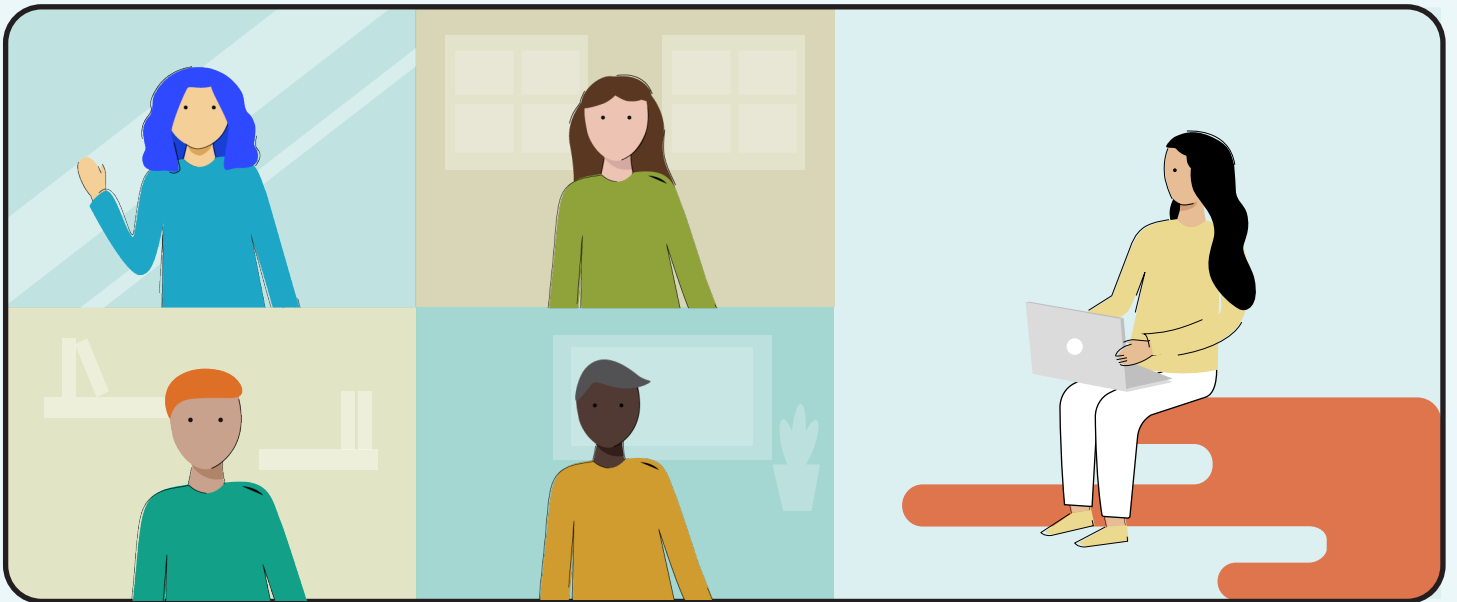20
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The Virtual Event Research Report for Membership Organizations

Executive Report Summary:

The Virtual Event Research Report for Membership Organizations 2020

If COVID-19 threw a wrench into your organization's event planning, you're not alone.

Organizations everywhere found themselves scrambling to reinvent their in-person conferences and meetups into virtual events.

But for many, this was no easy task.

How do you turn a big annual conference into an online event? Is it possible to engage members through a screen? And what about fundraising — can you even charge for virtual events?

We heard these questions and many more from our customers and the broader membership organization space, so we decided to answer them.

To share best practices and learn more about the virtual event landscape, we conducted a survey via our email subscribers and our social media accounts from May 13th to May 21st, 2020.

We heard from **1,142** non-profits, associations, clubs, and other membership organizations, who shared how they're running virtual events and which tactics have been most successful for them.

To help you learn more about how to better run virtual events, we separated this report into three main sections:

1. **An introduction to virtual events**

2. **Running virtual events**

3. **The success of virutal events**

Each header within the sections answers a critical question about virtual events, aimed at helping make your next online venture as successful as possible.

To gather this data, we first asked organizations how they were approaching events, both virtual and in-person, since the start of 2019. The results we're sharing in this report primarily come from two groups of respondents, segmented based on this first question: those who planned to run virtual events in 2020 but hadn't yet, and those who had already run virtual events.

We didn't include results from respondents who hadn't run any in-person or virtual events in 2019 or 2020, as they could provide no insight for this survey. We also included a section discussing why organizations choose not to run virtual events, based on the responses of organizations who ran in-person events in 2019 but chose not to run virtual events in 2020.

Here are a few of our main takeaways:

1.

42% of organizations surveyed ran virtual events in 2019 and earlier in 2020, and an additional 42% of organizations who were planning on running virtual events later this year (so, at the end of May or later). **This means that the number of organizations who were planning on running virtual events doubled in 2020!**

2.

Virtual events are much less expensive to run than in-person events. **84% of organizations who had already run virtual events reported that they spent less on virtual events than in-person ones,** and the same was true of 83% of organizations who were still planning on doing so.

3.

Sharing a donation page throughout a virtual event is an underused revenue generation tactic: almost a third more of organizations who reported generating more revenue from their virtual events than from their in-person ones used this tactic.

4.

Only 34% of organizations who had yet to run virtual events felt very confident that they would hit their goals, despite 56% of organizations who had already run their events reporting their events had been highly successful. **This suggests that virtual events are likely to go better than you might originally think.**

5.

If you want your event to be successful, you need to engage your attendees. Only 10% of respondents who had already run virtual events said that they were unsuccessful. However, **those who didn't try to engage attendees were 150% more likely to be unsuccessful.**

Ready to dive into the rest of our results? Let's get started!
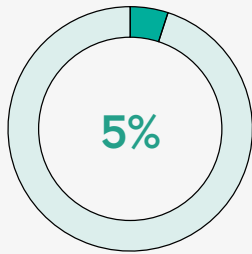
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Section 01

What Is the Virtual Event

Landscape in 2020?

How Many Organizations are Running Virtual Events?

To segment respondents, we first asked organizations to identify their approach to events, both virtual and in person, since the start of 2019.

Which of these statements best describes your organization's relationship with events?

5%	11%	42%	42%
We did not run events in 2019, and do not plan to run events in 2020	We ran in-person events in 2019, and have no plans to run virtual events in 2020	We ran in-person events in 2019, and will be running virtual events in 2020	We ran in-person events in 2019, and have already run virtual events in 2019 and 2020
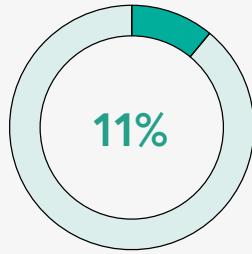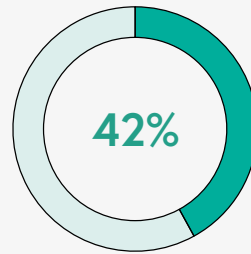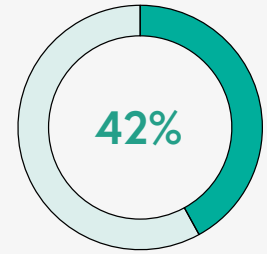
The survey focuses primarily on the two groups who had either already started running virtual events or who were planning on doing so this year. We chose to do this so that we would be able to see if there were any differences between organizations who already had experience in running virtual events compared to those who hadn't yet gotten started.

And solely based on this result, it's clear that there's been a huge boom in virtual events in 2020.

The number of organizations who had already run virtual events when we sent out this survey compared to those who were just getting started is almost equal — meaning that over the past few months, the number of organizations who are running virtual events has roughly doubled!

Is this the beginning of a new reality or just the reality of COVID-19? As we dig further into our results, we'll let you decide.

How Often are Virtual Events Being Run?

In 2020, virtual events will be a huge part of the landscape for membership organizations, both for organizations who are already running virtual events and for those who are just getting started.
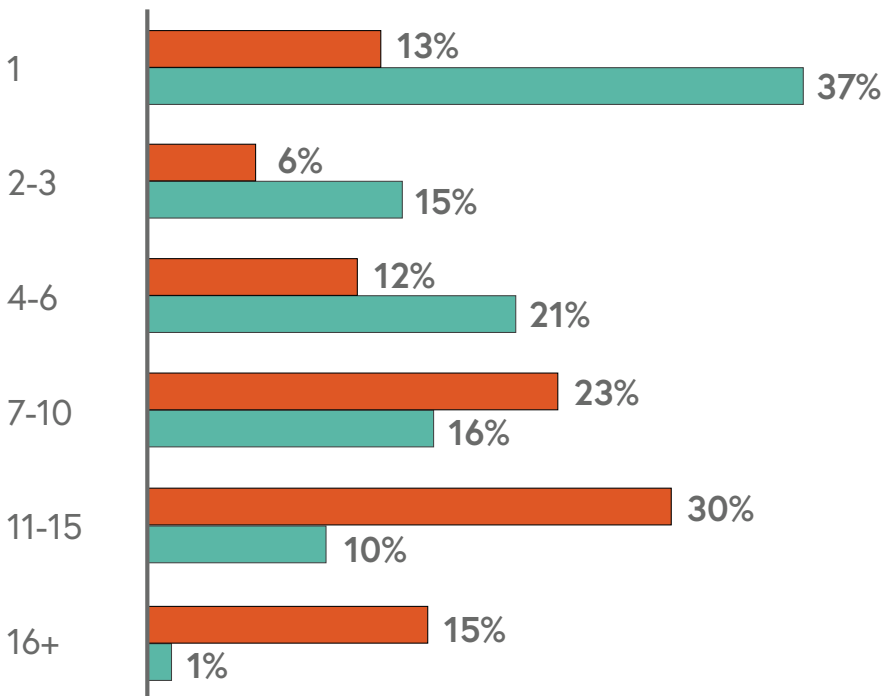
How many virtual events does your organization plan to run in 2020?

■ Already ran virtual

■ Hasn't run virtual yet

	Already ran virtual	Hasn't run virtual yet
1	13%	37%
2-3	6%	15%
4-6	12%	21%
7-10	23%	16%
11-15	30%	10%
16+	15%	1%

As you can see in the chart above, organizations who previously ran virtual events skew towards running a higher number of virtual events than their counterparts who are just now moving towards running virtual events.

This also corresponds with the number of in-person events those organizations were running. On average, organizations who previously ran virtual events plan to run 11 virtual events in 2020, which was roughly the same amount as their number of in-person events in 2019. Those who are just moving to virtual events, on the other hand, ran an average of 8 events in person but are only planning to run 6 events virtually on average.

The lower number of virtual events from those who haven't yet done so might be because those organizations don't have as much time left to do so in the year, as well as because they run fewer events in general. Later on in this report, we'll also discuss how this may point to a lack of confidence.

What Kinds of Events Are Run Virtually?

The most common types of events that are being run are, unsurprisingly, the same kind of meetings that organizations would usually hold with their members, adapted to a virtual environment.

	IN PERSON	VIRTUAL	% DIFFERENCE
Standard member meetings	64%	58%	-6%
Guest Speaker	56%	53%	-3%
Panel discussions	43%	41%	-2%
Other (please specify)	37%	24%	-13%
Happy hours	31%	25%	-6%
Some kind of class (e.g. exercise class, drawing tutorial)	31%	28%	-3%
A gala	24%	11%	-13%
Webinars	21%	53%	32%
AGM	16%	16%	0%
A run / walk	11%	7%	-4%
A performance (play, musical)	10%	8%	-2%
Q&A or AMA (ask-me-anything)	7%	16%	9%
Religious event (e.g. church service)	4%	2%	-2%

As organizations have moved online, event diversity has decreased. As the chart above shows, **10 of the 13** event categories are happening less often.

The only exceptions? Webinars, whose frequency increased by 37%, as well as Q&As, whose frequency increased by 11%. This is presumably because these events require no more than a webcam and an Internet connection to run virtually (and given the current climate of uncertainty, it makes sense that organizations would want to reassure their members by letting them ask questions).

Out of the "Other" category, the most common for the group who was already running virtual events were conferences (13% of the Other category or 3% in total) and board meetings (7% of the Other category or 2% in total). Organizing a virtual conference requires more specific technology than other kinds of events, which may be why this group is smaller in the virtual sphere. The same goes for the large decrease in galas: elaborate events that have a lot of moving parts may be seen as more difficult to run online.

Overall, these results seem to show that membership organizations aren't trying to innovate just yet when it comes to the types of virtual events they're running. This may be due to the fact that virtual events are still relatively new for **50%** of organizations, so they don't feel comfortable mixing it up. (If you're feeling brave and looking for virtual fundraising ideas to try, though, you can check out our list.)

What Are Organizations Hoping to Achieve with Virtual Events?

One of our main questions when running this report was to learn what kind of objectives organizations had, so we could understand why they might be moving online.

What are your objectives when running virtual event(s)? Select all that apply.

Objective	Percentage
Keeping members connected	91%
Trying to maintain normal programming throughout COVID	68%
Attracting new members	62%
Raising awareness of your organization	55%
Raising money	29%
Other (please specify)	8%
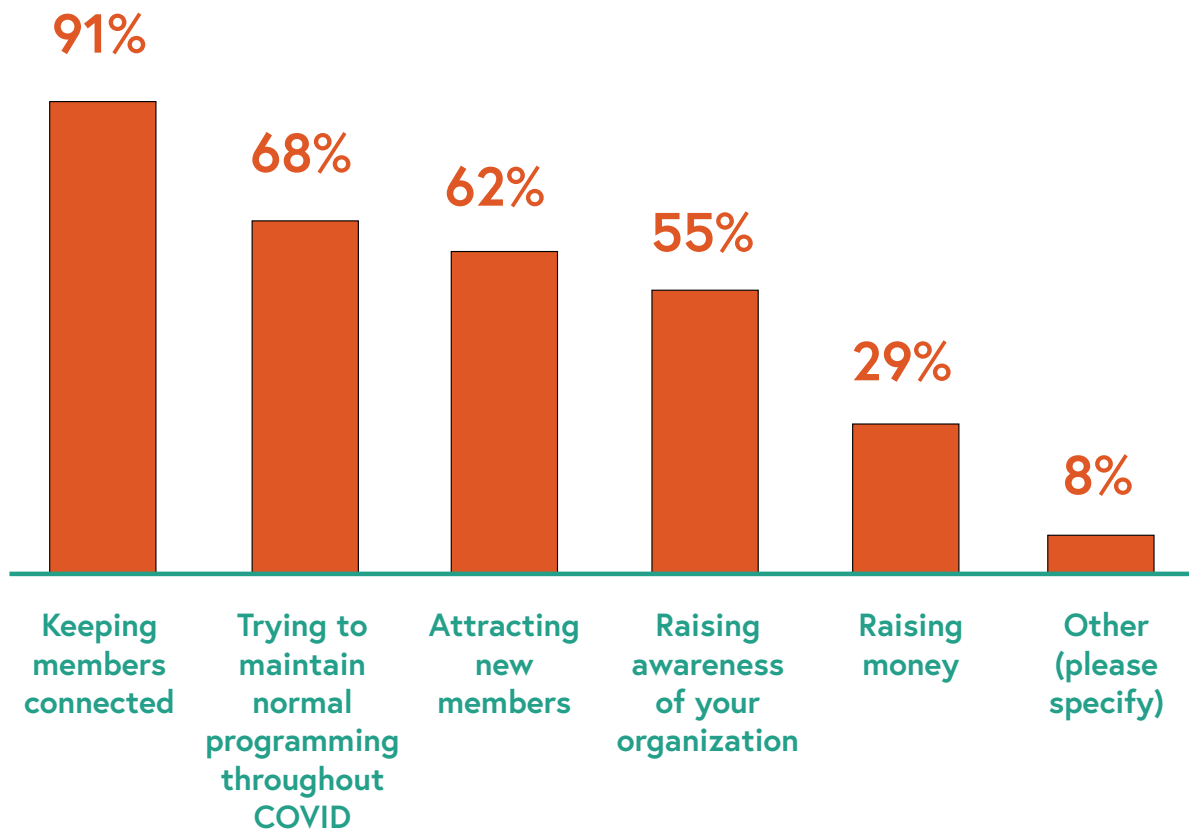
The main objectives for virtual events were similar regardless of whether organizations had run events or not, so the data for both groups is combined in the chart above. The most popular option by far was to keep members connected, which was selected by over 90% of respondents. Maintaining normal programming was also a popular choice, with just over ⅔ of organizations selecting it. This shows that membership organizations want to continue providing value to their members even if they can't meet in person.

When you look at all organization types grouped together, revenue doesn't seem to be a major driver, which surprised us. However, we suspected that this may be due to the different types of organizations we had asked… and once we broke it down by organization type, it was possible to see that it was much more popular amongst nonprofit respondents, by whom this choice was selected **38%** of the time, compared to only **9%** of clubs.

Associations and "Other" types of organizations fell between the extremes of nonprofits and clubs, with 20% of associations and 32% of other organizations intend to raise money through virtual events. This may be because associations, as the largest sample size within this survey, are the most diverse in terms of goals; the same is true of "Other" organizations, which encompassed subscription sites, event organizations and organizations that self-identified as "other."
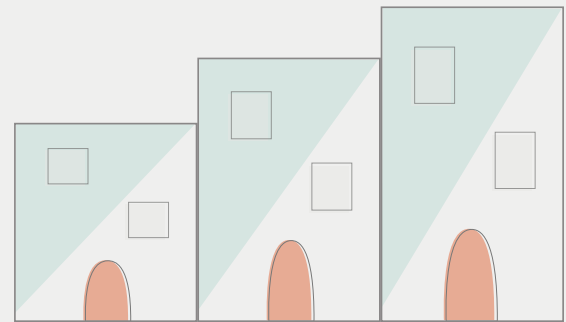
Regardless, it doesn't seem that many organizations who responded to our survey are planning on generating revenue from their events, and are instead trying to focus on a more basic human need: creating community for their members in a time of chaos.
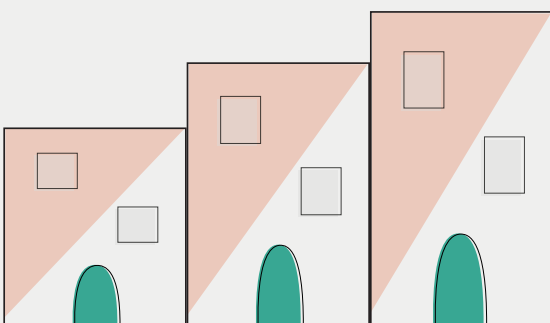
What About Organizations Who Decided Not to Run Virtual Events?

As we saw at the beginning of this report, there was a small percentage of organizations who ran in-person events in 2019, but who decided not to run virtual events in 2020.

What kind of in-person events did you run in 2019?
Select all that apply.

51%
Standard member meetings

46%
Other

39%
Guest speaker

28%
Some kind of class (e.g. exercise class, drawing tutorial)

24%
Panel discussions

24%
Happy hours

23%
A gala

22%
AGM

17%
Performance (play, musical)

9%
A run/walk

6%
Webinars

6%
Religious event (e.g. church service)

5%
Q&A or AMA (ask-me-anything)
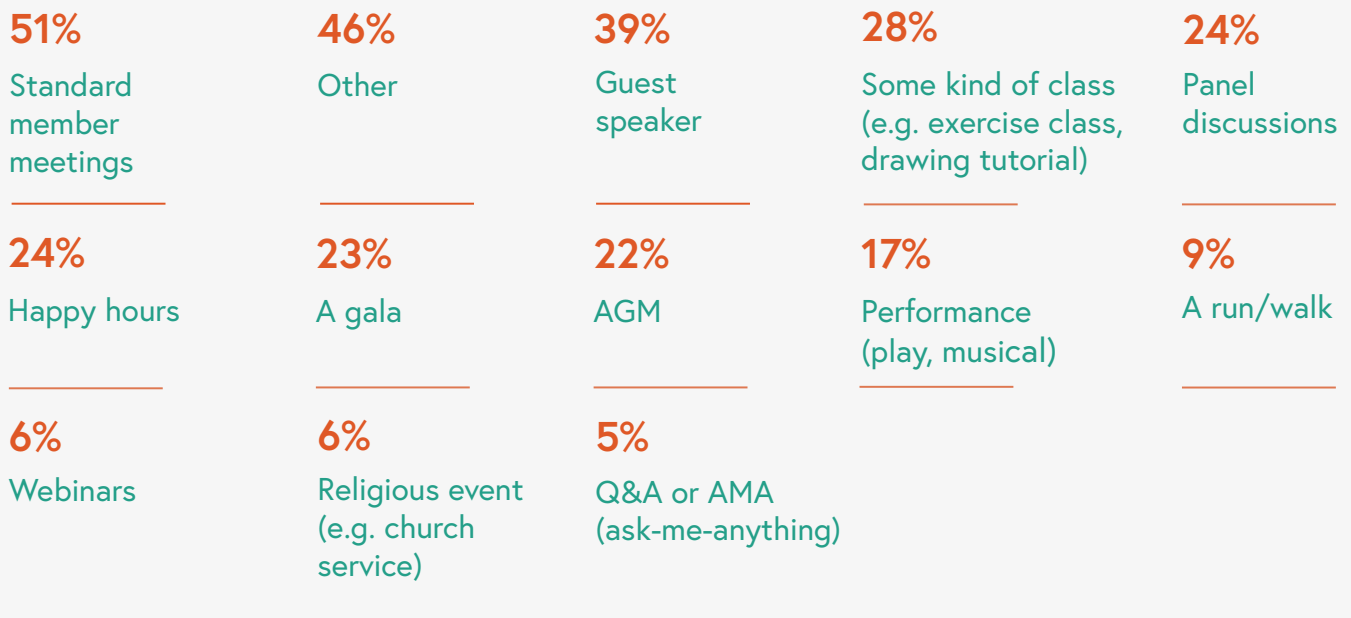
After member meetings, the most common choice in this segment was "other." The most common result out of those that were written in was some kind of sporting event (ie: golf tournament, football game), which accounted for 22% of the "other" results and thus 10% of the overall results. It makes sense that these organizations wouldn't be able to run virtual events, given that you can't hold sporting events online.

It's interesting, however, that even though member meetings could presumably still be held online (and are, as we've seen, one of the most popular choices for other organizations moving to virtual) these organizations continue to choose not to continue their programming. We dive into their reasoning on the next page.

What Made Organizations Decide Not to Run Virtual Events?

As we discussed on the last page, organizations didn't decide not to run virtual events solely on the basis of event types, though it did appear to play a part.

When asked why they didn't run virtual events, the most selected option was again "Other." The second most popular choice, "We can't deliver the kind of value our members need in a virtual environment," also points to this reasoning, as well as suggesting that many organizations don't know how to create virtual experiences that are a good replacement for in-person ones.

Why aren't you planning on running any virtual events?
Select all that apply.

38% —— Other (please specify)

32% —— We can't deliver the kind of value our members need in a virtual environment

32% —— We don't have the technological infrastructure to run them properly

27% —— Our audience isn't interested in virtual events

27% —— We don't know how to get participants to attend a virtual event

9% —— We can't afford to run virtual events
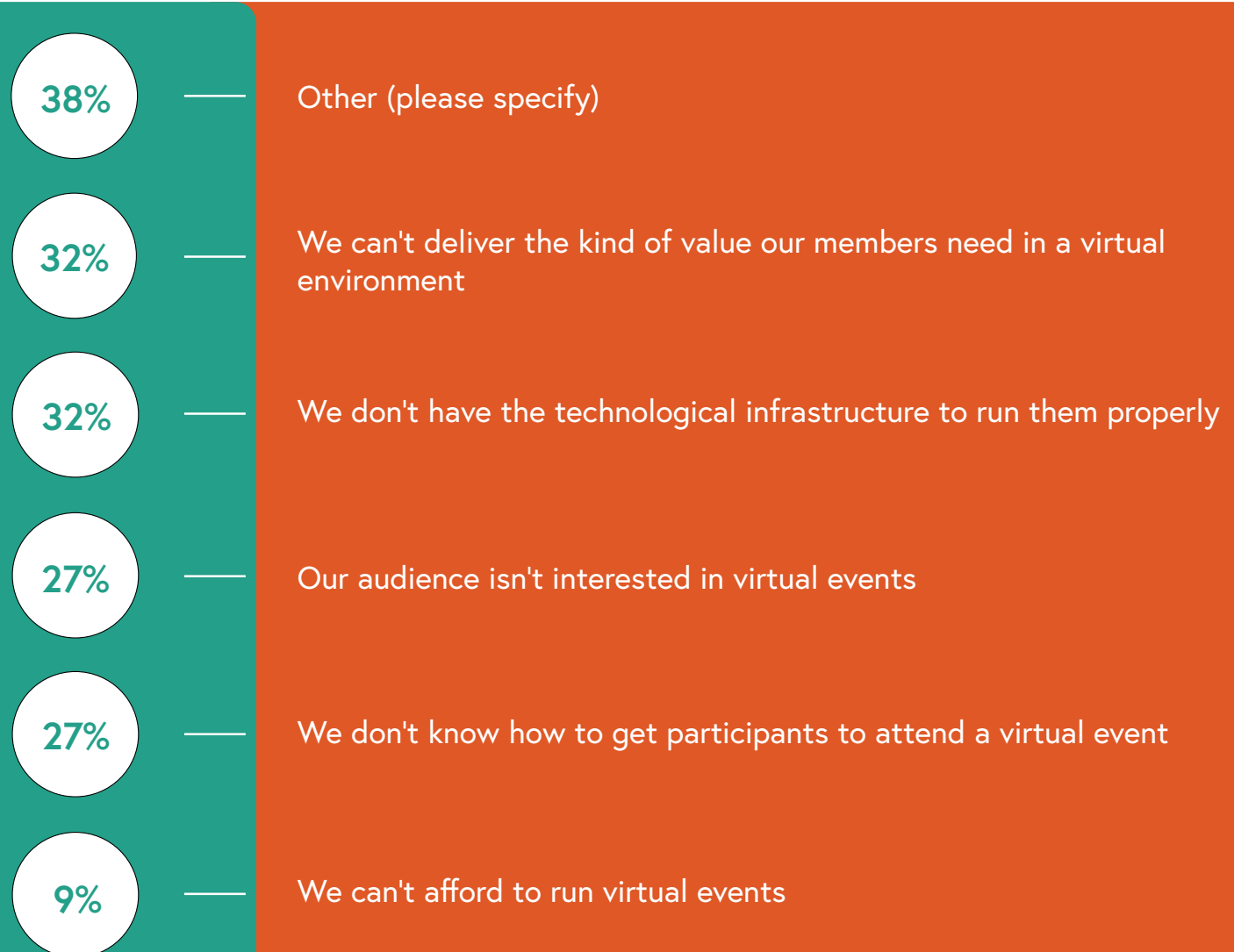
The main choice of "Other" was, as with the previous question, due to the fact that many sporting events cannot be held virtually. Additionally, some organizations who selected this option shared that they were still deciding whether or not to hold a virtual event, or that their large gala was scheduled for later in the year so they were still hoping to hold it in person. This suggests that organizations don't see virtual events as a 1:1 replacement for in-person events, and that for those kinds of large
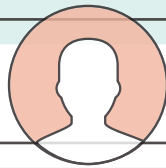
The other choices also provide insight into why organizations decided not to run virtual events. The number of people who replied that they didn't have the technological infrastructure to run virtual events properly suggests that they may see virtual events as a passing fad rather than something that they want to invest in long term. Other options, such as not knowing how to get participants to attend a virtual event, suggest that more education is required to help organizations learn how to make virtual events engaging for audiences.

Section 02

How do Virtual Events Compare to In-Person Events?

How Much Does Running a Virtual Event Cost?

There's good news for organizations with small budgets: the vast majority of respondents found that they were spending considerably less on running virtual events than on in-person events.

In fact,

84% of organizations who had already run virtual events reported that they spent less on virtual events than in-person ones.

The same was true for

83% of organizations who had yet to run a virtual event.

Additionally, there's no material correlation between the organizations who spent a lot to set up their virtual event and those who made a lot of revenue from it.

Out of the group who reported generating more revenue from their virtual event than they would have from an equivalent in-person event, 86% spent less on their virtual event. This shows that organizations can potentially see a higher ROI from virtual events since the initial setup cost is lower.

Plus, given the reduced cost associated with running virtual events, they can be a good step for organizations with smaller budgets who want to experiment with different ways to engage their audience.

How Are Tickets For Virtual Events Priced?

Compared to in-person events, organizations aren't focusing as much on ticket pricing as a source of revenue for virtual events.

The chart below shows how much organizations are charging for virtual event tickets compared to how much they would have charged for an equivalent in-person event.

How are tickets for virtual events priced?

■ Already done virtual   ■ Hasn't run virtual yet

29%	← We charged for in person events, but will not charge for virtual events →	**22%**
27%	← All of our events are free →	**25%**
23%	← Much less →	**26%**
12%	← Slightly less →	**18%**
9%	← The same →	**9%**
0.6%	← More →	**0.2%**
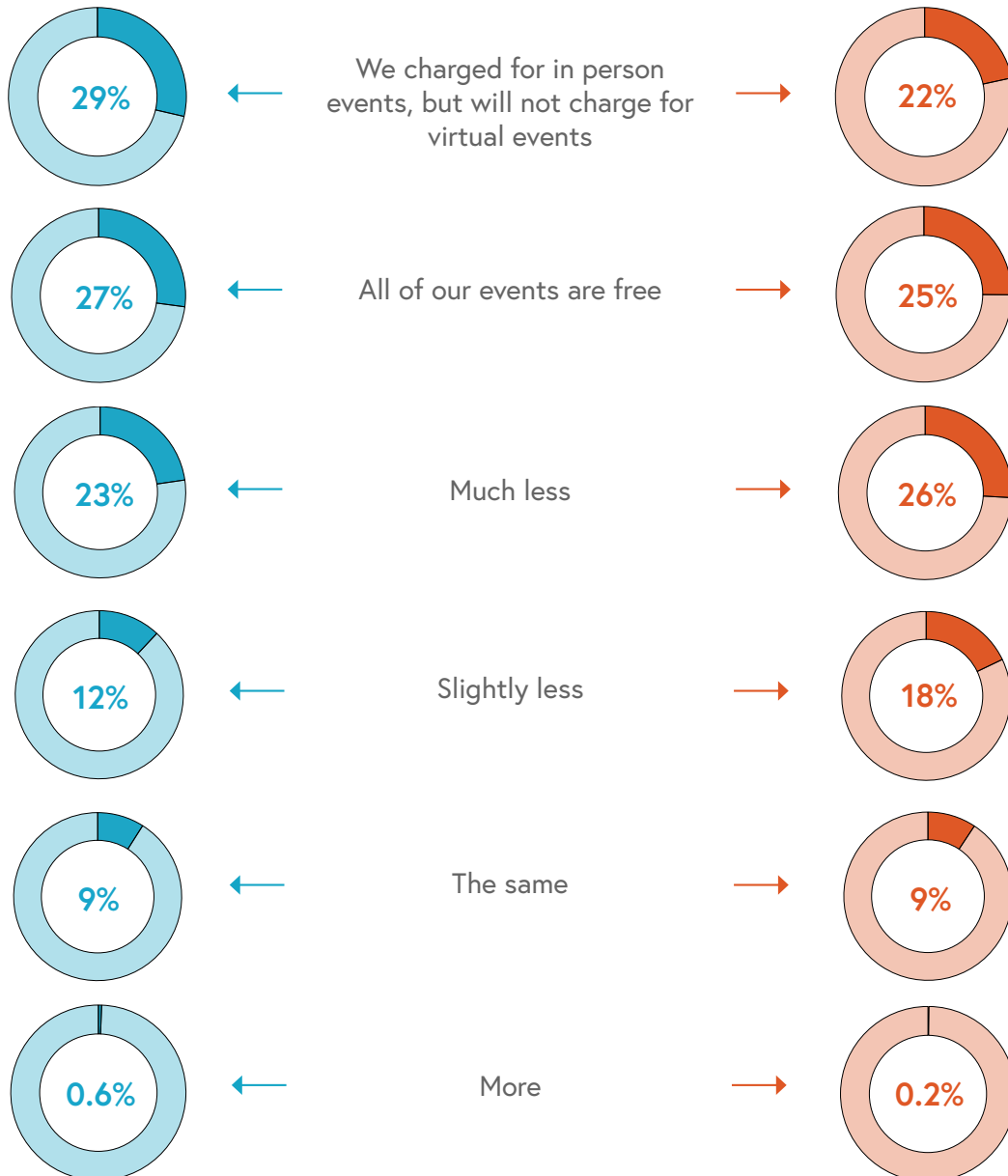
Out of the organizations who charged for in-person events, 87% of organizations who had already held virtual events were planning on charging less than they would have for an equivalent in-person event. (In fact, only three people said that they made their ticket prices more expensive than in-person events.)

Additionally, 29% of organizations are making their virtual events free even though they would have charged for an equivalent in-person event — suggesting that they may be concerned that they're not providing as much value online.

Interestingly, this wasn't the case for organizations who had yet to run a virtual event. A higher percentage of those organizations who charged for in-person events intended to charge for their virtual events (71%, as opposed to only 61% of organizations who had already run a virtual event). This could mean that those with experience think it works better to make virtual events free, something that many of those who are in the planning stages haven't learned yet.

These results also show that organizations who aim to raise money through their virtual events need to find additional revenue streams than simply ticket pricing, and may also mean that organizers don't think that audiences will be willing to pay as much for a virtual event.

How Much Revenue Is Being Generated from Virtual Events?

As it stands, most organizations who have already run virtual events aren't generating revenue from their virtual events to the same degree that they would have in person.

In fact, almost ¾ of organizations didn't generate any revenue from their virtual events in the last year.

Did your organization generate revenue from virtual events?

73%
Did Not Generate Revenue

27%
Generated Revenue

Of the 27% who did, here's the breakdown showing how much revenue they generated proportionately to how much they expected to generate from an in-person event.

12%

12%

76%
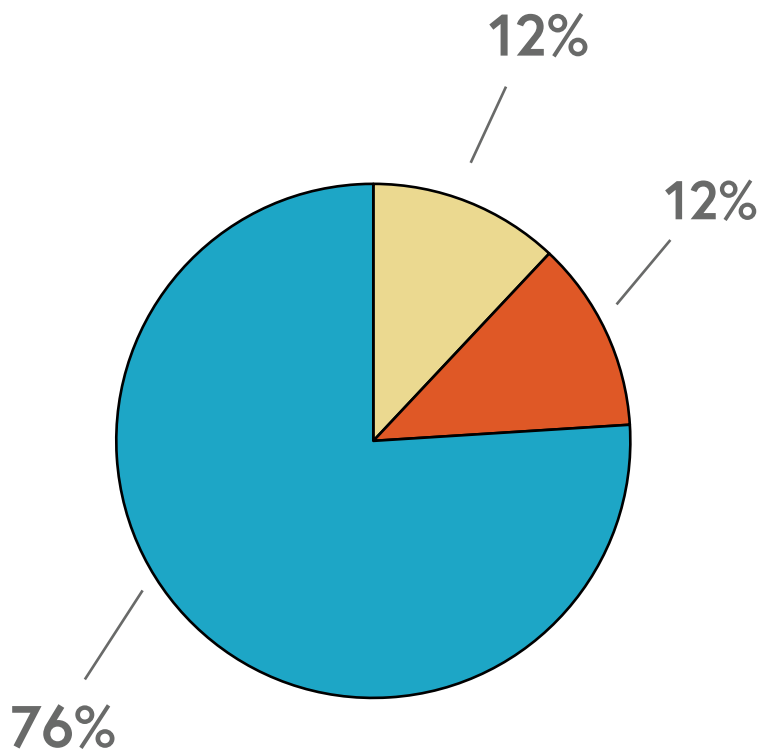
How much revenue did you generate from your virtual event proportionately to how much you would have generated from an in-person event?

- More Revenue
- The Same
- Less Revenue

75% of those who generated revenue from their virtual event still generated less revenue from it than they would have from an in-person event. Additionally, out of this group, three-quarters generated less than **25%** of their revenue from virtual events.

This may seem bleak for organizations who are hoping to raise money; however, the number of events and the amount of revenue generated should increase throughout 2020 as more and more organizations run virtual events, try new tactics, and their members come to realize the necessity of virtual events. (We'll also be covering what tactics work to generate revenue later in this report.)

When it comes to organizations who haven't yet run events, the proportions were slightly different: many more organizations still expected to generate revenue, albeit less of it (61% of organizations, as compared to only 27% of organizations who had already run events).

How much revenue do you think you will generate from your virtual event(s) proportionately to how much you expected to generate from equivalent in-person event(s)?

More Revenue

Less Revenue

Will Not Generate Revenue

The Same

7%

9%

23%

61%
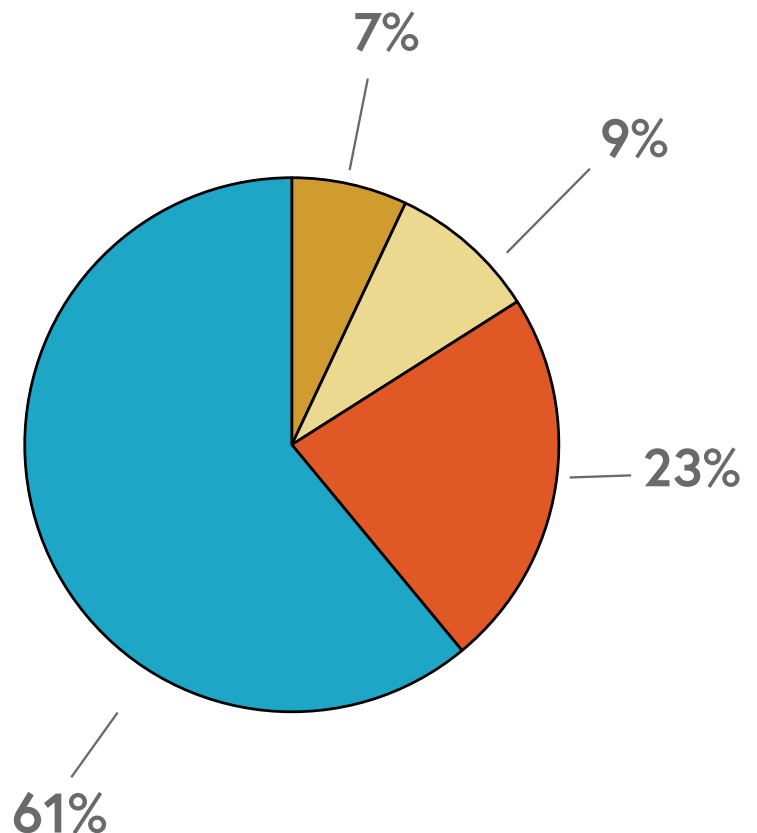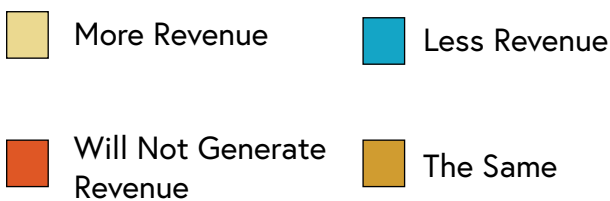
The disparity between these results could mean that there's a greater focus on fund-raising in future events, or it could mean that organizations who have yet to run virtual events should lower their expectations in terms of the amount of revenue they'll be generating.

Overall, these figures show that most organizations aren't expecting a great deal of revenue from virtual events. That could lead readers to conclude that virtual events are a poor substitute for in-person events.

However, there is another explanation. The majority of the respondents to this survey weren't focusing on revenue generation. Considering only 24% of the organizations who had already run events and 34% of the organizations who hadn't yet chose "Raising money" as an objective, many of the other respondents to this particular survey may simply not have focused on revenue generation tactics.

What Tactics Actually Work to Generate Revenue at Virtual Events?

When asked which tactics they used to generate revenue, 50% of the organizations in our survey who had already run virtual events indicated that they did not try to generate revenue at their event. However, there were some tactics in common between the 50% who were choosing to do so.

Which of the following tactics does your organization use to generate revenue during your virtual events?
Select all that apply.

64%
Charging for admission

44%
Finding sponsors for our event

25%
Promoting a donation page throughout the event

12%
Other (please specify)

11%
Selling merchandise for our organization

8%
Running a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign around the event

7%
Holding an online auction

5%
Creating text-to-give campaign

2%
Running a crowdfunding campaign around the event

Out of the group who's looking to generate revenue, the most common tactic by far was charging for admission (64% of respondents). Looking for sponsors came in second and was used by just under half (44%) of respondents; promoting a donation page was the third most popular tactic and was used by a quarter (25%) of respondents.

How effective was each of these tactics, however?

In the following chart, we segment each tactic by whether the organization reported generating more, the same, or less revenue compared to their in-person events.

Which of the following tactics does your organization use to generate revenue during your virtual events? Select all that apply.

Legend:
- Less Revenue
- The Same Amount
- More Revenue

	Less Revenue	The Same Amount	More Revenue
Charging for admission	65%	71%	65%
Finding sponsors for our event	39%	67%	46%
Promoting a donation page throughout the event	24%	33%	35%
Other (please specify)	12%	5%	4%
Selling merchandise for our organization	8%	24%	19%
Running a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign around the event	5%	24%	15%
Holding an online auction	8%	10%	8%
Creating a text-to-give campaign	5%	10%	12%
Running a crowdfunding campaign around the event	3%	10%	0%
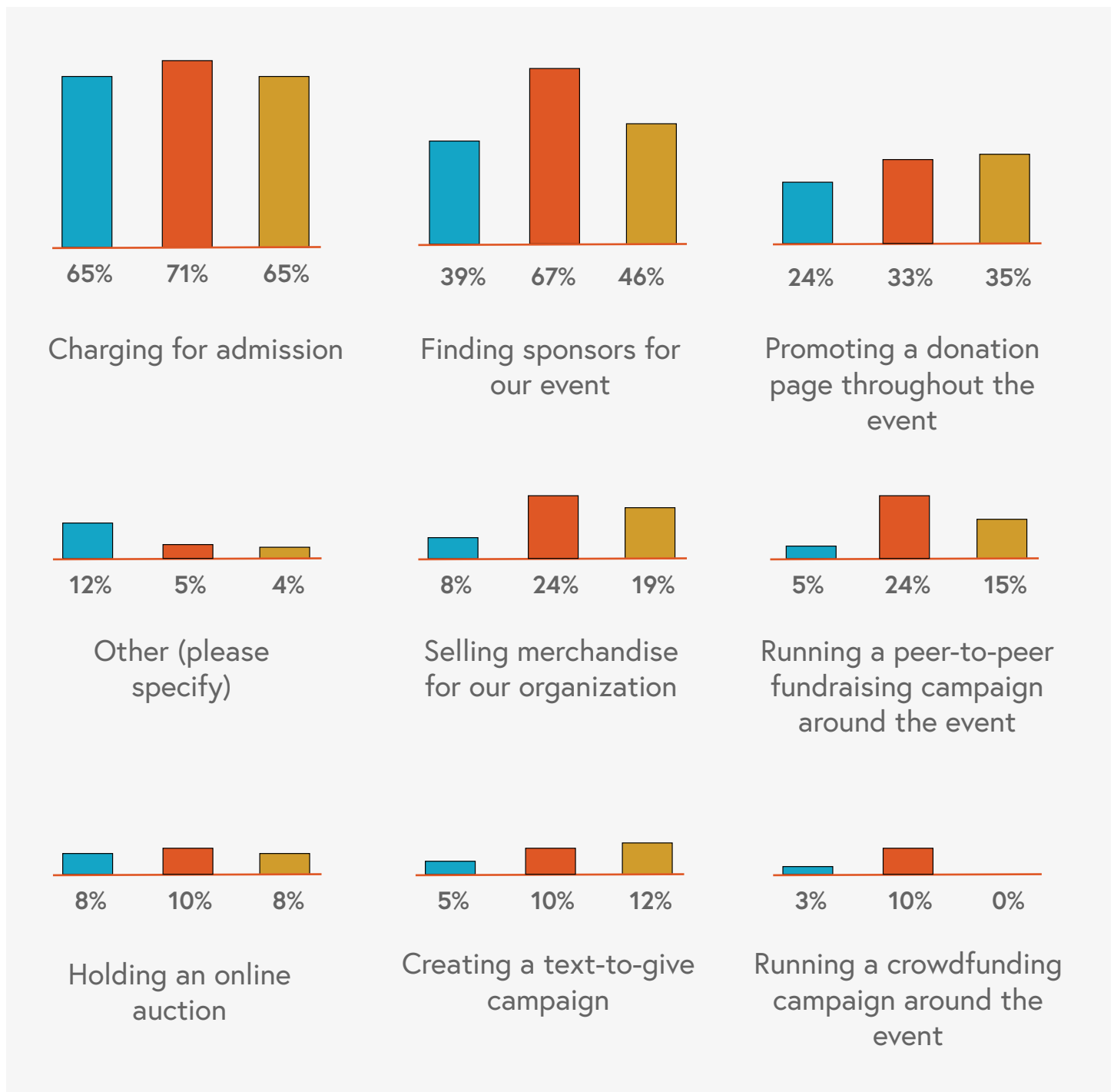
Charging for admission and finding sponsors, as the most used tactics overall, were still used by a large percentage of the group who generated more revenue. This shows that they're popular for a reason.

However, there was a greater disparity between other tactics chosen. Promoting a donation page, for example, was used by 35% of the "more revenue" group as opposed to only 24% of the "less revenue" group — meaning that organizations that successfully generated more revenue through virtual events were 46% more likely to use this tactic than their unsuccessful counterparts.

An even greater disparity was seen between the groups when it came to selling merchandise and running a peer-to-peer fundraiser: twice and three times the amount, respectively, of organizations who generated more revenue used these tactics as compared to those who generated less revenue. This means that although these tactics aren't as commonly used, they're well worth trying for organizations who want to increase their virtual event revenue.

And what about organizations who had yet to run a virtual event?

Only 31% of this group did not intend to generate revenue, a much lower percentage than the group who had already run virtual events. Out of the 69% who did plan to generate revenue, the tactics they planned to use were as follows:

Which of the following tactics will your organization be using to generate revenue during your virtual event(s)? Select all that apply.

59%	**55%**	**42%**	**24%**
Finding sponsors for our event	Charging for admission	Promoting a donation page throughout the event	Holding an online auction

19%	**17%**	**12%**	**11%**
Selling merchandise for our organization	Creating a text-to-give campaign	Running a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign around the event	Running a crowdfunding campaign around the event

8%
Other (please specify)
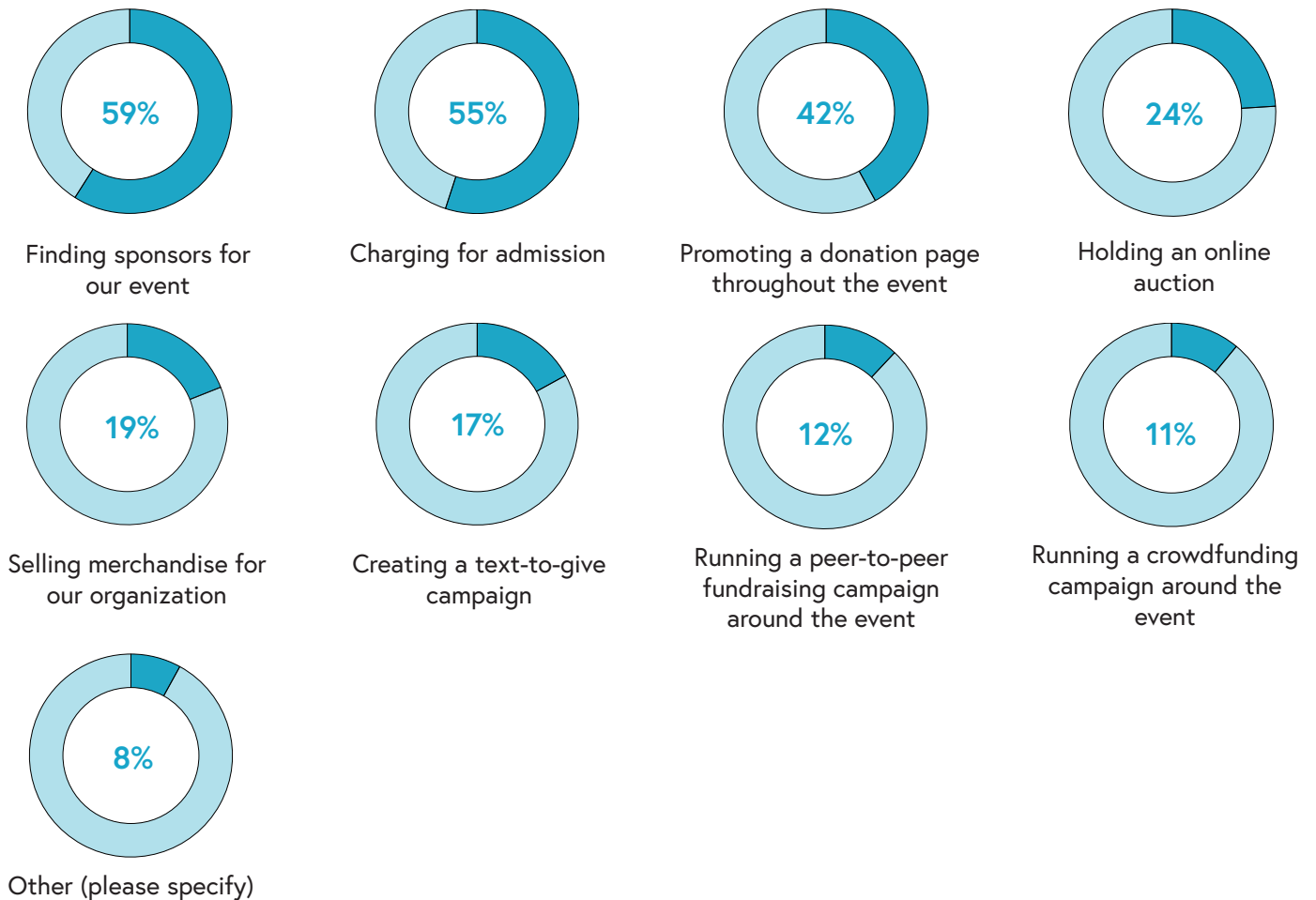
Interestingly, finding sponsors was a much more common tactic amongst this group — more common even than charging for admission. Just over five times the amount of organizations in this group compared to the group who had already run events were also planning on running crowdfunding campaigns around their events, and more than triple were planning on organizing an online auction.

Overall, much more of this group was planning on using revenue-generating tactics. That may be one of the reasons why they were slower at getting started with virtual events, as finding sponsors and creating campaigns can add set-up time.

When looking at the tactics for organizations who thought they would be generating more revenue than they would from in-person events, a similar pattern emerges as with the group who had already run virtual events.

Which of the following tactics will your organization be using to generate revenue during your virtual event(s)? Select all that apply.
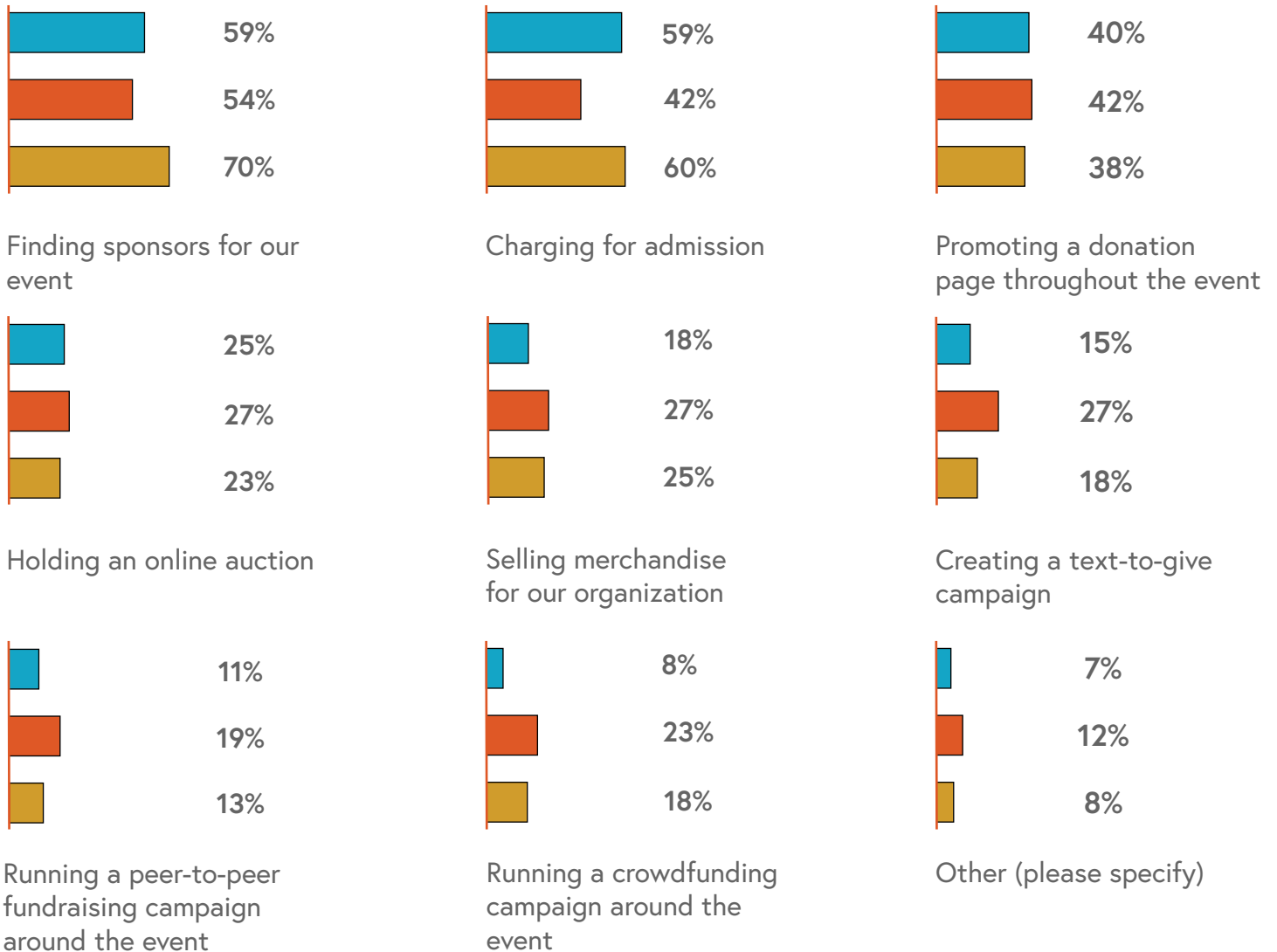
Legend: ■ Less Revenue ■ The Same ■ More Revenue

Finding sponsors for our event
- Less Revenue: 59%
- The Same: 54%
- More Revenue: 70%

Charging for admission
- Less Revenue: 59%
- The Same: 42%
- More Revenue: 60%

Promoting a donation page throughout the event
- Less Revenue: 40%
- The Same: 42%
- More Revenue: 38%

Holding an online auction
- Less Revenue: 25%
- The Same: 27%
- More Revenue: 23%

Selling merchandise for our organization
- Less Revenue: 18%
- The Same: 27%
- More Revenue: 25%

Creating a text-to-give campaign
- Less Revenue: 15%
- The Same: 27%
- More Revenue: 18%

Running a peer-to-peer fundraising campaign around the event
- Less Revenue: 11%
- The Same: 19%
- More Revenue: 13%

Running a crowdfunding campaign around the event
- Less Revenue: 8%
- The Same: 23%
- More Revenue: 18%

Other (please specify)
- Less Revenue: 7%
- The Same: 12%
- More Revenue: 8%

Sponsors continued to be a popular choice for those who expected to generate more revenue from their virtual events than their in-person events. This means that although many organizations may shy away from this tactic due to the difficulty of coordination and determining rewards, it may well be worth investigating.

Many organizations who thought they would make more or the same amount of revenue had also selected running a crowdfunding event and selling merchandise, meaning that even though those are less often chosen, they can be well worth it for organizations who plan to generate revenue.

Section 03

What Makes a Virtual Event a Success?

How Successful Are Virtual Events?

To get a better idea of how organizations felt their events were going, we asked those who had already run virtual events to share whether or not they had succeeded in reaching their goals.

How successful were you in reaching the goals you set for your virtual event(s)?

■ Unsuccessful
■ Moderately successful
■ Highly successful

10%

34%

56%
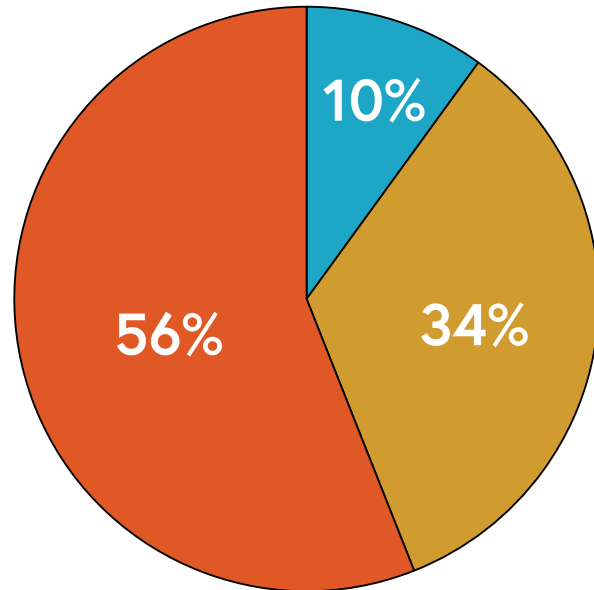
We also asked those organizations who were planning on running virtual events but hadn't yet to share their confidence level regarding the success of their virtual events.

20%

34%

46%
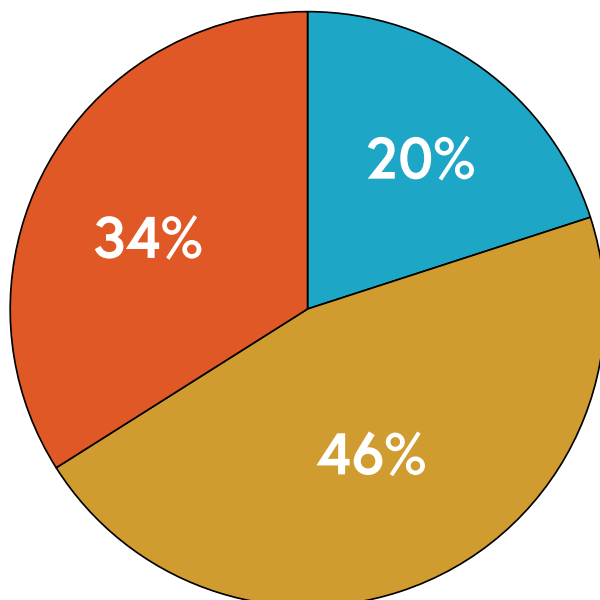
How confident are you in your ability to hit the goals you set for your virtual event(s)?

■ Unsuccessful
■ Moderately successful
■ Very confident

Comparing these two charts shows that people who ran virtual events felt that they exceeded expectations more than **55%** of the time, whereas just **34%** of organizations pivoting to virtual events had high confidence in achieving success.

While not an exact comparison, these charts should reflect one another, with confidence levels equivalent to prior success rates. The difference between confidence and results might just be pre-event nerves: running an event is stressful, especially if you've never done events online before. However, it could also mean that one of the reasons organizations haven't yet run virtual events is their lack of confidence in being able to accomplish them successfully. Whatever the case may be, it's worth reflecting that your event is likely to be more successful than you think!

How Do Your Virtual Event Goals Impact Your Confidence?

Following these results, we wondered: what are the differences between confident and less confident organizations?

Well, one of the biggest differentiators that impacted whether or not organizations thought they'd be successful were the goals they set.

In the chart below, we've segmented those planning to hold virtual events into the three groups we shared above — those not confident in their events' success, those moderately confident, and those very confident — and shows how likely people are to pick each goal depending on their confidence level.

What are your objectives when running virtual event(s)? Select all that apply.

■ Unsuccessful   ■ Average success   ■ More successful

41%	35%	28%		91%	91%	88%
Raising money				Keeping members connected		

61%	61%	67%		56%	58%	52%
Trying to maintain normal programming throughout COVID				Raising awareness of your organization		

67%	64%	55%		3%	7%	10%
Attracting new members				Other (please specify)		

As the chart above shows, people who said they were less confident were much more likely to have made raising money one of their desired goals **(41%)** compared to those who were very confident **(28%)**.

This means that people who were confident are less likely to make raising money one of the goals of their virtual events compared to those who are less confident, and could be interpreted that those who are trying to raise money are less confident in the outcome. Interestingly, however, the results for organizations who have already run events show that there is no major difference in terms of the goals selected and their level of success. This means that even if your goal is to raise money, you still have a good chance at succeeding.

How Does the Type of Virtual Event Impact Success?

Where we did see a difference in the level of success for organizations who have already run virtual events was in the types of events they were running.

Standard member meetings
- 64%
- 68%
- 58%

Happy hours
- 30%
- 32%
- 25%

Legend:
- More successful
- Average success
- Unsuccessful

Guest speaker
- 67%
- 53%
- 46%

Other (please specify)
- 26%
- 18%
- 29%

Webinars
- 58%
- 59%
- 58%

Q&A or AMA (ask-me-anything)
- 18%
- 19%
- 15%

Online performance (play, musical)
- 7%
- 9%
- 6%

Panel discussions
- 47%
- 44%
- 40%

AGM
- 14%
- 14%
- 17%

A virtual run / walk
- 5%
- 7%
- 4%

Some kind of class (e.g. exercise class, drawing tutorial)
- 34%
- 30%
- 31%

AGM
- 8%
- 9%
- 6%

Religious event (e.g. church service)
- 1%
- 2%
- 2%

This chart shows the propensity of unsuccessful, moderately successful, and highly successful organizations to run different kinds of virtual events.

For example, 58% of unsuccessful organizations plan on running the tried-and-true standard member meeting, compared to 68% of moderately successful and 64% of highly successful organizations.

Therefore, what this chart shows is not that organizations who run AGMs are more likely to be unsuccessful, even though the percentage of people who arwwwe unsuccessful in this chart is higher; it just means that people who are successful shy away from them.

The percentage of people in the more successful group who selected Guest Speaker as an event was 68%, or 48% more than the group who was unsuccessful. This group was also 15% more likely to run panel discussions than the group who was unsuccessful. Successful organizations may be choosing these events in greater number because they are, on the face of things, easier to run: they don't require any specialized technology or co-ordination, and organizers can then focus on making the events as engaging as possible.
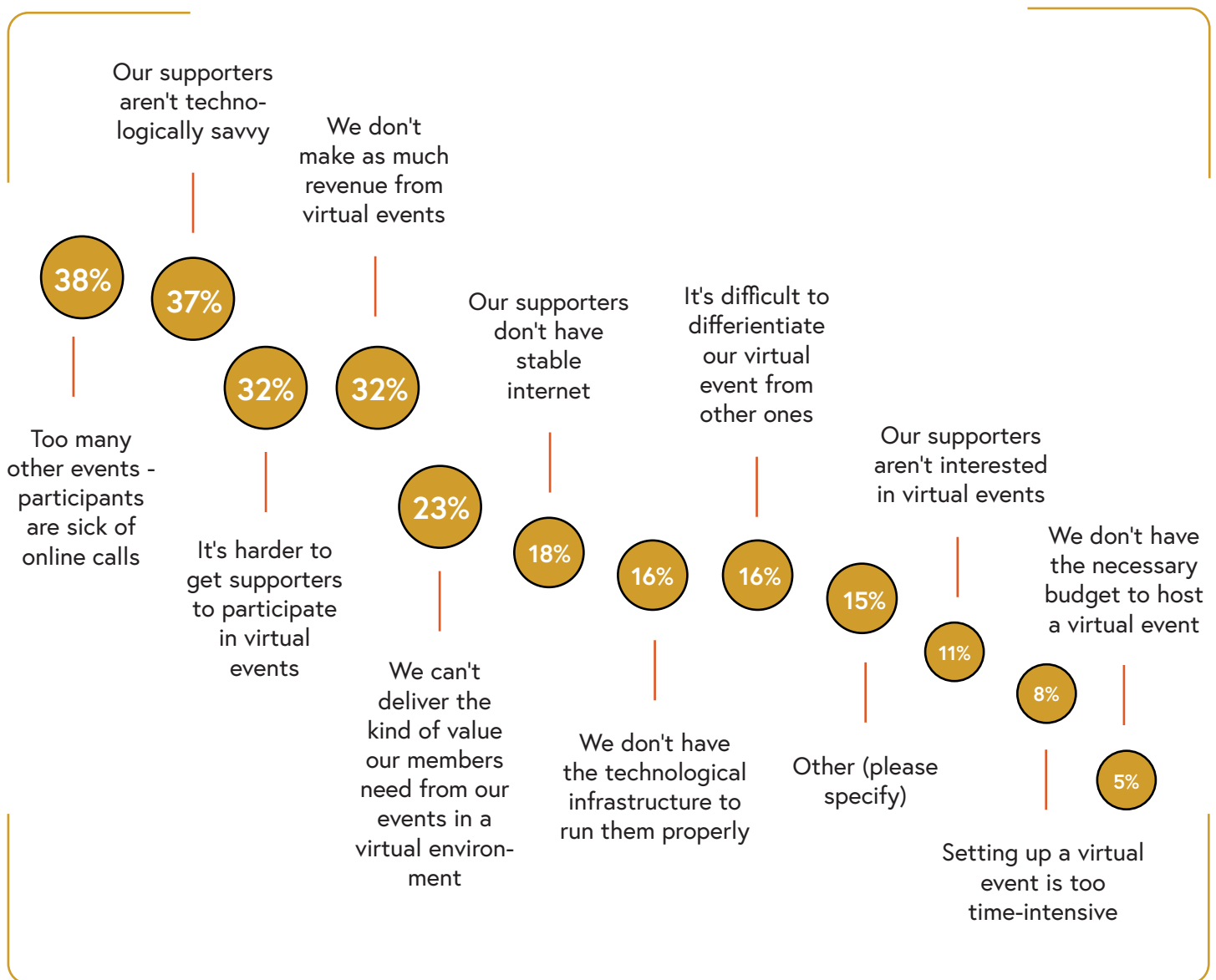
The group that reported they were unsuccessful was also the most likely to run "Other" kinds of events, which may relate back to the initial assumption that organizations aren't innovating as much through virtual events because they're not sure how to yet. Those organizations who did try to do so may have met with less success because there's less of a precedent for them to follow.

What Are The Main Challenges Associated with Running a Virtual Event?

Another big factor when it came to the success of a virtual event was, unsurprisingly, the number and type of challenges organizations faced.

The chart below shows the top challenges experienced by organizations who have already run virtual events — many of which may also be familiar to your organization.

What are your biggest challenges when it comes to running virtual events?

38% — Too many other events - participants are sick of online calls

37% — Our supporters aren't technologically savvy

32% — It's harder to get supporters to participate in virtual events

32% — We don't make as much revenue from virtual events

23% — We can't deliver the kind of value our members need from our events in a virtual environment

18% — Our supporters don't have stable internet

16% — We don't have the technological infrastructure to run them properly

16% — It's difficult to differientiate our virtual event from other ones

15% — Other (please specify)

11% — Our supporters aren't interested in virtual events

8% — Setting up a virtual event is too time-intensive

5% — We don't have the necessary budget to host a virtual event

The biggest challenge for organizations was that there were too many other events happening and that supporters were not technologically savvy.

The former of these challenges could tie into the phenomenon of "Zoom fatigue" reported by many people, who no longer want to participate in calls. If that's the case, one way for organizations to get around it is to find ways to make their events more engaging (see page 41) and/or reduce screen time. An excellent example of this are virtual walks, where participants simultaneously go on a walk together and chat while doing so… Just remind your attendees not to look at their screens while crossing the street!

Virtual St.

Events such as these, in which participants don't necessarily have to spend a lot of time on the computer, can also help overcome the latter challenge. Organizations might also want to provide simple computer literacy training (or partner with another organization who does so) to ensure that they're still able to connect with members in a virtual environment, as virtual events don't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon..

Looking at it through the lens of organizations who were successful compared to those who weren't, we see that organizations who reported that their event was successful reported that they were, on average, facing fewer challenges: **only 2.2**, compared to organizations who said that they were unsuccessful, who faced **3.7 challenges**.

And which challenges did they face? Examining the challenges faced by successful organizations compared to unsuccessful organizations led to several surprising results. For instance, "it's harder to get supporters to participate in virtual events" was chosen by **46%** of unsuccessful organizations as compared to only **24%** of more successful organizations, making it almost twice as likely to be chosen by unsuccessful organizations.
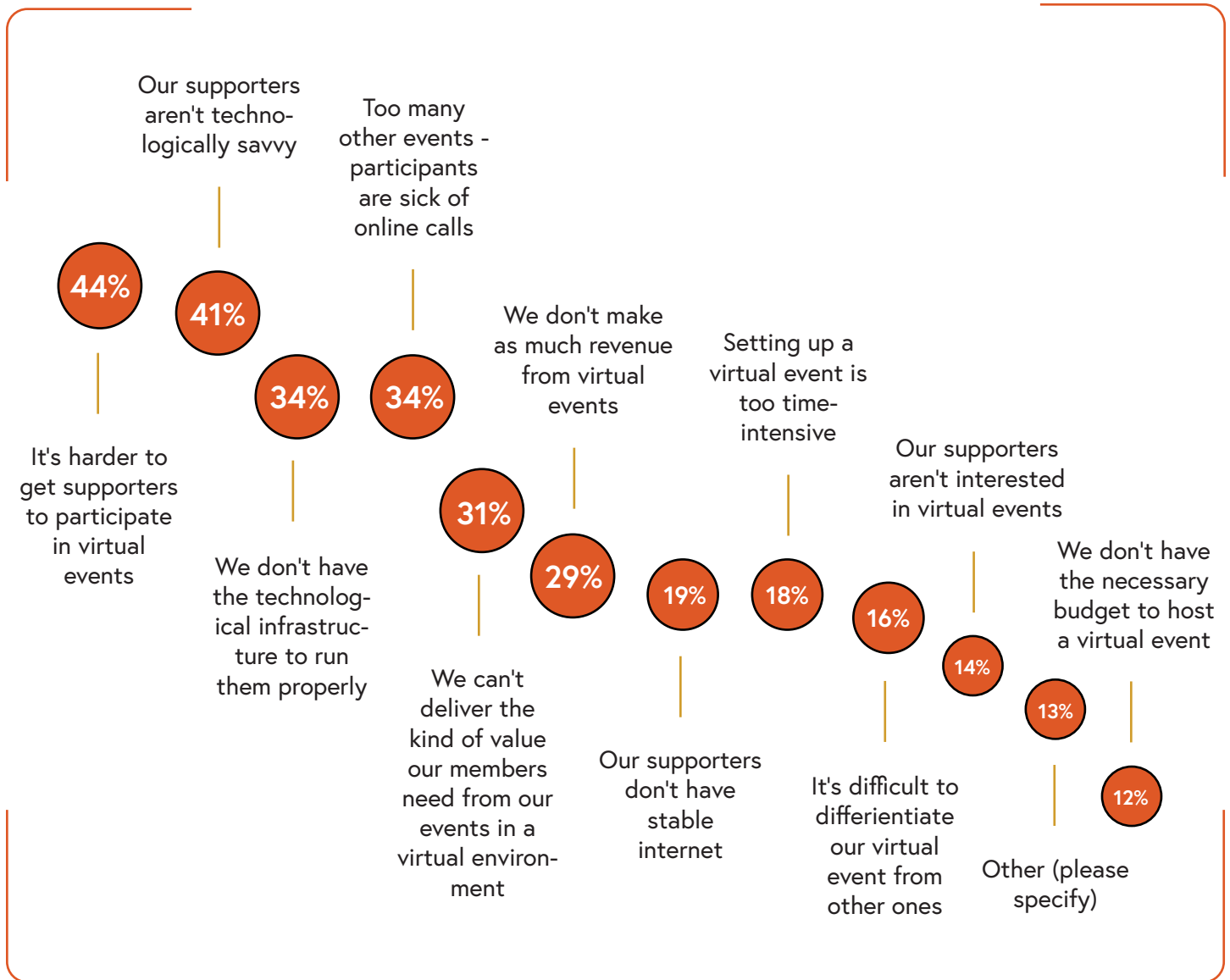
Another big variation was seen between the unsuccessful and successful groups with the challenge of **"we don't have the technological infrastructure to run them properly".**

Groups who were unsuccessful were almost **3x** more likely to select this as a challenge than the sucessful group **(31% versus 11%).**

The fact that these challenges were so much more prevalent in unsuccessful groups is actually good news, because they're both challenges that can be solved within the organization rather than external issues: the former by trying out new engagement tactics (which we discuss on page 41) and the latter by selecting simple events as well as investing in technology.

And what about the group who has yet to run virtual events?

What are your biggest challenges when it comes to running virtual events?

Our supporters aren't techno-logically savvy

Too many other events - participants are sick of online calls

We don't make as much revenue from virtual events

Setting up a virtual event is too time-intensive

Our supporters aren't interested in virtual events

44%

41%

34%

34%

31%

29%

19%

18%

16%

14%

13%

12%

It's harder to get supporters to participate in virtual events

We don't have the technolog-ical infrastruc-ture to run them properly

We can't deliver the kind of value our members need from our events in a virtual environ-ment

Our supporters don't have stable internet

It's difficult to differientiate our virtual event from other ones

We don't have the necessary budget to host a virtual event
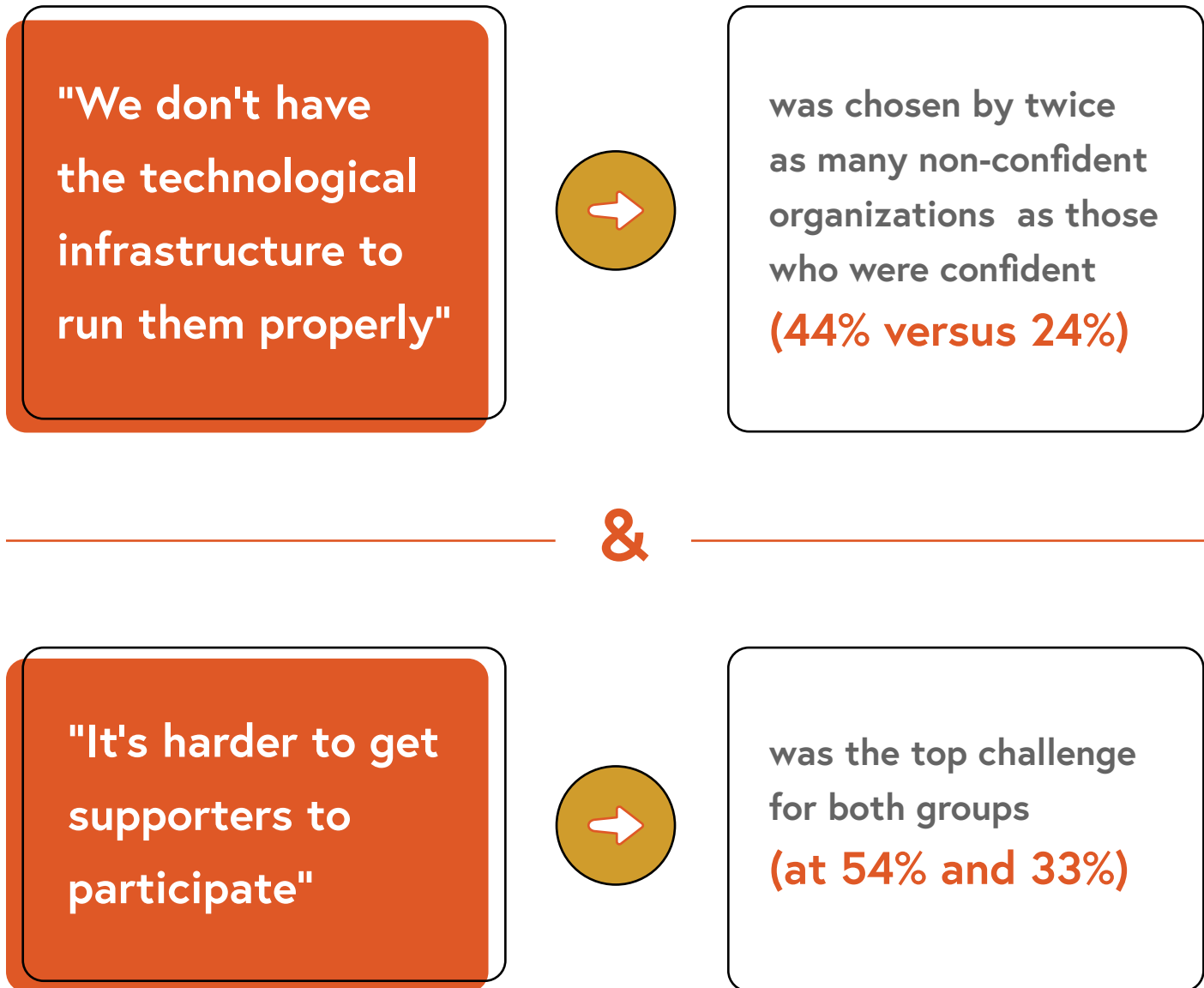
Other (please specify)

This group wasn't as concerned about there being too many other virtual events, but was more concerned about getting their supporters to participate in virtual events -- another challenge that relates to engagement. As with the first group, supporters not being technologically savvy was also a big challenge.

Interestingly, this group was almost seven times more likely than the group who had already run virtual events to select that they themselves didn't have the technological capabilities to run virtual events: this may be another reason why they have yet to do so.

Additionally, organizations who were very confident selected on average only 2.4 challenges, compared to 4 for the organizations who were not confident — meaning that organizations who weren't confident faced almost double the challenges!

Similar results from the group who had previously run events were also seen here.

"We don't have the technological infrastructure to run them properly"

➡

was chosen by twice as many non-confident organizations as those who were confident **(44% versus 24%)**

&

"It's harder to get supporters to participate"

➡

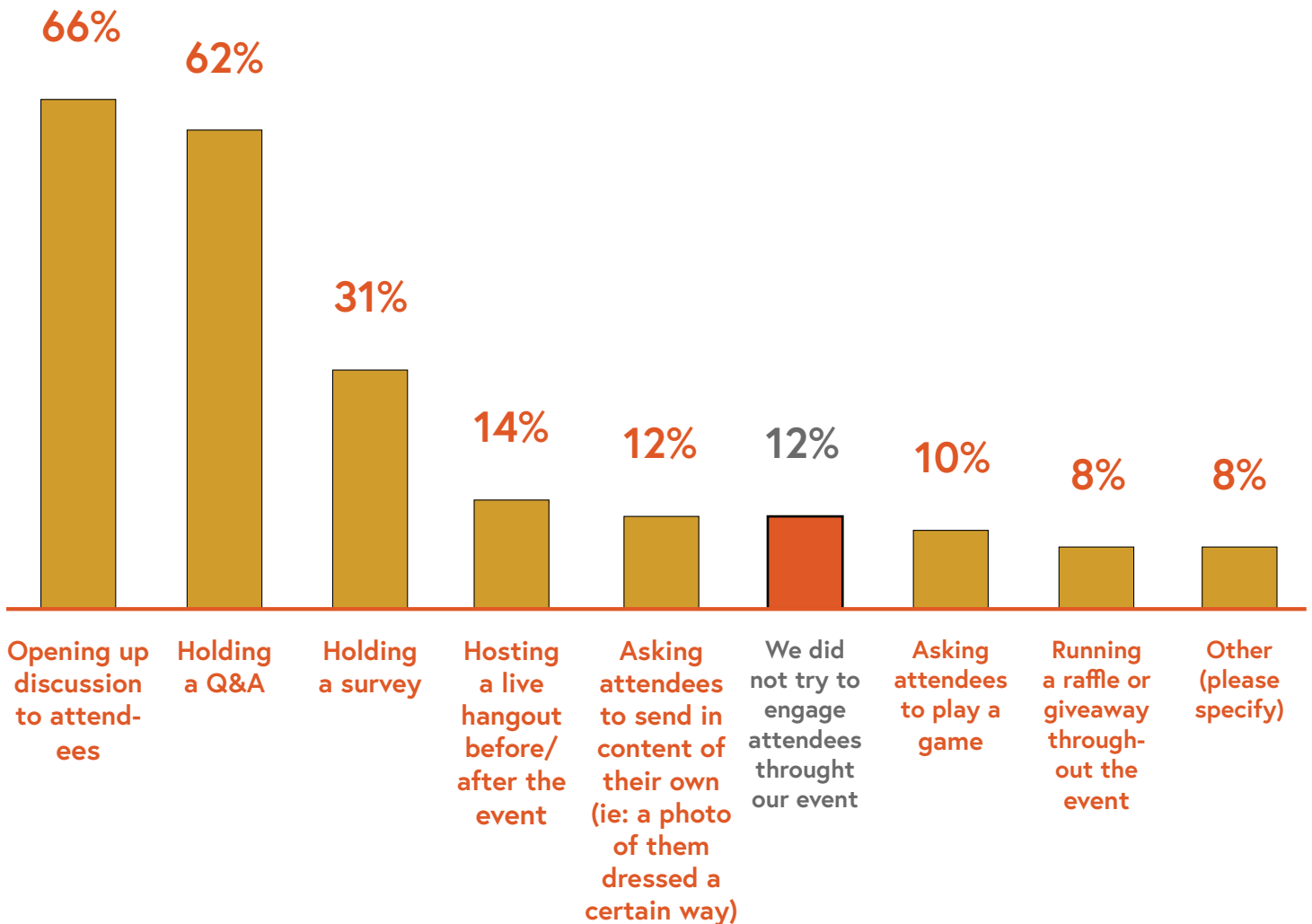was the top challenge for both groups **(at 54% and 33%)**

These results suggest that further education around how to get more attendees to virtual events as well as the best kinds of technology for organizations to use for virtual events.

How Can You Engage Attendees at a Virtual Event?

As we saw in the previous section, engaging supporters at virtual events is one of the biggest challenges are facing, and one of the biggest questions we wanted to answer with this survey.

However, never fear: it's not an impossible task! Here's what organizations who have already run virtual events are doing to make their virtual events interactive for attendees.

How did you engage your attendees throughout your virtual event(s)?
Select all that apply.

Category	Percentage
Opening up discussion to attendees	66%
Holding a Q&A	62%
Holding a survey	31%
Hosting a live hangout before/after the event	14%
Asking attendees to send in content of their own (ie: a photo of them dressed a certain way)	12%
We did not try to engage attendees throught our event	12%
Asking attendees to play a game	10%
Running a raffle or giveaway throughout the event	8%
Other (please specify)	8%

Before we look at which tactics were successful, let's make one thing clear — making your events engaging is super important. As discussed in the previous section, most organizations who had already run virtual events found success, with only 10% of respondents saying their events were unsuccessful. When you don't try and engage your attendees, that number jumps to 25% — a 150% increase!

So which tactics should you try if you want to succeed?

The most popular options were opening up discussion to attendees, as well as holding a Q&A. This may be because these are standard choices for organizations running in-person events as well, and they're also easy to run: they don't require any specialized technology.

Although those were the most popular, they weren't necessarily the most successful. Instead, that honour went to hosting a live hangout before or after your event, with

73% of the organizations who used it reporting that they used it reporting that they were successul (almost **15x** more than the number of unsuccessul organizations who used this tactic!).

The next most successful tactic was conducting a survey or polls during the event, which was used by **64%** of organizations who reported they were successful.

These **two tactics** were only used by **14%** and **31%** of organizations in total, respectively, but incorporating both into your next event could be valuable: **(1)** the former by allowing attendees to discuss amongst themselves and build additional and connections, and **(2)** the latter by ensuring that attendees pay attention during the event.

As they're used less frequently, they also can help you avoid the virtual event burnout mentioned by many organizations by bringing something fresh and new to the table — so be sure to include in your promotions that you'll be providing these opportunities for engagement.

Also of note:
out of the people who selected the "Other" option, 30% wrote in some variant of "I don't know". This indicates that driving engagement throughout virtual events is still one of the biggest difficulties for many organizations, and that sharing resources around what types of engagement is effective is key.

How Many People Actually Attend Virtual Events?

Getting attendees to join virtual events was another common theme through the challenges organizations face. This was also clear based on the mixed results of attendee numbers that organizations saw at their virtual events.

How many attendees did your virtual event(s) attract compared to how many you saw for equivalent in-person event(s)?

Legend:
- Much less
- Slightly less
- The same
- Slightly more
- Much more
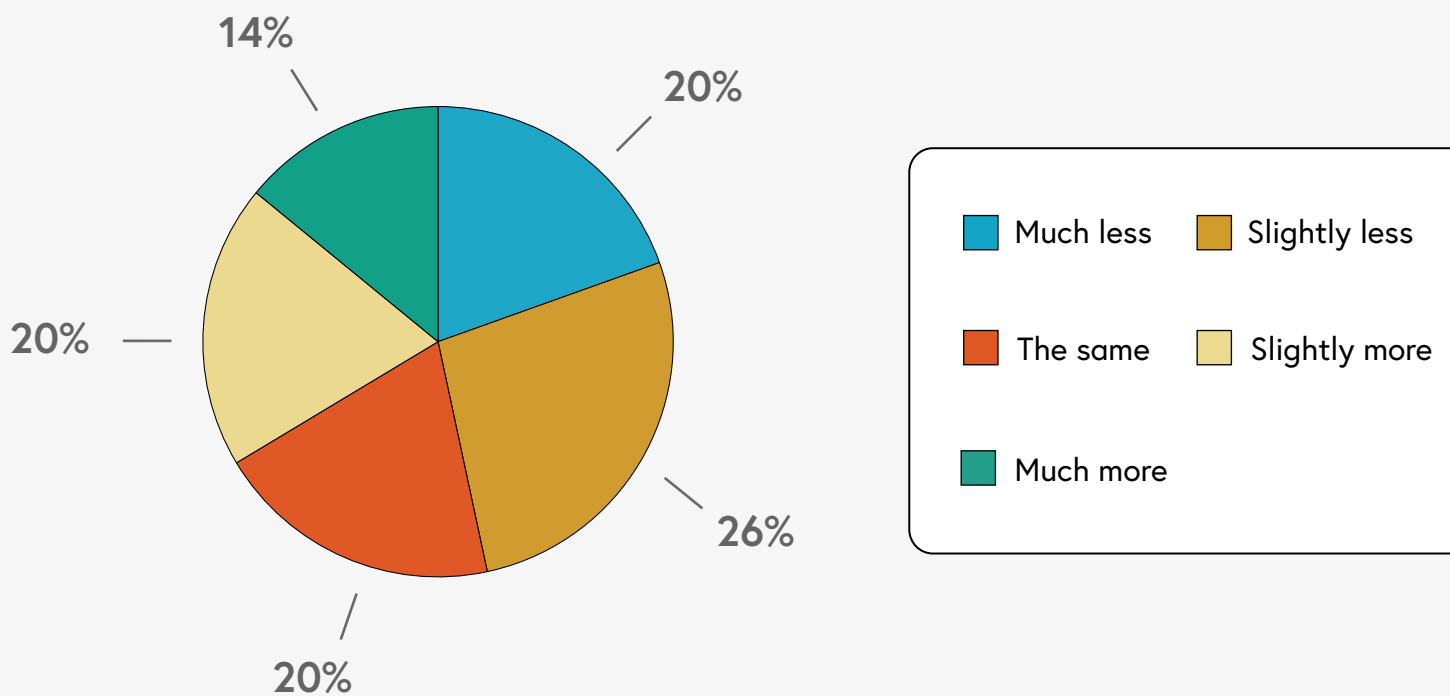
Just over a third of organizations (34%) reported seeing more attendees, whereas 47% reported seeing fewer attendees. Based on this, it seems that events are slightly more likely to have fewer attendees — but the results are so close between seeing the same or more (52%) or fewer (48%) attendees that it's hard to predict where you'll land.

However, it's not just determined by random luck: there are definitely things you can do to draw in more attendees. One of those tactics is by choosing the right kinds of events: 70% of people who selected that they had "much more" attendees had a Guest Speaker, compared to only 46% of those who indicated they had much less attendees.

Organizations who ran panel discussions were also likely to have much more attendees, with 57% of organizations who had many more attendees reporting that they ran a panel discussion as compared to only 38% of those who had much fewer. This may be due to the fact that these types of events are typically also promoted by the guest speaker or the people participating in the panel, and thus are likely to reach a wider audience.

And what about organizations who had yet to run a virtual event?

The majority of those organizations (61%) reported they expected to see fewer attendees at their virtual event.

How many attendees do you think your virtual event(s) will attract compared to how many you would expect to see for equivalent in-person event(s)?

8%

25%

18%

18%

31%

Legend:
- Much less
- Slightly less
- The same
- Slightly more
- Much more
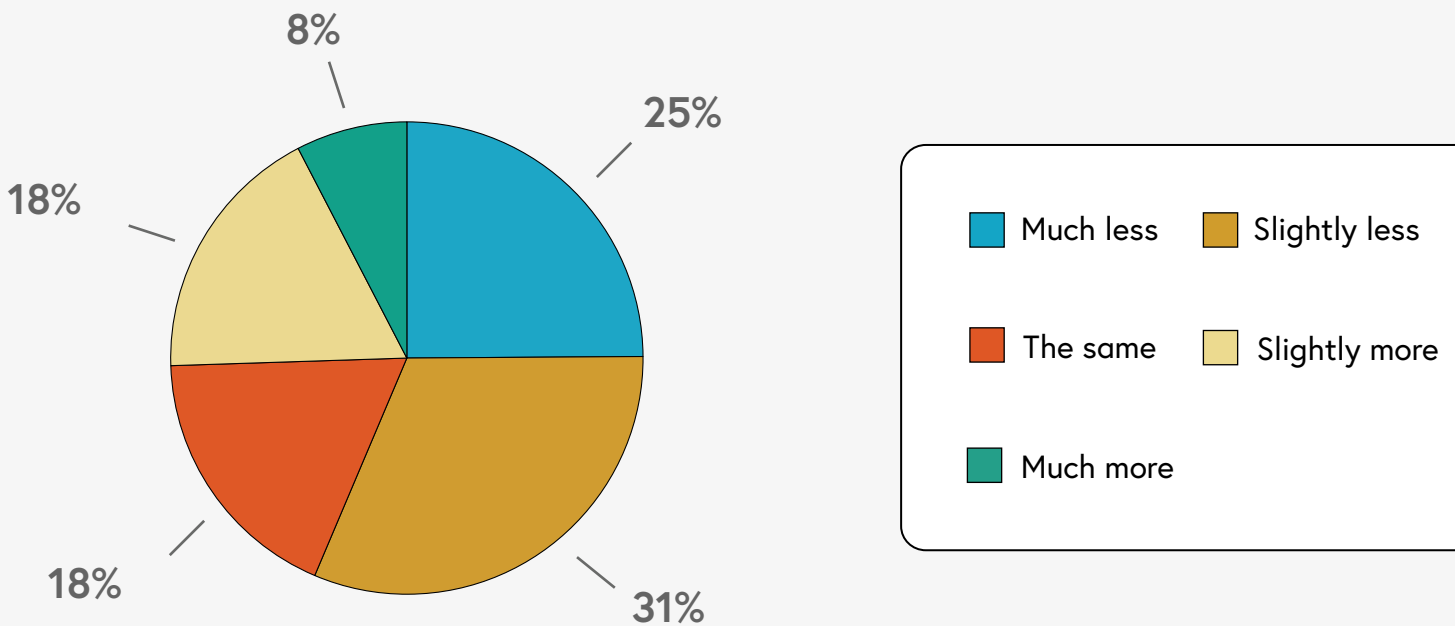
The disparity between these results might actually provide some hope to organizations who haven't yet run virtual events, as it seems as though virtual events may be better attended than organizations might have originally thought prior to running their event. They may also want to consider running a guest speaker or panel discussion event in order to leverage the potential of a larger promotional network.

How Can You Attract New Attendees to Your Virtual Event?

For organizations who want to attract new members via their virtual events, there's good news: it's definitely a possibility.

As the graph below shows, only 28% of survey takers knew all their attendees — meaning 72% were attracting new potential members!
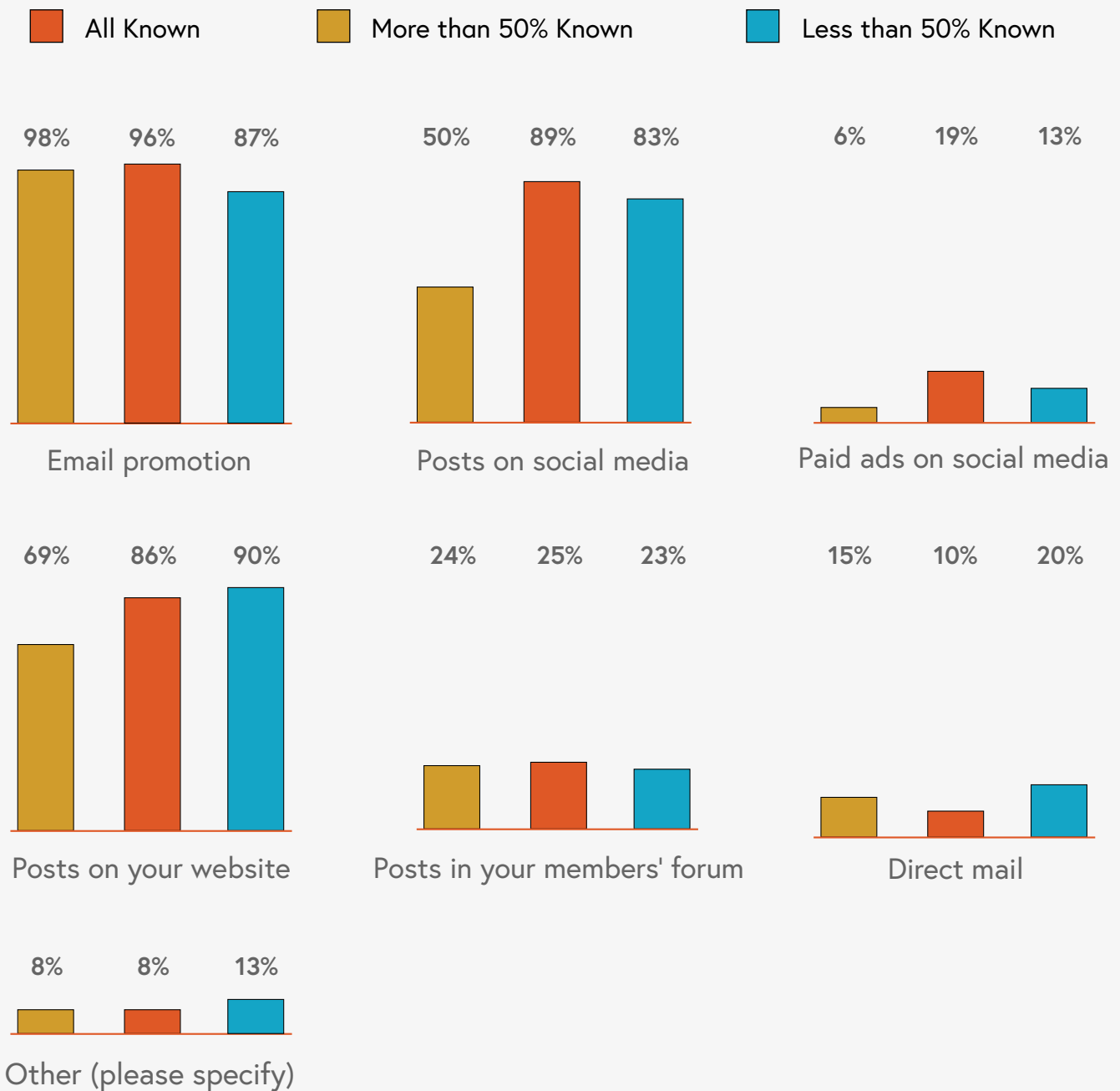
What percentage of your event attendees were previously known to your organization?
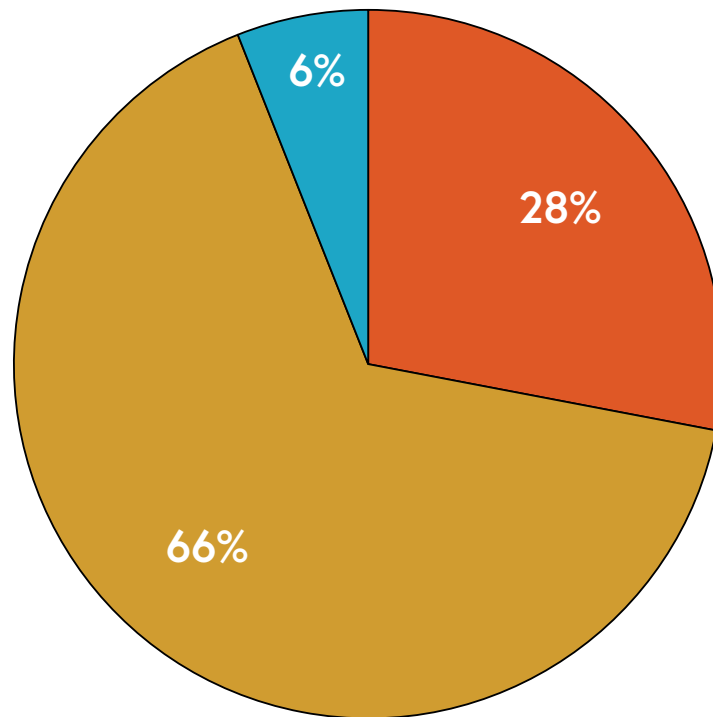
■ All Known	■ More than 50% Known	■ Less than 50% Known

When comparing the tactics used by groups who attracted more new attendees, we found that social media was much more heavily used — 83% of organizations who had attracted new members used this tactic, compared to only 50% for organizations who knew all their attendees.

Which of the following did you use to attract members to your virtual event(s)? Select all that apply.

Legend: ■ All Known ■ More than 50% Known ■ Less than 50% Known

Email promotion: 98% | 96% | 87%

Posts on social media: 50% | 89% | 83%

Paid ads on social media: 6% | 19% | 13%

Posts on your website: 69% | 86% | 90%

Posts in your members' forum: 24% | 25% | 23%

Direct mail: 15% | 10% | 20%

Other (please specify): 8% | 8% | 13%

The same was true for posting on the organization's website, which was done by 20% more of organizations who attracted more than 50% of new attendees.

This signals that if you want to extend your reach, posting on your website and on social media are tactics that you'll want to use. We also found that these groups used on average 3.3 tactics as opposed to only 2.7 for the group who weren't attracting as many newcomers — basically, the more outreach you do, the better.

Advice from Organizations Who Have Been There

We asked organizations who had already run virtual events to share some wisdom that you could use to run your next virtual event. Here's what they had to say!

> "Treat your virtual event as the kickoff to a short campaign. Not everybody will be able to get on (or will be interested in getting on) for the event itself, so make the content available and keep it in donors' faces for a set period of time.
>
> **- Director Of Development, Nonprofit**

> "Just three things: Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.
>
> **- CEO, Business Club**

> "Make sure the activity is interactive most of the time. Make use of break-out rooms regularly.
>
> **- Web Manager, Health Association**

> "Find ways to increase collaboration and engagement online. People need time to talk with one another, not just be talked to for hours on end.
>
> **- Communications Officer, Teachers' Association**

> "Open the virtual event 15 minutes before start time, and encourage attendees to join before starting time, especially if they are unsure how to use the technology. For members who are not tech-savvy, offer a one-on-one trial run of the tech way ahead of the event, so that these members don't feel too intimidated to attend.
>
> **- Consultant, Community Association**

Our Top Virtual Event Insights

The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually end, but it seems that the popularity of virtual events are just beginning.

With their lesser cost, high levels of success overall, and their ability to reach a much wider audience, membership organizations of all kinds should plan to keep virtual events in their toolbox as an additional member engagement tool.

If you're part of the group who has yet to run virtual events and are suffering from a lack of confidence, we have good news: there's no reason for such fear. Organizations that run virtual events achieved success **90%** of the time, and were more successful than they originally believed they'd be 56% of the time!

To run a more successful virtual event, here are several ideas we would suggest doing based on our findings:

- If you're trying to increase revenue, focus on finding virtual sponsors and create a shareable donation page.

- If you're trying to attract new members, publicize your events on social media and on your website.

- Consider partnering with a guest speaker and/or running a Q&A as part of your event to broaden your reach.

- Regardless of the type of event you're running, holding a live hangout before or after the event as well as sending out surveys and polls throughout can help make your event more engaging.

We hope you found this research report helpful, and that it has inspired you to start running or to improve the success of your own virtual events!

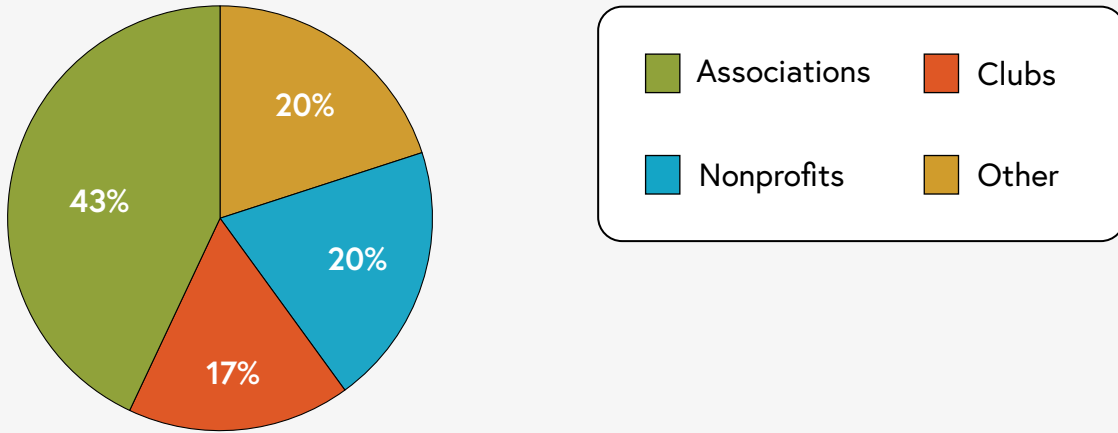# Want to move your membership into the virtual sphere along with your events?

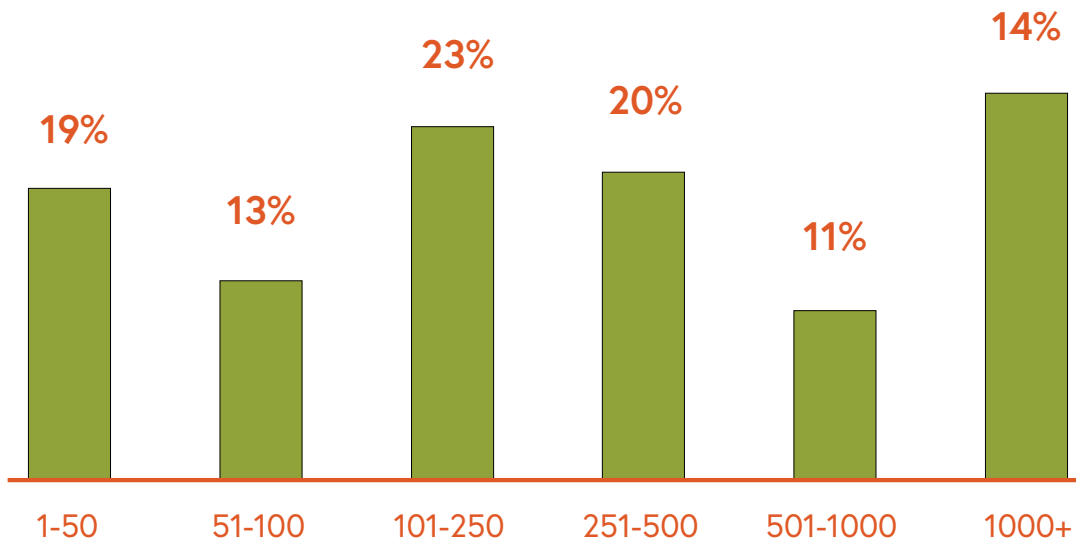Try Wild Apricot's 30-day free trial today!

Try it free for 30 days

Section 04

Demographics

What type of organization do you work for?

Legend:
- Associations
- Clubs
- Nonprofits
- Other

43% Associations
20% Other
20% Nonprofits
17% Clubs

How many members does your organization have?

1-50	51-100	101-250	251-500	501-1000	1000+
19%	13%	23%	20%	11%	14%

How many years has your organization been in existence?

Legend:
- +20 years
- 11 to 20 years
- 6 to 10 years
- 1 to 5 years
- Less than a year

61% +20 years
16% 11 to 20 years
11% 1 to 5 years
9% 6 to 10 years
3% Less than a year