

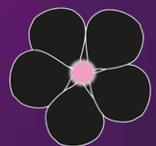


insiderly

## *Voice of Participants*

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**WHAT DOES THE USER THINK?  
A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES  
AND OPPORTUNITIES OF VIRTUAL  
CONFERENCES AND EVENTS.**



**mci**

Building Community

# Introduction



There's no doubt that Covid-19 has accelerated the switch from live-events to hybrid or virtual solutions. The crisis served as a boost: digital alternatives and virtual formats were introduced at record speed. Government guidelines didn't leave the industry much choice in the matter either. Target audiences accepted digital offerings – initially because there wasn't an alternative in sight. With the recent ease of government measures, analogue formats slowly begin to resurface again. So what do we do next? Stay digital? Go back to meeting in person? Or aim for the best of both worlds?

Over the past few weeks and months, users' opinions were shaped by their greater breadth and depth of experience with virtual solutions. This is the perfect moment to draw a first conclusion.

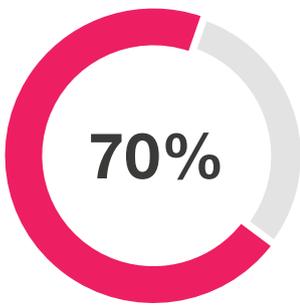
MCI Germany initiated and accompanied insidery's online study looking at the behaviour, expectations and challenges of users who have experience with both face-to-face as well as virtual fairs, conventions and events.

The goal of the 500 participant strong study was to take a closer look at users' beliefs. What do they perceive as opportunities or challenges to digital event strategies? Newly gained insights could support decision makers in better understanding participants, help them avoid making mistakes and be a source of inspiration for the development of effective and sustainable customer engagement strategies.

# More effective marketing

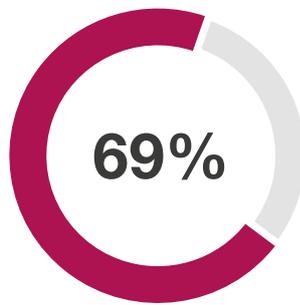
The most obvious difference between face-to-face and virtual events is the decoupling of space and place of experience. But as opposed to face-to-face events, virtual events are accessible from anywhere: office, home, and even on the go. Time-consuming business trips and expensive stays abroad disappear, which clearly saves time and money. And so the same budget can be used to attend multiple gatherings. An additional perk is that this helps reduce carbon footprints.

## COST SAVINGS

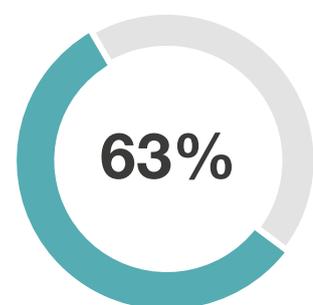


Greatest asset of virtual events

## TIME SAVINGS

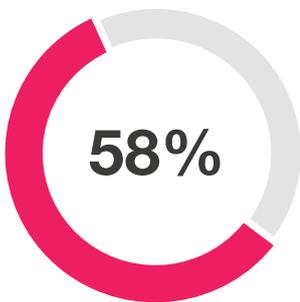


## MINIMISING CARBON FOOTPRINT



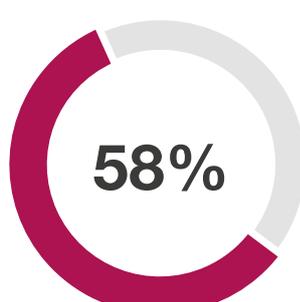
Time is equally important regarding content. Users appreciate instant access – ideally personalised, available long-term and according to their needs.

## INSTANT ACCESS

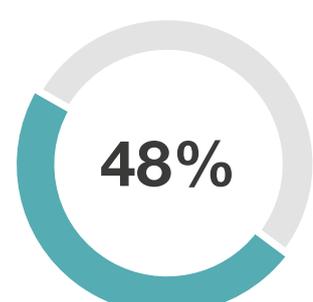


Greatest asset of virtual events

## LONG-TERM AVAILABILITY



## PERSONALISED CONTENT



This suggests significantly lower transaction costs for audiences. It is in-expensive, quick and easy for them to access information. Everything is on-demand and there is no need to leave your desk at work.

These findings allow companies to further optimise their marketing and communication campaigns by better aligning them to their customer's journey: personalisation makes it possible to offer audiences the precise content that is relevant to them. The contents' long-term availability also expands life-cycles beyond the actual event: virtual formats are not only cheaper in production but remain accessible and thus live long after the event itself has ended, contrary to i.e. booths that need to be disassembled at the end of every convention.

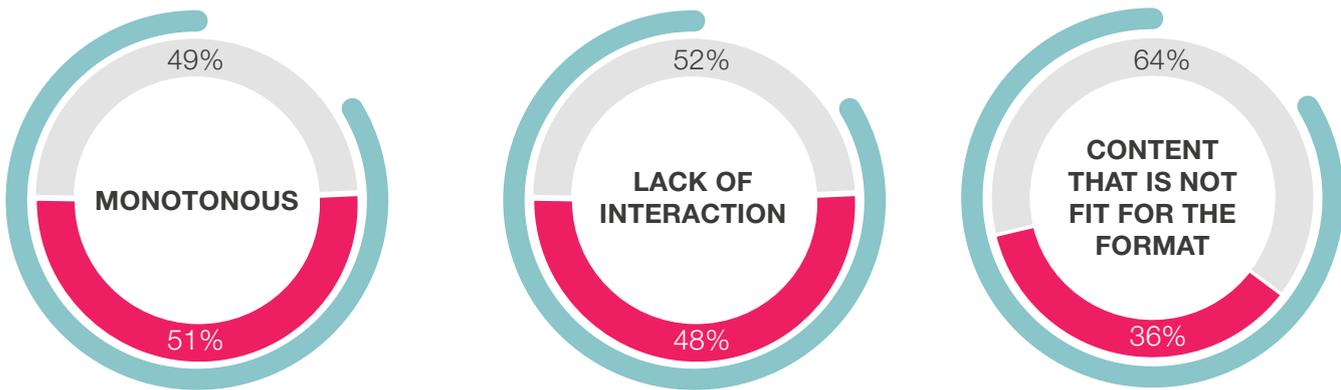
But the potential marketing efficiency can only be realised if users truly engage with and understand the messages of a brand or product. Participation-only is no guarantee - a proper concept for virtual spaces is needed. That is why user experience should be included from the get-go, starting in the development and planning phase.



# Incorporating external elements

The experience of a virtual event is completely different from that of a physical one. A challenge that both sides - organisers and participants - encounter. Participants benefit, generally speaking, from greater attendee convenience (as discussed before), but struggle to fully commit. On the one hand, as widely discussed in the media, distractions at home and work make it harder to concentrate on contents, which may suffer as a result. Our findings support that assumption.

On the other hand, one has to look at the virtual experiences' concepts. The last few weeks and months have shown that, from a user's perspective, the structure of digital events is too monotonous. Also, content design doesn't seem to have fully reached the virtual world yet. Virtual events lack, again from a user's perspective, interaction, especially among participants.

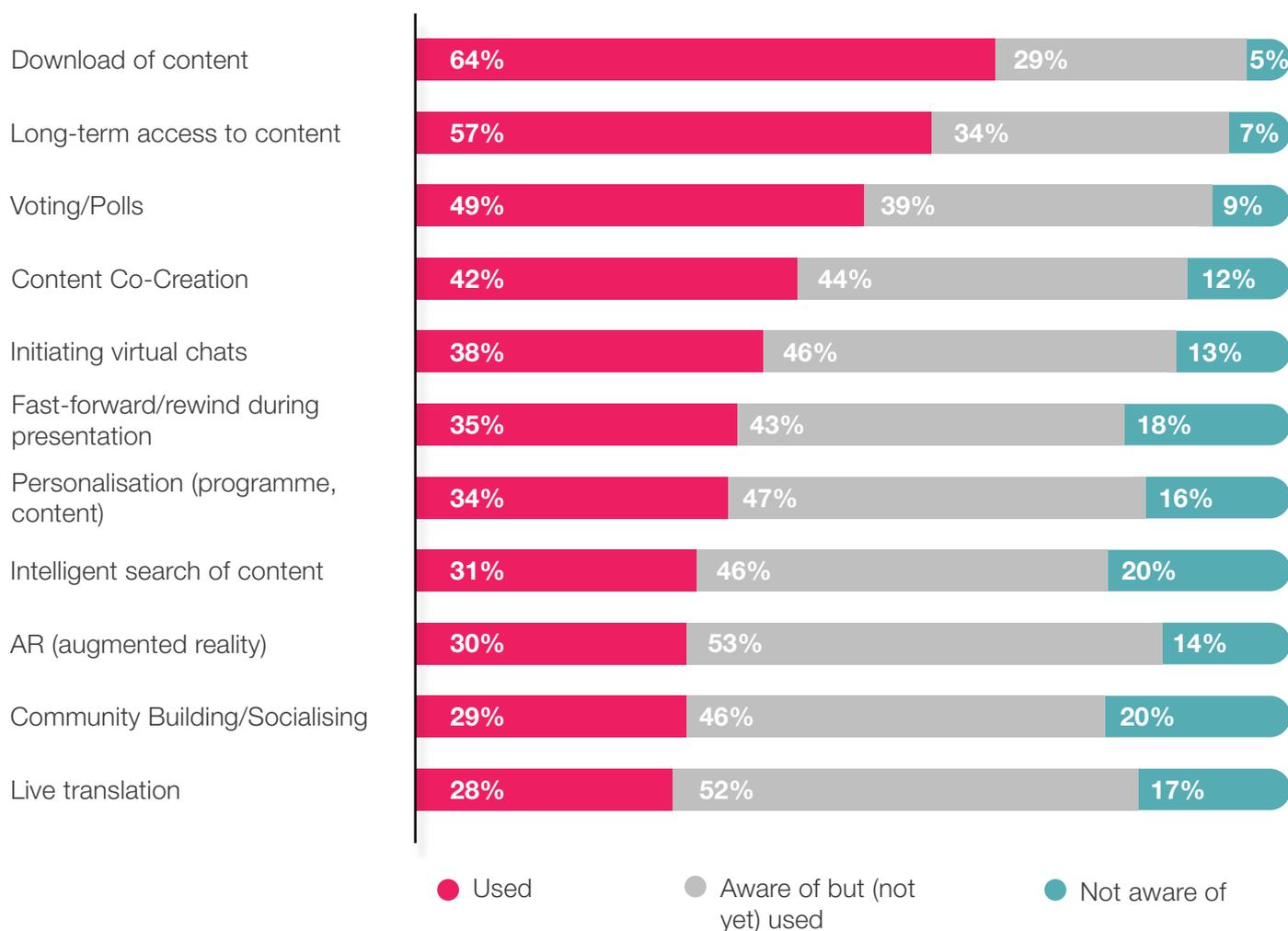


- Agree
- (Rather) don't agree

Elements that make virtual events tedious

Companies need to see the world through their audiences' eyes to understand how to best respond to their real world experiences and address their needs.

It is interesting to note that some companies have already taken steps to address these issues and are trying to implement countermeasures, at least where features are concerned. The initial usage numbers are indicative of such a shift:

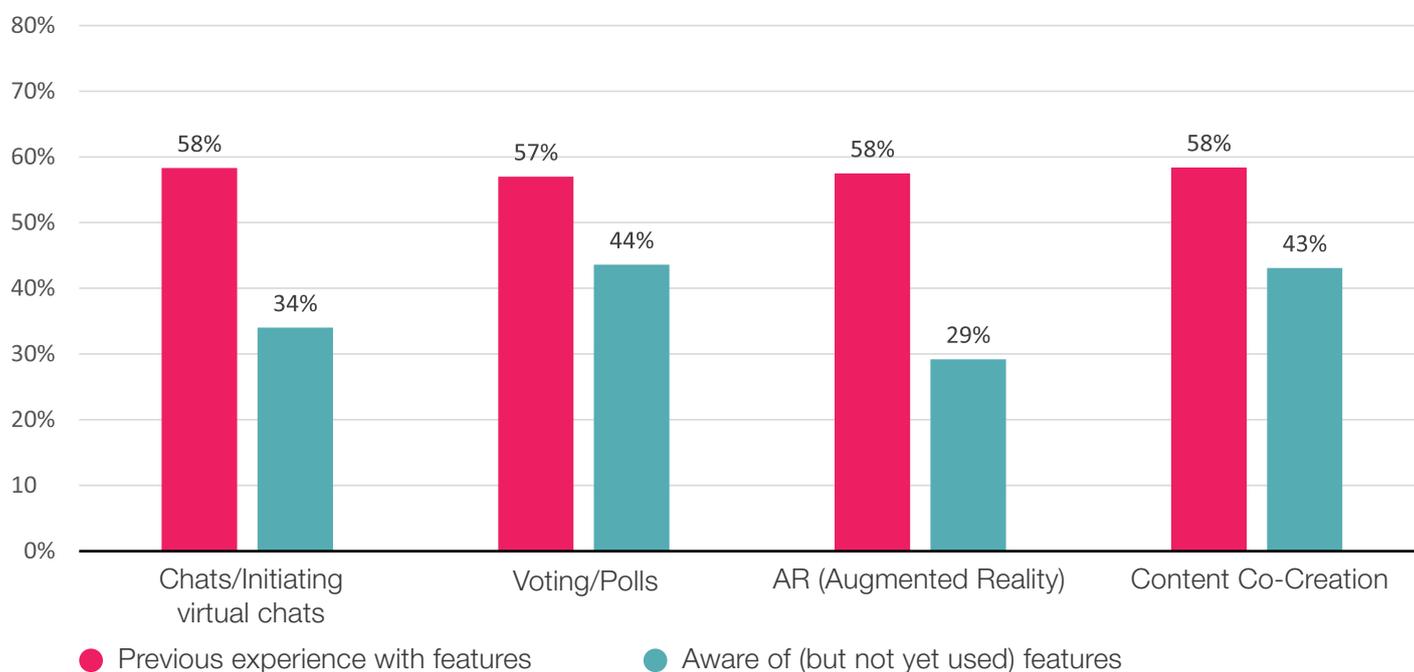


Usage/Awareness of functionalities available to virtual events

Chat and community functions nurture interaction, voting/polls engage audiences by capturing their reactions instantly, and content co-creation options manage to break up a programme's perceived monotony. Augmented reality techniques aim at making content more tangible to its audience.

If you look closely at how participants value each feature, a stark discrepancy appears between participants, who have already had experiences with the features in questions and those who haven't. Participants who have already had tangible experiences with a feature find it much more useful.

## USAGE PATTERN ACCORDING TO PERSONAL VALUE ATTRIBUTIONS



Personal use of virtual event features

There are two conclusions to draw: first, the aforementioned countermeasure strategies seem to work and should play a key role when developing the concept of events. But they have to go beyond merely integrating new functionalities and focus more on conveying their benefits ahead of time. Second, whilst usage numbers are encouraging they haven't reached enthusiasm levels yet, which means that integrating interactive features isn't the sole answer to a customer's or interest groups' needs.

Additionally, organisers as well as participants may face technical challenges on either end.

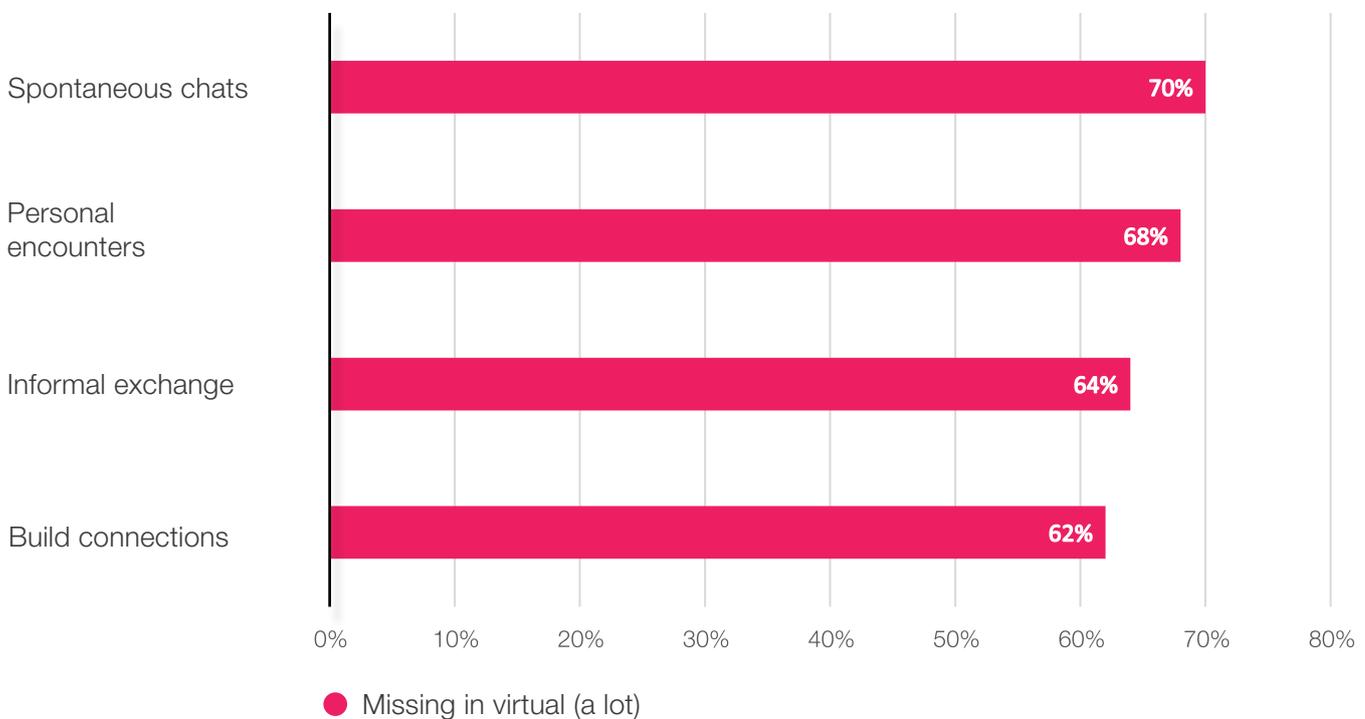
Of course virtual events should ideally only present a conceptual challenge. But given that, according to our study, every second user is facing technical issues the whole experience as well as its benefits suffer as a consequence.

The transition from face-to-face to virtual hasn't been frictionless. At the moment, there isn't an adequate digital substitute for all aspects of an in-person meetup. Participants are placed on the outside of an experience by default because sender and recipient face a disparity in time, setting and place. That is why strategies for the (re)integration of target audiences are crucial. They must, however, be carefully selected according to needs and be communicated in alignment with their respective goals.

# *Do emotion and connection run the show?*

One of the core features of face-to-face events are in-person encounters. Brands must be charged with emotions and made to be experienced (commit to emotions) as well as build relationships based on trust (commit to connection).

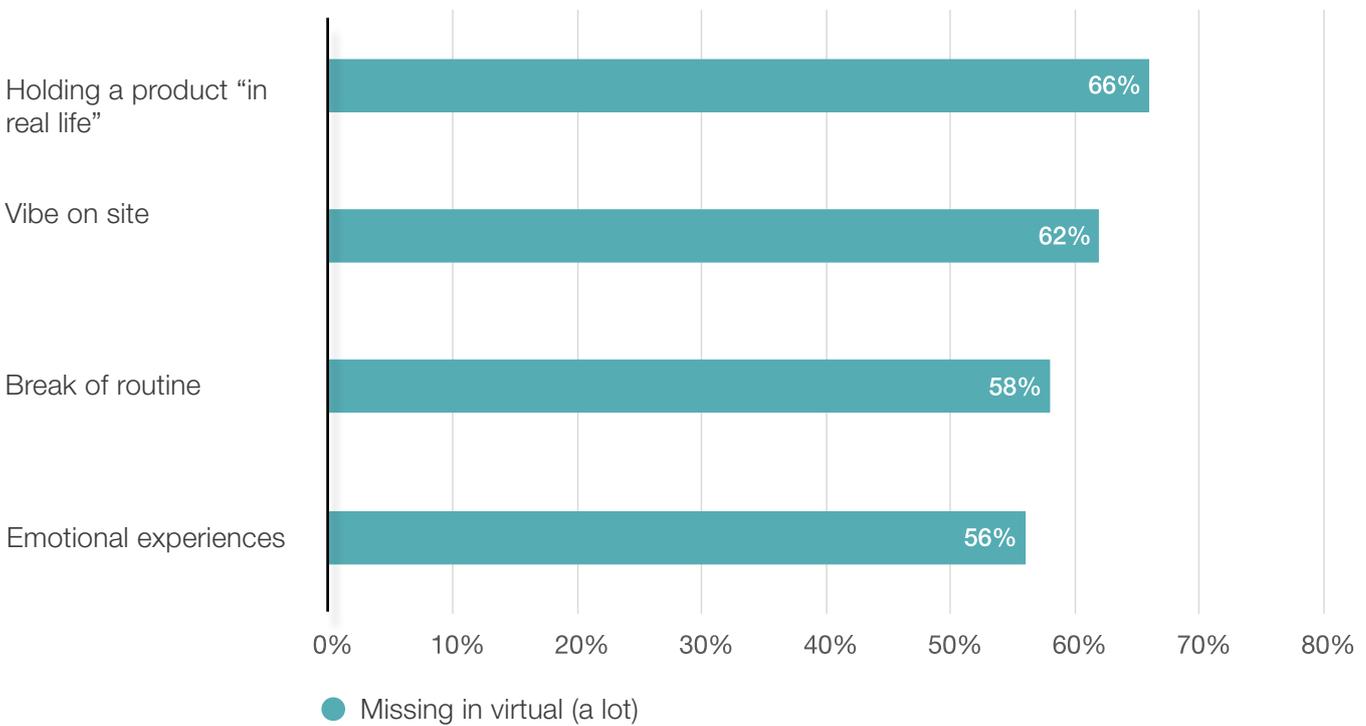
Unfortunately, the current set of virtual concepts offers neither the proximity nor depth needed for brands and people to connect. Virtual concepts often leave too little room for personal interactions:



Elements that are missing from virtual events compared to face-to-face events

Attendees miss spontaneous encounters and chats as well as meeting companies and their representatives in person. They feel like they miss out on informal conversations. A large proportion of users also struggle to maintain or create a trustworthy relationship with existing or new acquaintances.

Generally speaking, it isn't easy to trigger emotions in virtual spaces for now. Participants miss an emotional connection, formed by a joint experience that speaks to all their senses: the vibe, the inspiration, the break away from routine and daily patterns (leave your workplace and explore the world), the enthusiasm and the tactile experience of touching an actual product.



Elements that are missing from virtual events compared to face-to-face events

Companies should pay particular attention to this when customers feel emotionally connected and place trust in their brand or product. When developing campaigns (for either communication purposes or to heighten engagement with a brand of product), companies must not just focus on their target audiences but learn more about their target audiences' personas. This is the only way to design truly user-centric experiences that faithfully match participants' needs - whether in virtual or physical spaces.

# Conclusion

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In the last couple of months, virtual events boomed. Attendees accept them as a substitute or complementary offer.

Their top benefits include lower time investments, lower costs of attendance, and long term, personalised, on-demand access to content.

Chats, votings, community building and augmented reality are promising solutions for digital concepts, although it is important to note that not all aspects of live events are seamlessly transferable to virtual spaces yet. Emotions, connections and spontaneous encounters are currently tricky to reproduce. However, those are the aspects participants cherish most at face-to-face events.

Abandoning in-person events altogether doesn't seem to be the best course of action. But hybrid solutions will become significantly more important.

Companies need to decide who to focus their efforts on. Which customer segment or interest group is worth the investment of building an emotional tie and trustworthy relationship with? Because, aside from virtual, a real, personal, human connection remains key. To identify and prioritise such a core target audience could become a crucial element of a company's experience portfolio.

The challenges of designing virtual experiences are twofold: first, it is imperative to build a stronger link between virtual and face-to-face elements. And second, to guarantee success, each virtual element must closely match its respective audience's needs. The greatest potential for achieving this lies in personalisation of and extended access to content.

That is how you can achieve the best of both worlds. The only thing left to wonder is: do you know what your target audiences expect, what motivates them and how they are different from one another? No? Let's chat and find out together.

# Study information sheet

**PUBLISHER:** MCI Deutschland GmbH and insidery GmbH

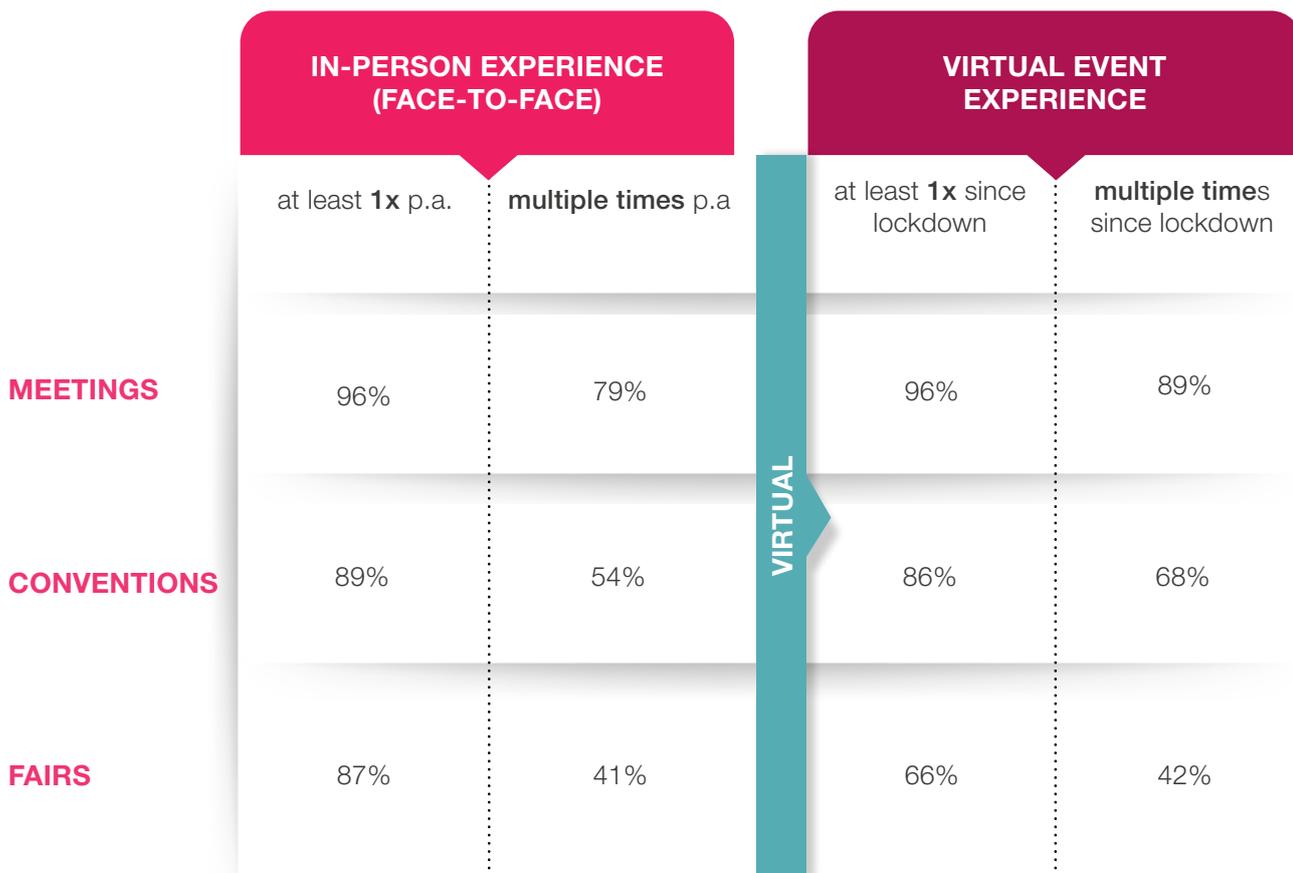
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**METHODOLOGY:** Online survey through an employee panel representative of Germany

**TIME FRAME:** June 2020

**SAMPLE:** 543 completed interviews

**SCREENINGKRIERIEN:** Regular attendance of face-to-face events (such as out-of-office meetings, fairs, conferences and conventions) and simultaneous attendance of virtual events (such as virtual out-of-office meetings, virtual fairs, virtual conferences and virtual conventions) since March 2020.



Online-Survey; Time Frame: June 2020