State of Associations Quarterly: 2024 Q2

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Key findings

- **Multi-day conferences fill 60 percent of their eventual registration total more than 90 days before start**, against 22 percent for single-day forums.
- Virtual events see the shortest lead time of any format: a median of 11 days between registration and event start.
- Member tenure does not predict lead time. A member's first year with an association and a member's tenth year show nearly identical registration timing.
- Early-bird pricing deadlines set 60 days out capture registrants who were already going to attend; deadlines set 30 days out capture almost none.

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Why registration lead time, and why this quarter

Membership growth and renewal are annual questions. Registration timing is a quarterly one — meetings staff plan an entire year's calendar around assumptions about when registrants will show up, and those assumptions are rarely tested against real data. This brief uses early responses to the same benchmarking survey behind State of Associations 2024 to test them.

Format drives timing more than anything else

Across the sample, the single strongest predictor of registration lead time is event format and length, not organization size, member tenure, or sector. A two-person association and a forty-staff federation running the same two-day conference show nearly identical registration curves.

Multi-day events versus single-day forums

Multi-day conferences fill 60 percent of their eventual registration total more than 90 days before the event starts, reflecting travel planning, budget approval cycles, and the need to request time off work. Single-day forums fill only 22 percent of their total registration that far out — most registrants for a one-day event decide within six weeks of the date.

Director of Research Inês Carvalho-Reyes said the gap has direct planning consequences. "If your conference is filling slowly at the 90-day mark, that's consistent with a healthy multi-day event. The same pattern for a one-day forum would be a warning sign, not a pattern to wait out."

Virtual events register late, and that's normal

Virtual events see the shortest median lead time in the sample: 11 days between registration and the event's start. There's no travel to plan and no hotel block to secure, so registrants wait until closer to the date. Meetings staff who built virtual-event marketing timelines around in-person norms reported the widest gap between expected and actual registration pace.

Early-bird pricing: where the deadline actually lands

Organizations that set an early-bird deadline 60 days before an event captured registrants who, on this data, were largely going to attend regardless — the deadline shifted timing of payment, not the decision to attend. Organizations that set the deadline 30 days out saw almost no early-bird registrations at all, since most attendees for shorter-lead-time events hadn't yet decided to attend.

The exception is multi-day conferences, where a 90-day early-bird deadline aligned closely with the point in the registration curve where attendees were still deciding, making it the one format-deadline combination in the sample that appeared to influence the decision itself rather than just the payment date.

Where hybrid events fit

Events run in a hybrid format — an in-person option alongside a livestreamed or remote-attendance track — show a split registration curve rather than a single one. The in-person track follows the same lead-time pattern as a comparable fully in-person event of the same length, while the remote track follows the short lead time typical of virtual attendance. Meetings staff planning a hybrid event should build two separate registration timelines rather than a single blended one, since averaging the two tracks together produces a lead-time estimate that matches neither.

The sample includes too few hybrid events to break this finding out by chapter region with confidence, but the pattern held consistently across every hybrid event reported so far, including events run by chapters with very different overall attendance sizes.

What to change before your next event

- Match your early-bird deadline to your event's format: 90 days for multi-day conferences, 30 to 45 days for single-day forums, and skip early-bird pricing altogether for short-lead virtual events where it captures almost no one
- Don't read a slow-filling multi-day conference at the 90-day mark as a warning sign on its own — compare it to your own event's history first
- Build virtual-event marketing timelines around an 11-day median lead time rather than reusing an in-person schedule

- If running a hybrid event, market and track the in-person and remote tracks on separate timelines, since a blended registration curve will mislead planning for both

A note on marketing spend

Meetings staff frequently ask whether marketing spend should concentrate near an event's start date, once most registrants have historically shown up. This data cautions against that instinct for multi-day conferences specifically: since 60 percent of eventual registration arrives more than 90 days out, marketing spend concentrated in the final month is reaching an audience that has largely already decided whether to attend. For single-day forums and virtual events, where lead time is genuinely short, late marketing spend has a better chance of reaching undecided registrants, since more of the eventual audience hasn't yet committed at that point in the cycle.

Director of Research Inês Carvalho-Reyes said the research team plans to revisit this question with a full year of registration data once State of Associations 2024 and its full sample are complete, rather than the early responses this brief draws on.