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Executive Summary
Looking Forward® Challenges 2026

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Letter from the President

Associations are operating in a period defined not only by disruption but also by the collapse of many of the assumptions that historically sustained the association business model.

For more than a decade, Association Laboratory's Looking Forward® research has tracked the strategic pressures shaping the future of the association sector. The 2026 data make one reality increasingly clear: The challenges associations face are not temporary, cyclical, or isolated. They are structural, reflecting fundamental shifts in how professionals engage, how employers invest, how markets compete, and how trust, community, and value are created.

This year's research reveals a sector struggling to reconcile static assumptions and slow decision-making with an increasingly dynamic and uncertain environment. While economic conditions stabilized more than many anticipated during 2025, the underlying pressures facing associations intensified. Membership concerns now dominate the strategic landscape, with associations wrestling not only with retention, but with a more foundational challenge: defining a compelling role in the lives of professionals before they ever choose to join.

At the same time, traditional pillars of association strategy, including meetings, sponsorship, advocacy, governance, and education, are being reshaped by evolving employer expectations, political volatility, digital competition, technological acceleration, and growing skepticism about institutional value. Across nearly every strategic domain studied, respondents identified barriers that are remarkably consistent year-over-year, suggesting that the sector's greatest risks are embedded in long-standing business models and governance structures rather than in isolated market conditions.

Associations can no longer assume employer support for participation, travel, or dues reimbursement. They can no longer rely on historical loyalty, legacy governance systems, or incremental adaptation as sufficient responses to market change. Associations compete not only with one another but also with employers, commercial firms, and alternative communities that are all vying for the same professional relationship space.

Yet this moment also presents an opportunity.

Associations willing to challenge historical assumptions, invest in deeper market understanding, modernize decision-making, and redefine how they create value may emerge stronger, more relevant, and more resilient. The future will likely belong to associations that operate with greater agility, clearer differentiation, and a sharper understanding of the evolving realities facing their members and industries.

The purpose of *Looking Forward® Challenges 2026* is not simply to identify problems, but to help association leaders engage in the enterprise-level conversations necessary to navigate this changing environment successfully. We hope the data, analysis, and insights contained in this report support thoughtful leadership, strategic reflection, and meaningful action as associations prepare for the decade ahead.



Dean West, FASAE
President and Founder
Association Laboratory Inc.



Thanks to Our Strategic Partners

Association Laboratory would like to thank CE21 for their essential contributions to the continued collection and dissemination of quality association sector research.

CE21

CE21 is a cloud-based technology and services company that provides a full-service Learning Management System (LMS) that delivers distance education, online registration, and physical product sales solutions.

The company serves professional education verticals including Legal, Accounting, Health Care, Insurance, Business, Education Content Providers, Professional & Trade Associations, and Non-Profit Organizations.

Association Laboratory uses CE21's LMS system to increase its capacity and capability to provide cutting-edge content to association leaders. You can see the system in action at the [Association Laboratory's Knowledge Center](#).

CE21's award-winning LMS can help your organization deliver a best-in-class e-learning experience designed specifically for your most important customers – your learners.

Built for today but designed with the flexibility to take on tomorrow's changing needs, CE21 provides an elegant, mobile-optimized online learning environment that will transform your organization into a 24/7 on-demand value provider.

For more information visit [CE21.com](https://ce21.com).



Economic Circumstances Facing Association Members

In 2014, Association Laboratory’s sector research on behalf of the ASAE Foundation identified the link between the economic circumstances facing members and member organizations and their likelihood of engagement with the association.

Historically, the more economic hardship faced by association members, the less likely they were to engage with an association. In Looking Forward® Challenges, we asked respondents to identify the anticipated economic circumstances of their members during the upcoming year.

In 2026, as in 2025, just 7% of associations anticipate their members facing a more positive economic climate in the coming year.

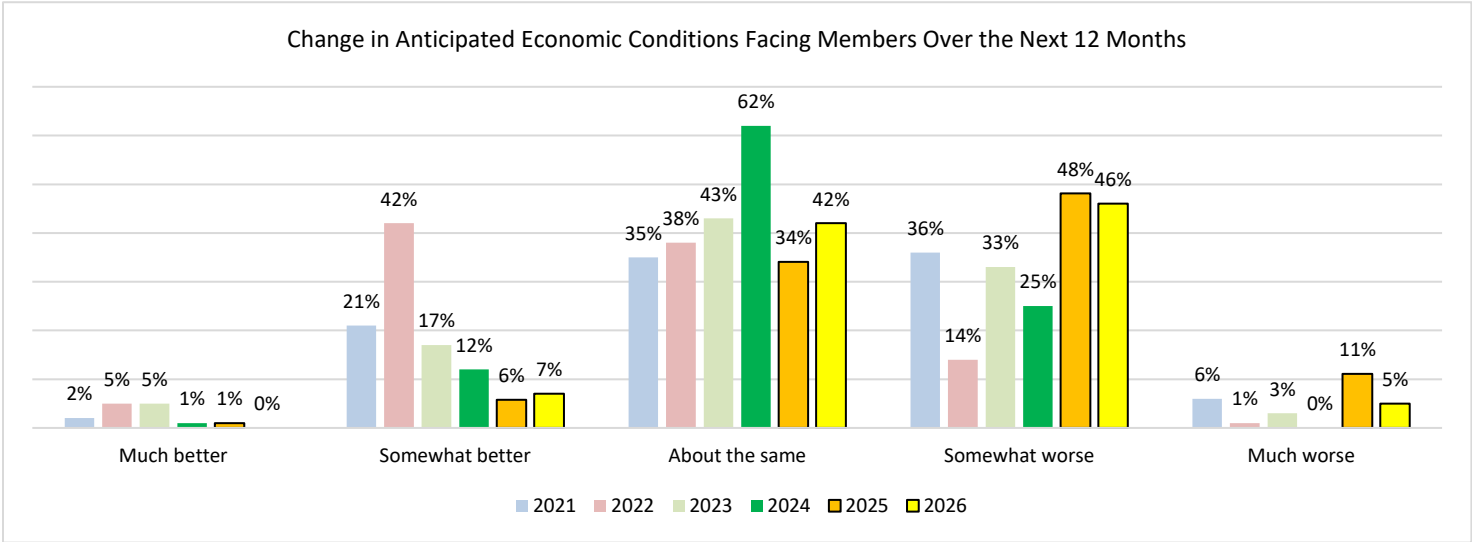


FIGURE 1 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026
Question text: What will be the economic situation facing your members over the next 12 months?

Meanwhile, 51% of respondents anticipate a worse economic climate for their members in the coming year.

The economic uncertainty currently faced by associations and their members makes it all the more essential for leaders to carefully assess their association’s role and value in their members’ lives.

Leaders must continue assessing the future economic climate facing their members and understanding the impacts, challenges, and opportunities this climate presents to the association.

The Challenges Facing Association Strategies

Looking Forward® Challenges assesses challenges across 10 association strategy domains. Participants identified the most significant challenges to their association’s success within these strategies.

Strategic Concerns

Looking Forward® Challenges asked respondents to identify the association strategy domains most likely to face challenges in the near future (next three years). The following five charts show the responses in 2026, 2025, 2024, 2023, and 2022 and identify the level of concern respondents have for each strategy (shown in descending order based on the “Concerned” data).

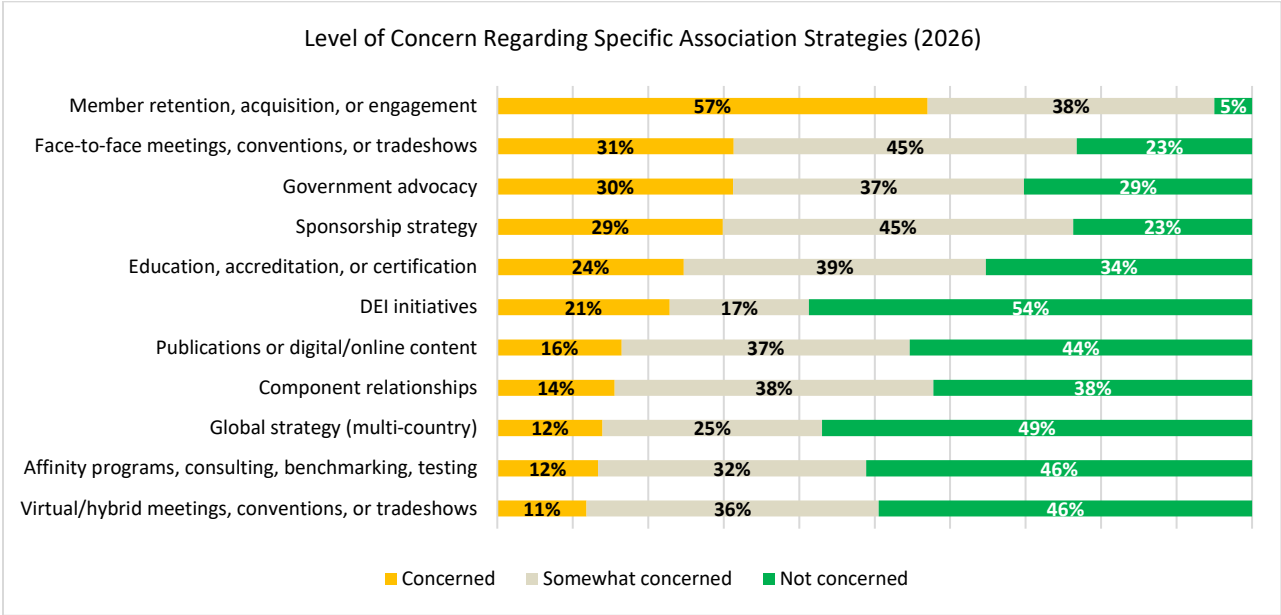


FIGURE 2 LOOKING FORWARD CHALLENGES 2026
Question text: How concerned are you about each of the following association strategies over the next three years?

As in past years, member retention, acquisition, or engagement is the top strategic concern, with more than half of responding associations concerned and another 38% somewhat concerned.

While in 2025 respondents had a higher level of concern about a variety of issues, in 2026 concerns are primarily centered on membership issues.

Level of Concern Regarding Specific Association Strategies (2025)

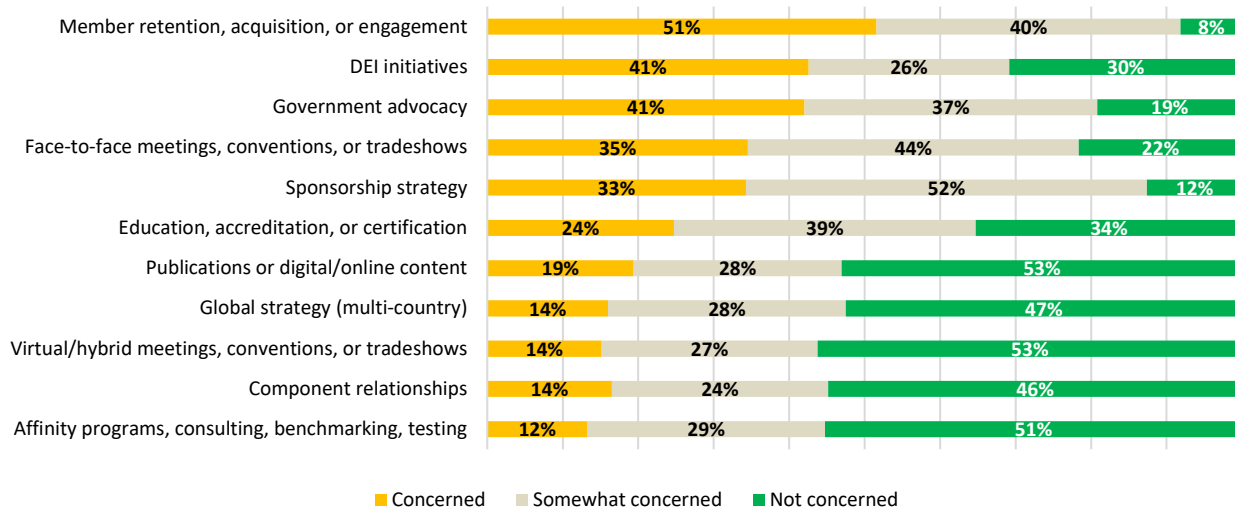


FIGURE 3 LOOKING FORWARD CHALLENGES 2025

Question text: How concerned are you about each of the following association strategies over the next three years?

Level of Concern Regarding Specific Association Strategies (2024)

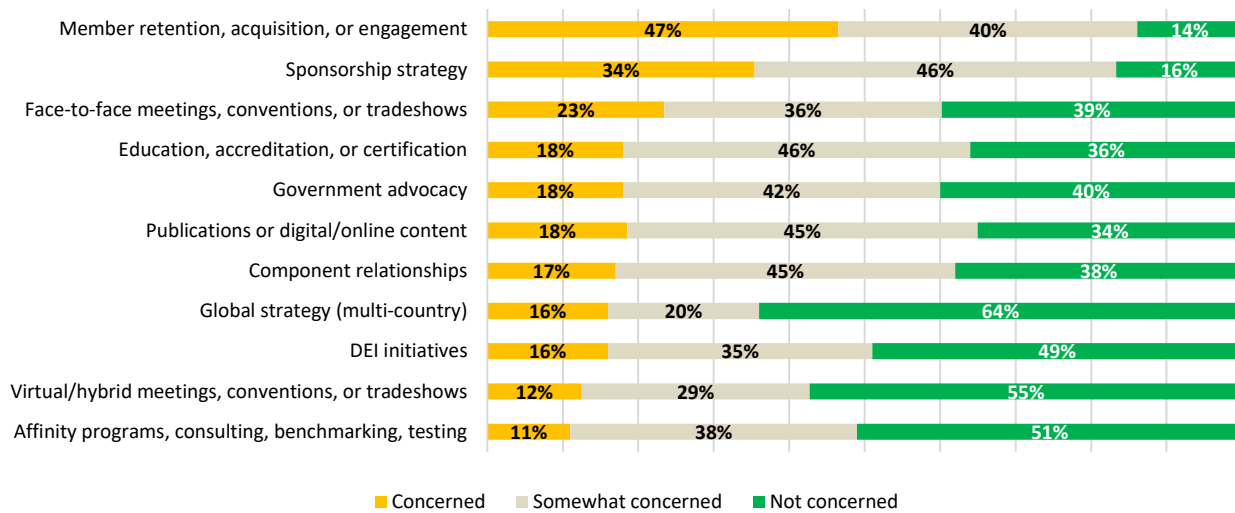


FIGURE 4 LOOKING FORWARD CHALLENGES 2024

Question text: How concerned are you about each of the following association strategies over the next three years?

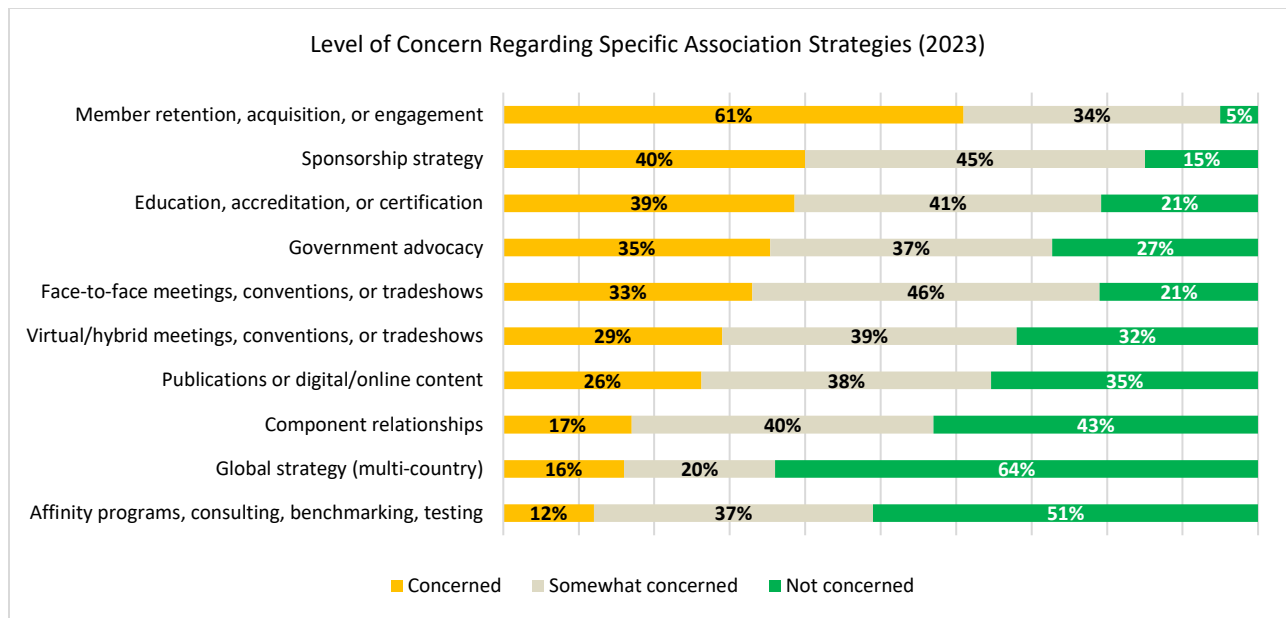


FIGURE 5 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT 2023

Question text: How concerned are you about each of the following association strategies over the next three years?

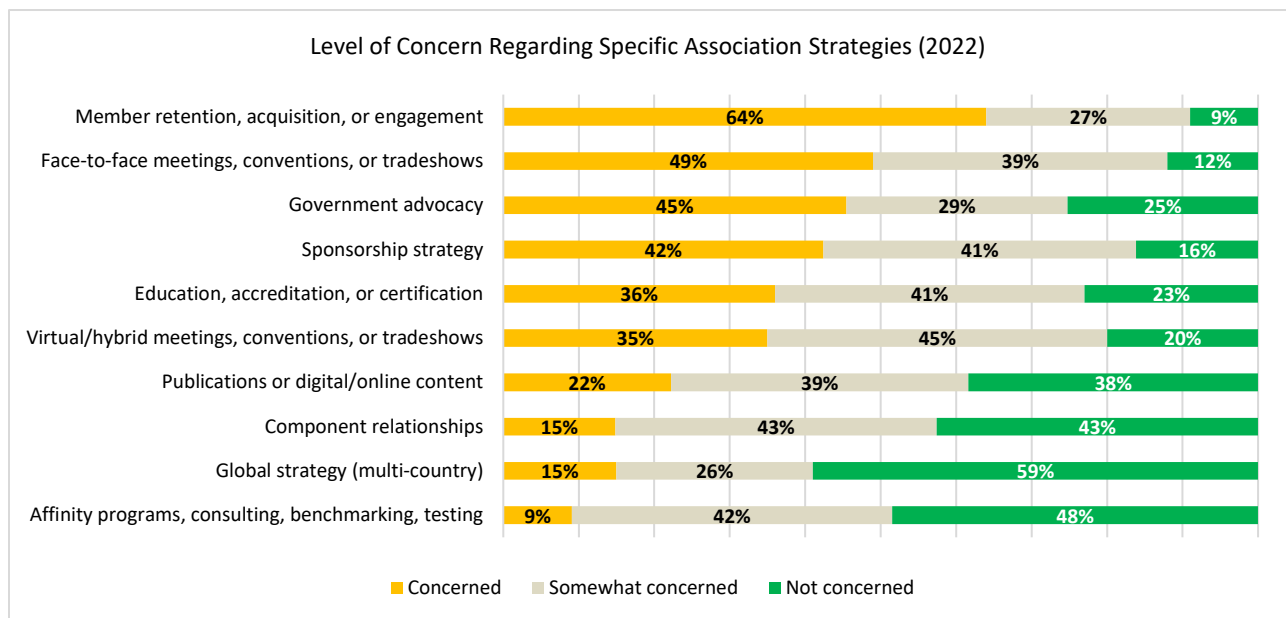


FIGURE 6 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT 2022

Question text: How concerned are you about each of the following association strategies over the next three years?

Challenges to Face-to-Face Meetings Strategy

The following are the primary anticipated challenges of a face-to-face meeting strategy.

After an increase in 2025, 2026 saw further increases in concern about employer travel restrictions (62%, up from 45% in 2025), remaining the top challenge to face-to-face meeting strategy.

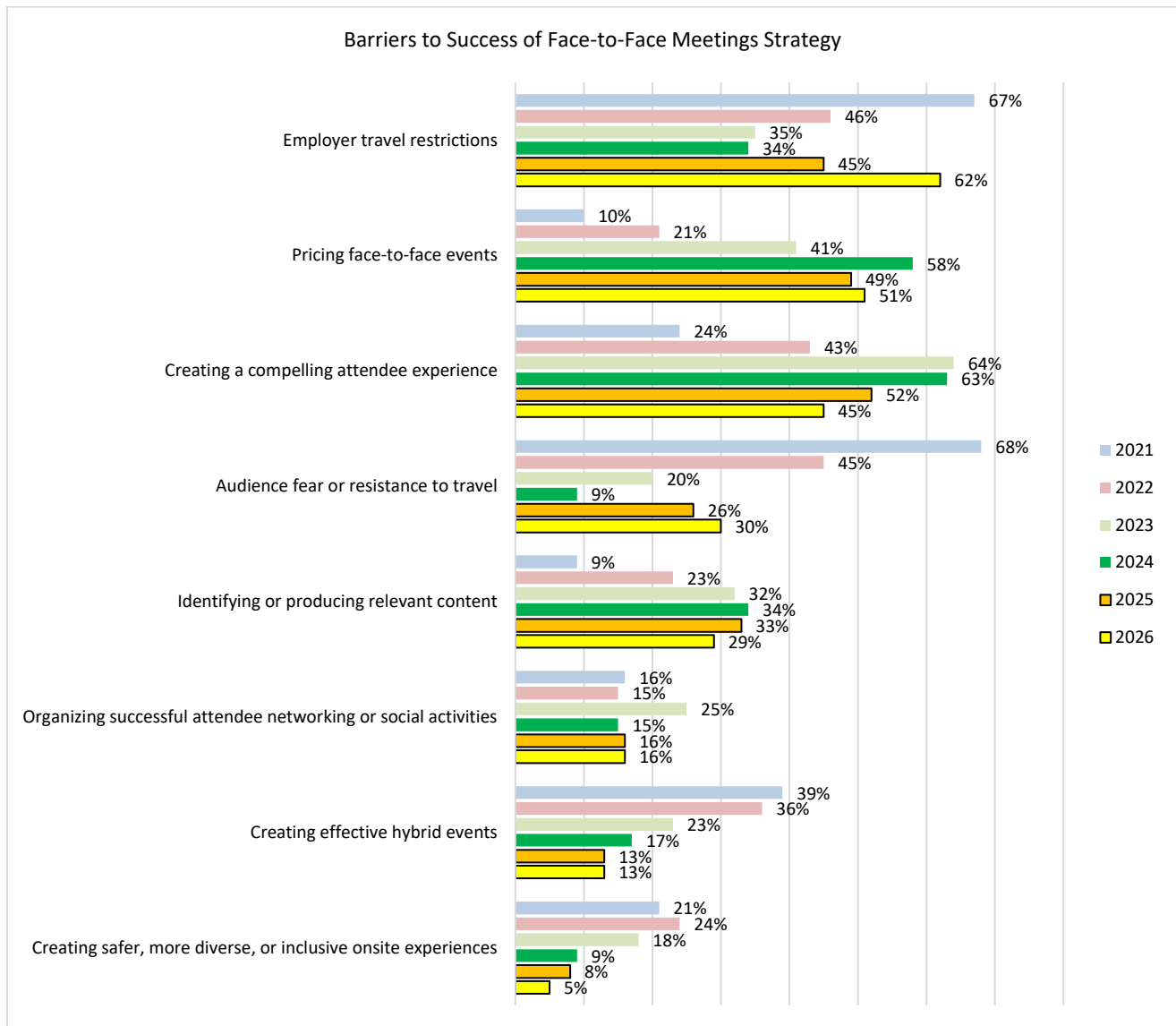


FIGURE 7 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your face-to-face meetings? Select up to three.
(Respondents indicating concern regarding face-to-face meetings only)

Challenges to Membership Strategy

Membership is a foundational strategy essential to the success of most associations. The following are the primary anticipated challenges to this strategy.

The 2026 data show the continued importance of creating positive awareness of the association among non-members.

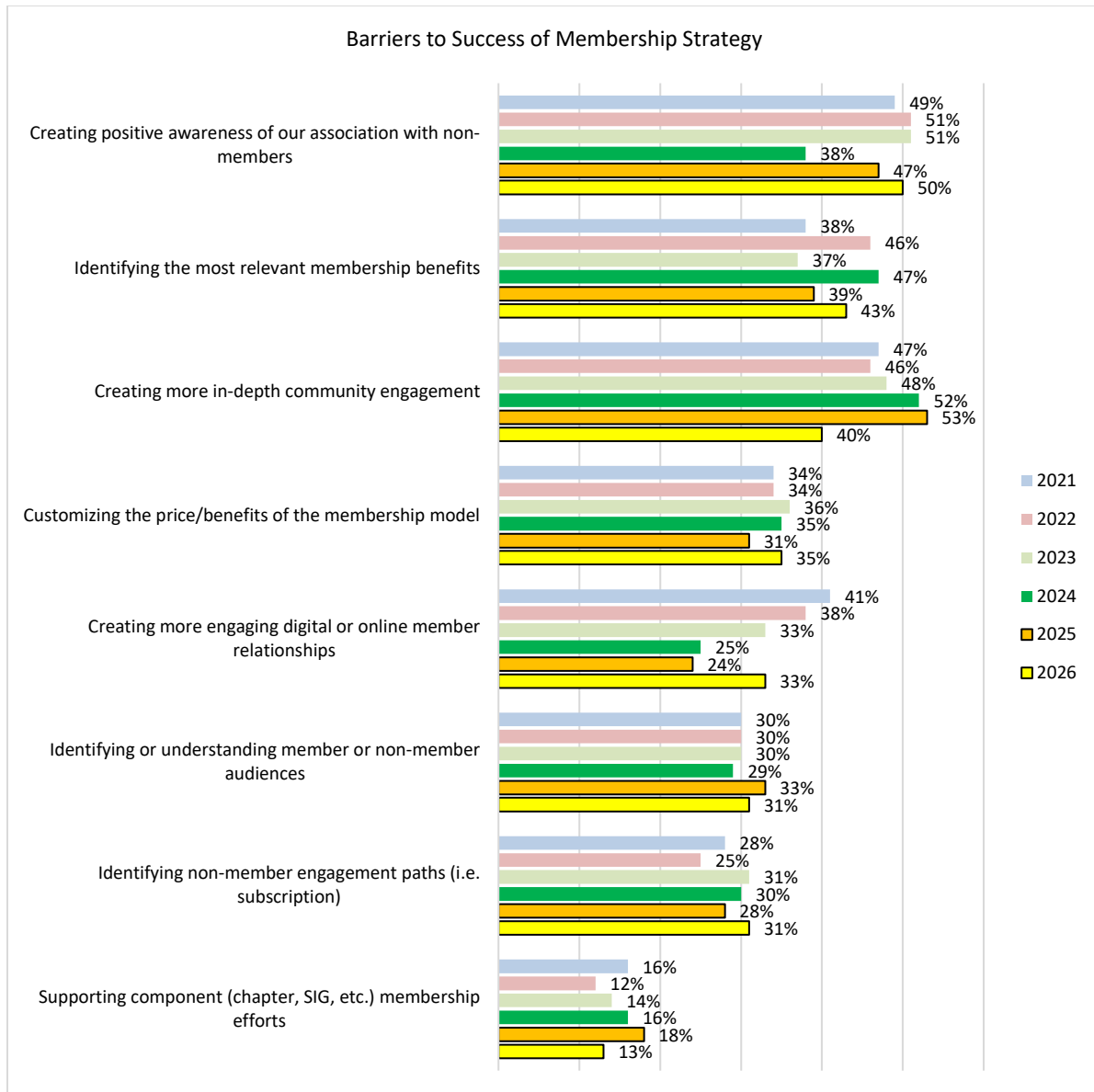


FIGURE 8 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your membership strategy? Select up to three.
(Respondents indicating concern regarding membership strategy only)

Challenges to Exhibits or Sponsor Strategy

Supplier support of associations is often essential to a sustainable financial model. The following are the primary anticipated challenges to this strategy.

Concern about the effect of company budget cuts/marketing reductions on exhibits or sponsor strategy remains high in 2026.

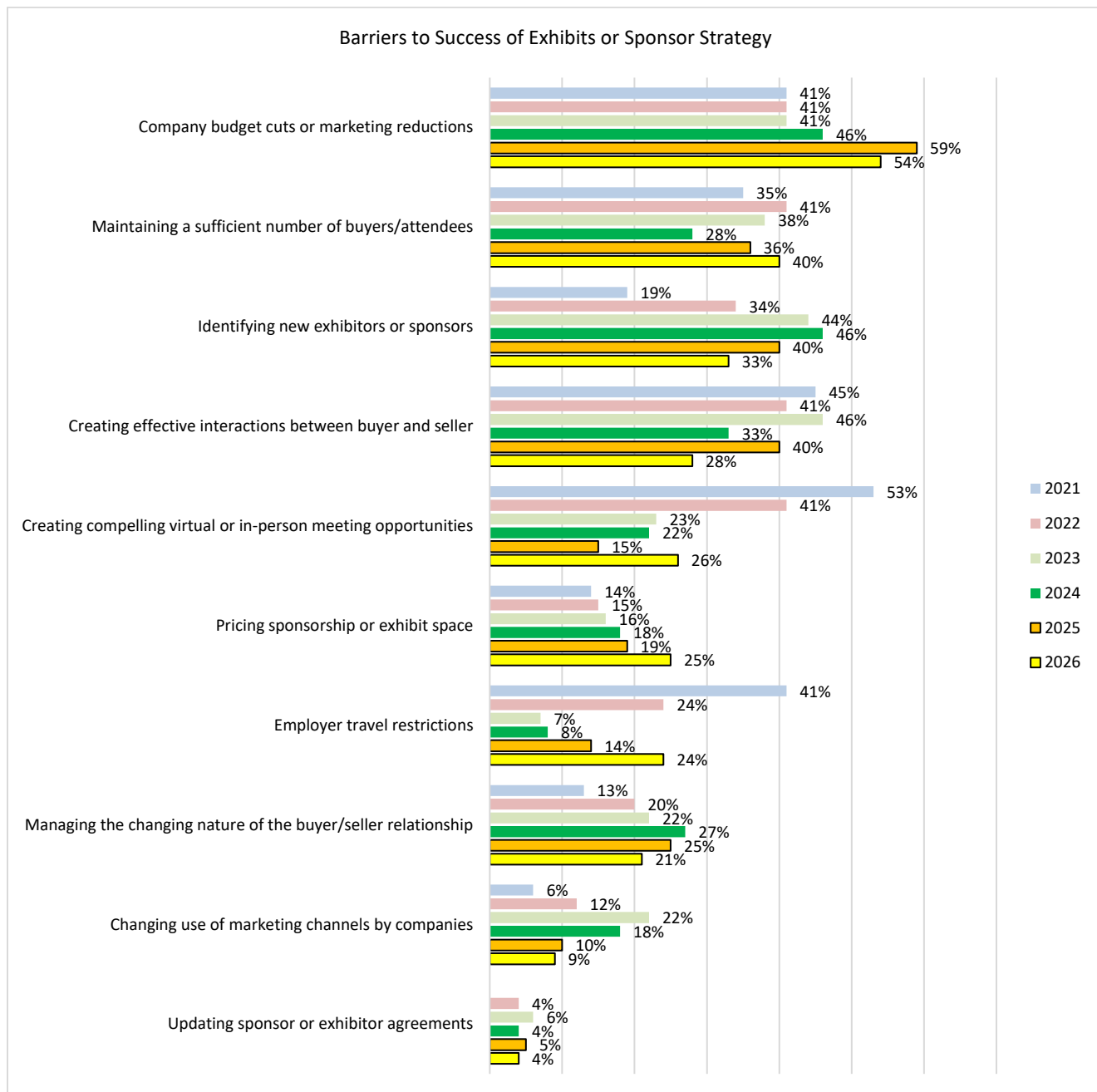


FIGURE 9 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your exhibitor or sponsor strategies? Select up to three.
 (Respondents indicating concern regarding exhibitor/sponsorship strategy only)

Challenges to Virtual/Hybrid Meetings Strategy

Many associations have adjusted their strategy to offer members and stakeholders virtual or hybrid meeting options. The following are the primary anticipated challenges to this strategy. The data for 2026 show an increase in concern about registration pricing.

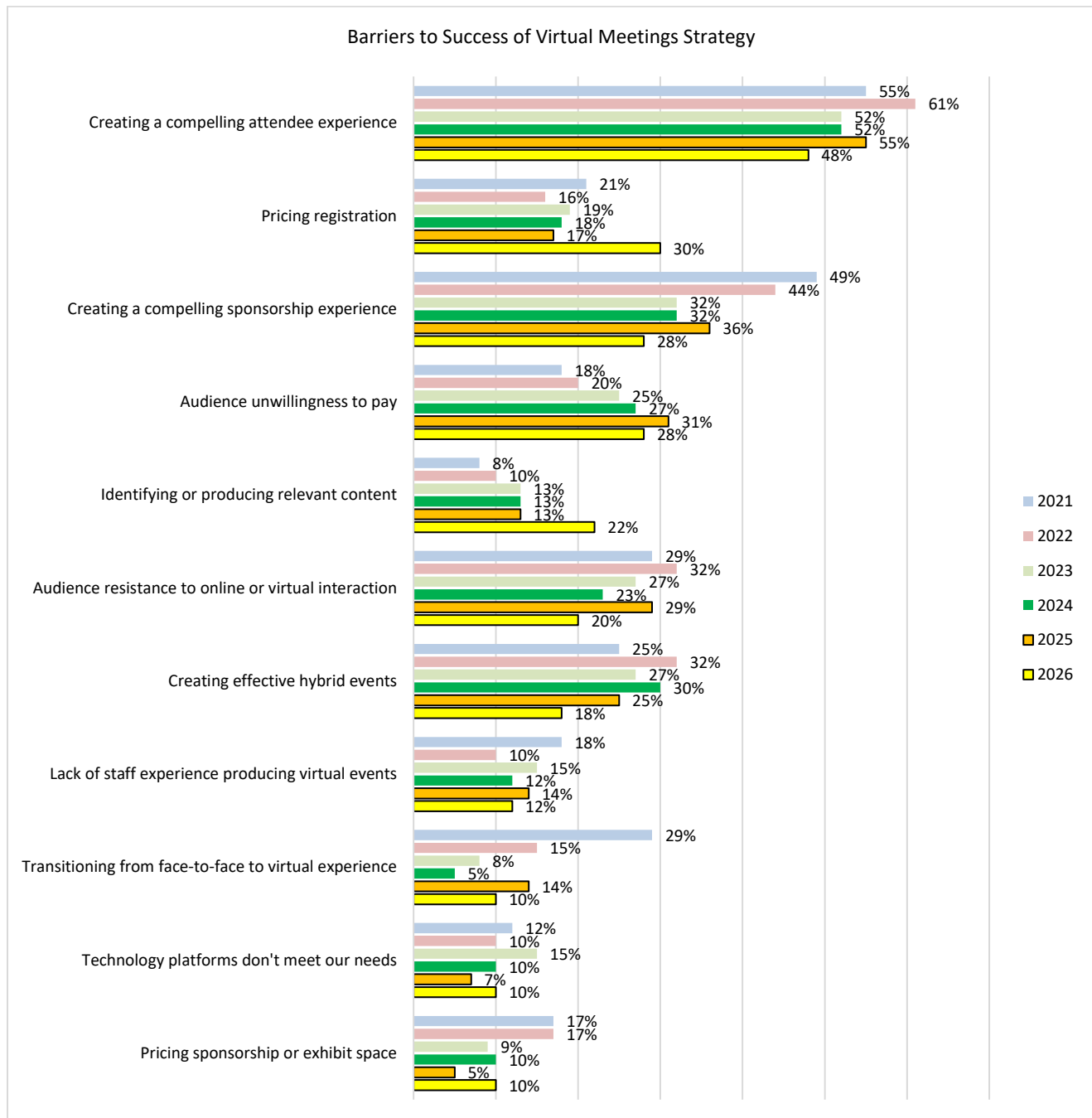


FIGURE 10 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your virtual meetings? Select up to three.

(Respondents indicating concern regarding virtual meeting strategy only)

Challenges to Government Advocacy Strategy

Many associations act as an aggregating, unifying voice for their industry or profession. The following are the primary anticipated challenges to this strategy.

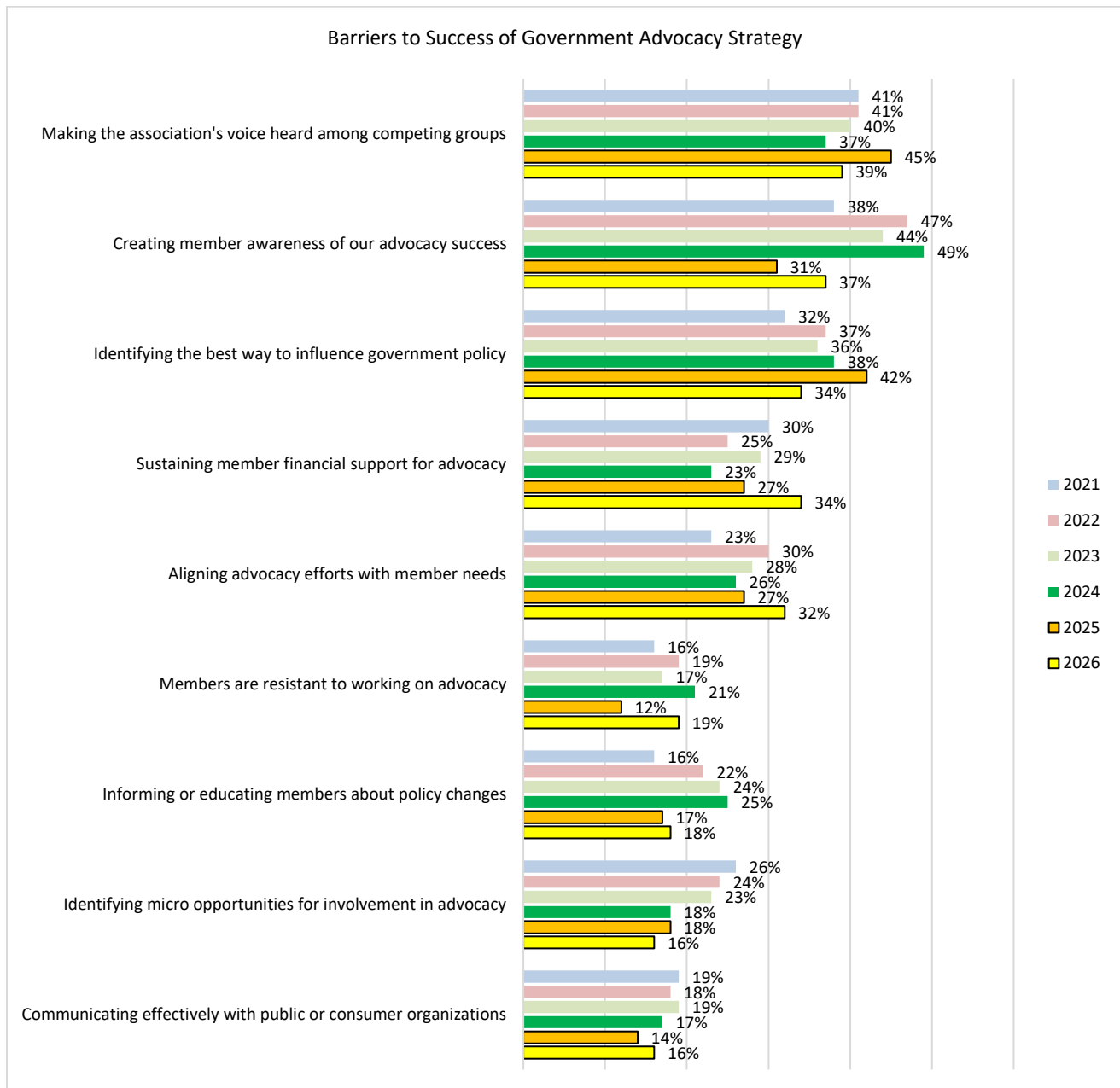


FIGURE 11 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your government advocacy strategy? Select up to three.
(Respondents indicating concern regarding government advocacy strategy only)

Challenges to Education Strategy

Education is central to many associations' missions. The following are the anticipated challenges to this strategy. Of note in 2026 is an increase in concerns about perceptions of credibility—both association credibility as an information source, and the credibility of specific credentials.

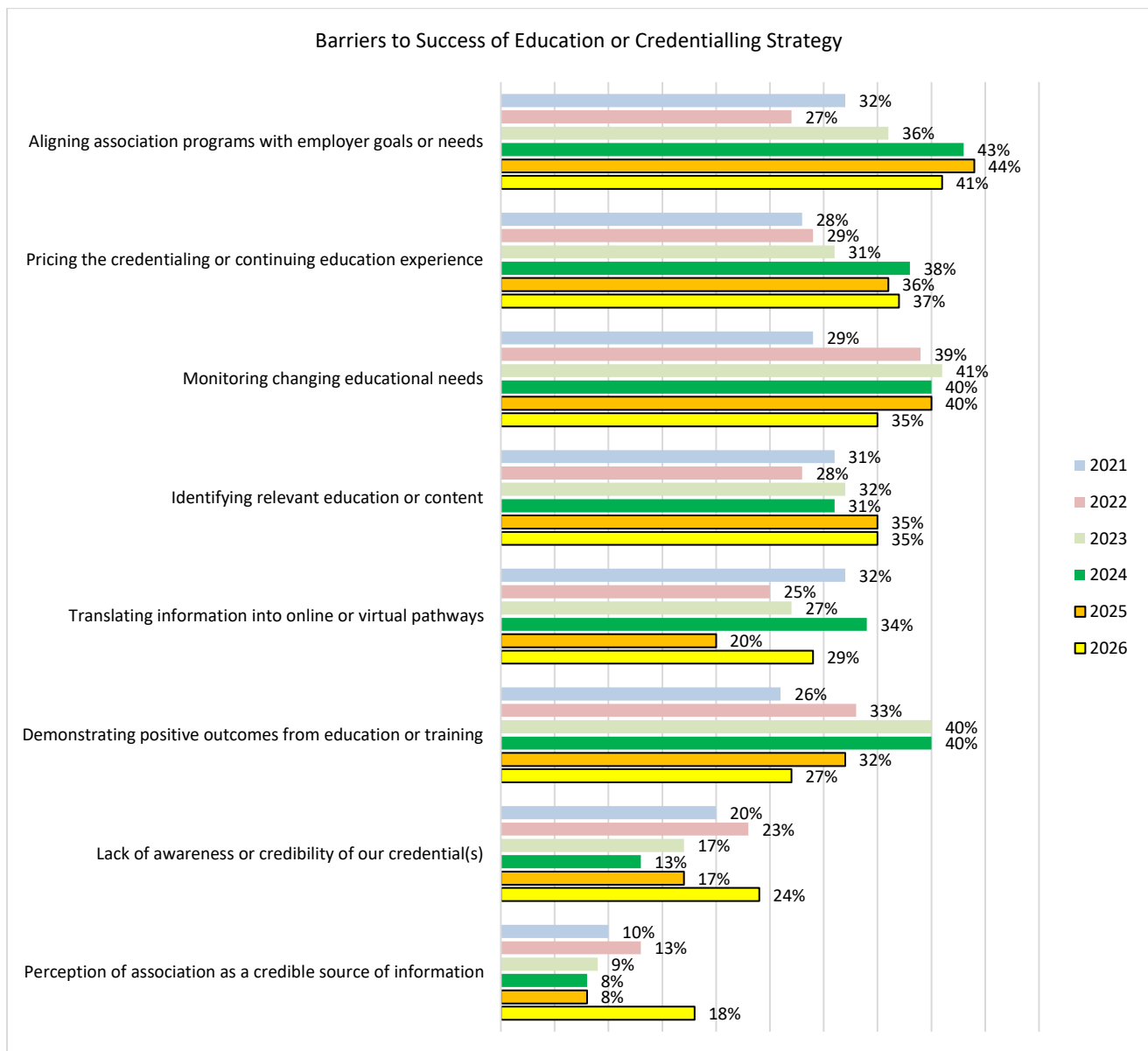


FIGURE 12 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your education or credential (certification/accreditation) strategy?

Select up to three.

(Respondents indicating concern regarding education/credentialing strategy only)

Challenges to Publications or Content Strategy

One of the most substantial strategies for associations is creating, vetting, and disseminating relevant information. The following are the anticipated challenges to this strategy.

The 2026 data show a marked increase in concern about sustaining digital subscriptions or advertising support.

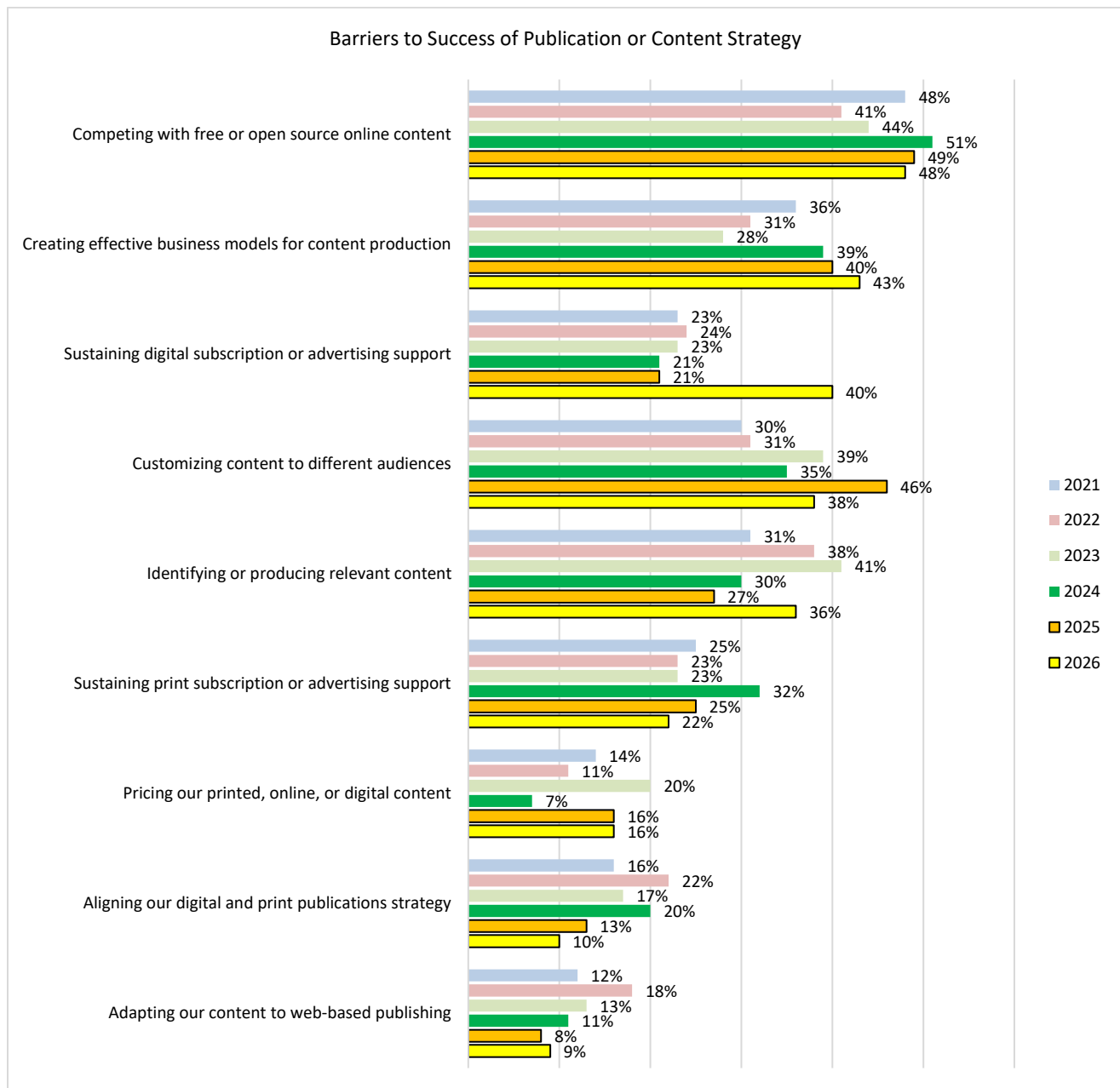


FIGURE 13 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your published, online, or digital content strategy? Select up to three.

(Respondents indicating concern regarding publications/content strategy only)

Challenges to Component Strategy

The component relationship and component strategy are vital to many associations, ranging from efforts at distinct localities to global markets. The following are the anticipated challenges to this strategy. The 2026 data show a continued struggle when it comes to creating effective component/parent relationships.

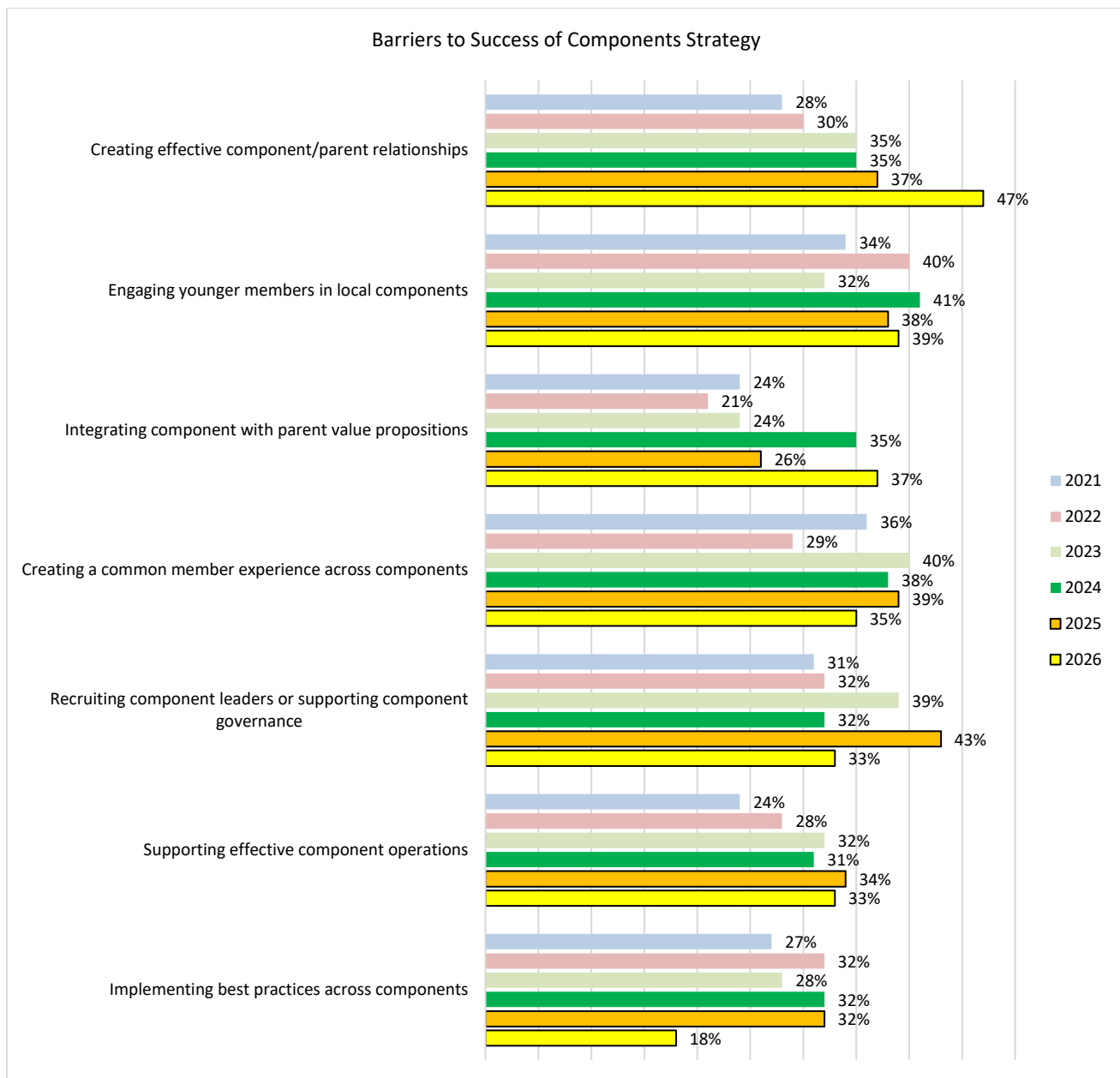


FIGURE 14 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

*Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your component relationships or strategy? Select up to three.
(Respondents indicating concern regarding component strategy only)*

Challenges to Global Strategy

Many associations have an international or global reach, targeting audiences from multiple countries or regions.

Respondents who self-identified as international (serving across two or more countries) were asked to identify the most significant challenges to global strategy.

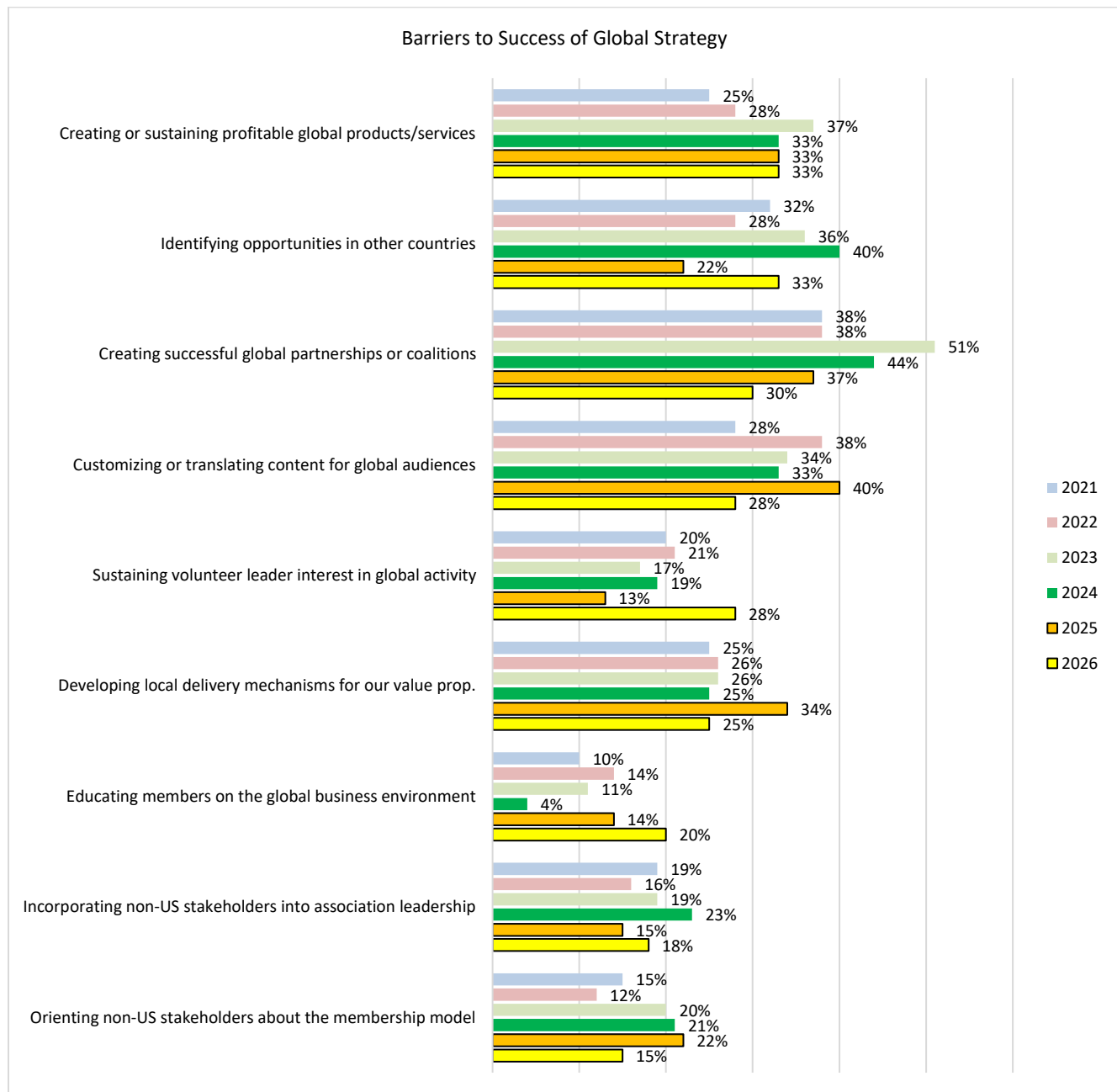


FIGURE 15 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT /CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your global strategy? Select up to three.

(Respondents indicating concern regarding global strategy, and with a 2+ country scope, only)

Challenges to DEI Strategy

As in past years, in 2026 associations appear to be more focused on improving inclusion than working on diversity or equity efforts.



FIGURE 14 LOOKING FORWARD CHALLENGES 2024-2026
Question text: How important will working on each of the following concepts be to your association over the next year?
(All respondents)

As in 2025, respondents' primary concern regarding DEI strategy in 2026 is the need to understand, adapt, or revise DEI and related policies given state and federal action.

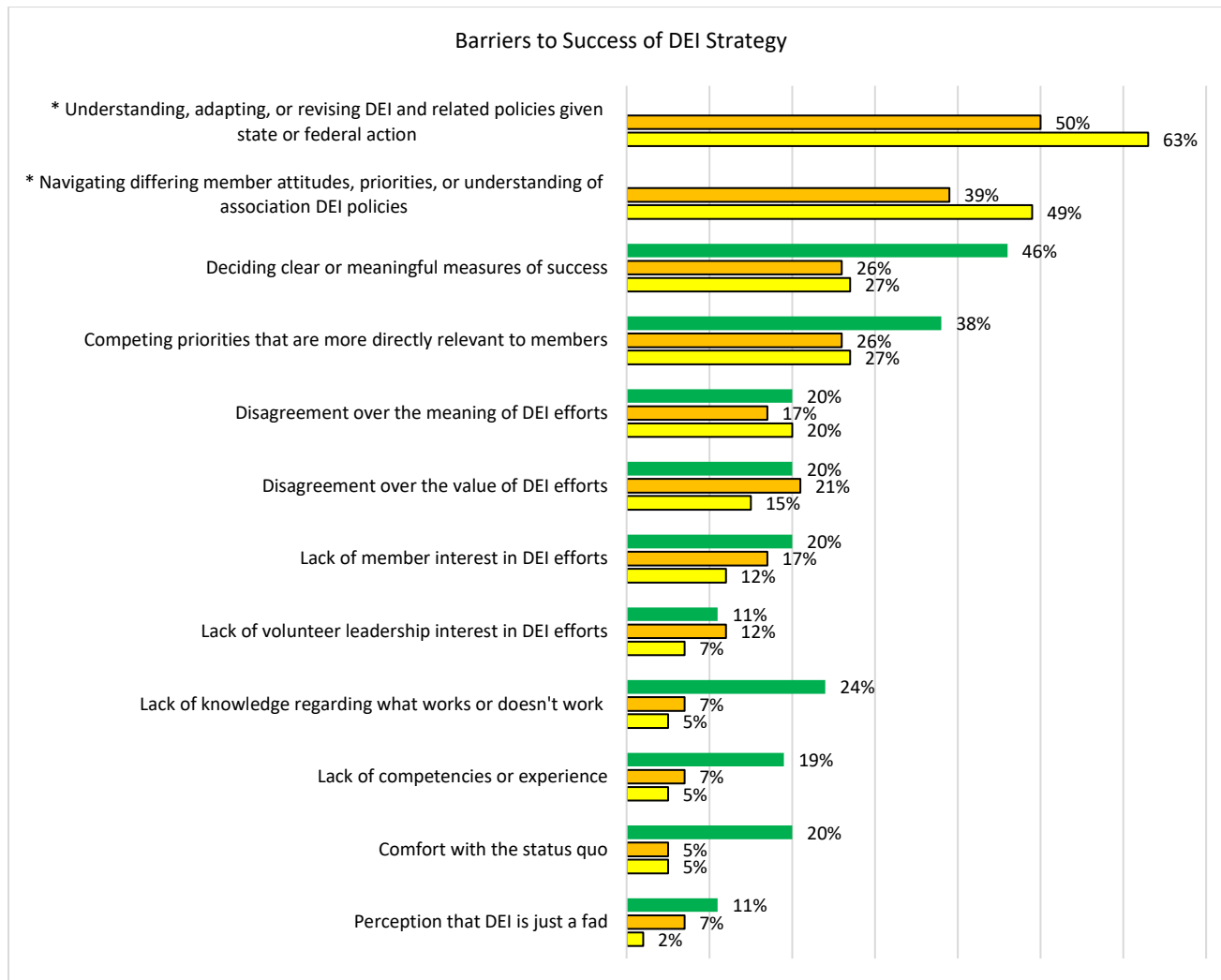


FIGURE 17 LOOKING FORWARD CHALLENGES 2024-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your DEI strategies? Select up to three.
(Respondents indicating concern regarding DEI strategy only)

* New response option for 2025

Challenges to Internal Governance

Faster, better decision-making within associations is an essential condition of success. The following are the anticipated challenges to internal association governance.

In 2026, as in previous years, associations appear to be struggling with creating and sustaining a strategic, future-focused function among the Board and volunteer leaders. Interesting to note, in light of our overall findings on the need to rethink our historical assumptions about the member model, this year associations reported a 10% increase in “leadership resistance to changing audiences of business models.”

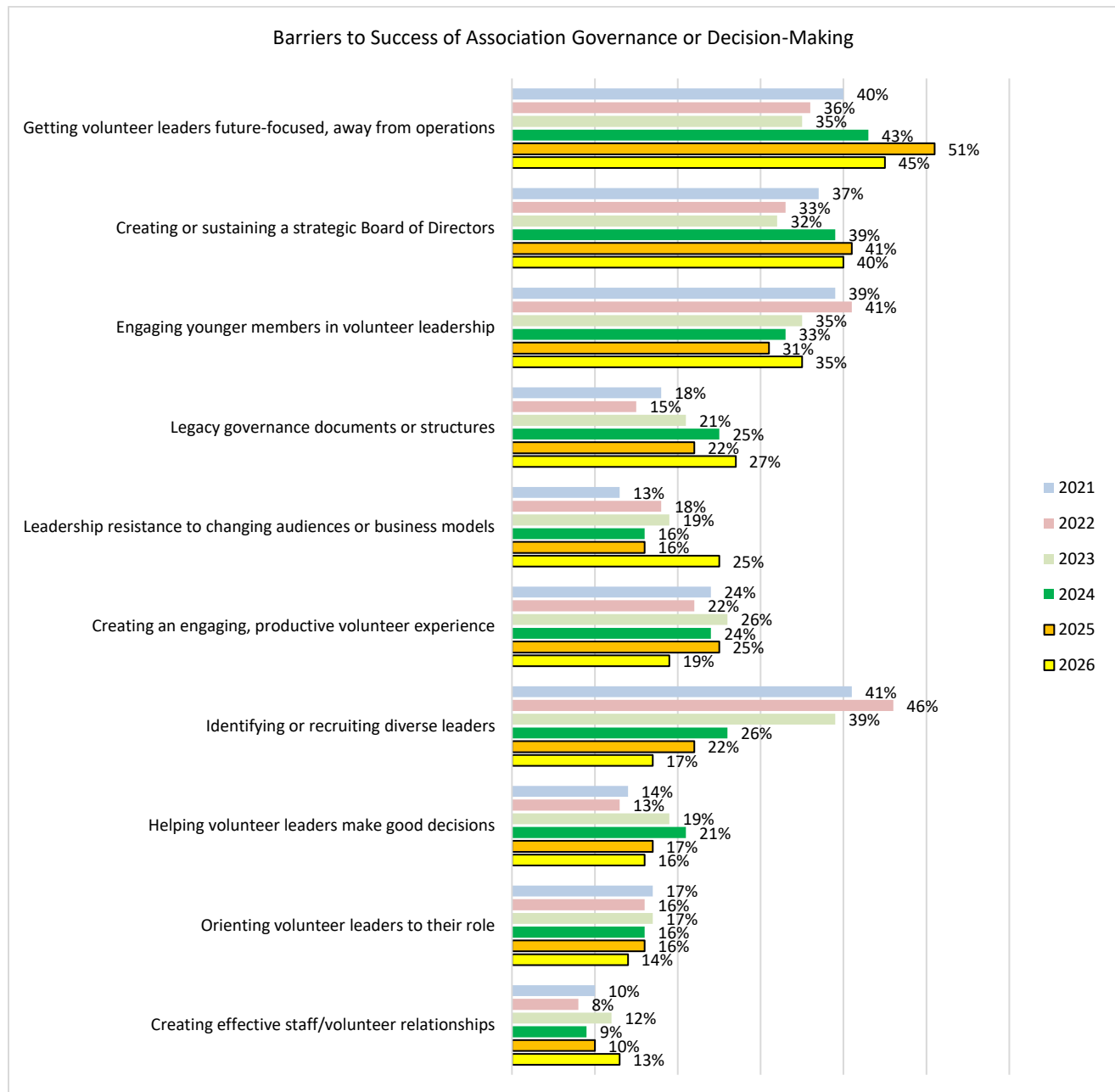


FIGURE 18 LOOKING FORWARD IMPACT/CHALLENGES 2021-2026

Question text: What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your governance or decision-making? Select up to three.
(All respondents)

Closing

Associations continue efforts to adapt to a changing world.

To be successful, it will be vital to answer the following questions.

1. Who are you designing your association to serve?
2. What is the world in which your market lives and works, and what are the implications of their needs?
3. What are they attempting to accomplish within this world relevant to your association?
4. What is their relationship to your association?
5. How is the relationship impacted by alternatives in the market?

The increasing competitive challenge facing associations shows that other entities have recognized the value of building relationships with their communities. They don't necessarily believe your association is the best avenue to create this relationship.

Too many associations are structured around historical assumptions, making them ineffective in a world that has changed so dramatically that those assumptions are obsolete.

Associations that invest in market knowledge, develop business processes to support effective decision-making, and strategically differentiate themselves from competitors are more likely to succeed.

As a new generation of volunteer leaders and executives begins taking their place in leadership, we will have unprecedented tools, resources, and opportunities.

During the next 10 years, we will discover whether our ability as executives will be sufficient to keep the association sector prospering.

Please contact Association Laboratory if you believe we can help in any way.

Good luck.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Looking Forward® Challenges provides an ongoing picture of the challenges associations face as they seek to adapt their strategies and business model to the forces influencing members' professional and business environment.

Association Laboratory developed and deployed an online survey directly and via collaboration with the company's Research Alliance partners. Data collection took place between March 24 and May 4, 2026.

Response options for Looking Forward® Challenges 2026 were originally informed by qualitative research conducted in 2021 with executives from the Association Laboratory Research Alliance, combined with Association Laboratory's extensive experience in environmental scanning on behalf of clients representing a wide range of professions and industries.

The study assesses challenges associations face as they adapt to the changing member environment. Specifically, it investigates challenges in the following 11 association strategy areas:

- Member retention, acquisition, or engagement
- Sponsorship strategy
- Face-to-face meetings, conventions, or tradeshow
- Education, accreditation, or certification
- Government advocacy
- Publications or digital/online content
- Component relationships
- Global strategy (multi-country)
- DEI initiatives
- Virtual/hybrid meetings, conventions, or tradeshow
- Internal governance or decision-making

Respondents were first asked to rate how concerned they are about each of the 11 strategy areas:

"How concerned are you about the following association strategies over the next three years?"

Respondents who indicated concern about a strategy were asked a follow-up question about their specific concerns, such as:

"What are the most substantial barriers to the success of your governance or decision-making? Select up to three."

The survey also collected information, including:

- General economic outlook for members
- Demographic info

A total of 111 individuals participated in the survey.

Appendix 2: About Association Laboratory

Your Leadership Asset - Helping Associations Make Better Decisions in Complex Environments

Association Laboratory is an award-winning research and strategy consulting firm dedicated exclusively to the needs of trade and professional associations. Founded in 1999, the firm works with national and international organizations operating in complex, volunteer-led environments where strategic clarity, member engagement, and public trust are essential to success.

With offices in Washington, DC, and Chicago, IL, Association Laboratory is recognized globally for its deep expertise in associations that function as knowledge authorities, standards-setters, education providers, and conveners of the professional community.

Decisions and Strategy Backed by Research

Association Laboratory specializes in turning complex strategy into practical, evidence-based action. Its work is grounded in both qualitative and quantitative research and designed to support associations across the full lifecycle of strategy—from insight gathering to implementation.

A Modern Approach to Member Insight

Association Laboratory's **Authentic Voice of the Member Program** is a continuous research solution that replaces episodic surveys with a structured, year-round approach to understanding member needs. The result is a clear, always-on picture of what matters to members, what's changing, what's working, and where opportunity lies—supported by strategic guidance tailored for staff and volunteer leadership.

Global Perspective. Local Relevance.

Association Laboratory routinely conducts research across global markets. It brings the voices of practitioners, academic leaders, industry partners, and other stakeholders into strategy discussions—producing insights that reflect market diversity while supporting enterprise-level decisions.

Evidence-Based. Volunteer-Centric. Transparent.

Association Laboratory's approach is distinguished by:

- Research designed around real decisions, not abstract data
- Iterative strategy development that engages stakeholders along the way
- Neutral, structured facilitation that supports informed consensus
- Transparency in methods and findings to support Board-level decision-making

Thought Leadership for the Sector

Association Laboratory is also the publisher of Looking Forward®, the longest-running environmental scan of the association sector. This research, based on interviews with hundreds of association CEOs and senior staff, helps leaders understand the evolving landscape of association strategy, membership, governance, and related areas.

Association Laboratory helps CEOs lead with clarity, act with confidence, and build strategies that earn adoption—not just approval. To learn more, visit: www.associationlaboratory.com