

THE INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

A brief look into the changing needs of delegates of an association conference

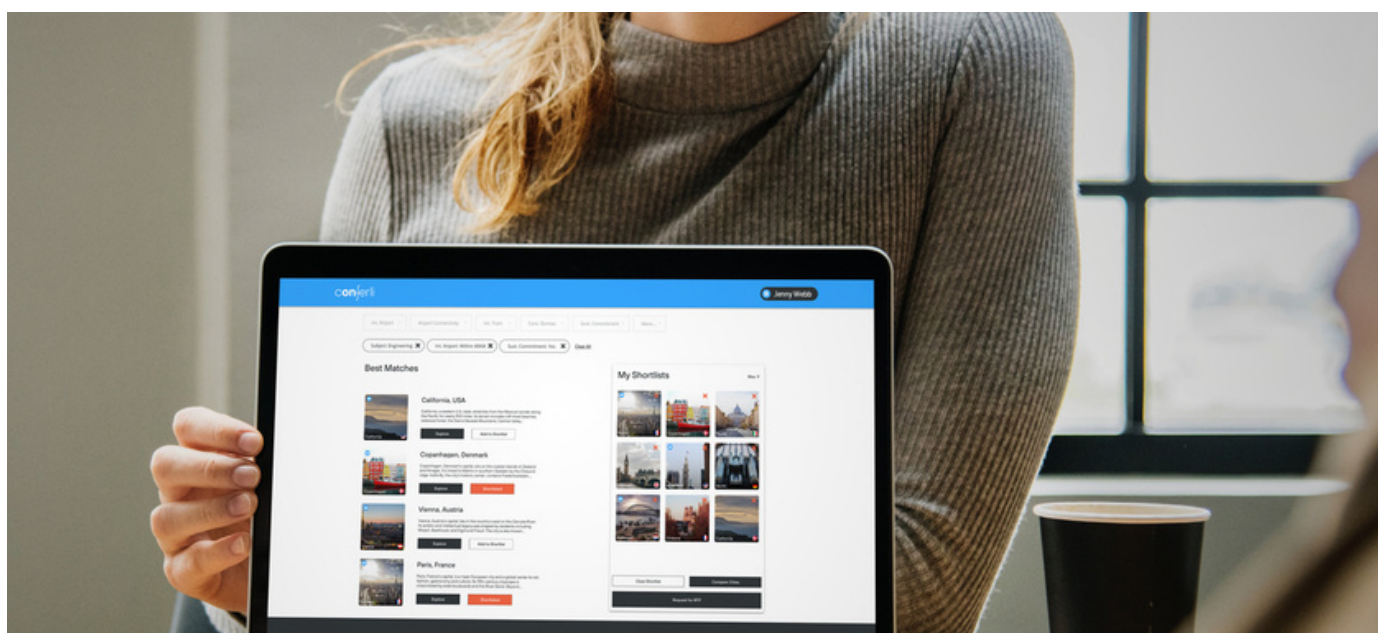


ABOUT CONFERLI

Conferli is a conference matchmaking platform for organizers, 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-suited 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.

www.conferli.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nienke van der Malen has a broad expertise in the event industry, with over 15 years of experience in various functions. Most recently, she worked as Director of The Hague Convention Bureau. Working in the conference industry her entire career, Nienke had one ambition - to build a platform that connects associations, venues and destinations.

She noticed that creating and maintaining these connections can be challenging and that the entire event industry would benefit significantly from having better access to each other.

This is how Conferli.com was created.



INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has changed the way of attending conferences. A lot has been written about planning of events, but much more important are the delegates participating at these conferences.

What has changed and what do they consider, as important future trend to watch? How do association planners cope with the current changes and what can we learn from this and incorporate into our daily business?

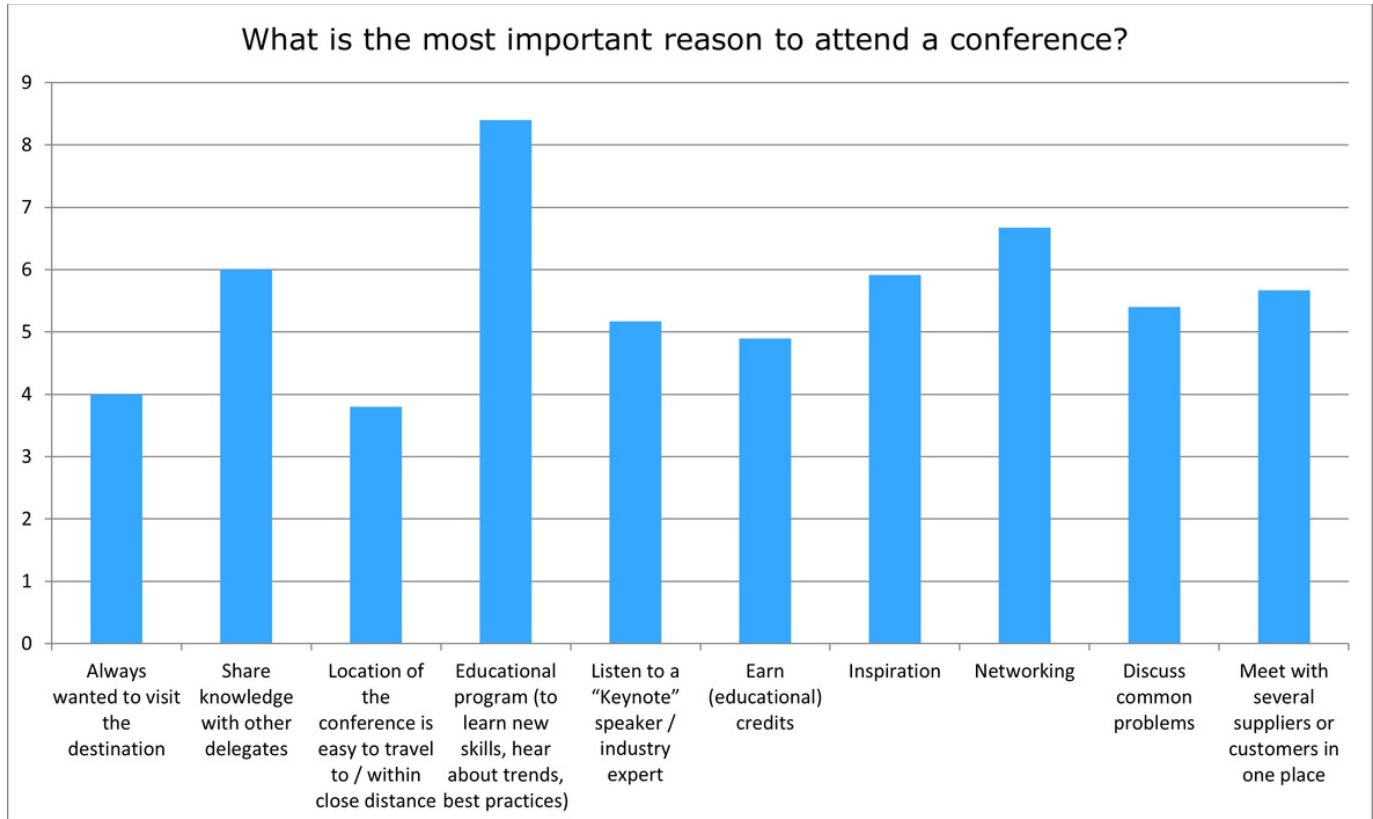
Change of plan

Due to the lack of responses on the survey (less than 150), this report will only show you some valuable insights and some first conclusions. We will draft trends and conclusions about the findings and we hope this will become a discussion point amongst industry professionals to make sure that the outcomes will be incorporated into our daily routines.



REASONS TO ATTEND A CONFERENCE

Looking at the reasons why delegates attend association conferences, the following was stated:



10 was the highest score. The "educational program" is ranked the highest, followed by "networking" and "share knowledge with other delegates". Furthermore "inspiration" and "meeting with several suppliers/ customers " ranked high.

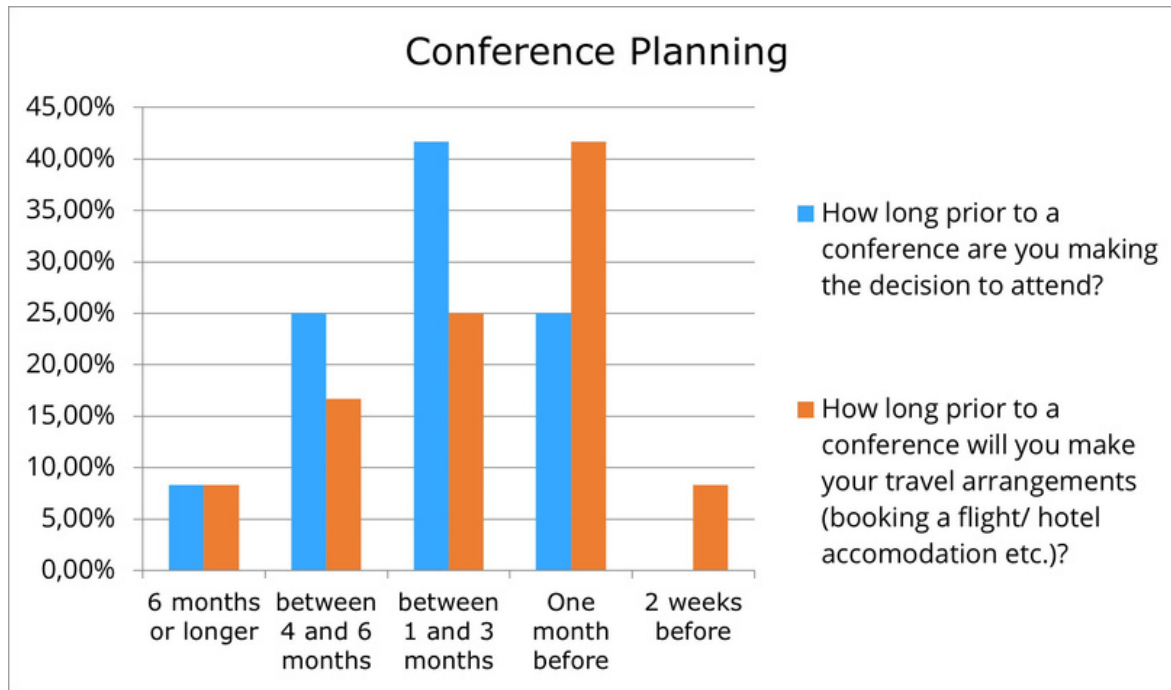
100% of the respondents stated that this changed because of the pandemic. On the question "**which of these topics became more important due to the pandemic**", 92% answered that networking became more important, 42% answered that the educational program and the possibility to meet with several suppliers or customers in one place became more important.

Furthermore, 33% find it more important to share knowledge with other delegates, that the location of the conference is easy to travel to and that they get inspired. A small percentage (25%) find it more important to discuss common problems and a minority (8%) comes to listen to a certain keynote speaker.

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- Networking is difficult online, the need to connect in person feels urgent.
 - Just coming out of a pandemic means travelling less (particular long distance), so I choose more carefully where I go.
 - Knowledge transfer is easy via Zoom, but exchange is important and that only happens when you meet inperson.
 - The ability to meet multiple people in one place to conduct business is more sustainable than taking multiple trips.
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PLANNING TO ATTEND

Deciding on participating at a conference can be influenced by many factors. We have asked our participants when they start to plan their participation:



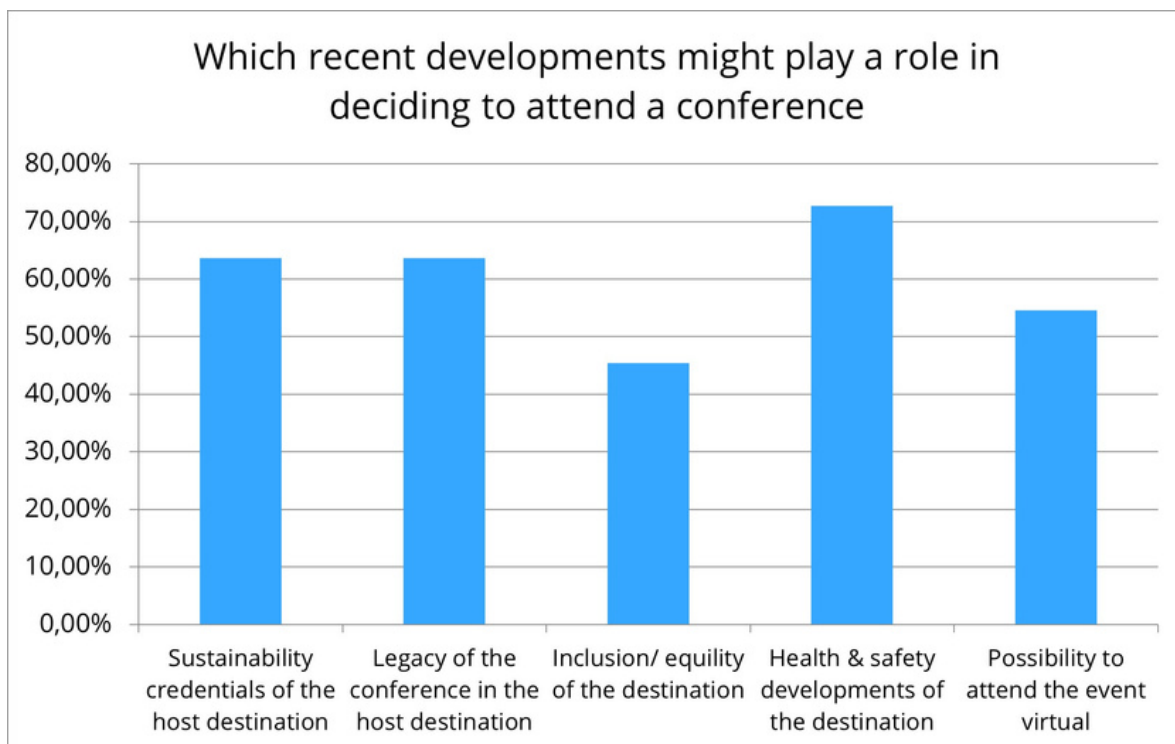
The far majority is making their travel arrangements 1 month before attending and they are deciding to attend the conference between 1 and 3 months prior to its start.

This is an important **trend** to watch, as 67% stated that it became shorter due to the pandemic. As an organizer, especially if you are using room blocks and ticket registrations, it is important to know and understand when the delegates are making their decisions and actively booking, to spend your marketing budget wisely.

“ I think we value our time more now and will be more careful in picking the events we attend. ”

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

Below figure shows which developments play a role when attending a conference. Without surprise, due to the pandemic, Health & Safety developments (The disease risk/ COVID-19/ To be in quarantine etc.) are ranked the highest. But there is also way more attention for sustainability (is it worth to "fly in" to attend a conference/ and carbon footprint) and legacy. The two topics are widely discussed in various media, in the past months and are now also finding their way to the delegates. As an association it is advised to incorporate this into your marketing strategy in order to attract more delegates.

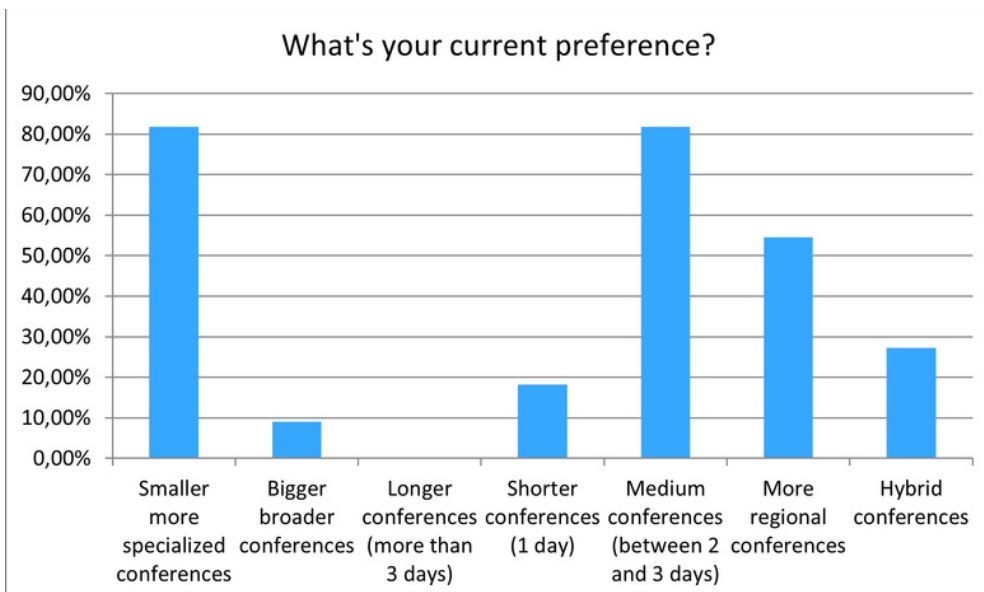


Besides the above developments two other developments were mentioned:

- The war/ Safety
- Downtime from work

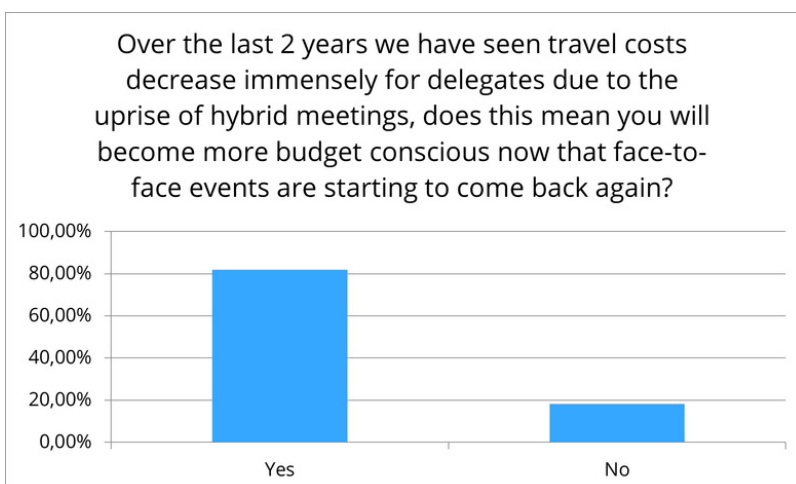


PREFERENCE



The above figure shows that especially smaller more specialized conference which last between 2- and 3 days have increased in popularity. This could possibly open up possibilities for smaller conference destinations that a delegate could be less familiar with.

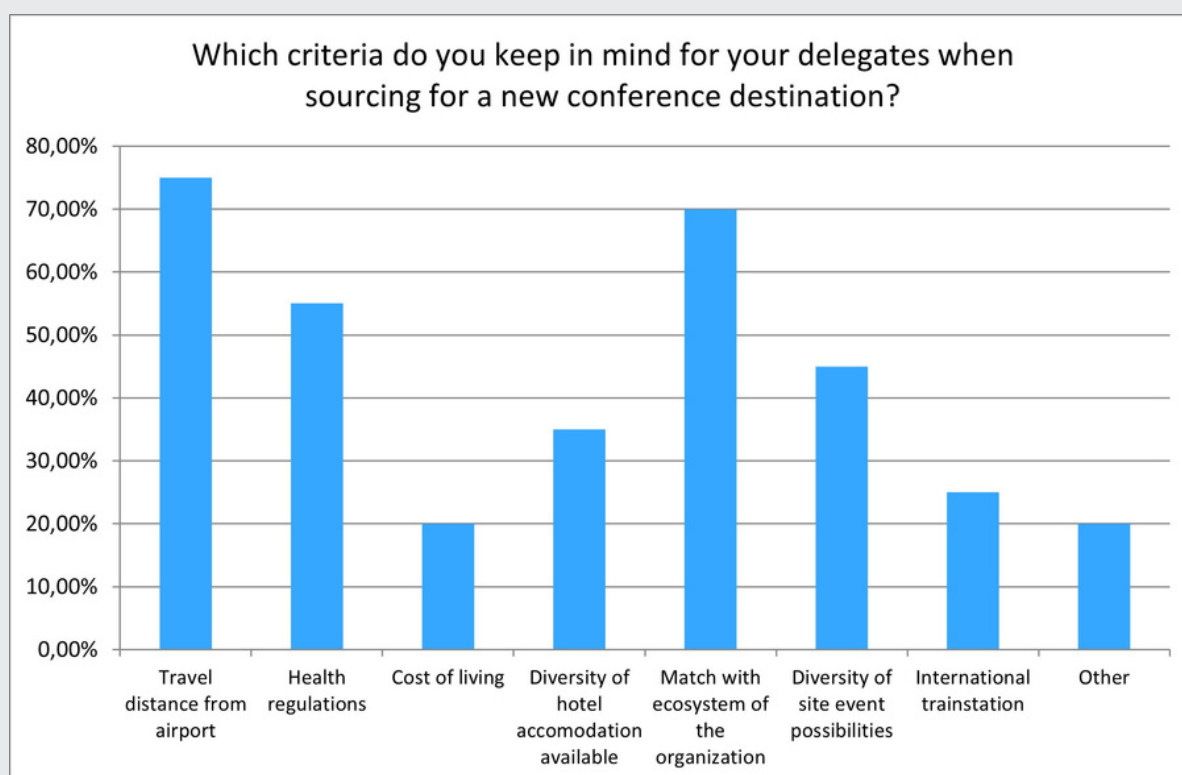
TRAVEL EXPENSES



Over 80% became more budget conscious over the years, as an organizer you need to focus on the added value of your conference in order to attract the desired number of delegates.

ASSOCIATION EVENT PLANNER

In order to organize and attract the right delegates a lot of planning is needed. In order to find out what has changed for specifically the association event planner itself, we asked the question what criteria they use in their destination selection process and if this has changed in the last two years.



Other criteria that were mentioned:

- Option for AV / Hybrid meeting support
- Support of local members
- Budget and financial support + local involvement from the higher education system

The number 1 criteria is the travel distance from the airport, followed by match with ecosystem (intellectual capital) of the organization. The criteria that became more important is "health regulations". 70% of the respondents answered that these criteria didn't changed because of the pandemic. Although they mentioned that public health regulations were not a factor before the pandemic.

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- *The pandemic has made funding more difficult but did not affect the choice of location.*
- *There is positive experience with online meetings, the concept of hybrid is also more accepted, there are better tools for online events available and travel policies from members have changed during the pandemic (and it seems that people think it will take some time before that will change).*
- *Reluctance to travel is still prevalent for our members (budgets not approved, corporate bans)*
- *We always looked at the full range of aspects. That didn't change. Although we are looking even more at the budget after not having had an in-person conference for two years.*

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ATTRACTING DELEGATES

90% of the respondents feels that they need to put more effort into getting delegates to attend their in-person conference. During the pandemic a lot of associations saw a rise in delegates numbers because of the possibility to attend the virtual event. However this is now creating some challenges as it is becoming more difficult to get all these delegates at the in-person events again.



Associations are experiencing the following issues:

- There is an added need for safety of travel and a low cost as the prices dramatically rose.
- Even when people realize it is important to meet each other in person they also learned that it can be much more efficient for yourself to attend online.
- They need to show it's worth to travel after two years of online meetings.
- People are less eager to travel or to attend conferences with numerous attendees.

In order to attract more delegates, following has been done:

- Changing the cancellation policy, making it easier for delegates to cancel because of illness, travel restrictions or other COVID-19 related effects.
 - Addressing concerns about what protocols will be put in place to manage pandemic safety issues.
 - Increasing marketing awareness.
 - Pro-actively approach members.
 - Working closer with the destination in order to see how to boost delegate numbers.
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Conclusion

Looking at the outcomes we can draw a few conclusions:

Top 3 reasons to attend a conference:

- Educational Program
- Networking
- Share knowledge with other delegates

Booking window has changed: The far majority is making their travel arrangements 1 month before. This is an important trend to watch. 67% stated that it became shorter because of the pandemic. Especially with room blocks and ticket registrations it is important to know when the delegates are making the booking to spend your marketing budget wisely.

New decision criteria: Sustainability and legacy became developments where delegates build their decision on to participate or not. This should be incorporated into the marketing outings of the conference.

Size of the meetings: Smaller more specialized conference which last between 2 and 3 days gained on popularity.

Increasing work efforts on attracting attendees: 90% of the respondents experience the increased effort into attracting enough delegates to their conferences, due to the uncertain current situation. Increasing marketing awareness, flexibility in cancellation policies, partnering with destinations are a few of the taken actions.

DISCUSSION

As this is the first outcome of a survey we would love to hear your thoughts and input. Please feel free to contact us via info@conferli.com.



THANK YOU FOR READING

Questions or suggestions, please contact us



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