6 Factors Impacting Global Incentive Travel

According to Aberdeen Research, 100% of “best-in-class” companies (those with the highest customer retention and sales growth numbers) offer group travel to recognize year-end sales success. And while the concept of incentive travel works, understanding how to deliver the most motivating and memorable experiences is what keeps it working.
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Taking into consideration both inherent human desires and changing human tastes, we’ll review six factors impacting global incentive travel.

1. The Power of Recognition and Desire for Experiences

A CareerBuilder survey found that, of people contemplating leaving their jobs, 50% said an increase in employee recognition (awards, incentive trips, etc.) would encourage them to stay. Whether internally among peers or outside the organization, recognition creates a snowball effect; increasing momentum and reinforcing positive behaviors. Getting your recognition and reward strategy right can help you keep your best talent thriving, meaning you’ll see better results. The power of recognition proves that celebrated behaviors get repeated.

Incentive Travel as Rewarding Experiences

Rewards – like incentive travel experiences – go hand-in-hand with recognition. In at least two studies, the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE), found that almost 90% of respondents believe that “the power of incentive travel made them feel appreciated” and earning the trip made them feel recognized by their company and peers; generating the desire to continue to excel and earn similar rewards.
People desire and are motivated by experiences because:

- They make them feel empowered
- They create an emotional impact which builds enduring memories
- They are sharable with others through pictures and stories
- They are representative of their beliefs and values
- They are the new status symbol over material goods

Bud Light’s “Whatever, USA” campaign is an ideal example of exclusivity and status. Over 1.7 million contest applicants submitted a brief video of themselves, showing they were “Up For Whatever” and 1,000 people were vetted and selected as the perfect partygoers. After participating in a weekend-long party and total town takeover, winners became quasi-celebrities by appearing in promotional videos from the festival. Ultimate Party Animal Status? Check.

This falls in line with results from the Incentive Research Foundation, which found that incentive travel and experiences are desired more so than cash awards – 86% to 14% respectively.

2. Creating Community – Welcome to the Club

President’s Award. CEO Circle. Diamond Club.

Whatever you name your incentive program, you’ll want to make the effort worthwhile. It’s about status, yes, but it’s also about belonging; being part of the club. And membership has its perks, like access to senior leadership, collaboration opportunities, and bragging rights.

Networking and Relationship Building

Millennials are now dominating the workforce, and of those polled in The Decision to Attend study, 84% state that networking and making connections at meetings is very important to them. It’s common that incentive participants travel from all over the country or even the world; so creating the right environment to foster relationship building with senior leaders and camaraderie among co-workers is a valuable benefit to incentive travel participants. When out of the office and engaging in activities, participants are able to connect on a more personal level and in a relaxed atmosphere.
It’s all about finding the right balance for your group. Whether it’s a welcome reception or nightly cocktail hour, a beach cabana or hospitality suite; just the right amount of networking should feel natural instead of forced – you are rewarding them after all.

**Mobile Community**

Many people think of mobile apps for meetings, but mobile technology has become more important in starting conversations among participants before, during and after incentive trips as well. Mobile apps help build excitement about the trip with push notifications, and allow for group chats with other travelers. They keep the conversation going, increase collaboration and promote social sharing with photos and posts, all through the security of a closed community.

A mobile event app fosters connections among incentive attendees with these features:

- **Activity Feed** – serves as a central hub for participants to share thoughts and photos on the trip
- **Content Pages** – a place to share best practices or review special recognition for all the winners
- **Gamification** – scavenger hunts and relevant games can function as team building

The bonds created during a group incentive trip can help propel the trajectory of the winner’s career and create a more connected workforce. Some executives take this valuable time to consult with their top performers to understand how to better motivate others or discuss business strategies.

**3. Unique, Local Experiences**

Incentive travel is not just about visiting a destination. It’s about immersing the participants in the local culture, exposing them to the charm of the location and informing them of the customs and traditions that make it special.
The possibilities are endless when you draw inspiration from a destination. Here are some experiences we created as told by incentive travel planners.

“A unique aspect of a trip to Ireland was when we paired local couples and families to host the incentive attendees in their own homes. The groups became fast friends and even stayed in contact after the trip was over. You can’t get much more local than a delicious meal in the home of an Irish family!”

“After a day on safari in South Africa, we surprised the participants with a Sundowner reception lead by a local choir in the bush.”

“Our participants became part of a Native Panamanian Tribe for a day. After a canoe ride down the river, deep in the rainforest, the Emberá tribe invited us in for a homegrown lunch and celebratory music and dancing by the villagers.”

“From private musical performances to city bike rides and food trucks – we created a full-fledged hipster experience in Austin, Texas.”

“The Mountain States serve as an ideal backdrop to reconnect with nature. In Colorado, we rented out a ranch and the group joined in on indigenous activities like wagon rides, hatchet throwing, and skeet shooting competitions. In Montana, we welcomed the families to their own “glamping” accommodations and took them on a cattle drive...it was unforgettable.”

“We took incentive winners on a fashion tour in Florence, Italy. A high-end local designer, Jennifer Tattanelli, gave guests an understanding of the painstaking process of creating high-end leather products. Following the tour, guests had lunch at her family’s restaurant and received a store credit for a designer item of their choice, while personal shoppers were on-hand for assistance at her boutique.”

You can incorporate cultural experiences into just about every aspect of a program – such as during a welcome reception or within the days’ activities. Local music and traditional dances create the vibe for an authentic experience for guests. Aside from authentic experiences, take-home mementos serve as treasured keepsakes for years to come. Let guests choose gifts from a craft merchant display and make sure to take lots of photos! Send attendees a USB stick with photos from the trip, print photobooks, or simply send them access to a digital album.

4. True Personalization (Without Big Data)

Coined “Generation Me,” Millennials may be seen as the drivers of highly personalized experiences; but honestly, who doesn’t love being catered to and receiving tailored service? The challenge is that customized experiences are now expected; demanded even. It’s no longer impressive when a hotelier knows you prefer a high floor. But, when you mention you forgot sunscreen, and find a bottle delivered to your hotel room with a note – that’s a personalized experience!

As companies turn to Big Data in a quest to offer their version of personalized customer experiences, one of the purest forms of personalization can be achieved through incentive travel programs. Face-to-face interaction and the, seemingly minor, acts of “wow, they noticed,” are the ones that lead to memorable experiences. After all, an experience is defined as “a memorable event that engages a guest in an inherently personal way.”
When planning incentive travel programs, an easy place to start personalizing is during online registration. Use this as an opportunity to get a feel for the winners’ personalities based on the activities they choose. You can also figure out a way to surprise them with a room-drop gift based on interests or preferences. Direct manager or senior leadership recognition can have a huge impact and is as simple as a hand-written note identifying key contributions by the individual winner. Mobile event apps are another great way to supply customized agendas directly to participants’ phones and send relevant push notifications to remind participants when activities are about to start.

A heartfelt way to personalize the experience for guests on an incentive trip is to have the winner secretly record a video thanking them for their support in reaching such a challenging goal. Pack the tissues though...there won’t be a dry eye in the house!

5. The Politicization of Global Travel

The incentive travel industry is strong and growing, but there is also a level of uncertainty surrounding the current geopolitical climate. The uncertainty is brought on by a nationalist approach from a number of countries towards topics like immigration and visa issuance. And although the stance creates apprehension when sourcing and contracting incentive travel destinations – for fear of boycotts or visa troubles – industry leaders are advocating the importance of open travel and diversity.

CEO of Marriott International, Arne Sorenson, wrote, “Our business depends on the vibrant exchange of ideas, the sharing of customs, the ability to travel and experience new things. We know the many tangible benefits of diversity and inclusion, because we live it every day in every one of our properties.” Kevin Hinton, chief excellence officer for SITE and the SITE Foundation, agreed stating, “Incentive travel programs provide a bridge between the power of diverse travel experiences that inspire people to deliver excellence — and the sense of human solidarity we envision as the most important benefit of a global economy.”
In a survey done by Meetings and Conventions Magazine, respondents were split on whether the political climate would influence their site-selection decisions in the future – with 49% saying “yes” and 51% saying “no.”

Officials at Brand USA – the organization that markets the United States as a premier travel destination to the rest of the world – observed a rise in reluctance regarding travel to the U.S. in February 2017. Travelers from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, France, India, Japan, South America, Mexico and the United Kingdom said they were less likely to visit the United States, citing the political climate as a reason, according to Meetings & Conventions Magazine. And even though the United Kingdom is seeing an uptick in travelers after its Brexit announcement, largely due to the dip in the value of the pound, it has yet to be seen if incentive travel planners will jump to make it the destination of choice.

6. The Quest for Well-being and Mindfulness

As consumers are bombarded with all the “noise” that is technology and social media, they take solace in activities that create a sense of mindfulness; a sense of well-being. More than just eating healthy, it’s about nurturing the whole self and the relationships with those in our family, work, and community circles. Incorporating wellness and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within your incentive program helps participants deepen relationships (with self and others), and build and maintain mindful lifestyles and globally conscious mindsets.

Better World

Companies that earn recognition on lists such as “Best Places to Work” and the GameChangers 500 – which highlights companies working for social good – prove that purpose-driven organizations and human-centric thinking are taking center stage in businesses today.

CSR initiatives are an excellent way to help a cause, enhance the engagement of employees, and be seen as a caring business partner. Because these initiatives are so important to employees and consumers, companies need to make them part of their DNA, too. Tying CSR initiatives to your company purpose or local community will increase the appeal of your organization’s story. In fact, the 2015 Global Corporate Social Responsibility Study reports that 84% of global consumers seek out responsible products every time they shop, and 91% expect companies to do more than make a profit."
In addition to monetary donations, there are many ways of inviting your incentive guests to join in on your CSR efforts. Creative Group Account Executive, Tom Hillmer, recalls an incentive trip to Costa Rica. “Our client sponsored an elementary school and we asked participants to bring a backpack full of school supplies. Everyone did – some even more than one. The donations didn’t cost the company a single cent, nor did the activity take any time out of the program, but the attendees were happy to be contributing and the school received much-needed resources.”

**Better Self**

Wearable technology and the Internet of Things (IoT) have enabled us to track the movement of our bodies and monitor if we are getting the right exercise and enough sleep. This well-being demand has influenced the world’s first WELL Certified™ city district in Tampa, Florida and fitness club Equinox (whose tagline states “IT’S NOT FITNESS. IT’S LIFE.”) to launch a hospitality brand for health-conscious travelers.

Julie Keller Callahan, editor-in-chief of American Spa’s 2017 Trend Report, explains that “many [wellness] experiences...garnering attention...are actually healing modalities with deep historic roots” with a modern twist. For example, floatation therapy dates back to the 1950’s, but is relevant now, more than ever. Described by some as the “shortcut to meditation,” simply floating in warm saltwater allows the brain and body to relax and unplug from constant connectedness.

On an incentive trip, whether organized or on own, guests will appreciate activities that will get them moving, or help them unplug. Offer walking maps or a fitness center schedule. If you have enough interest, it might be worth hiring a private instructor to lead the group in yoga or meditation. During one incentive program, we included a 5k event where participants could choose to run/walk or cheer on their colleagues.

Family incentive programs can also be a great way for your top performers to re-connect with their loved ones and focus on important relationships in their lives. Creating the option for a program like this can be very motivating for the right audience.
Summary

From increasing sales and profits to improving employee engagement and morale, incentive travel programs have helped countless companies achieve their biggest business objectives. Although uncertainty can cause apprehension in selecting and traveling to worldwide destinations, the overall outlook and future of incentive travel is a positive one because the business case is strong. It’s an exciting time to discover and create inherently personal experiences that reward the hard work your employees and channel partners bring to the table every day.

You can unleash the potential of your people, connect your team to your objectives, increase sales, and grow your business with the use of thoughtfully planned incentive travel programs.

Start Creating Motivating Incentive Travel Experiences Today

Creative Group’s approach is focused on creating the most engaging and personalized participant experience. Our global programs and experiences reward excellence and inspire people to reach their full potential – we call it Thrivability – the art and science of reaching for the stars and nurturing individual greatness. To get started, contact Creative Group.

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