

Festivals Forum

A Closer Look at Late Bookers

February 2026



Hello, we're Thrive - the research and evaluation people for arts and heritage.

We uncover the real relationship between art, policy, people, and place. Our work doesn't just capture numbers, it helps organisations and policymakers understand what those numbers mean and how to act on them. We created IMPACT, the first research of its kind to show who really attends the arts in Northern Ireland, and how that attendance brings economic and social value.

We offer accessible, practical help - whether free or budget-friendly - across research, evaluation, and marketing. Our team knows Northern Irish audiences inside out, and we're here to share that knowledge to drive real change in the sector. Because we believe that the future of arts and heritage depends on strong relationships with people. And the people here? They're not like anywhere else.



What makes us different?

We're the only audience development organisation on the island of Ireland

We have 20 years of experience and we're here on the ground working in our sector. We pride ourselves on delivering practical support - we won't just hand you a report and leave it at that.

We know research and we know the sector

We carry out surveys, focus groups, observational research, interviews and ticketing analysis. We don't just work with performing arts venues; our research is inclusive of heritage, non-ticketed and participatory projects. As a not for profit organisation funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, we can offer support that's more affordable than commercial consultancies because we're part of this sector, just like you.

We'll tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear

We believe in delivering the truth because our goal is to help create meaningful change within our sector. We're clear, we care, and we're in it for the long haul.

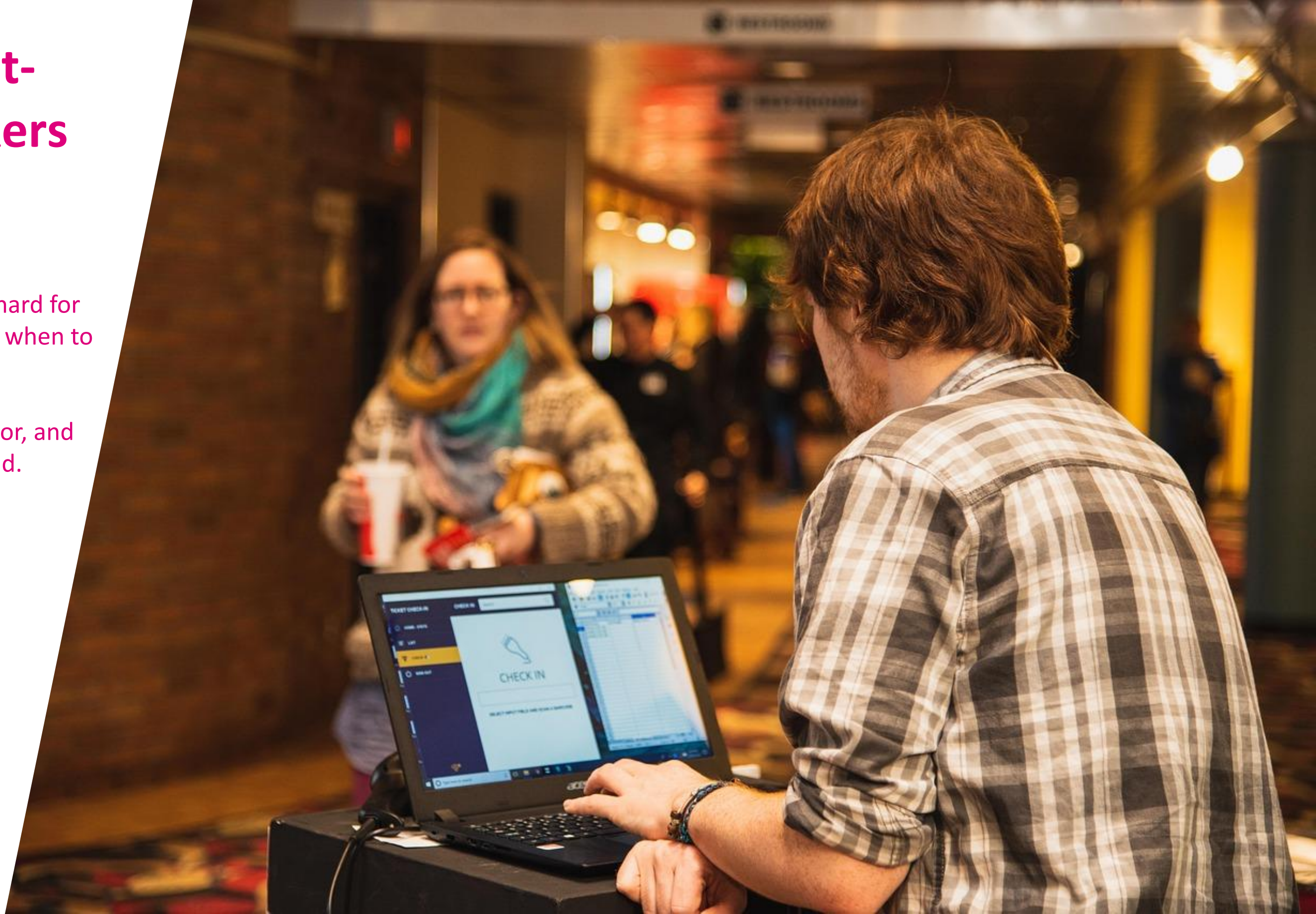
Thrive: the art of turning research into results.

**About those
last-minute
bookers...**

We know last-minute bookers are a pain.

We hear you - it makes it hard for you to plan staffing, know when to pull an event or not.

While it's a pain, it's also happening across the sector, and not just in Northern Ireland.



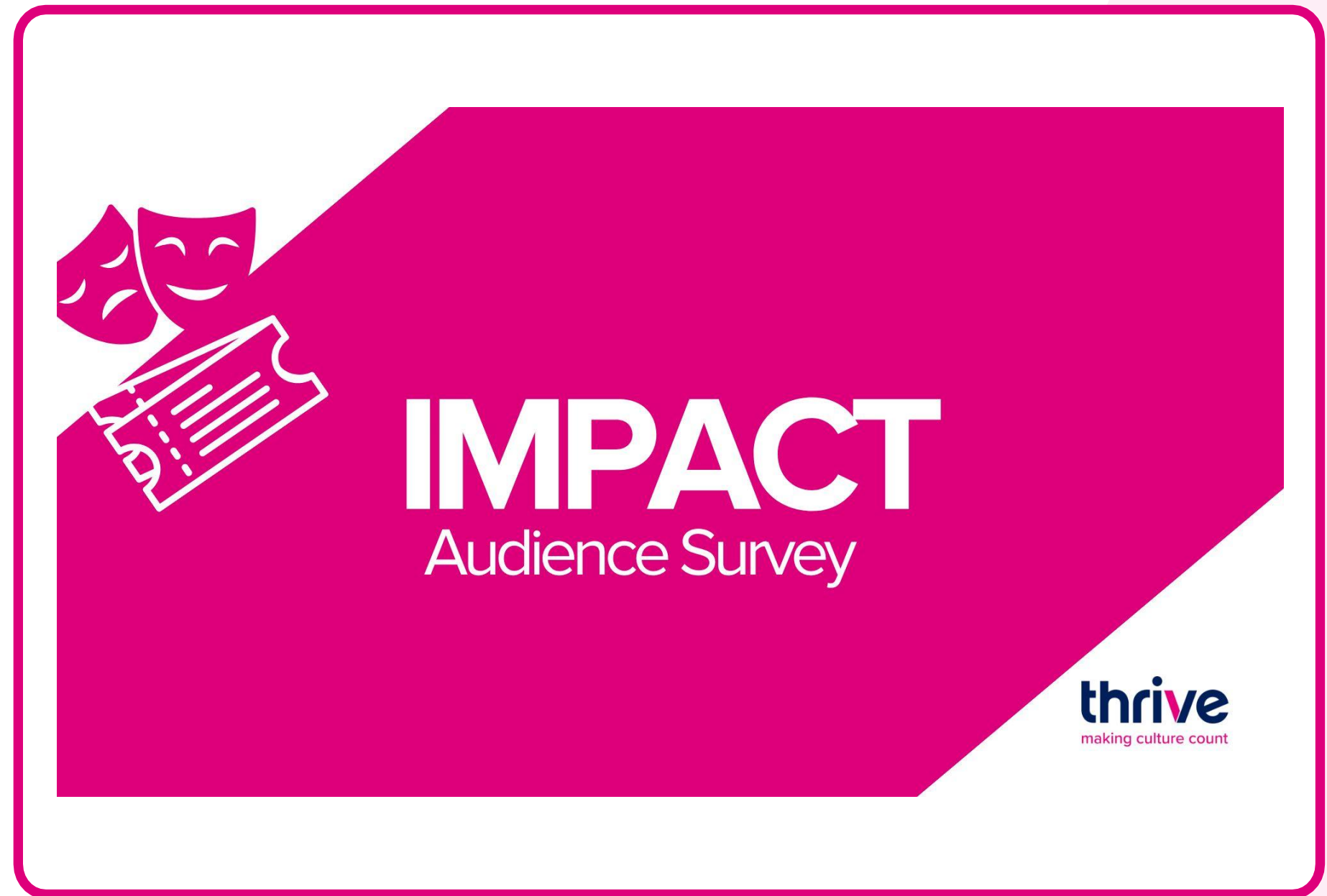
Do you know why your audiences
are booking last-minute?

Before we begin – we want to show you some stats from our thrive IMPACT survey

For those who don't know, IMPACT is thrive's sector-wide, post-visit survey.

It stands for Impact Measurement of People Attending Culture Today.

The survey has over 8500 responses collected by over 30 organisations, and it gives a good picture of arts attendance, including motivations, behaviours, demographics, and impact

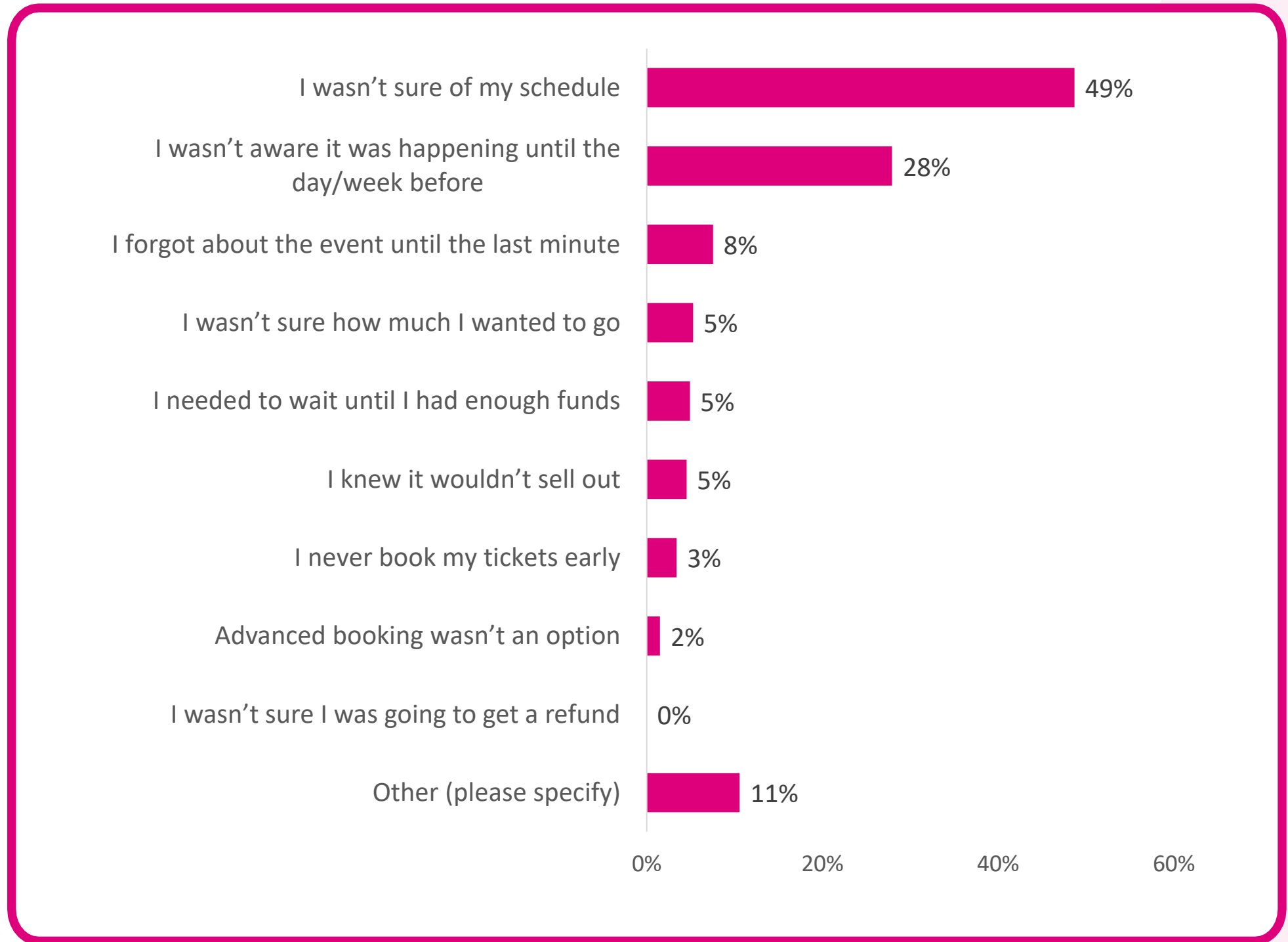


We asked arts attenders in IMPACT why they book last-minute

Nearly half (49%) of last-minute bookers said it was because they weren't sure of their schedule.

Just over a quarter (28%) said they simply weren't aware of the event until the last minute.

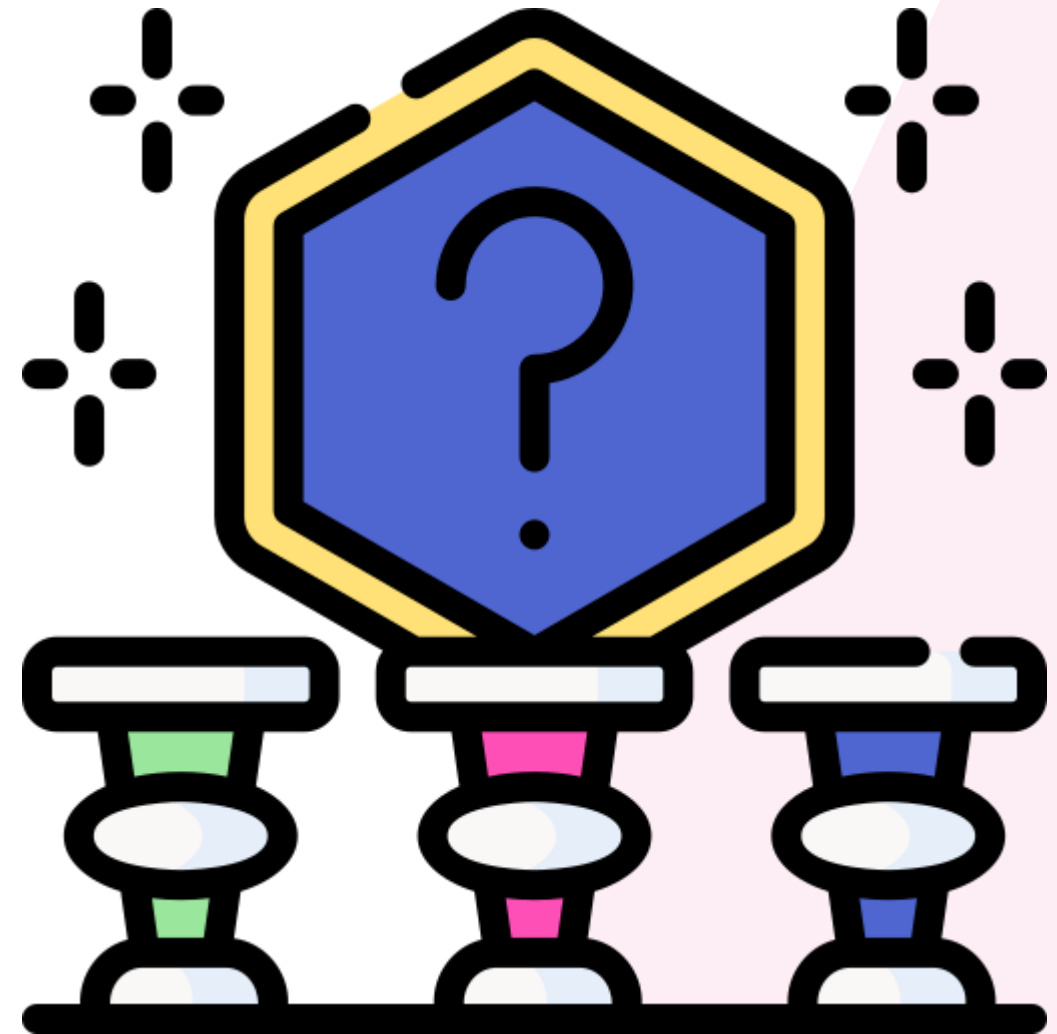
What was your reason for booking close to the day of the event? Select all that apply.



This means for nearly HALF of
last-minute bookers,
their behaviour is
out of your control

Who are the last minute bookers?

They're not always the people you think



Early bookers:

- Are more likely to have **disposable income**
- Are **already familiar** with the venue/space
- Go for more **enduring reasons** – to see a specific person/artist perform or to celebrate a special occasion
- More likely to see music or comedy
- Spend a longer time **travelling** to the location
- Are more likely to **bring others** with them (spouse/partner or adult family members)
- Are more likely to have heard of the event **directly through the organisation** via email/newsletter

Takeaways:

- Have a big name in music/comedy? **Push those events sooner** – put them on sale early and do early comms with your early bookers.
- **Help them to make a night/weekend out of it:** include comms around local bars/restaurants, good places to park, or convenient public transport spots.

Last-minute bookers:

- Are **younger**
- **Less financial stability** - they are more likely to be on lower incomes
- **Employment isn't always stable** (student, part-time worker or unemployed)
- More likely to be **new** to the space/venue
- Are quite **local** to the venue
- Are more likely to have heard about the event through WOM, Instagram or posters/flyers
- Why they go differs – it's more **spur of the moment**: to see something new, get out of the house, or feel part of a community
- Are more likely to go **alone** or with **young children** under 12

Takeaways:

- Remember that you don't have control over last-minute bookers' situation, but you do have control over your marketing and messaging
- Focus on your **early bookers first** – be proactive
- Don't offer last-minute discounts, it gives the wrong message to early and late bookers alike
- If you do want to target last-minute bookers, understand that they may not have the capacity to book early.
- Target them closer to the event date via channels they use (i.e. Instagram), and use tailored messaging (i.e. about something new/different), and go local (put posters/flyers in spots close to your event location)

Discussion

Thoughts: what can festivals do to...

- 1.) Assess your last-minute booker situation?
- 2.) Find out more about why people book last-minute?
- 3.) Do something about it?

Thoughts: what can festivals do to...

1.) Assess the last-minute booker situation?

- How big a problem are last-minute bookers? Look at the % of tickets sold the day/week of the event, % of all events sold last-minute, financial impact of cancelling performances, etc.
- What are the type of events last-minute people are booking?
- When do early sales tend to drop off for you?
- Who are booking last-minute? Is it new audiences like in IMPACT? Are they from local postcodes or from further afield?

Thoughts: what can festivals do to...

2.) Find out more about why they book last-minute?

This is the **WHY** – talk to your audiences:

- Have a queue? Have staff/volunteers at specific events (of last-min bookers) and have them **chat to people in the queue**. Get to know them.
- **Ask on social media**. ‘We’ve got a burning question – over 50% of people attending XYZ booked tickets at the last minute. Tell us why!’
- **Take part in IMPACT** – if you get loads of responses, we can parse out your data to see who YOUR last-minute bookers are compared to those who book far in advance.

Thoughts: what can festivals do to...

3.) Do something about it?

Make small changes to your ticketing

- Release tickets **earlier**
- **Reward** the early bookers! Try dynamic pricing or staggered pricing based on date (e.g. early bird tickets, general admission tickets, 'last call' tickets). Don't do last-minute discounting.
- Take it a step further – **segment your audiences** in your ticketing system. Create a segment of early bookers and email them with tailored messaging – they are more likely to be your loyal audience. You can offer a discount code for early bookers, just remember to have separate ones for your different channels (email vs. social media) so you can **track it** to see which channels are working best for you.
- **Discount codes aren't the only way** to incentivise early booking – you can offer waived fees or exclusive content. Remember, early bookers are more likely to be returning audiences. Go with what perks they'd enjoy.

Thoughts: what can festivals do to...

3.) Do something about it?

Other ticketing changes you can implement:

- When people book, at checkout ask them how they heard about the event. Track this – look at which channels the early bookers are saying vs. the last-minute ones. If you check throughout the time tickets are on sale, you can see shifts in the responses, and adjust your marketing spend as you go.
- Get your early bookers to encourage the last-minute ones to book sooner. Encourage TRACKED word of mouth – give a discount code like ‘friendsandfamily’ at checkout and remind them about the code in the email confirmation.

Change up your comms

- Spread your marketing comms throughout the sales cycle (encourage early bookers to book early again via email/newsletter, continue comms when early sales start to drop, and target younger customers with last-minute comms in the channels they use most)

Final thoughts

- Audience behaviour has changed, so we need to change with it
- Stop worrying about last-minute bookers and take control by being proactive
- Look at your ticketing data and engage with your early bookers



Thank You



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