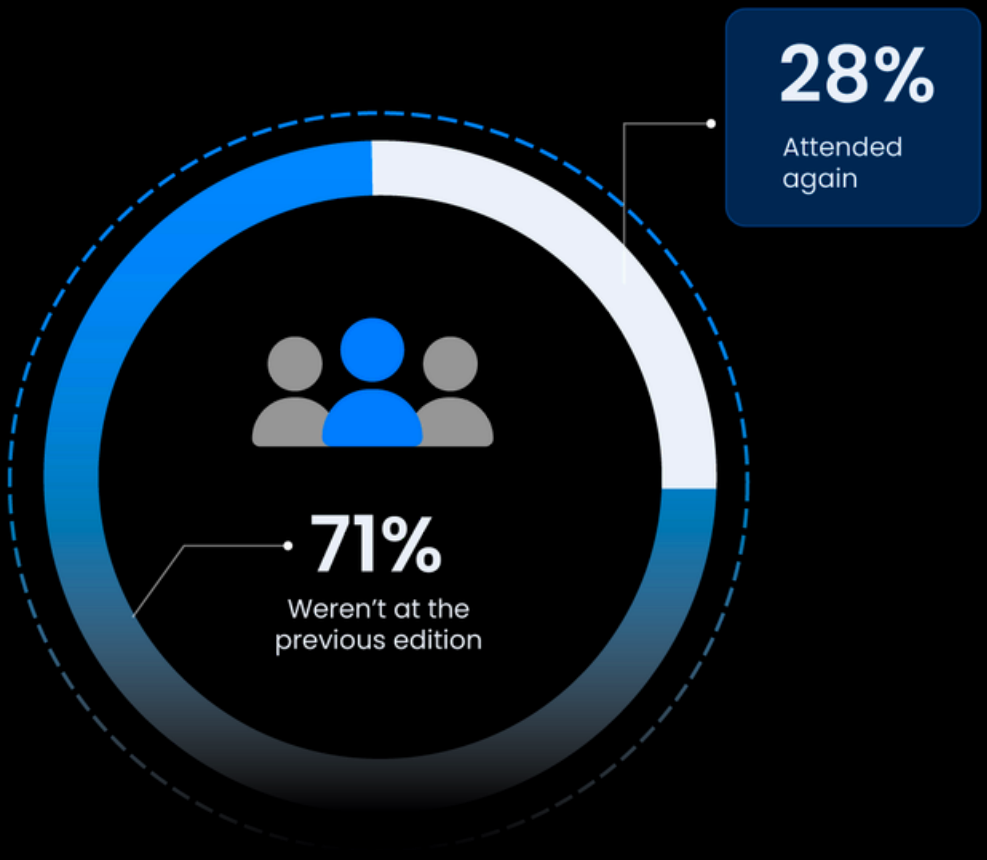
Event Data Lab Report #11

Seven in Ten Attendees Weren't at the Previous Edition

Data-backed benchmarks from real-world events

Repeat attendance, audience turnover, and what predicts a return visit



pheedloop

Executive Summary

This report measures how much of an event's audience returns from one edition to the next, and what distinguishes the attendees who come back from those who do not.

It is based on 556 consecutive edition pairs across 260 organizations, covering more than 330,000 prior-edition attendees, and on 194 three-edition chains where the same event could be followed across three years.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- For the median edition pair, 28% of the people at one edition attended the next (interquartile range 21% to 38%). Read from the later edition's side, 71% of its attendees were not at the earlier one.

- The return rate is stable across event size (28% to 30% across four size bands), year (27% to 29% across 2024 to 2026) and cadence (30% for annual events, 23% for other cadences).

- Returning is habit-forming. In three-edition chains, 51% of second-time attendees came back for a third edition, against 23% of first-timers. Second-timers returned at the higher rate in every chain.

- Members returned at 37% against 18% for non-members at the same events. Attendees who checked in at the prior edition returned at 31% against 20% for registered no-shows.

WHO THIS REPORT IS FOR

Event marketers setting acquisition and retention targets, association teams planning membership and renewal campaigns around their events, and anyone building a year-over-year audience forecast.

WHAT DECISIONS IT SUPPORTS

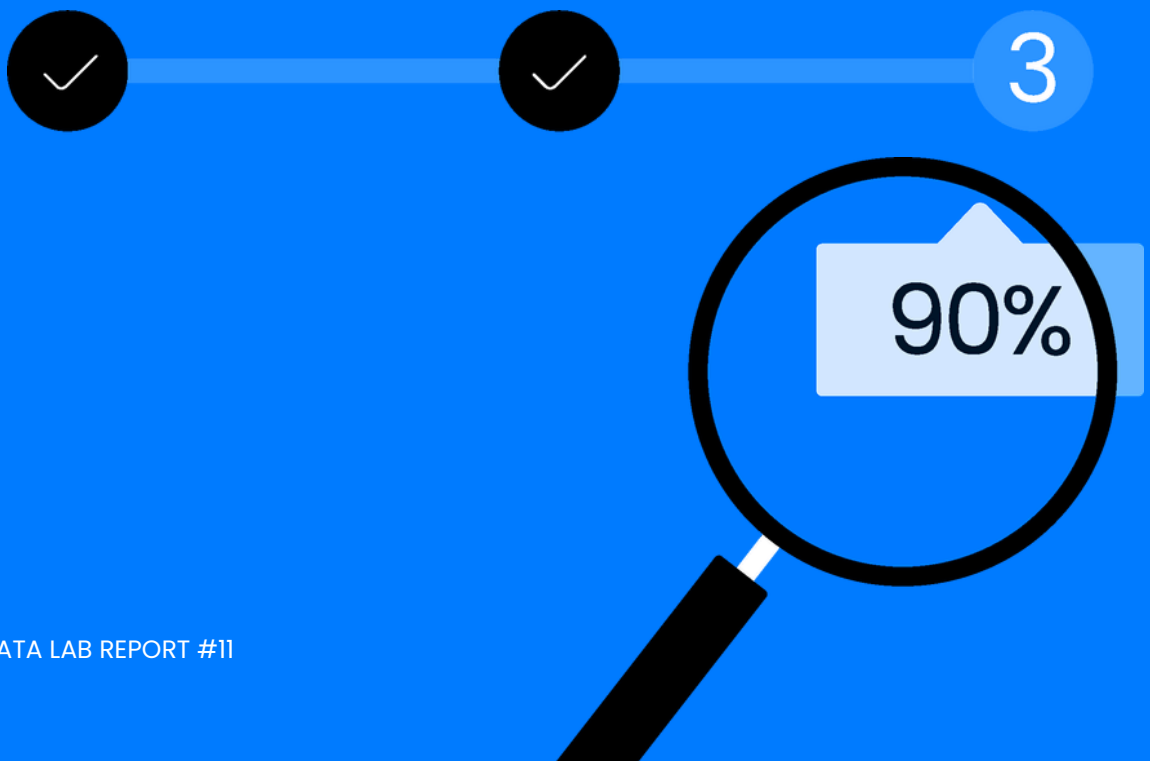
- How much of next year's registration must come from new audiences.

- Where to concentrate post-event follow-up.

- What a healthy return rate looks like against a real benchmark rather than an assumed one.

About the Event Data Lab

The **Event Data Lab** is an ongoing research initiative focused on analyzing real-world event performance using aggregated and anonymized data. Reports published under the Event Data Lab aim to surface empirical benchmarks and operational insights across registration, onsite operations, engagement, and ROI.



Dataset and Methodology

Data sources

Registration records from live events hosted on an event management platform between January 2023 and October 2026. Each record is a completed ticket purchase or ticketless registration attached to an attendee profile.

How consecutive editions were identified

Editions of the same event were paired by matching event names within an organization, with a cross-check against the platform's copied-from relationship where it existed. 39% of pairs matched more than one candidate prior event by literal name; return rates in that group (29%) and the unambiguous group (28%) were the same, so the ambiguity does not affect the results. Pairs where either edition had fewer than 100 completed registrations were excluded.

How a returning attendee is recognized

The platform keeps one attendee profile per person per organization, matched on email address. A person who registers for a later edition with a different address (a new employer, or a personal address in place of a work one) is counted as a new attendee. Return rates in this report are therefore lower bounds. If 10% of returning attendees re-registered under a new address, the true median return rate would be approximately 31%; at 20%, approximately 35%.

The central finding, that most of an event's audience did not attend the prior edition, would only be reversed if more than 44% of returners had changed addresses between editions, which no estimate of year-over-year B2B contact decay approaches.

Metric definitions

Return rate

People at the earlier edition who also appear at the later edition, divided by all people at the earlier edition.

New-audience share

People at the later edition who did not appear at the earlier edition, divided by all people at the later edition.

Three-edition chain

Two consecutive pairs sharing a middle edition. Second-time attendees are people at the middle edition who were also at the first; first-time attendees are people at the middle edition who were not.

> **Metrics note:**
> All figures are medians across edition pairs unless stated. Every pair counts once regardless of size.

Exclusions

- Test, sandbox, demo and internal events, and sample registrations
- Cancelled registrations and cancelled purchases
- Add-on purchases (a person is counted once per edition regardless of how many items they bought)
- Registrations with no attendee profile (3% of records)

Anonymization

All data was aggregated and anonymized prior to analysis. Attendee identities were replaced with per-organization counters before extraction. No individual event, organization or attendee can be identified from this report.

Benchmark Results

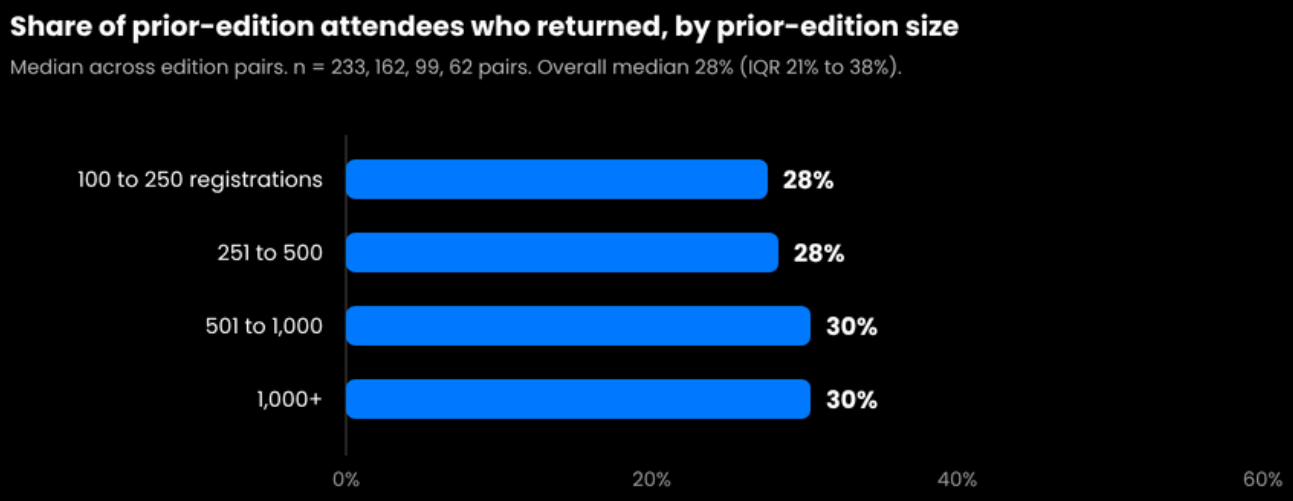
Return rate and new-audience share

Measure	Median	25th percentile	75th percentile
Share of prior-edition attendees who returned	28%	21%	38%
Share of later-edition attendees who were new	71%	62%	79%
Pairs retaining more than half their audience	9%		

At the 10th percentile of pairs, 13% of attendees returned; at the 90th, 48%. The pairs at the very bottom are cohort programs, multi-city series and similar formats where the audience is structurally different each time. They are retained in the benchmark because they are real recurring events, and because excluding them would overstate the norm.

By prior-edition size

Completed registrations, prior edition	Pairs	Median return rate
100 to 250	233	28%
251 to 500	162	28%
501 to 1,000	99	30%
1,000+	62	30%



Median share of prior-edition attendees who returned, by prior-edition size. n = 233, 162, 99, 62 pairs.

By year of the later edition

Year	Pairs	Median return rate
2024	153	27%
2025	197	28%
2026	204	29%

By cadence

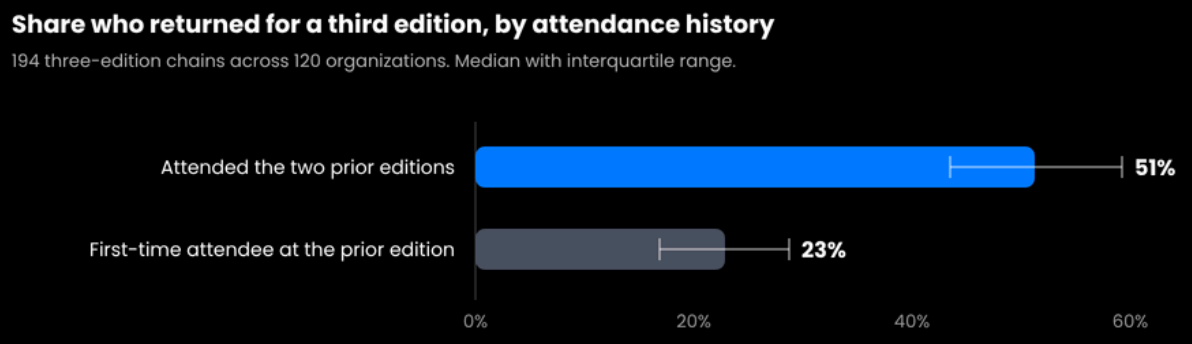
Days between editions	Pairs	Median return rate
330 to 400 (annual)	473	30%
All other cadences	83	23%

Events that run on a clean annual cycle retain more of their audience than events on irregular, semi-annual or multi-year cadences. The gap is modest but consistent, and it is the only structural variable in the dataset with a visible effect.

Three-Edition Analysis

194 chains of three consecutive editions across 120 organizations allowed the middle edition's audience to be split by attendance history and followed into the third edition.

Attendance history at the middle edition	Returned for the third edition (median)	IQR
Attended the first edition too (second-timer)	51%	44% to 59%
New at the middle edition (first-timer)	23%	17% to 29%



Share of middle-edition attendees who returned for the third edition, by attendance history. Median across 194 three-edition chains, with interquartile range.

- Second-timers returned at a higher rate than first-timers in 100% of chains. The median ratio was 2.1 to 1.
- 14% of the first edition's attendees were at all three editions.
- 7% of the first edition's attendees skipped the middle edition and returned for the third. Skipping a year and coming back is uncommon.

Key insight

Attendance loyalty is built at the second visit, not the first. An event retains about a quarter of first-timers and about half of everyone else.

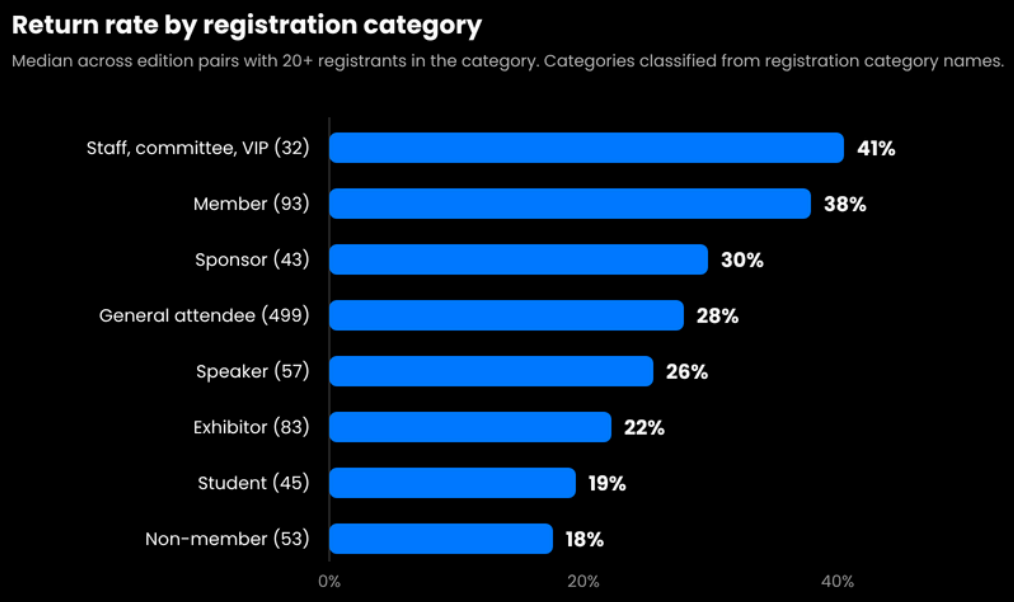
A note on the email-matching floor: *because people who change email addresses are counted as new, some of the first-timer group are in fact returners. If those hidden returners behave like other returners, the true first-timer return rate is lower than 23% and the gap between the groups is wider than reported, not narrower.*

Secondary Cuts

By registration category

Registration category names were classified by keyword into the groups below. Medians are across edition pairs with at least 20 registrants in the category at the prior edition.

Category group	Pairs	Median return rate
Staff, committee, volunteer, VIP	32	41%
Member	93	38%
Sponsor	43	30%
General attendee	499	28%
Speaker	57	26%
Exhibitor	83	22%
Student	45	19%
Non-member	53	18%



Median return rate by registration category group. Pairs with 20+ registrants in the category; sample sizes in parentheses.

The member and non-member comparison is the one that holds within events. In the 51 pairs where both categories had 20 or more registrants, members returned at 37% and non-members at 18%, and members returned at the higher rate in 92% of those pairs. The other category groups are reported as between-event medians only and should be read as descriptive.

By prior-edition attendance

In the 162 pairs where the prior edition used check-in, people who checked in returned at a median 31%; people who registered but were not checked in returned at 20%. Checked-in attendees returned at the higher rate in 86% of those pairs. This cut inherits the limitation from Report #05 that incomplete scanning cannot be distinguished from genuine no-shows, so the gap should be read as directional.

Practical Implications for Event Teams

- **Budget for turnover as the baseline.** For the typical recurring event, seven in ten seats are filled by people who were not there the year before. Acquisition is the main engine of attendance, and a forecast that assumes a loyal core of more than a third is likely optimistic.

- **Treat first-timers as a distinct audience with one goal: the second visit.** The data says that converting a first-timer to a second attendance roughly doubles the chance of a third. Post-event follow-up, early-bird offers and membership invitations targeted at first-year attendees specifically are working on the group with the most headroom.

- **Measure your own return rate each year.** It is a single join between two registration exports, and it is a better signal of audience health than total registrations, which can grow while the returning share shrinks.

- **Do not treat 28% as a failing grade.** It is the norm across hundreds of recurring events. The events that beat it do so by several points, not by multiples, and the ones that fall well below it are usually designed to.

How to Use These Benchmarks

These benchmarks are most useful as planning references and diagnostic tools. Compare your own return rate against the size band and cadence that match your event, and compare your first-timer and second-timer return rates separately, since those are the two numbers that respond to different levers. Individual event performance will vary based on audience, format, membership structure and constraints, and the figures here should not be read as targets or guarantees.

Limitations

- Returning attendees are matched on email address. All return rates are lower bounds; see the methodology section for the sensitivity range.
- Edition pairing relies on event-name matching within an organization. 39% of pairs had more than one name-match candidate. Return rates were the same in ambiguous and unambiguous pairs.
- The sample is limited to events with at least 100 completed registrations at both editions, and to organizations that ran at least two editions on the same platform. Events that moved platforms, or that ran once, are not represented.
- Registration category groups are classified from organizer-chosen category names, which vary in consistency. Only the member versus non-member comparison was tested within events.
- Check-in based cuts depend on organizers scanning all attendees. Partial scanning inflates the apparent no-show group.
- Event format (in-person, virtual, hybrid) and event type were not available as fields in this extraction.

Closing

Event Data Lab benchmarks are designed to help event teams move beyond anecdote and evaluate performance using empirical evidence. This report establishes a baseline for audience turnover and shows that the question of whether an attendee returns is largely settled by their second visit. Future reports will examine cancellations and refunds, group registrations and other registration behaviours that every recurring event records.

Event Data Lab research is informed by data captured across live events supported by modern event infrastructure and operational tooling.

Appendix

Definitions and Formulas

- **Return rate =** |A ∩ B| ÷ |A|, where A is the set of attendee profiles at the earlier edition and B the set at the later edition.
- **New-audience share =** 1 - |A ∩ B| ÷ |B|.
- **Second-timer third-edition return =** |A ∩ B ∩ C| ÷ |A ∩ B|; first-timer third-edition return = |(B - A) ∩ C| ÷ |B - A|.
- **Three-edition attendance =** |A ∩ B ∩ C| ÷ |A|; skip-and-return = |(A ∩ C) - B| ÷ |A|.
- **Annual cadence =** 330 to 400 days between edition start dates.
- Size bands use completed registrations at the earlier edition.