



RESEARCH REPORT | 2026 EDITION

The 2026 B2B Event *Delegate Report*

What is actually driving delegate registrations for B2B conferences in 2026, where organisers are quietly losing budget, and what the most successful events do differently to fill seats.

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2026.

78%

of organisers rank
in-person as top
channel

18%

of trade show
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40%

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2026

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The Real State of B2B Events in 2026

In-person B2B events are back. Strongly. But the conditions around them have changed in ways that most organisers have not fully caught up with.

Budgets are tighter. Attendee expectations are higher. And the pressure to justify every pound or dollar spent on an event has never been more intense. The gap between events that fill seats and events that do not has widened considerably, and the reasons behind that gap are rarely what organisers expect.

78%

of B2B event organisers say in-person conferences are their most impactful marketing channel

Bizzabo 2026 State of Events

69%

of B2B event leaders report flat or decreasing event budgets for 2025 while costs have risen 40 to 50%

SalesHive Event Marketing Report

40%

of event organisers still struggle to prove ROI to leadership in 2026, though this is down from 70% in 2025

Bizzabo 2026 Benchmark Report

The optimism is real. Attendance is up. More events are being planned. But optimism alone does not fill seats with the right people. And "the right people" is where most organiser strategies quietly fall apart.

Gone are the days when attendees registered months in advance. Now, most sign up in the final weeks, leaving organisers sweating over fixed costs and empty seats until the eleventh hour.

Source: vFairs Event Planning Challenges Report, 2025

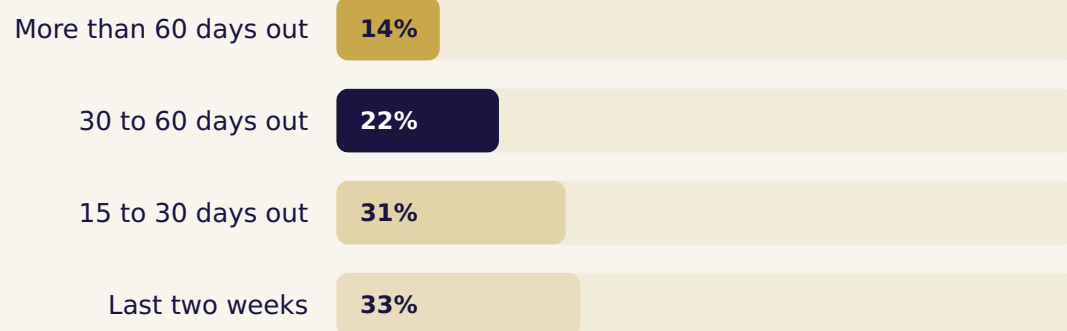
The Last-Minute Registration Problem

One of the most disruptive behavioural shifts happening right now is how late delegates decide to register. This is not a logistical inconvenience. It is a structural problem that affects venue contracts, catering commitments, sponsorship promises, and programme planning.

The delegates who register earliest are almost always the ones who were personally invited or directly reached out to. The ones who wait until the last minute are usually the ones who found you through an ad, a social post, or a vague email blast. The quality gap between these two groups is significant, and most organisers feel it acutely in the room on the day.

When Delegates Typically Register

Based on registration timing data across B2B conferences



Indicative data compiled from event industry research. B2B conferences, 200 to 2,000 delegate capacity.

What this data tells us is that two-thirds of registrations happen in the final month before an event. For most organisers, this is when panic sets in. The problem is not the final month. The problem is the previous five months during which nobody was actively reaching out.

Why Paid Ads Are Failing Event Organisers

The instinct to run ads when seats are empty is understandable. It feels like doing something. It looks like activity. But for most B2B events, paid advertising has become one of the most expensive ways to fill a room with the wrong people.

This is not a critique of advertising in general. Ads work well for consumer products, mass-market services, and brand awareness campaigns where reach is the goal. For a B2B conference with 300 seats and a specific delegate profile in mind, ads create a fundamentally different problem: too many impressions from people who will never show up, and too few meaningful conversations with the decision-makers you actually need.

\$4,350

Average customer acquisition cost via Google Ads in B2B, tracking full sales cycle through closed deal

Digital Bloom B2B PPC Report, 2025

7-12%

Lead-to-qualified conversion rate for Google Ads in B2B. LinkedIn performs better at 14 to 18%, but costs more upfront

Digital Bloom, 2025

42%

of the average B2B marketing budget now goes to search ads, yet event organisers see declining returns per pound spent

Digital Bloom B2B PPC Report, 2025

The Conversion Problem Nobody Talks About

Here is what the advertising platforms will not tell you: a click is not a delegate. A lead form submission is not a delegate. Even a registration is not always a delegate, because without personal outreach and qualification, a significant portion of those registrations will become no-shows.

The average no-show rate for B2B events where delegates registered through passive channels (ads, social posts, email blasts) is materially higher than for delegates who

were personally contacted. The reason is straightforward: when someone signs up because an algorithm served them an ad, their commitment to attending is shallow. When someone signs up because a real person reached out, spoke with them, and answered their questions, the commitment is entirely different.



Algorithms optimise for clicks, not for delegate quality. Every time you run a conference ad, you are paying for attention from people the algorithm thinks are relevant. But relevance to an algorithm and relevance to your event are two very different things.

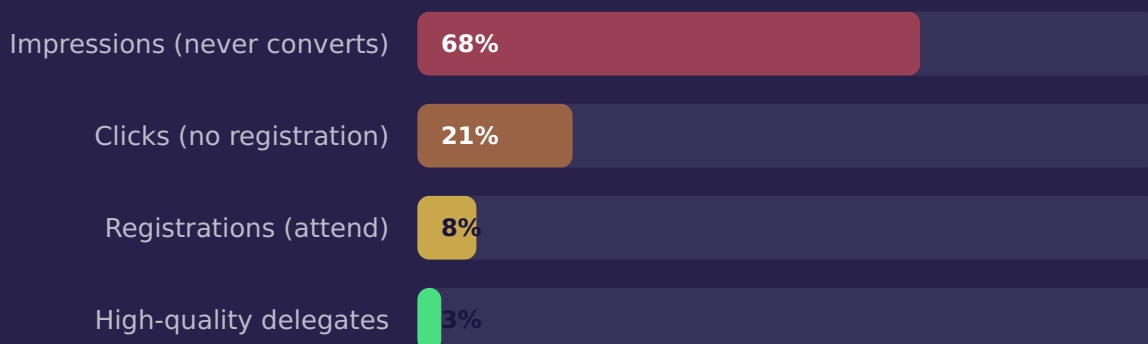
Growth by Sajilni Research

Where the Budget Actually Goes

Most event ad budgets are structured to run across the full promotional window, from three to six months before the event, gradually increasing spend as the date approaches. The problem is that most of the early spend generates impressions and clicks from people who are simply not ready to register, or who will never register regardless of how many times they see the ad.


Where Paid Ad Budget Goes vs. Where Delegates Come From

The mismatch between spend and return



Illustrative model based on B2B event advertising benchmarks and conversion data.

The uncomfortable conclusion is that paid advertising, at best, converts around 3% of total budget spend into delegates who genuinely match the profile you wanted. The other 97% is spread across impressions, clicks, and low-intent registrations.



The average B2B event organiser spends between \$5,000 and \$20,000 per month on paid ads. The average cost per closed B2B deal via Google Ads alone is \$4,350. For a 300-delegate conference, the maths rarely works.

The Hidden Cost of Empty Seats

An empty seat at a paid B2B event is not just a missed ticket sale. It is a cascading failure that touches sponsorship revenue, speaker credibility, venue ROI, and future event reputation.

Most organisers calculate the cost of an empty seat as the ticket price not collected. This is the smallest part of the problem. The real cost of low delegate numbers runs much deeper and most of it only becomes visible after the event.

10x

higher ROI from event attendees versus non-attendees, which means every delegate who does not show up is worth far more than their ticket price

Splash and GTM Partners research

31%

of B2B buyers attend industry events as part of their active purchase process, making delegate quality directly tied to commercial outcomes for sponsors

Marketing Charts

35%

of event budgets go to venue and food and beverage, fixed costs that must be paid regardless of how many delegates show up on the day

Zuddl and SalesHive data

50%

of B2B sales go to the vendor that responds first to a lead. Events that generate high-quality delegates close more deals faster for their sponsors and partners

SalesHive Event Marketing Report

The Sponsor Revenue Multiplier

For most B2B conference organisers, ticket revenue covers operating costs while sponsorship revenue is the profit engine. Sponsors pay for access to specific types of professionals: decision-makers with budget authority in their target sectors. When an event is filled with the wrong delegates, sponsors notice.

The damage is not just a difficult renewal conversation. It is a reputational signal in a market where word travels fast. Sponsors talk to each other. A conference that

consistently delivers the wrong delegate profile will find it increasingly difficult to retain sponsors, regardless of how well-produced the event itself is.

83% of marketers say events are critical for their business growth. But that figure assumes the event is attended by the right people. The critical variable is not attendance volume. It is delegate quality.

Source: Splash Event Marketing Statistics

The Compounding Effect Across Years

A conference that struggles to fill seats in year one often falls into a pattern that is difficult to reverse. Lower than expected attendance leads to reduced sponsor confidence, which leads to lower sponsorship renewal rates, which leads to a smaller budget for year two, which makes filling seats even harder.

The flip side is equally true. Events that consistently deliver high-quality, targeted delegates build a reputation that makes acquisition progressively easier. Sponsors become advocates. Delegates refer colleagues. The event itself becomes a networking signal, meaning that senior professionals want to attend because they know the right people will be in the room.

83%

of marketers say events are their most effective marketing channel

But effectiveness depends entirely on who is in the room. A full room of the wrong delegates is often worse for long-term event health than a smaller room of the right ones.

What Successful Conferences Do Differently

After speaking with senior event professionals across the GCC, UK, and Southeast Asia, a consistent pattern emerged. The events that reliably fill seats with the right delegates share a small number of habits that the rest of the market has not yet adopted at scale.

None of these habits are complicated. But each requires a mindset shift away from broadcast marketing and toward direct, deliberate acquisition.

Habit 1: They Start Outreach Much Earlier

The standard industry approach is to launch marketing campaigns four to six weeks before an event. The best-performing events start direct delegate outreach four to six months before.

This is not about sending more emails earlier. It is about identifying the specific professionals you want in the room and beginning a personal, targeted conversation with them long before a registration deadline creates urgency. By the time the event is close, these delegates are already committed. They have been spoken to, their questions have been answered, and they have made a genuine decision to attend rather than a last-minute, low-commitment registration click.

Outreach Start Time vs. Delegate Quality Score

Relationship between early outreach and high-quality delegate outcomes



Habit 2: They Define the Delegate Profile Before They Market

Most events define their target audience in terms of broad sectors: "technology professionals," "finance leaders," or "healthcare executives." The best-performing events define their delegate profile with a level of specificity that makes most marketing teams uncomfortable.

They know the exact job title. The seniority level. The size of company. The geographic market. The budget authority level. They know which LinkedIn groups their target delegates participate in. They know which other events these delegates attend. This level of specificity feels like narrowing down. In practice, it is the difference between 300 vague registrations and 200 delegates who generate real commercial outcomes for everyone at the event.

76.8% of event marketers prioritise pipeline creation as their key KPI. But pipeline requires the right attendees. Broad audience targeting produces broad results: lots of registrations, few real commercial conversations.

Source: Zuddl B2B Event Trends Report

Habit 3: They Use Direct Outreach, Not Just Content

The shift from content-led marketing to direct outreach is the single biggest differentiator between events that fill seats quickly and events that spend money waiting for registrations to arrive.

Content marketing, social posts, and even most email campaigns are passive. They put your event in front of people and hope those people take action. Direct outreach goes to the specific person you want in the room and starts a conversation. It does not hope. It asks.

- ✓ **76% of marketers** say email is the single most effective way to drive event registrations (Markletic)
- ✓ **39% of marketers** say their sales teams generate a significant number of registrations through direct outreach (Markletic)
- ✓ **Event agencies** specifically see a 48% cold email open rate, well above the B2B average (GrowthList 2026)

✓ **Personalised outreach** generates reply rates 133% higher than generic messaging (Belkins, 5.5 million email dataset)

Habit 4: They Follow Up Systematically

This is perhaps the most overlooked element of successful delegate acquisition. Only 18% of trade show leads are ever followed up on seriously. For conference delegate prospects, the numbers are similarly poor.

The events that fill seats treat delegate prospect follow-up the same way a sales team treats a qualified lead. There is a sequence. There is a timeline. There is a human being responsible for moving each prospect from interested to registered. This structured approach converts prospects that passive marketing would simply lose.

The Shift from Passive Marketing to Active Acquisition

There is a fundamental difference between marketing an event and acquiring delegates for it. Most organisers do one when they need to be doing the other.

Marketing an event means creating awareness. Ads, social media, email newsletters, content marketing, PR. All of this serves a purpose: it builds a general signal that the event exists. But awareness is not registration. And registration is not attendance. And attendance is not quality attendance.

Active delegate acquisition is a different discipline entirely. It starts with a specific list of the people you want in the room. It involves direct, personal outreach to each of those people. It involves qualifying their interest and their fit. And it involves guiding them through the registration process with a human being available to answer questions and remove friction.

60%

of virtual event organisers use social media to drive registrations, but only a fraction of those registrations convert to genuine attendance

Markletic Research

18%

of trade show leads ever receive serious follow-up, meaning 82% of the investment in acquiring those leads is effectively wasted

SalesHive Event Marketing

60%

more likely to convert when trade show and conference leads are followed up within 24 to 48 hours of initial contact

SalesHive Event Marketing Report

The Outbound Model: How It Actually Works

The most effective delegate acquisition model combines data-driven targeting with personalised human outreach. It is not a mass email blast. It is not a LinkedIn ad

campaign. It is a structured process that looks more like B2B sales than traditional event marketing.

1 **Profile Definition**

Define the exact delegate profile with specificity: job title, seniority, company size, sector, geography, and any intent signals. This becomes the filter for every outreach decision.

2 **List Building**

Build a verified contact list using professional data tools. Quality over quantity. A list of 500 precisely targeted professionals will outperform a list of 5,000 broadly matched contacts every time.

3 **Personalised Outreach**

Reach out directly via email and LinkedIn with short, relevant, personalised messages. No generic templates. The message needs to feel like it was written for that person specifically, because it was.

4 **Qualification**

Not everyone who responds is the right fit. A qualified conversation means a two-way exchange with a decision-maker who matches the delegate profile and has expressed genuine interest. This filter protects the quality of the room.

5 **Registration and Follow Through**

Guide qualified prospects through registration. Answer questions. Remove friction. Follow up with confirmed delegates in the weeks before the event to maintain commitment and reduce no-shows.



The difference between passive marketing and active acquisition is the difference between waiting for the right people to find you and going directly to find them yourself.

Growth by Sajilni

THE DEFINITION

What Qualified Delegate Acquisition Actually Means

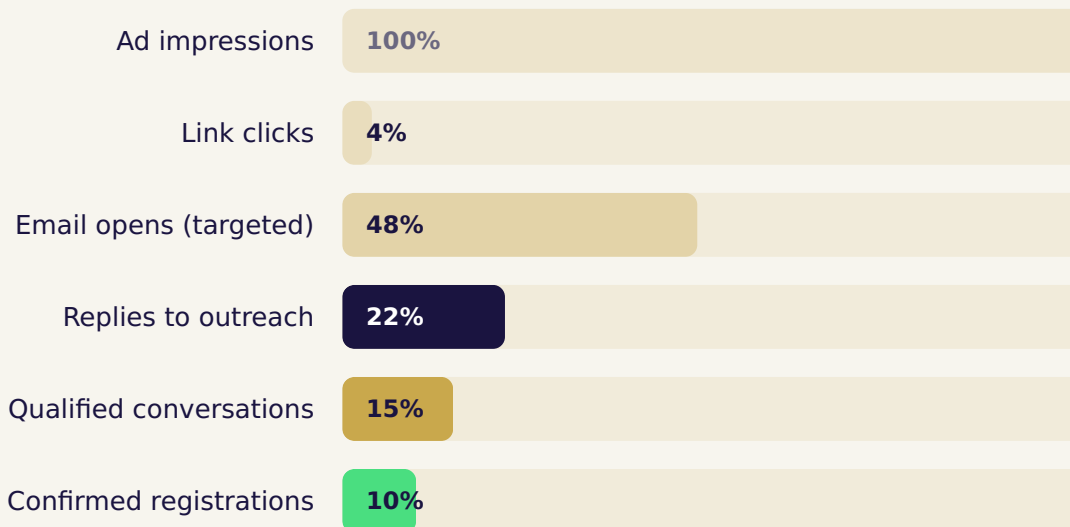
The word "acquisition" gets used loosely in events. A click is counted as a lead. A registration is counted as an acquisition. An attendance is counted as a success. Each of these is a different thing, and conflating them is how budgets get wasted.

Qualified delegate acquisition has a specific meaning: a delegate who matches your defined profile, has confirmed intent to attend, and has been registered through a process that involved a real human conversation at some point.

The Qualification Ladder

From Impression to Qualified Delegate

How acquisition narrows from broad interest to committed attendance



Comparative conversion rates: paid advertising vs. targeted direct outreach. Event agencies, 48% open rate baseline (GrowthList 2026).

The numbers tell a clear story. Direct outreach to a targeted list produces dramatically higher conversion at every stage of the funnel compared to paid advertising. The reason is simple: every person who receives a targeted outreach message was chosen because they match the delegate profile. Every person who sees an ad was chosen by an algorithm with commercial, not event-specific, objectives.

The Difference Between Volume and Quality

A common objection to targeted acquisition is that it produces fewer registrations than a broad ad campaign. This is sometimes true. But consider what a registration actually represents in each case.

Metric	Paid Ad Campaign	Targeted Direct Acquisition
Registrations (example event)	400	180
Actual attendance rate	55 to 65%	78 to 88%
Delegates matching sponsor ICP	25 to 35%	70 to 85%
Post-event sponsor renewal rate	Lower, variable	Significantly higher
Cost per delegate who attends	High (ads spend divided by actual attendees)	Lower when calculated on attendance, not registration
No-show risk	High	Low (qualified and committed)

The column that matters for long-term event health is not total registrations. It is delegates who match your sponsor's ideal customer profile and actually show up on the day. On that measure, targeted acquisition consistently outperforms broadcast marketing.

Key Benchmarks and What to Expect

One of the most common questions from organisers considering a shift to direct acquisition is: what results should I realistically expect, and over what timeframe?

These benchmarks are drawn from industry research and conversations with B2B event professionals across multiple markets. They are not guarantees. Every event is different. But they provide a realistic baseline against which to measure any acquisition strategy.

20-50

Qualified delegate registrations typically generated per campaign within the first 30 days of active outreach

Growth by Sajilni campaign data

3-5x

Higher conversion rate for directly contacted delegates versus passive channel registrations, when measured against actual attendance

Industry outreach benchmarks

2 wks

Typical time from outreach launch to first confirmed registrations when targeting a well-defined delegate profile

Growth by Sajilni

Realistic Timeline for a 300-Delegate Event

W1

Week 1 to 2: Profile and List

Define the delegate profile. Build the outreach list using verified professional data. Set up the outreach infrastructure. First messages sent by end of week two.

W3

Week 3 to 4: First Conversations

Initial replies and conversations begin. First qualified delegates enter the pipeline. Early registrations from the most responsive prospects. Follow-up sequences running on non-responders.

W5

Week 5 to 8: Pipeline Building

The pipeline deepens. More conversations, more qualified prospects. Registration rate accelerates. Targeting refines based on response patterns from the first four weeks.

W9

Week 9 to 12: Conversion Push

Focus shifts to converting warm prospects to confirmed registrations. Follow-up with prospects who have engaged but not yet registered. Pre-event communication with confirmed delegates to maintain commitment.

The most important insight from events that run successful acquisition campaigns: the first 30 days are about conversations, not registrations. Registrations are the output. Conversations are the input. Organise for conversations first.

Growth by Sajilni Research

What Good Looks Like vs. What Average Looks Like

Average Event

Starts marketing 6 weeks before event.

Spends 80% of budget on paid ads and social.

Tracks registrations, not delegate quality.

No-show rate of 35 to 45%.

Sponsor renewal rate decreasing year on year.

High-Performing Event

Starts direct outreach 4 to 6 months before.

Combines targeted outreach with light-touch marketing.

Tracks qualified conversations and delegate profile match.

No-show rate of 12 to 22%.

Sponsor renewal rate growing year on year.

What This Means for Your Next Event

The B2B event market is not short of opportunity. Attendance is recovering. Investment is growing. In-person conferences are producing real commercial outcomes for organisers who get the delegate mix right.

The challenge is not the market. The challenge is the approach. An industry that has spent decades relying on passive broadcast marketing is discovering that the delegates it wants are not always the ones who respond to ads and email blasts. Those delegates need to be found, contacted directly, and given a reason to say yes.

The shift from passive to active acquisition is not a small tweak. It requires a different discipline, different tools, and a different measure of success. But the events that have made that shift are consistently outperforming their peers on the metrics that actually matter: delegate quality, sponsor satisfaction, and revenue per event.

Three Things to Take Away from This Report

- ✓ **Start earlier.** The quality of your delegate room is determined in the months before the event, not the weeks. The earlier your outreach begins, the better the delegate profile you can build.
- ✓ **Define before you target.** A specific delegate profile is not a limitation. It is the foundation of everything that follows. The more precisely you define who you want, the more efficiently you can find them.
- ✓ **Measure quality, not volume.** The number of registrations is not the right metric. The number of delegates who match your profile, show up, and generate commercial outcomes for your sponsors is the right metric.

The most successful event organisers we spoke with had one thing in common: they stopped waiting for the right delegates to find them. They went and found them instead.

Growth by Sajilni Research, 2026

ABOUT GROWTH BY SAJILNI

Ready to Fill Your *Next Event* the Right Way?

Growth by Sajilni is a B2B delegate acquisition service. We find the right professionals, reach out to them directly on your behalf, and get them registered. No ads. No social posts. Pure targeted outreach. If we do not generate at least 10 qualified delegate conversations in your first 30 days, we work a second month at no charge.

[Book a Strategy Call at growthsajilni.com](https://growthsajilni.com)

Free 30-minute call. No commitment required.