



# The pleasure and pain of delivering live events

Research report – 2019



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# About the authors

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## Significant experience that adds up to outstanding events

Meet Chris Elmitt and Chris Carey who have each been working in the live events space for over two decades...

Chris Elmitt: I run Crystal Interactive, the UK's leading event technology company which provides interactive technology to support audience collaboration for some of the world's leading brands.



Chris Elmitt

Chris Carey: I lead Axiom Communications, we help organisations around the world achieve their goals, through the actions of their own better engaged, aligned and motivated people, and often through live events.



Chris Carey

Axiom and Crystal have been partnering to deliver highly interactive live events for over 12 years. In that time we have seen a number of patterns emerge that invariably lead to successful, engaging and collaborative events; that continue to make an impact long after the lights have been switched off at the event venue.

This report takes advantage of our joint experience, but builds on it significantly, through the survey feedback kindly provided by our clients and a wider network of interested respondents. We trust you'll find this report valuable in shaping your approach to live events, going forward.



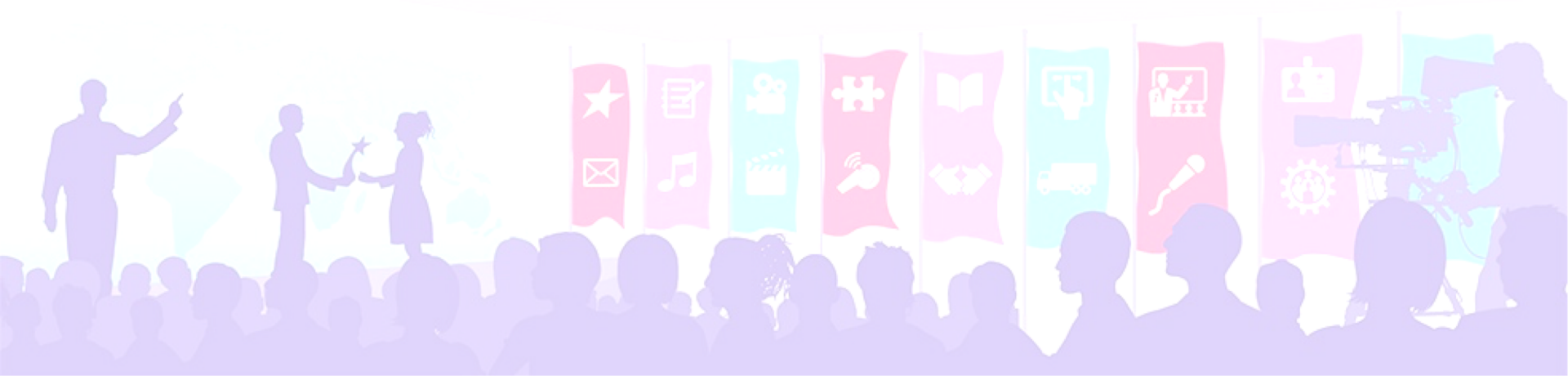
## SETTING THE SCENE

About the research and sample

## The research methodology – at a glance

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- The research was conducted amongst event and communication professionals to explore the pleasure and pain of delivering live events as the decade draws to a close:
  - Why are events being run? Who are the participants? What are the hot topics everyone is talking about? Where are they focussing their efforts? How are they allocating their budgets? What trends are they seeing? What is frustrating those responsible for delivering these events?
- To explore these issues, an online survey was created using the Survey Monkey research platform
- The research took place during the Summer of 2019 with over 50 participants



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Insights to guide your thinking

# Executive summary – insights to guide your thinking

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## Why people are delivering events and who is coming

Almost half of respondents cited the primary reasons for delivering internal events as providing a strategy update, or, in a related topic, guiding colleagues through major change.

The majority of these events were primarily targeting ‘general managers, people managers, the board and c-suite’ as attendees. However, around four in ten respondents reported inviting ‘all colleagues’ to their events – perhaps taking advantage of developments in live-streaming and virtual collaboration tools.

## The biggest frustrations

Time, in a number of guises, was frequently mentioned by respondents as the biggest frustration in delivering live events, including: insufficient face-time with presenters ahead of the event, presenters not making time to properly prepare and rehearse, presenters pushing for 45-minutes slots and refusing to believe they can deliver their content in less time - and speakers making last minute changes.

The natural consequence of all this appears to be agendas that are too tightly packed and speakers running over time at the event, therefore stealing time from other presenters or activities and causing unnecessary stress.

Our research indicates that whilst respondents report spending a good proportion of their time in pre-event planning, business leaders and presenters do not. The disconnect is clear to see, it causes enormous frustration and calls for revised approaches.

# Executive summary – insights to guide your thinking (cont.)

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## The biggest frustrations (cont.)

The early sign-off of the event objectives and the agenda to deliver them, amongst leaders and speakers, together with strict adherence to deadlines for content creation and both off-site and on-site rehearsal schedules point to a less stressful existence.

Fear of genuine interactivity amongst senior leaders, was also cited as frustrating and could be increasingly at odds with today's 'always socially connected' audience members. Hard won know-how tells us it is better to start with one, perhaps more enlightened, speaker and prove the efficacy of audience engagement, as opposed to going 'big bang' and heightening anxiety.

Technology failures also featured as frustrating, highlighting the importance of rigorous testing and scenario planning ahead of time.

## The keys to success

The most frequently cited critical success factors in our research revolved around the need for participants to leave events engaged and armed with clear actions, then deliver change once back in the workplace. However, over 70% of respondents reported spending 0-25% of their resource on post-event activities.

The need for 'the business' to own the content post-event is well understood. However, as we have seen, it doesn't often own it in the run up to the event, despite research respondents rating pre-event planning and preparation as the third highest critical success factor.

Perhaps greater levels of partnership with the business, post-event, could pave the way for greater success?

# Executive summary – insights to guide your thinking (cont.)

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## The hot topics

The hot topics that respondents reported being discussed at their recent live events were almost as varied as the make up of the panel, and perhaps reflected the potentially unique challenges faced by their organisations.

That said, the topic of ‘change’ was most frequently cited, by a fifth of respondents. The rise of ‘digital’ / AI and the new ways of working that these is triggering was a big factor. Leadership, Technology and Personal Development were also focus areas.

Sustainability did not make it to the top ten and it will be interesting to see the extent to which this topic features in future surveys.

## The emerging trends in live events

The rise of audience engagement and interactivity topped the poll, together with the increasing use of technology at events; both were cited by a third of respondents.

We are seeing the demise of large gratuitous events, and the rise of highly focussed business, outcome orientated activities.

Live-streaming and interactive techniques to engage ‘off-venue’ and remote workforces are clearly on the increase, as are live feedback, surveys and collaborative problem solving. The research points to the more and more hybrid events, blending face-to-face with virtual participants – often engaged on joint collaborative activities, powered by interactive tech.



# Executive summary – insights to guide your thinking (cont.)

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## The emerging trends in live events (cont.)

Given the reluctance of some leaders, who are often baby boomers, to take advantage of the transparency afforded by these interactive technologies, the challenge facing the generation X and Y-led events industry might be how to engage with senior leaders. One approach to drive up the adoption of interactive technology with senior leaders, that seems to work in our experience, is the use of case studies showcasing how their peers are leading the way and achieving great results in adopting new interactive tech.

And from the data provided by respondents, allied with the combined experience of both Axiom and Crystal, we can see that event participants and speakers alike are increasingly time-poor. And when they get to the live event we can see they have short attention spans. That means when we do get people together we need to make the very best use of their time; we need to win both their hearts and their minds, and quickly.

We also need to inspire them to take the buzz of the live event and amplify it through the organisation.

Broadening participation, collaboration and action planning, as part of pacey and interactive plenary and break-out session powered by technology, is no doubt part of the solution.

However, the live events industry must be acutely aware that consumers of technology at internal live events are also consumers of technology in the outside world, where their expectations are set ever higher.

To apply the logic of Jack Welch in this setting: “If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near.”



# Executive summary – insights to guide your thinking (cont.)

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## The role of external partners

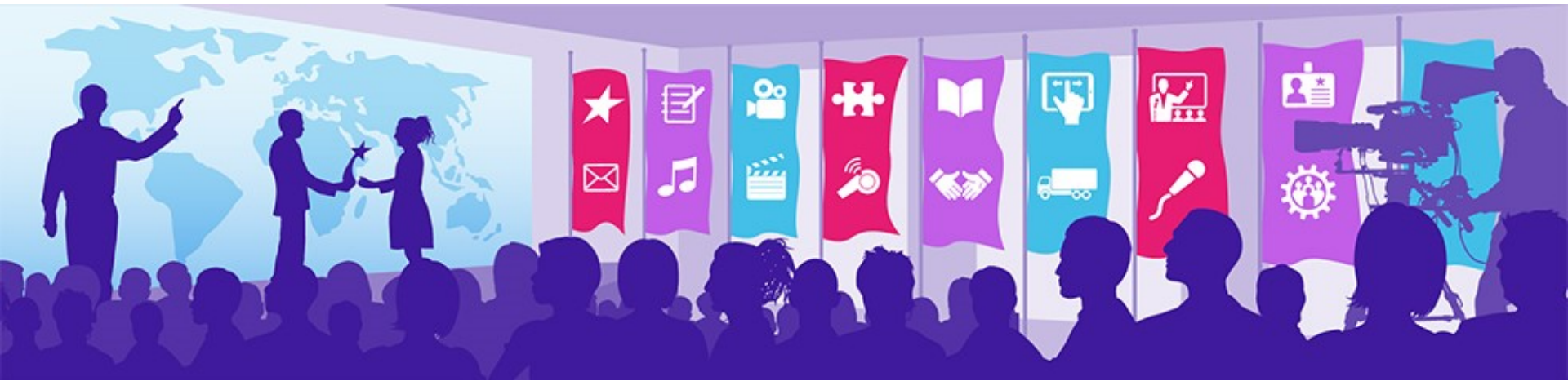
A recent survey highlighted event planning as the fifth most stressful job in the world. So what did our survey say about how external partners can help? True partnership is highly prized, with respondents wanting external suppliers to work as extensions of the 'in-house' team.

Innovation, creativity and new ideas were clearly important, as was trust. Deep expertise and specific knowledge in key areas were frequently cited as important. Understanding the needs of the client and the challenges they face was also considered important.

Flexibility, reliability and affordability were considered key, as was faultless execution.

In the light of the rest of this executive summary, pre-event, participants said they were most likely to use external resource to help with participant logistics and venue finding. At the event, audio and technical services topped the poll and post-event few respondents enlisted the support of external partners.

The juxta position between the biggest frustrations, discussed earlier, and how external partners are actually used is interesting. Could it be that external partners are not being fully harnessed to add value where the pain points really are – and add to the pleasure of delivering world-class events – albeit behind the scenes?



# The pleasure and pain of delivering live events

The survey in full as graphs and word clouds



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## THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The people behind the numbers

# Our survey participants have a mix of roles although most are employment engagement / communication professionals or senior managers and sponsors

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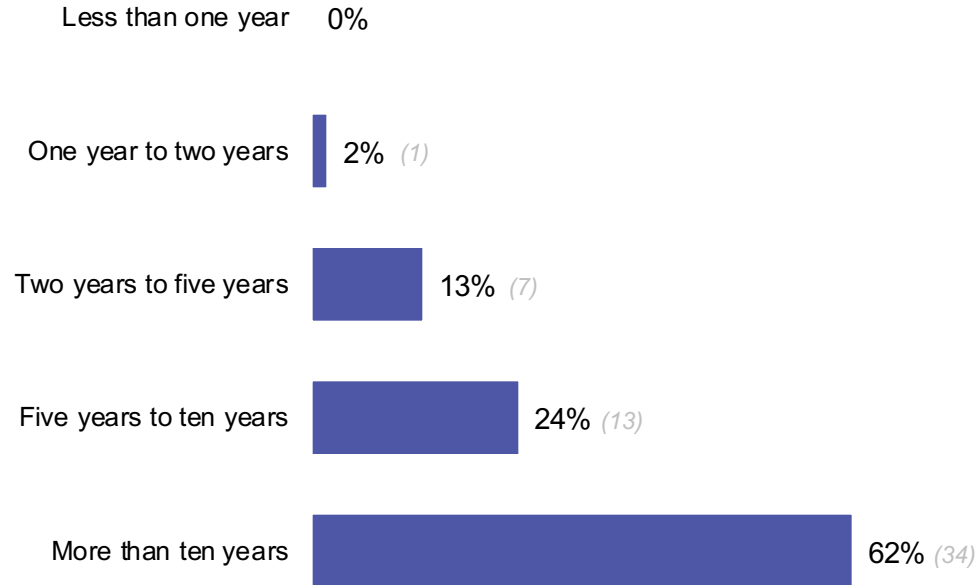
**Q: Which of the following best describes your role in delivering live events?**



## Our sample also differs in their levels of experience in delivering live events, but most have been involved in the industry for more than a decade

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**Q: How long have you been involved in delivering live events?**





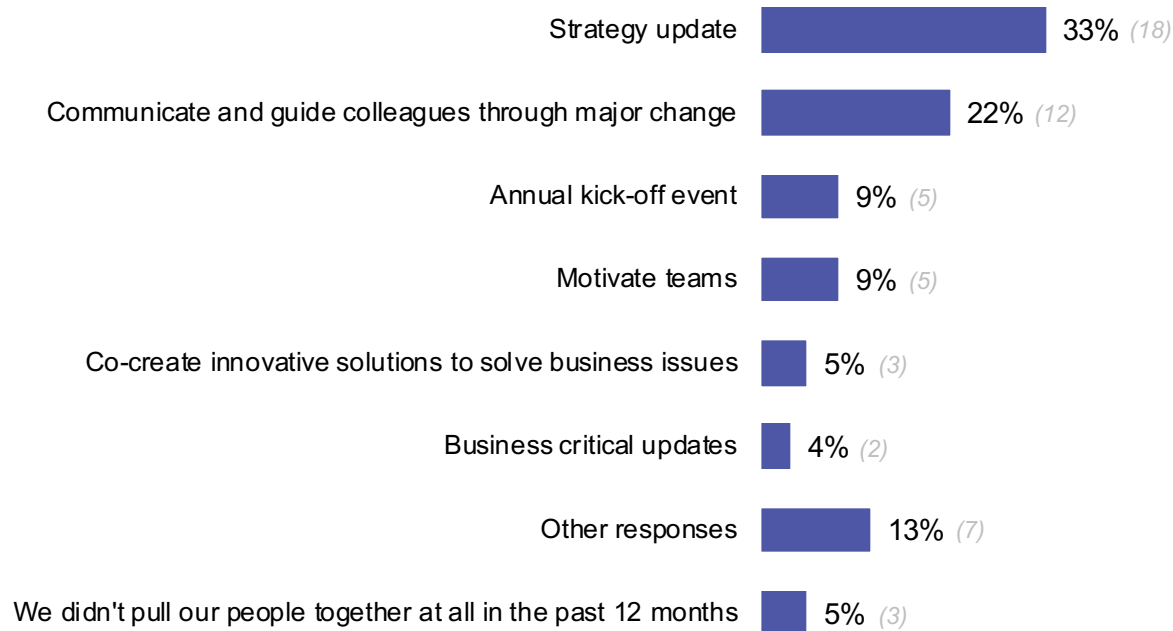
## DELIVERING AN EFFECTIVE EVENT

### Event objectives and evaluation

# Internal live events have mainly been driven by change – be it a strategy update or to communicate and guide colleagues through a major change

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**Q: Over the past year, which best describes the primary reason you pulled your people together for an internal live event?**

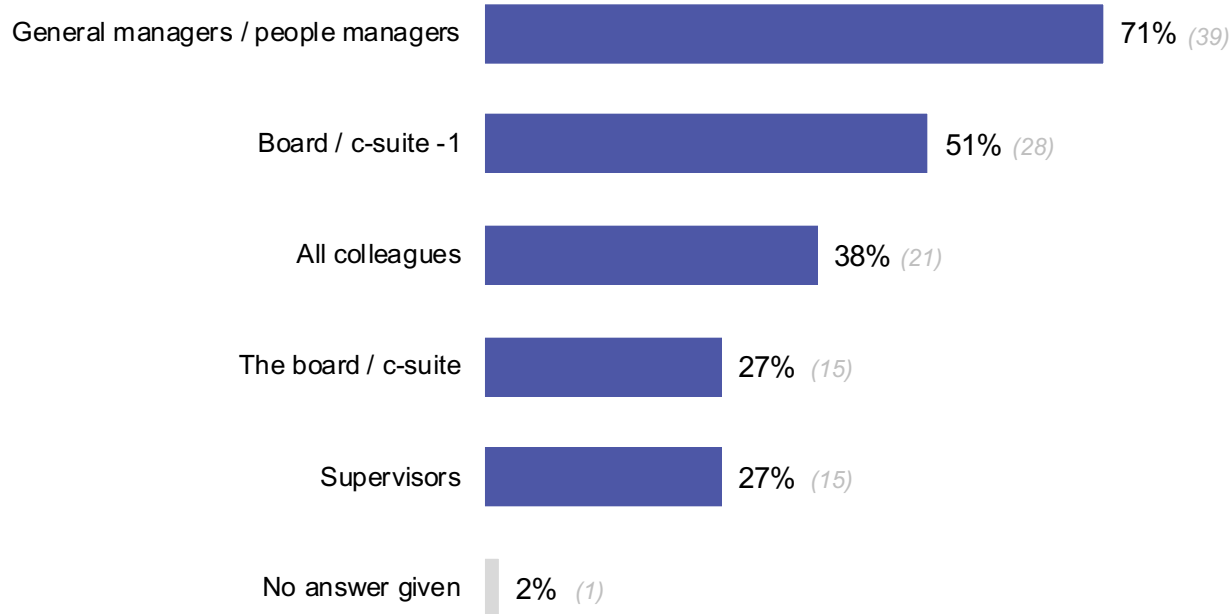




# General managers and people managers top the broad list of invitees

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**Q: Over the past year, who have you typically invited to your events?**



Sample base: 55 respondents  
Percentages are shown *(the number of people behind the percentages are shown in italics)*



# Frustrations are diverse, but issues relating to timings / agenda planning and content / audience engagement are mentioned most

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**Q: Thinking about the past few major live events you've been involved with, what are your biggest frustrations?**

"Agenda too big for time  
- gets squeezed at  
either end."

"Late stage changes to  
agenda / focus of execs at last  
minute and post-event pull  
through from leaders."

"Engagement,  
engagement,  
engagement."

"Audience engagement and  
participation. Presenters  
lacking in confidence or just  
plain dull! Trying to do too  
much on the day."

Timings / sticking to timings / agenda planning 22% *(12)*

Audience engagement / management / content 18% *(10)*

Dealing with / engagement from stakeholders or leadership 16% *(9)*

Dealing with / management of speakers and presenters 16% *(9)*

Technology failures / management 16% *(9)*

Clear message / messages not getting through 9% *(5)*

Getting people to attend / uncertainty of numbers 9% *(5)*

Venue / venue management 7% *(4)*

Budget / budgeting 5% *(3)*

*Themes at 5% or more*

The word cloud aims to give a feel for the most commonly used words in the verbatim comments



# The critical success factors emphasise that events need to engage attendees and effectively convey the key messages

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**Q: Thinking about the past few major live events you've been involved with, what are your top three critical success factors?**

"Engagement, results, action after event."

"Relevant content, ability to engage and work on strategic themes, clear takeaways / call to action."

"1. People go away engaged and committed to the mission 2. Key messages are understood 3. Actions are followed through."

"Creating the desire for people to want to change. Keeping people engaged. Getting the client aligned to what is possible."

Attendees leave with message / actions / leads to change 31% *(17)*

Engagement / people leave engaged 29% *(16)*

Pre-event planning / preparation 24% *(13)*

Interactive / experiential 18% *(10)*

Location / venue 16% *(9)*

The content / topics covered 16% *(9)*

Clarity / understanding (of event aims / desired outcomes) 15% *(8)*

Technology 11% *(6)*

The right agenda / clearly defined 11% *(6)*

Increased performance (e.g. ROI, awareness, revenue) 9% *(5)*

Networking / social events 9% *(5)*

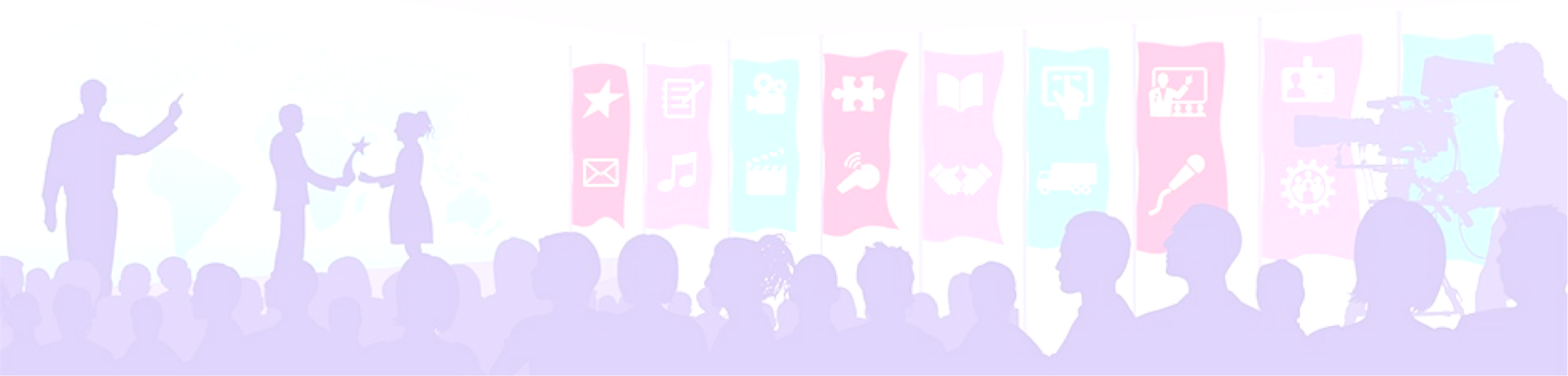
Leadership involvement 7% *(4)*

Speakers 5% *(3)*

*Themes at 5% or more*

The word cloud aims to give a feel for the most commonly used words in the verbatim comments





## EVENT RESOURCES

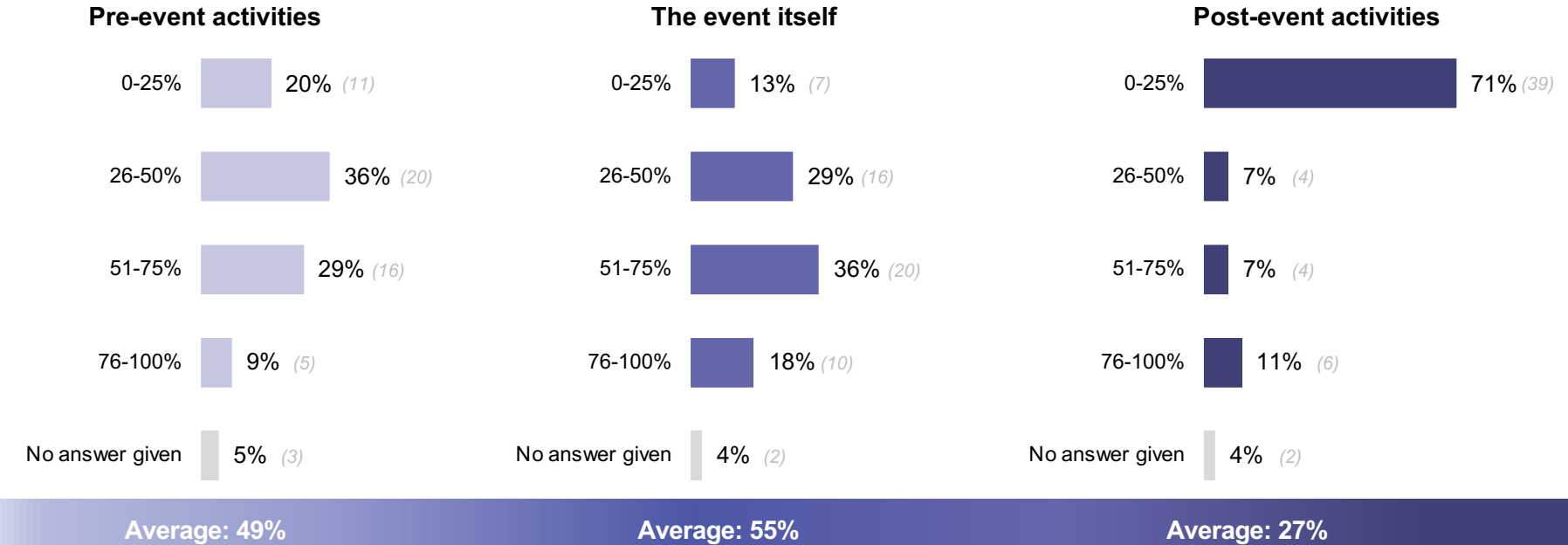
Logistics & external partners



# The lead up and the event itself draw the most resource – significantly less resource is dedicated to the activities that follow

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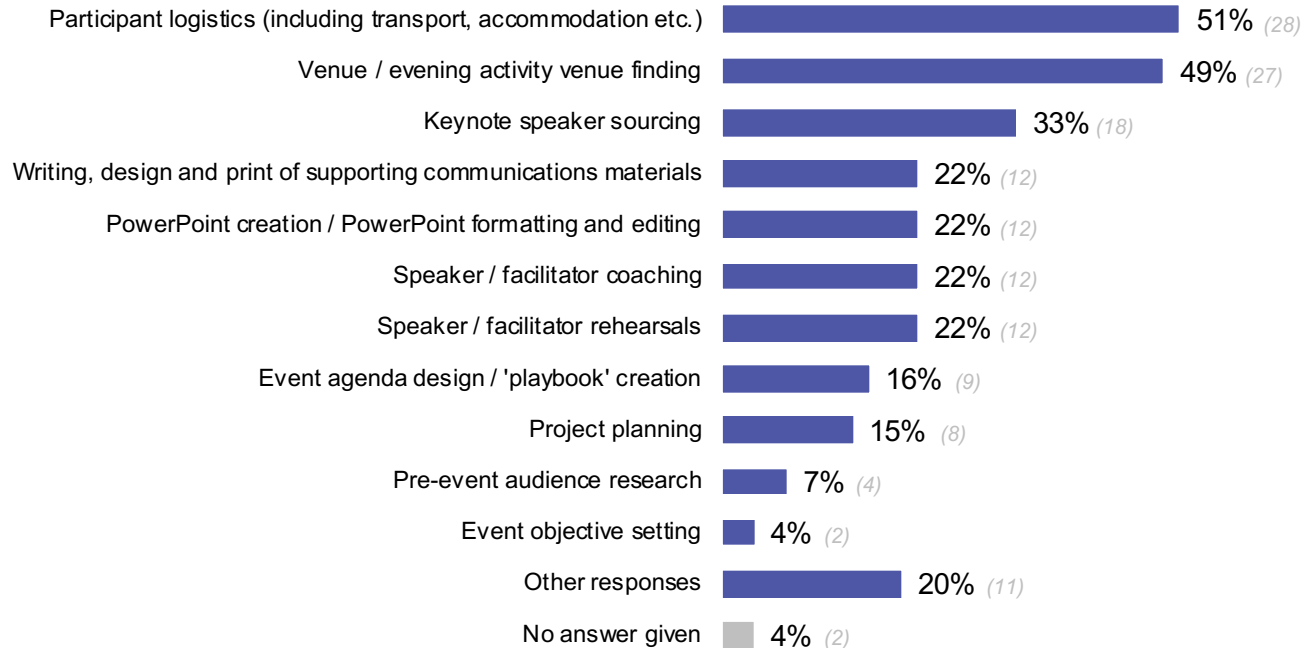
Q: In percentage terms, what proportion of your overall resources do you dedicate to....



# When it comes to pre-event services, participant logistics and venue finding are the services that are most likely to be supplied by external partners

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**Q: Which of the following pre-event services would you typically procure through external partners?**

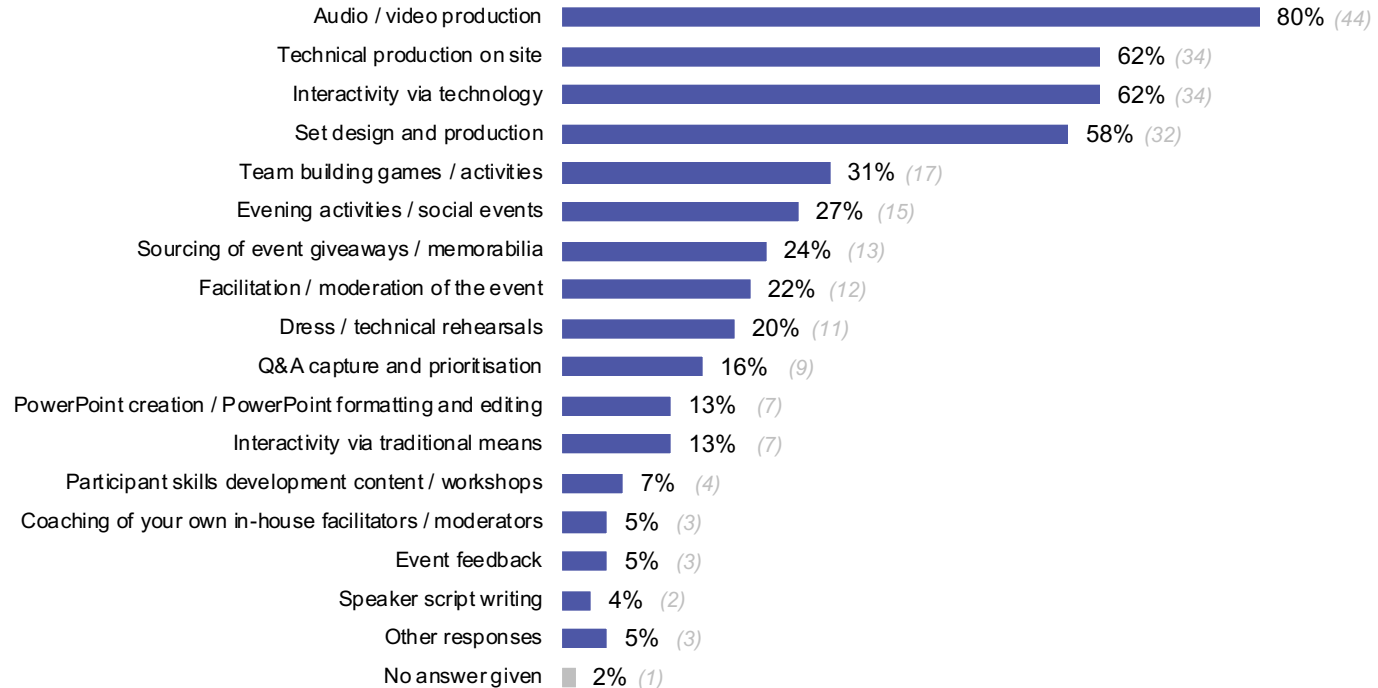




# The more technical on-site services (like audio / video production, technical production, tech-driven interactivity) are most likely to be outsourced

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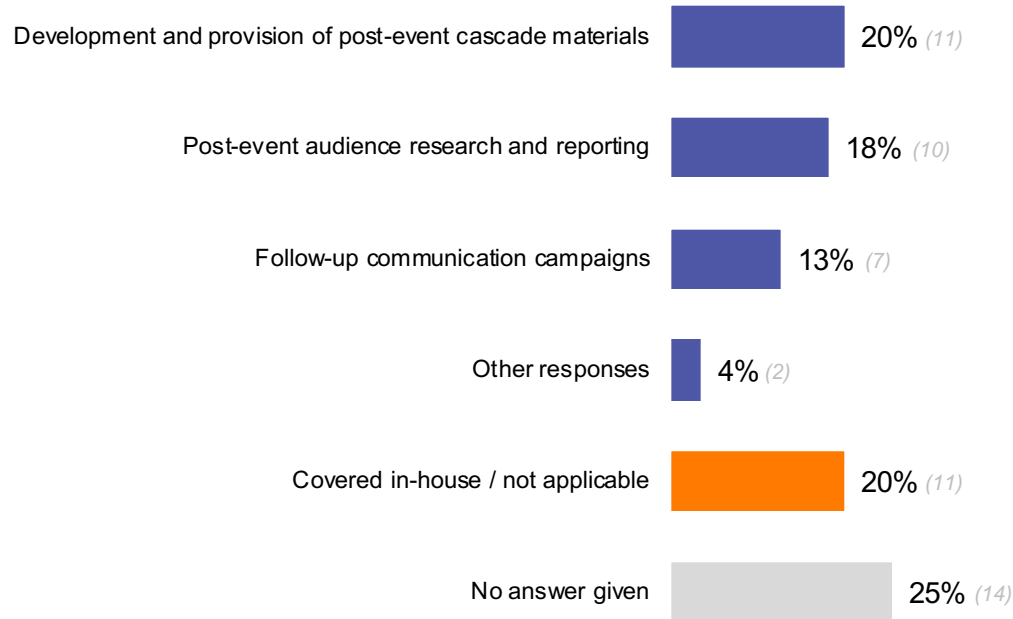
**Q: Which of the following on-site services would you typically procure through external partners?**



# Developing cascade materials and research / reporting are outsourced the most *after* the event, but fewer people use external partners at this stage

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**Q: Which of the following post-event services would you typically procure through external partners?**



# When asked to consider the most valuable characteristics of external partners, a collaborative working style rises to the top

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**Q: What do you value most in a potential external partner, should you use one?**

“Ability to work with me as a team, to add value to my ideas, to stretch me and help me achieve my objectives.”

“Bringing new ideas, expertise, benchmarks. Working in partnership, brainstorming and feeling we are one team.”

“Objective, collaborative, proactive.”

“An understanding of what we do and the ability to think together with us on how to enhance the value proposal.”

Collaboration / partnership / working well together 20% *(11)*

Innovation / creativity / new ideas 16% *(9)*

Delivery / on-time delivery 15%

Trust 15% *(8)*

Expertise / knowledge in key areas 13% *(7)*

Reliability 13% *(7)*

Communication / easy to get hold of 7%

Experience 7% *(4)*

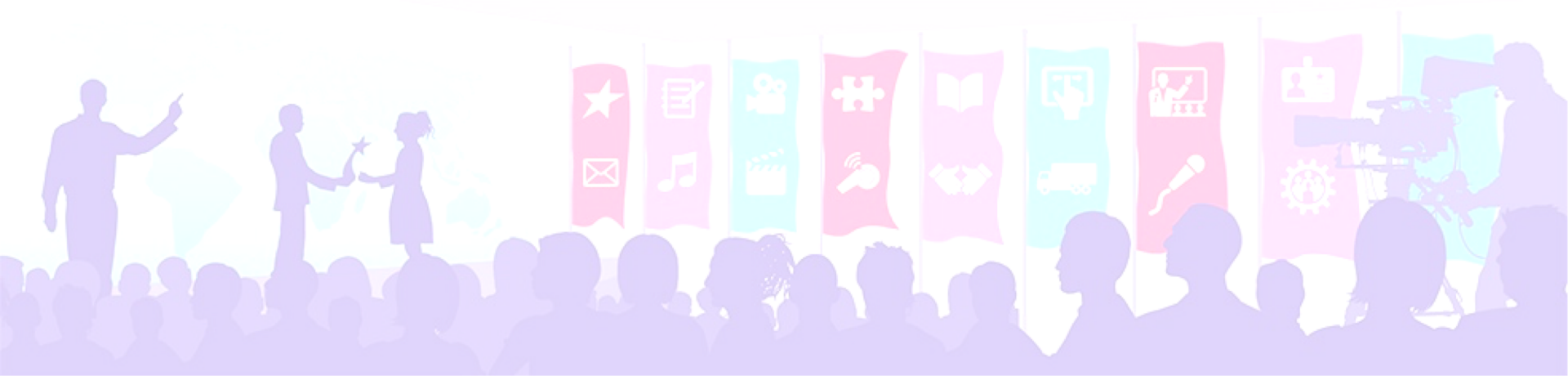
Flexibility 7% *(4)*

*Themes at 5% or more*

**Q: What do you value most in a potential external partner, should you use one?**

The word cloud aims to give a feel for the most commonly used words in the verbatim comments





## NOW & NEXT

Trends and hot topics

# In terms of observed trends, increased focus on audience engagement and technological advancements are mentioned most in spontaneous feedback

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**Q: What major trends, if any, have you seen emerge?**

"Audience engagement is becoming central with more workshops, interactivity and smaller groups sessions."

"People want more of an experience, and wanting things to be interactive because of short attention spans."

"Use of interactive technology has increased. There is also an increased shift toward experiential and immersive experiences, with much less reliance on PowerPoint presentations."

"The use of technology and more venues with AV built in for self serve."

Audience engagement / interaction 33% *(18)*

Technology / new technology 33% *(18)*

Digitalisation 13% *(7)*

Virtual events / communication 7% *(4)*

Breakout sessions 5% *(3)*

Smaller groups / events 5% *(3)*

Use of social media 5% *(3)*

Workshops 5% *(3)*

*Themes at 5% or more*

31

[illegible]

# The hot topics at recent events show some varied interests, but responding to change (and managing the change) and talking strategy top the list

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**Q: What would you describe as the hot topics at your recent live events?**

"Business change and strategy."

"Changes of purchasing behaviour  
- Digital transformation -  
Regulatory changes - Change  
management within the company."

"Change, personal  
change, acting  
differently."

"1. Rationale for change.  
2. Connection to strategy."

Change / change management 18% *(10)*

Strategy 16% *(9)*

Digital / digitalisation 13% *(7)*

Leadership 13% *(7)*

Technology 13% *(7)*

Personal development / focus 11% *(6)*

Globalisation / global challenges 9% *(5)*

Brexit 7% *(4)*

Data / data protection 7% *(4)*

Culture / ways of working 5% *(3)*

Sustainability 5% *(3)*

Trends 5% *(3)*

*Themes at 5% or more*

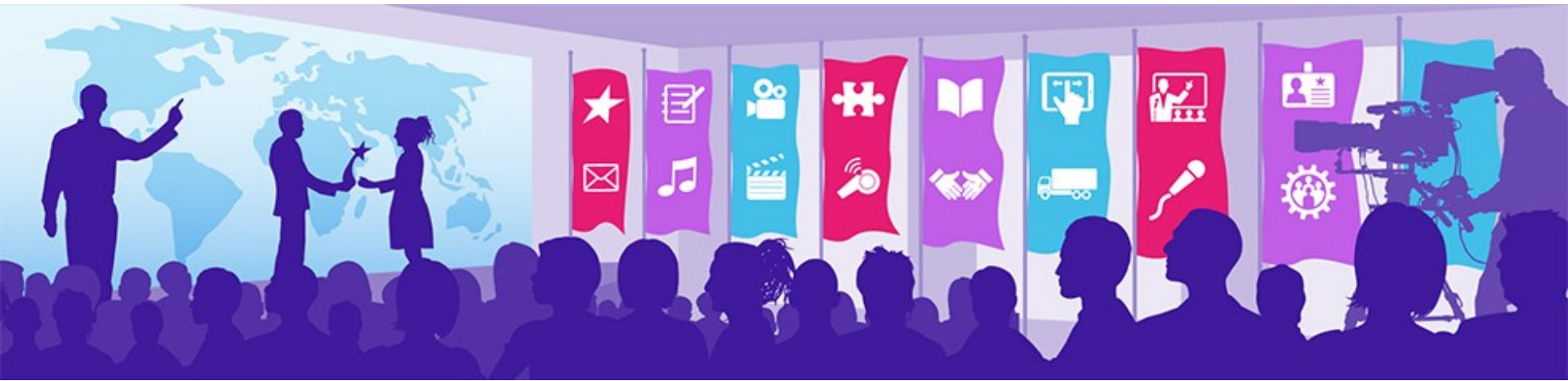


**Q: What would you describe as the hot topics at your recent live events?**

33

The word cloud aims to give a feel for the most commonly used words in the verbatim comments





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