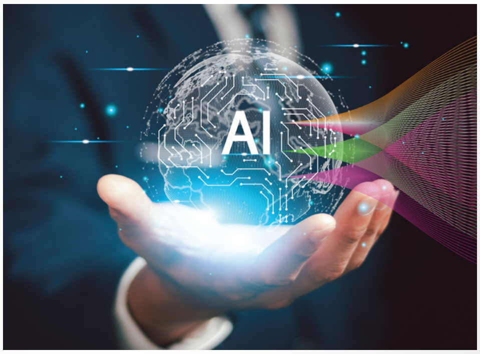
MPI

MEETINGS OUTLOOK™



There's growing positive sentiment for the year ahead in events and in-person attendance this quarter.

2026 Q1 EDITION

OPTIMISM, challenges and AI

MPI MEETINGS OUTLOOK™

BY MICHAEL PINCHERA

As 2026 begins, event professional sentiment breaks through an important positivity threshold while still contending with growing costs and expectations.

Event industry sentiment for the year ahead and in-person attendance expectations reveal growing optimism even though challenges are evident, according to findings from MPI's Q1 2026 Meetings Outlook survey. Most notably, budgets are not projected to keep pace along with greater stakeholder demands. And while the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in this industry has zoomed into widespread adoption, there are hints of event professional overwhelm and/or concern with the tech.

"From where I sit, the biggest shifts are rising costs, higher expectations and very little patience for meetings that don't clearly justify the time commitment," said Thomas Bryson (MPI Minnesota Chapter), director of member services and outreach at Twin Cities NECA, in his Meetings Outlook survey comments. "Food and beverage, AV and labor continue to climb, so events have to be planned with real intention. You can't afford autopilot anymore."

Bryson's insights continued, effectively distilling the most notable trends reported by event professionals this quarter.

"At the same time, attendees are more selective about when they show up in person," he explained. "When they do, it's because they're looking for connection, relevance and practical value, not just another date on the calendar. I'm seeing smaller, more focused gatherings outperform larger, unfocused events every time. I also use technology and AI

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> ***"The most significant trends I'm seeing are a continued shift toward fewer but more meaningful in-person events****, higher expectations around production value and experience design and a stronger focus on measurable outcomes."*

MICHAEL FARRELL, MTA
MPI CAROLINAS CHAPTER
Director of Development, Van Wagner

tools regularly to streamline planning, tighten communication and eliminate unnecessary friction behind the scenes. The payoff is simple: more time and energy to focus on people, relationships and delivering a strong experience in the room."

The big-picture Meetings Outlook data point found more than half of respondents (57%) anticipate favorable business conditions over the next year. This current result is the most positive from the past four quarters, but still significantly below the record-high optimism expressed from late 2020 to early 2025.

Respondents had similarly positive projections for in-person attendance over the same timeframe with 60% expecting favorable movement. Many are not eyeing significant changes, however, as 39% of respondents anticipate in-person attendance growth of less than 5%.

Concerningly, budget projections over the next year have, for the second consecutive quarter, decoupled from moving in conjunction with the overall business projections and live attendance projections. Positive budget projections are essentially flat quarter-over-quarter with 53% of respondents expecting favorable budget changes.

AI: Powerful and disruptive

With regard to specific trends impacting the events landscape, AI shined prominently in Q1 with 70% of respondents saying they use AI regularly. Year-over-year, that's up from 43%.

Curiously, though, event professionals' self-reported ability to use AI for the delivery of meaningful experiences and events has dropped over that same period. One-third of respondents rated their AI ability as "excellent" or "good," compared to 43% who said the same the previous year. Two possible reasons for this change could be a feeling of overwhelm due to the astounding growth in AI options—both in the variety of AI services and the depth to which they can be used—and/or event professionals feeling that their AI skills aren't keeping pace with what's possible.

Event professionals also reported a downward shift in their overall sentiment regarding this booming technology, appreciating the benefits AI avails while more cognizant of the potential challenges or threats that come along with it. Survey data revealed a decline in the percentage of respondents who view AI as "very positive" (20%, down from 26% this time last year) and an increase in the percentage who view it as "somewhat negative" (11%, up from 7% the previous year). That said, 62% still shared a positive sentiment.

"AI remains the most powerful and disruptive force in the meeting industry. The technology has the potential to make every aspect of the guest, planner and stakeholder experience better and more streamlined, but also entails serious risks from professionals becoming over reliant on the tool and security/privacy risks from data leakage events or data scraping by tech companies that control the AI products," explained Adam Nelson (MPI Michigan Chapter), event specialist at Creative Day Technologies, in his survey comments. "I believe that the most successful meeting professionals in 2026 will be the ones who look seriously and creatively at AI and use it not as a blunt instrument, but as an endless toolbelt. Some problems are nails, some are screws, and AI can, when used thoughtfully, be the right tool for the job."

The Q1 2026 Meetings Outlook survey was open Dec. 8-Jan. 5 and received a total of 179 unique responses, of which 54% were from meeting and event planners and 46% were from industry suppliers. The following pages present this quarter's results alongside that of previous surveys to help you visualize the movement in these and other important data points.

BUSINESS CONDITIONS

Projected business conditions over the next year are the most positive seen in Meetings Outlook since Q1 2025 with 57% expecting a favorable landscape. This is 10 percentage points higher than the best from the past year—which was 47% in Q3—but does remain down compared with results from "normal"/healthier times.

	Q2 '25	Q3 '25	Q4 '25	Q1 '26
Favorable	31%	47%	45%	57%
Neutral	12%	14%	19%	18%
Negative	57%	43%	36%	36%

"There is a clear shift toward smaller, *more curated meetings with higher engagement."*

MARTHA RANGEL, CPS
MPI CARIBE MEXICO CHAPTER
Manager, Turism

BUDGET PROJECTIONS

A majority of respondents (53%) expect favorable budgets for the year ahead, essentially the same as last quarter. Budget projection data have not improved at the rate seen in overall business and in-person attendance projections, two metrics that budget projections often mirror in movement. Digging deeper: Only 9% of respondents expect budgets to increase more than 10% this year while an additional 9% anticipate a budget decline greater than 6%.

	Q2 '25	Q3 '25	Q4 '25	Q1 '26
Favorable	36%	47%	54%	53%
Flat	23%	23%	15%	23%
Negative	40%	30%	31%	23%

*“**Organizations are being far more selective about where they want to invest event dollars**, and they want partners who can help them justify the spend with clear ROI, stronger engagement and experiences that elevate their brand. At the same time, planning timelines are getting shorter and clients are looking for turnkey support that still allows for customization and creativity.”*

ANDREA YATES
MPI DALLAS/FORT WORTH CHAPTER
Business Development Director, Inspire Event Technologies

ATTENDANCE FORECASTS

In-person attendance projections continue to move in alignment with the overall business condition projections as 60% of respondents expect favorable live attendance over the next year. A majority of respondents anticipate in-person attendance growth of less than 10% while one-fifth expect no growth and 21% expect to see a decrease.

Projected Live Attendance

	Q2 ‘25	Q3 ‘25	Q4 ‘25	Q1 ‘26
Positive	36%	47%	44%	60%
Flat	16%	19%	24%	20%
Negative	48%	35%	32%	21%

Virtual attendance projections remain generally flat but with a dip in the percentage of respondents expecting favorable conditions.

Projected Virtual Attendance

	Q2 ‘25	Q3 ‘25	Q4 ‘25	Q1 ‘26
Positive	32%	31%	30%	25%
Flat	38%	36%	47%	49%
Negative	30%	32%	24%	25%

AI & EVENTS

It's no surprise that AI use by event professionals has skyrocketed since late 2023. But the extent to which it has grown is impressive. In Q1 2026, 70% of respondents said they use AI regularly. Last year, 43% said the same; in Q4 2023 only 22% regularly used the tech.

How often do you use generative AI technologies such as ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, Gemini, Grok, etc.?

	Q4 '23	Q1 '25	Q1 '26
Regularly	22%	43%	70%
Rarely	30%	40%	26%
Not at all	48%	17%	3%

Interestingly, event professionals' self-reported ability to use AI for the delivery of meaningful experiences and events has dropped year-over-year. In Q1 2026, only 8% rated their ability as "excellent," down slightly from 9% last year. Additionally, this quarter, 25% rated this ability as "good," down from 34% in Q1 2025.

Rate your ability to use AI on the delivery of meaningful experiences and events.

	Q4 '23	Q1 '25	Q1 '26
Excellent	5%	9%	8%
Good	25%	34%	25%
Average	46%	40%	47%
Poor	19%	15%	18%
Terrible	6%	1%	2%

Q1 2026 data saw a slight downward turn in event professionals' overall sentiment towards the integration of AI in the meeting landscape with fewer respondents expressing a "very positive" sentiment and more sharing "somewhat negative" sentiment towards AI. The overall sentiment, however, remains positive.

Rate your overall sentiment towards the integration of AI technologies in the meeting and event business landscape.

	Q4 '23	Q1 '25	Q1 '26
Positive	50%	68%	62%
Neutral	31%	23%	26%
Negative	19%	8%	12%

*"AI is an element that is still challenging to understand how to utilize most effectively [especially] for a business that is **so heavily reliant on actual human interaction.** I know it's a tool that has the potential for efficiencies and won't put all the people out of business, but it can be hard to keep up with and integrate in a timely fashion."*

ANONYMOUS CANADIAN SUPPLIER

ECONOMIC IMPACT DATA

We hear a lot about the economic impact of meetings and events on the local host community; however, most planners say they rarely or never collect this data. Meanwhile, a majority of suppliers report collecting event economic impact data at least "often." Curiously, 77% of all respondents expressed that economic impact data is at least "slightly important" to their internal and external stakeholders.

How consistently do you or your organization collect economic impact data of your in-person meetings and events on the local host community?

	Planners	Suppliers
All the time	6%	21%
Most of the time	13%	15%
Often	10%	25%
Rarely	43%	23%
Never	28%	16%

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