



# PULSE SURVEY

## **THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS AND EVENTS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19**

October 21, 2020



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Even optimistic meeting professionals are growing jaded**, as a timeline for pandemic recovery remains elusive. Just a month ago, Northstar's PULSE Survey found that a strong majority of planners (71 percent) intended to resume face-to-face events no later than the second quarter of next year. That number has dropped to 55 percent, with the rest eyeing Q3 or beyond.

"Sadly, most of our events have now completely cancelled, as my clients don't foresee an end to the crisis," commented one of the 690 meeting planners who responded. "The earliest new requests have now been pushed to Q3, but clients are not willing to commit to hotel contracts unless the hotel is offering a way out in case the crisis continues. Neither the clients nor the hotels want to lose any more money, so it's a bit of a standstill."

This latest version of Northstar's PULSE Survey, established in March 2020 to gauge and track the industry's response to the pandemic, was conducted from Oct. 6-21.

Following are the latest takeaways.

### **We're in a Holding Pattern**

Rescheduling or rebooking remains the key task for 36 percent of respondents. Only 18 percent are focused on sourcing or booking new business. Nearly one-third of respondents note they are "not currently focused on live, in-person events."

Meanwhile, virtual events are increasingly prevalent. Fully 82 percent of planners are working on digital-only events that don't have an in-person component. One in four are planning only all-virtual meetings at present, and another 35 percent say more than half of their events are only online.

### **Live Events Are Pushed to Q3 2021**

When asked when they'll hold their next in-person or hybrid event, Q3 2021 is now the prevalent answer, cited by 29 percent. That's a significant shift from the last survey, when most were eyeing Q2 of next year. In late August, 71 percent of PULSE Survey respondents expected to hold in-person gatherings no later than Q2 2021. That number has since dipped significantly, to 55 percent.

Issa Jouaneh, who founded the event-planning and consulting company Elevadas Inc. in August, sees the same patterns with his clients. "There are no signs of a broad-based recovery or return to 'normal' levels in the Americas and Europe," he said. "Some clients are showing interest in smaller and regional meetings early in 2021," he added, "with a general consensus that larger meetings and events are targeted for Q2 and Q3 2021."

While he's heard buzz about "pent-up demand," Jouaneh has yet to see that resulting in more meetings.

However, a bullish 13 percent will hold in-person events before year-end 2020. "Now is fine, as long as all parties involved follow safety measures and social distancing," said LaToya Williams, manager of global accounts for HelmsBriscoe. "We must get back; safety must be the priority."

### **Planners Aren't Traveling Either**

Nearly three in four planners (72 percent) do not plan to go to any in-person events this year. That's up from 67 percent when we asked that question a month ago.

As they plan for future live or hybrid events, planners are most concerned about the continued fear of travel, followed closely by budget constraints, as factors that could deter attendance.

"The economic damage to many of our clients has been significant, so demand is reduced substantially," commented a respondent. A new hindrance is that corporate clients are asking program participants to sign liability waivers, said the planner, which could make would-be attendees even more hesitant to travel.

### **Virtual Events Are a Mediocre Substitute**

Are planners confident they can satisfy their clients' objectives with virtual events? The answer is "sort of." On a scale of 1 to 5, their confidence level in virtual events is currently at a 3.13. Verbatim comments reflect a decidedly uncertain future for virtual events, particularly those that rely heavily on revenue from sponsors or exhibitors.

"Attendees have 'virtual fatigue,'" noted a respondent. "They don't visit exhibitors/sponsors on the virtual platform, and they don't want to pay to attend. Meanwhile, exhibitors are not seeing the ROI. Because the barriers to entry are so low there is a lot of crap out there, which ruins it for those who have good/decent platforms."

Others see digital events much more favorably. "Meetings are a MUST," one planner commented, "so virtual MUST work!"

### **We All Need a Break!**

Many verbatim comments reveal how tough this year has been for meeting professionals, many of whom expected some semblance of normalcy by now.

"The fact that we are still dealing with so much uncertainty is disheartening," a planner lamented. "We have to make decisions now for an event that is 6-plus months out, with no obvious path or clear answers. I know the skills I have gained by putting on a virtual event are so beneficial, but I just miss the thrill of an in-person event. Who knew one day I would miss putting out all those little fires?"

Said another, "As an industry we have to work together to be flexible as we all find our way through this maze of new realities."



PULSE SURVEY

NEW  
DATA

# **THE FUTURE OF MEETINGS AND EVENTS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19**

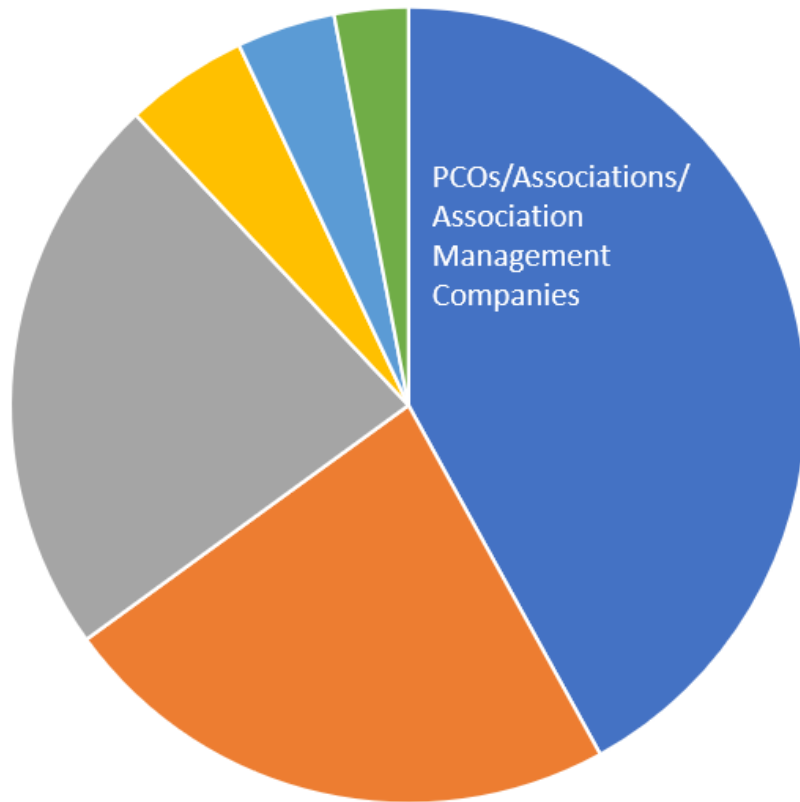
OCTOBER 22, 2020



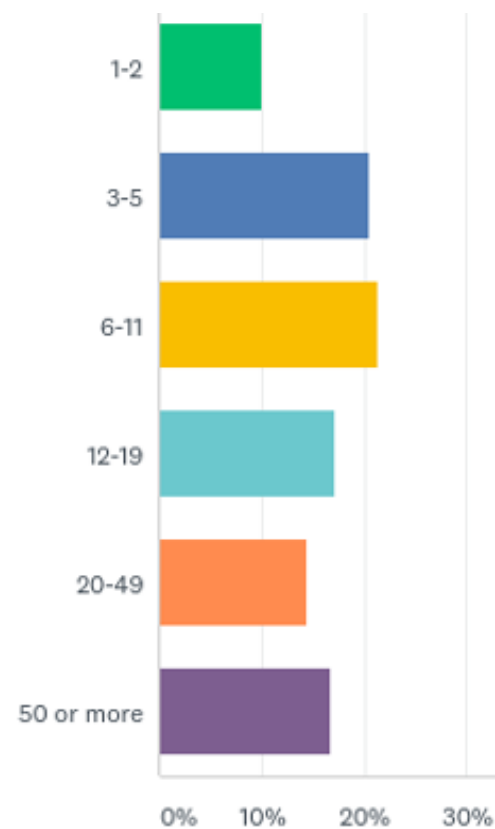
**NORTHSTAR**  
MEETINGS GROUP

# Respondents By Type, Volume and Size

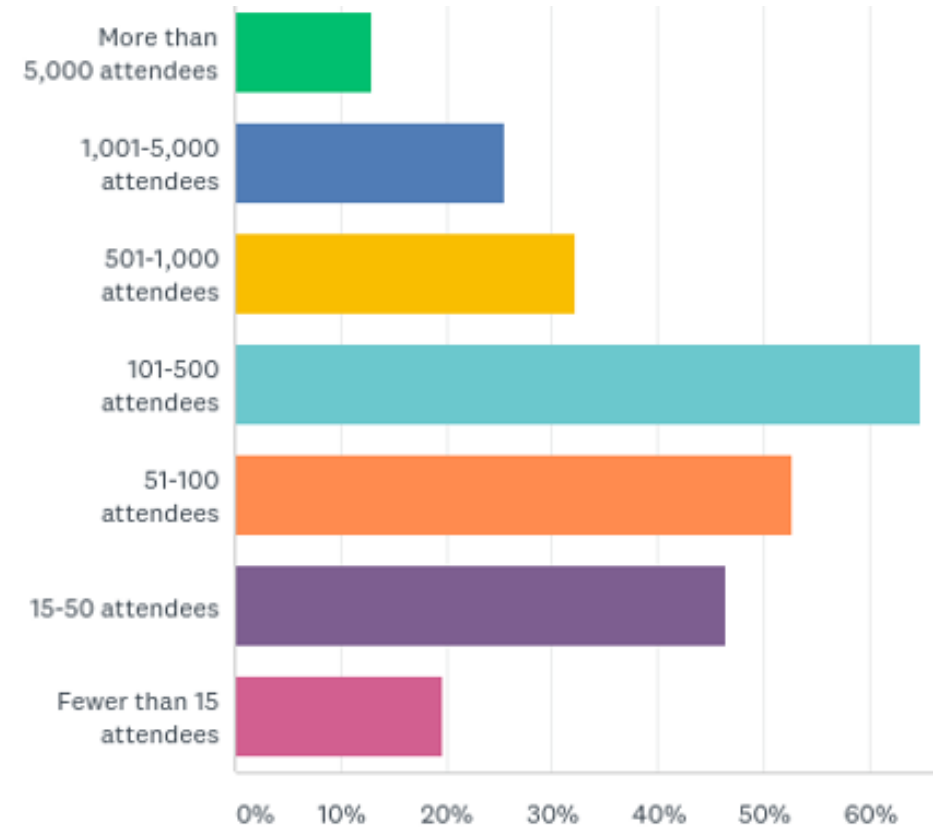
690 Valid Planner Responses



Type



# of Meetings



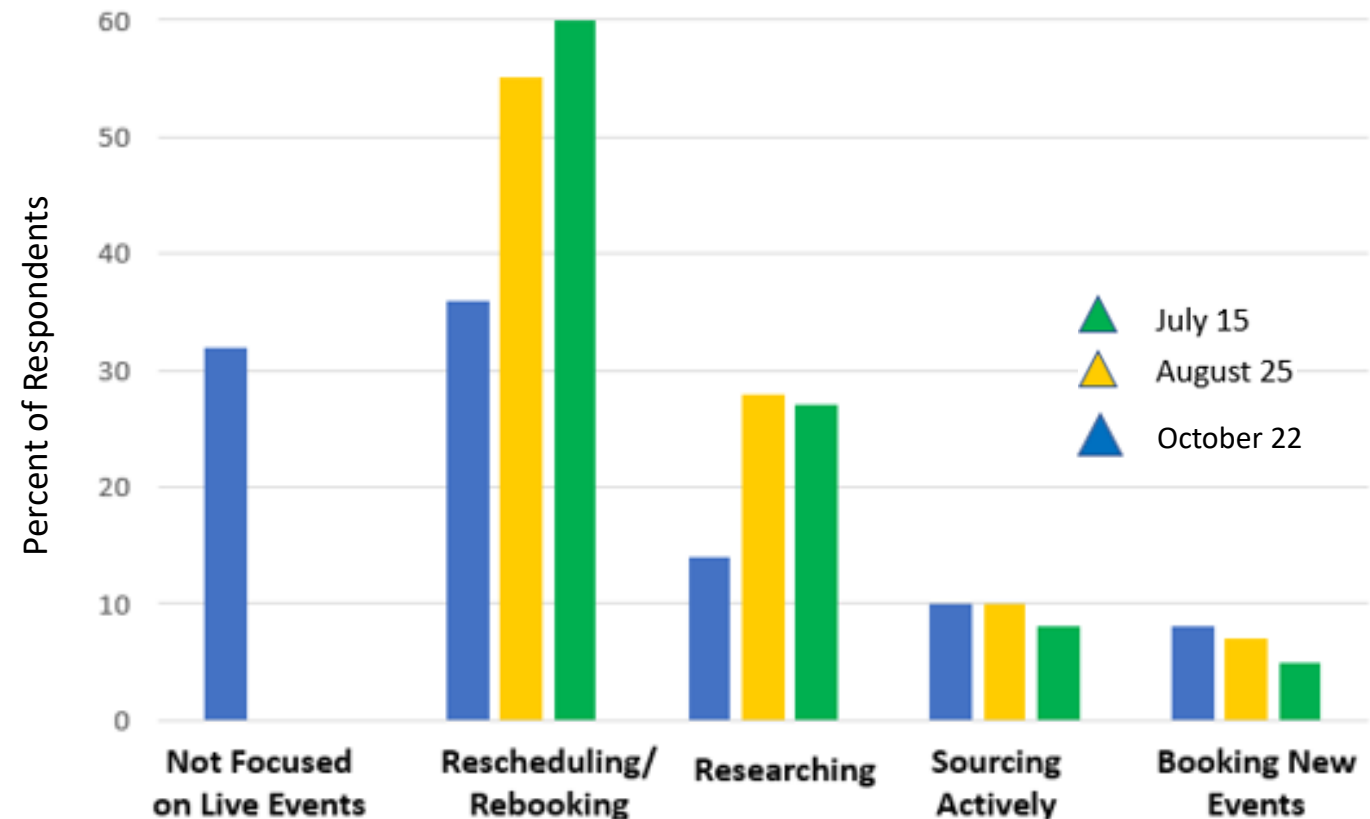
Size of Meeting

# For Now, Many Planners Are Not Focused on Live Events

## Sourcing and booking remain steady, but for many, “live” is not an option

### ANSWER CHOICES

I am rescheduling or rebooking events.	36.25%
I am researching potential new events, but not ready to issue an RFP or lead.	13.83%
I am actively sourcing (issuing RFPs or leads) for new events.	10.33%
I am booking new events.	7.79%
I am not currently focused on live, in-person events.	31.80%



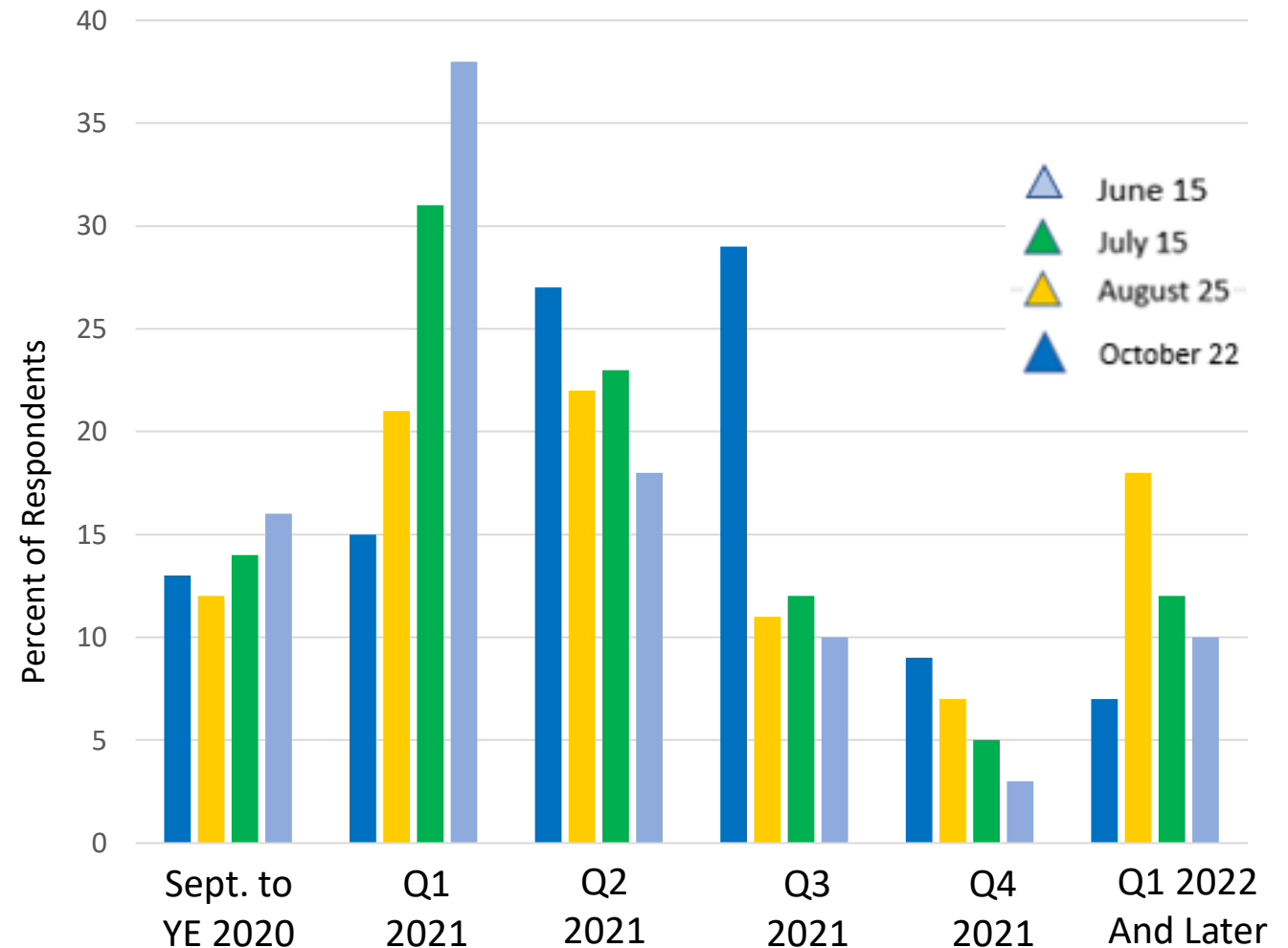
# When's Your Next Live Event?

## Q3 '21, Say Most Planners

When at the earliest do you expect to hold your next in-person or hybrid meet or event?

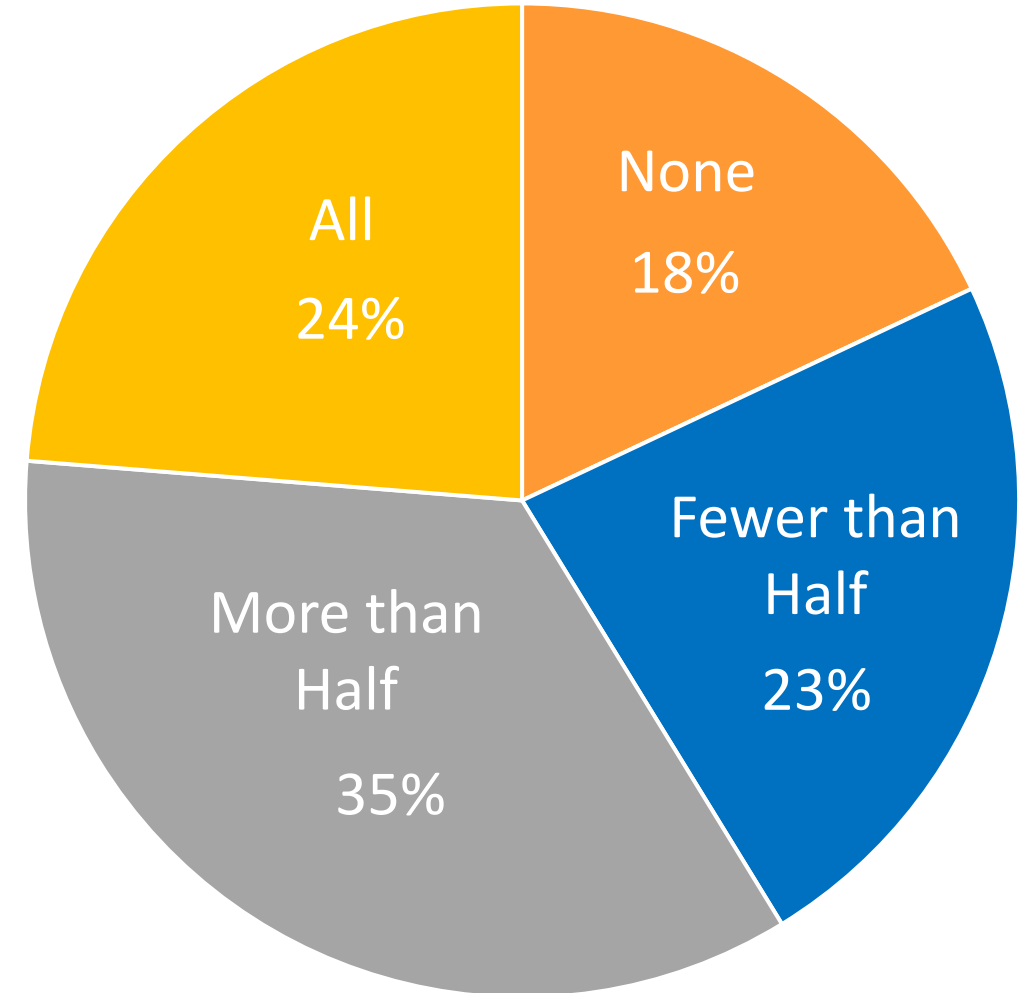
### ANSWER CHOICES

Before year-end 2020	13.02%
Q1 2021	14.79%
Q2 2021	27.17%
Q3 2021	28.62%
Q4 2021	9.00%
2022 or later	7.40%





**What percentage of the events you are now planning will be online only?**



# Fewer Planners Will Attend In-Person Gatherings in 2020

Do you plan to attend any in-person meetings or business events before year-end 2020?

As of October 22, 2020

**72%** Say “No”



As of September 15, 2020

*In response to the same question last month, 67% said “No”*

# Planners are Divided on Virtual Events

As of October 22, 2020

How successful will virtual events be for your constituents? (with  
1 = not at all confident; 5 = highly confident)

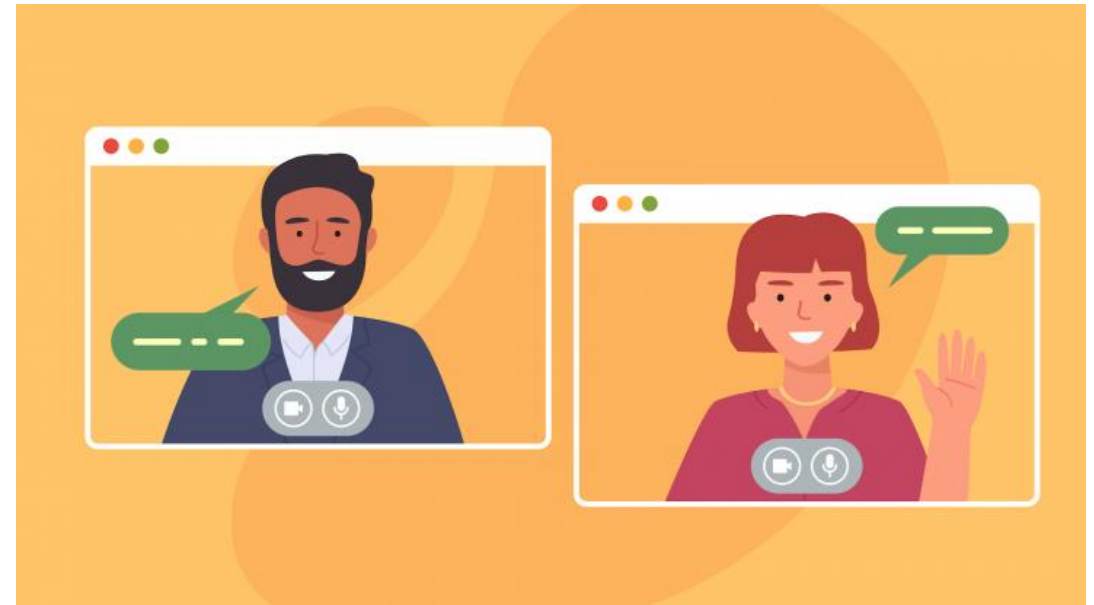
## 3.13 Out of 5

“Attendees have ‘virtual fatigue’ . . . “

“The idea of hybrid meetings has taken root and I like  
the possibilities . . . “

“Exhibitors are not seeing the ROI . . . “

“Hybrid meetings will continue to rise significantly, and get  
better in terms of presentation and content . . . “



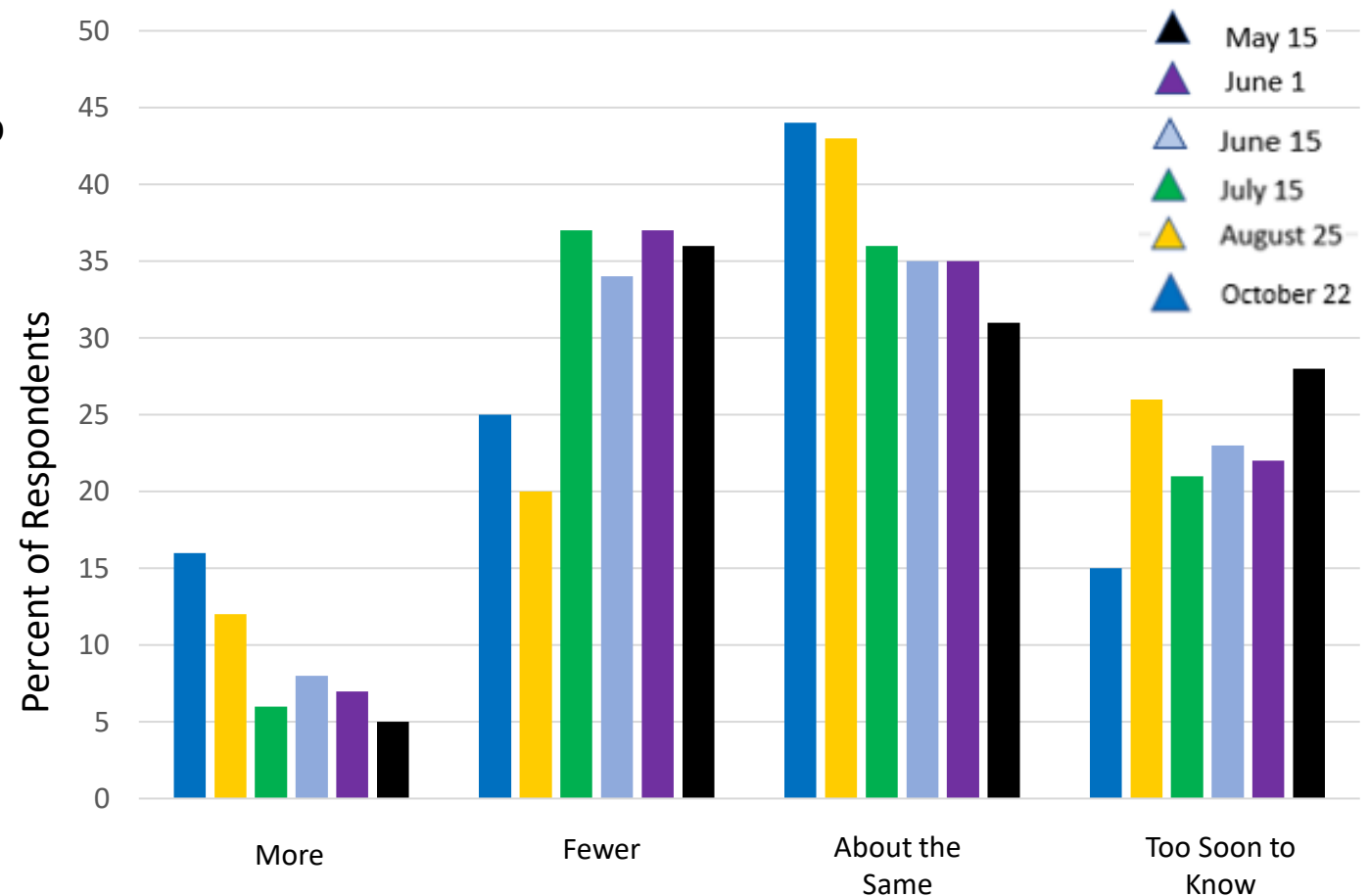
# Most Planners Expect the Same Number of Meetings

*But of note, both the “more” and “fewer” camps have increased since the last survey*

**When in-person gatherings are no longer restricted, do you expect more or fewer in-person or hybrid meetings than before Covid-19?**

October 22 Responses

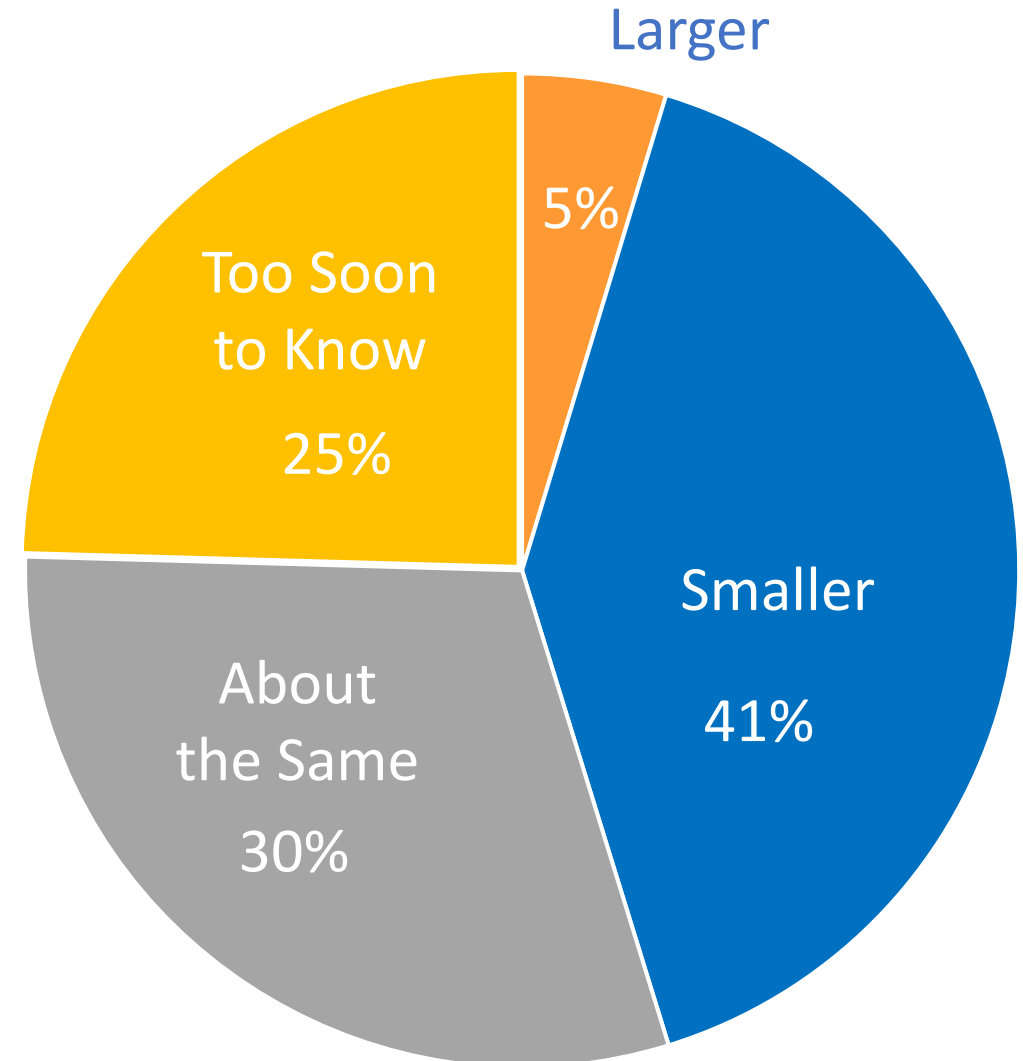
▼ More	16.32%
▼ Fewer	24.72%
▼ About the same	44.10%
▼ It's too soon to know.	14.86%





# Planners Expect Smaller Audiences Post-Covid

When in-person gatherings are no longer restricted, will the size of your live audiences be larger or smaller than before Covid-19?



# Fear of Travel and Budgets Are Top Concerns

*For your future in-person or hybrid events, how concerned are you about the following? Rate each on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being “not at all concerned” and 5 being “extremely concerned”)*

Continued fear of travel  
extending over long-term

Impact of crisis on airline  
service, routes, pricing, etc.

Hotel staffing reductions/hotel  
closures

Impact of virtual events on  
demand for physical events

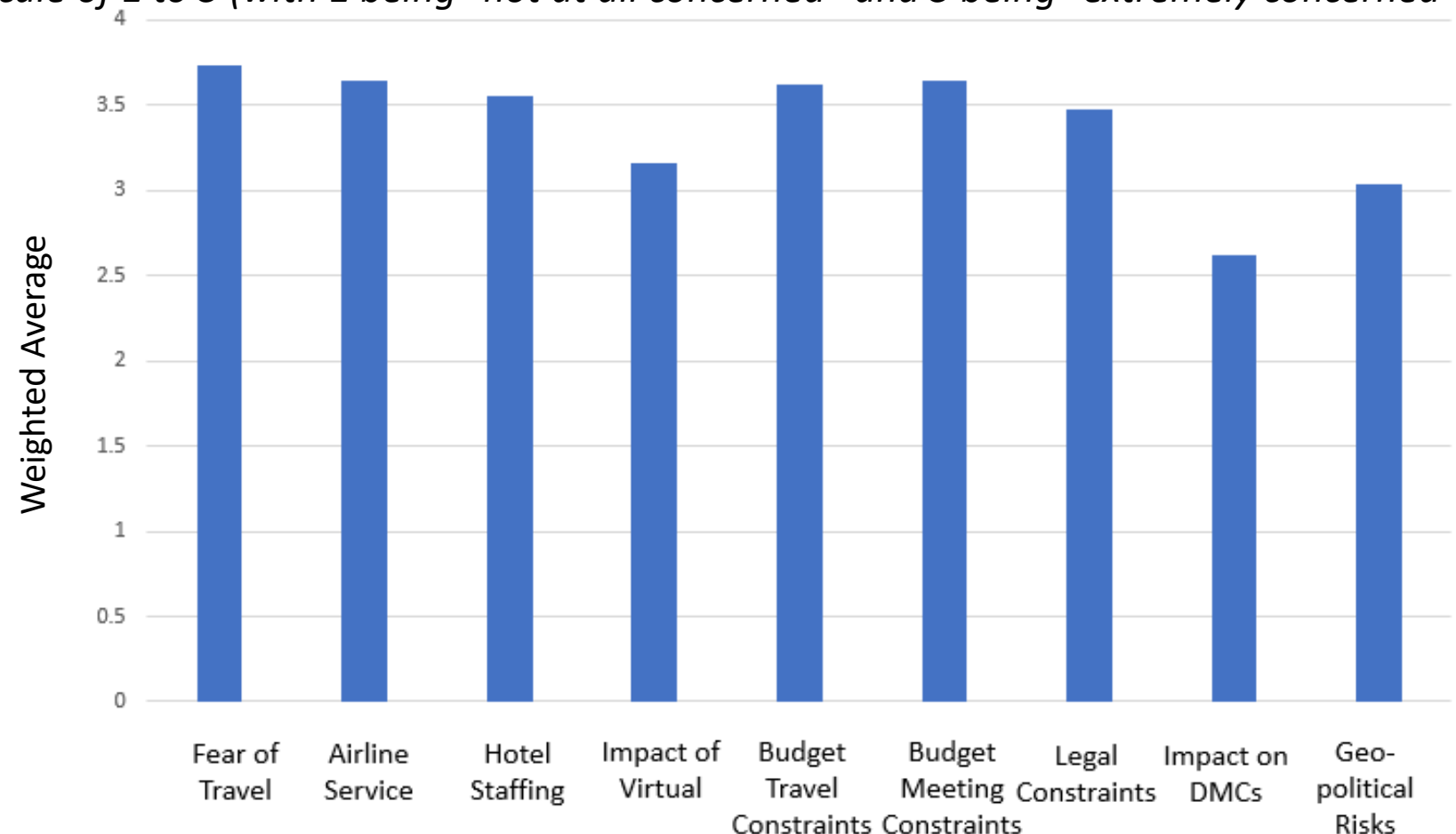
Constraints on business travel  
budgets

Constraints on meetings  
budgets

Inflexible legal/financial  
contractual terms

Loss of destination marketing  
companies to support programs

Risks associated with  
geopolitics, civil unrest, crime,  
immigration, trade, etc.



## In Summary:

- ✓ Q3 2021 is when most planners expect to get back to producing live events again, representing a material shift out of Q1 to Q3 since the last survey.
  - ✓ Planners' primary focus remains rescheduling events (36%), but now, given the option, nearly one-third report they are not currently planning live events.
  - ✓ 24% report that virtual events are the only events they are planning, while 35% say more than half their events are virtual.
  - ✓ Smaller, fewer meetings continues to be the expectation.
  - ✓ For future live events, planners are most concerned about the continued fear of travel, followed closely by constraints on meetings budgets and constraints on travel budgets.
- “The event ecosystem is ready, but unfortunately the majority of companies will not host live events for several months.”
  - “Hybrid events for internal meetings is going to be very expensive and budgets may not be able to cover both hybrid and in-person. The concern over having to stay virtual because of the economics is there.”
  - “We just finished a 40-person live event. With the proper precautions the meeting was a success. We hope to show the industry that meetings are possible.”
  - “Hybrid meetings can be a real plus in providing a bigger opportunity for attendance, sponsorship and post-event use of content.”
  - “We held a successful one-day virtual seminar which exceeded attendance from our previous live events. We recorded the conference and anticipate it will continue to bring in additional revenue.”
  - “We had an event with 2,500 attendees that generated \$5.5 million in revenues. We are indefinitely cancelling the event and are effectively out of the events industry.”
  - There will be pent-up demand to meet in-person as soon as it is deemed safe to do so. Virtual meetings will take the place of internal face-to-face meetings that are not essential, and companies will be more budget-conscious when it comes to travel.