MARKET STUDY May 2024

THE INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Shaping tomorrow's RFP: Insights from association professionals



Dresden, Germany

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INTRODUCTION

In the fast-changing world of event management, the Request for Proposal (RFP) process is essential but also a bit of a headache. It's a key step in planning a great conference, but let's be honest, it often feels old-fashioned and slow - like it hasn't caught up with the times and the cool tech we have now. But let us look at the real question here: in the world of associations, is the RFP just an outdated tradition, or does it still serve a crucial purpose?

This market study is an insight into a journey of innovation and change for associations. We are diving deep into the RFP practices as they stand today within associations to map out a future where these processes are not only simpler but smarter, swifter, and better suited for today's event planning needs.

With this market study we are on a mission to figure out what the future of the RFP will look like. Join us as we tackle today's challenges, discover what associations really want, and develop ideas that could become new standards, changing the way we do things for the better.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

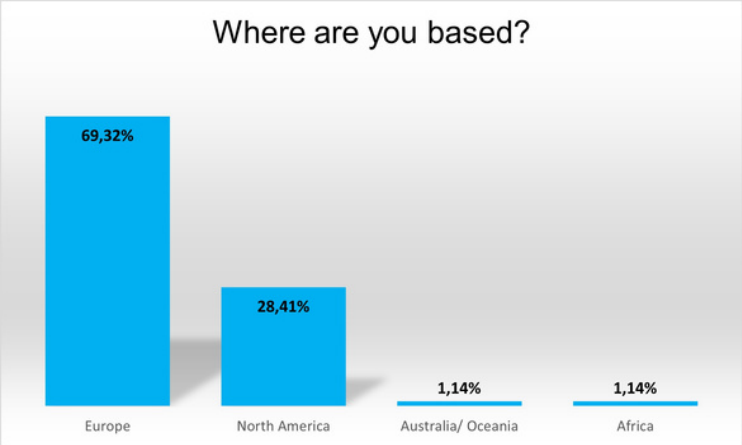
This market study was conducted to get a clear understanding of the current RFP process of associations, their challenges and how associations are seeing the future of the RFP. A survey was conducted among our association database; ESAE and Boardroom shared the questionnaire among their networks and 94 associations participated in this survey.

Furthermore, in February this year we hosted a session at the VisitBritain Association Conference, in Edinburgh about the RFP of the Future and in March, we hosted an association event in Brussels about strategic event planning where the topic ‘RFP of the future’ was also discussed. The input and outcome gathered during these sessions are also used for analyzing this market study.

The results are examined on a global scale and used to draw general trends, conclusions and recommendations. It is not our intention to steer the reader in a certain direction, however we will open up the discussion on what we can change within the industry and how this might be done.

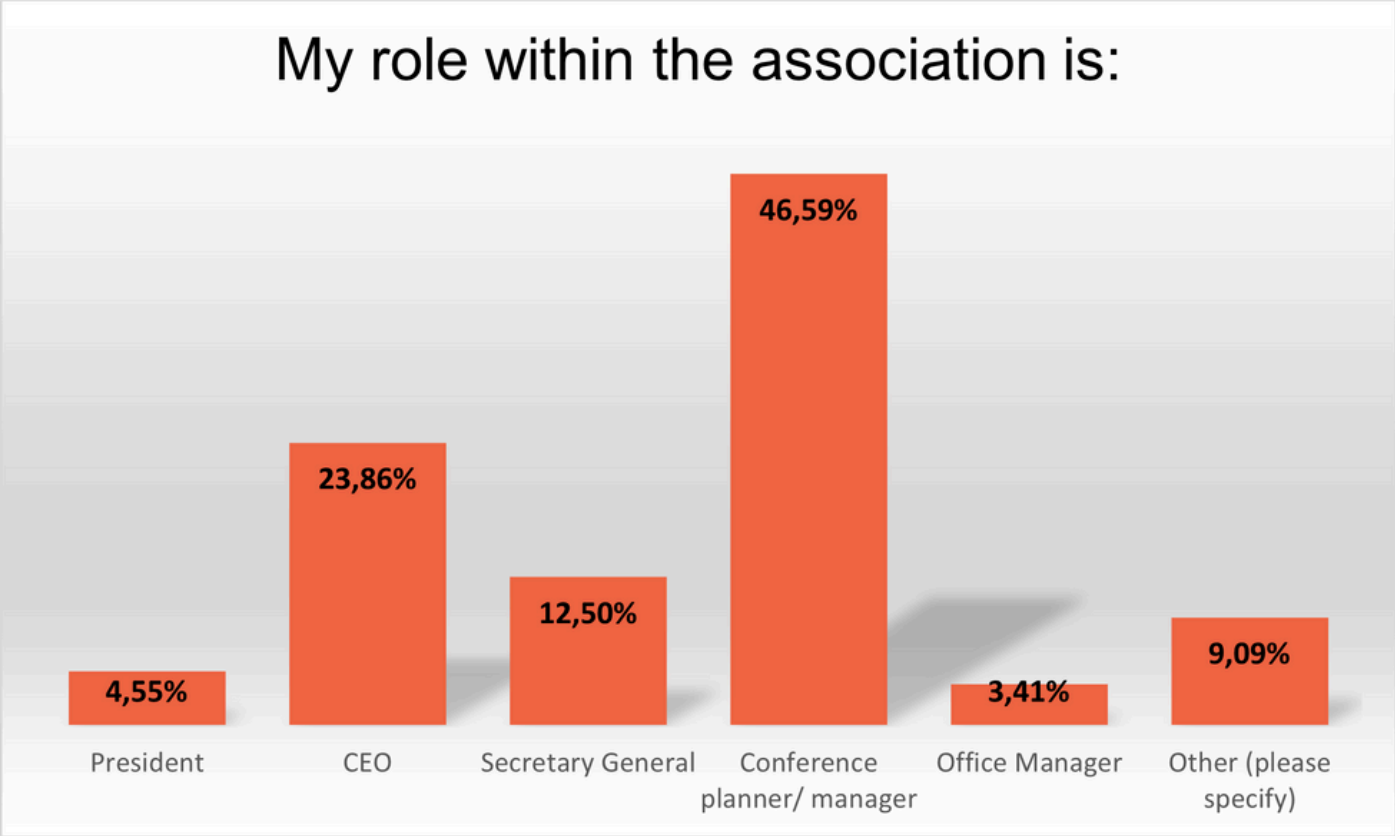
To support the results of the survey, a varied number of articles and best practices were studied along with in-depth interviews that were conducted with industry leaders. In the report you will find best practices and quotes, these are all collected with the approval from the specific organization or person.

Respondents



Giving context to the research, we analyze the profile of our respondents to see where they are based. As seen in the graph, majority of the respondents are from Europe, followed by North America.

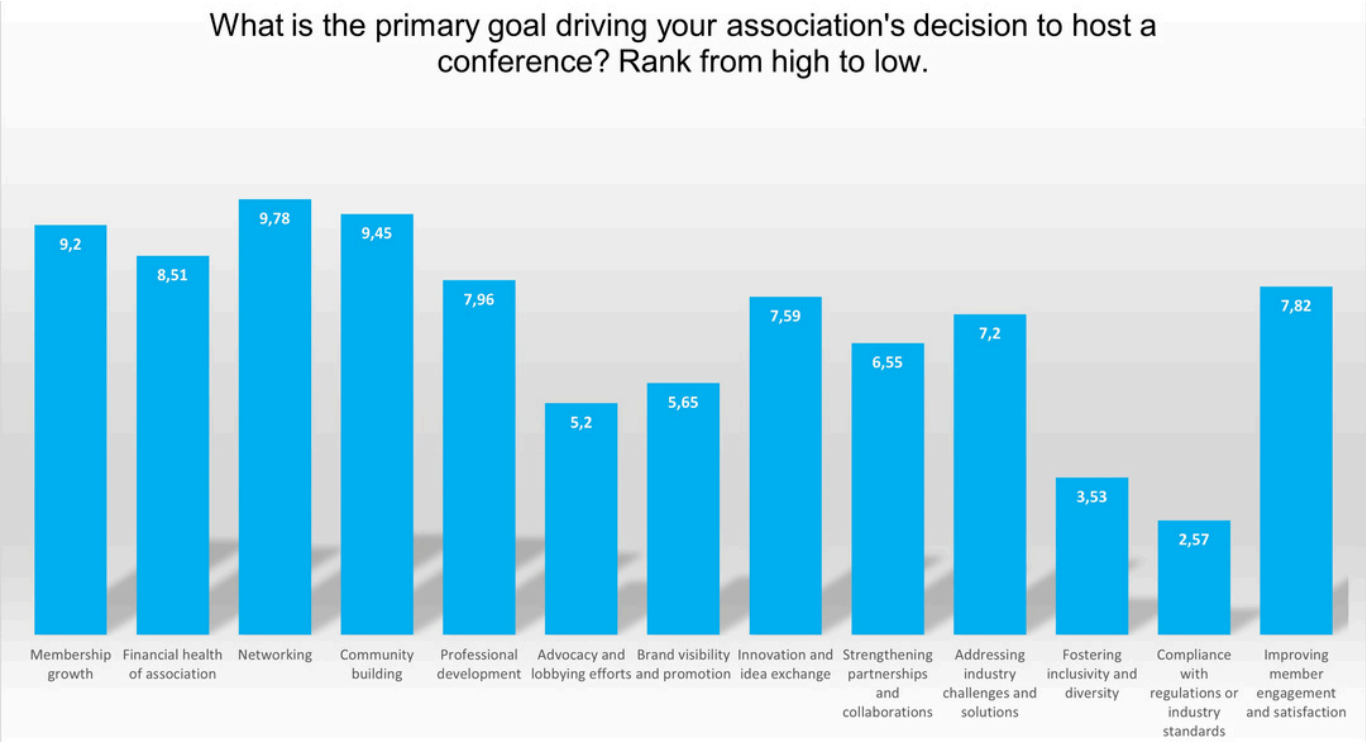
This can be explained by the strong presence Conferli has in Europe and the broad presence of associations within North America.



Over 45% of the respondents work as a Conference/ Event manager within the association. Followed by 24% CEO's and 12% the Secretary Generals. This is very representative for the outcome of this survey because the far majority of respondents either work on a daily basis in conference planning (including drafting RFP's) or have a key position in the organization and are able to take major decisions within the association.

A small number of respondents also held roles like Membership Director, Vice-President, Advisor to the Board.

Why do associations organize conferences?



The main goal of organizing association conferences is networking, followed by community building, membership growth and financial health for the association. These elements aren't just nice extras for the association's activities; they are essential for its survival. Networking and community building serve as the foundation for relevance in the industry, ensuring that the association remains a central, integral force within its field. Meanwhile, membership growth and financial stability are vital for the association's sustainability and capacity to continue delivering value to its members.

It is crucial that these conferences offer significant value since they are directly linked to the association's survival and well-being. Each conference should be carefully designed to boost networking, strengthen community ties, attract new members, and support the association's finances.





Amplify your impact: Should Advocacy be on the agenda of your next conference RFP?

Advocacy and lobbying might not top the list of conference goals, but they shouldn't be overlooked. These activities are crucial for speaking up about the issues that matter most to your members and making a real difference in your industry. When you bring advocacy into your conferences, you turn them into powerful events that can change policies and perspectives. In addition, picking the right city is key for these efforts as a city with strong connections to your industry or good access to policymakers can make your conference the perfect spot to get your voice heard.



In many associations, a familiar scenario unfolds: the policy team occupies one part of the office, focused on developing strategies to influence policymakers, while the events team occupies another, focused on organising engaging events that boost member involvement and fund the association. Interaction between these teams is typically minimal, often limited to last-minute logistical requests from the policy side. Yet, for associations aiming to advocate for specific industries or groups, bridging this divide is essential for maximising impact.

Events should not merely serve as platforms for member engagement and fundraising; they should be strategically aligned with an association's advocacy objectives. The events team must be well-versed in the organisation's policy goals and should actively seek ways to design events that advance these aims.

For one thing events can be an effective way of introducing policymakers to industry values. For example, if an industry emphasises sustainability, events can showcase innovative sustainability initiatives from member companies.

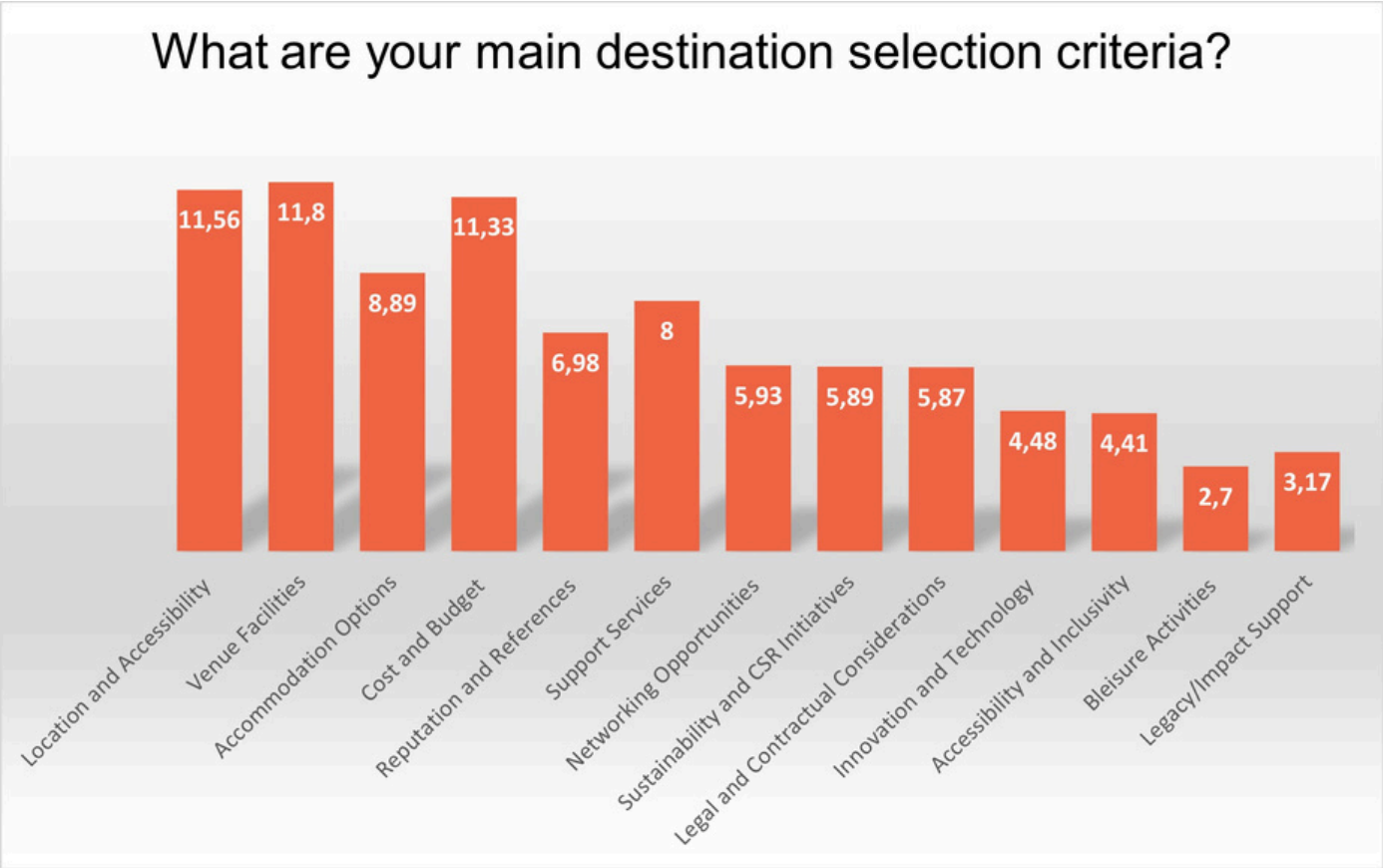
Events also prove effective in mobilising members around specific policy topics. I recall attending an aviation event where the association strongly opposed a proposed change to air traffic control funding. Throughout the event, attendees were surrounded by messaging opposing user fees—signs, explainer videos, and informational materials distributed widely. This concerted effort left attendees with a clear understanding that the association was defending their interests.

Aligning events with advocacy goals demands a coordinated effort between policy and events teams, ensuring that each gathering serves a dual purpose: fostering engagement while driving policy change.

Paul Walsh, Association Professional

Destination selection criteria

As the primary goal of conferences is networking, community building and membership growth, the choice of destination becomes paramount. Selecting the right destination can enhance networking and community building, it can also contribute to attracting new members by offering a unique and engaging setting. Taking this into account it is important to look at which criteria are considered when selecting a conference destination and how do these factors influence the decision-making process?



The 5 most important selection criteria for a destination, listed in order of importance, are:

1. **Venue Facilities;** Availability of adequate meeting spaces, exhibition areas, breakout rooms, and technological infrastructure to support the conference's needs, flexibility to scale up or down based on registration numbers.
2. **Location and Accessibility;** Proximity to transportation hubs, ease of access for attendees, and suitability of the destination for the association's target audience.
3. **Cost and Budget;** Overall affordability of hosting the conference at the venue, including rental fees, catering, AV equipment, and any additional services.
4. **Accommodation Options;** Variety and quality of nearby accommodations to cater to different preferences and budgets of attendees.
5. **Support Services;** Availability of on-site support staff, event planning assistance, and resources to help ensure the smooth execution of the conference.



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Followed by:

- **Reputation and References;** Track record of the venue in hosting similar events, testimonials from past clients, and reviews from industry peers.
- **Legal and Contractual Considerations;** Compliance with local regulations, insurance requirements, liability issues, and terms and conditions of the various contracts.
- **Sustainability and CSR Initiatives;** Commitment to environmentally-friendly practices, social responsibility, and alignment with the association's values and objectives.
- **Networking Opportunities;** Potential for networking and collaboration with other events or organizations hosted at the venue, as well as opportunities for social activities.
- **Innovation and Technology;** Integration of cutting-edge technology, digital solutions, and interactive tools to enhance the conference experience and engagement.
- **Accessibility and Inclusivity;** Provision of accommodations for attendees with disabilities, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and commitment to creating an accessible and welcoming environment for all participants.
- **Legacy/Impact Support;** Destination and local community commitment to lasting positive impacts beyond the conference, aligning with the association's values and mission.
- **Bleisure Activities;** Nearby leisure options for attendees to enjoy before or after the conference, enhancing their overall experience.

It is clear that when selecting a conference destination, associations prioritize a blend of practical, financial, and experiential factors to ensure the success and appeal of their conferences. This highlights the essential foundation needed for a smooth running conference. These factors address the core logistical requirements that directly impact participant experience and the operational ease of the conference.

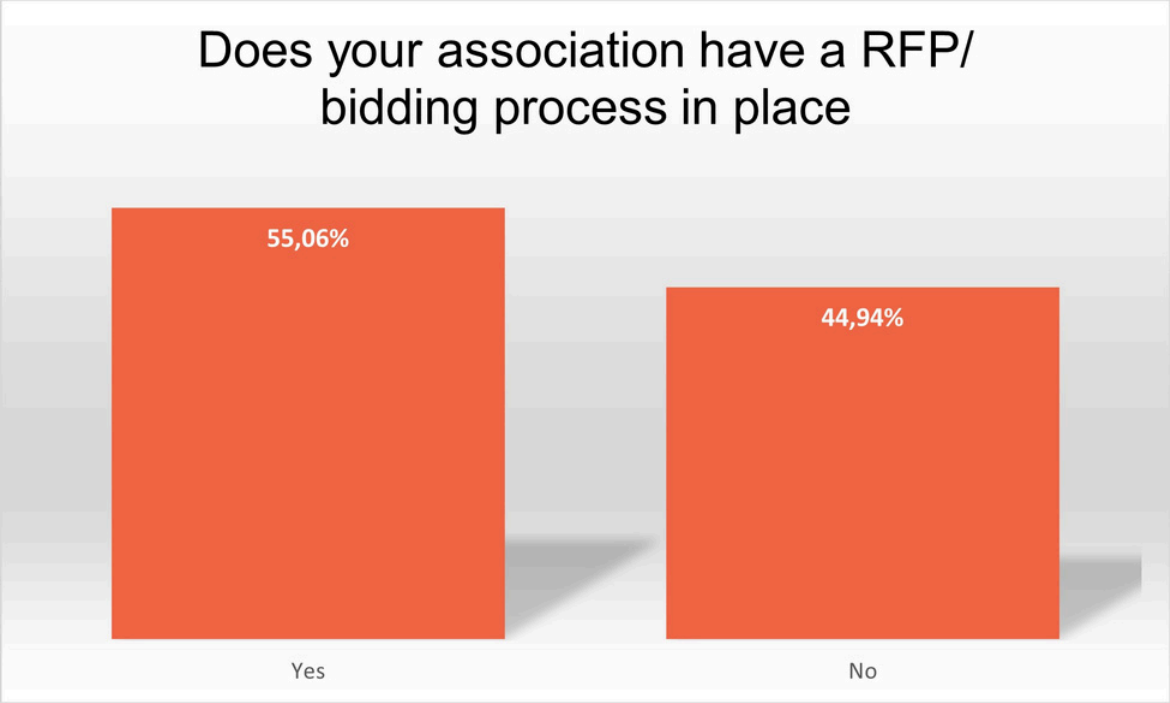
Beyond the primary factors, associations also care about other important features like the destinations/ venue's good reputation, legal security, a focus on sustainability, chances to network, and modern technology. These aspects do more than just improve the conference itself; they also match up with wider goals and long-term effects, including benefits for the community and making attendees satisfied.

Other crucial selection criteria associations especially mentioned are:

Local Industry and Expertise; Having local industries and manufacturers nearby is beneficial, especially if the conference includes tours or sessions that showcase the area's top practices. This also involves the local market’s strong presence in your field/ ecosystem, which can improve the conference's content and attractiveness.
Member and Community Involvement; Proximity and relevance to where member societies are based, including local organizations that can assist in planning. The city’s engagement and enthusiasm in hosting the conference, as well as the presence of local members, sponsor partners, and academic institutions, can significantly enhance support and participation.
Financial Considerations; The extent of funding or support provided by the destination and local consortiums can influence the overall cost-effectiveness of hosting the conference in a particular destination.

Current RFP process

To envision the RFP of the future, it is important to understand how the current RFP process of associations works and is perceived.



From the data provided, it is evident that the landscape of RFP processes within associations is quite divided. While just over half of the associations have an established Request for Proposal (RFP) process, a significant portion, over 40%, do not follow a specific RFP procedure. This discrepancy highlights a notable variability in how associations approach the organization and execution of their conferences.

It is somewhat surprising to find that a substantial 40% of associations do not employ a formal RFP process. This raises a critical question: How can you ensure a successful conference without clear guidelines and procedures? The absence of an RFP process can lead to a host of drawbacks, including inconsistent standards, potential oversights in destination and venue selection, and missed opportunities for negotiation. Furthermore, without a structured approach, associations risk compromising on quality and value, making it challenging to meet the expectations of attendees and stakeholders. Implementing a standardized RFP process is not just about maintaining order; it is crucial for ensuring that every conference lives up to its potential by systematically addressing all critical requirements.

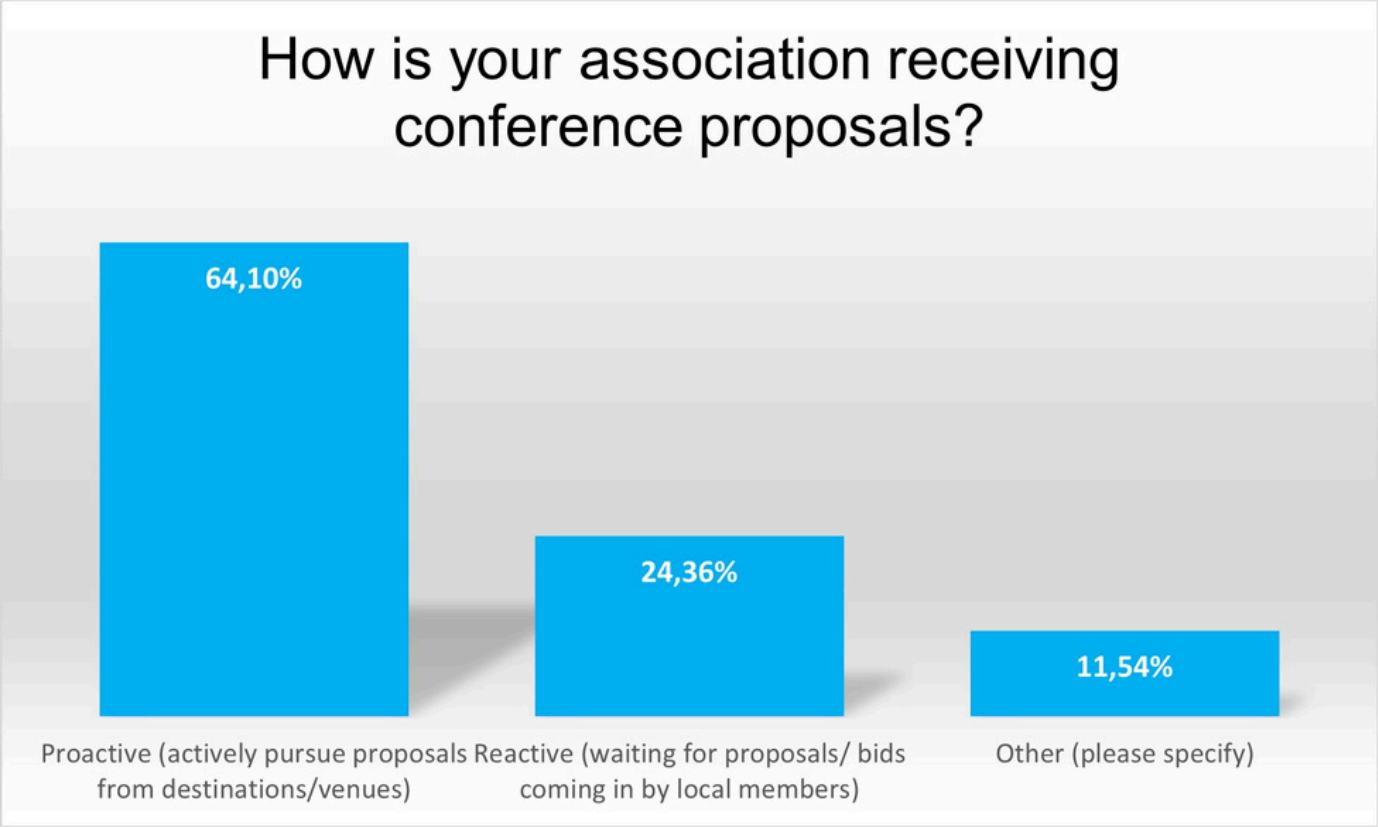
What is in the name?

As there is no consensus on how we to address the process of sending/ getting proposals in, the terminology can be complicated sometimes. While some call it an RFP process, others Bid procedure and others Tender process. To keep it simple we use the term RFP in this market study that is a collective representation for all the above-mentioned processes

Type of RFP

When it comes to association conferences, there are two types of RFP processes:

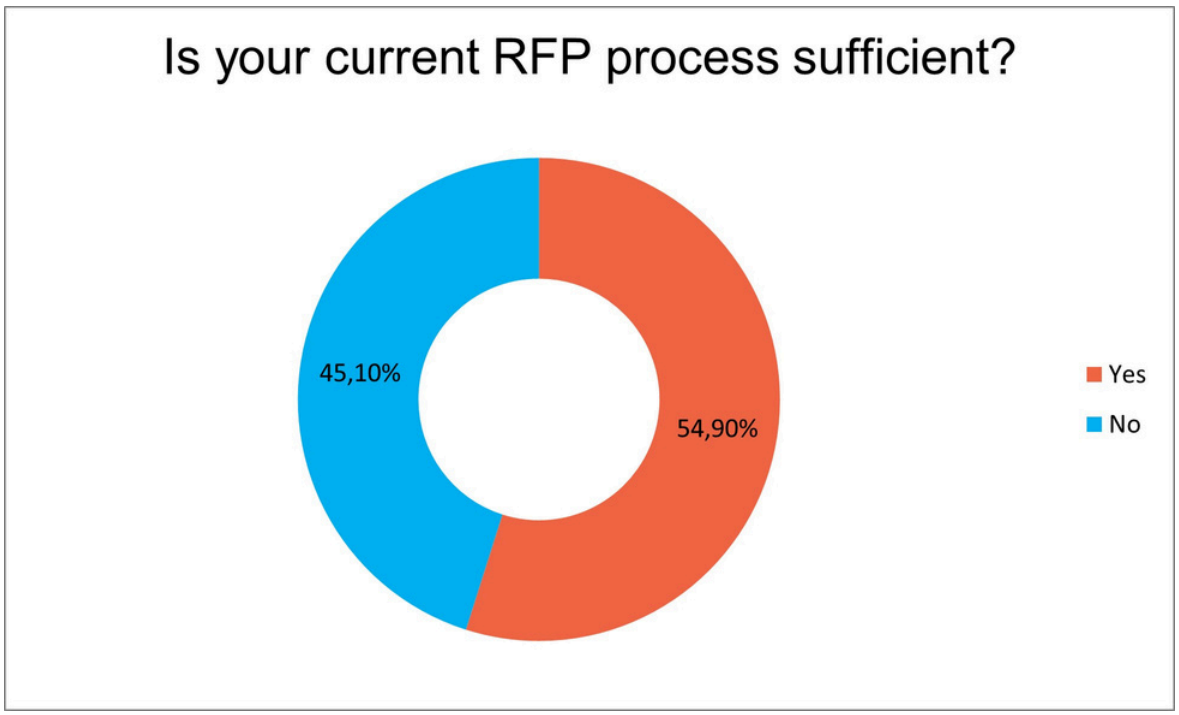
1. **Centrally driven RFP process:** The association takes the lead in the RFP process. They proactively reach out to individual members, destinations or venues to receive proposals. In some cases, they hire a Professional Congress Organizer (PCO). Typically, they announce that the congress is open for tenders or bidding and while they may reach out to the certain organizations to bid, others are welcome to bid as well.
2. **Traditional RFP process:** In this case a local host is involved, which can take various forms. It could be that a pre-defined local host group will be invited to bid, or all members get the announcement that the congress is open for bidding or the local host is expressing interest themselves, often with the help of a convention bureau.



The survey results indicate a remarkable shift in trends toward centralization in the RFP processes among associations, with over 60% now adopting this approach, up from 40% in 2022. This shift suggests that associations are increasingly seeking the benefits of consistency, control, transparency, good governance and efficiency in their RFP process, pointing at a broader move towards standardized and streamlined operations in conference planning.

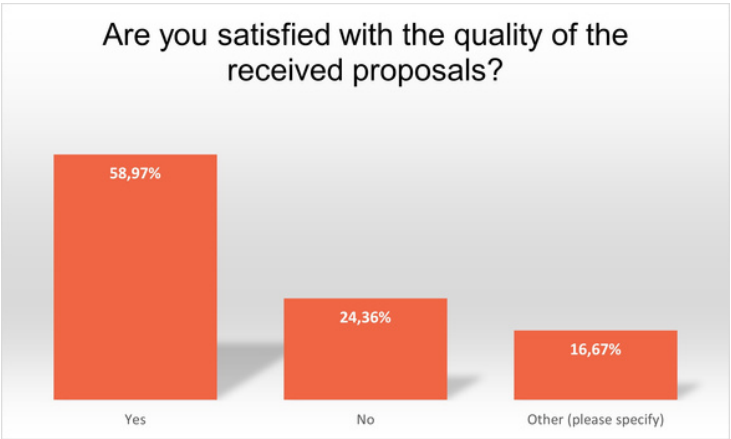
Opinion about current RFP process

Over 50% of the respondents are of the opinion that their current RFP process is sufficient, however for 45% it is not considered to be sufficient or there is room for improvement. Some of the supporting statements that the survey results indicate are “Yes, but we face a challenging hotel market that is not aligned with our needs” ; “It works, but it is time consuming and we often have to start over when we can't afford a certain market.” Especially the time-consuming part comes back very often in the results of the survey.



Quality of proposals

This question is focused on finding out if the proposals received by associations when they send out their RFPs are good enough. Are these proposals hitting the mark? We wanted to know if what comes back really helps the associations plan events that meet their goals and satisfy their members.



In general (nearly 60%) associations are satisfied with the quality of proposals they receive.

The feedback from associations regarding the quality of received proposals points to several consistent themes that need improvement across the board, read the most important findings on the next page.

1. **Completeness and Relevance of Information/ Understanding and Transparency;** Associations frequently encounter proposals that lack complete details or don't address all the specific requirements requested. There is a strong need for proposals to be comprehensive and tailored to the specific needs of the association and the type of event, including flexible date options when stated. There is a significant call for a better understanding of the association's budget and overall expectations. For instance, transparency regarding the number of guaranteed hotel rooms and all potential costs, such as F&B minimums, attrition rates, and other fees added later during the contract period, is crucial. Associations seek honesty in initial bids and adherence to those bids without subsequent cost increases.
2. **Efficiency and Clarity;** There is a desire for more streamlined communication that reduces the need for excessive back-and-forth. Associations prefer receiving proposals that are as close to the final offer as possible initially, with clear and professional presentation, focusing directly on the association's needs without being overly lengthy.
3. **Consistency and Comparability;** Proposals often come in formats that make it difficult to compare them directly, complicating the decision-making process. Standardizing proposal formats could greatly enhance the ease of comparison and selection.
4. **Response Time and Professionalism;** Timely and professional responses from venues and destinations are essential. Slow response times and incomplete information necessitate additional follow-ups, which could be eliminated with more accurate initial responses.

"It would be great if the proposal included all the information I requested"

"Most don't respond if dates don't line up even if RFP indicates we're flexible on timing."

"Limited availability, unfavorable terms (F&B minimums that are high given number of attendees expected, terms like 90% daily room block pickup rates to avoid attrition, high meeting room rental fees). Bids received in inconsistent format making it hard to compare apples to apples."

"Answering all the questions asked completely."

"More info about sustainability and better impressions of space use of similar sized events plus a better overview of room set ups available."

"Largely incomplete information is provided, so lots of reach out asking for all info."



Gdansk, Poland

Optimization

We have gathered feedback from a variety of associations to understand different aspects of their RFP processes, not just the proposals they receive but the whole process from start to finish. This feedback on what they perceive as challenges and bottleneck gives us valuable insights into what works well and what could be improved to make the RFP process smoother and more effective for everyone involved.

When asking associations what can be optimized in their current RFP process here are some snippets of the responses:

- “Automate process for faster and consistent responses from responding venues.”
- “Easier collection of data for side by side review, along with changes noted from the original proposal.”
- “Focus on long-term partnerships instead of short-term fee/revenue-based thinking from venues.”
- “Clearer requirements for respondents to solicit the level of info we need.”
- “More specific targets to send RFP to knowing they have the dates and space we need.”
- “Less time consuming for both the association and the venue”
- “We have a bidding process for multiple events and the technology that underpins them is challenging”.
- “Knowing the ballpark F&B minimum, room rate in a market.”
- “More automation, less human resources and time-consuming process.”
- “A customized tech tool with various templates, approval process and beautiful UX.“

In reviewing feedback on the RFP process, it's clear that associations are eager for improvements. This feedback highlights several areas needing attention and will guide the development of a future-oriented RFP model.



Budapest, Hungary

Associations have emphasized the following areas of improvements:

- **Increased Automation:** Associations are advocating for a more automated RFP process to speed up and standardize responses from venues and destinations, reducing the need for manual effort and resources.

- **Enhanced Data Management and Market Insights:** There is a desire for better methods to collect and compare data effortlessly, including side-by-side proposal reviews and access to preliminary market standards like catering costs and accommodation rates to aid decision-making.

- **Strategic Relationship Building:** A shift towards long-term relationships with venues and destinations is preferred over one-off financial transactions, indicating a move towards more meaningful and strategic partnerships.

- **Improved Communication and Requirements:** Associations seek clearer and more specific RFP requirements to ensure they receive the necessary information for informed decision-making. Targeted RFP distribution is also crucial to ensure responses only from venues/ destinations that meet specific needs. There's a frustration with the generic approach of many RFPs, where venues or destinations fail to address the unique needs of the association or specific questions from the RFP, reflecting a lack of tailored service.

- **Technology Enhancements:** There is a call for a technological solution designed specifically for associations, featuring templates, an integrated approval process, and a user-friendly interface to overcome current tech limitations.

- **Overall Efficiency:** A universal desire exists to streamline the RFP process, making it less time-consuming and reducing the complexity of planning events.

- **Geographic Variability:** The significant differences in costs and operational norms across regions challenge the standardization and comparison of bids, pushing associations to adapt their requirements for fairness and relevance.

- **Structural Rigidity:** Associations face challenges with venues imposing rigid conditions, such as high minimums for hotel blocks and meeting spaces, which do not align with the needs of smaller or specialized events.

- **Transparency and Communication Issues:** Associations report a lack of transparency regarding financial commitments and overall costs, with a call for clearer communication and upfront disclosure of all potential expenses.

This input provides a clear directive for revising the RFP process, aiming to align it more closely with the evolving needs of associations and the dynamic landscape of event planning.

Need for New Approaches

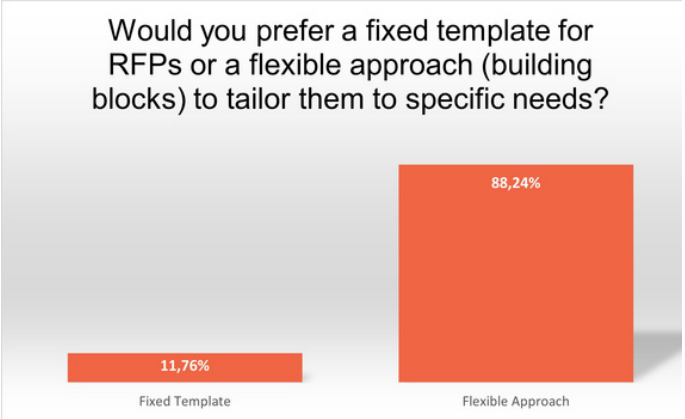
Given the above challenges about the current RFP process, there is an openness among associations to re-evaluate and potentially overhaul traditional RFP practices. Suggestions include adopting a two-stage bidding process, improving harmonization of offers for easier comparison, and exploring more flexible, understanding approaches from venues.

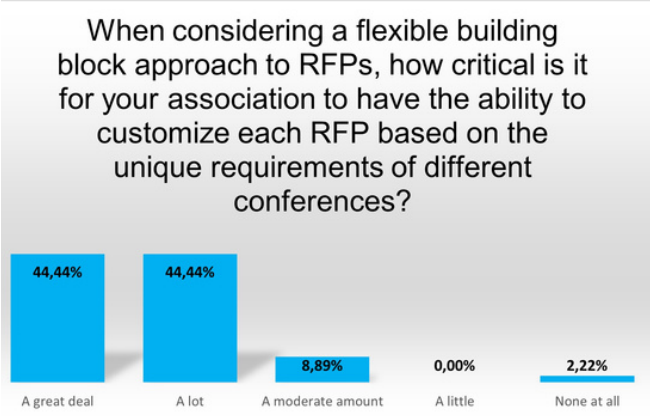
Overall, there is a clear demand for more adaptable, transparent, and efficient RFP processes that better cater to the varied and specific needs of associations organizing conferences globally.



RFP of the Future

With the insights gathered, we can now explore what the RFP of the future might look like.





Over 85% of the respondents answer that they prefer a flexible approach instead of a fixed template. They prefer building blocks where they can pick and choose what should be in the specific RFP. Among these respondents, over 80% find it critical to have the ability to customize each RFP based on the unique requirements of different conferences.



Most important elements of the RFP

From the responses gathered about the most important elements that associations look for in RFP proposals, several key priorities and themes pop up, which are crucial for venues and destinations aiming to successfully attract association events:

Transparency and Detailed Information: Associations overwhelmingly desire clear, comprehensive information within proposals. This includes transparent pricing, detailed service descriptions, an overview of total costs and a breakdown of all potential costs with assurances that these will not increase unexpectedly. Complete transparency right from the submission stage through to contract finalization is critical.

Flexibility and Customization: There is a significant call for flexibility in terms of financial negotiation, space options, and the ability to customize services to fit varying needs. Associations appreciate the ability to modify elements of the proposal, such as the inclusion of different service modules and the adaptability to specific technologies and landscapes.

Professionalism and Specificity: Associations expect proposals to be well-structured, professional, and directly responsive to their stated requirements. Proposals should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the association's event objectives and organizational identity, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

Supportive and Strategic Partnership: It is important for destinations and venues to show how they can support the association's event beyond just providing space and services. This includes highlighting how the destination can enhance the conference experience and what strategic benefits the conference will bring to the area.

Cost Effectiveness and Financial Considerations: Competitive pricing remains crucial, with associations looking for good value through special rates, room for negotiation, and clear cost breakdowns. The financial aspect often dictates the feasibility of a destination or venue.

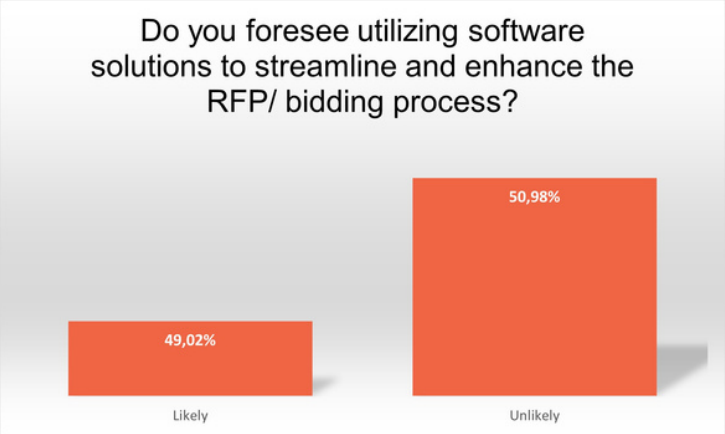
Sustainability and Legacy: Increasingly, associations are placing a higher emphasis on sustainability and social responsibility. Proposals that include sustainable practices, green technologies, and opportunities for creating a lasting positive impact in the community are particularly compelling.





Software usage

Although a lot of associations say that they want their RFP processes to be more flexible and use building blocks and automation, over half of them aren't keen on using software to handle their RFPs in the future. This is a bit of a puzzle as they like the idea of making things better and more modern, but they're not ready to jump in and actually use it. This interesting finding shows us that there is a significant gap between wanting to improve things and taking the right steps to do it. Understanding why they feel this way might help us make tools that associations are more comfortable using and that is tailor-made for them to work better and faster.



Reasons given why associations are unlikely to use software:

Human Interaction Preference: A significant number of respondents value the personal touch and direct interaction that comes with traditional RFP processes. They express a preference for maintaining human connections over adopting more automated, software-driven methods.
Cost Concerns and Infrequent Use: Many associations say the cost of new software keeps them from using it, especially those that only do RFPs once a year or every two years. For these groups, spending money on specialized software doesn't seem worth it or cost-effective.
Simplicity and Size of Operations: Smaller teams or those with less complex needs feel that their current methods—whether manual or using basic document templates—are sufficient. They believe that the added value of specialized RFP software does not outweigh the simplicity and flexibility of their current systems.
Unique Requirements: Some associations have specific needs they believe might not be well-served by standard software solutions. They prefer to maintain control over their customized processes, particularly when their requirements are considered unique or highly specialized. Furthermore there is a concern that software solutions might standardize the process too much, potentially diminishing the local or individual flavor that can be significant in decision-making.
Technological Limitations: A few responses indicate a general hesitation towards more technologically driven solutions, either due to a lack of technological inclination within the team or due to concerns about potential issues such as increased response times and procedural complexity.



Other significant concerns include the learning curve associated with new technology, data security, and the need for widespread adoption by all industry players to ensure effectiveness and compliance.

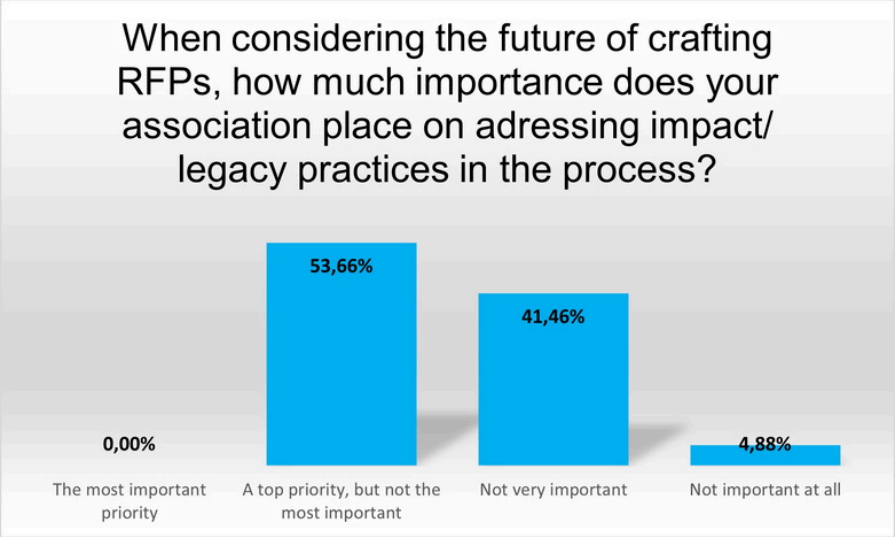
Are high-costs barriers to innovation and change?

As we can see in the answers, some associations hesitate to adopt new technology for their RFP processes, assuming it will be expensive. However, this isn't always the case. There are now many affordable technology solutions available that can streamline RFP processes without significant investment. These cost-effective options make it easier for associations to embrace technology and benefit from its efficiencies without straining their budgets some even come without any extra investment.



Legacy & Impact

In today's world, the significance of giving back to our communities, making a positive impact in the long run, and championing change within our industries is more vital than ever, especially when it comes to organizing conferences. However, the topic of legacy and impact reveals that it is relatively uncharted waters for many. How far are associations in prioritizing this topic in their RFP process. Is it taken into consideration, is it an essential destination selection criterion? Is it even important?

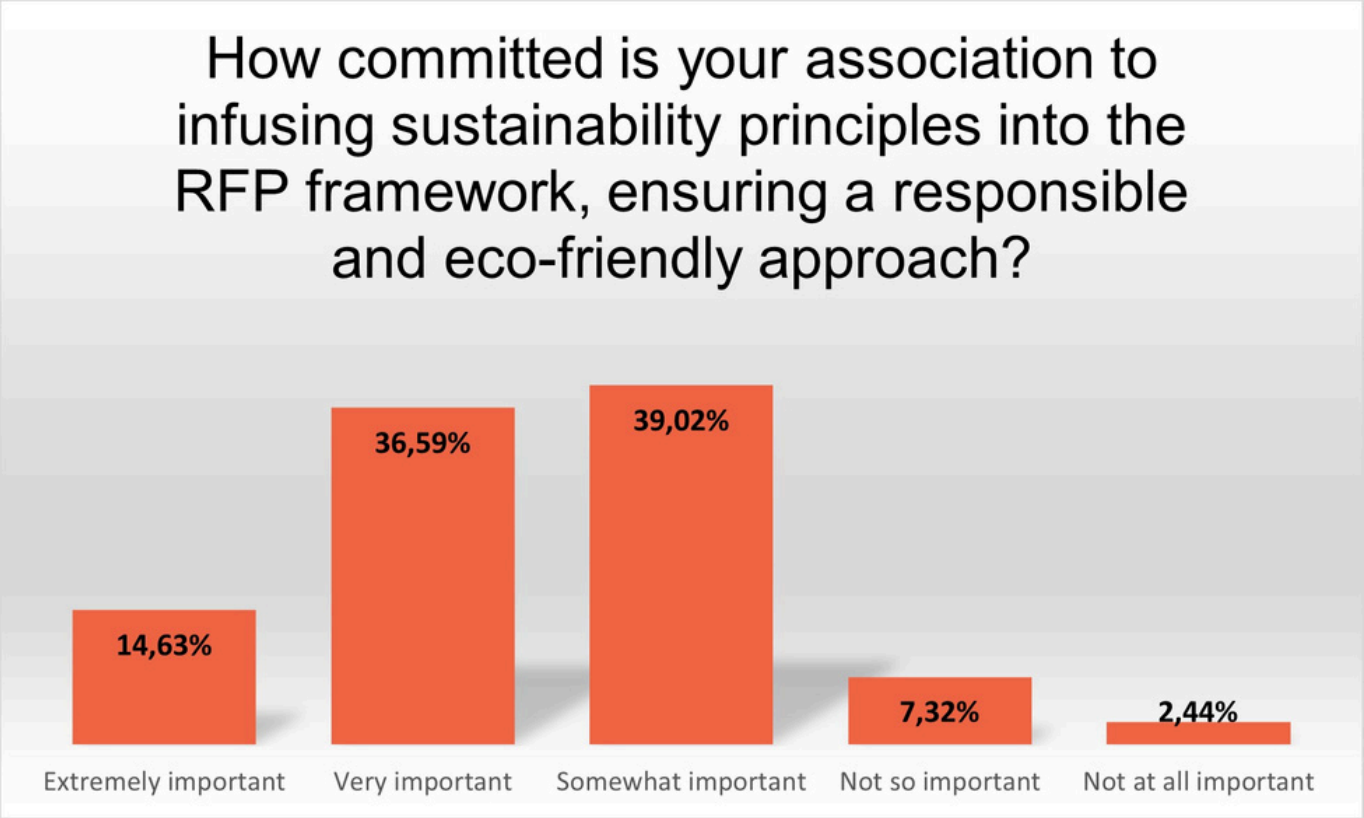


The data tells a compelling story of divided priorities. While the temptation of leaving a legacy is undeniable, many associations seem to maintain a practical stance, possibly focusing on the logistical success and direct outcomes of their events rather than the enduring impact on the host location.





Sustainability

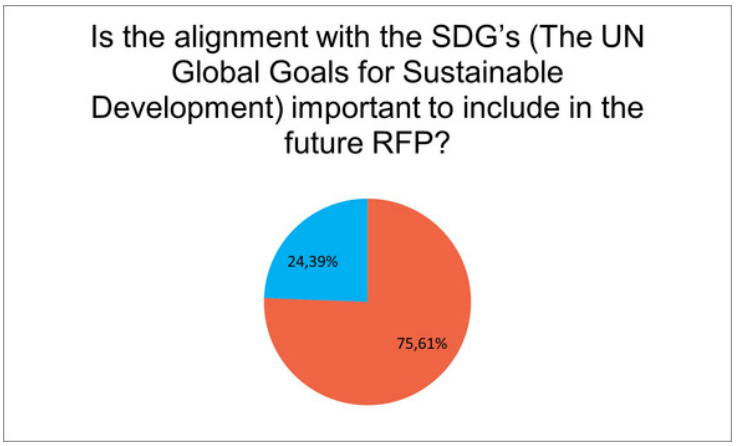


The responses show that associations vary widely in how much they focus on sustainability and social responsibility in their event planning and RFP processes. While many understand its importance and are trying to include it, others see it as too complex or haven't started. This difference is an opportunity for industry leaders to promote simpler, more effective ways to include sustainability and social responsibility in RFPs. This could help those who see its value but are overwhelmed by the complexity, and also inform those who haven't considered it yet. Clearly, there is a need for education and tools to help associations adopt sustainable and responsible practices that fit their size and needs. Such efforts not only make conferences more ethical but also more attractive and compliant with global standards.

In regard to sustainability and social responsibility a few notes made by the respondents are as follows:

- **Specific Priorities and Compliance:** Responses indicated specific areas of focus such as socio-economic impacts, accessibility, inclusivity, and compliance with new regulations (like European rules). This suggests that where social responsibility is considered, it is often tailored to meet specific organizational goals or legal requirements.
- **Challenges in Implementation:** Some responses hint at challenges faced in finding destinations that align with their social responsibility goals, especially in certain regions, indicating geographical variations in how these responsibilities can be met.
- **Complexity and Practicality Concerns:** There is a concern about the complexity that considerations of social responsibility might add to the RFP process. Some respondents highlighted the importance of keeping the process simple to not discourage potential bidders, indicating a preference for practical, straightforward approaches.

SDG's



Over 70% of the respondents believe that alignment with the SDG's (The UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development) is important to include in the RFP of the future. This is a trend that is gaining priority since 2023 where our research about the critical success factors of a conference destination showed that only 54% took the SDG's into consideration and only 13% saw them as a deciding factor. From the above data, we can conclude that sustainability is becoming a more central concern in the association conference industry. This suggests that associations are responding to broader societal shifts towards sustainability and possibly increasing expectations from their members and stakeholders. Given this trend, it can be expected that future RFPs will need to explicitly address how potential venues and destinations align with the SDGs. This shift may also influence the broader strategies and partnerships within the industry, as more organizations look to meet these criteria. This growing priority indicates a transformative phase in the industry where sustainability is not just an optional add-on but a fundamental aspect of planning and decision-making processes.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

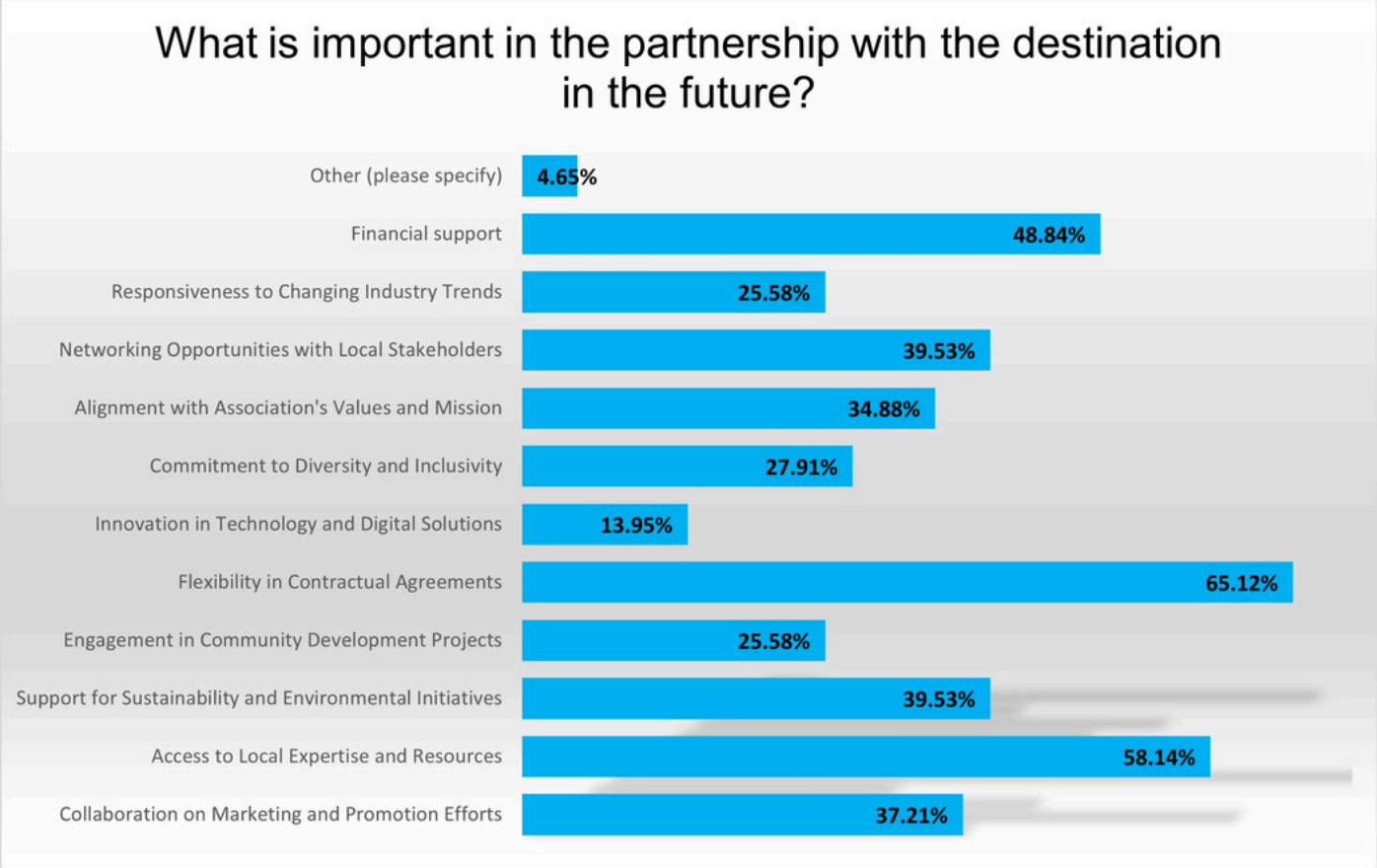
Responses to the question of which aspects of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) must be included in an RFP, if they have to be included, clearly indicate, while there is a growing recognition of the importance of incorporating DEI into RFPs, there remains a spectrum of how deeply embedded these practices are within different associations.

For many, DEI is seen not just as a checkbox but as an essential component of creating an inclusive, equitable, and accessible event experience. This includes ensuring physical accessibility, accommodating specific health-related needs, and creating a safe and welcoming environment for all attendees, regardless of their backgrounds.

However, the lack of consensus on how to approach DEI in RFPs and the presence of several non-committal responses ("N/A" or "None") suggest an opportunity for more targeted training, awareness and advocacy. Associations that are already deeply engaged in DEI could serve as models for others. Moreover, there is a need for clearer guidelines and best practices that can help associations at all levels of DEI integration to understand how to effectively incorporate these important aspects into their event planning processes.

Partnership with destinations

Associations do consider the destination they visit as an important stakeholder. In the future they see the role of this partnership as follows:

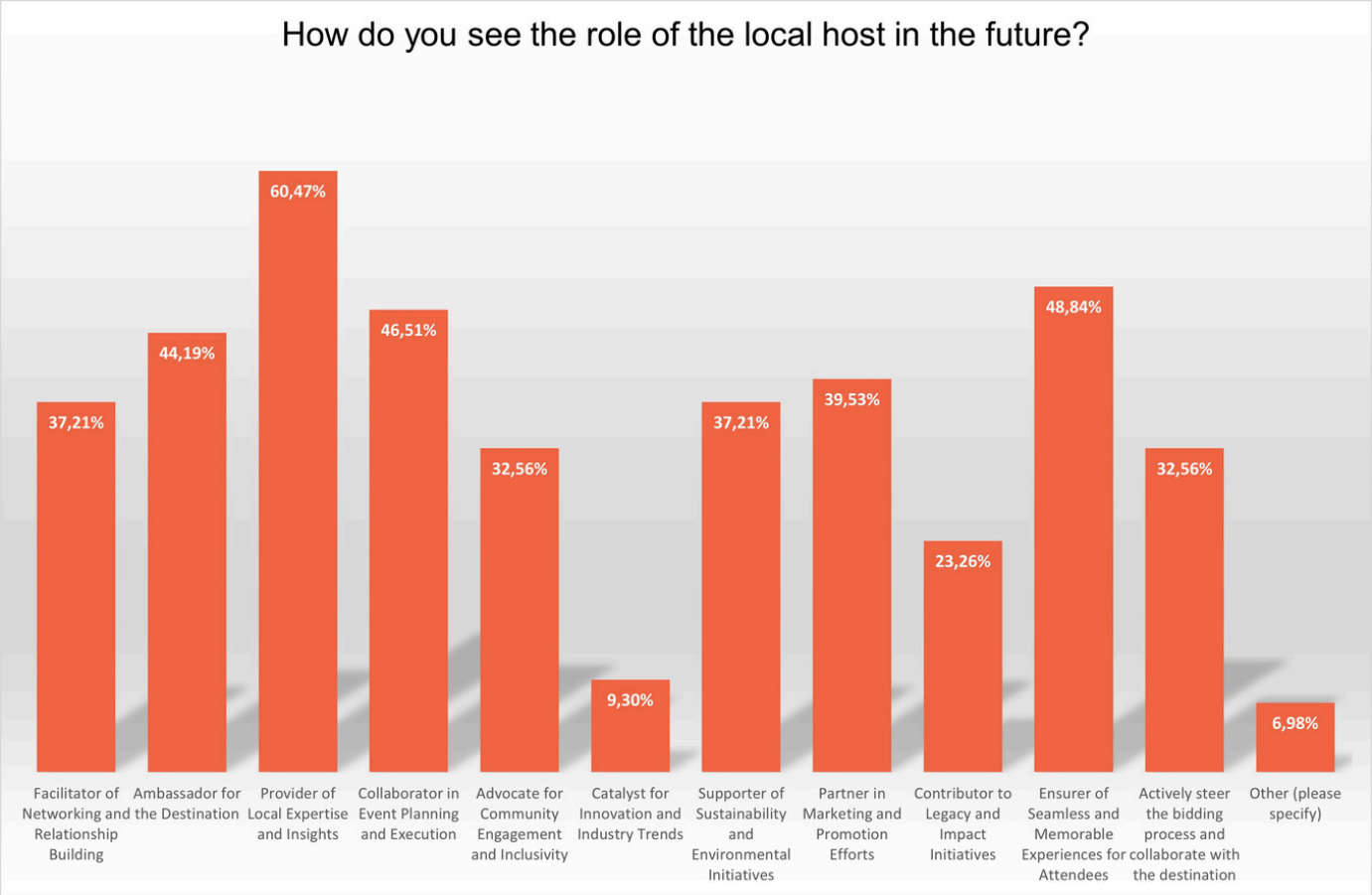


Given the fact that networking, membership growth, community building and financial health are the main reason that conferences are organized it comes as no surprise that the top 5 consists of the following:

- Flexibility in Contractual Agreements
- Access to Local Expertise and Resources
- Financial support
- Networking Opportunities with Local Stakeholders
- Collaboration on Marketing and Promotion Efforts

In order to strengthen the relationship, it would be wise for destinations to focus on these points during the RFP process and offer full transparency.

Role of Local Host



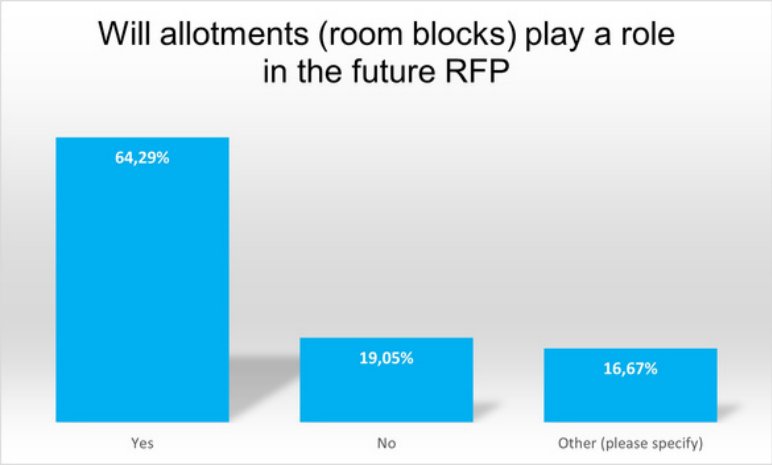
In the future, local hosts are seen as a real partner of the main association. A provider of local expertise and insights, a guarantor of seamless and memorable experiences for attendees, a collaborator in event planning and execution and a true ambassador for the destination. A local host as a person/ committee that actively steers the bidding process and collaborate with the destination only comes in on the 7th place (out of 10). This seems to be a big shift from the traditional tendering method of associations. Others even mentioned that tendering will be without local hosts.


Dubai, UAE


Noordwijk, The Netherlands

Hotel bookings

An important topic during the RFP is the number of room nights an association brings to the destination or venue. After COVID delegates are more conscious about where to travel to and how long to stay. Furthermore, the average pick-up from allotments (pre-booked blocks at certain hotels) dropped to ca. 30%. Associations struggle how to handle this in the future and during the RFP process.

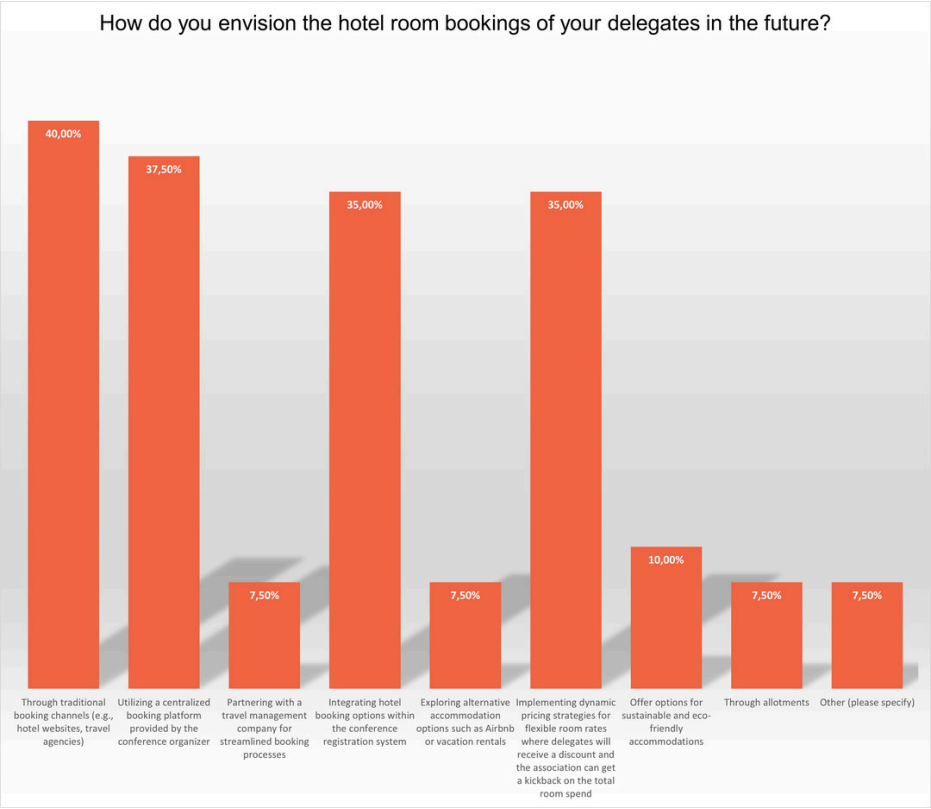


Although the far majority still sees that allotments will be necessary in the future the general consensus is that it needs to become more flexible.

"I hope this becomes more flexible!"

"This is outdated and needs to be REMOVED as a requirement for booking meetings and conventions. If we pay to rent a facility, we should not be obligated to meet a room block!"

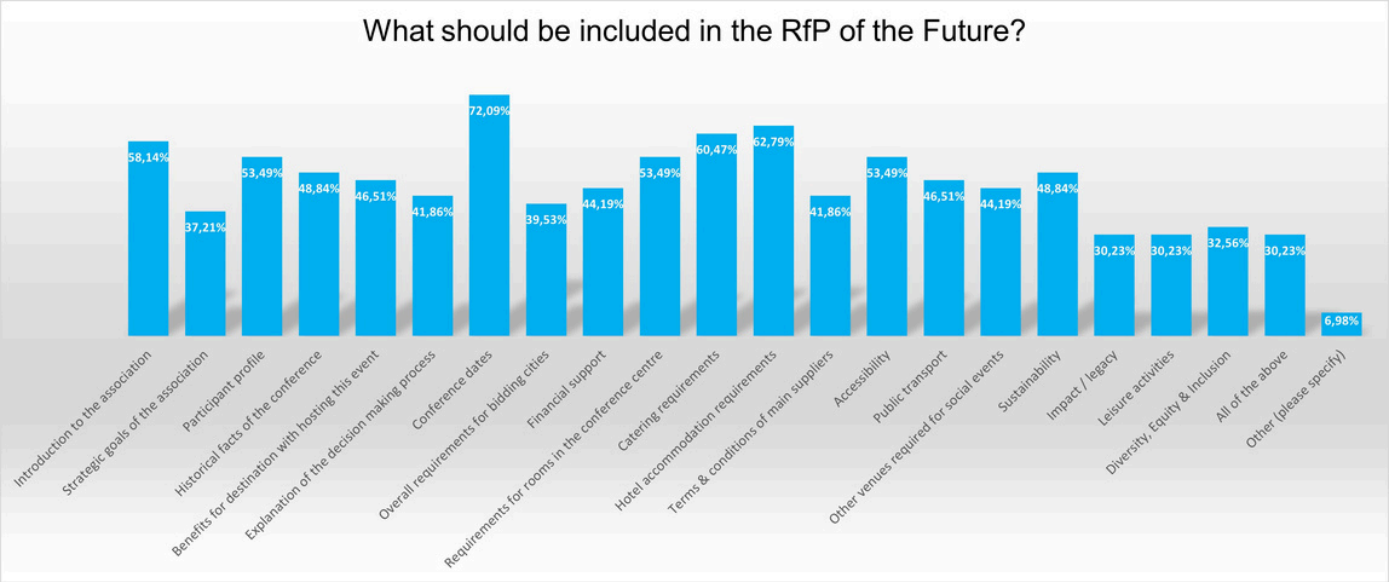
Looking at how associations envision the hotel room bookings during their conference the following can be showed:



Over 40% of the respondents will leave it up to the delegates where to book and expect them to book through traditional booking channels (e.g., hotel websites, travel agencies, booking.com). The challenge with this is that the association lose insights on where the delegates stay and how long they will be in the destination. On the 2nd place comes utilizing a centralized booking platform provided by the conference organizer and integrating hotel booking options within the conference registration system. An interesting option comes in the 3rd place, implementing dynamic pricing strategies for flexible room rates where delegates will receive a discount and the association can get a kickback on the total room spending. With this solution in place the data insights will stay at an association, and they will be able to diversify their revenue stream as an extra income.

What should be included in the RFP of the Future?

Looking at the topics that needs to be addressed in the RFP of the future we see the following:



The top 7 consists of:

1. Conference dates
2. Hotel accommodation requirements
3. Catering requirements
4. Introduction to the association
5. Accessibility
6. Requirements for rooms in the conference center and Participant profile
7. Historical facts of the conference, Benefits for destination with hosting this event, Public transport and Sustainability

Especially when looking at the building block approach for the RFP of the future these are essential blocks to integrate into a template/ program.

Review of proposals

In this section of the report, we tackle the question that's on the minds of many in the association world: How can we improve the review and selection process for proposals to make it more transparent? Currently, there's a noticeable lack of transparency in how associations choose venues and destinations for their conferences. This vagueness can lead to confusion and even skepticism among stakeholders about the fairness and effectiveness of the decision-making process.

From the diverse answers regarding the ideal scenario for the review and selection process of proposals to increase transparency, it can be concluded that there is a mix of traditional and technology-driven preferences among respondents. Here are some conclusions we can draw based on the various responses:

1. Need for Clarity and Accessibility in RFP Processes:
A common thread across many responses is the demand for clarity and detailed information in the RFPs, with straightforward access to this information. Respondents value the ability to easily understand what is expected in the proposals and seek transparency in how decisions are made. This includes direct communication and the possibility of engaging with the suppliers directly to get questions answered promptly.

2. Balancing Human Judgment and Technological Assistance:
There is an interest in integrating technology into the review process, with several responses highlighting the use of AI to streamline and improve decision-making. AI is seen as a tool for handling data and making initial assessments or rankings, which can help in managing preferences and automating the initial stages of proposal evaluation. However, there is also a clear desire to retain human judgment, particularly for making subjective decisions that algorithms might not handle well.

3. Desire for Simplification and Efficiency:
Several respondents indicated a preference for making the process simpler and more efficient, whether through technology (like AI or centralized data systems for comparison) or through procedural adjustments (like using one comprehensive document or streamlining decision-making to a few knowledgeable individuals). This reflects a broader desire to make the review process less tough, especially for board volunteers who might feel overwhelmed by the complexity of information.

4. Diverse Methods of Evaluation:
Responses also showed a variety of preferred methods for evaluating proposals, ranging from very structured (checklists of criteria, elimination processes) to more fluid and subjective ("coup de coeur" or decisions based on personal appeal). This indicates that while some seek objectivity and standardized criteria for fairness and transparency, others value the personal touch and intuitive decision-making that allow for unique and potentially innovative choices.

5. Interactive Approaches:
Some respondents advocate for an interactive approach to the review process, suggesting that involving more stakeholders in a democratic manner could enhance transparency. This could mean involving various members of an association in the decision-making process or having a committee that represents a broad cross-section of interests within the organization.

"AI looks at my needs and wants then ranks the responses based on my desires then it created a dashboard for quick comparison."

"Data input in a centralised system, allowing for instant and transparent comparison."

"direct communication - 100% transparency."

"Destinations submit data rather than pretty pictures into a centralised database and AI then matches the criteria with the questions. It could then look for other reputational information to gather the "probablity" of the answers being correct."

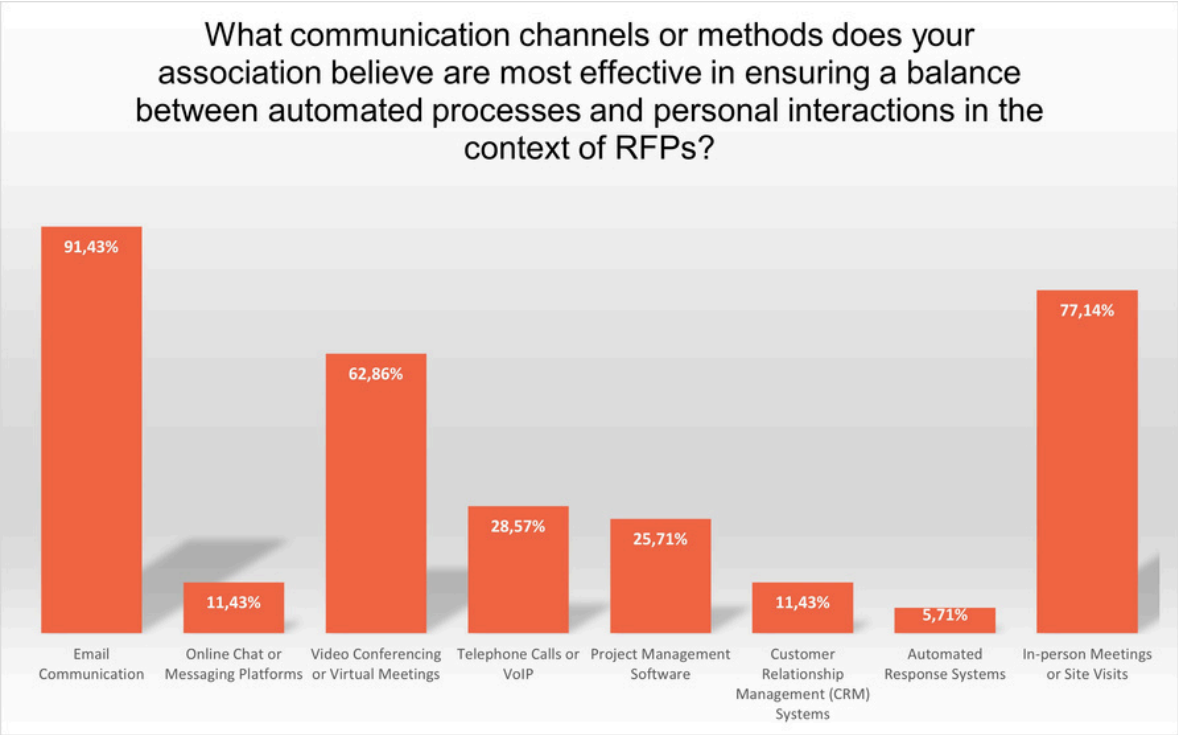
"1 document for everything."

"An easy process for board volunteers to review details without feeling overwhelmed by information that they don't understand."

Communication

In this section, we explore the communication channels and methods that associations find most effective for balancing automated processes with personal interactions in the context of RFPs. Understanding these preferences can help refine processes, ensuring they are both efficient and engaging.

The preferred communication method for associations is email or video calls while the graph below also shows that a significant part of this communication also happens in person.







Ideal Scenario

Taking the current challenges and bottlenecks into account it comes with no surprise that associations are looking for an RFP/bidding process that is efficient, flexible, and integrated with technology while still valuing human interaction and partnership. They expect customization to meet specific needs, professional handling of their inquiries, and overall, a process that fosters transparency and collaborative relationships. These insights can guide the development of more effective and satisfying RFP systems that align with the evolving needs of modern associations.
The main takeaways:

Automation and Efficiency: Many associations express a strong preference for an automated process that allows for quick initial responses to fundamental inquiries like availability, pricing, and space. This would ideally be followed by a more detailed interaction tailored to specific needs. The desire for a simplified, faster process, potentially shortening typical timelines from years to months, reflects a need for efficiency and quicker decision-making.

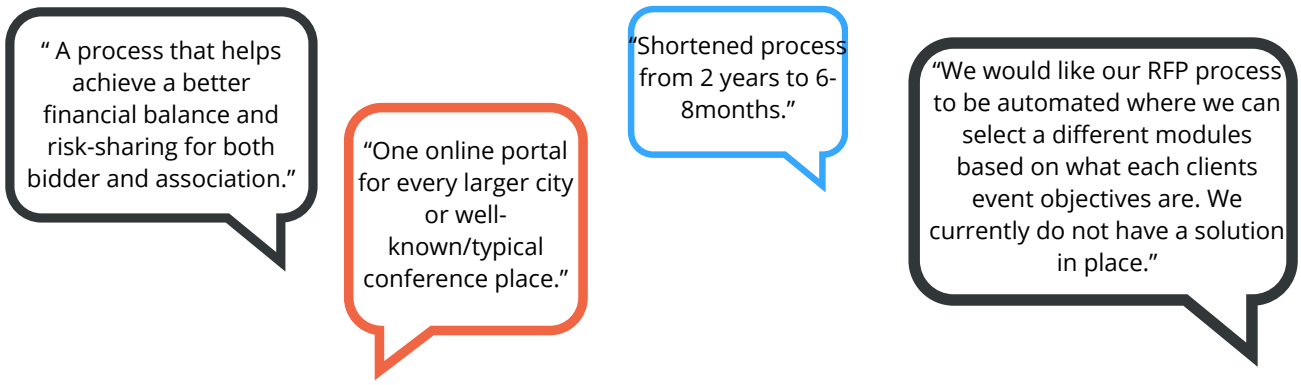
Flexibility and Customization: Associations seek flexibility both in terms of the RFP process itself and in the responses from venues/ destinations, including pricing and payment terms. They also emphasize the importance of customizability, such as the ability to select different modules based on each event's objectives and having tools that cater specifically to their industry's unique requirements.

Transparency and Professionalism: There is a recurring demand for transparency throughout the process, with a format that allows for easy comparison of proposals. Associations also value professionalism and a thorough understanding of their needs from the venues and destinations, underscoring the importance of detailed and direct responses to their RFPs.
Personal Interaction and Relationship Building: Despite the interest in automation, personal contact remains crucial for many. Initial direct interactions with humans, rather than purely digital communications, are preferred for establishing a relationship and getting a real sense of potential collaboration.

Partnership Orientation: Several responses indicate a shift away from viewing the RFP process as merely transactional (buyer/seller) towards seeking a partnership approach. This involves defining joint objectives and even co-creating bids, emphasizing collaboration and mutual benefits.

Technological Integration: The ideal RFP tool would not only be efficient and user-friendly but also aesthetically pleasing, with good UX design, customizable templates, and capabilities for collaboration and approval processes. Advanced features like AI to provide trends and guidance were also mentioned, highlighting the desire for smart, integrated tech solutions.

Specific Needs and Industry Relevance: It is clear that associations want their unique circumstances and the specific needs of their industry to be considered seriously by destinations and venues. Proposals should be tailored rather than generic, ensuring they address the specific challenges and requirements of the association.



Conclusion

As the event industry evolves, the traditional RFP (Request for Proposal) process is ripe for a revolutionary overhaul. Our comprehensive market study, drawing insights from nearly 100 associations worldwide, reveals a pressing demand for a smarter, more streamlined, and technologically integrated approach that matches the dynamic needs of modern conference planning.

The future of RFPs lies in embracing automation and technology—not to replace the human touch, but to enhance it. Associations are clear: they want efficiency without sacrificing the personal engagement and customization that form the backbone of successful conferences. Imagine an RFP process where AI-driven tools swiftly handle initial data gathering and analysis, yet personal interactions define the strategic discussions and final decisions. This hybrid model (non-existent at the moment) promises a significant reduction in time and resources spent, cutting down lengthy processes from years to mere months, while also enhancing accuracy and relevancy in proposal selection.

Transparency and professionalism must be the pillars of the new RFP paradigm. Associations are crying out for a process where clarity reigns—where every proposal is straightforward, comprehensive, and directly comparable across all submissions. This requires a standardized yet flexible template that allows for easy tailoring to specific association needs, ensuring that proposals are not only comparable but also deeply relevant.

Moreover, the RFP of the future must pivot from being purely transactional to building meaningful, long-term partnerships. It's about crafting bids that are not only competitive but also collaborative, where venues, destinations and associations co-create value, sharing risks and rewards alike. This partnership approach will transform how destinations, venues and associations perceive and interact with each other, fostering deeper engagement and mutual commitment to the success of every event. In order to build real partnerships and to receive better quality proposals, there is a strong desire from associations that venues understand the association business better.

A noticeable trend is to have a centralized RFP process (no local host) which opens possibilities to be more strategic about the destination selection of a next conference.

Sustainability, impact, and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) are no longer just 'nice-to-have' criteria but essential components of every RFP. Associations expect proposals to not only address these elements but to highlight them as core frameworks that drive the event. Proposals that effectively integrate sustainable practices and promote inclusivity will stand out, aligning with global standards and association values.

In the future, hotel bookings for conferences will prioritize flexibility and delegate preferences. Post-COVID, associations are facing reduced uptake from pre-booked hotel blocks due to changing travel habits. Over 40% of associations now prefer letting delegates choose their accommodations via traditional booking channels, although this reduces their ability to track attendee details. In response, some associations are adopting centralized booking platforms or dynamic pricing strategies to keep insights and generate additional revenue, shifting towards more adaptable and delegate-friendly solutions.

Call For Change

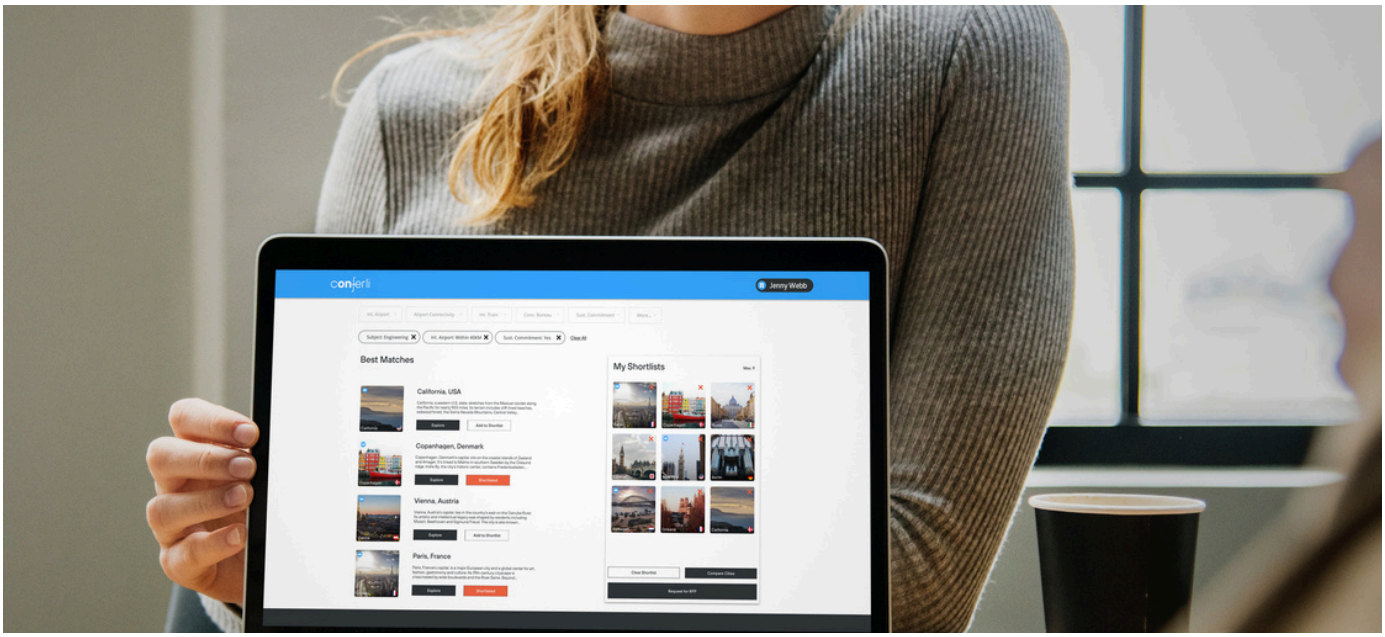
In conclusion, the RFP of the future isn't just a document; it is a strategic tool designed to foster innovation, efficiency, and partnership. By adopting a bold, technology-forward approach while maintaining a commitment to personal interaction and customization we would be able to enhance the RFP of the future. Well! Here is the challenge such a tool doesn't exist, but you might know us by now and we are always up for a challenge. Want to be part of our advisory group about this topic? Let us know and we would be honored to deep dive into this and shape the future together.



ABOUT CONFERLI

Conferli is a conference matchmaking platform for associations, venues and destinations. Our aim is to level out the playing field in the event industry, enabling events of all shapes and sizes to find best-suiting destinations - easily and efficiently. We do that by creating access to independent benchmarking data, supported by smart technology and fueled by our passion for the conference world. Associations will get free support on destination matching, shortlisting, benchmarking and assistance during the entire RFP process.

www.conferli.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nienke van der Malen has a broad expertise in the event industry, with over 20 years of experience in various functions. After her studies at Hotelschool The Hague, she moved to Germany, to work at Intercontinental Hotels as a Sales Manager for meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE). Her enthusiasm for technology developed when she moved to Spain to work for a travel start-up. After returning to the Netherlands she was Director of Sales at a hotel chain, where she managed commercial activities. Most recently, she worked as Director of The Hague Convention Bureau, where she implemented a new business proposition, launched new branding and developed and implemented innovative partner management approaches.

In this market study Nienke addresses the outcomes from the survey the association RFP of the future and elaborate on how this might look like in the near future.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Questions or suggestions, please contact us



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