

Five Tips to Ensure a Successful Incentive Travel Program

Jim Ruzala
Director, Marketing
Maritz Travel Company

As organizations look to reinvest in their incentive travel strategies, the question of how to ensure a program will help achieve the best value for the investment is typically a major topic of discussion. To fuel those discussions, consider how your organization and strategy goes about identifying and understanding the program elements that generate the strongest appeal, interests and participant engagement. In years past, this discussion primarily focused on destination and activities. While these are important components, successful planners will expand their framework, and do so while keeping in mind business objectives and budgets.

Sounds like a big challenge, but it doesn't have to be. Achieving more effective incentive travel design hinges on addressing five fundamental points in your planning process. While any one item can add tremendous value, look towards incorporating each in concert based upon your organizational and program participants' unique needs, interests and preferences. Doing so will help make for a much more meaningful, motivational and measurable set of performance outcomes.

The Experience

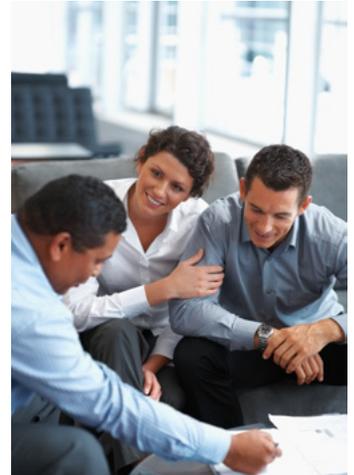
The travel experience must be compelling enough to the individual participant to get them excited to improve their performance efforts. Based on extensive participant research, experience elements that drive the highest levels of excitement include:

- Sun and fun destinations;
- Expanded guest policies;
- Unscheduled time for leisure activities; and
- Meaningful reward and recognition activities

Today's participants are more savvy and particular about the type of experience they have the opportunity to earn. The true measurement of today's incentive travel program is based upon engagement. Before, during and even after a program, participant engagement is something that has to be earned, retained and nurtured. Focusing on the experience throughout the lifecycle of the program lends the best approach towards more effectively incenting participants and effectively achieving business objectives.

The Qualification or Rule Structure

Above all, the qualification guidelines must be perceived as *fair* and *attainable*. For this reason, we recommend companies evaluate their program structures to entertain opportunities of what design enhancements might afford; such as, a more individually based performance structure or going beyond historical glass ceilings where only the top one to three percent of participants qualify as earners. One program design where the same people earn year-after-year can inhibit the meaningful and motivational interests of non-earners.



Communications and Management Buy-In

Client studies continually show that as many as one in four participants in an incentive travel program are unaware they are even eligible or that there is a program present at all. Promotional communications represent a truly performance critical area in establishing and maintaining strong participant engagement throughout the lifecycle of the program. From kick-off announcements, regularly scheduled updates on performance and standings to maintaining continued buzz and excitement, promotional communications can greatly help avoid your program from “being kept a secret” so that you can better ensure broad and steady participant engagement. In addition, encouraging leadership and management to communicate and reinforce program goals by incorporating reminders and updates in formal team meetings and one-on-one engagements helps inform and advise participants on progress and towards ways of stepping up their level of effort.

Measure for Effectiveness

Let’s say that an incentive travel program is based upon helping to successfully achieve some prescribed sales target. With that, we believe it is a good idea to leverage sales leaders to model exceptional sales skills by enlisting them in promoting brand values and further equipping participants to become more effective business objective ambassadors. Conducting pre-to-post and additional post-post (30, 60, 90 days after the onsite experience) surveys can provide you further insight and a deeper understanding into the important contribution these people play before, during and well beyond the travel experience. By doing so, you go beyond traditional ROI approaches and gain deeper insights on the intangible values of how your program helped improve the attitudes, behaviors and intentions of program participants.

Invite Participants into the Design Process

Design decisions on such program attributes as trip length, location, guest policy, and activities can greatly be informed by surveys, direct inputs from sales advisory councils and past program participants (earners and non-earners). Leveraging these “voice of the participant” insights can really help better align and fine tune your program design to create a much more meaningful, motivational and memorable experience while better supporting core business objectives. Today’s incentive participant places more weight on the type of experience offered before they make engagement choices based upon the added time and effort they need to put forth to earn the reward. Without participant insights, organizations can run great risk with hit and miss outcomes that drive unnecessary costs and simply fall short of providing for a more ideal, overall experience.

There are varied types and levels of available practices available to consider in today’s incentive travel strategies. Following these five tips will help design an approach and incentive travel experience that provides for more meaningful and motivational value to program participants. Further aligning to participant interests, needs and preferences creates for more exceptional opportunities to meet, achieve and exceed business performance outcomes that create short and long-term value for both the organization and program participants.



For more information, please visit Maritz at www.maritz.com or call (877) 4 MARITZ.