2025 Channel Insights

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Foreword

Dear industry colleagues,

As the exhibitions industry begins to exceed pre-pandemic levels of scale and economic impact in many regions of the world, it is vital that we not only celebrate our resilience but also take a close look at how our customers' needs have evolved. This research, commissioned by UFI, supported by SISO, and conducted by Explori, offers a robust, data-led insight into exhibitor sentiment across nearly a decade of B2B events. Drawing from standardised surveys across more than 3,000 exhibitions, alongside in-depth interviews with senior industry stakeholders, the findings reflect both the strength of our recovery and the changing dynamics that will shape our future.

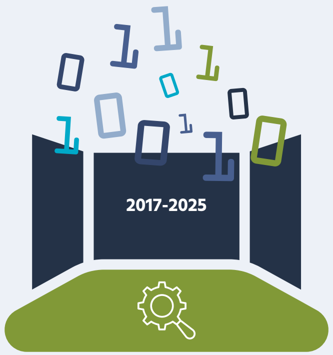
What emerges clearly is that while satisfaction and confidence in the exhibition channel remain high, exhibitors' priorities and expectations are shifting. Success can no longer be measured by past formulas alone. As an industry, we must continue to adapt—deepening our understanding of exhibitor objectives, refining event experiences, and innovating in response to a changing commercial landscape. This report provides essential takeaways for both organisers and exhibitors to navigate that evolution, ensuring we stay relevant, resilient, and ready to lead in the years ahead.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Skeith OBE
Managing Director & CEO, UFI

The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry

Methodology & data



3,245 B2B events

This report draws from Explori's exhibitor data, collected and aggregated using our dedicated research platform over the period **2017-2025**. All of Explori's exhibitor surveys include a comprehensive range of **standardised questions**, asked **consistently, and tailored to different event types**. This approach allows us to create robust KPI benchmarks and track changes in the exhibitor experience over time, using anonymised and aggregated data collected at 3,245 B2B events since 2017.

6 key metrics

In particular, this report looks at our **exhibitor KPIs**, including **four key** questions: Satisfaction, NPS (Net Promoter Score), Likelihood of Return, and Event Importance. We also explore how successfully exhibitors are achieving their **core business objectives** – both pre and post-pandemic.

15 industry leaders

In addition to our quantitative analysis of the data, we interviewed **fifteen industry leaders**, including **exhibitors**, **organisers** and **agencies/suppliers to build a broader understanding of the industry trends**.

Key findings

1

Post-pandemic, exhibitors are getting more value from events

Core metrics such as Overall Satisfaction, Net Promoter Score (NPS), and Likelihood of Return have remained significantly above pre-pandemic levels, following a 2022 surge that has proved to be more than a 'honeymoon phase'.

2

Event objectives are being met more successfully

Exhibitors are more likely to achieve their key goals – including lead generation, meeting with existing customers, product launches, and market entry – compared to the years preceding the pandemic.

3

Economic pressure is driving smarter exhibiting strategy

In the face of high costs and lower budgets, exhibitors have become more selective, prioritising meaningful engagement over volume. Data-driven planning, budget-conscious innovation, and a focus on quality interactions define today's exhibiting mindset.

4

In-person connection is more important than ever

In a digitally saturated work environment, face-to-face interaction is more valuable than ever. Events now serve as critical touchpoints for relationship-building and authentic engagement, both with existing and prospective customers.

5

Flexibility and collaboration are key to event success

The path forward includes offering more flexible participation models, curating high-quality audiences, and treating exhibitor relationships as strategic partnerships – supported by shared data, tailored packages, and stronger ROI tracking tools.

6

Technology can unlock greater efficiencies

Emerging tech, especially AI, must be deployed more effectively to improve matchmaking, streamline logistics, and enhance both the attendee and exhibitor experience at scale.

01
Evolving (and improved) exhibitor KPIs

Stronger metrics

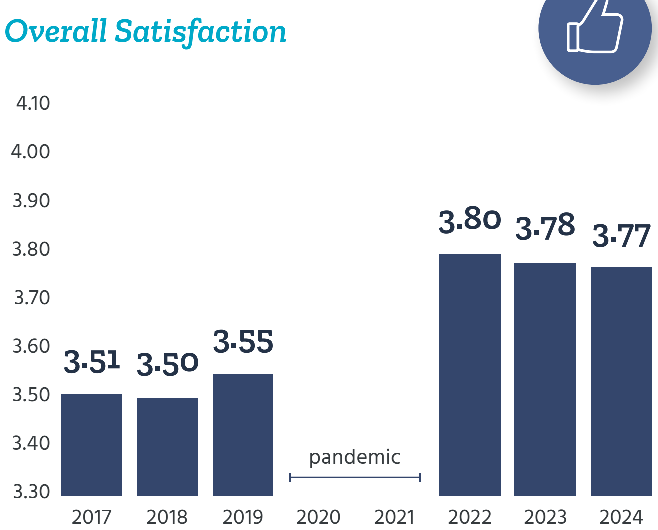
Here are four of the key metrics we use to measure the exhibitor experience at trade shows and events:

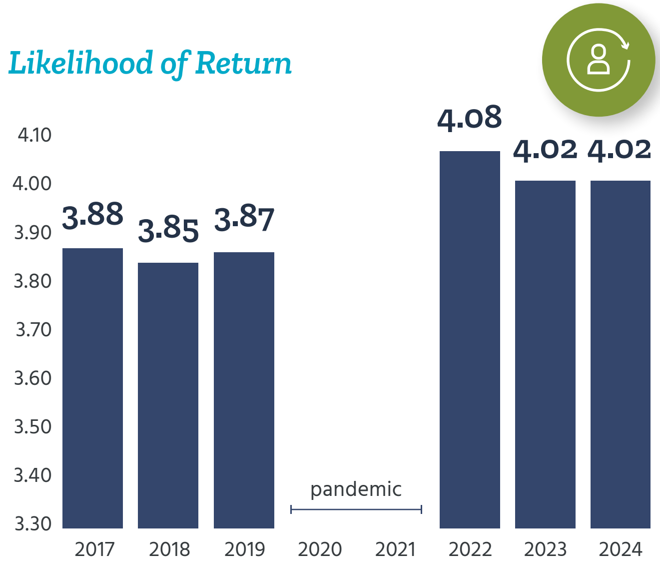
- ***Overall Satisfaction***
- ***Likelihood of Return***
- ***Net Promoter Score (NPS)***
- ***Importance***

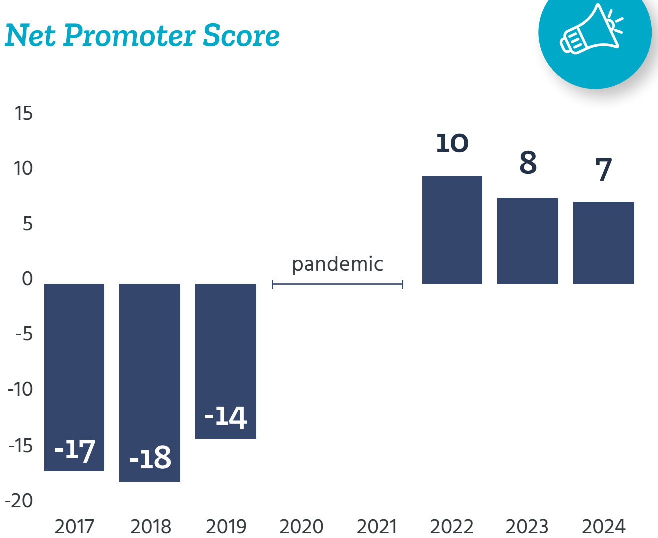
In **2022**, when in-person events returned to full strength after the pandemic, all four metrics enjoyed a **significant boost**, with each of the four KPIs **up significantly** on 2019.

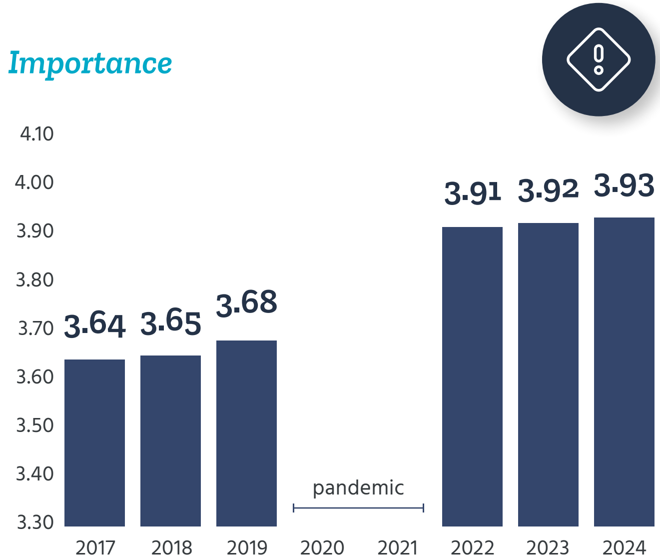
Now, it's clear that this was not simply a post-pandemic honeymoon period, but the start of a **longer-term trend**. Although **2022** marked a particular high point, all four metrics have stayed well above pre-pandemic baselines in the years since.

Annual exhibitor KPI benchmarks 2017 – 2024 (mean average per year)





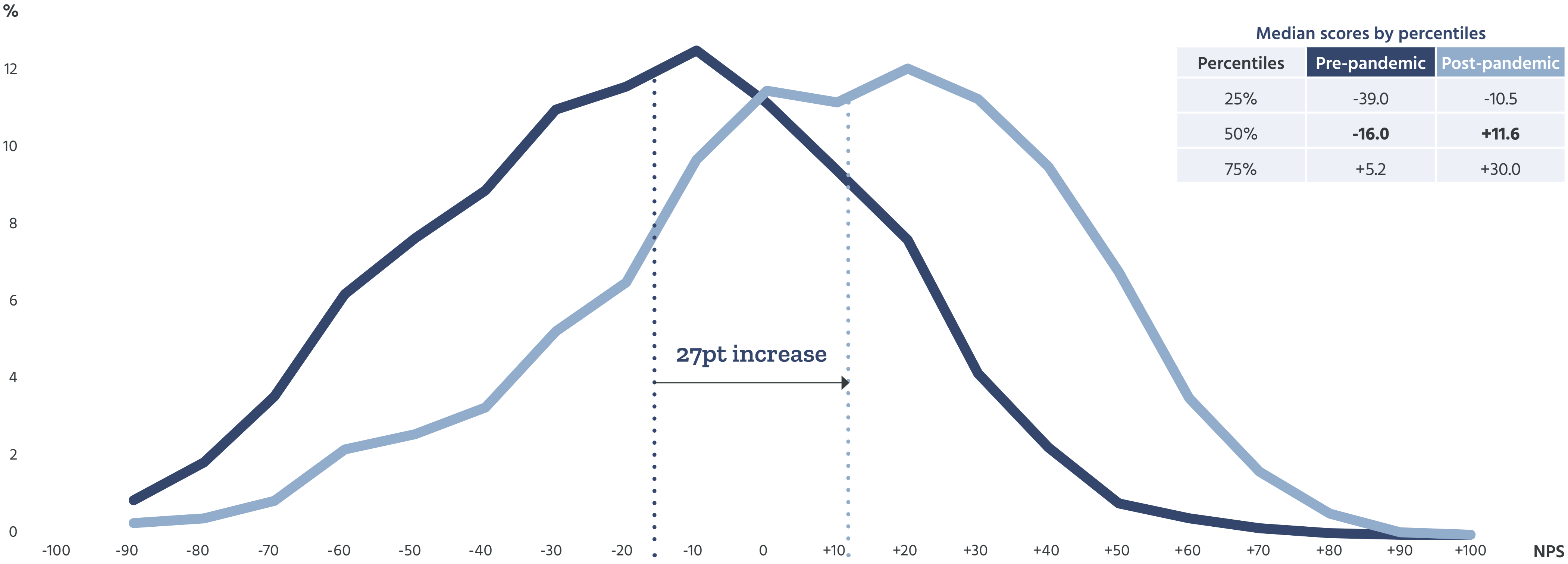




This chart shows the standard distribution curves of exhibitor NPS across the 3,245 events in the sample. Before 2020, the majority of events received negative NPS ratings; from 2022 however, most events receive positive scores (above the 'zero' midpoint on the scale).

Explori's data shows that there is notable variation in NPS by sector, region and event subtype – these more granular benchmarks are only available to Explori customers. Observing the industry as whole across the comparable periods, we have seen a positive shift in exhibitor NPS of 27 points. This is the greatest shift we have seen in NPS benchmarks since Explori launched in 2012.

Exhibitor NPS distribution curves – pre vs post-pandemic



Median scores by percentiles

Percentiles	Pre-pandemic	Post-pandemic
25%	-39.0	-10.5
50%	**-16.0**	**+11.6**
75%	+5.2	+30.0

The outlook

While the exhibitor KPIs are stronger than they were five years ago, there is still room for improvement. In a challenging economic macro-context, it is important for the industry to address any issues head-on. In the next two sections, we will look at how exhibitors and organisers can work in partnership to drive mutual success and future-proof the events industry.

I think we are in a good place at the moment, but as an industry we can't become complacent... you need to be vigilant; you have to be looking at data. You have to be asking why; you have to be pulling back the layers to really understand the dynamics that are at play.

Adam Ford
COO, Clarion Events

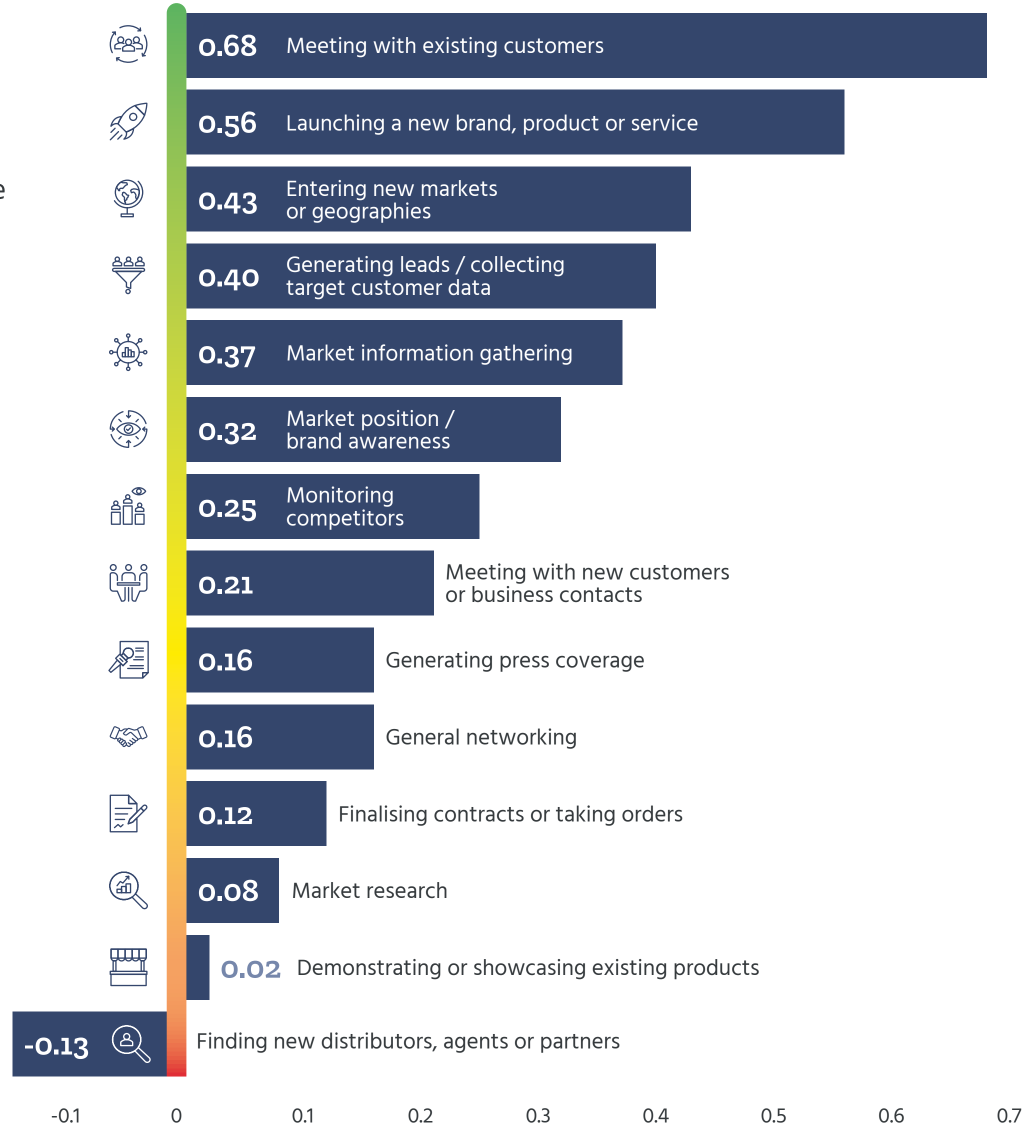
Better outcomes

Our data also shows that exhibitors are **meeting their objectives** more successfully at events. Comparing post-pandemic events to pre-2020 events, exhibitors were **notably** more likely to feel that they had achieved their goals for 8 of the 14 key objectives tracked.

The only objective showing a decline in achievement is '**finding new distributors, agents or partners.**' Conversely, the achievement of all other objectives has improved. This evidences that since 2022, exhibitors are getting more from trade shows.

'Achievement of objectives' is measured on a 5pt scale. The chart shows the change in the average 'achievement score' for each objective since the pandemic.

Achievement of exhibitor objectives pre vs post-pandemic



02
Drivers of improved exhibitor satisfaction

To further explore the drivers behind improved exhibitor satisfaction, we interviewed fifteen leaders from across the events industry.

Though our contributors were approaching this issue from different perspectives – as exhibitors, organisers, or agencies/suppliers – they all broadly agreed on the driving factors behind this positive trend. These factors fall into two broad categories: first, the renewed importance of in-person events post-pandemic; second, the changing nature of what 'exhibiting' looks like today.

Both factors are, inevitably, shaped by the broader global context, from virtual working practices to economic uncertainty.

In-person events as a virtual antidote

All our contributors felt that the pandemic had **re-emphasised** the value of **in-person events**, leading to a surge in satisfaction when colleagues were finally able to return to the trade show floor.

A few years on, many of our contributors suggested that the **longer-term shift** to virtual working practices had triggered a more **fundamental appreciation** for events that brought people together in-person. In particular, **exhibitors** noted how crucial events had become for face-to-face engagement with existing customers.

Some contributors observed that they found the **online world** increasingly difficult to navigate, with ‘real’ opportunities to connect lost amid high content volume and digital fakes. By contrast, **face-to-face** meetings now feel **more important**, and **more authentic**, than ever.

Pre-pandemic, it felt like trade shows were being taken for granted. But the great ‘experiment’ – of not having any in-person events – actually then allowed that medium, that channel’s attributes to really be seen in the light of day.

Adam Ford
COO, Clarion Events

Online, it has become harder and harder to cut through the noise. That’s why in-person events aren’t just about chasing fresh leads anymore – they’re powerful trust accelerators. They give prospects who already know your brand online the face-to-face assurance they need to turn curiosity into a confident ‘yes’.

Tim Groot
CEO & Founder, Grip

The strategic evolution in event participation

In our conversations, exhibitors and organisers both described a shift toward more **strategic, data-driven approaches** to exhibiting.

This was predicted, this post-pandemic effect. People are so happy to gather again. But if everyone returns to the old formats, I think over time we will find that not everything, even before the pandemic, had a reason to exist. So, some shows may not continue, only the most valuable.

Stephen Rose
Head of Communication Services, SIEMENS

As a result, exhibitor priorities have changed: they are more **selective** about attendance, measure success based on **quality** of interactions rather than **quantity**, focus on **relationship-building** over simple **product showcasing**, and are seeking new ways to meaningfully **show up** at events. In the context of increasing exhibiting costs, exhibitors are looking for innovative ways to **increase impact** without increasing their spend.

Our budgets are either flat or declined and yet the cost is higher. And so how do you manage that? We're doing more sponsoring, we're asking how we can get more creative in how we show up, or how we might engage an audience differently than we might have thought about before.

Colleen Bisconti
VP, Events and Experiences, IBM

While our data paints a positive picture, it's hard to ignore the wider economic context, with exhibitors and organisers alike dealing with economic uncertainty and the threat of tariffs. Costs have increased significantly since the pandemic, and this is undoubtedly a key influence on exhibitors' more selective approach to event participation.

If I were an exhibitor, what would my strategy be in this economy – to secure the foundation. I want to have quality time with my existing customers, make sure I maintain them, and potentially I can grow that.... So, we as organisers need to understand that.

Adam Ford
COO, Clarion Events

03

Building on exhibitor satisfaction in 2025 & beyond

We asked our fifteen contributors for their thoughts on how the industry can build on this positive trend in exhibitor satisfaction levels. Some key themes emerged across all groups – organisers, exhibitors and agencies/suppliers – though there were some points of difference.

Quality over quantity

Quality over quantity is becoming more important and we're hearing a lot of that... Quality attendees are key, we need to be keeping the audience at the centre because our secret sauce as event organisers is going to be the audience.

Kate Spellman
CCO, Questex

After the pandemic, organisers improved their offering of digital products to help exhibitors organise their visits, to have matchmaking capabilities, to make appointments. So, exhibitors had more interactions – they were able to organise themselves better and to get more out of the show.

Ulas Boyaci
COO, Exhibitions, Hamburg Messe und Congress

Quality of attendees was a recurring theme in the interviews. The **organisers** we spoke to believed that **attendee quality** was the key driver of exhibitor Satisfaction, and that the focus should be on targeting **higher-level decision-makers** within attendee organisations. Contributors also emphasised the value of **sophisticated match-making programs** over basic networking set-ups.

A focus on existing relationships

In addition to general attendee quality, many of our contributors talked about how exhibitors can use events as a means of expanding their relationships with existing customers.

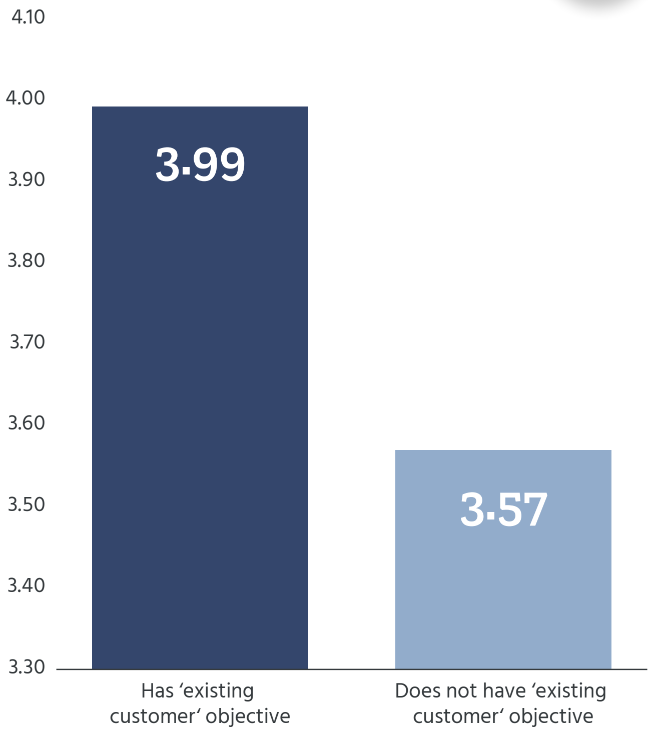
Instead of casting a wide net, in the traditional way, you know who's going to be there. I know who I want to meet – either an existing client or a prospective client. And so, this idea of more meetings, this idea of targeting the approach, the speaker placement, that's how the approach has evolved.

Colleen Bisconti
VP, Events and Experiences, IBM

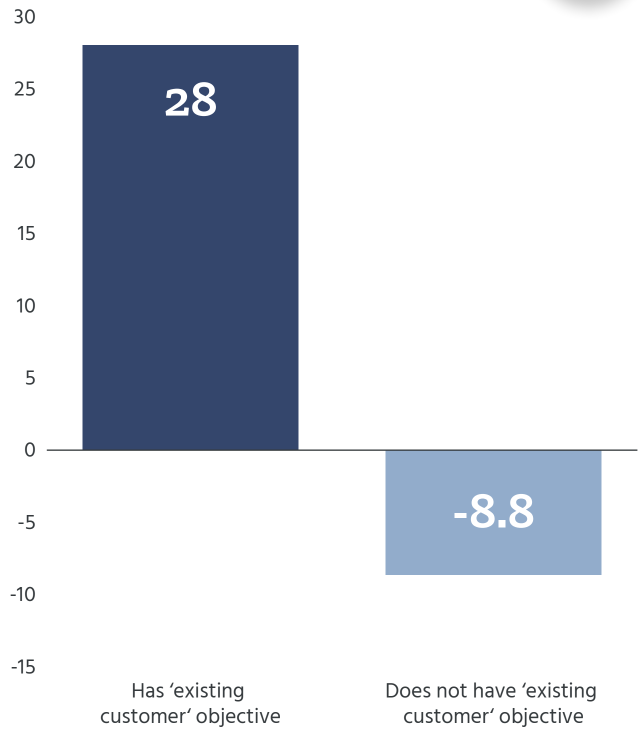
Exhibitors who use events to meet with existing customers have **better outcomes**. This is clear from Explori's exhibitor metrics: exhibitors who attend an event with the objective of 'meeting or engaging with existing customers' give **significantly higher** ratings for **Overall Satisfaction**, **NPS** and **Event ROI**.

KPI variance for exhibitors that had the objective of 'meeting with existing customers' vs those that don't

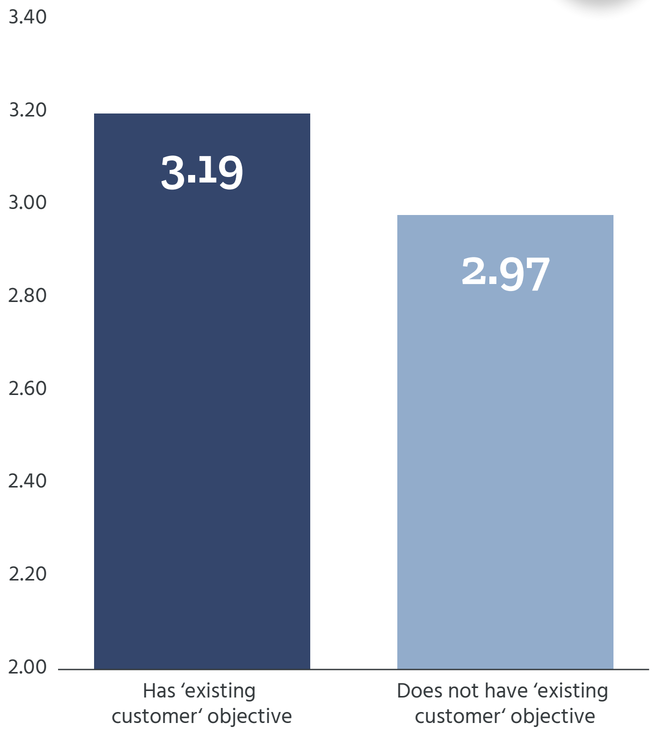
Overall Satisfaction



Net Promoter Score

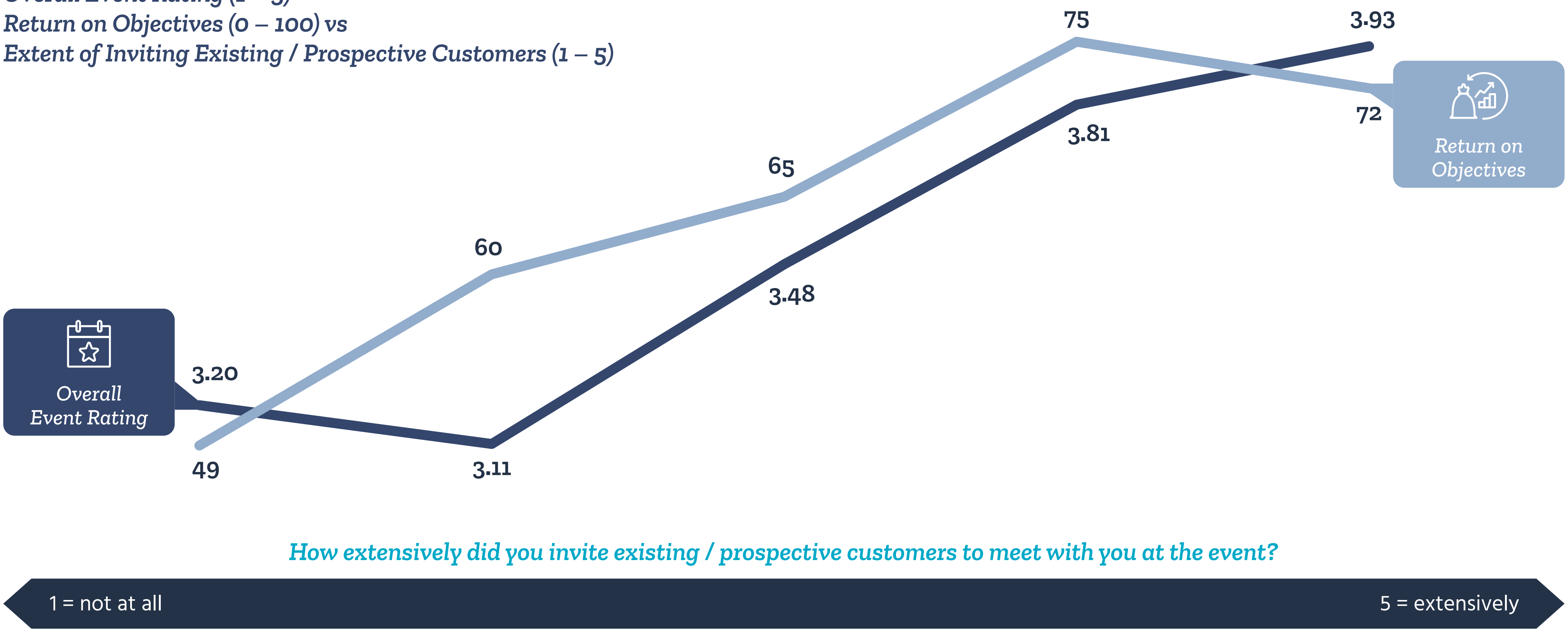


Return on Investment



Data from Explori's exhibit measurement product, Maxbi, backs this up further. Used by hundreds of exhibitors to **evaluate outcomes** against their **event strategy**, Maxbi tracks the extent to which exhibitors have invited existing / prospective customers to meet with them at the event. There is a strong correlation where the more extensively exhibitors invite customers / prospects to meet with them at the show, the greater their 'Return on Objectives Score', and the more highly they rate the event.

Overall Event Rating (1 – 5)
Return on Objectives (0 – 100) vs
Extent of Inviting Existing / Prospective Customers (1 – 5)



Data provision to demonstrate ROI

Many of our contributors referenced the need for **improved data** to enable exhibitors to track their **ROI** more effectively. Exhibitors are looking for **robust data** on attendee demographics & engagement, and for organisers to provide the **tools to measure and track** business outcomes. This is a familiar concern: the demand for enhanced event data comes up often in research with exhibitors.

Data is only valuable if it's actionable. Organizers need to help exhibitors understand not just who is attending, but whether they're the right people. The more precise the data, the better the decisions.

Nicola Kastner
CEO, Event Leaders Exchange

As a premium and resource-intensive marketing channel, trade shows face real risks if they are unable to communicate their commercial and strategic value to exhibitors, many of whom are under pressure from internal stakeholders to cut costs and prove ROI.

You've got to use the data post event. Most companies know how to capture the data, but don't know what they need to do with it, and that's where that gap is. Everyone can claim that data is critical to help make informed decisions – and it is – as long as you know what to do with the data post event.

Dean Armintrout
Senior Director, Experiential Marketing, Zendesk

Traditionally, measurement was all about leads... But those same people at some of the same events that I've been going to for years are starting to say, they don't care about leads, they care about qualified discussions and meetings that drive pipeline. So I've seen a big shift there.

Aaron Karpaty
Senior Director of Strategic Growth, Captello

More flexibility

Exhibitors told us that they want their participation in shows to **evolve**. To support this, they need organisers to offer more **flexible engagement models**, with different contract options, and price points. Exhibitors are looking to work creatively within **budget constraints** to find new ways to show up at events, beyond the traditional booth model.

I tell my teams that we don't need to sign up for a booth just because you think you have to. Instead of a booth, maybe sponsor a lounge or ancillary event, or host a private reception or happy hour. That's what we shifted the model to in order to maximise our ROI.

Dean Armintrout
Senior Director, Experiential Marketing, Zendesk

Our research here at The Opus Group indicates that events have transitioned from 'product showcase' to 'solution storytelling'... I think you're going to have a more fruitful conversation when you're in a meeting room versus on a busy show floor.

Kim Kopetz
President & CEO, The Opus Group

Organisers, too, referenced the need to offer exhibitors more than just a physical space, and to **design features** that acknowledge the increasing importance of events as a space for **building relationships**.

We have to keep on moving. We have to develop our shows further. There is a high expectation now to get more tailored offerings... it's not just the one type of exhibitor.

Ulas Boyaci
COO, Exhibitions, Hamburg Messe und Congress

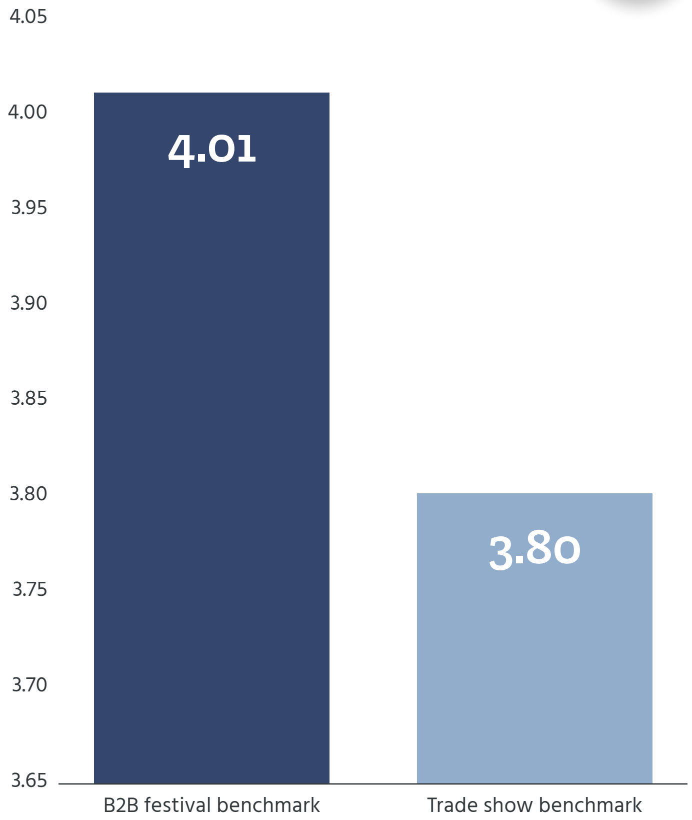
Increasingly, sector-leading shows have responded to this trend by delivering B2B festival models. These events differentiate the ways brands participate and how they engage buyers, compared to traditional trade shows.

In this analysis, we identified a sample of events that are specifically marketed as B2B festivals. The findings support the idea that exhibitors value the variations on the traditional trade show format.

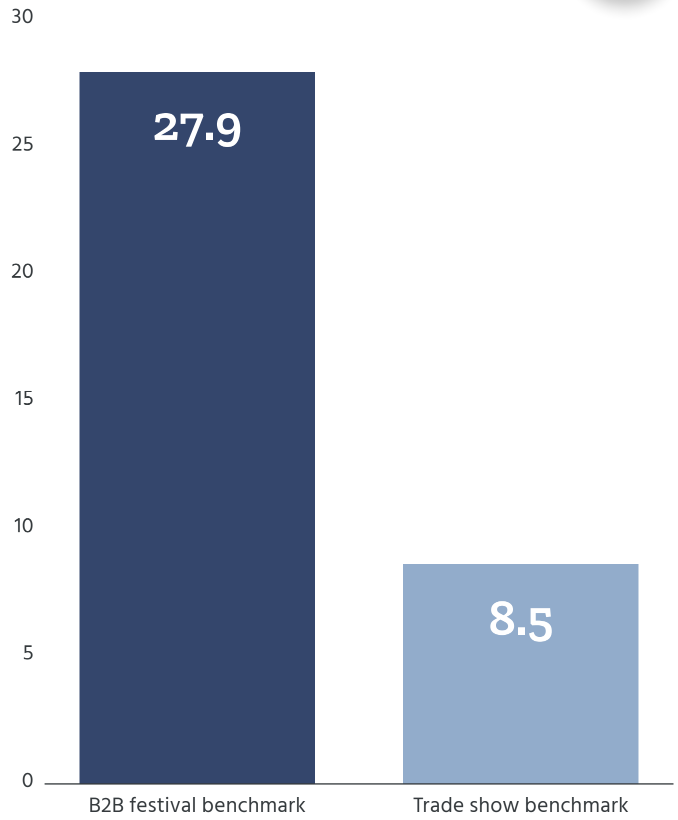
The data indicates that B2B festivals produce much higher Overall Satisfaction and NPS outcomes for exhibitors, than traditional trade shows.

B2B festival events vs trade show benchmarks

Overall Satisfaction



Net Promoter Score



Tech solutions

Many of our contributors felt that technology – and **particularly AI** – could be deployed more effectively to **enhance the experience** of exhibitors and attendees, facilitate **connections** and create **logistical efficiencies**, for example improving wayfinding solutions in large venues.

I genuinely feel that AI agents are going to change customer behaviour. We already use WhatsApp for customer service, self-service type interactions. What I can increasingly see happening is the use of an AI agent to serve information, like a virtual assistant. My belief is that will come pretty quickly, I would say within the next year to 18 months.

Clare Puddifoot
Chief Marketing Officer, EMEA, Informa

Whenever AI can help us to create new, exciting formats, we should leverage it. Therefore, I see a big, bright future for a strong combination of artificial and natural intelligence.

Stephen Rose
Head of Communication Services, SIEMENS

AI is no longer just a talking point—it's becoming a tangible part of the physical event experience. We're already integrating it into live demos, workshops, breakouts and smaller customer touchpoints. It's not just a slide in the deck anymore—it's powering registration flows, driving personalized interactions, and even shaping high-stakes executive sessions. The opportunity isn't whether to use AI, it's how creatively and meaningfully you bring it to life in every part of the event journey

Vanessa Karlsson
Director, Global Events, Cisco

Working in partnership

Underpinning many of these conversations was the idea that the **exhibitor-organiser relationship** is at its best when it functions as a **strategic partnership**. This materialised in discussions about how **organisers** can better understand **exhibitor needs,** and design event formats and participation packages accordingly.

If organisers want a multi-year commitment from exhibitors, then they need to show their mid-term strategy, and help us as well to see the long-term impact. This being said, they must be able to follow the trends, and the trends are changing very quickly. So, it's a mix of being agile, but also having a clear road map and being able to show what is unique when you attend this exhibition.

Anon
VP Events, Aerospace Industry

Other ways of working in **partnership** included, as described earlier, better **data-sharing**; contributors also discussed ways to **enhance** the exhibitor experience, including the possibility of organisers offering **'playbooks'** to help exhibitors maximise their investment.

How do you equip your sponsors and exhibitors with a playbook that helps them create excitement – before, during, and after the event? Give them the tools to activate on social, engage meaningfully on site, and even repurpose the experience when they return home. That's how you help them maximise their investment.

Angie Smith
CEO, InVision Communications

What we see is, that people are looking for two things. Of course, there is the business value of the show, but the second thing is the experience itself. Content and experience. Working closely with exhibitors we've learned that they focus intensely on how people feel emotionally about their booths. So as organizers, we make sure to create moments that matter.

Stefan Rummel
CEO, Messe Munchen Group

Takeaways for organisers

Organisers need to drive value for event participants – and find ways to prove that value, too. Based on this report, there are several pathways to success.

We need to make sure we learn the lessons from the pandemic and not go back there. We've got to be really conscious of it and proactive in addressing the concerns that were being raised in 2019 and actively address them while we have time.

Clare Puddifoot
Chief Marketing Officer, EMEA, Informa

01

Understand exhibitor needs

Exhibitors will choose to participate at events that feel designed with their needs, objectives and budgetary realities in mind. Organisers should take a robust, data-driven approach to understanding exhibitor needs – and iterate event formats based on what they find.

02

Empower exhibitors to become more data-driven

There is a clear need for better measurement tools that allow exhibitors to understand attendee demographics and track outcomes. In particular, there is an expectation that organisers should improve ROI measurement beyond simple lead counts.

03

Facilitate authentic connection

Industry colleagues agree that – now, more than ever – events are critical for connecting in-person. Organisers should acknowledge this by offering a spectrum of interaction models beyond presentations and one-on-one meetings.

04

Focus on existing relationships alongside new ones

A key finding is that exhibitors get added value from trade shows when they use them to engage with existing customers. Organisers should capitalise on this and do more to support exhibitors to attract their existing customers to join them at trade shows.

05

Think beyond the booth

Exhibitors may want alternatives to the traditional square footage presence. Organisers should consider offering more flexible packages, with different formats and price points, to engage a wider variety of exhibitors.

06

Leverage technology to streamline participant experiences

Tech solutions, in particular AI-driven solutions, could remove friction for exhibitors, and enable more targeted connections with potential customers. Organisers that stay ahead of the curve on this will be rewarded in the long-term.

Takeaways for exhibitors

Exhibitors need to work creatively within budget to maximise event ROI for stakeholders. This report outlines several strategies for success, including some tried-and-tested approaches from report contributors.

No longer can sellers go to New York City and meet with their top five customers in their offices, because they're not consistently in the office anymore. But their customers are at key industry events, so they can go to an event and meet with their top 20 customers there. That's incredibly valuable.

Dean Armintrout
Senior Director, Experiential Marketing, Zendesk

01

Activate beyond the booth

A common theme cited by the interviewees was how they had experimented with alternative activations at trade shows, including lounge sponsorships or ancillary events such as happy hours. These approaches enable brand connections with customers in differentiated, and possibly more engaging ways.

02

Rethink the 'shop window' approach

Our contributors talked about moving away from a 'shop window' approach at events, so that exhibitors can optimise those valuable opportunities to connect face-to-face. Should exhibitors now be bringing more expertise – i.e. product or tech specialists – to their booth or other event activations?

03

Build on existing relationships

In a virtual world, trade shows give exhibitors a rare chance to connect in-person with existing customers. While new connections and lead generation will always be a vital part of the trade show experience, exhibitors should consider how they can make the most of the opportunity to strengthen relationships with existing clients.

04

Advocate for better data

Exhibitors are more effective when they can make data-driven decisions. Exhibitors should consider how to organise and visualise their trade show data more consistently across their third-party events programs. To create the conditions for more useful data, they must collaborate with organisers to find a path to proving ROI more repeatably and scalably.

The way forward

Dear industry colleagues,

It has been a pleasure working on this report, and I sincerely hope that organisers and exhibitors around the world will take action on the points most relevant to their organisations.

While the pandemic marked an all-time low for our industry, the data we now see indicates that the seismic changes it brought about have acted as a catalyst for long-term improvement in the channel value of live events. In today's world of remote working and 'digital fakes', we can be more confident than ever that in-person events have a critical role to play in the marketing landscape.

However, what we cannot overlook – and what this research further confirms – is the pressing and growing risk the industry faces if measurement does not improve. With rising costs, increasing carbon pressures, and a widening gap in measurability compared to other channels, today's vibrant industry conditions may soon be tested by a new inflection point. At Explori, our mission is to drive innovation in event measurement and play our part in addressing these problems.

Thank you for reading this report. Please don't hesitate to reach out if there are any topics you would like to explore further.

Mark Brewster
CEO and Founder, Explori

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