

Fire Research Report

UFBA Conference Evaluation: a benchmark of perceived benefits and an exploration of how to improve future conferences

Synovate Ltd

June 2009

This research looked at the annual UFBA conference with the following objectives:

- To provide a base-line measure of how effective the UFBA conference is in delivering a range of benefits to participants, the relevant brigades, and New Zealand Fire Service volunteers overall.
- To identify opportunities to improve the benefits delivered and increase overall appeal of conference.

The research found that the UFBA conference is important to the majority of both delegates and non-attending CFOs. The majority would recommend the conference to others, regardless of whether they had attended recently or not. Conference benefits are most strongly associated with networking and industry outcomes as opposed to individual or brigade benefits. To build further support the conference must better cater to operational aspects and the specific knowledge needs of individual brigades.

UFBA Conference Evaluation

A benchmark of perceived benefits and an exploration of how to improve future conferences.

- Prepared for: the UFBA and the New Zealand Fire Service
- Prepared by: Synovate
- June 2009

Contents

• Background and Objectives	2
• Research Approach	4
• Executive Summary	6
• Detailed Findings	8
- Perceived value of the conference	9
- Attendee experiences	14
- Opportunities to increase attendance	21
• Summary	27
• Appendix: Sample Breakdown	29

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Background and Objectives

Research objectives

Background:

- The UFBA conference is an annual event that provides an opportunity for delegates and key stakeholders to gather to discuss the volunteer firefighting industry. The conference is part funded by the New Zealand Fire Service. To ensure the continued support of the conference, both the UFBA and the NZFS seek to 1) better understand the benefits that the conference delivers to delegates and 2) identify opportunities to make the conference more appealing to a broader group of brigades. Synovate was commissioned to provide these insights.

The overall objective of the research is:

- To provide a base-line measure of how effective the UFBA conference is in delivering a range of benefits to participants, the relevant brigades, and New Zealand Fire Service volunteers overall.
- To identify opportunities to improve the benefits delivered and increase overall appeal.

Specifically the research sought to identify and measure:

- Overall satisfaction, importance, and value of the conference to volunteer firefighters and brigades;
- Satisfaction with key aspects of the conference;
- Perceptions of the main benefits derived from the conference;
- Opportunities to improve future conferences to increase satisfaction;
- Potential barriers to attending future conferences.

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Research Approach

Research approach

To meet the project objectives:

- Synovate conducted interviews via Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) between Thursday 23 April and Tuesday 5 May 2009.
- Synovate was provided with a list of conference participants and a complete list of non-attending Chief Fire Officers.
- A total of 202 conference interviews were completed, of which:
 - 100 attended the 2009 conference;
 - 102 did not attend the 2009 conference and have not attended conferences for the past 4 years.
- The survey length was approximately 13 minutes.



Executive Summary

- *“At the end of the day it's about the practical application of putting out the fire ... not waving paper at it.”*



Executive summary

Overall

- The UFBA conference is important to the majority of both delegates and non-attending CFOs.
- The majority would recommend the conference to others, regardless of whether they had attended recently or not. This demonstrates that overall, brigades (CFOs at least) do support the conference. There are, however, key improvements required.
- Conference benefits are most strongly associated with networking and industry outcomes as opposed to individual or brigade benefits. To build further support the conference must better cater to operational aspects and the specific knowledge needs of individual brigades.

Attendees

- Almost everyone who attended was satisfied with the conference, although some issues with travel occurred.
- Improving the relevance of speakers and subject matter will have the greatest impact on satisfaction. It is likely that a change in format is required to facilitate this. Options to consider are individual break-out sessions targeting specific knowledge areas or narrowing the theme of specific conference by selecting relevant key note speakers and targeting specific brigades to attend.
- Almost all delegates undertake some form of information-sharing process with their brigades upon their return. Ensuring this is an easy process, for example supported by materials or training resources, is likely to encourage those currently not attending to attend in the future. Currently non-attending CFOs remain unsure of the value of the conference in building the firefighting capability of their specific brigades.

Non-attending CFOs

- While 70% non-attending CFOs would recommend the conference to others, only 30% believe they will attend in 2010.
- Increasing awareness of the conference details and making benefits more aligned to firefighting capability development will increase likelihood of attendance.

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Detailed Findings

Perceived value of the conference

The UFBA conference is important to the majority of both delegates and non-attending CFOs.

The majority would also recommend the conference to others.

Benefits are more strongly associated with networking and industry matters as opposed to individual or brigade benefits.



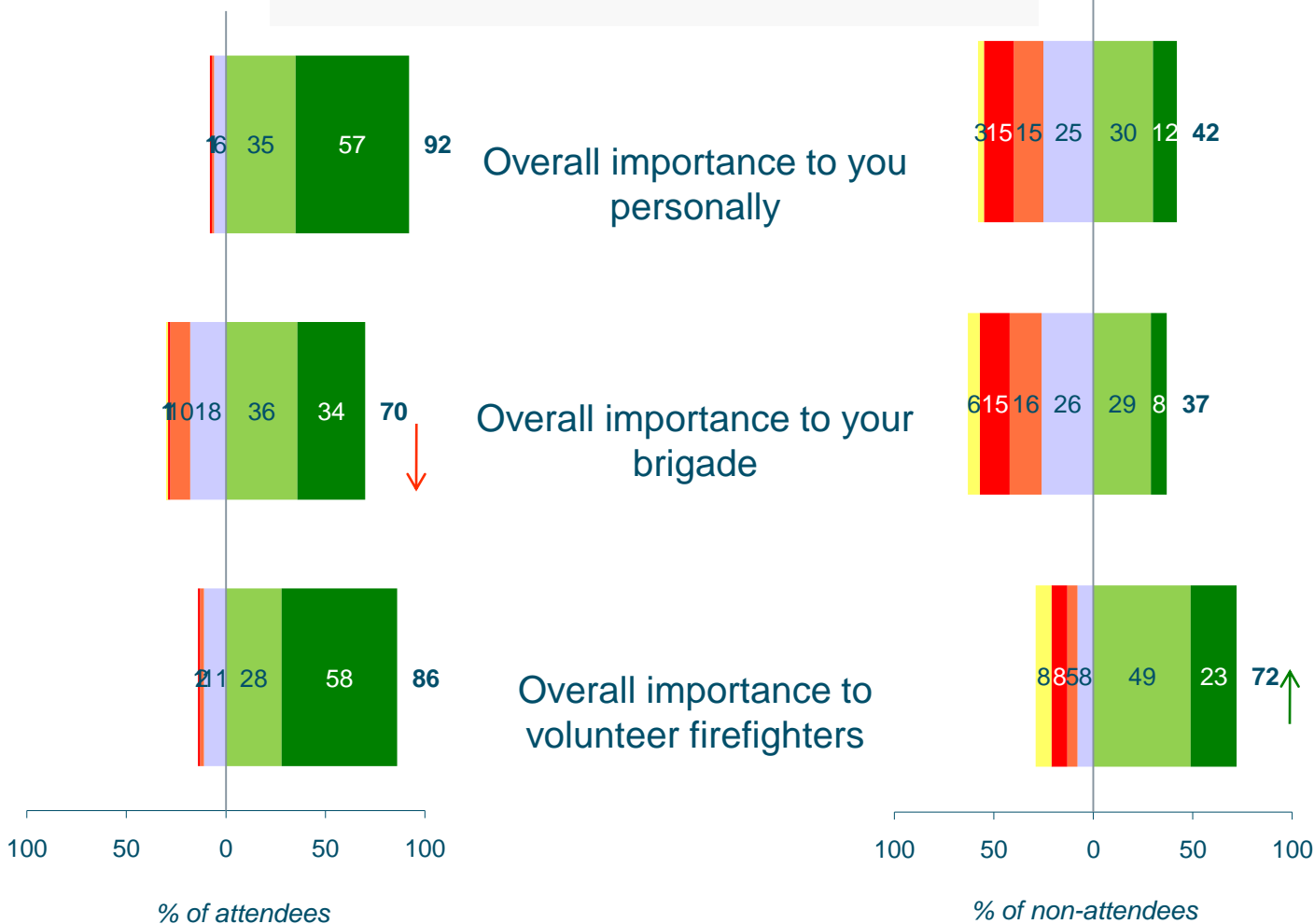
Overall importance of the UFBA conference

Q11 And overall how important is the UFBA conference...?

Attendees



Non-attendees



Overall the UFBA conference is an important event. Both attendees and non-attendees believe the conference is important to the volunteer community. However, those CFOs who do not attend do not believe it is *as important* to themselves or their brigade. Interestingly even delegates do not believe the conference is as important to their own brigades as it is to them personally or to volunteers overall, although it remains important to the majority.

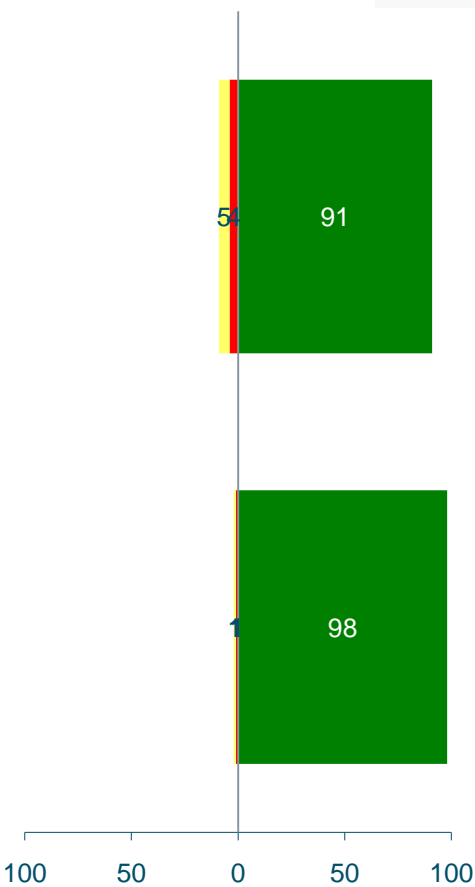
Advocacy and future attendance

Q12 Are you likely to attend / recommend...?

Attendees

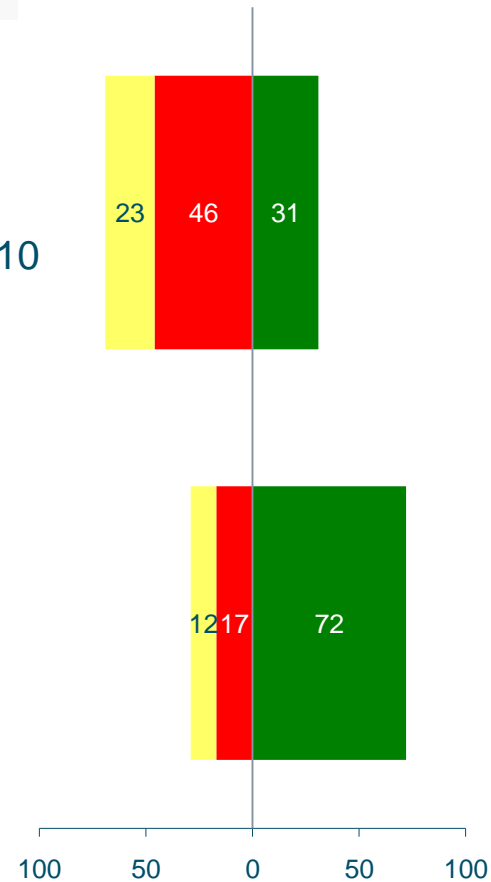
Non-attendees

Don't know No Yes



Likelihood to attend
UFBA conference in 2010

Recommendation of
UFBA conference to
others



% of attendees

% of non-attendees

The conference is well supported by existing delegates with almost all both recommending it and likely to attend future conferences. In keeping with the theme of the conference being important for others but not so important for me, most non-attendees would recommend it to others but are less likely to attend future events themselves. Importantly as an indication of attendance potential just under a third of those who did not attend this year are likely to attend the 2010 conference.

Claimed benefits of the conference

Q7 What, if any, benefits do you believe are derived from the annual UFBA conference?

Attendees



% of attendees

Non-attendees



% of non-attendees

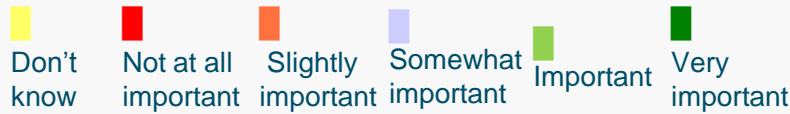
These responses are unprompted and indicate that the conference is primarily seen as a networking and information-sharing event. This view is shared by both attendees and non-attendees. Again, this finding is consistent with the theme that the conference is important as an 'industry' event and is less important in terms of bringing new skills back to the brigade.



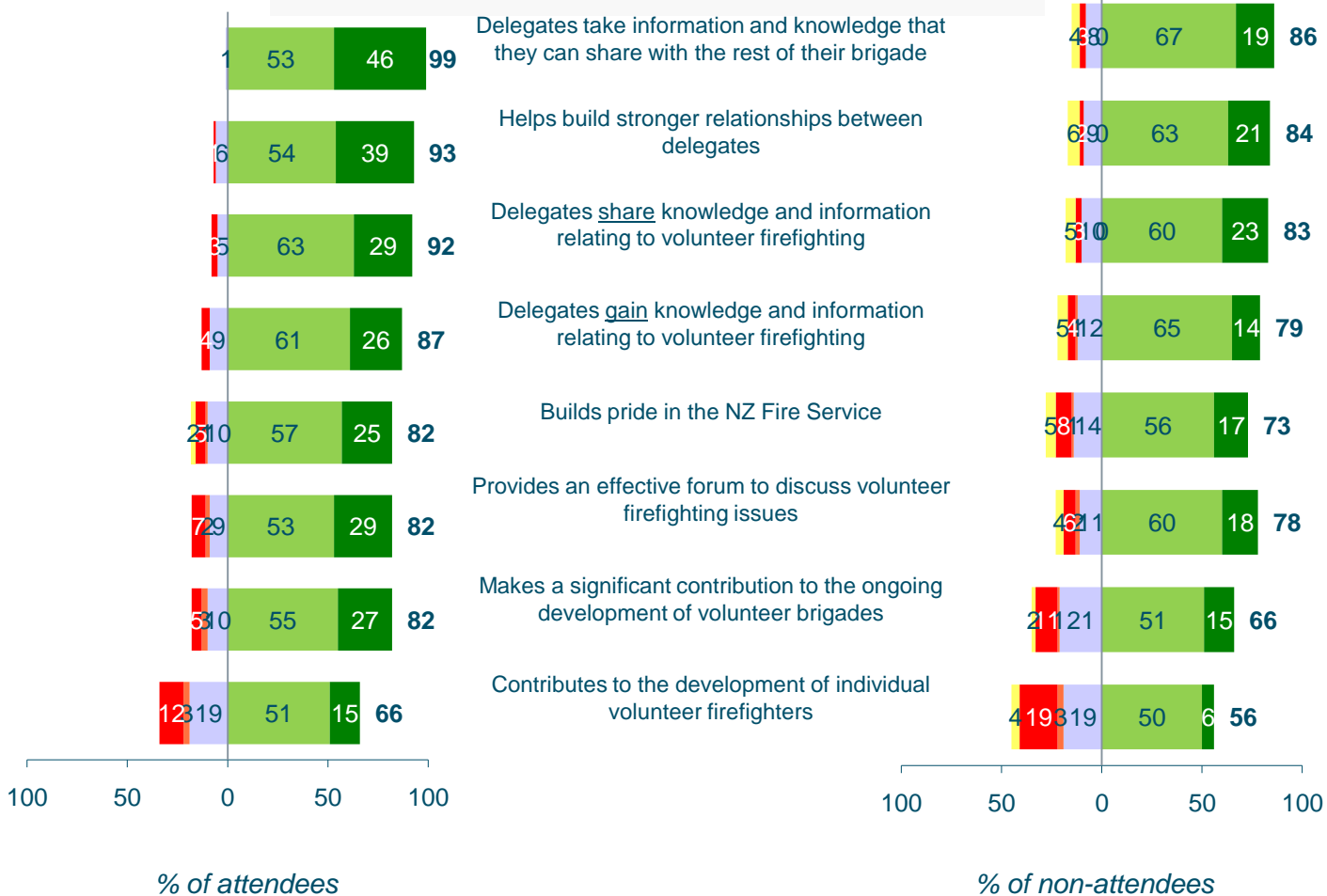
Claimed outcomes derived from conference

Q8 Now thinking about the conference outcomes, based on what you know from your own experience or what you understand to be the case, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...?


Attendees



Non-attendees



Again, the conference is seen primarily as a forum to build relationships, exchange ideas, and resolve issues. It is not seen to contribute as greatly to the development of individuals or brigades. However, that is not to say these outcomes are absent altogether, with a small majority of both attendees and non-attendees believing the conference does contribute to the development of individuals and brigades.



Attendee experiences: Opportunities to improve satisfaction and outcomes

Almost everyone was satisfied.

Improving the relevance of speakers and subject matter will have the greatest impact.

Almost everyone undertakes some form of information-sharing process with their brigades upon their return.

How to improve satisfaction scores

- To improve the overall satisfaction of those already attending the conferences, the UFBA should: (listed in order of importance)
 1. Engage quality guest speakers that are relevant to individual brigades.
 2. Utilise conference venues that are larger and more comfortable.
 3. Improve travel arrangements.
 4. Improve the balance between AGM requirements and the main conference activities.



Priorities to maintain / improve satisfaction (top 5)

- Drivers of overall satisfaction with the way the conference was run

Maintain % (or risk losing this % who are favourable)

Potential % (if improved, could gain this % who are not favourable)



Maintenance is typically greatest when performance on the attribute is strong and the outcome is related to (correlated with) the attribute.
- The better the performance, the more there is to lose if performance declines.

Potential is typically greatest when performance on the attribute is weak and outcome is related to the attribute.
- The worse the performance, the more there is to be gained if performance is improved.

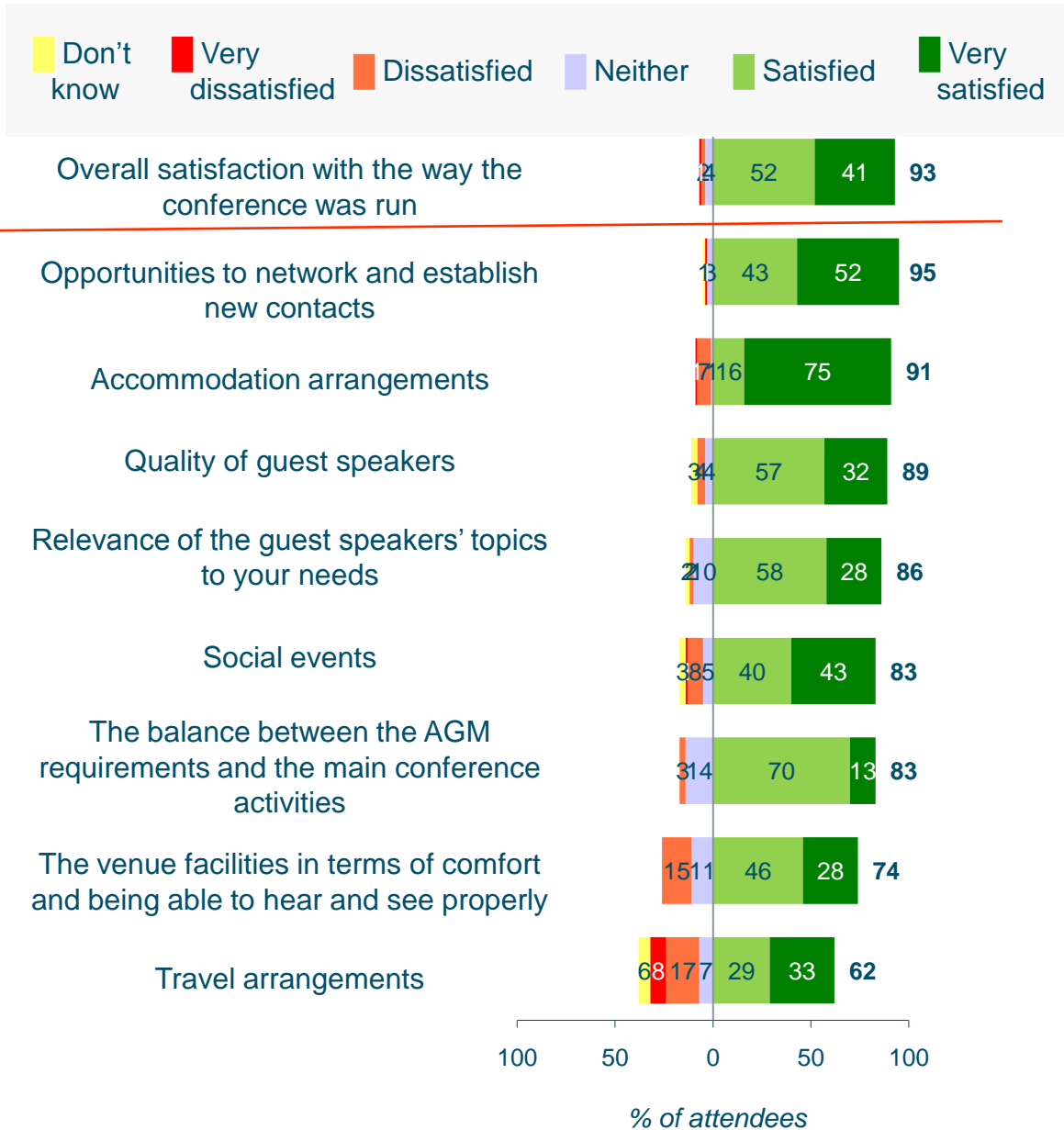
N=99 (excludes 'Don't knows')

Branding, communication, and touchpoint strategies should focus on maintaining and improving the above key attributes to have the greatest impact on increasing overall satisfaction with the way the conference is run.



Satisfaction with the conference experience

Q4 Now thinking about the conference in detail, to what extent were you satisfied with the following...?



Almost all firefighters were satisfied with the way the conference was run overall (93%). Well over three-quarters were satisfied with most aspects of the conference, except with 'venue facilities' (74%) and 'travel arrangements' (62%).

Changes to improve satisfaction

Q5 *And what would you change about the way the UFBA conference in Queenstown was run this year to increase your satisfaction?*

Travel and accommodation arrangements

- “I think the travel and accommodation - we weren't told until 2 weeks before we were due to leave and I had to phone up to find out about it. It would be better run by UFBA rather than travel companies”
- “Travel arrangements would be my most concern, maybe getting there a bit earlier than we did. I only arrived about a half an hour before conference started so I was a bit pushed for time”
- “...the bookings, I think they should do it themselves. They did not get the cheapest flights or accommodation”
- “It is with the accommodation. I stayed additional nights and the travel agent charged more. Through internet I could have got a lower price. [Also] the travel agent sorted my accommodation and flight only in the last three days”

Venue

- “One of the issues was that the venue was a bit tight for the number of people. People were crammed in”
- “A bigger venue... we were like sardines. They used the hall for dinner on the last night and it was jam-packed”
- “I would say the venue could have been a bit bigger and it was a bit cramped, the venue was a wee bit small”

Length

- “I think it should be shorter because 2 and a half days is unnecessary and the venue was too small”
- “... possibly cut down conference to 2 days. There's no need for 2 and a half days. There are a lot of fill-ins and stuff that's not really applicable to the full conference”

Others

- “Probably the biggest is lack of outside speakers, outside of the Fire Service. They normally bring special guests but did not this year”
- “Probably just thinking along the lines of the networking, perhaps having additional events outside the AGM in the evenings that people have a choice to attend even if it was at a cost...”

Most who attended the conference would like the travel and accommodation arrangements improved and preferably not done by travel agents. A larger venue and shorter conference duration would assist in improving satisfaction.

Changes to increase benefits derived

Q9 And how could the UFBA conference be improved or changed to increase the benefits the event delivers to volunteers?

Happy with the way it is or don't know

- "Not really, nothing, I can't really comment on there, I am reasonably happy with what goes on"
- "I do not think it can be at this stage, I am happy with how it stands"

Address issues relevant to volunteer firefighters

- "To involve career staff more in the process to improve our understanding"
- "The country is made up a lot of volunteer firefighters they need to target what volunteers need in general so that they're more informed of what's going on ... most are volunteers compared to full-time..."

Improve content covered

- "Reintroduction of break-out sessions as far as I am concerned"
- "I think they should have some workshops where you can go and talk about different topics, maybe they can have 3 different topics and you can move around during the conference and hear what other people have to say"

Most attendees are happy with the conference the way it is; however, a large proportion feel issues relevant to volunteer firefighters need to be addressed and content needs to be improved overall.



Process to share information with brigade

synovate

Research reinvented

Q10 And what process, if any, do you undertake to share the information gained from the conference when you return to your brigade?

Debrief team at monthly meetings

- "I give a report to our meeting, our monthly meeting when I return from the conference, normal practice is we have monthly meetings, then I report back on the conference at the next monthly meet after the conference"
- "Monthly meeting. I give a rundown from the outcomes of the conference"
- "We pass that on straightaway at next brigade meeting which is monthly or our training night or meeting"
- "Just a general discussion at our next monthly meeting we have after the conference is finished and we go into detail with what was discussed, so basically I just report back to the local brigade on the findings and benefits"

Prepare reports or presentations

- "I gave them immediate feedback and then did a report for our AGM"
- "We give a report to the brigade about what happened, minutes of the conference"
- "I have done a brigade report on the conference, on the outcomes discussed at the conference"
- "I always do by preparing a report and tabling it at meeting and also passing it over to be put on website. I also have in the past used a PowerPoint presentation (Australian one modified to suit NZ) and which was very sufficient. Also pass on information through training where we share knowledge, also operational groups have regular meetings where we share information and regional manager informs us of what's going on"

Hold special training sessions if necessary

- "Specific report is table. Training or meeting or casual discussion around experience"
- "Give a report at our office meetings or training if applicable"
- "Just a discussion on our training night"

Only one person mentioned that they did not share information as they found it irrelevant

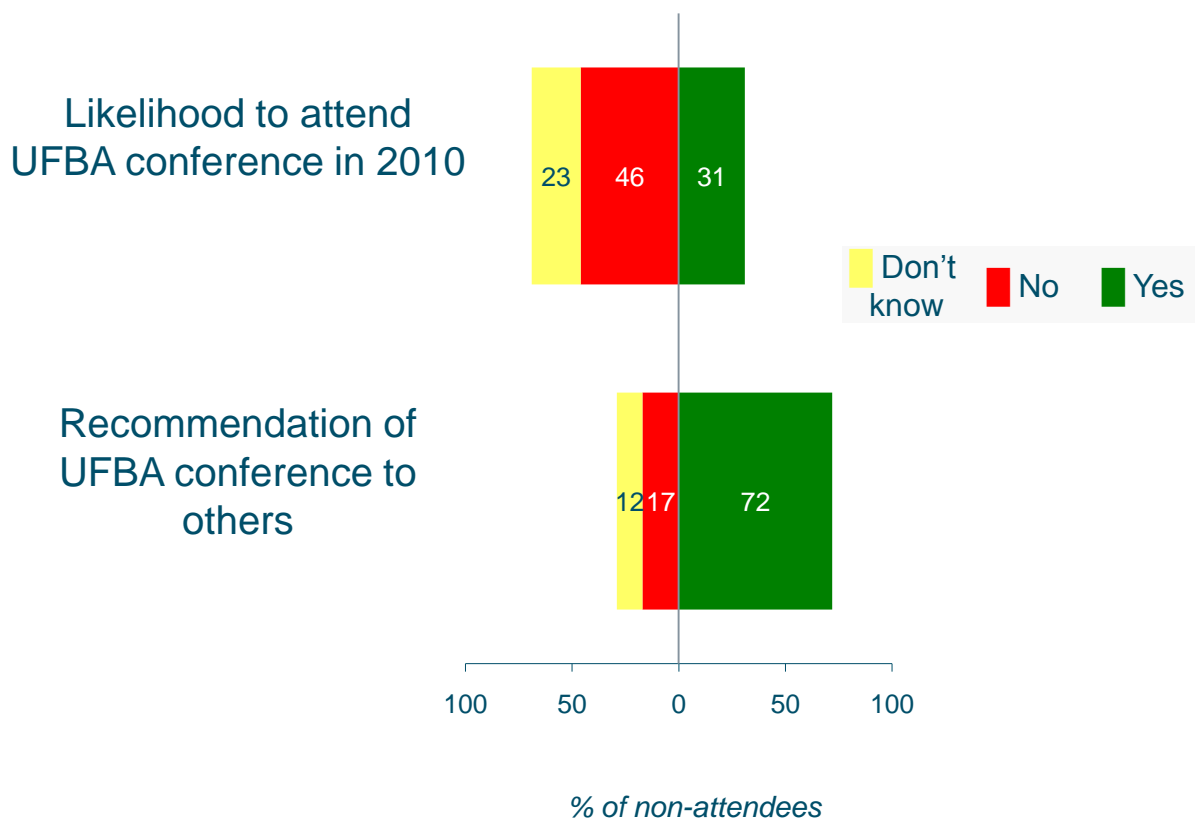
Almost everyone who attended the conference shares key lessons and information with the rest of their team by either giving a verbal debrief, preparing reports or holding special training sessions.

Opportunities to increase attendance

While 70% non-attending CFOs would recommend the conference to others, only 30% believe they will attend in 2010.

Increasing awareness of the conference details and making benefits more aligned to firefighting development will increase likelihood of attendance.

Non-attendee attendance and advocacy



Of those who have not attended the UFBA conference for at least 4 years, over 30% indicate a likelihood to attend in 2010. And despite not attending themselves, 72% would recommend that others attend.



How to increase likelihood to attend

- Non-attending CFOs will be more likely to attend if they believe: (listed in order of importance)
 1. That delegates gain important volunteer firefighting knowledge.
 2. That this knowledge that can be shared with their brigade.
- To create these beliefs, the UFBA needs to:
 - 1) Communicate to the non-attending brigades and make them aware of the conference and of the value that attending can deliver to the firefighting capability of the brigade.
 - 2) Structure the conference so that the unique firefighting needs of individual brigades are catered for.
 - This requires selection of speakers that are considered experts and are relevant to the brigade area of need.
 - It will also require putting in place either specialised information sessions within a broader conference agenda or creating conference themes where brigades are encouraged to attend only those conferences that are deemed relevant to their unique circumstances.

Reasons for not attending conference

Q6 And why did you or any others in your brigade not attend the UFBA conference?

Not enough time or work commitments

- “No time, everyone’s busy with work commitments”
- “We had work commitments”
- “Just because of the distance, it is a bit too far for us and we had work commitments”
- “Because we are all self-employed and the time of year, not a good time of year. We are all agricultural in our brigade and all self-employed”

Lack of interest or no value

- “I don’t think we have been interested”
- “We are not into that sort of stuff”
- “I do not see what I get out of these conferences. They do not seem to do much as far as I am concerned”
- “I have attended in the past and from a time management point of view they are not value for my time”

Too expensive

- “The expense of it and it is refundable back through the brigade, but it is too much hassle of getting reimbursement”
- “We haven’t got the funds. We work for the district council, they didn’t pay for us to go so we would have to fundraise to send people away to these things”
- “Financially they were only able to send so many from the region and only 2 from management go”

Not informed of conference

- “Part of it was apathy and also the brigade delegate was not informed of the conference”
- “I didn’t know it was on and I have never been to one. Probably lack of knowledge of invitations I would guess”

Those who did not attend the conference mainly didn’t due to time and work constraints, lack of interest or financial reasons.

Non-attendees' changes to increase conference benefits

Q9 And how could the UFBA conference be improved or changed to increase the benefits the event delivers to volunteers?

Happy with the way it is or don't know

- "I can't really answer that one, I haven't attended any conferences so can't comment"
- "They are doing a good job"

Need to make the conference more valuable

- "I believe it's a waste of time, so I believe that the money could be better spent on volunteer fire stations and that all the information can be sent by computer, you don't have to go and sit in a room for 3 days to listen to it"
- "UFBA should come out and tell us exactly what they do for us and make it an interesting place to go to"

Improve content covered

- "Allowing volunteers to actually discuss in conference time the issues that face them without filling time with time-consuming entertainment-type presentations"
- "I think less focus on small detail stuff like competitions and traditional agendas. We need more modern agenda that is more relative to modern day volunteer firefighting – less emphasis on competition rules"

Others

- "Having it more in a central part of New Zealand..."
- "Changing the timing...busiest time for many parts of the country with farmlands"

Most non-attendees don't really know how the conference can be improved as they haven't attended, but others feel content covered need to be improved and add more value.



Summary

Summary

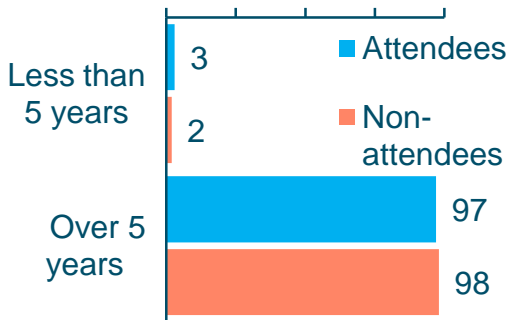
- The UFBA conference is supported by the majority of attending and non-attending Chief Fire Officers.
- However, it lacks both personal or brigade relevance to many. This results in a relatively low likelihood of non-attending brigades attending in the future.
- To make it more relevant, the conference material needs to be better aligned to fire brigade needs that are relevant and can be shared across individual firefighters.
- To improve conference outcomes the UFBA needs to:
 - improve the perceived quality and relevance of guest speakers;
 - improve the extent to which the conference experience can facilitate information sharing in a targeted and relevant way;
 - deliver information in such a way as to make it easy to communicate key benefits back to the brigade.



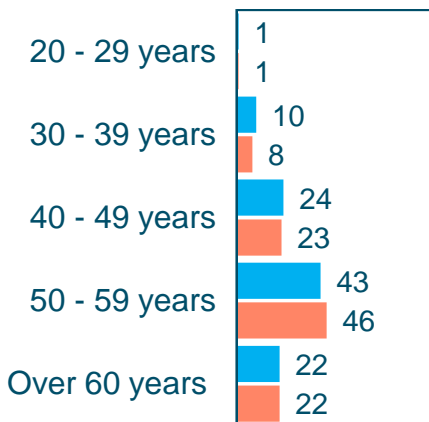
Appendix

Sample breakdown

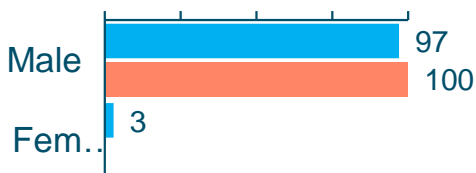
Time with Fire Service (Q16)



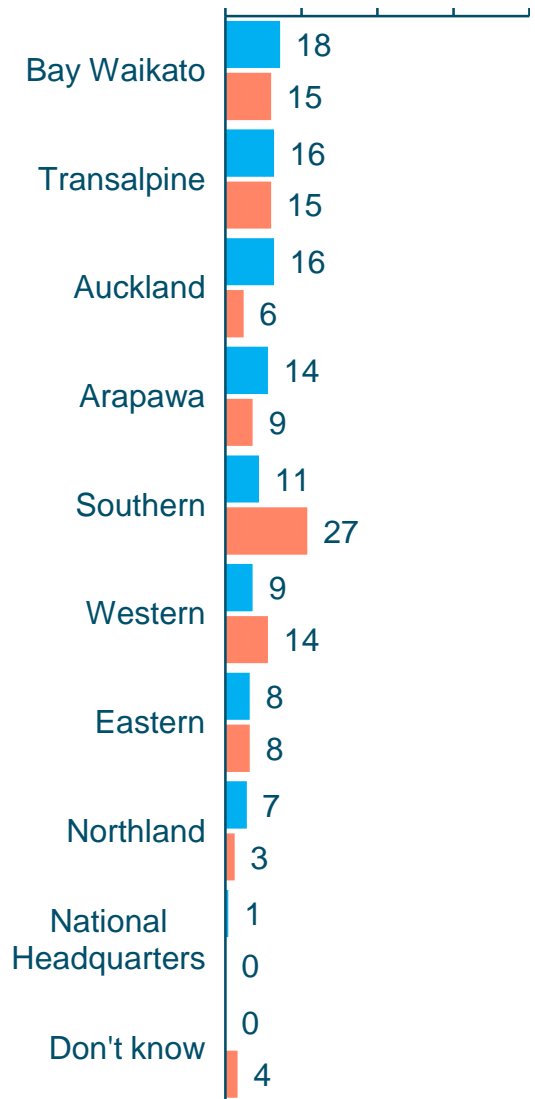
Age (Q14)



Gender (from sample)



Region (Q2)



% of firefighters