State of Associations Quarterly: 2026 Q3

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Key findings

- Sponsorship now accounts for a median of 22 percent of a typical association's annual conference budget, up from 15 percent three years ago, as attendance-based registration revenue has flattened.
- Sponsored content, such as a named general session or a branded reception, is the fastest-growing benefit category, outpacing exhibit-hall booth sales for the first time in the survey's history.
- Sponsorship tier pricing varies widely even among associations of similar size: a top-tier package ranges from under $5,000 to more than $40,000 among associations with 1,000 to 3,000 members.
- Associations that renew the same sponsors year over year report meaningfully higher per-sponsor revenue than associations that resell packages to a new sponsor pool each cycle.

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Why sponsorship revenue, and why this quarter

NANA's research team tracks non-dues revenue mix as a recurring theme across the State of Associations Quarterly series, and this brief returns to sponsorship specifically because it has grown faster than any other conference-revenue line in the three years the survey has tracked it. As registration revenue has flattened across the sample — a pattern this series has reported before — sponsorship has become the lever associations reach for first when a conference budget needs to close a gap.

Sponsorship's growing share of the conference budget

Sponsorship now accounts for a median of 22 percent of a typical association's annual conference budget, up from 15 percent three years ago. The increase holds across organization

sizes in the survey sample, though it is most pronounced among mid-sized associations with 1,000 to 5,000 members, which report the largest percentage-point increase in sponsorship's share over the period measured.

Director of Research Inês Carvalho-Reyes said the growth reflects two things happening at once: sponsors are willing to spend more for visibility at a conference as their own marketing budgets shift toward targeted, in-person channels, and association staff have gotten more deliberate about building sponsorship packages that offer more than a booth and a logo on a slide.

Sponsored content overtakes exhibit-hall space

For the first time in the survey's three years tracking sponsorship benefit categories, sponsored content — a named general session, a branded reception, or a sponsored track within the conference program — has overtaken exhibit-hall booth sales as the fastest-growing benefit category by revenue. Exhibit-hall revenue continues to grow in absolute terms but at a slower rate than in prior years, while sponsored-content revenue has grown at roughly twice the rate of exhibit-hall revenue over the past three years.

Sponsored-content revenue has grown at roughly twice the rate of exhibit-hall revenue over the past three years. Carvalho-Reyes said this shift tracks a broader pattern of sponsors wanting association staff and members to associate their name with a specific moment or session, not just a location on a show floor that an attendee may or may not walk past.

Why tier pricing varies so widely

The brief finds wide variation in how associations price a top sponsorship tier, even among organizations of similar member count. Among associations reporting 1,000 to 3,000 members, a top-tier sponsorship package ranges from under $5,000 to more than $40,000, a spread the survey did not find fully explained by differences in conference attendance, benefit content, or region.

Associations at the high end of that range tend to share one practice: pricing tiers benchmarked explicitly against comparable associations' published or informally shared sponsorship rates, rather than pricing based only on an internal estimate of what a package is worth. Associations at the low end more often reported setting a tier price once, years earlier, and adjusting it only for inflation since.

Renewing sponsors versus reselling packages

Associations that renew the same sponsors from year to year report meaningfully higher per-sponsor revenue than associations that resell their sponsorship packages to a new sponsor pool at each conference cycle. The gap likely reflects two effects working together: an association with a track record of sponsor satisfaction can more credibly ask a returning sponsor for a modest annual increase, and a returning sponsor has less due diligence to do before committing again, which shortens the sales cycle and lowers the association's own cost of securing the revenue.

The finding does not suggest associations should avoid recruiting new sponsors, but it does suggest that a sponsorship strategy built entirely around each year's new prospect list is leaving revenue on the table relative to one that also invests in sponsor renewal.

The tax question that follows

A growing sponsorship line raises a tax question directly: not every sponsor payment is a tax-

favored qualified sponsorship acknowledgment, and a benefit that crosses into advertising — a comparative claim, a price message, or an inducement to purchase — can create unrelated business income. NANA's Sponsorship Income and UBIT Brief covers the specific test in full; this brief flags it here because the same growth this brief documents in sponsored-content benefits is exactly the category most likely to drift from acknowledgment into advertising if a prospectus isn't drafted carefully.

What this means for a sponsorship prospectus

Associations revising a sponsorship prospectus for an upcoming conference cycle should treat this brief's benchmarks as a starting point for two specific decisions: whether their current top-tier pricing reflects what comparable associations charge, and whether their fastest-growing benefit category, sponsored content, is described in acknowledgment language rather than advertising language. Associations with an established sponsor base should also weigh the renewal-versus-resale finding directly against their own recruiting costs before assuming a fresh prospect list will outperform a well-managed renewal conversation with an existing sponsor.