wrg A division of The Creative Engagement Group

The Return to Live
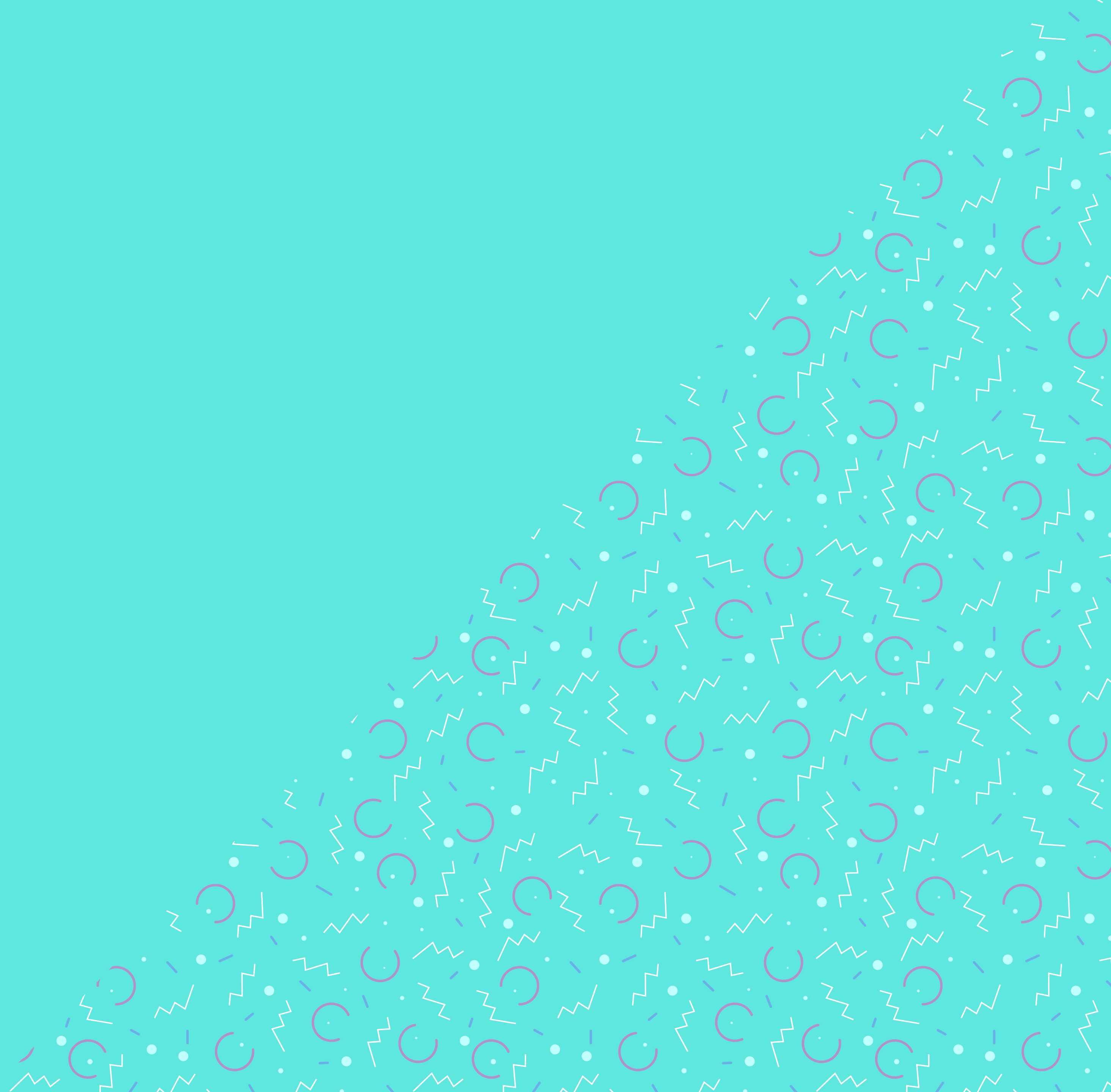
Introduction

With a return to live events on the horizon, we wanted to explore how to bring audiences back together in 2021 and beyond.

Although we've all missed live events and can't wait to have them back, it's important that we understand people's mindsets and think about how the way we've lived for the last 12 months has affected us in the long term.

We wanted to discuss this shift with those who shape and commission internal and external events, to build as realistic and comprehensive a response as possible. We assembled a focus group of 60 senior events, marketing and communications professionals to consider how we should best bring audiences back, and what the potential pitfalls could be.

Our conversation was guided by our events experts Tim Collett and Greg Kiner, and our Head of Behavioral Science, Guy Champniss, PhD.

As we unpacked the issues, it became clear that the excitement and primal need to get together again was understandably tempered with anxiety. There was also a new level of expectation from an evolved audience. Schooled in virtual and more autonomous in the workplace, they would be keen to get together – but would want control in doing so.

The return to live

Don't call it a comeback

What we heard loud and clear from our focus group is that we should put the audience at the heart of everything and make them feel like their attendance is important, valued, and absolutely worth their while.

Putting our audiences first is not new news – so this is not a comeback. Moreover, our response should be to double our efforts in earning the audience's trust, by respecting them and understanding how their needs have changed.

The key themes

When analyzing the data from an audience-need perspective, four important actions can be identified. Ultimately, when looking to attract audiences back to live events, we need to give them **reassurance, a reason to be there, choice** and **control**.

...and the supporting science

To help us understand what might trigger (or cater for) new audience behaviors, our Head of Behavioral Science, Guy Champniss, PhD, has summarized each theme to explain how the science supports our findings.

So, let's take a closer look at our four key themes.

1

Give _____ _____them reassurance

Give them reassurance

We must do all we can to establish the trust of our attendees well before the event begins, and the way to do that is by putting the audience first. Consider every detail from the audience's perspective – what does it make them think, feel and do?

Trust needs to be earned as early as possible and maintained throughout. An anxious audience won't enjoy the experience, or even worse, might skip it altogether.

To help quell some of this anxiety, ensure that safety precautions are well planned and clearly communicated outside of the usual pre-event engagement. This way, people will know they're being looked after and their personal safety has been well considered, increasing their confidence and making them feel more relaxed.

3.29

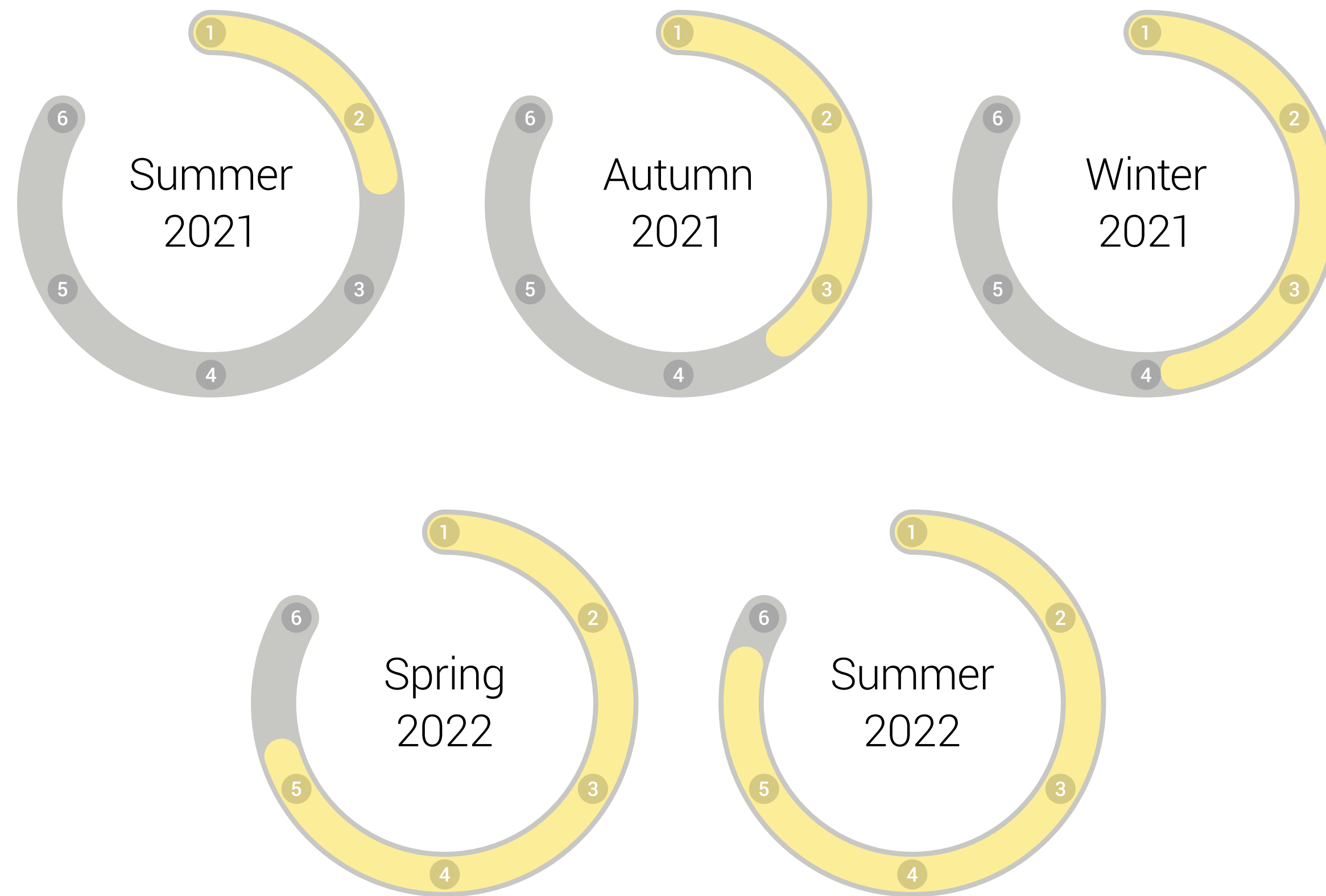### Receptivity of audiences to live events

Scale from 1-6, with 1 being 'very open' and 6 being 'very concerned'

5.77

Importance of comms around safety measures

Scale from 1-6, with 1 being 'not important' and 6 being 'very important'

Confidence in timescales for returning to live events

Summer
2021

Autumn
2021

Winter
2021

Spring
2022

Summer
2022

Hybrid events – with varying degrees of 'liveness' – will be the norm for some time, and wholly 'live' audiences are a long way off. In some contexts, they may never return. It is therefore critical that virtual attendance is available as an option. Everybody's circumstances are different, so participants should absolutely have the right to attend virtually or in person, free of judgment.

Scale from 1-6, with 1 being 'not confident' and 6 being 'very confident'

The science of reassurance

The natural response to reassure is to provide detail around measures being taken to ensure the audience's safety. But we shouldn't forget that none of us are really clear on which safety attributes matter, in what is still a fast-moving and unclear situation.

In these situations, rather than thinking clearly about which 'safety attributes' are important, we tend to make decisions more on an overall 'attitude' towards the event, or on 'effect' (how the decision to attend will make us feel).

Providing audiences with a clear line of sight of what others are doing is a transparent and useful decision aid

Behavioral science reveals two more routes to give assurance:

a) Brand equity
Brands work by providing us with mental shortcuts (heuristics) to predict if something's going to be good quality and worth our effort. Existing trust in the event organizer's brand (and the brands attending) is a powerful lever to reassure that attending is safe and sensible.

b) Seeing the preferences of others
We've all been in the situation on vacation when trying to decide between two restaurants. One has a full terrace of diners, whereas the other is almost empty. Our choice? The full one. Seeing the behaviors of others is a strong guide in situations that we're struggling to navigate. Providing audiences with a clear line of sight of what others are doing is a transparent and useful decision aid.

2

Give them_
__a reason
to be there
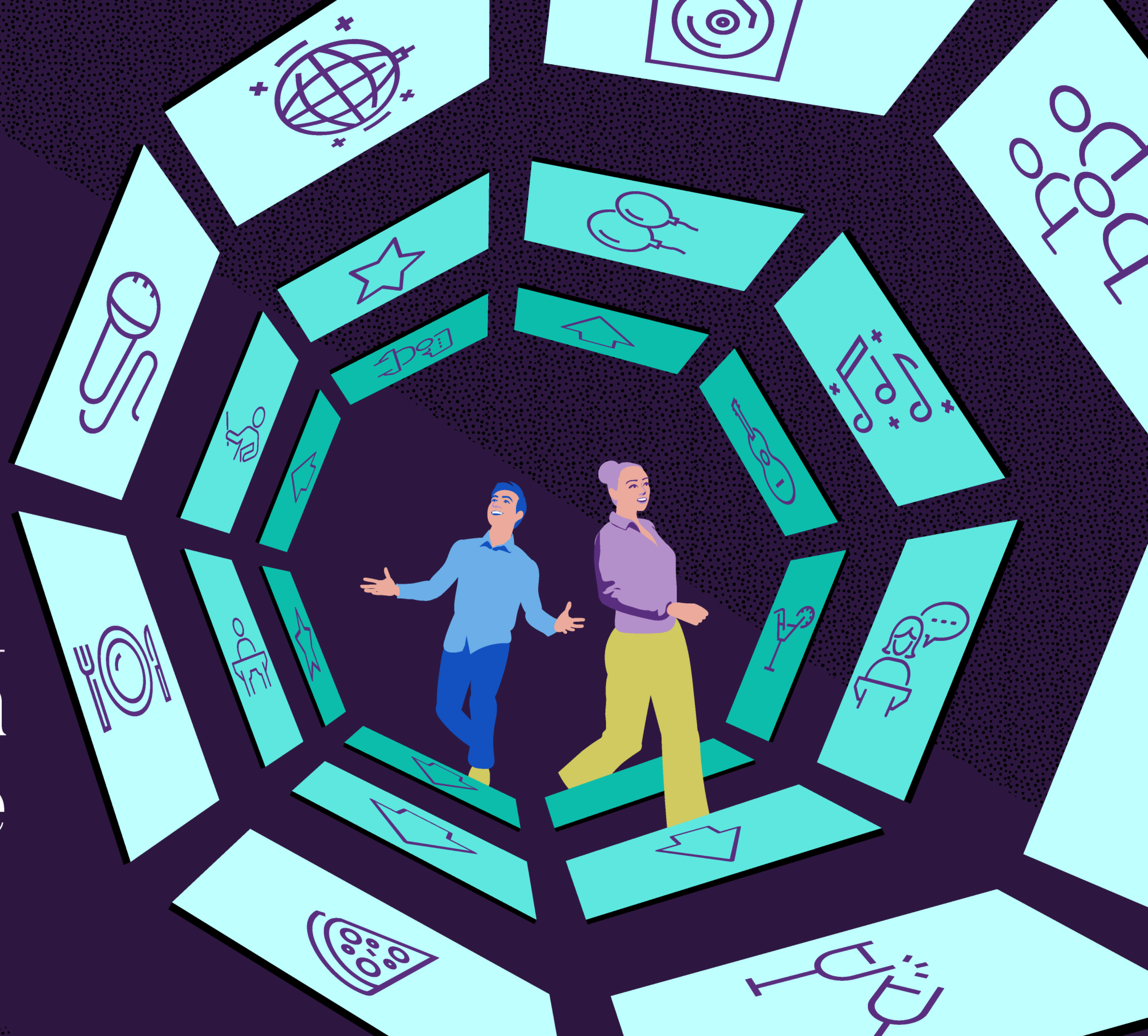
Give them a reason to be there

We need to make events count. This isn't breaking news and we've all known this for years, but it's doubly important now. Attendees need a coherent, well-communicated and relevant purpose, and the reasons why the event exists must be crystal clear.

People want to experience not only a purposeful event, but one that shows respect for their time. We are entering a world where we need to sell attendance of events to even an internal audience. There is an investment to be made by our attendees: their personal time, time away from loved ones, time away from the office, and time to recover after long haul travel. We need to earn that investment and ensure the experiences are 'worth it'.

One of the key reasons for people to attend a live event is the opportunity for social interaction on a huge scale. Whilst some have flourished during lockdown, the majority of audiences are craving the chance for real-life encounters that take us on unexpected journeys, and the unparalleled joy of shared experiences that events can give us.

"Anything that doesn't require hands-on group work or culture change should be virtual"

– ThinkTank participant

62%
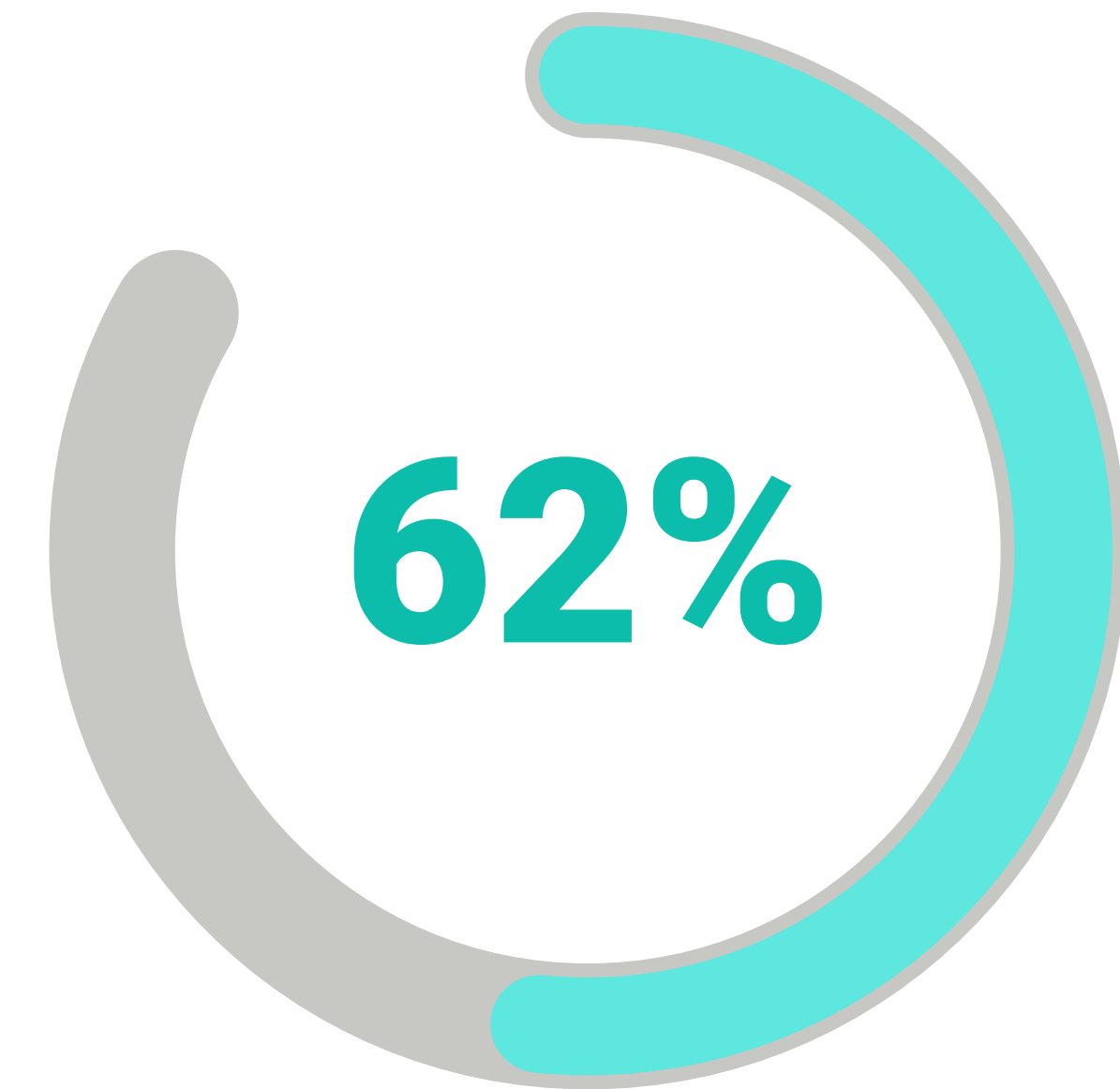
When asked about which elements are best experienced at a live event, 62% of responses mentioned networking and social interaction

83%
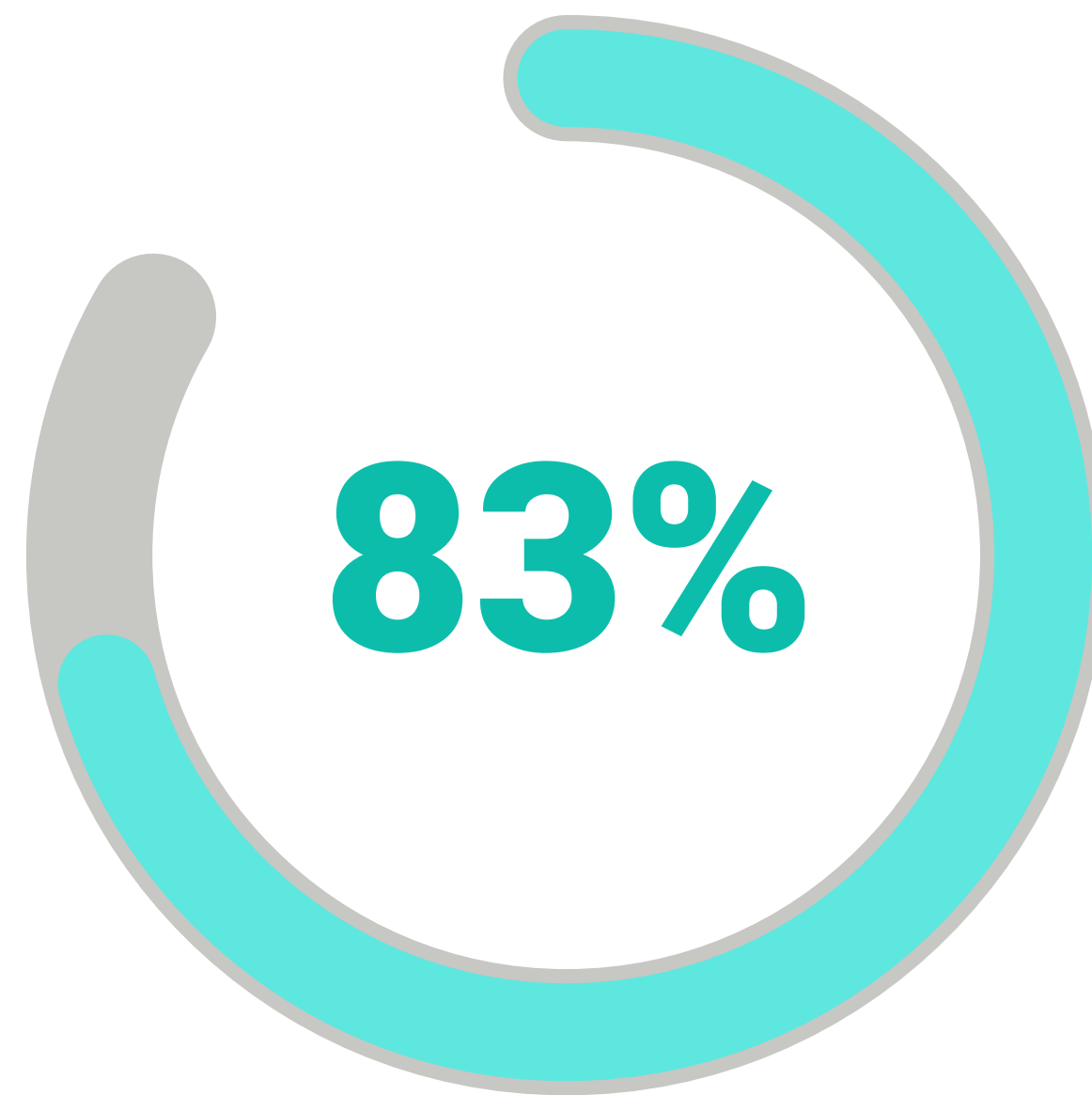
83% of participants felt the last 12 months will have a significant impact on future event strategies

Great content is also key; events can't be an 'information dump' that would be more effectively delivered in another way. The content should be relevant to the live setting, sparking impromptu interactions, meetings and collaborations. Simply put, if an event could be virtual or on demand, it probably should be.

There are many other unique and attractive qualities of the experience that need to be made clear to potential attendees. These may include the collective physical experience, embracing the sense of location, sensory immersion in the event space itself, and even some precious time away from the coalface.

Ultimately, live events exist to provide moments that matter. Let that be the guiding principle, and the reasons to attend will become clear.

The science of cost versus benefit

Lockdown has been the world's largest behavior change experiment, with countless behaviors upended. The reality is that most of these disrupted behaviors are habits. Habits are a very particular type of behavior, in that they are not triggered by us wanting to achieve something (a goal), but by our environment. Think about how you used to buy a coffee every day on the way to work – was that because you wanted a coffee? Or was it because you always passed the same coffee shop at the same time?

Habits are not triggered by us wanting to achieve something, but by our environment

When habits are broken, we go back to thinking about whether the habitual behavior really was the best way to meet the original goal. Having been made aware of the benefits of virtual, audiences will be carefully re-evaluating whether turning up is still the best way to meet their goals for any event. In that 'cost-benefit analysis' that everyone's now working through, behavioral science says two things are important:

a) Building an enhanced user experience before, during and after the event – ideally creating a 'behavioral swim-lane' to make sure each step focuses on meeting the needs of the user.

b) Communicating that enhanced user experience, so attendees can easily see the reduced 'costs' and enhanced 'benefits' of meeting their goals with your event.

Give
them
choice

3

Give them choice

A year of virtual living – and virtual events – has resulted in our work-life balance carrying more weight than ever. Well-executed virtual events have been proven to deliver effective communications, and the flexibility that dialing in remotely brings us has been eye-opening. We value different things now, and one thing that

audiences will be craving is something they haven't had for some time – choice.

We also need to give our audiences greater control over their experience. For example, allowing them to choose whether to attend in person or virtually is important, and this option should be made clear from the very beginning.

47%

■ Excited	11
■ Mixed	09
■ Cautious	15
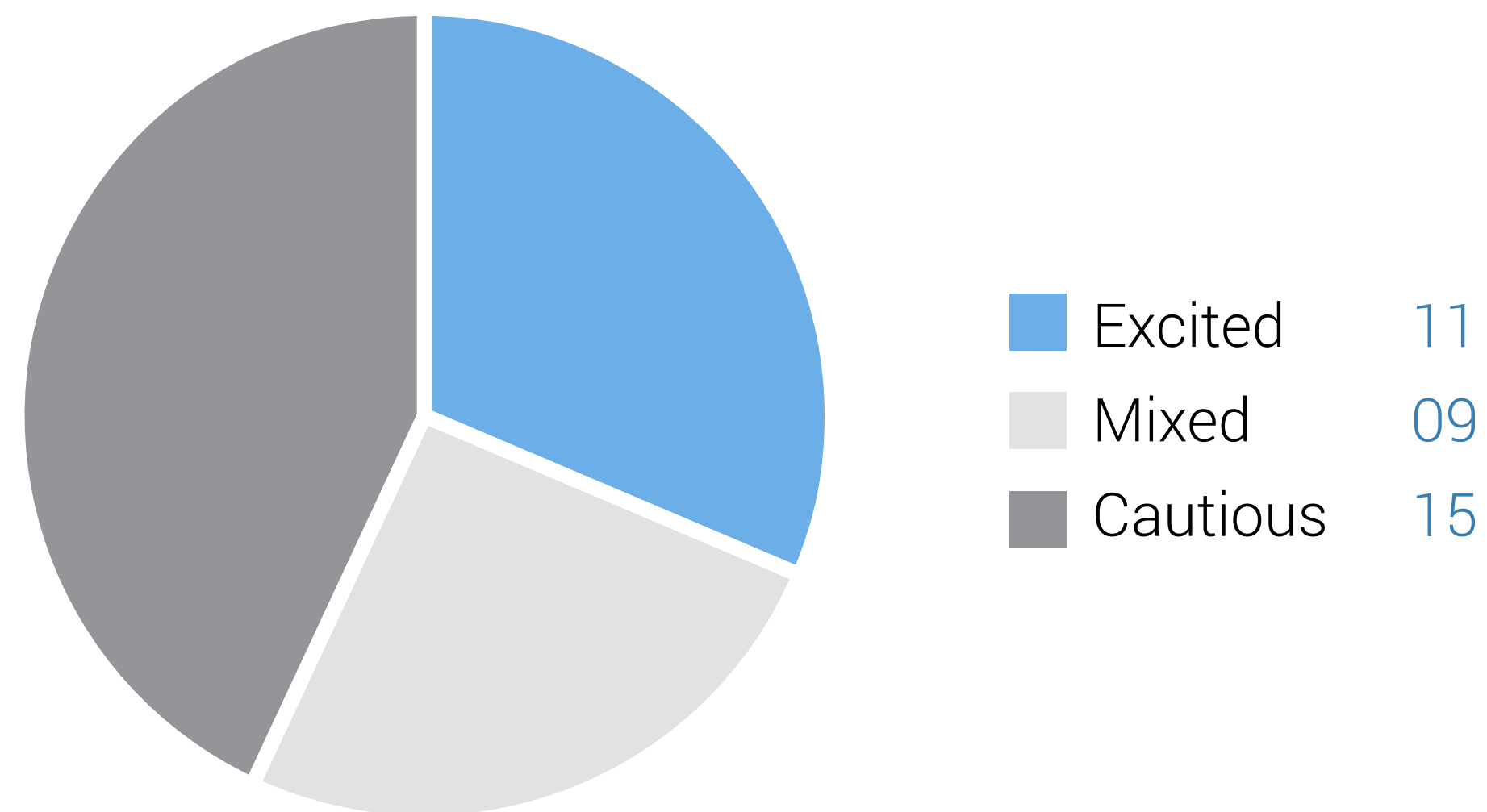
Audience feelings about returning to live events
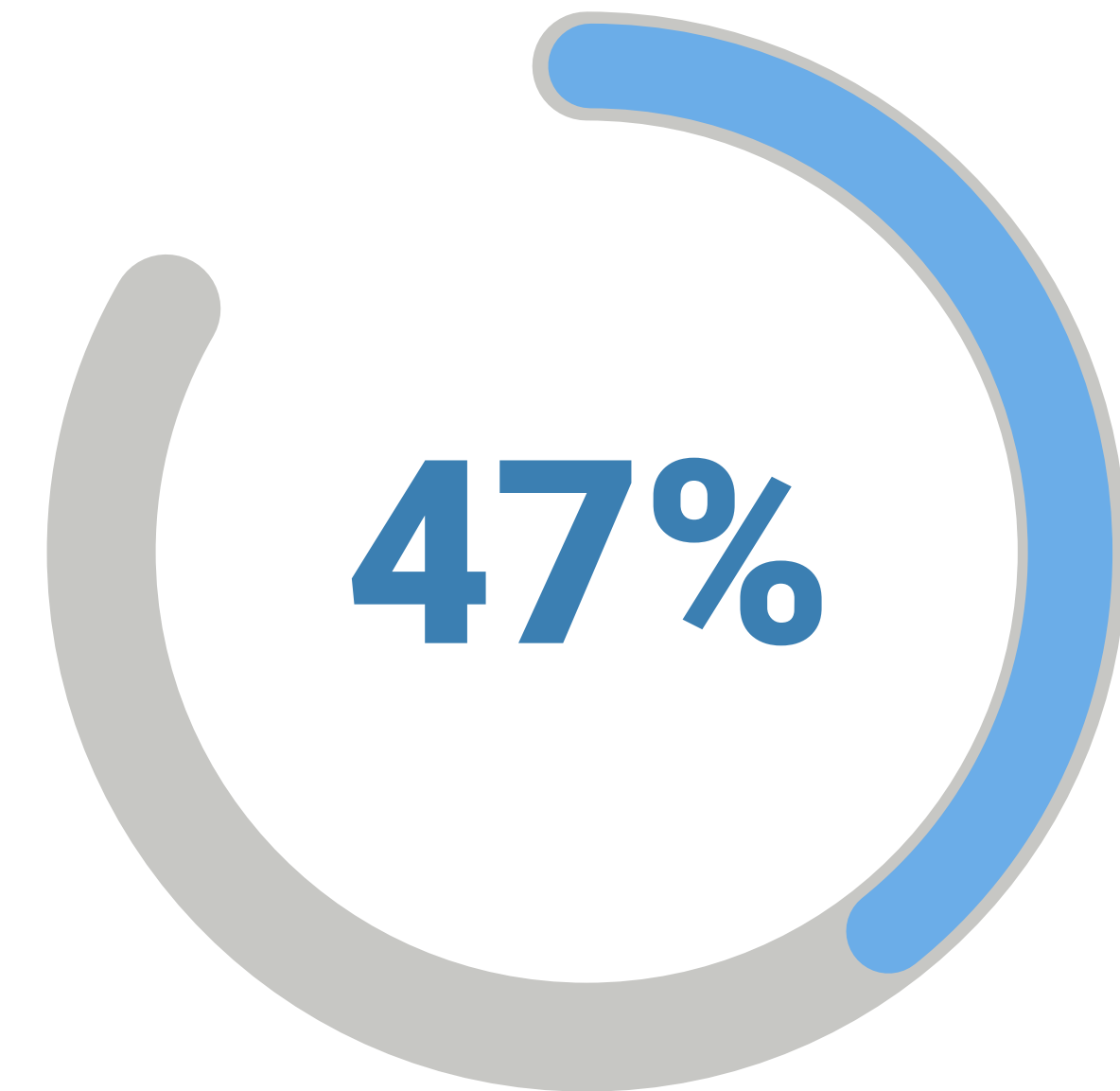
47% of attendees commented that to make audiences feel more comfortable returning to live, they need the choice to attend in person, virtually or from small hybrid hubs

The factors affecting audience attitudes when they consider a return to live events

Purpose of Event

Sustainability

Travel

Vaccinations

Fear/
Unknown/
Anxiety

Safety/
Hygiene

Scale from 1-6, with 1 being 'not significant at all' and 6 being 'very significant'

Engagement tactics need to be geared with the lives of our audience in mind, and giving the in-person audience and virtual attendees an equally compelling experience will continue to be incredibly important. We'll still need to show that we care as much for the virtual attendee as we do for the live participant.

Maximizing the live experience will be crucial, so we should think about ways to do this. For example, moving one-way communications so they can be digested pre- or post-event will allow greater time for debate and collaboration in person.

The science of choice

Choice is paradoxical. On the one hand, we champion choice. On the other, we all find choice overwhelming, and there are numerous studies that show too much choice stops us making a choice. It doesn't matter what the choice is — vacation destinations, medical treatments, jam flavors — making any choice involves effort, and we're programmed to avoid exerting effort when we can. More choice means more effort to choose well.

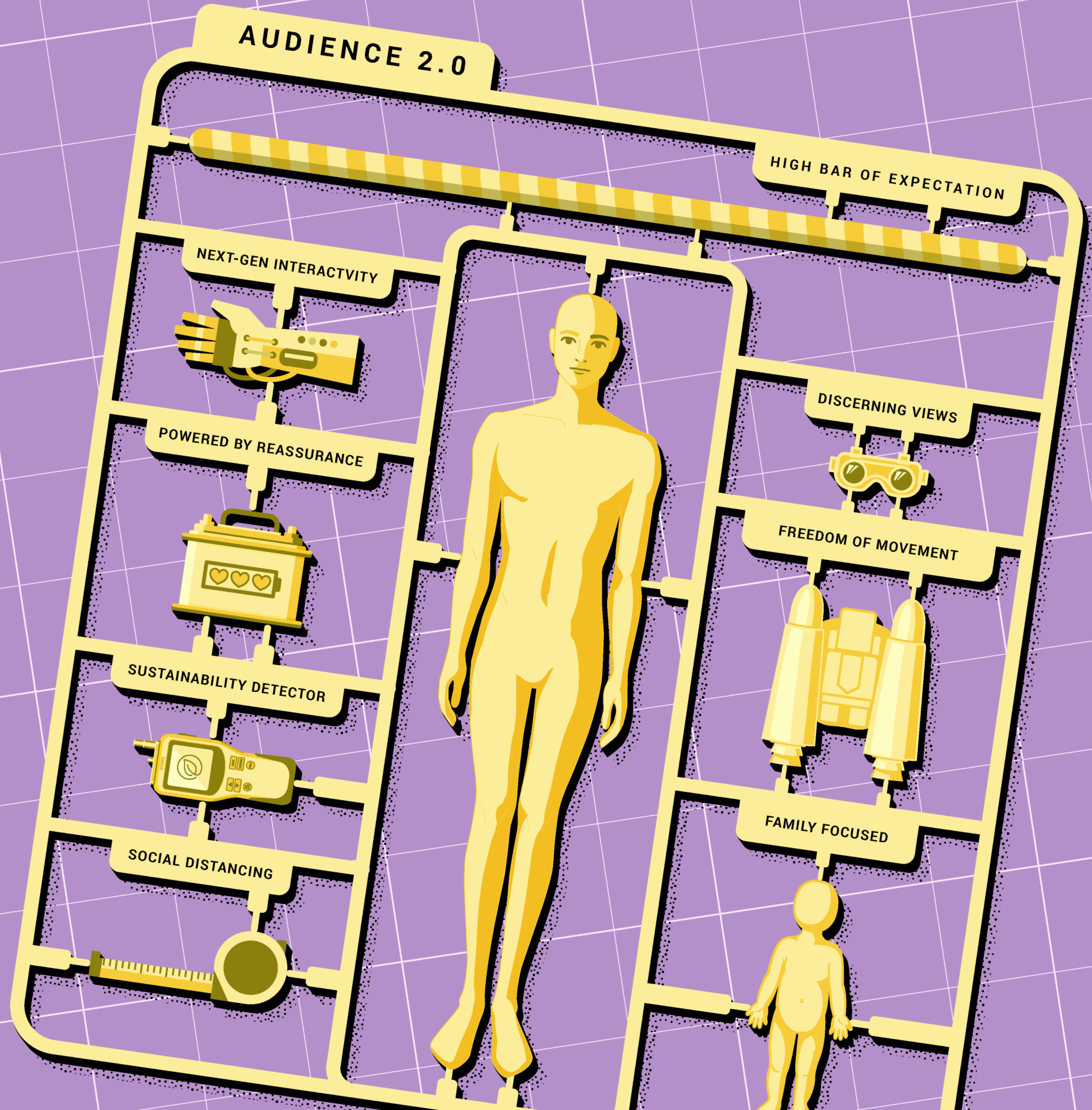**We need to constantly ask ourselves — what would make the best choice the easy choice for the audience?**

Behavioral science gives us two pointers here:

a) We need to be careful how much choice we give to attendees. Sometimes, the illusion of choice allows us to 'enjoy being in control' without the burden of actually having to choose. We can use 'nudges,' such as default settings, to signal which choices are likely to be best for the individual.

b) We can also create 'boosts' to guide better choices. Boosts involve providing the specific information in a palatable format, at the right time to allow the individual to make a better choice.

So, we need to constantly ask ourselves — what would make the best choice, the easy choice for the audience?

Give
_____
them
_____
control

4

AUDIENCE 2.0

HIGH BAR OF EXPECTATION

NEXT-GEN INTERACTVITY

POWERED BY REASSURANCE

SUSTAINABILITY DETECTOR

SOCIAL DISTANCING

DISCERNING VIEWS

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

FAMILY FOCUSED

Give them control

Newly steeped in the possibilities of virtual, audiences will be savvier than ever.

We've spoken about how important it is to gain the audience's trust, but it's equally important that we put our trust in them too – and show them the respect they deserve.

Audiences will be more discerning, with less tolerance for low-quality or irrelevant content, but will also be more keen to engage with worthwhile experiences that resonate with them. They will expect greater levels and quality of interactivity and for content to be even more relevant to them. This goes for both live and virtual audiences.

Thoughts from our ThinkTank participants on how audience requirements have changed over the last 12 months

"information at their fingertips on demand"

"respect people's time"

"the live experience must offer something virtual can't"

"content is king"

"content needs to be much more interactive vs what can be just done virtually"

"higher levels of interaction"

"higher standards"

"audiences used to dipping in and out so content needs to be relevant to retain attention"

"focus on objectives and experience"

Changes to audience requirements over the last 12 months

More Experiences

Respecting Time

Short and Snappy

More Interaction

On Demand

More Content
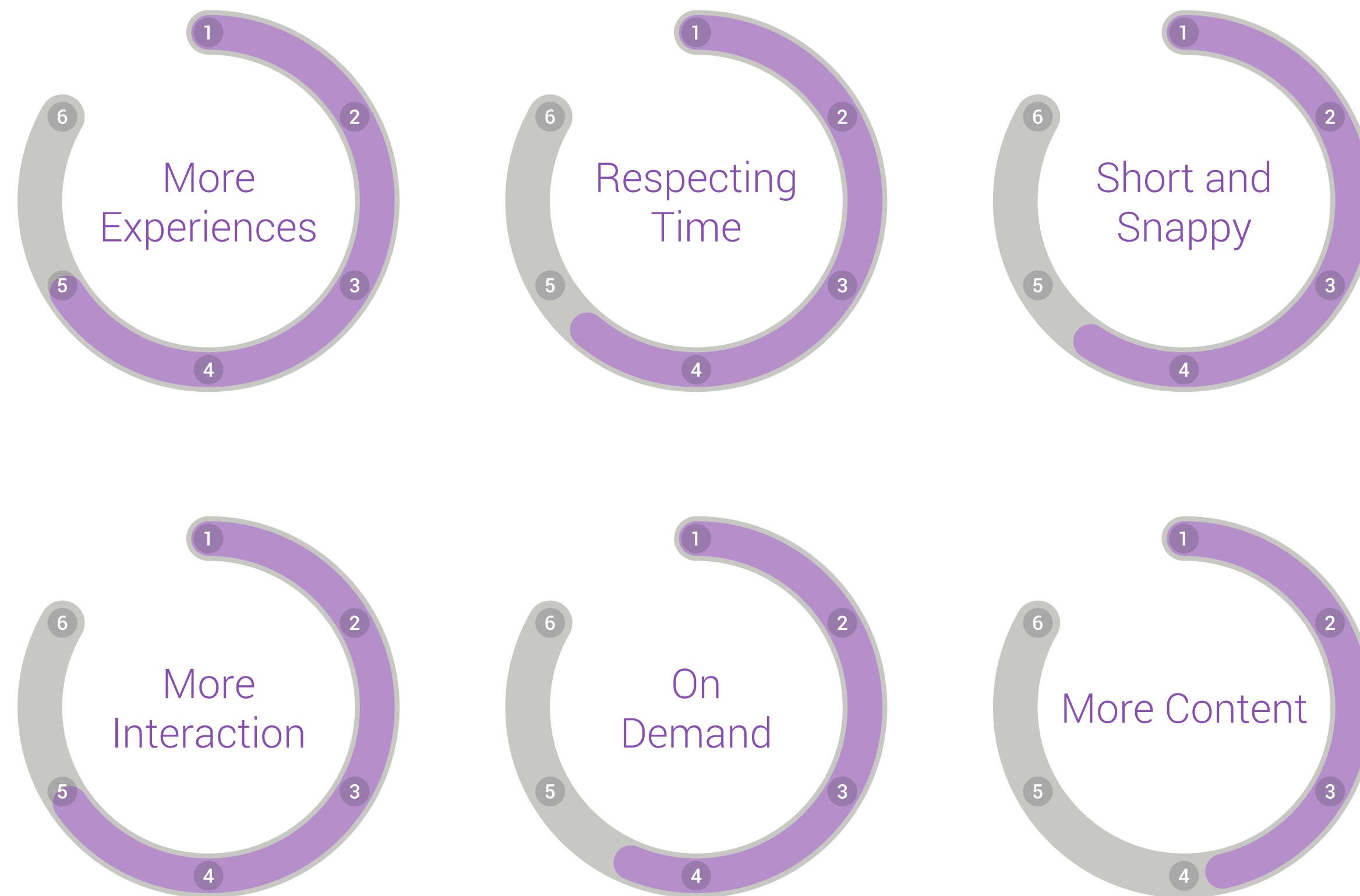
Scale from 1-6, with 1 being 'not significant at all' and 6 being 'very significant'

Due to a heightened awareness of sustainability, the efficiency of time, money and resources will also feel more apparent and open for scrutiny from the audience.

It's time to do away with ill-suited content, overly long plenaries and information-driven interactions. Give your audience room to interact with others without making them rush between sessions and activities. Let them control their own time and allow them room to breathe. Make them feel like the experience was designed purely for them.

The science of customization

We know audiences are coming back as more sophisticated buyers. This is in part due to habits being broken and goals being re-evaluated, and in part due to having a more nuanced understanding of how and where virtual works better.

Giving this 'new' attendee license to create or configure their own event may sound like we're placing work at their door, but this can be an effective mechanism to boost a sense of value from the event. Behavioral science knows this from what's known as the effort-reward heuristic (or the 'Ikea effect').

In short, this effect shows us that sometimes when we put more effort in, we get more out. Sometimes, asking our audiences to do some work can reap benefits. This can be explained by the endowment effect – once I've invested time and effort in customizing something, that thing becomes more valuable to me.

As counter-intuitive as it may sound, behavioral science should give us confidence in providing customization options and allowing audiences to build their own events (or certainly some aspects). This increased sense of value could also lead the audience to become stronger advocates for the event and for those involved. This in turn can help build more relevant and positive brand associations with those involved, driving stronger brand equity (see Give them reassurance).

Once I've invested time and effort in customizing something, that thing becomes more valuable to me

A closing thought from our Global Head of Events – Tim Collett

We called this paper 'don't call it a comeback', not only because of our love of LL Cool J, but also because we've found the return to in real life activities won't be just a straight return (don't say new normal).

The rapid evolution of the digital landscape, and our ability to maximize its potential, has given us a more developed alternative to how we share and consume content efficiently. When we are ready to come back to live events, we will need to reassure and

be assured that it is the safe thing to do, the right thing to do and the best thing to do.

Of course, we all believe that nothing comes close to live events for those special moments of being together. With our enhanced digital ecosystem, we have the opportunity to focus the live experience to be a human one, centered around interaction and collaboration. What does all of this mean? We have never been more excited about the future of live events.

We have the opportunity to focus the live experience to be a human one, centered around interaction and collaboration

About WRG

Contact us

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WRG is the events and experiential division of The Creative Engagement Group. WRG engages internal and external audiences through the strategic creation of live, virtual and hybrid experiences. We combine expertise in creativity, events, communications, exhibitions and logistics.

In a typical year, WRG creates and delivers 1,400 internal and external meetings, events and shows around the world.

We had been creating hybrid and virtual events for 11 years before COVID came along. Thanks to this depth of experience, we've remained resilient throughout 2020, scaling to deliver 625 global virtual and hybrid events and congresses last year (up 57%).

We're also able to draw upon a diverse range of in-house services from our parent group, The Creative Engagement Group, such as film, digital, immersive and behavioral science.

The full report

Part 1: As an audience member

In three words, how are you feeling about returning to live events?

Most participants feel apprehensive and cautious about returning to live events, some are excited and ready to return to them, and some expressed a mixture of these feelings. A few mentioned that they will feel more ready to return to live events if they and others have the vaccination first, and a few people agreed that a blend of digital and live events would be best.

Please rate your confidence in returning to live events for the following timescales
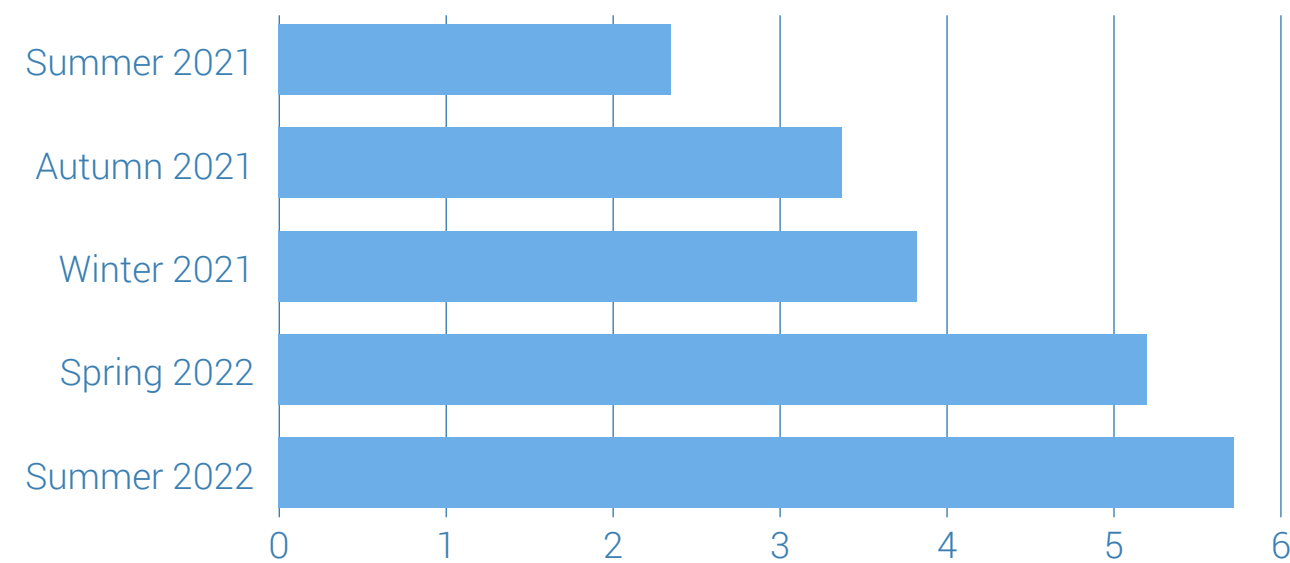

Participants did not have high confidence in returning to live events until spring 2022 and beyond. Summer 2021 had very low confidence from the group (2.35/6).

What do you miss most about live events?

Participants miss the aspects around socializing and personal interactions, whether this is in a professional capacity through networking, or more casual spontaneous conversations. They also miss the atmosphere and perks of live events, including the music, food/drink and travel.

Which type of event do you think you will attend first?

- Personal/Leisure Events
- Business Events

76%
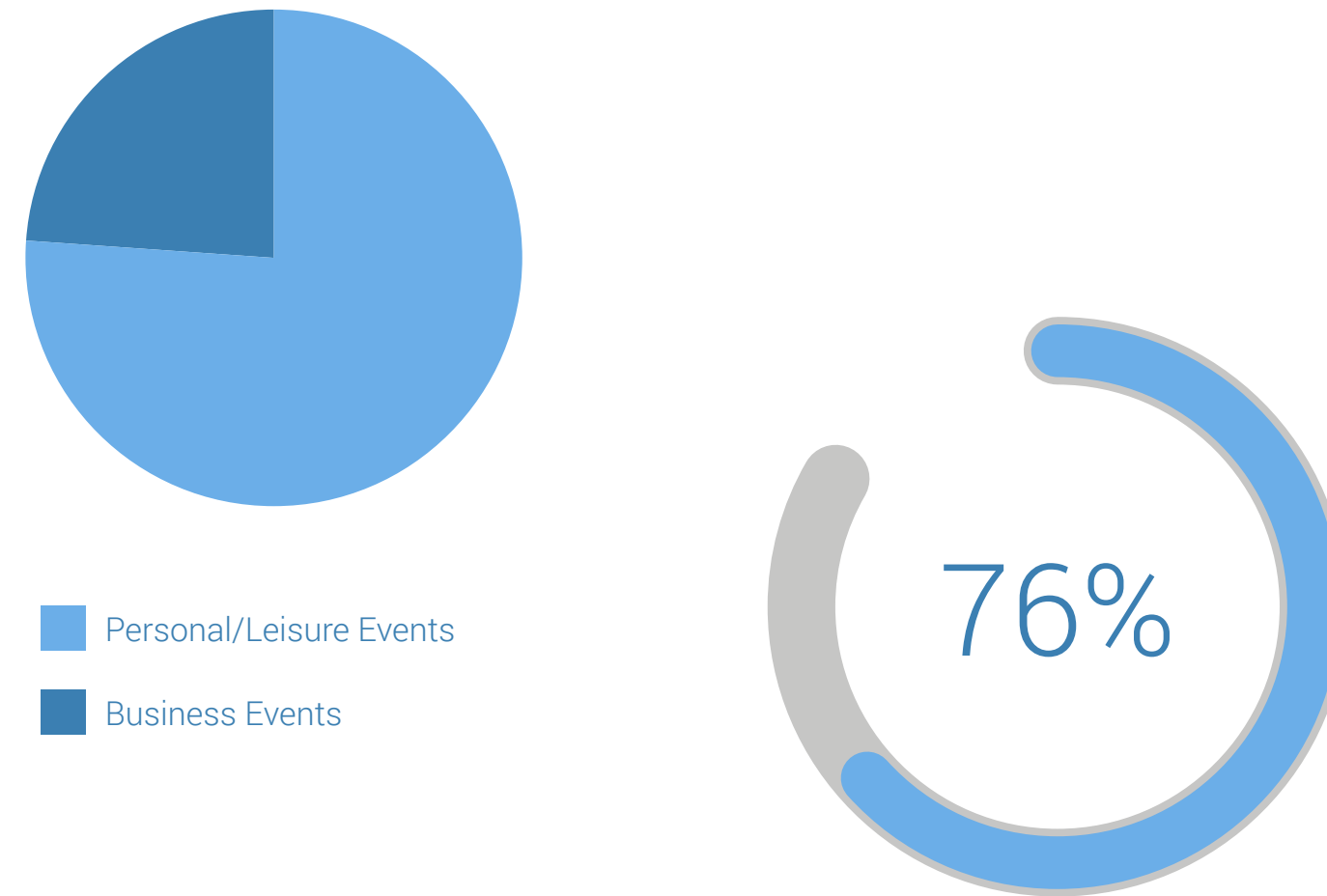
Participants shared a 76% preference around attending personal events over business events.

What have the benefits been of going virtual for you as an audience member?

The two biggest benefits of going virtual both refer to saving time, with the first being the time saved by not traveling to live events. Secondly, virtual events feel more efficient overall, especially being able to only attend what feels relevant and as a result, this allows attendees to spend more time with family.

Following the theme of time, participants also like being able to attend more events, given the convenience of virtual formats and on demand content.

### Please rate the significance of these benefits
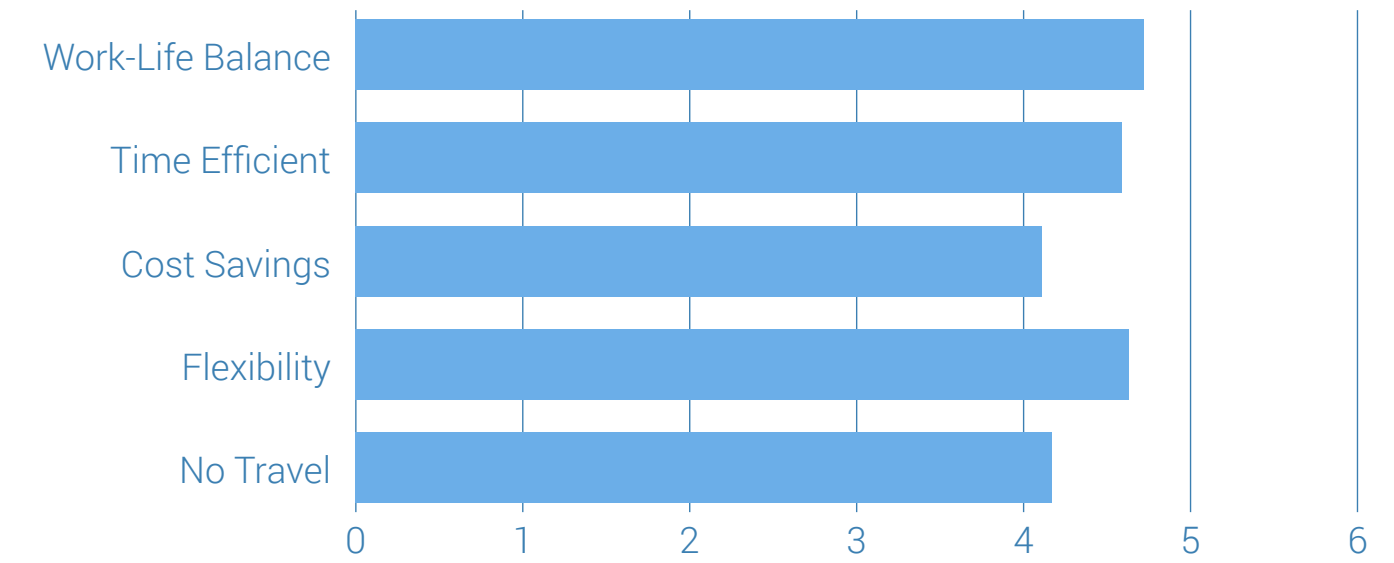
Work-life balance has been the most significant benefit of attending virtual events – time efficiency and flexibility connect to this point; both were determined to be significant benefits in terms of impact.

What have the drawbacks been of virtual experiences for you as an audience member?

Participants said the most significant drawbacks of virtual experiences have been excessive screen time and 'Zoom fatigue'. Getting bored quickly, being easily distracted and multitasking through virtual events were also linked to this. The lack of personal interaction and ability to participate has also been a big downside for attendees and organizers alike.

Please rate the significance of these drawbacks
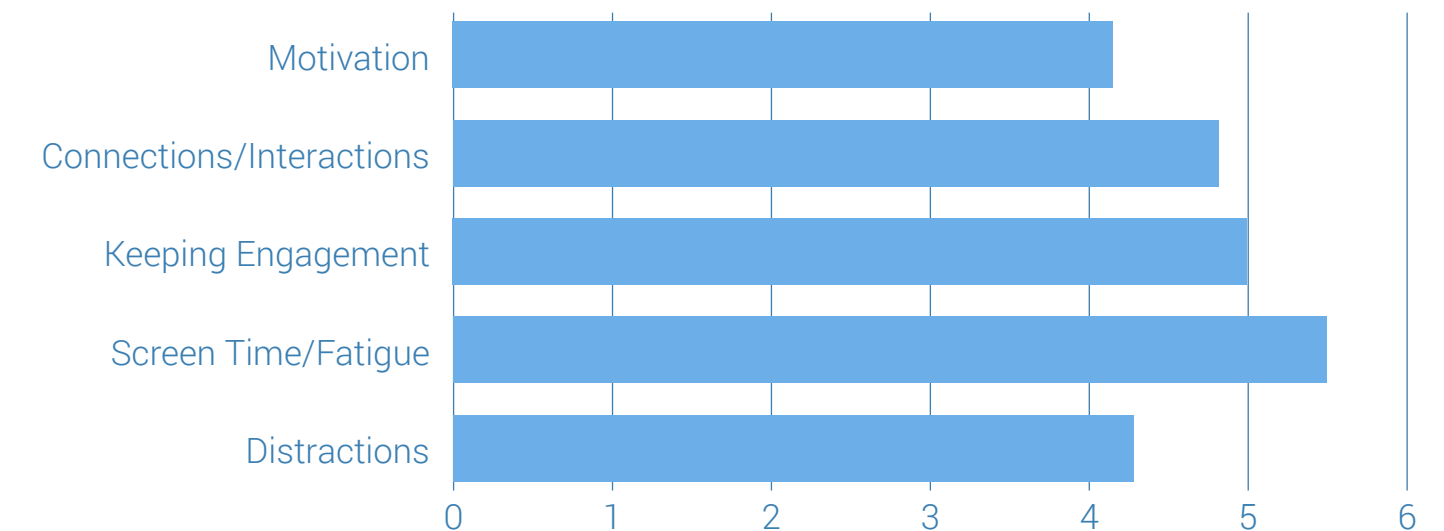
Part 2: Getting audiences to the event

How open do you believe your audiences are to coming back into a live event setting?

Participants don't believe audiences are willing and confident to return to live events yet, as this was rated 3.29/6.

What do you think is impacting audiences' attitudes when they consider returning to live events?

Safety, including vaccinations, mixing with other audience members, and fear around attending events are the main contributors to participants not feeling ready to return to live events. Anxiety also was a significant factor, as social distancing has become the new normal and members are anxious about the idea of traveling and leaving their families.

Please rate these ideas in terms of impact
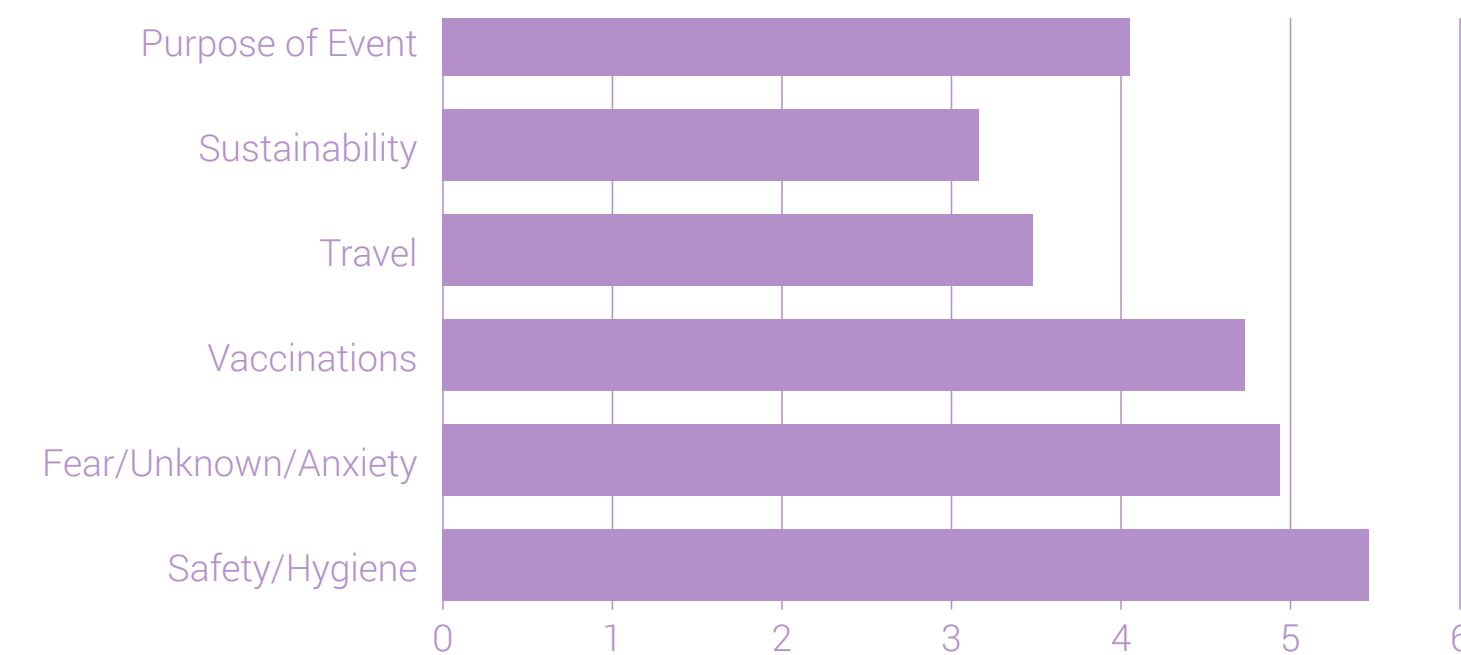
When asked to rate the key factors that are influencing attitudes to returning to live events, safety and fear/anxiety were considered to be the most impactful.

If safety/hygiene is going to have the most significant impact, what will you do to address this challenge?

Participants suggested clear communications around safety measures to reassure participants will be crucial in overcoming anxiety around safety and hygiene. For example, what will be done to allow for social distancing – will there be reduced numbers of attendees, or other initiatives such as removing communal items like buffet tables?

What COVID measures are you planning on bringing into your events?

Most measures suggested were around creating distance and space for audience members to allow for social distancing. Other suggested safety precautions included PPE, sanitizing stations, temperature scans, reduced touch points and capacity caps. Some participants also mentioned that they would ensure there are both virtual/hybrid options for those still not comfortable to attend live events. There were also initiatives around audience preferences, such as a coded system for those that were comfortable mixing and those that were not.

What do you think the impact of the following precautions would be on audiences' attitudes towards events?
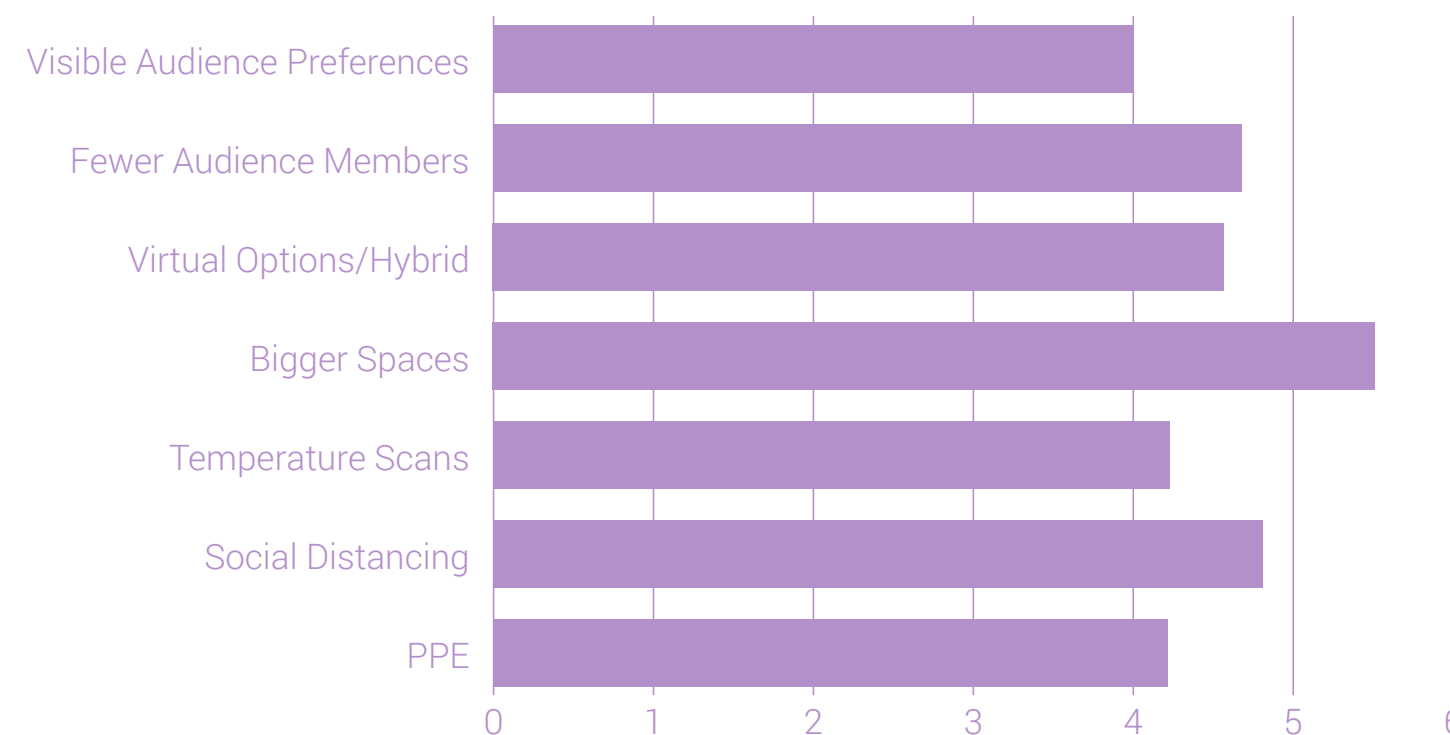
Do you think that COVID measures make people feel more or less comfortable?

Participants felt that COVID safety measures certainly helped with making audience members more comfortable (4.31/6).

What other ways are you considering to make people feel more comfortable?

Hybrid solutions were the top suggestion, as they allow those comfortable to attend live events to do so, as well as a virtual option for those joining from their homes. Communications around safety precautions and capacity caps are also key to making audiences feel more comfortable, along with ensuring they have flexible ways to attend and interact with live events.

How important will communication about COVID measures pre-event be to make people feel more comfortable to attend?

Communications around safety measures will be an important factor in making audiences returning to live events more comfortable (5.77/6).

Why do you think this will be important?

Participants suggested that communications around COVID safety measures will reassure audience members and help them feel safe to attend, as well as allowing them to make an informed decision on whether they would prefer to attend virtually.

Part 3: Moving forwards

Do you think the change in delivery methods over the last 12 months will have a lasting impact on your event strategy as restrictions are lifted?

Participants felt that the last 12 months had an impact on delivery methods of live events and events strategies moving forward (4.97/6).

What factors are best experienced at a live event?

Participants felt that live events were crucial for networking and social interactions, including unplanned meetings, collaboration and team building. They also said live events were important for creating immersive experiences.

As most events have been virtual during the pandemic, what events do you think should remain virtual?

Participants felt that virtual events are best suited to regular business updates, more functional events, and communications from one key person to a large audience. However, they suggested that all future events should have a virtual component – not only to allow people who are not comfortable to attend live events to participate, but also to allow global participants to attend who may not be able to travel.

Over the last 12 months, how do you think audience requirements have changed?

Participants suggested that audience members are looking for more focused and relevant content from live events, as well as engaging experiences and more interactivity, as this has been difficult to achieve over the last 12 months. There were also discussions around respecting audience members' time, communications fatigue, and the need to meet raised standards expected for live events, due to the significant break from them.

Impact of requirements
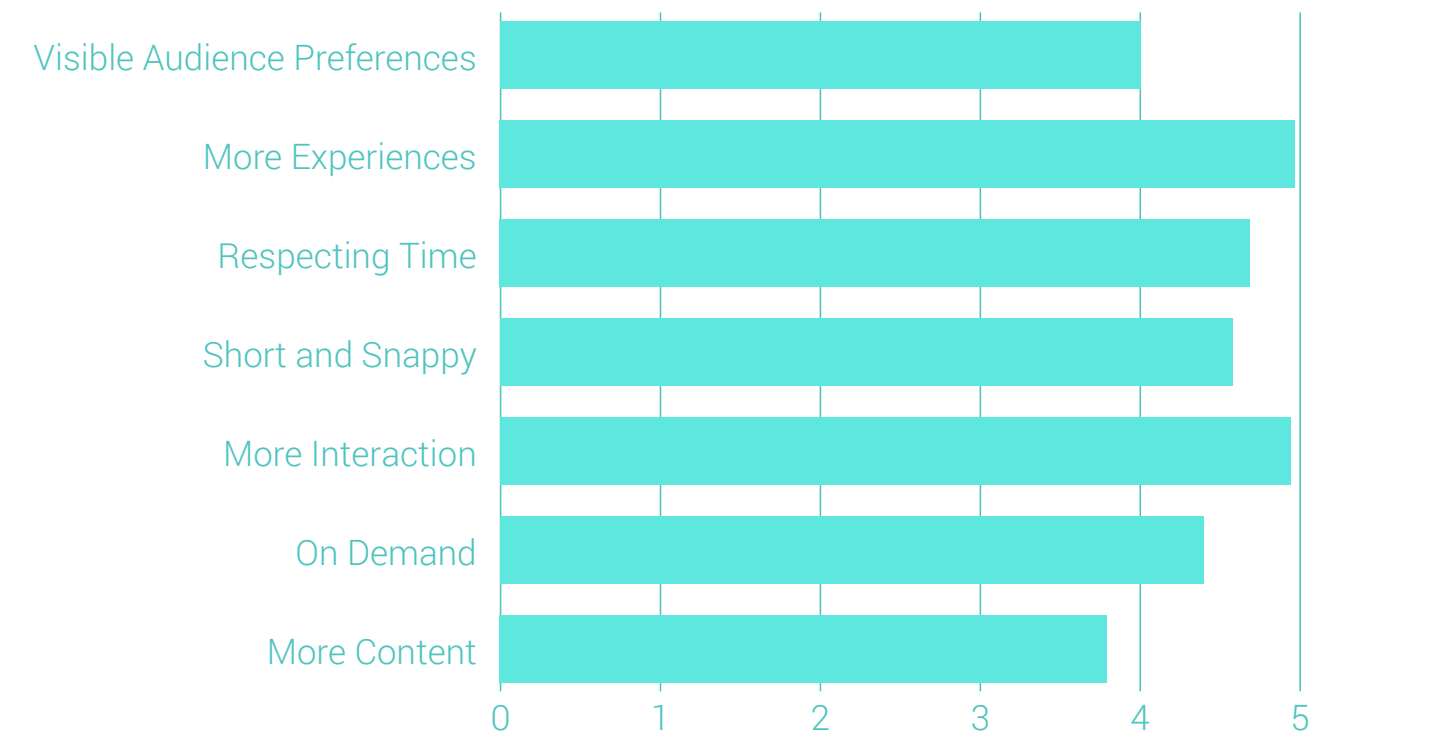
Creating more experiences and increasing interactions are important audience requirements, along with respecting audience members' time by providing on demand and easy to digest content.

How might we address changes to provide more experiences?

In terms of creating more experiences that meet the audiences' requirements, event planners need to think outside of the box and try new things, as audience members are wanting to experience something they cannot experience from their own home. Innovation of event formats will be crucial to this, as well as ensuring quality over quantity and not hosting live events for the sake of it. Even though audience members are wanting to have more live experiences, safety is still key and event planners need to make sure that experiences are suited to smaller groups.

What advice would you give to your peers when planning the return to live as restrictions are lifted?

Participants suggested lots of great advice for planning a return to live. Not rushing back to live when restrictions are lifted was a common suggestion, as well as ensuring a flexible approach and justification of live over virtual with clear communications. Event planners need to listen and engage with their audiences – a two-way dialogue with audience members will be vital in event planning, meeting expectations and creating a purpose for events. Participants said creativity will be important and that events planners should think about how they can 'come back with a bang!'