessary investments to get the most out of events in 2021 and beyond? Not quite.

While event professionals were forced to do a lot more with less and get scrappy transforming existing platforms, event tech remains a significant hurdle for many companies. As hybrid, virtual, and smaller business events become permanent fixtures of the marketing calendar, companies will need the right tools to create and manage those events across the organization. And they will need the flexibility to adjust to shifting attendee expectations, deliver tailored event programs for each audience, and measure the business impact.

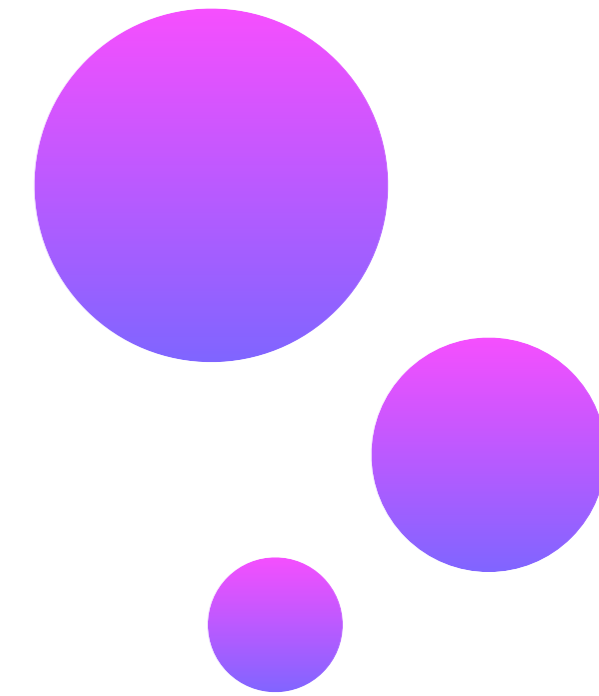
If companies make event technology a priority and embrace the reality of a virtual and hybrid future, 2021 may be another unprecedented year for events.

Methodology

In October 2020, we conducted an independent survey with Researchscape of 270 event marketing professionals and 3,133 event attendees across the United States in the following industries:

- Healthcare
- Education
- Retail & Wholesale
- Advertising & Media
- Professional Services
- Software & IT
- Manufacturing
- Finance, Insurance & Real Estate
- Hospitality

The survey was not weighted. Not all responses total 100% due to rounding.



About

Splash is a next-generation event marketing platform designed to help teams build and host virtual, in-person, and hybrid events. Splash liberates people from the constraints of outdated event technology and enables them to do what they love: create memorable experiences, new connections, and business value.

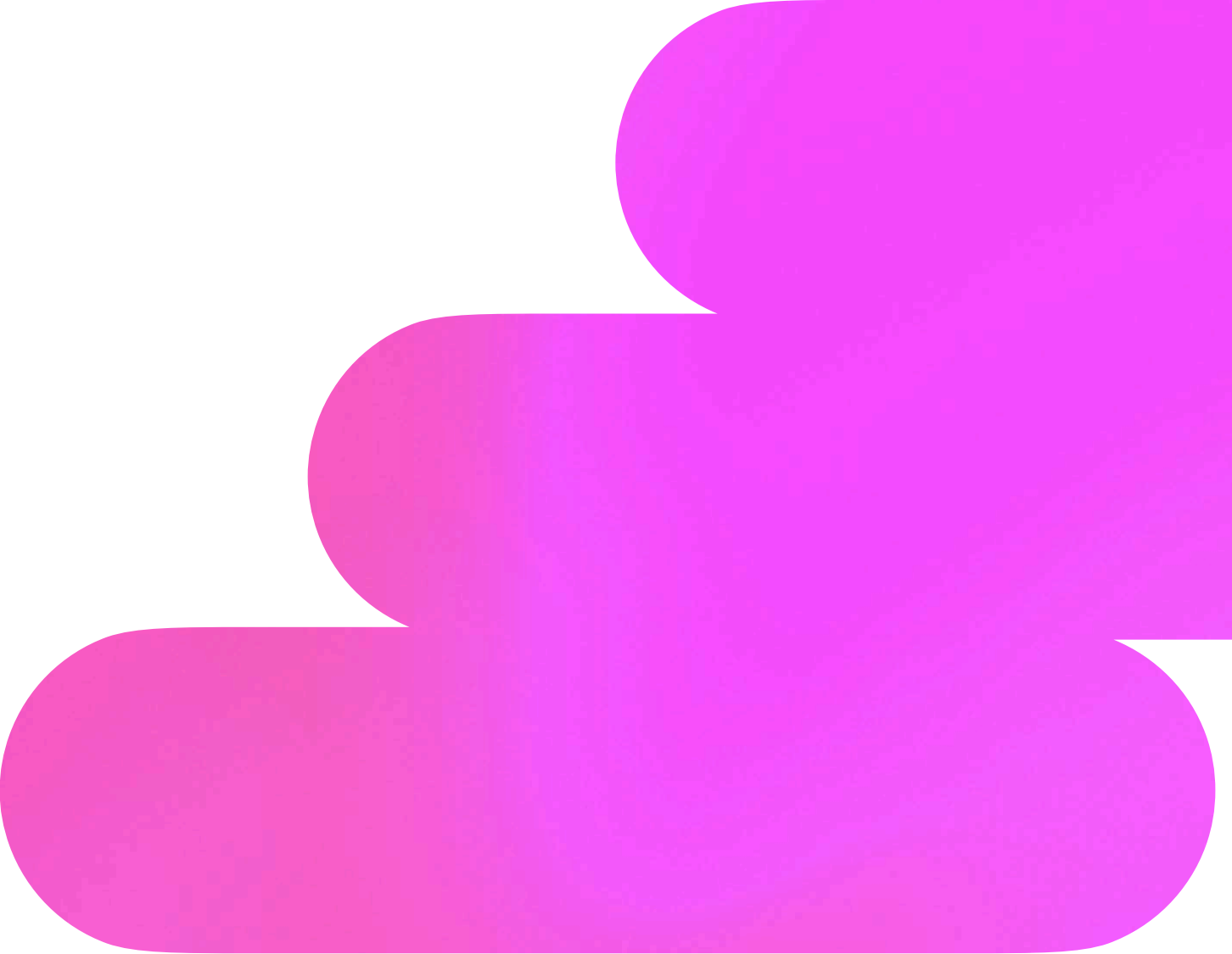
The platform empowers everyone in an organization to easily create their own branded, connected, and compliant programs in minutes or hours, not days or weeks. By marrying data and design, Splash helps companies' market, measure, and scale their event programs in ways that were previously impossible.

See why Fortune 500 companies choose Splash to power their events at www.splashthat.com.



splash

Discover an event marketing platform that
scales to support your agile event
programs, no matter what they look like.



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