

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND EVENTS: CONNECTING THE DOTS

*A Groundbreaking Study of Event Attendees' Social Media Usage*

eBRIEFING | SOCIAL MEDIA



# Finally, answering the big question: How do event attendees *actually* use social media?

Up until now, no one has truly understood if or how people use social media when it comes to professional events. It's about time someone figured this out.

We hear it constantly: social media is a crucial tool for marketing success. Not breaking news, right? Many event marketers recognize this and acknowledge that they should integrate social media into their programs. And why not? We know that businesspeople use platforms like LinkedIn for professional networking. We can also point to figures around tweets or Facebook posts that suggest event attendees are active on social media. But at best, these are just hints at how people interact with social media at business events. What this social activity doesn't tell us is exactly how and why attendees are utilizing media at events. Better yet, are people even paying attention to event-related social media?

*This report answers those questions, and more.*



## Methodology

*Sparks and Exhibit Surveys, Inc. joined forces to take the pulse of social media users at business events. We questioned a statistically significant group of professionals, all of whom had attended a business event in the previous 24 months and were self-reported users of social media for professional purposes. From January 6th to January 19th, 2015, 377 respondents from Nielsen's business survey panel explained to us how they are using social media before, during and after events. Target thresholds were set across industry, age and gender categories to provide a sample representative of the professional population. Targets based on current U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.*

## Key Findings

a.

When asked whether or not business people who currently use social media for business purposes had used social media connected to a professional event (before, during or after) over the last two years, 83% of our respondents indicated that they had in fact done so.

83%  
use social media  
connected to  
business events

b.

Event attendees tell us they use social media because they find it adds value to event experiences. When asked, “How valuable to you is the use of social media at events,” 89% of respondents indicated that it was at least somewhat valuable. Only 11% said it failed to add any kind of value.

89%  
say social media  
is at least somewhat  
valuable at events

c.

People are most likely to like/favorite, share and comment on content featuring their fellow attendees as the focal point. Could that selfie at your booth garner more attention than some of the main points from the convention keynote? The patterns in our study show that attendees were most likely to take a social action on people-focused content, for example, “pictures of friends/colleagues” and “pictures/video of keynote speakers.”

Attendees are most likely to  
share content featuring  
fellow attendees



d.

A lot of the people we surveyed see social content, but aren't likely to share or interact with it. On average, respondents indicated there were at least 7 different types of event content (out of the 14 we inquired about) posted on social channels that they will simply view. In comparison, the average respondent was only willing to like/favorite/share 4 different types of content, and comment even less frequently.

### SOCIAL CONTENT

### VIEW

Pictures/video of keynote speakers 65%

Session presentations (slides) 61%

Pictures/video of session speakers 61%

### SHARE

Pictures of friends/colleagues 43%

Pictures of myself at the event 36%

Facts/figures from sessions 32%

Are attendees of business  
events on event-specific  
social media?

We now have an answer,  
rooted in hard data: a big

**YES.**

The average respondent indicated there were 7 out of 14 types of social content they would simply view. In comparison, the average for like/favorite/share was 4 types.

## Implications

Now the big question is what do you do with these interesting findings? Let's talk implications for event marketers.

### *Business events should have a dedicated social media strategy.*

As we've confirmed, attendees use social media before, during and after business events. Even attendees from industries with a reputation for being "social media shy" indicated they're using social at events. For example, 79% of respondents in the medical and healthcare industries and 77% in financial/legal/real estate reported using social media in accordance with events. The belief that certain professions won't use event social media simply isn't rooted in fact.

Marketers who put on events should use event-specific social media strategies that contribute to marketing objectives for their event and take all phases—before, during and after—into account.

### *Events should have their own social profiles.*

A whopping 93% of respondents felt it's at least somewhat important for events to have social media profiles—an account or page on a social network specifically representing that event. As one panel respondent put it, "[Social media] makes it easy to keep up with what's going on, maximize the use of time, spread the word, network, and makes the event much more valuable." Event marketers should meet this expectation by creating social profiles and integrating them into their communications for the events they manage.

### *Be active.*

Building social media profiles is only half the battle—they require oversight and maintenance. Marketers should use event profiles to publish content, participate in discussions and build relationships with attendees before, during and after their event. Just as events allow for a very personal and interactive approach to building relationships, social media enables the conversation to continue and expand. Use social media channels to discuss content, address attendee questions and gather feedback—many of the same conversations an attendee might have with onsite staff.

### *Get your event on Facebook.*

Believe it or not, Facebook is the biggest player when it comes to communicating with attendees of professional events. Facebook proved to be the most utilized social channel by respondents for business purposes. When asked about the degree of use, 37% said they use Facebook extensively, 21% said the same for LinkedIn and 15% for Twitter. We were as surprised as you are!

93%  
*felt event social profiles are at least somewhat important*

SOCIAL PLATFORM	% USING EXTENSIVELY
<i>Facebook</i>	<b>37%</b>
<i>LinkedIn</i>	<b>21%</b>
<i>Twitter</i>	<b>15%</b>

*Facebook proved to be the most utilized social channel for business purposes*

Marketers should reach out to attendees on Facebook—even if it requires a social advertising budget to make sure your content is seen. Prospective attendees are checking out your event’s Facebook page whether you know it or not, so it’s important to keep your content fresh.

*Integrate social media into attendance marketing efforts.*

What won’t show up within social media measurement reports is that over half (55%) of our respondents stated that they use social media in deciding whether or not to attend a business event. As one person explained, “[Social media] gives me insight into the event, letting me know if the event might be worth attending.”

Posting event updates, photos or video from previous events, or blogs demonstrating your thought leadership sets expectations for prospective attendees. So, don’t be discouraged if your content isn’t attracting a ton of interaction in the form of shares, likes or comments, as prospects are likely viewing your Facebook content as they assess the value of attending.

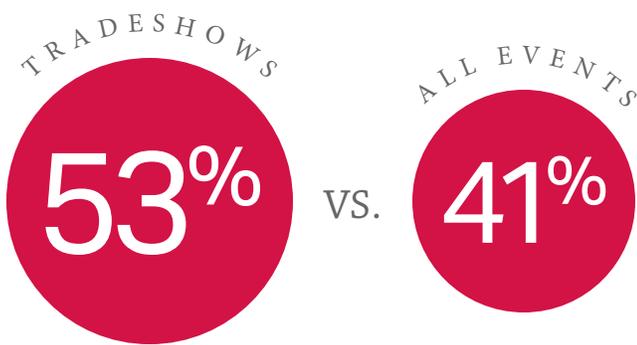
*During trade shows, exhibitors and sponsors should post product/ services content on social channels.*

Decision-makers and influencers are gathering product information on social media. Of respondents attending tradeshow, 53% said they use social media to “learn more about a company or product I’m considering purchasing”—12% more than the survey average across all types of events. Plus, 67% of respondents that attend tradeshow indicated they were either extremely or very likely to interact with an exhibitor’s social media profile compared to 53% of overall respondents.

Trade show exhibitors and sponsors should use social channels to publish content about their products or solutions. This doesn’t mean it’s ok to inundate your social audiences with nonstop product placement, as best practices dictate that social media be used as more of a “soft sell.” Instead, post content that piques the interest of the audience like new announcements, interesting photos, product reviews.

*Use social media to encourage and enhance networking.*

In the context of business events, social media is the cocktail party surrounding the cocktail party. Attendees connect online before actually meeting face-to-face and carry on relationships via social channels after meeting in person. Our results show that these connections are one of the primary reasons event attendees are using social media. The top use of social media at events, confirmed by 76% of respondents, was, “to network with other attendees.”



Percentage of attendees who use social media to learn about a company or product for purchase consideration



*How best to generate more human interest?  
Publish pictures of attendee interactions.*

Online connections most often stem from the social media discussion surrounding an event, meaning event marketers should be conscious of keeping this dialog lively. Facilitate the discussion surrounding an event or provide a call-to-action for attendees to take part themselves. And help attendees find one another on social. For example, allow attendees to add their twitter handles to your event app.

*Put attendees at the center of an event's social content.*

It's all about the people, people! Our results indicate that attendees of business events were most likely to take a social action when human beings are the focal point. Attendees were more likely to share pictures of friends/colleagues or pictures of themselves and like/favorite images of people.

How best to generate more human interest? Publish pictures of attendee interactions as live coverage of the event or provide images of speakers delivering a key message. Event marketers should also consider capturing photos of people for use in post-event marketing.

*Create share-worthy moments.*

People generally trust their peers more than any other source, making the content that comes from your attendees and visitors very impactful. Get people to post about your company and its products and services. In the case of professional events, our study shows experiences featuring interaction with fellow attendees are the most "share-worthy." Create shared experiences to activate peer-to-peer sharing.

*Don't get discouraged by a lack of interaction.*

Many marketers are obsessed with numbers around likes, shares, clicks or others indicators of social media activity. When these numbers lag, they become discouraged by a perceived lack of interest. Our results show that just because a piece of social content doesn't go viral, doesn't mean people aren't paying attention to it. Respondents were willing to view nearly twice as much content (7.3 types) as they were willing to like/favorite (4.1 types), share (4.0 types) or comment on (3.5 types).

Publish content around events, but temper expectations around the level of interaction that will result. The impact of these messages should be evaluated independently of the social action taken around them. For example, 61% of respondents said they were likely to view presentation slides online but only 24% said they'd share them and only 25% said they'd comment on them. In this situation, we can expect content like this to be heavily consumed, but have little virality.

TYPES OF CONTENT [14]	SOCIAL ACTIONS
7.3 types	View
4.1 types	Like/Favorite
4.0 types	Share
3.5 types	Comment

*Attendees are much more likely to view content than take an additional action*

*Consider all types of social media content, regardless of event type.*  
The type of event has little impact on an attendee's willingness to interact with different categories of content. For every type of content we considered (facts/figures from sessions, live blog posts, pictures/videos of keynote speakers, etc.), the likelihood of attendee interaction remained largely consistent across the types of event attended.

The bottom line: Marketers should be thinking about social media whether their focus is a tradeshow, conference, company sponsored event or any other professional function. Despite any preconceptions, social strategies shouldn't favor a specific type of event.

EVENT TYPE	% USE SOCIAL MEDIA
Tradeshows	90%
Conferences	85%
Company sponsored events	88%
Other business events with 50+ attendees	89%

*Marketers should be thinking about social media, regardless of event type*

## Conclusion

Social media is an extremely powerful tool in the context of event marketing, but up until now, we were stuck making educated guesses about how (or even if!) attendees of business events were using it. We can now feel confident that they are, and have evidence to support an array of event-connected social media approaches. These study results will help us to make more educated decisions in terms of social media strategies around professional events.

*NOTE: For the purposes of this study, our use of the terms "like" and "share" do not refer to platform-specific behaviors. For example, Facebook has the functionality to "Share" a post, but we might also consider a retweet in the same category.*



## Sparks

Sparks is a leading global event marketing agency. We create influential brand experiences that incite action!

Part creative studio, part production powerhouse, our core competencies include the Strategy, Creative, Production, Management, and Measurement of:

- Tradeshow Exhibits
- Events and Meetings
- Consumer Activations
- Brand Environments
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Learn more at: [www.sparksonline.com](http://www.sparksonline.com) or drop a note to [dcallner@sparksonline.com](mailto:dcallner@sparksonline.com)

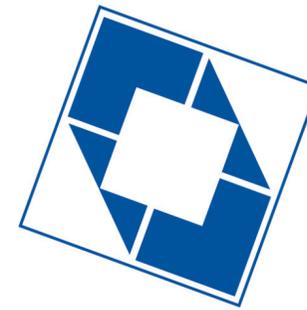
## Exhibit Surveys, Inc.

Exhibit Surveys, Inc., the award-winning provider of research, measurement, and consulting services exclusively for the exhibition and event industry, has measured over 15,000 individual tradeshows, events and exhibits providing strategic insights to:

- Grow audiences and acquire new attendee segments/customers
- Measure exhibitor's performance, satisfaction, and ROI
- Help justify budgets and make informed critical investment decisions
- Ensure exhibits and events remain healthy and growing

Learn more at [www.exhibitsurveys.com](http://www.exhibitsurveys.com) or drop a note to [alissa@exhibitsurveys.com](mailto:alissa@exhibitsurveys.com)

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***Exhibit  
Surveys***

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# EVENT SOCIAL MEDIA STUDY

TOP LINE FINDINGS

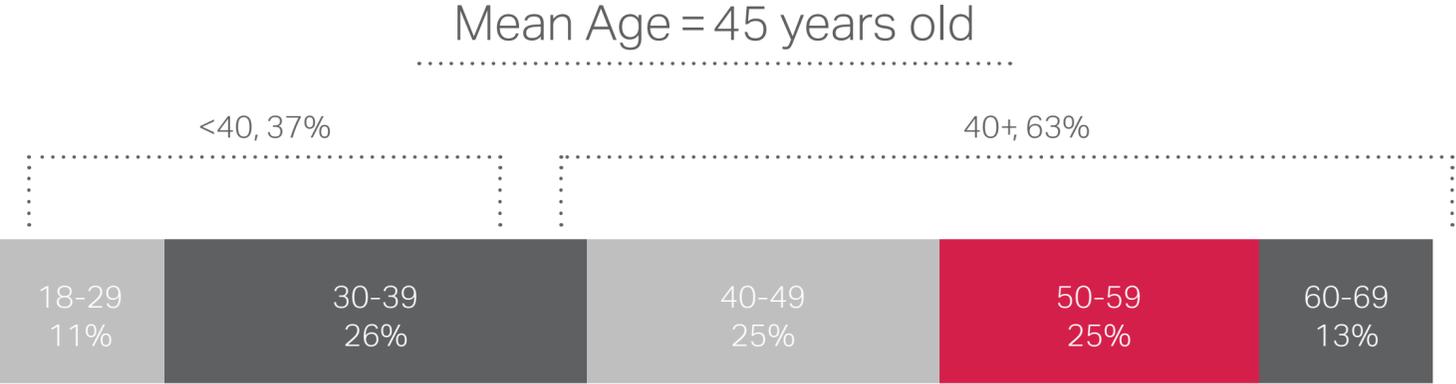
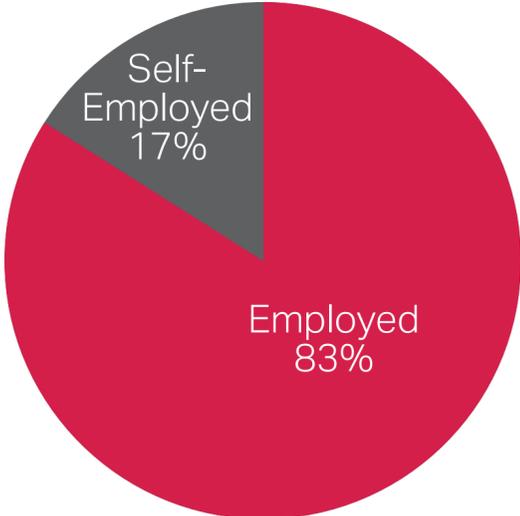
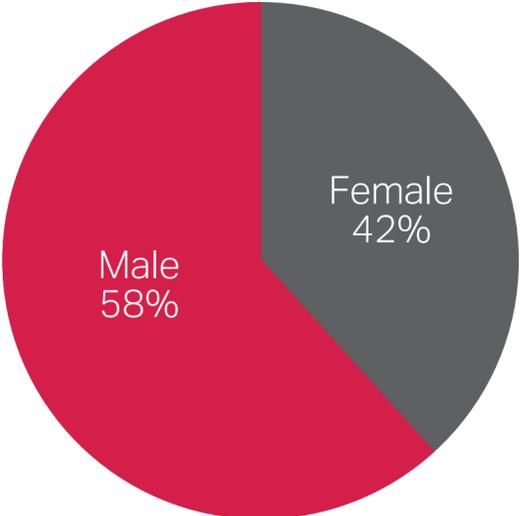
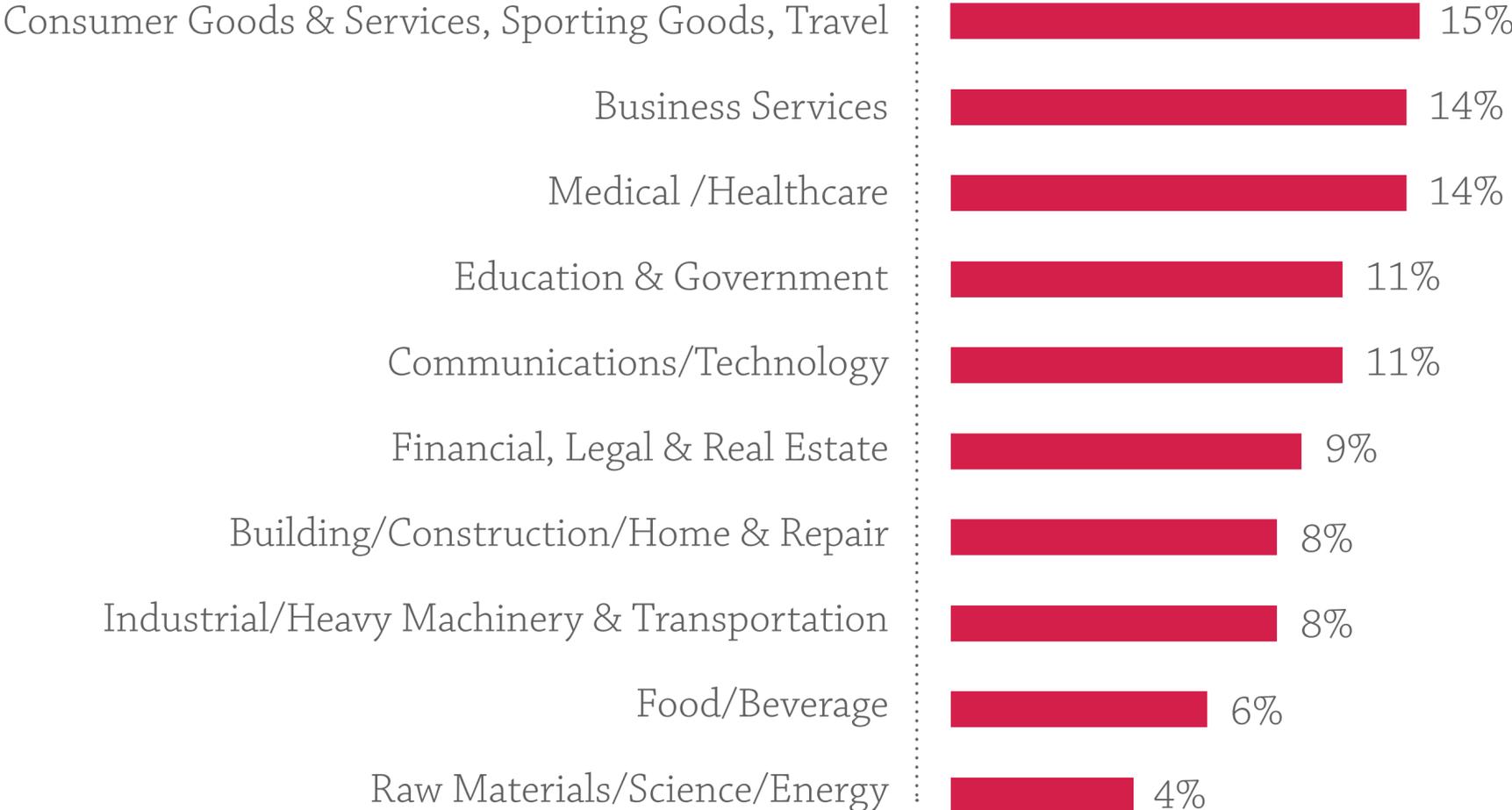
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# METHODOLOGY

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- An online survey was conducted Jan. 6 through Jan. 19, 2015.
- The survey was programmed by Exhibit Surveys, Inc. (ESI) and fielded using business sample provided by Nielsen. Targets were set by industry, age, and gender to ensure a representative sample.
- We received 377 completed surveys. The maximum statistical error due to sample size is  $\pm 5.1\%$  at a 95% confidence level.

# RESPONDENT PROFILE

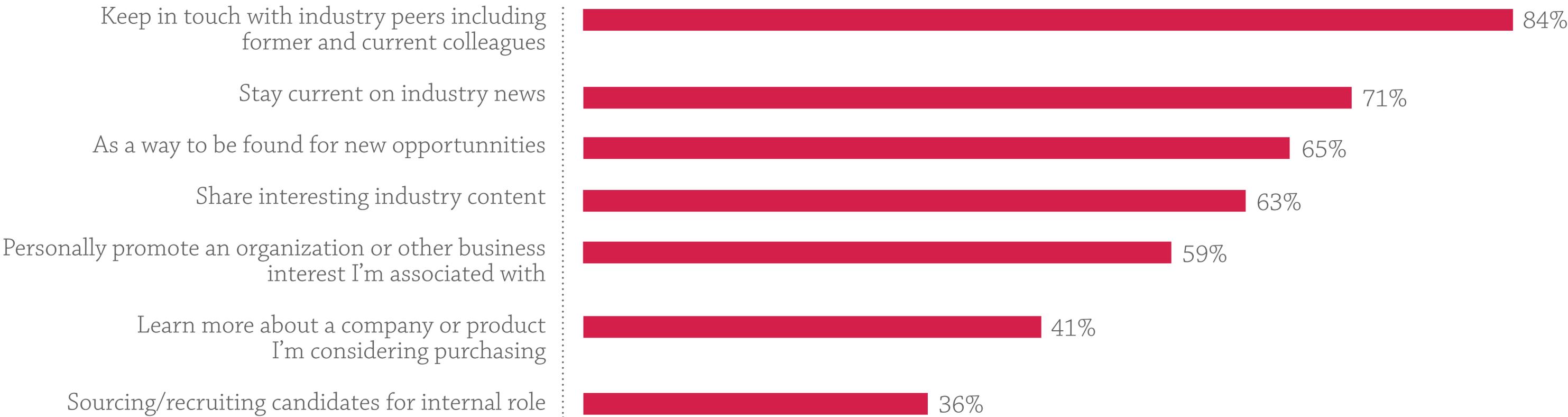


## TYPES OF EVENTS ATTENDED

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# REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR BUSINESS/PROFESSION



⋮

# SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS – USE FOR BUSINESS/PROFESSION



- Facebook



- LinkedIn



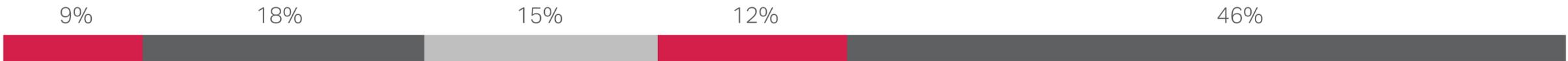
- Twitter



- Google+



- Pinterest



- Instagram



- Tumblr



- Snapchat



# PERSONAL USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

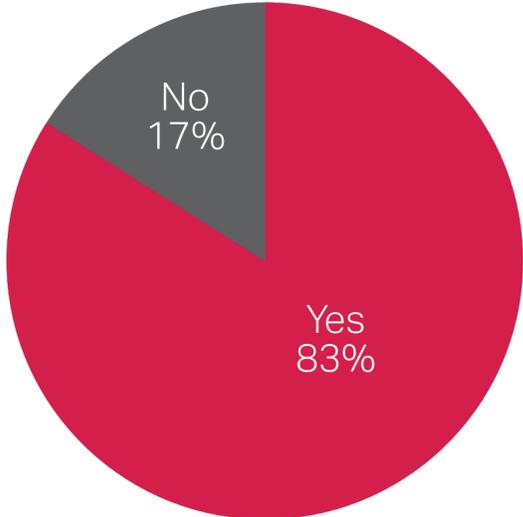
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Extensivley Regularly Somewhat Often Sparingly Never

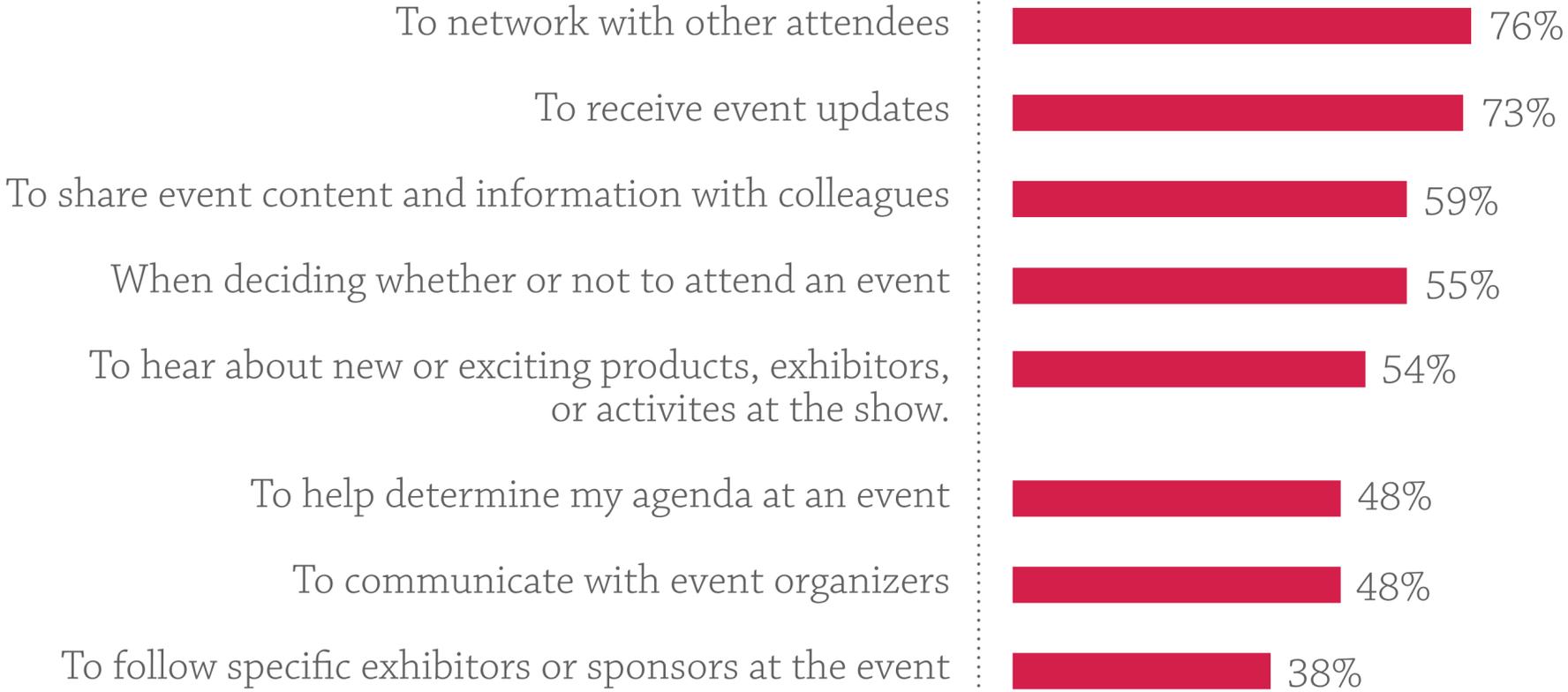


# EVENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Percentage of Social Media use at an Event

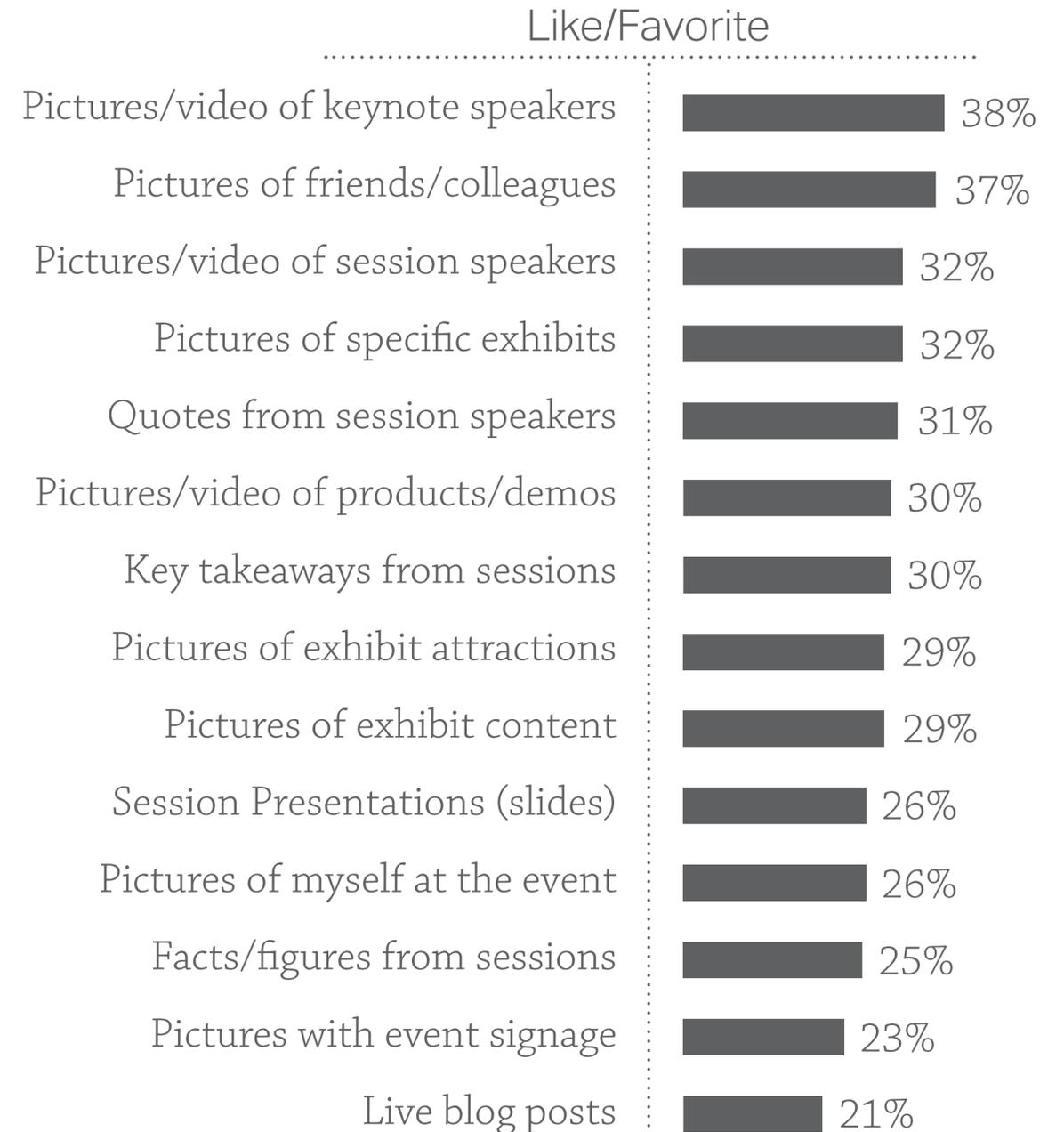
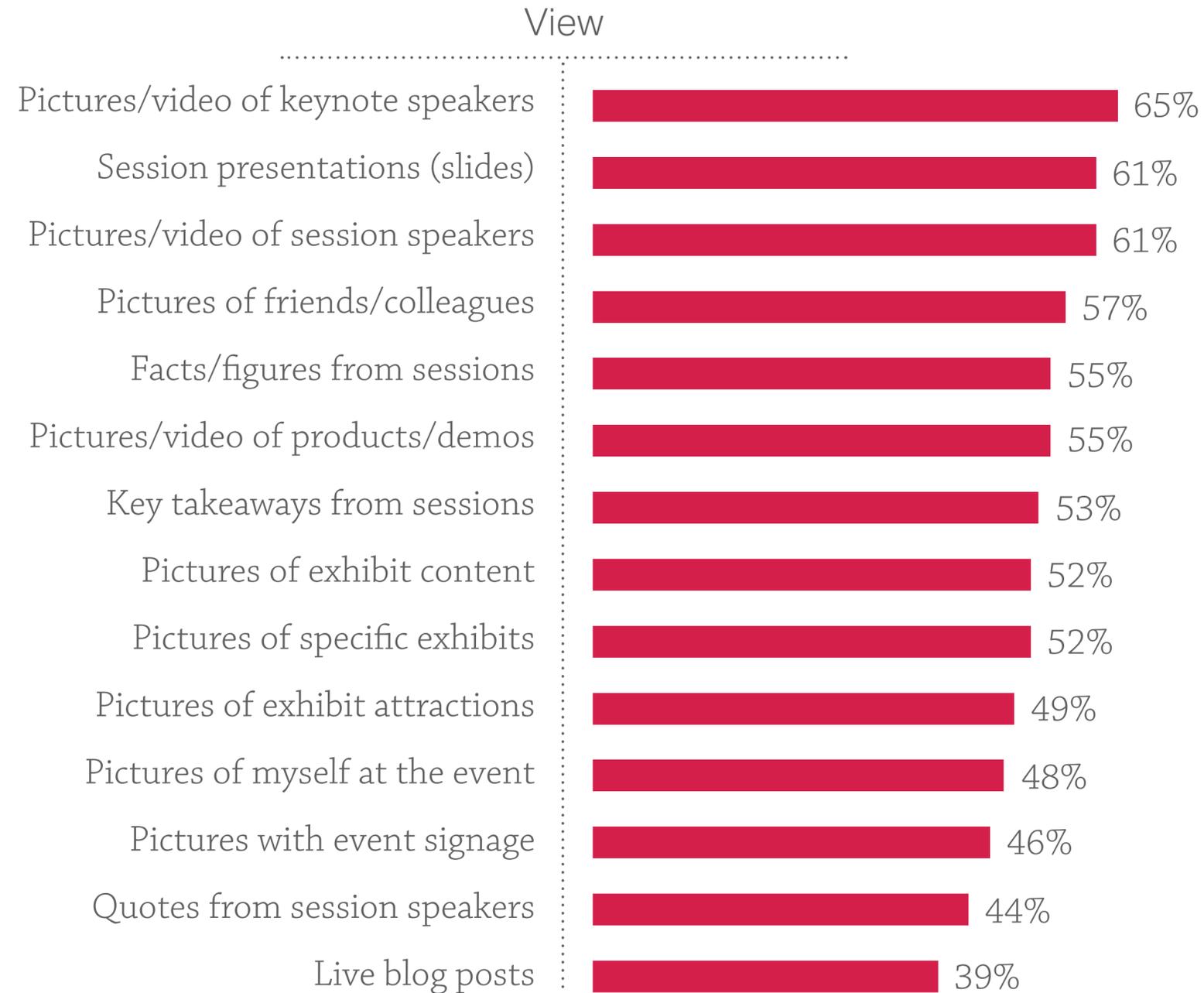


Uses of Social Media at an Event



Based on those who use Social Media at an Event

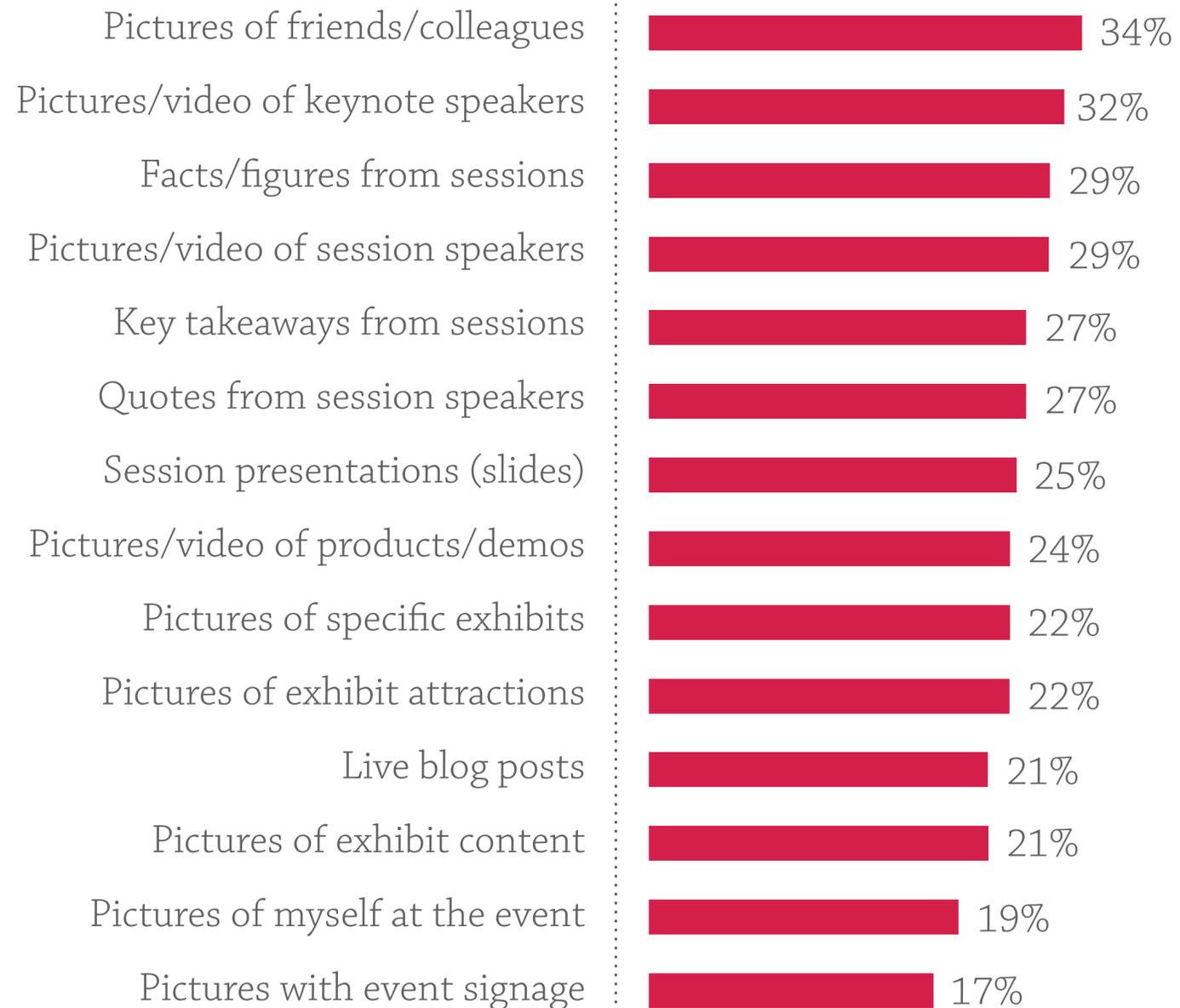
# ACTIVITIES



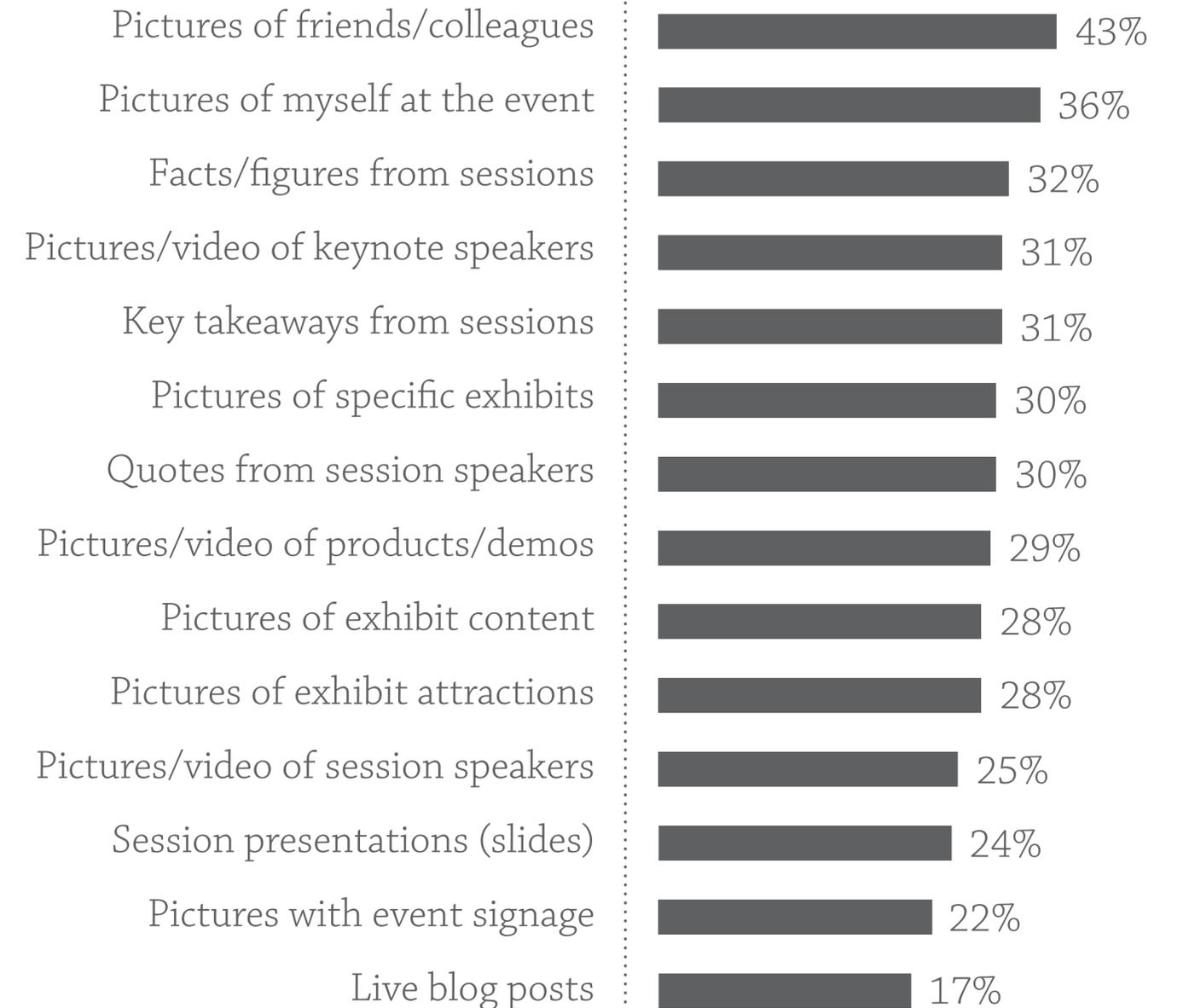
Based on those who use Social Media at an Event

# ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

## Comment On

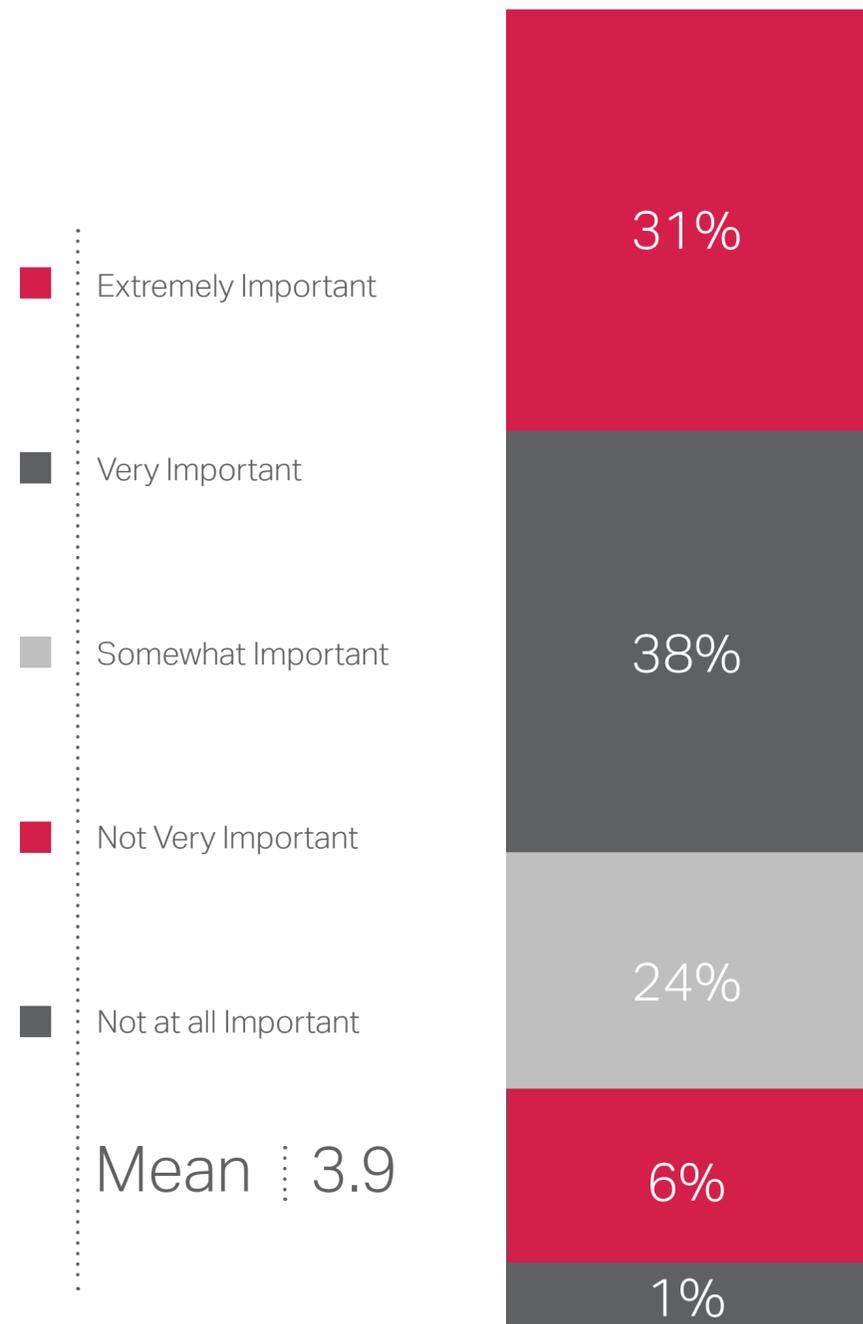


## Share with others



Based on those who use Social Media at an Event

Top 2  
69%



## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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# IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: SAMPLE COMMENTS

## Rated Extremely/Very Important:

Makes it easy to keep up with what's going on, maximize use of time, spread the word, network, make the event much more valuable.

It is very important to be visible online, and to show that you have the capability of keeping up with today's technology. However, there are other more professional ways to keep in touch with the business.

Gives me insight into the event. Let's me know if the event might be worth attending based on how their site is set up and the overall look.

## Rated Somewhat Important:

I believe it is somewhat important because more people expect it these days, but still some people may not like, or have access, to such a profile; thus, it is not yet "very" or "extremely" important, but is getting closer to that level of importance.

The use of social media is the preferred communication method of the younger generation. If you do not adapt and use it, you will be left out of much information.

The events usually provide most of what is needed without a social media profile.

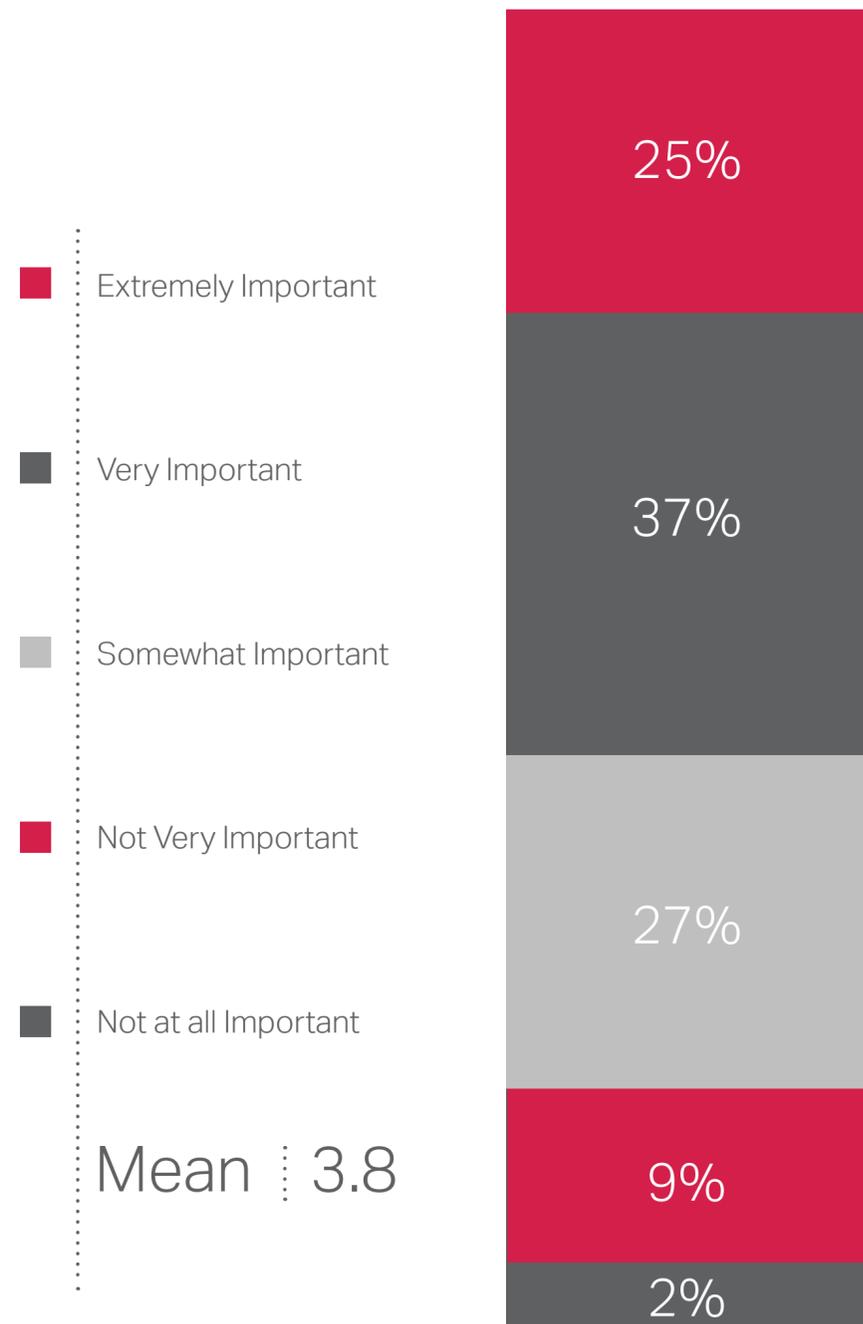
## Rated Not Very/Not at all Important:

I'd rather see a direct web address versus being directed to social media that tracks me and then posts to my clients who I'm looking at for a supplier, etc. I sell directly to consumers and don't need them seeing all the 'hows' of my business.

I attend these events for hands on interaction, I can't get that with Social Media

The events I attend all have websites.

Top 2  
62%



## VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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# VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: SAMPLE COMMENTS

## Rated Extremely/Very Valuable:

For me the use of social media during and/or after an event helps in remembering/learning the material that was presented, being able to share key material/highlights with other key employees who might not have been able to attend the event themselves. Networking with other attendees, exhibitors and sponsors during & after the event

It is extremely valuable so that I can easily plan my agenda. It also helps me keep and forward valuable information which I get from attending the event. It makes it easier for me to contact vendors and attendees and speakers or the event organizers.

My job is a part of my life, and that's the point of social media. I'm passionate about my career, so it only makes sense that it play an active part in my online presence.

## Rated Somewhat Valuable:

Can get access to answers to questions quickly; look up product info; research a book or something mentioned by the speakers

I believe social media use at events is only somewhat valuable, as I still believe that face to face contact in real time is more important.

Usually I am too busy at events but they are useful to meet up with people during free time that I did not know were going to be at the event. I have always been surprised in the past at large events (50K+) to run into people I know. With Social Media I know they will be there and can arrange a meeting.

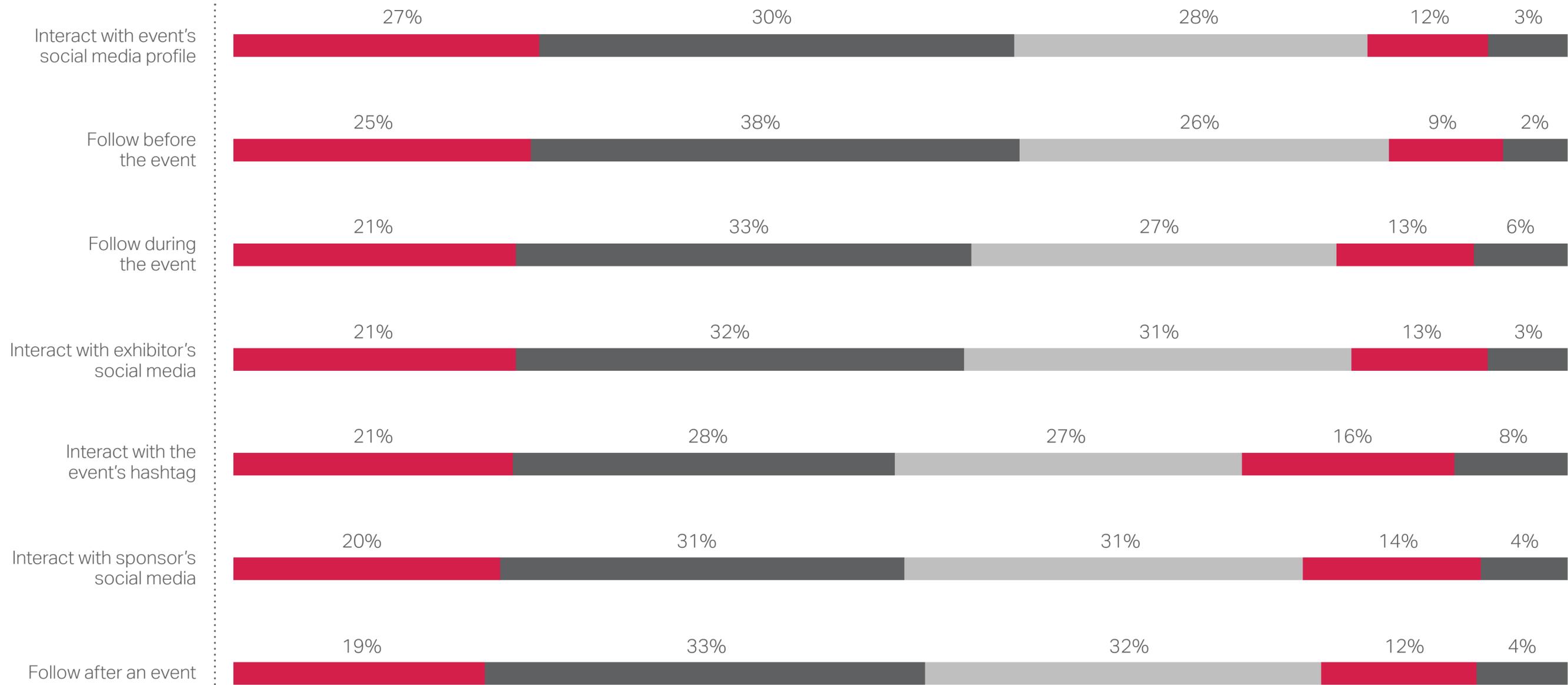
## Rated Not Very/Not at all Valuable:

I think people spend way too much time (and information) on social media versus actually interacting with people

Most users of social media are more interested in reading their own posts, not paying serious attention to input from someone else.

It can distract from the event if people are posting pictures and stuff all the time while I'm trying to pay attention to the "going-ons"

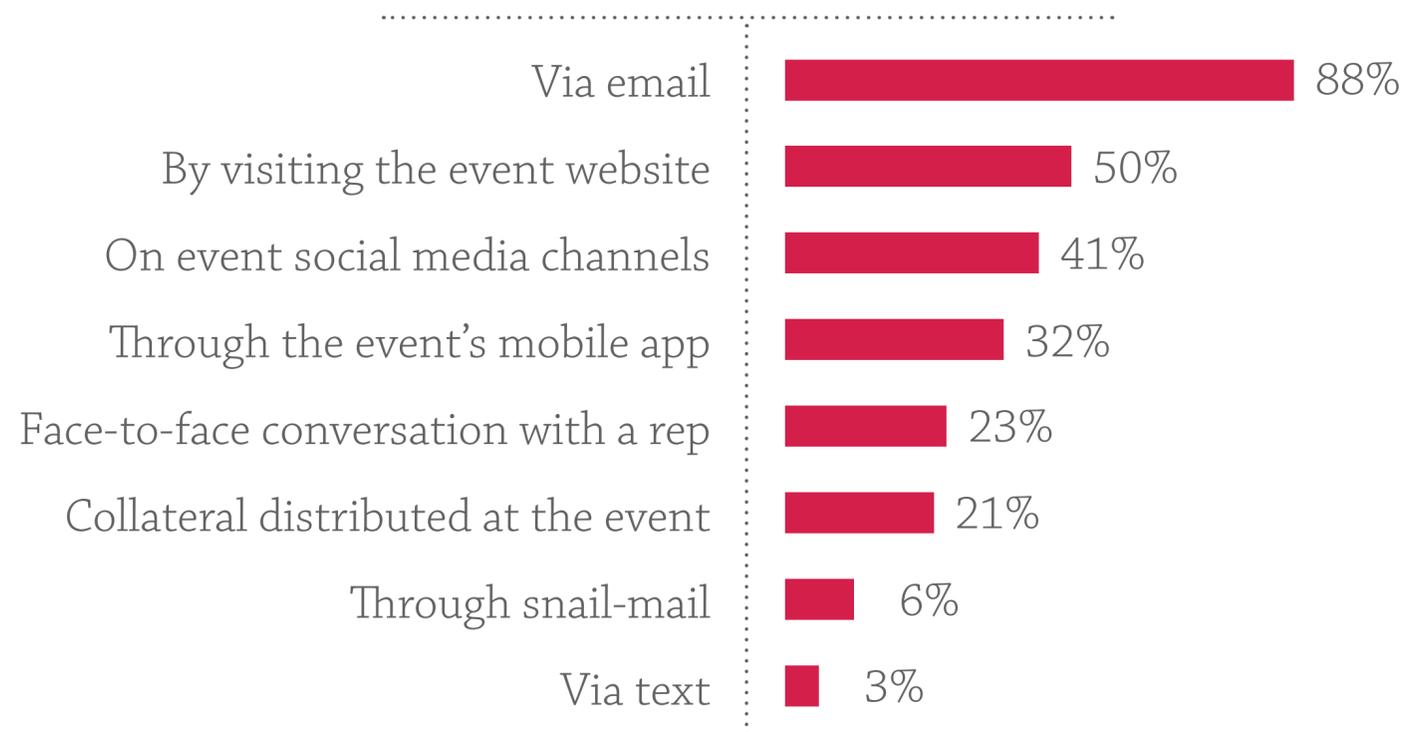
# EVENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE



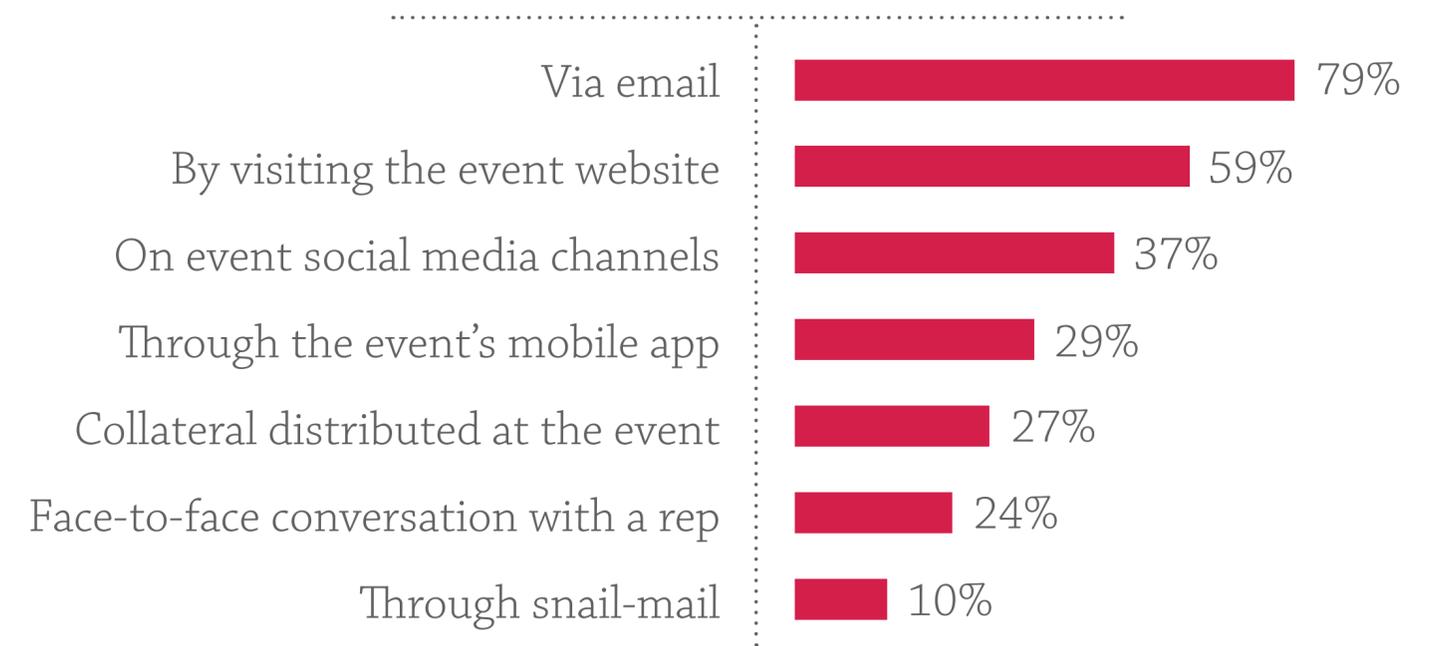
# PREFERRED METHOD TO RECEIVE....

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## Event Updates



## Event Updates

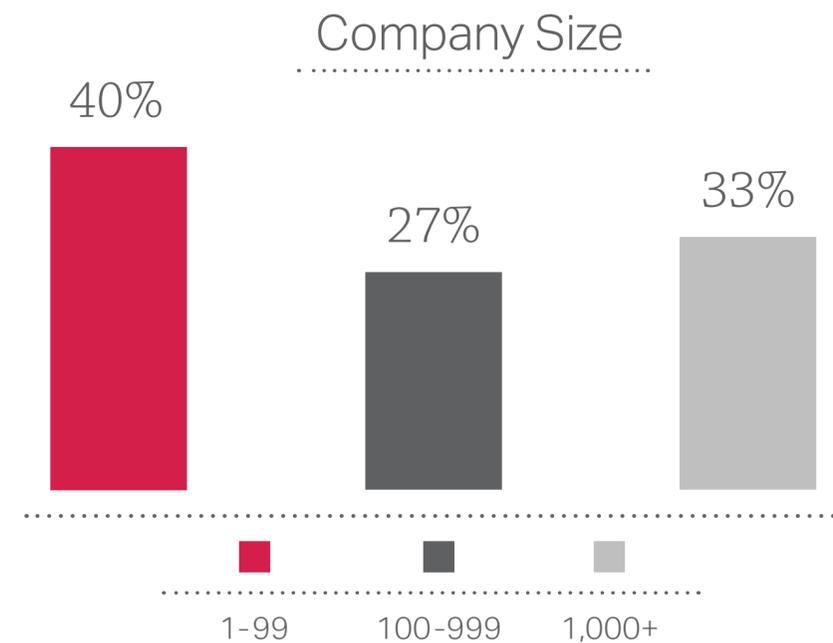
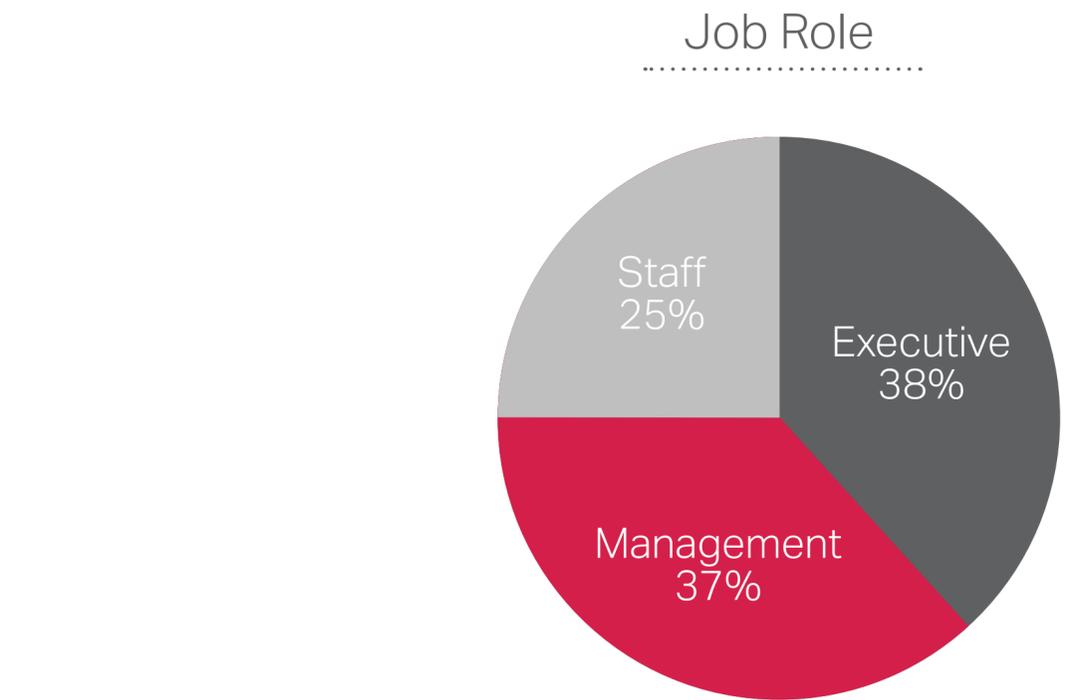
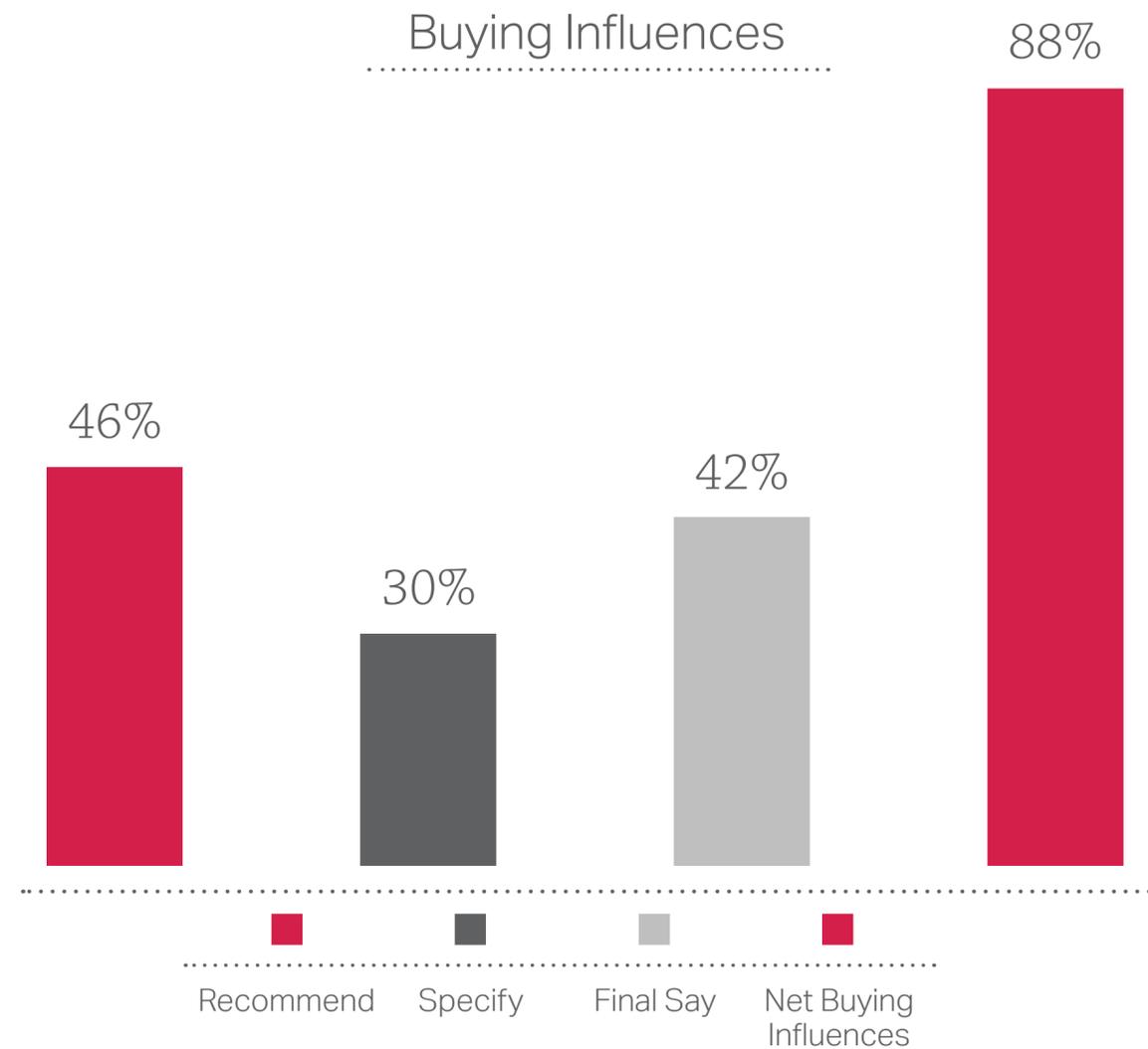




## REASONS TO ATTEND EVENTS

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# BUYING INFLUENCES/ JOB ROLE/COMPANY SIZE



# GEOGRAPHY

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## 27% – Northeast

- 1% Connecticut
- 1% Delaware
- 1% Maine
- 2% Maryland
- 1% Massachusetts
- 2% New Hampshire
- 3% New Jersey
- 9% New York
- 6% Pennsylvania
- 1% Vermont

## 8% – Southwest

- 2% Arizona
- 1% Oklahoma
- 5% Texas

## 21% – Southeast

- 1% Alabama
- 0% D.C
- 7% Florida
- 4% Georgia
- 2% Kentucky
- 1% Louisiana
- 1% Mississippi
- 2% North Carolina
- 1% South Carolina
- 1% Tennessee
- 1% Virginia

## 27% – Midwest

- 5% Illinois
- 2% Indiana
- 1% Iowa
- 1% Kansas
- 4% Michigan
- 2% Minnesota
- 3% Missouri
- 2% Nebraska
- 1% Ohio
- 1% Wisconsin

## 17% – West

- 11% California
- 1% Colorado
- 1% Montana
- 1% Oregon
- 1% Utah
- 1% Washington
- 1% Wyoming