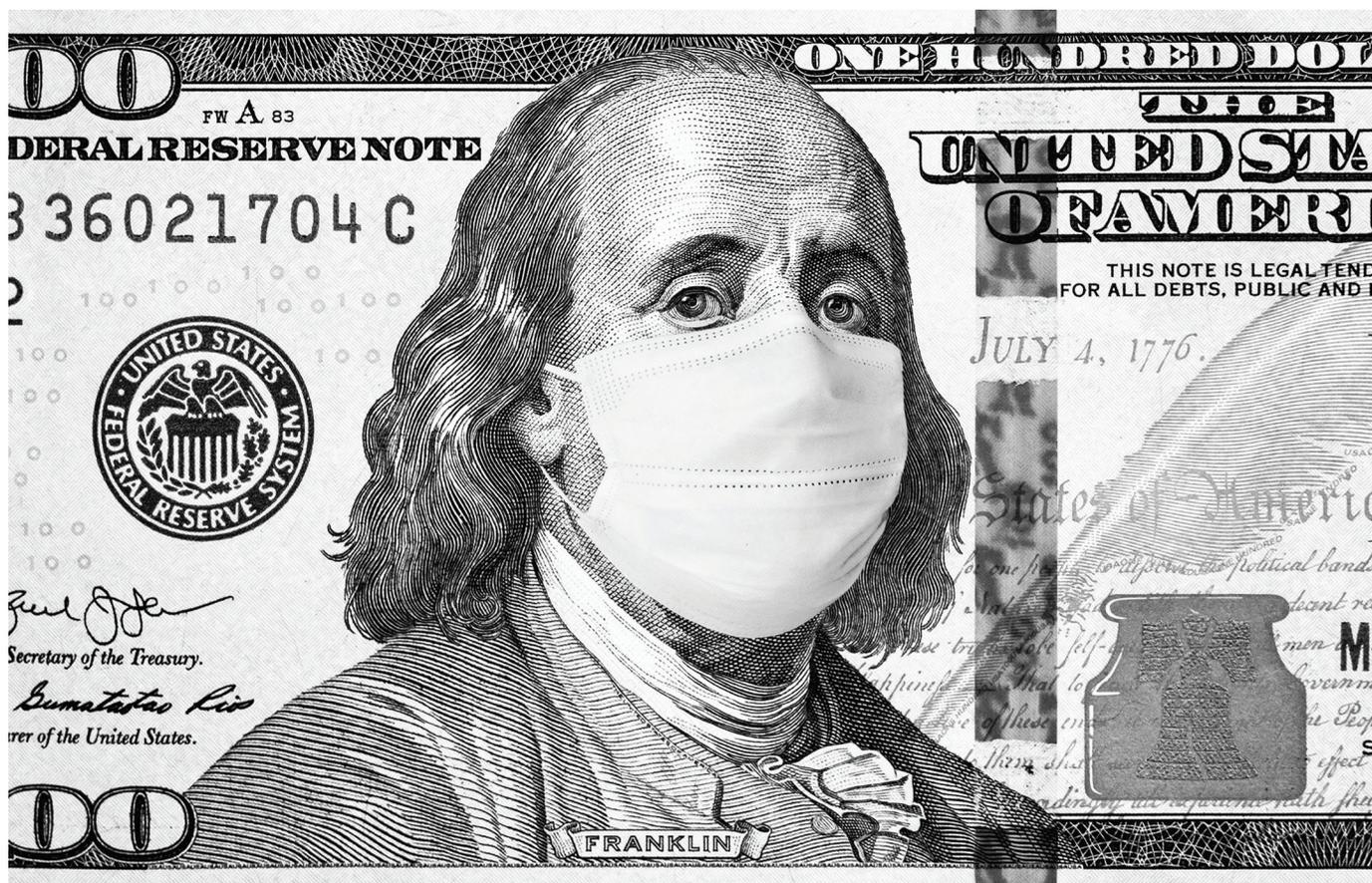


WHITE PAPER # 1

# EXHIBITOR INSIGHT REPORT

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON THE TRADE SHOW INDUSTRY



May 15, 2020

PRODUCED BY EXHIBITOR MEDIA GROUP

# I. Introduction

The trade show and events industry has been rocked by COVID-19. Countless organizers have canceled their 2020 events, while many others have been postponed until the year's third or fourth quarters. As such, face-to-face marketing as we know it has all but

ground to a screeching halt, leaving exhibit and event professionals wondering what to do, how to cope, and when we'll return to business as usual — if ever.

To ascertain the magnitude of COVID-19's impact on our industry and begin to identify when and how trade shows and events will resume, EXHIBITOR completed a two-part research initiative that surveyed both corporate exhibit managers and suppliers to the trade show and events industry. In just two days we received more than 1,000 responses to our survey (including 613 corporate marketers and 446 vendors/suppliers of trade show-related products and services), which have helped us peer inside the post-COVID crystal ball and get a glimpse of what the future might hold for face-to-face marketing.

This report provides the data obtained through this initiative from both exhibit marketers' and trade show suppliers' points of view, drawing comparisons where appropriate. We hope this report affords you exclusive

insight about where the industry is at right now, as well as where it will likely go in the foreseeable future. In addition, EXHIBITOR will continue to conduct pulse surveys every four to six weeks to identify trends and update readers on how the data has been impacted by this rapidly evolving pandemic. ■



Travis Stanton, editor; tstanton@exhibitor magazine.com

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## II. Executive Summary

With nearly all corporate exhibit managers having been affected by the cancellation and postponement of trade shows due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on the face-to-face marketing industry is both obvious and overwhelming. Below are a dozen key findings and takeaways culled from the quantitative and qualitative data within the 163 pages of survey respondents' actions, predictions, and opinions.

### Corporate Exhibit Managers

- ▶ Only 13 percent of responding corporate exhibit managers say they will definitely participate in events rescheduled for later in 2020, along with 31 percent who say it's probable or likely.
- ▶ Based on current plans, most exhibiting companies (59 percent) anticipate returning to show floors by the end of September 2020, but another 20 percent have no plans to exhibit at any shows for the remainder of this year.
- ▶ Ninety percent of exhibit managers are under companywide travel restrictions that preclude them from attending trade shows. Most of these mandates (63 percent) currently have no defined expiration date.
- ▶ Only 19 percent of corporate exhibit managers believe face-to-face marketing will rebound in 2020. The majority (52 percent) predict it will be at least second quarter 2021 before the industry will return to normalcy.
- ▶ When it comes to the long-term impacts of COVID-19, respondents anticipate more virtual/hybrid events (75 percent), decreased attendance (64 percent), fewer events (55 percent), and a shift from large national shows to smaller regional alternatives (53 percent).

### Trade Show Vendors/Suppliers

- ▶ A slight majority of trade show vendors/suppliers (51 percent) report at least a 71-percent drop in monthly revenue, and roughly two-thirds anticipate annual revenue declines of 50 percent or more compared to 2019.
- ▶ Precisely one-third of trade show vendors/suppliers have pivoted and retooled their operations to assist in the COVID-19 recovery effort, manufacturing everything from personal protective equipment (PPE) to temporary structures used for testing and treatment.
- ▶ Forty-six percent of trade show vendors/suppliers have already furloughed staff, and 43 percent have laid off employees.
- ▶ Six out of 10 vendors/suppliers have already applied for a bank or Small Business Association loan. Additionally, one-third have applied for federal assistance, and 17 percent have applied for state assistance.
- ▶ When asked how long it would take their companies to return to business as usual if the COVID-19 pandemic ended today, the majority of vendors/suppliers (62 percent) predicted it would be at least three months before they would be fully operational again.

**Fig. 10:** Nearly half of exhibit managers believe the industry will return to normal in the first or second quarter of 2021.

**Fig. 11:** Exhibitors anticipate future shows will include more hybrid events and lower traffic.

**Fig. 12:** Trade show vendors/suppliers' monthly revenue has fallen sharply.

**Fig. 13:** Roughly four in 10 vendors/suppliers have already furloughed and/or laid off employees.

**Fig. 14:** Vendor/supplier layoffs have heavily impacted project managers, detailers, and account managers.

**Fig. 15:** Six in 10 vendors/suppliers have applied for state and/or federal assistance.

**Fig. 16:** The majority of vendors/suppliers predict it will take them three months or more to recover.

**Fig. 17:** Most vendors/suppliers anticipate more furloughs in the next month.

**Fig. 18:** Three in 10 vendors/suppliers expect the industry to return to normal in the first quarter of 2021.

**Fig. 19:** The majority of vendors/suppliers say clients are planning to exhibit in August and September of 2020.

**Fig. 20:** Most industry stakeholders anticipate a return to business as usual by the first or second quarter of 2021.

### III. Corporate Exhibit Managers

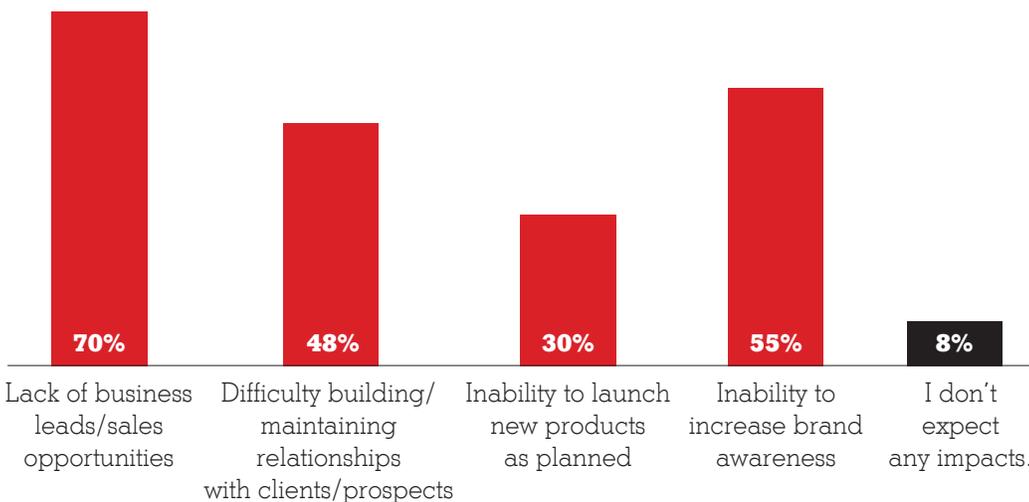
EXHIBITOR surveyed more than 600 corporate exhibit and event managers, marketing managers/directors, sales managers, and executives who are responsible for their organizations' trade show exhibit and event programs. The majority of our sample pool represents the manufacturing/distribution sector, with top industries including technology, manufacturing, and wholesale trade. Company size varies from one to four employees (6 percent) to 5,000 or more (11 percent), and annual revenue ranges from less than \$1 million (9 percent) to \$1 billion or more (14 percent). The objective was to identify how COVID-19 has impacted their programs, as well as when they plan to resume their exhibit-marketing efforts.

#### A. IMPACTS

Virtually all exhibit managers (97 percent) have had shows canceled and/or postponed due to COVID-19. More precisely, respondents planned to exhibit at an average of 56 trade shows in 2020 (including regional, national, and international events). That estimate is on par with data from EXHIBITOR Magazine's 2020 Economic Outlook Survey, conducted in January of this year, which found exhibiting companies anticipated participating in 54.4 shows on average. However, when asked how many shows they currently expect to exhibit at this year — given what they know right now — respondents predict that by the end of 2020, they will have participated in an average of just 19 events (including shows that occurred during the first quarter of 2020). In other words, two-thirds of events they planned to exhibit at are no longer on their 2020 marketing agendas.

That precipitous decline in trade show participation is definitely being felt by marketers and sales teams, with repercussions ranging from a lack of business leads and sales opportunities (70 percent) to an inability to increase brand awareness (55 percent), difficulty building/maintaining relationships with clients and prospects (48 percent), and being unable to launch new products as planned (30 percent).

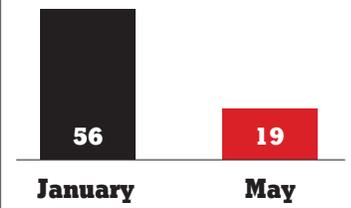
**FIGURE 1:**  
How have trade show cancellations and/or postponements impacted your company?



“Working through show cancellations and postponements was like learning how to do my job all over again, but in reverse.”

— **Events Coordinator**

How many shows had your company originally planned on exhibiting at in 2020, and how many do you now anticipate participating in?

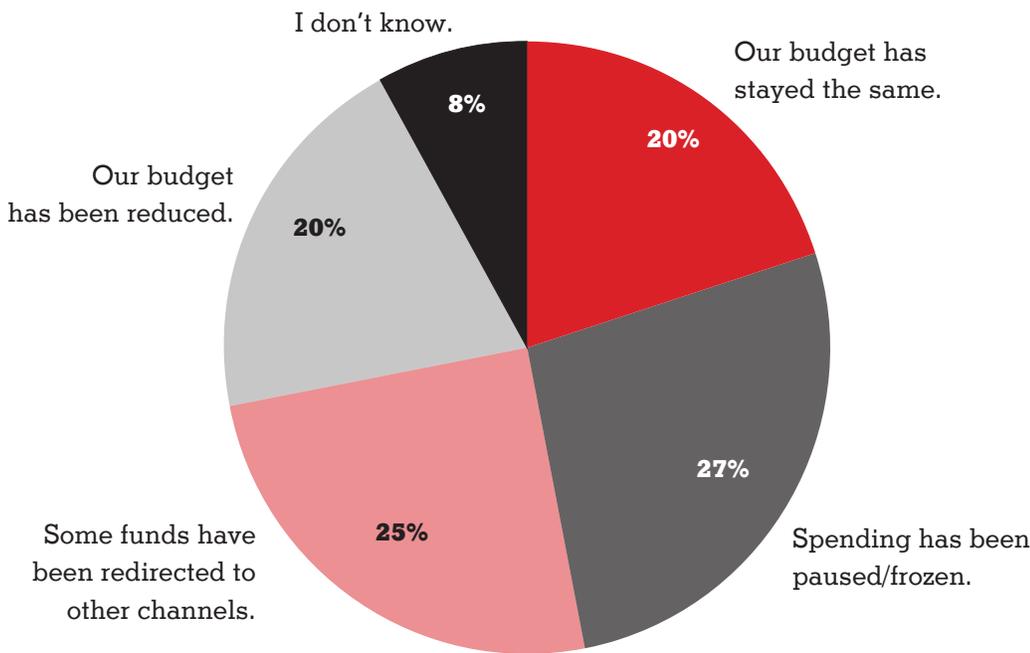


“If trade shows don't come back online within six months, I will be forced to start looking at alternate ways to sell my company's products.”

— **Chief Sales Officer**

A combination of these factors and others has translated into a sizable impact on corporate America. One-half of respondents say COVID-19 has had a “significant” or “very significant” impact on their businesses, while another 33 percent say the pandemic has had a moderate impact on their organizations’ bottom lines. As such, many face-to-face marketers have found their original 2020 budget allocations cut (20 percent), frozen (27 percent), or reallocated to other channels (25 percent). In fact, only one-fifth of marketers are working with the same budgets they were given at the start of the 2020 trade show season.

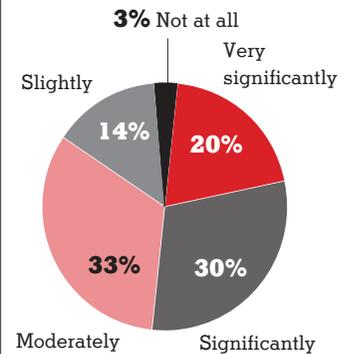
**FIGURE 2:**  
**How has your exhibiting budget changed as a result of COVID-19?**



Furthermore, 19 percent of exhibit managers report that their companies have cut employees’ compensation, 21 percent have furloughed staff, and 16 percent have experienced layoffs. Still, it appears they are faring much better than trade show suppliers whose numbers are more than double that of exhibiting companies, with 55 percent cutting pay, 46 percent furloughing workers, and 43 percent laying off employees.

When looking specifically at exhibit/event departments, 21 percent have experienced furloughs and/or layoffs to date. And a slight majority (51 percent) report being assigned additional/alternate responsibilities, such as digital marketing (including social media), long-term planning, virtual events, and lead nurturing for prospects identified at past shows.

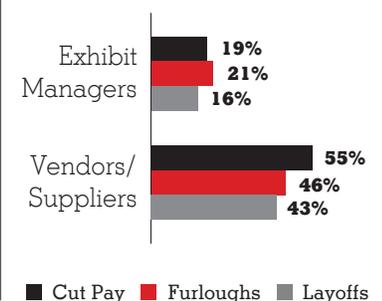
**How significantly has COVID-19 impacted your company's business?**



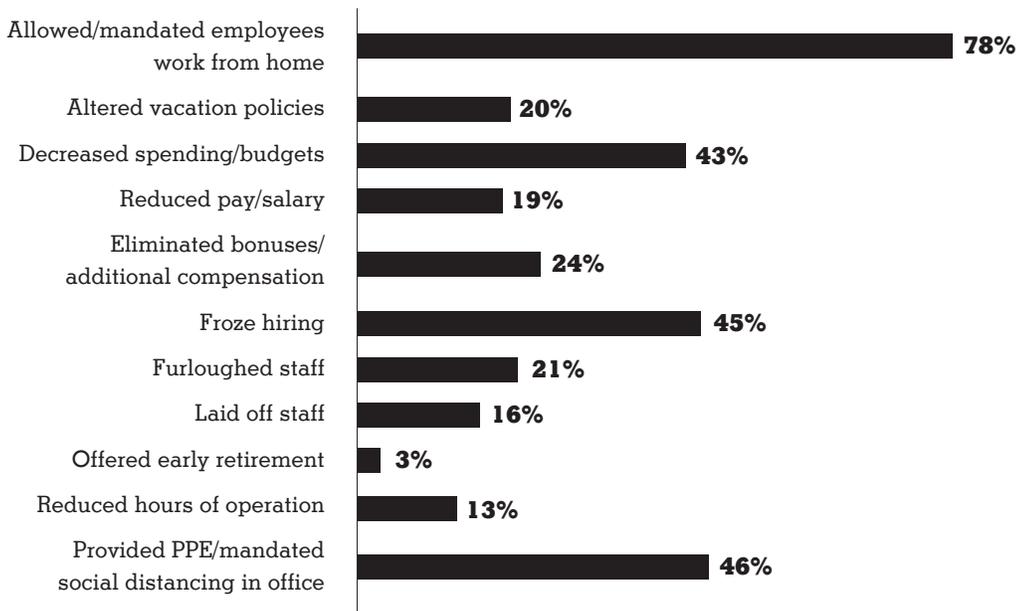
“We have eliminated the trade shows line item from our budget through the end of 2020. Our industry was hit hard, and cuts had to be made to maintain staffing and keep our doors open.”

— **Public Relations and Marketing Specialist**

**Has your company cut employees' compensation, furloughed staff, or experienced layoffs?**



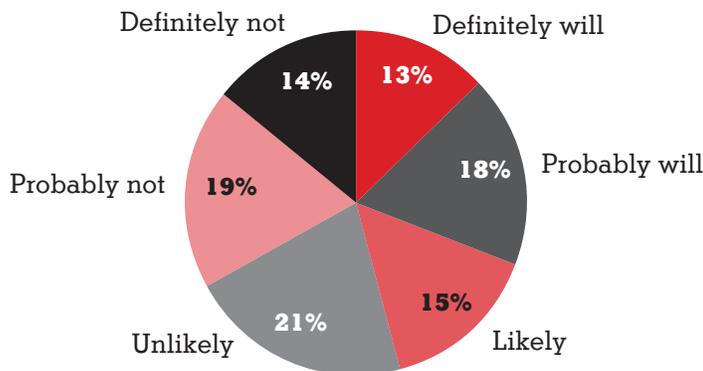
**FIGURE 3:**  
**What actions has your company taken as a result of COVID-19?**



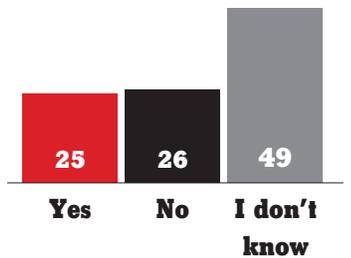
The silver lining, if there is one, is that the absence of trade shows has made the hearts of upper management fonder of face-to-face marketing. One-fourth of respondents say the cancellation and postponement of events has helped make the value of exhibiting at trade shows more obvious to members of the C-suite.

In terms of events that have been rescheduled for later in 2020, it appears exhibiting companies are unlikely to participate en masse. When asked about their current plans, only 13 percent of respondents say they will definitely participate in rescheduled events, along with an additional 31 percent who say it is probable or likely. Further complicating matters is the fact that 39 percent of respondents indicate that if they participate in rescheduled events, they will be dialing back their investments in those shows. Additionally, as exhibiting companies are being forced to make go or no-go decisions far later into the planning process than before, it's causing frustration, tightened timelines, and an inability to take advantage of early bird discounts, which further increases the cost of exhibiting.

**FIGURE 4:**  
**How likely are you to exhibit at events that have been rescheduled for later in 2020?**



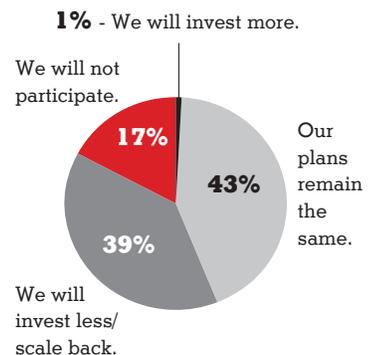
Have show cancellations/postponements made the value of exhibiting more obvious to upper management?



“Given that event ROI is difficult to justify, I almost wonder if we’re in a better place today, since business leaders can see the overwhelming value lost by cancellations.”

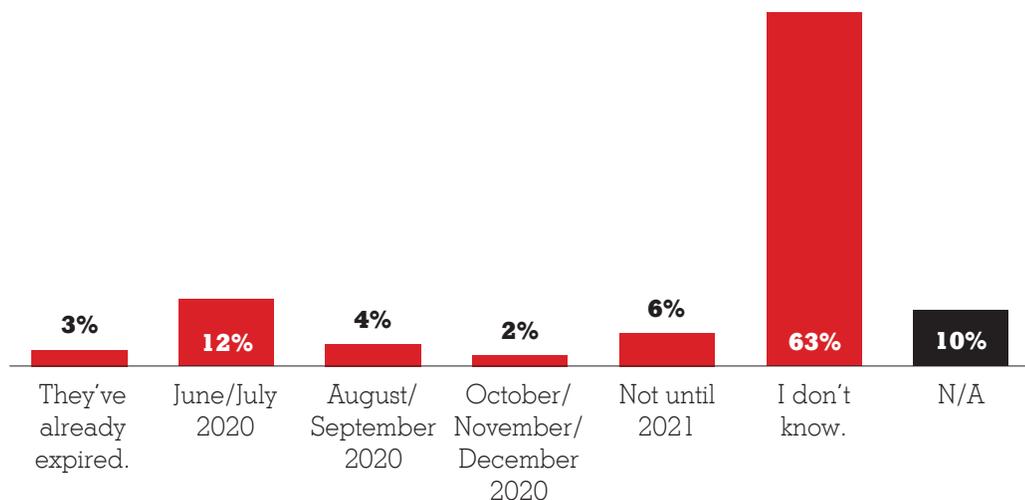
— Director of Event Marketing

How will your presence at rescheduled shows compare to your pre-COVID plans?



One possible explanation for their unlikeliness to participate in third- and fourth-quarter events is that 90 percent of corporate exhibit managers are under companywide travel restrictions that preclude them from attending trade shows. (Interestingly, just 47 percent of trade show suppliers have similar restrictions in place.) And while 19 percent of those mandates expire prior to the fourth quarter of 2020, 63 percent have no defined expiration date — and 6 percent extend all the way into 2021.

**FIGURE 5:**  
**When will your company's travel restrictions expire?**



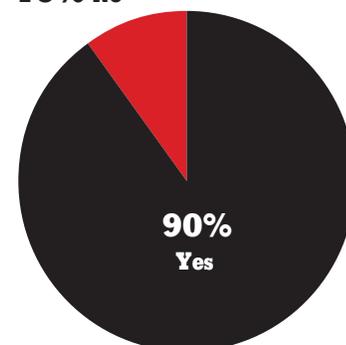
## B. OPINIONS

It's safe to say that corporate exhibitors are relatively worried about the impact of COVID-19. When asked to rate their personal level of concern on a scale of 1 to 10, they averaged 7.4 — nearly identical to the 7.6 average for trade show vendors/suppliers. That sentiment has translated into a balance of hopeful caution for most. When prompted to describe their feelings regarding the future of their careers, it was a mixed bag of optimism (26 percent), hope (34 percent), and caution (35 percent). While that leaves us with only 5 percent of exhibit managers who feel pessimistic about the future of their careers, it's a stark contrast to data obtained in January via EXHIBITOR Magazine's 2020 Economic Outlook Survey, when 85 percent felt hopeful or optimistic versus just 60 percent today.

Similarly, exhibit and event professionals' opinions on the economy have soured as well. In January, 71 percent described their feelings as hopeful or optimistic. Today that number has fallen to just 42 percent. Thankfully, a slight majority (56 percent) are confident that the trade show industry will survive intact, with the remaining 44 percent concerned about "serious long-term impacts" on the face-to-face marketing landscape.

**Has your company enacted travel restrictions that preclude you from traveling to trade shows and events?**

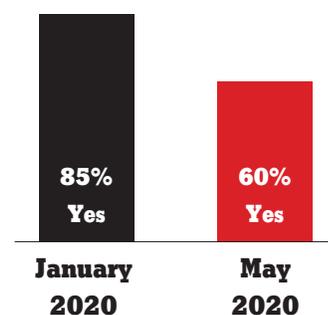
**10% No**



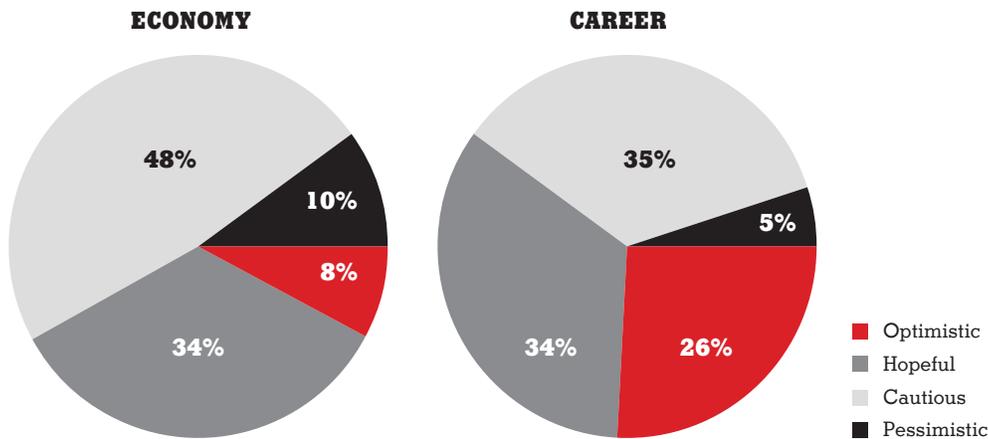
"Due to company travel policies, we're not allowed to travel unless it's considered business critical."

— **Conference Manager**

**Do you feel optimistic about the future of your career?**



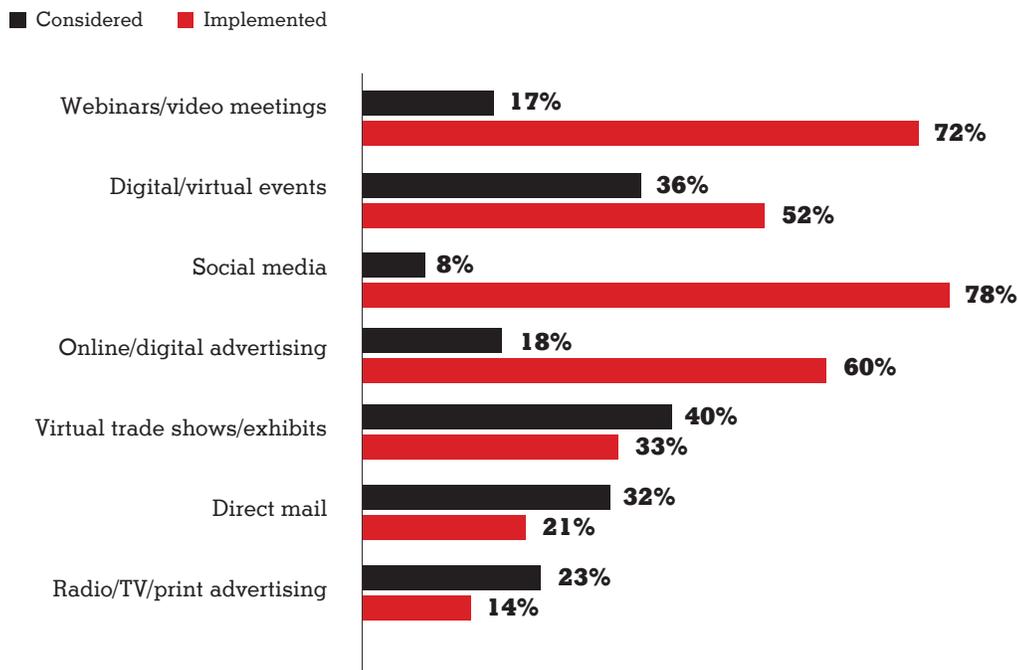
**FIGURE 6:**  
**How would you describe your feelings about the general economy as well as the future of your career?**



**C. PRACTICES**

In place of live trade shows and events, corporate marketers are turning to different channels in an attempt to connect with customers, increase brand awareness, and obtain viable sales leads. Not surprisingly, the most popular include webinars/video meetings, digital/virtual events, social media, online/digital advertising, virtual trade shows/exhibits, and direct mail, all of which have been either considered or implemented by at least half of respondents.

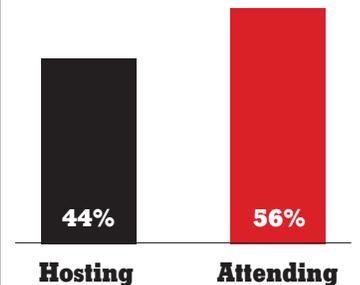
**FIGURE 7:**  
**In lieu of face-to-face events, what channels/tactics has your company considered or implemented as alternative marketing opportunities?**



“Eventually people will be very ready to resume the professional and immersive experience that only an in-person event can provide. But in the meantime, they need a bridge to remain connected with vendors, products, inspiration, and the hope of getting back to the best of normal.”

— Exhibit Manager

**Are you currently hosting or attending virtual events?**



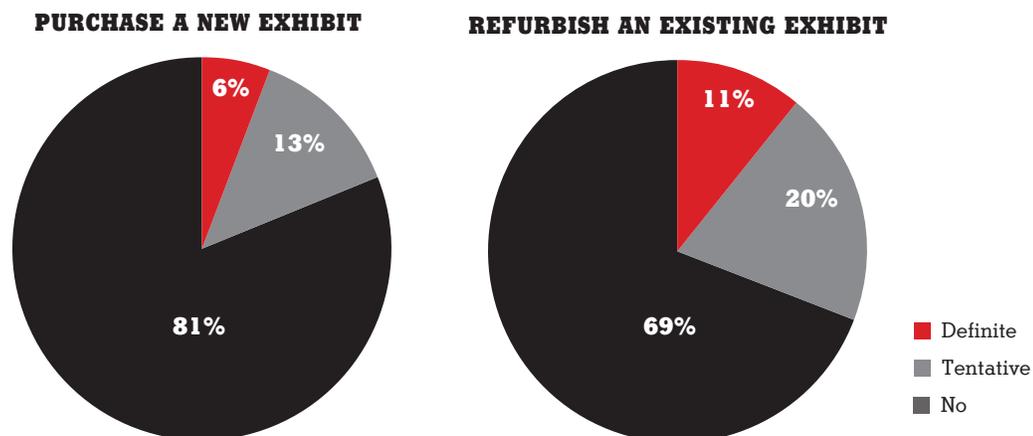
“It’s yet to be determined whether the transition to virtual events will be a temporary shift for us, or if we will maintain a virtual platform on some level from here on out.”

— Events Manager

Looking specifically at virtual trade shows and events, 56 percent of marketers report plans to attend virtual events, 47 percent are hosting them, and 44 percent have plans to exhibit in virtual trade shows. And while a majority (59 percent) believe digital alternatives are an “adequate” replacement for live events, they also view it as an inferior channel.

As they pivot away from live events, exhibit and event professionals are also tabling plans to replace their existing stands. In January of this year, 58 percent of exhibitors had definite or tentative plans to build new booths. Today, however, that number has fallen to just 19 percent. Among those who had a new build already in process when the pandemic hit, 81 percent either canceled or postponed those projects. A glimmer of hope, perhaps, can be found in the fact that 31 percent have at least tentative plans to use this downturn as opportunities to refurbish their existing booths. But with nearly one-third of respondents reporting that their exhibit house account executives have been furloughed or laid off, many are expressing concerns that the individuals who remain lack the kind of understanding and familiarity with their programs required to move forward with any large-scale investments.

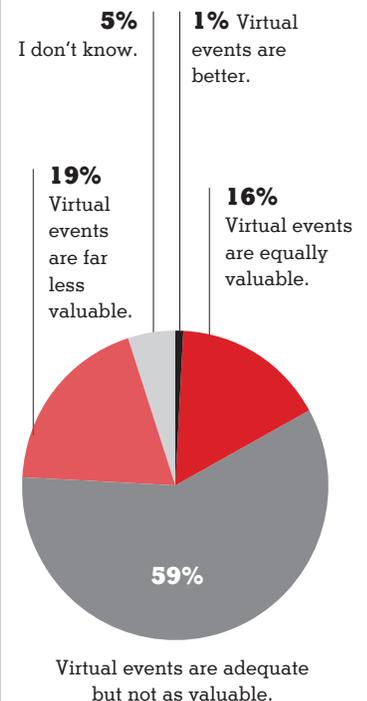
**FIGURE 8:**  
**Do you have plans to purchase a new exhibit or refurbish an existing one in 2020?**



**D. PROJECTIONS**

Based on their current plans, most exhibiting companies (59 percent) expect to return to trade show floors by the end of September, but another 20 percent have no plans to exhibit at upcoming 2020 shows. Having said that, plans could shift considerably if a treatment or vaccine is made available. Sixty-three percent of exhibit managers say that a COVID-19 treatment would make them feel more comfortable about exhibiting at a trade show, while 81 percent say a vaccine would ease their concerns about mass gatherings. Eight out of 10 also report that enhanced cleaning/sanitation policies at hotels, in convention centers, and on airplanes would also make them more likely to return to the show floor sooner rather than later.

**Given your experience with virtual events, how do they compare to live events?**



“Thus far, it looks like online trade shows are a lot of work with relatively little return on investment.”

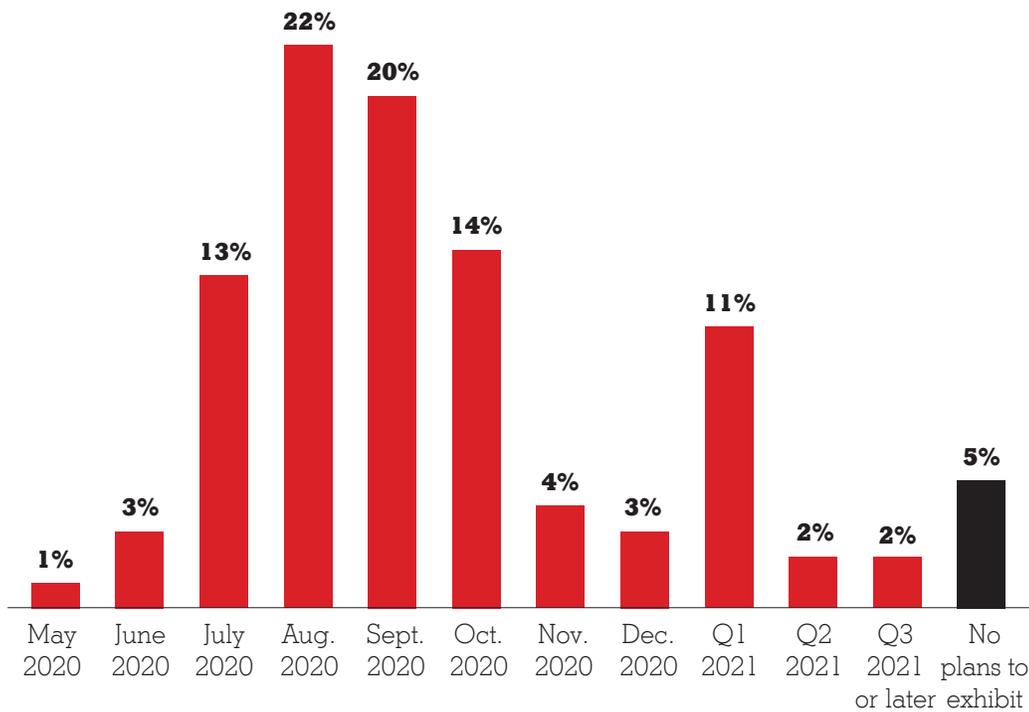
— Marketing Consultant

“Our shows that went virtual were disappointing. We think live events will come back in 2021, so we’re holding off until then.”

— Senior Trade Shows and Events Manager

**FIGURE 9:**

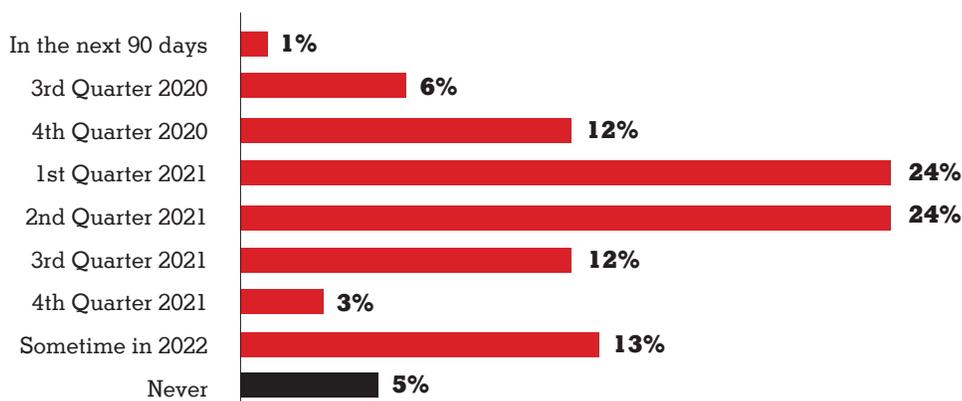
**Given what you know right now, when is the next trade show your company plans to exhibit at?**



But the ultimate question — when will the trade show and event industry return to “normal” — remains. When asked for their expectations, only 19 percent of corporate exhibit managers believe the industry will rebound in 2020. The majority (52 percent) predict it will be at least the second quarter of 2021 before the industry will return to normalcy, 13 percent of which don’t expect that to occur until 2022 — and 5 percent of which question whether the industry will ever return to business as usual.

**FIGURE 10:**

**When do you believe the trade show and events industry will return to normal?**



**What would make you feel more comfortable about exhibiting at a trade show or other face-to-face marketing event?**

- 81%** Availability of a COVID-19 vaccine
- 80%** Increased cleaning/sanitation on planes
- 79%** Increased cleaning/sanitation at convention centers
- 79%** Increased cleaning/sanitation at hotels
- 63%** Availability of a COVID-19 treatment
- 54%** No new COVID-19 cases reported in city/state/country
- 41%** Other companies returning to trade show floors
- 33%** Offices reopen for business
- 28%** Increased consumer confidence/spending

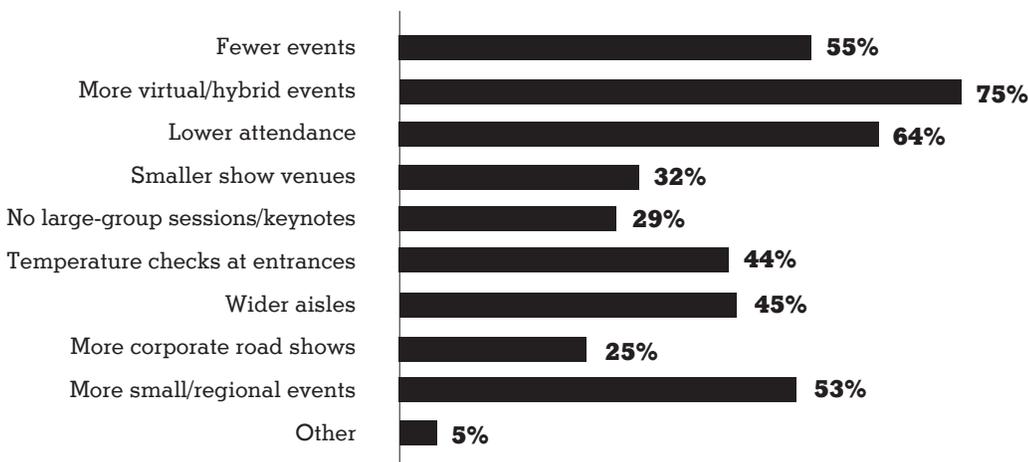
“I am looking to the future of our exhibits, but instead of planning for a heavy fourth quarter, I’m looking at first quarter 2021.”

— Marketing Coordinator

It's important to note that the expiration of shelter-in-place orders will not immediately bring about a return to normality. Only 23 percent of exhibit managers say they would feel comfortable exhibiting at a trade show or other face-to-face marketing event within one month of shelter-in-place restrictions expiring. In fact, the majority (58 percent) wouldn't feel comfortable exhibiting until at least three months have elapsed since shelter-in-place mandates have been lifted.

Assuming the overwhelming majority of corporate exhibit managers (95 percent) who believe the industry will rebound are correct, what will trade shows look like in a post-COVID world? When asked what long-term changes they anticipate as a result of the pandemic, the majority of exhibit managers expect to see more virtual/hybrid events (75 percent), lower trade show attendance (64 percent), fewer events (55 percent), and a shift from large national shows to small/regional alternatives (53 percent). Additionally, four out of 10 predict wider aisles at exhibitions and temperature checks at conferences and corporate events.

**FIGURE 11:**  
**What long-term changes do you anticipate the trade show industry will experience as a result of COVID-19?**



**How soon after shelter-in-place orders expire would you personally feel comfortable exhibiting at a trade show?**

- 7% Immediately
- 2% Within days
- 6% Within 1 – 2 weeks
- 8% Within 3 – 4 weeks
- 19% Within 1 – 2 months
- 24% Within 3 – 4 months
- 15% Within 5 – 6 months
- 14% Within 7-12 months
- 5% More than a year

“Do booths need to be bigger to accommodate social distancing? Will we limit the number of people on the show floor at any one time? Do we need better ventilation in convention centers?”

— Trade Show Consultant

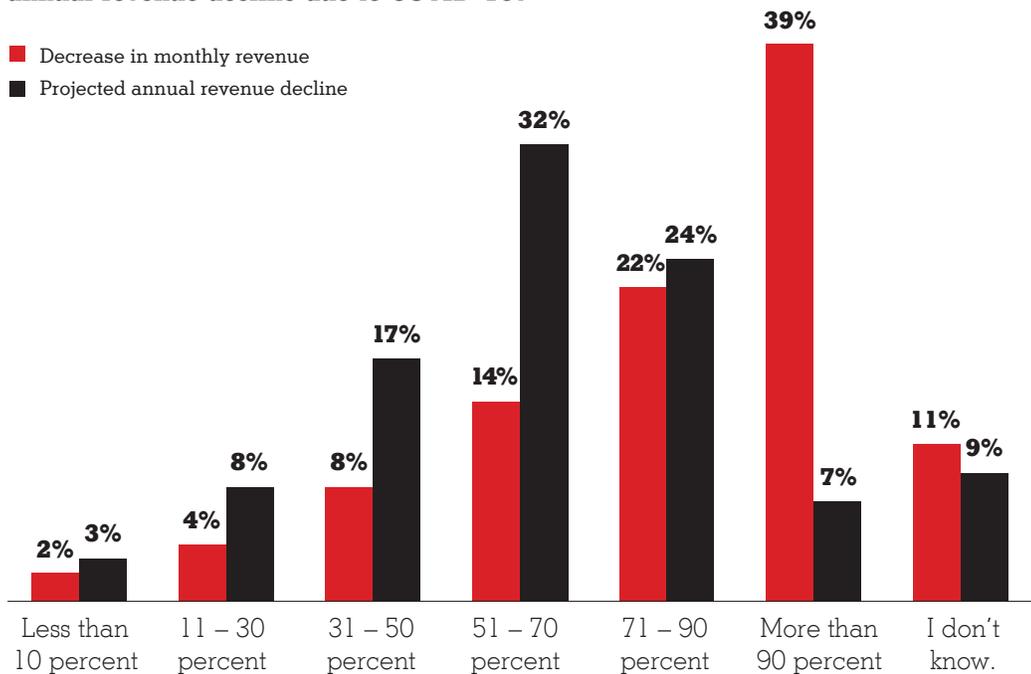
# IV. Trade Show Vendors/Suppliers

EXHIBITOR surveyed more than 400 vendors and suppliers of trade show-related products and services to identify how COVID-19 has impacted their businesses, as well as when they expect to rebound from the pandemic. The majority of supplier respondents (53 percent) are managers/executives, and 58 percent work for exhibit producers, resellers, or builders. The size of respondents' operations varied considerably from one to four employees (17 percent) to more than 500 employees (7 percent). Similarly, annual sales-revenue numbers ranged from less than \$2.5 million (32 percent) to more than \$30 million (17 percent).

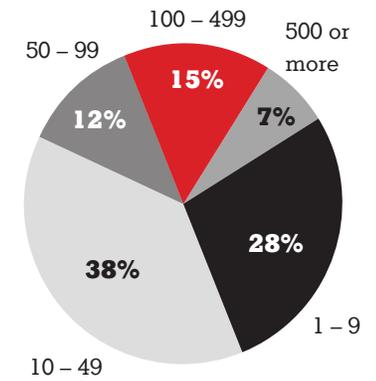
## A. IMPACTS

The impact to vendors and suppliers of trade show-related goods and services cannot be overstated. The vast majority (83 percent) say COVID-19 has "very significantly" affected their businesses, while an additional 12 percent report "significant" impacts. In other words, more than nine in 10 trade show- and event-related suppliers have experienced major repercussions to their bottom lines. More specifically, 90 percent expect "moderate" to "significant" revenue shortages when comparing second quarter 2020 with second quarter 2019. In terms of monthly revenue, the decline has been catastrophic, with 51 percent of vendors/suppliers experiencing at least a 71-percent revenue reduction. And roughly two-thirds anticipate annual revenue declines of at least 50 percent compared to 2019. One of the additional challenges faced by vendors and suppliers has been disruptions in their supply chains, as 58 percent report such difficulties stemming from COVID-19.

**FIGURE 12:**  
**Estimate your company's monthly decrease in revenue, as well as your projected annual revenue decline due to COVID-19.**



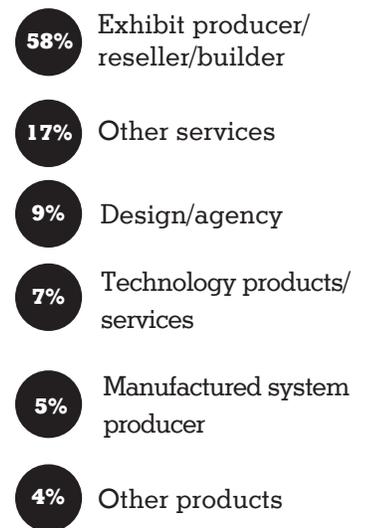
When fully staffed, how many employees are in your organization?



What is your primary job function?

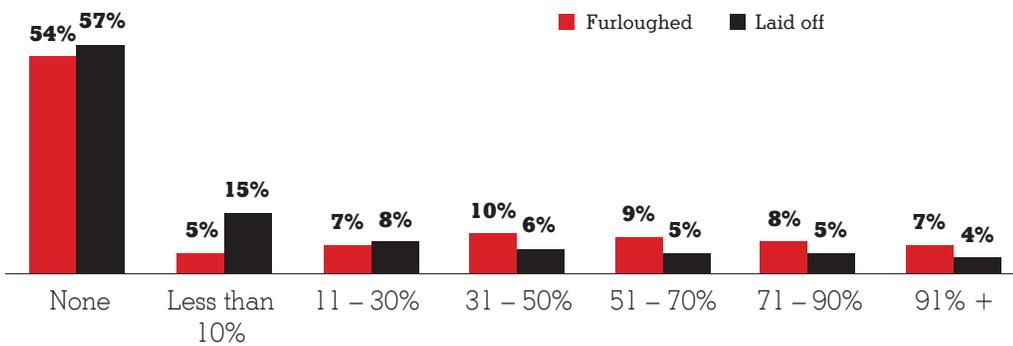


What is your primary line of business?

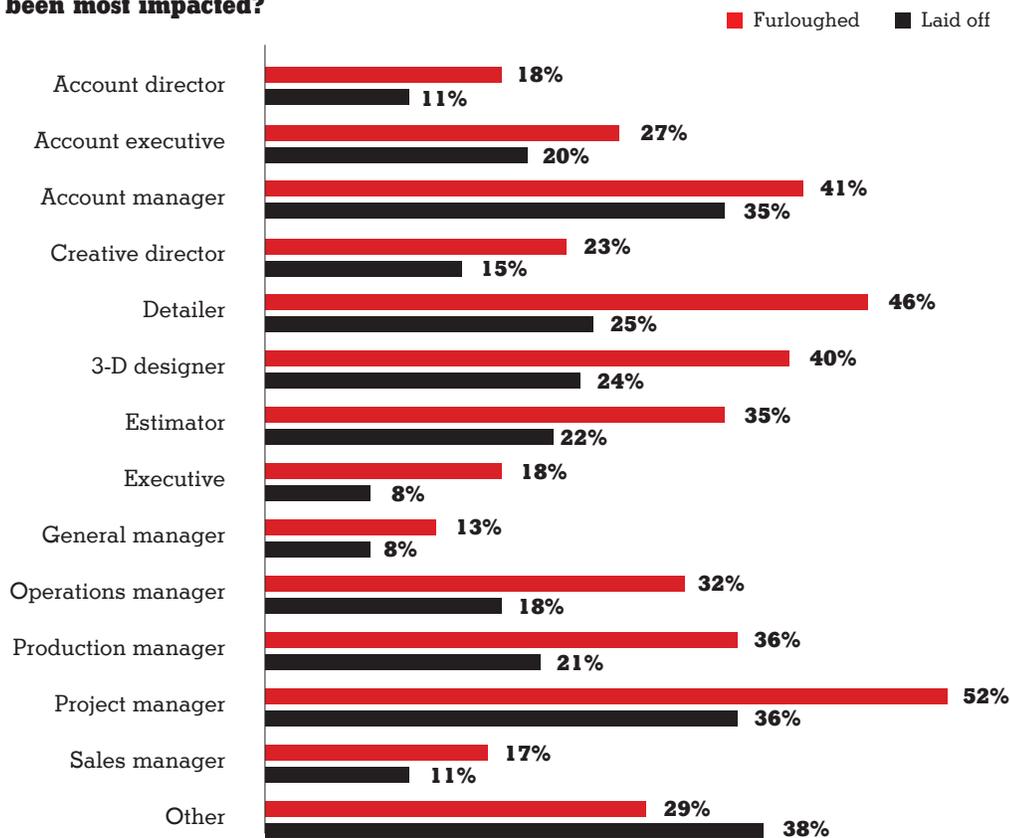


While the majority of trade show vendors/suppliers are operating at a reduced capacity, 31 percent are open with normal hours of operation, and 11 percent are currently closed. Additionally, 46 percent have furloughed staff, and 43 percent have laid off employees. The impact of furloughs varies considerably, with 5 percent of companies furloughing less than 10 percent of workers, while another 7 percent have furloughed more than 90 percent of their employees. Similarly, whereas 15 percent of companies have laid off less than 10 percent of employees, 4 percent have already laid off more than 90 percent of their workforce. The roles most affected by those furloughs and layoffs include account managers, detailers, 3-D designers, estimators, production managers, and project managers.

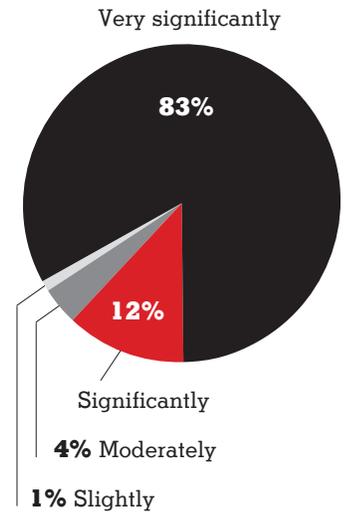
**FIGURE 13:**  
**What percentage of your workforce has been furloughed or laid off?**



**FIGURE 14:**  
**If you have implemented furloughs and/or layoffs, what roles/departments have been most impacted?**

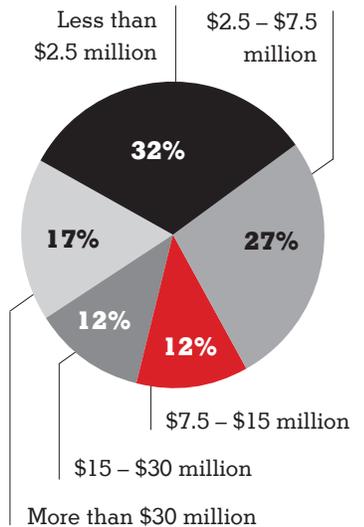


**How significantly has COVID-19 impacted your business?**



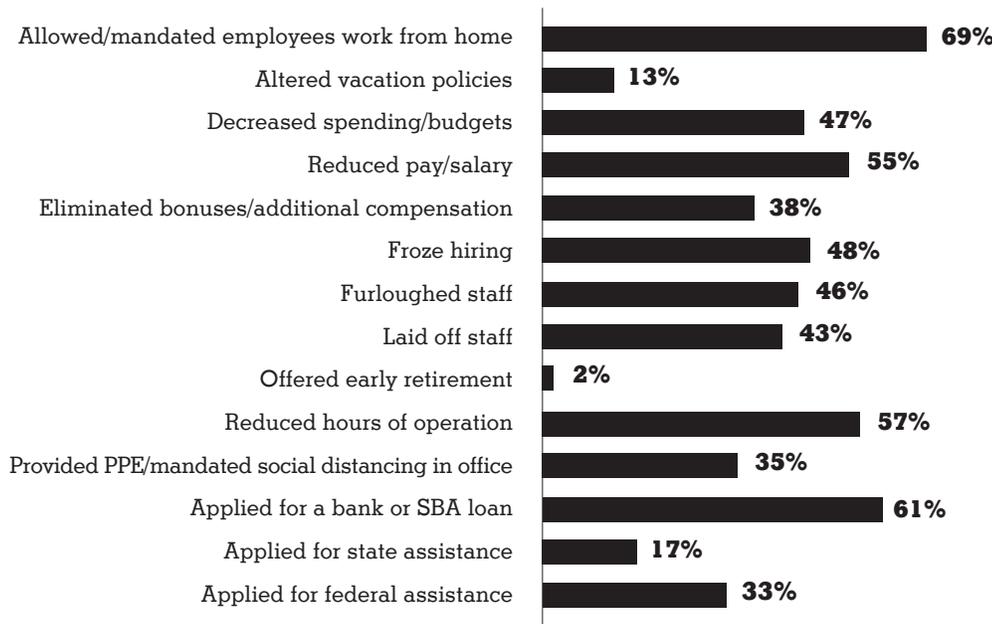
“How do we turn this thing around? How do we get back to work? The industry is hurting, and nobody seems to have a plan.”  
 — Senior Account Executive

**In a normal year, what is your annual sales revenue?**



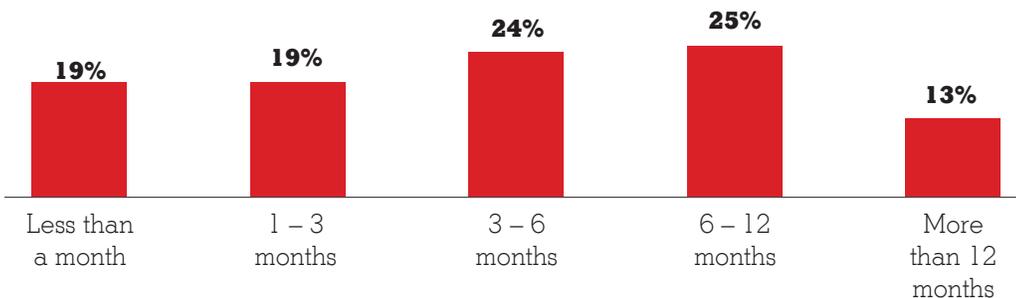
Vendors/suppliers have also taken a number of actions as a result of COVID-19, including allowing employees to work from home (69 percent), applying for a bank or Small Business Association loan (61 percent), reducing employees' compensation (55 percent), enacting hiring freezes (48 percent), cutting budgets (47 percent), and restricting business travel (47 percent). And while 61 percent of those with restrictions have no defined date for when business travel will resume, 19 percent anticipate lifting restrictions by the end of July, whereas 9 percent don't plan on doing so until December at the earliest.

**FIGURE 15:**  
**What actions has your company taken as a result of COVID-19?**

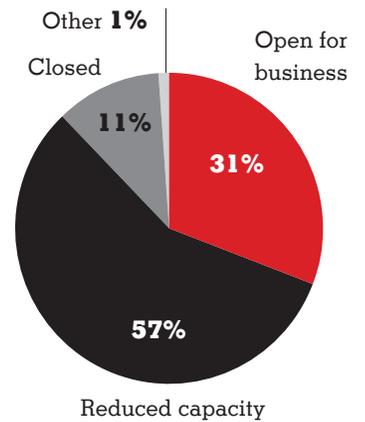


When asked how long it would take their companies to return to business as usual if the COVID-19 pandemic ended today, the majority of vendors/suppliers (62 percent) predicted it would be at least three months before they would be wholly operational again — and 13 percent anticipated it would take more than 12 months to fully rebound.

**FIGURE 16:**  
**If COVID-19 ended today, how long would it take your company to get back to business as usual?**



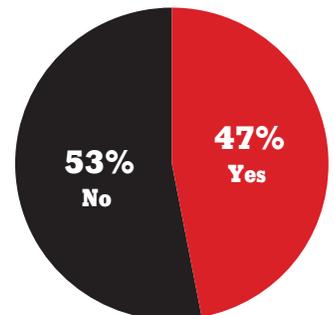
**What is the current status of your company?**



“We’ve laid off or furloughed most of our workforce. I hope that we can bring them all back in the fall for the crush of rescheduled events, but until demand returns, there’s no work to be done.”

— Chief Operating Officer

**Has your company enacted travel restrictions that preclude you from traveling to trade shows?**

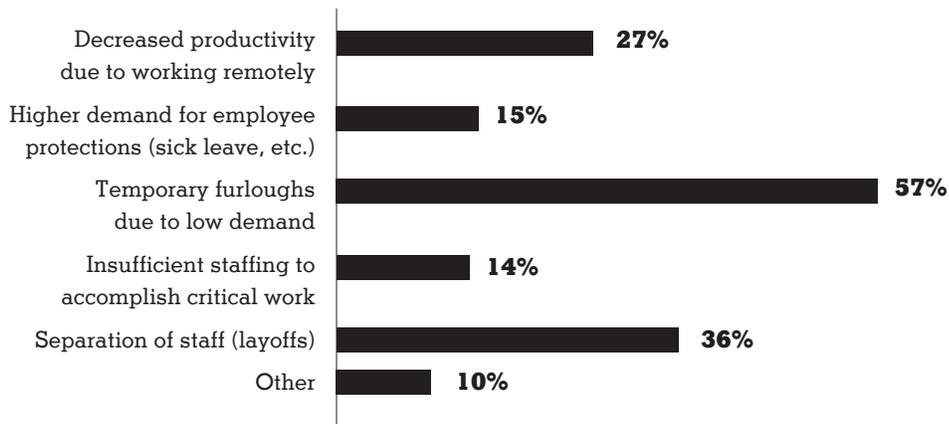


## B. OPINIONS

Not surprisingly, the pandemic is stoking fear and uncertainty among trade show-related vendors and suppliers. When asked to rank their personal concern over COVID-19, supplier respondents averaged 7.6 on a one-to-10 scale. Additionally, 53 percent expect “serious long-term impacts” on the face-to-face marketing industry.

Drilling down further, it appears the following concerns are currently paramount to vendors/suppliers: the health of themselves and others (54 percent), the financial impact of the pandemic (52 percent), a potential global recession (41 percent), a reduction in the number of exhibiting companies at shows (40 percent), and job security (34 percent). The latter concern isn’t surprising given that 57 percent anticipate additional temporary furloughs will occur in the next month, while 36 percent expect they will need to lay off employees in the next 30 days.

**FIGURE 17:**  
**Which of the following does your company expect to occur in the next month?**

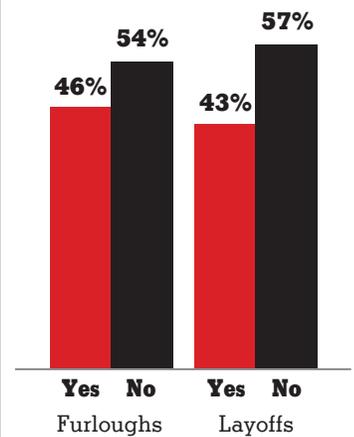


Vendors and suppliers report considerably less concern about returning to trade shows following the expiration of shelter-in-place orders. Whereas only 7 percent of corporate exhibit managers would feel comfortable returning to show floors immediately following the lifting of shelter-in-place mandates, 20 percent of vendors/suppliers say they would be comfortable attending face-to-face marketing events within days of those mandates’ expirations. Additionally, vendors and corporate exhibit managers have differing levels of confidence in the future of their careers. Twelve percent of vendors report feeling “pessimistic” about their roles in this industry, whereas only 5 percent of corporate exhibit managers share that sentiment.

“If not for the Paycheck Protection Program, I guarantee our layoffs and furloughs would have cut much deeper.”

— **Director of U.S. Sales**

**Has your organization already implemented layoffs and/or furloughs?**



“I believe when COVID-19 is no longer a threat, we will see a surge in exhibiting and attendance at conventions and events. People will value the face-to-face interaction we’ve lost more than ever before.”

— **Content Marketing Manager**

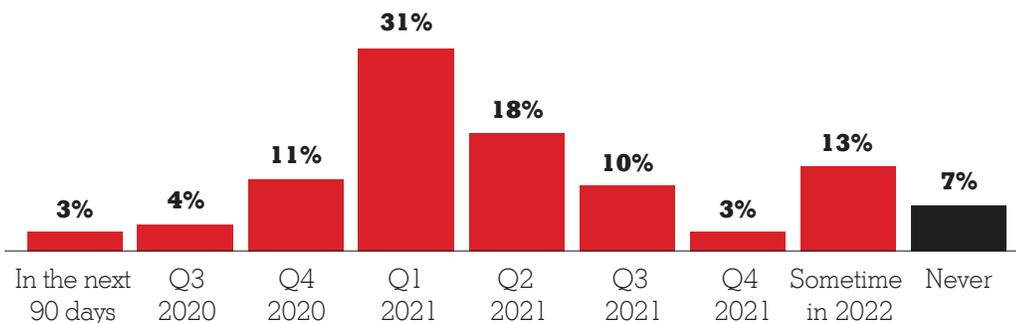
### C. PRACTICES

One-third of trade show vendors/suppliers have retooled their operations to assist in the COVID-19 recovery effort, manufacturing everything from PPE to temporary medical structures and offering project management for the creation of pop-up hospitals. (For more information on how exhibit-related companies are assisting in efforts to end COVID-19, visit [www.ExhibitorOnline.com/ShowofSupport](http://www.ExhibitorOnline.com/ShowofSupport).) While these efforts are helping businesses keep their doors open, there's concern that these purchases are unlikely to result in sustained revenue.

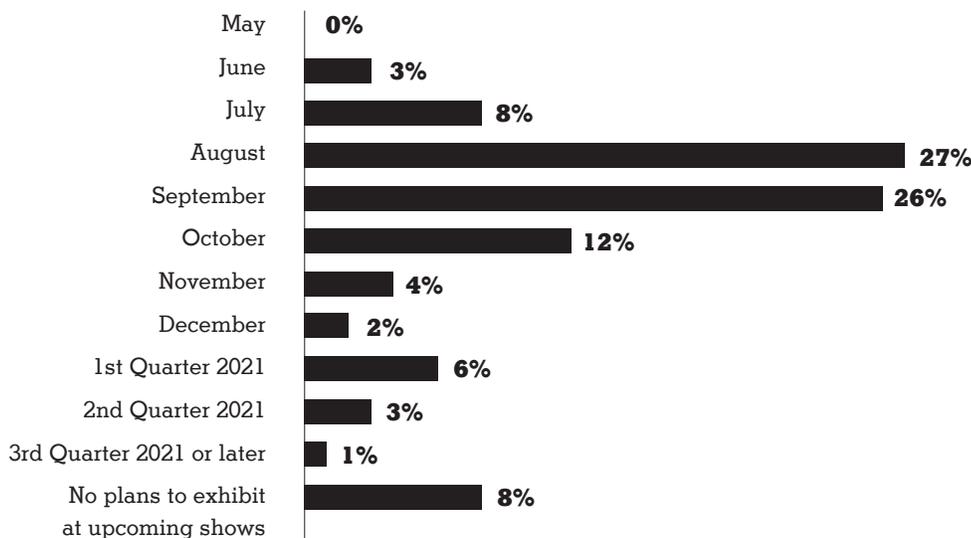
### D. PROJECTIONS

Eleven percent of vendors/suppliers have clients planning to exhibit at June and July events, but the majority don't foresee their clients participating in shows until September at the very earliest. Similarly, when asked for their projections on when the trade show and events industry will return to "normal," just 18 percent selected dates in 2020, while 62 percent anticipate the industry will rebound sometime in 2021 (the majority of which pinpointed the first quarter of next year).

**FIGURE 18:**  
When do you believe the trade show industry will return to normal?



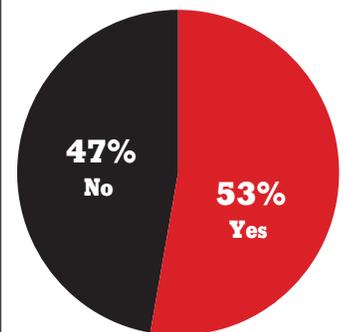
**FIGURE 19:**  
As of now, when is the next show your client(s) plan to exhibit at?



"We are a small design/build firm, so instead of trying to compete for the larger installations of isolation and treatment facilities, we're developing outdoor booths for safe distribution of goods on the retail side, as well as similar booths that hopefully will be used to administer vaccines once they're available."

— Owner/Architectural Designer

Do you anticipate serious, long-term impacts to the trade show industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



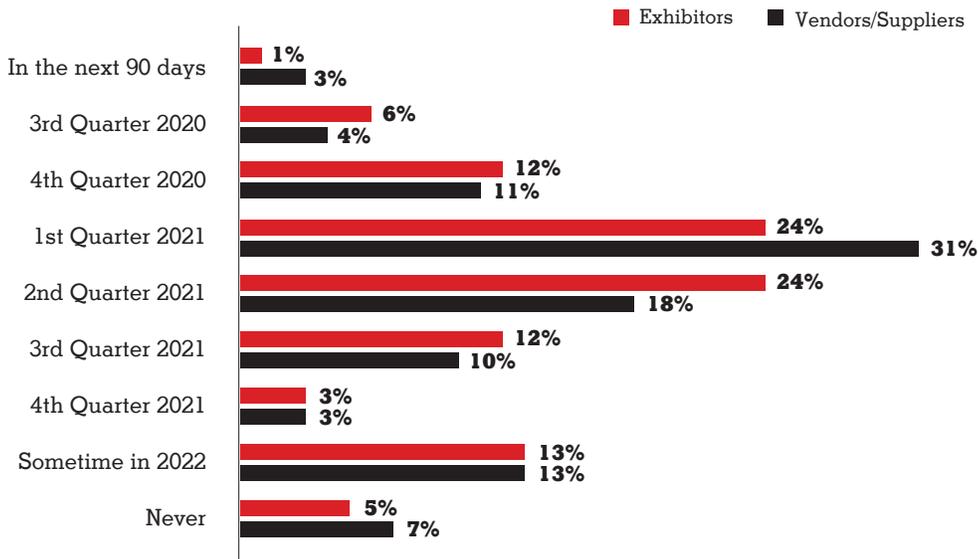
"We are producing desk and counter sneeze guards, lots of social-distancing floor decals, and structures related to helping stop the spread."

— Executive Vice President

# V. Conclusion

Make no mistake: The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a deep and lasting impact on the face-to-face marketing industry — even more so on vendors and suppliers of trade show-related products and services. People will lose their jobs, not all companies will survive, and there will likely be new practices and policies enacted by convention centers and even state and local governments. Still, it's not a question of if, but rather when, trade shows will return.

**FIGURE 20:**  
**When do you believe the trade show and events industry will return to normal?**



With 70 percent of companies experiencing a sales-lead drought due (at least in part) to the cancellation and postponement of trade shows, they will be forced to return to exhibit halls around the world. Having already suffered declining revenues due to COVID-19, they will be unable to survive on current clients alone. And the fact that 25 percent of exhibitors say this downturn has helped upper management see the value of face-to-face marketing in a renewed light hints at a bright — albeit potentially distant — future for our industry.

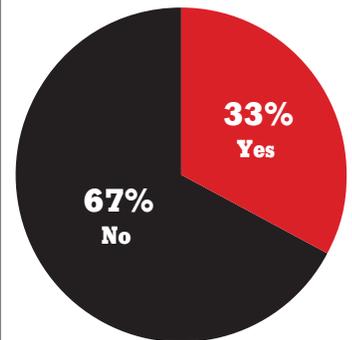
Additionally, while many corporate exhibit managers are experiencing budget cuts, the majority seem to have merely paused expenditures or temporarily redirected funds to other channels as a result of live events being canceled and postponed. As such, there is little indication those budgets won't return once trade shows resume and uncertainty caused by the pandemic dissipates. In fact, a slight majority (52 percent) don't anticipate any long-term budgetary impacts as a result of the COVID-19 downturn. Having said that, budgets for exhibitors in harder hit sectors will undoubtedly be slower to rebound than others.

It's difficult to know whether the popularity of virtual events will remain once we're able to gather together again at trade shows and events. But given most marketers see them as inferior channels, they are far more likely to evolve into adjuncts, not alternatives, to live events (i.e., hybrid events).

"How can we work together as a community to get events and trade shows back to where they were? If we as an industry can adopt standard practices for temperature checks and face masks moving forward, it will help large companies and organizers feel more comfortable opening trade shows back up."

— Senior Account Manager

Has your company pivoted to assist in the COVID-19 recovery effort?



"With all of the trade shows and events being canceled for March, April, May, and June, I've had ample time to put more effort into planning my upcoming events."

— Event Coordinator

The reality is that exhibitors (and trade show attendees) will decide when to return to the trade show floor, and that decision will dictate when we rebound. One significant bellwether will be corporate travel restrictions. Since the vast majority of companies have not yet communicated an anticipated date when they will allow employees to resume business travel, no one can accurately predict exactly when the bulk of trade shows will resume. But the data seems to indicate that we should see an uptick — albeit not a full return to business as usual — by the fourth quarter of 2020. Still, many will be exhibiting with scaled-back plans, so a full return to normalcy is unlikely until the second or third quarter of 2021.

Shows may be different, some won't survive, and others will evolve. We may very well see a reduction in the number of exhibiting companies at major national and international events, along with a corresponding uptick in their participation at regional/local trade shows. Attendance will likely dip for the foreseeable future, but past downturns have proven that when attendance drops it typically results in a higher concentration of serious buyers with purchasing intent and budgets in hand — and fewer tire kickers simply window shopping the show floor.

And the truth is that everything can change on a dime. If a treatment or vaccine is discovered and made available, the impetus behind corporate travel restrictions will evaporate — along with corporate exhibit managers' personal concerns about attending mass gatherings such as trade shows and corporate events. So while this report provides a glimpse into the future of our industry, only time will tell exactly how and when we'll all get back to business — and back together.

For additional updates to this data based on subsequent pulse surveys conducted every four to six weeks, visit [www.ExhibitorOnline.com/Research](http://www.ExhibitorOnline.com/Research).

#### ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The "EXHIBITOR Insight Report: COVID-19's Impact on the Trade Show Industry" is based on a survey conducted by Exhibitor Media Group. An email survey was sent to both corporate exhibit managers and trade show vendors/suppliers on May 4, 2020, and the survey was closed on May 6, 2020, collecting 1,111 responses. After screening out survey respondents who reported no involvement in their companies' trade show and/or corporate event programs, the final number of analyzed responses was 1,059, including 613 corporate marketers, and 446 vendors/suppliers of trade show-related products and services. The majority of responses from corporate exhibit managers represent the manufacturing/distribution sector, with top industries including technology, manufacturing, and wholesale trade. Exhibiting company size varied from one to four employees (6 percent) to 5,000 or more (11 percent), and annual revenue ranges from less than \$1 million (9 percent) to \$1 billion or more (14 percent). Meanwhile, the majority of vendor/supplier responses (53 percent) were from managers/executives, and 58 percent work for exhibit producers, resellers, or builders. The size of vendor/supplier operations varied considerably from one to four employees (17 percent) to more than 500 employees (7 percent). Similarly, annual sales-revenue numbers ranged from less than \$2.5 million (32 percent) to more than \$30 million (17 percent).

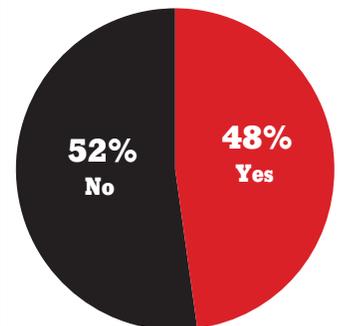
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"I'm taking this downtime to rethink strategies and build better ones. My team has often said that we wish we could take a year off attending shows to really reevaluate our strategies. Well, we got our wish."

— Marketing Operations  
Project Manager

Do you anticipate long-term budgetary impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



"We are planning ahead with the extra time and looking at ways to enhance what we're able to do once we can meet again."

— Marketing Manager