The Behavioral Scar

How restrictive ticket policies taught fans to buy late — and what it costs the people who run events.

Fans who get burned by a no-refund policy don't complain to the venue. They learn. Burned once, they protect themselves the only way they can: they stop buying early. That learned behavior — the behavioral scar — is now visible in every organizer's sales curve. The harm isn't fewer attendees. It's a **timing mismatch**: every commitment an organizer makes locks in before a fifth to a third of the audience has decided to buy.

The numbers

7 in 10	attendees say a restrictive cancellation policy would cause them to register closer to the event. The policy itself trains the waiting. *(Freeman research, reported by Skift Meetings, Oct 2026)*
32.7%	of show tickets sell in the final week — 17.6% of them just 1–3 days out. Galas sell 20.1% in the final week, with a median purchase just 22 days before the event. *(RSVPify, Event Ticketing Trends 2026)*
45%	of registrations land in the final four weeks — 22% in the final week alone. *(Maritz, via Trade Show Executive)*
42%	of buffet food goes uneaten, driven by organizers' fear of running out after the count is locked. *(WWF/ReFED U.S. Food Waste Pact study, reported by PCMA Convene)*
45%	of all event feedback is about food and beverage — ahead of content (27%) and location (18%). Run short, and that's the review. *(Lime Venue Portfolio, The Big Food Survey)*

Your deadlines don't move

- **Auction lots:** solicited 6–9 months out; roughly 95% secured by month 8.
- **Venue deposits:** 25–50% at signing; balances due 90 and 30 days out.
- **Sponsor artwork** locks 6–8 weeks out; **programs** go to press about 4 weeks out.
- **Hotel room blocks:** ~80% attrition liability, with cutoffs 14–30 days out.
- **Accessibility:** ASL interpreters need ~21 days' lead; CART and interpreters 10–14 days. A ticket bought 3 days out can make a requested accommodation impossible to fulfill.
- **Catering:** final count due 3–5 business days out, cannot be reduced, and is billed at the guarantee or the actual count — whichever is greater.
- **Staffing:** servers (1 per 15–20 plated guests), bartenders, ushers, and security are all hired against a forecast.

Every one of those commitments crystallizes before the late surge arrives. Guarantee high and you buy dinners nobody eats. Guarantee low and you run out — of the thing guests grade you on most.

The gala version

Sponsorships — not tickets — are the majority of a successful gala's revenue, so late buying doesn't mainly threaten ticket money. It threatens **the room**. Paddle-raise plants and matching gifts are pre-secured. Auction lots are procured months ahead. And every guest is supposed to be researched in advance, so seating and asks can be planned. Fundraising consultant Laura McCarty Tufano learned why the hard way: “I once found out a year later that the CEO of a Fortune 500 company had been at my organization's gala, and we hadn't realized it.” A guest who buys three days out gets no cultivation, no research, no planned ask.

Two honest notes: no study has shown that late buyers give less on the night — we won't claim otherwise. And late registrants attend just as reliably as early ones, so the surge can't be discounted in your food, staffing, or seating plan. It has to be served in full, on the least notice.

The way out

Early buyers aren't gone because they're fickle. They're waiting because buying early stopped being safe. Give patrons a fair, official way to pass a ticket on, and buying early becomes safe again.

Changed Plans is a fan-to-fan exchange built for exactly that — face-value capped, personally brokered, and free for venues to point patrons to. No platform to build, buy, or staff.

Face value or less, never above. The only extra cost is a 14% buyer fee — and your first transaction is free.

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