

CHANGING TRENDS IN INCENTIVE TRAVEL

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Abstract

Purpose – As the economy has improved internationally, the same is true for incentive travel programs which are booming. Budgets are up, lead times are growing, and the destinations incentive planners are changing and expanding their offer. This spur increases supplier competition, but also forces suppliers to meet the heightened expectations of their clients. Suppliers recognize the need to improve their incentive travel services and over the years, they are finding more creative ways to add value.

Design / methodology / approach – The main focus of this article is to identify trends in the incentive travel area over past few years. It is acknowledged that trends in tourism are numerous, and as such, a full review of the complete body of knowledge is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, the article will review the formative literature and significant papers in the field of trends in incentive travels, with a view to identifying the key trends in the incentive travel industry.

Findings – There is a demand for experiential program design, but quality cannot be compromised. It is important to offer a wide range of activities to the incentive groups as this rewarding experience is something that they will take back home to share with others. Technology continues to be at the forefront of incentive event trends because social technology has changed the way we communicate. In the future, incentive travel organizers will have to continue finding new and creative ways to add value and wow them at every touch point.

Originality of the research – Given the lack of research in this area, an understanding of the components of incentive travel that may be perceived as attractive by employees is an important first step to research in this area. It is important to acknowledge that as a conceptual article, the limitations are clear. Nonetheless, it offers a foundation for future research in an area which, until recently, has remained without a strong theoretical underpinning.

Keywords trends in the incentive travel, incentive planners, incentive destination, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Incentive trips are an integral part of business tourism, and thus the MICE industry. These components of business tourism are related to the tourists who travel with the purpose of carrying out some work, and therefore this form of tourism is one of the oldest forms considering that people of ancient times have already traveled with purpose of trade (Davidson and Cope 2003, 15).

Everyday duties often cause an accumulation of stressful, conflict situations and can negatively influence on the results of work. Therefore, the employers are seeking various methods to ease arguments and they are absolutely determined to win positive interpersonal relations between their employees. Motivating elements constitute such solutions. However, it should be remembered that not every form of motivation eases conflict. Incentive travel that has rich programs, with physical activities and also those

that enable the feeling of negative emotions, are more and more often used (Celuch 2014, 22-30). As the working generations are changing, employers and incentive travel organizers have to keep up with trends and employee preference in order to throw them a good reward in form of a complementary trip i.e. incentive travel.

Besides the continuous rise of incentive travel tourism, there are other current trends that shape incentive tourism but also tourism in general and to which incentive travel organizers need to adjust efficiently and find appropriate ways so as to turn them to their benefit (Marinescu 2017, 281-286). These trends include last minute bookings (due to the rise of the internet and low-cost airlines), shorter and more frequent stays (due to the flexible work program), the growing share of millennials who are ecologically aware, reliable transport facilities, good health standards, and a clean environment (Evans et.al. 2011, 25).

1. INCENTIVE TRAVEL

According to Incentive Travel Buyer's Handbook (2008): „Incentive travel programs are motivational tool for increasing productivity and achieving business objectives in which participants receive a trip as a reward based on specific levels of achievement established by the management of a company.“ Incentive travel basically implies the memorable and fun trips paid by employers, and are mainly used with the primary objective of increasing sales. What distinguishes the incentive programs of other forms of the MICE industry is that they are focused on entertainment, gastronomy and other activities, rather than on education and the work itself. Employers send employees on incentive trips in order to achieve the objectives of the business, strengthened communication and networking within and outside the company, strengthening corporate culture and social interaction, generating enthusiasm for future business period and strengthened loyalty to the company (Ford 2009, 671).

1.1. Incentive travel as a motivation tool

A key concept that is tied to the incentive travel is motivation. Each person is an individual for himself and everyone has only himself-inherent internal incentives, motivators, resulting in its final behaviour. These motivators provide answers to the following questions: Why the results of his work differ from results of other employees with the same expertise, experience and rank in the organization? Why someone does something in his specific way, and not in the way we want or that we have predicted? Why one type of incentives and stimulation works well on one side, and less well on other employees?

The organizations are experiencing problems and mistakes when they do not know the answers to these and similar questions, or when it is assumed that they are quite clear. It is a misconception, as well as that the motivation is a general characteristic of the whole working group and that the same incentives will equally work for all employees (Gutić and Rudelj 2012, 371). Another mistake is the belief that motivation is static and unchangeable category, and that once established motives remain forever the same and that it is not necessary to constantly monitor them and investigate. It is known that man

constantly changes his behaviour, interests and needs, and with the time also his motivation (Gutić and Rudelj 2012, 371). The question is what motivates employees most? Motivation depends on various factors and is influenced by the national culture, organizational culture, economic policy, etc.

Apart from the improving relations with colleagues, the intensive travel performs an essential and important role. It is a motivation to further activity. It tries to mobilize the employees to bigger sacrifices, it gives them a chance to identify with a firm and it strives toward long term goals, i.e. to increase profit of a corporation. The incentive travel is a marketing tool, which is most frequently mentioned as a form of reward. Coupons, certificates of merit or even president's personal thanks, are not as effective in motivating an employee as is professionally arranged incentive travel. Rewarding an employee in this way has an accurately determined objective and the persons responsible for planning such stays understand that the goal of the program is to mobilize a participant to work more actively (Celuch 2014, 22-30).

1.2. Incentive travel as a controlled competition

Controlled competition is advisable, as thanks to it, the rush to succeed increases, the rating of a firm rises, and the employees gain willingness to be engaged in group activities and identify emotionally with a firm. Incentive travel is a marketing tool, which makes possible self development, working on improving a firm's results and also reducing conflict. Group incentive travel can also provide a kind of a test, following which participants learn more about themselves, as well as about the companions in the adventure.

Incentive travel is more frequent in companies that operate in highly competitive sectors where maintaining or increasing market share requires constant great efforts in sales and management and incentive travels are just common form of motivating employees. In line with this, the largest buyers of incentive programs come from the automobile industry, the financial sector, the pharmaceutical industry, office equipment industry, electronics, telecommunications, food and tobacco industry (Swarbrooke and Horner 2001,75).

2. THE BENEFITS OF INCENTIVE TRAVEL

There are several strategies a company can utilize to facilitate employee engagement and motivation, including incentives. Such incentives can be given in the form of either cash or non-cash rewards. One type of non-cash incentive program involves rewarding qualified employees with a trip to a desirable travel destination, known as IT. The design of the program determines how successful it will be at increasing motivation. Such design components can include the criteria for qualification, feedback opportunities, program structure, as well as the trip destination, duration, and itinerary. An organization must first find what drives their employees in order to strategically create a program that increases engagement (SITE, 2016). Studies on IT have found that it can sometimes be more effective in motivating employees than cash rewards (Fenich, Vitiello, Lancaster, & Hashimoto 2015, 145–158).

The importance of such programs cannot be overestimated; their impact and value reach well beyond the typical event timeline. Earners of the incentive travel program are far from the only beneficiaries of the program. The sponsoring company, the destination and the suppliers all receive significant benefits as well. Outside of providing networking opportunities and building participant motivation, research found that the incentive travel program produces following benefits (Incentive Research Foundation 2008, 1):

- Positive organizational culture
- Employee recognition
- Retention of top performers
- Drives desired behaviours to meet or exceed financial and non-financial objectives.

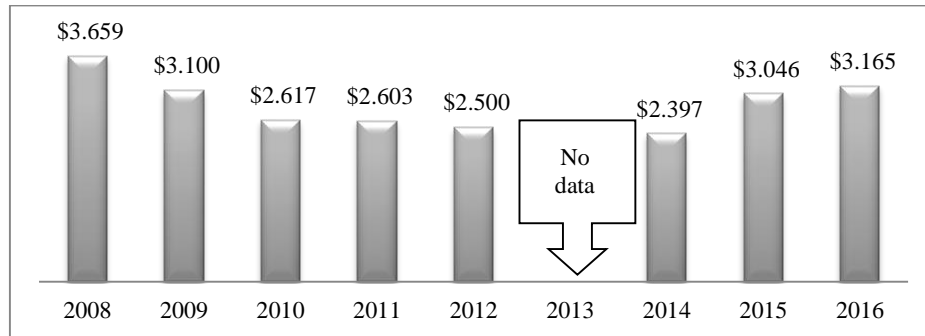
Travel can also increase long term performance by enhancing the relationship between the employee and employer. Incentive awards in general provide a signal of recognition of good performance from employees which leads to more of the same behaviour in the future (Long & Shields 2010; Mone, Eisinger, Guggenheim, Price, & Stine 2011; Stajkovic & Luthans 2003). This praise also leads employees to feel valued by the organization and leads employees to increase their commitment to the organization (Shore & Wayne 1993; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick 2002).

3. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF INCENTIVE TRAVEL

Many destinations either don't track the specific dollar amount of incentive travel or lump it in with other corporate business travel. This makes it very difficult to estimate the overall economic impact. Recent economic studies (World Trends Watch Report 2016, The World Travel & Tourism Council 2012, Van Leeuwen et al. 2009, Domański and Gwosdz 2010), however, were able to show a multiplier effect that varied based on the specific region and the development of tourism in that region. This range is typically 1.3 to 1.7, which means if an incentive travel program spends \$1,000,000 in a particular destination and the region has a multiplier effect of 1.3, then the multiplier effect to the local economy would be \$300,000; if the region has a multiplier effect of 1.7, then the multiplier effect to the local economy is \$700,000 (Van Dyke 2010). This means that in addition to the \$1,000,000 spent in the destination, there is an additional \$300,000 to \$700,000 benefit to the destination.

One of the most authoritative annual surveys of the incentive travel market is the one conducted by MeetingsNet and the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF). Most of the planners surveyed are North-America based, but given the international importance of that market, the survey's findings are of interest to the worldwide. Current survey points to a continuing rally in demand for incentive travel, as it indicates that budgets are expanding and incentive programmes are growing, building on the turnaround in the market seen in 2015 (ibtm World Trends Watch Report 2016, 11). That resurgence of spending on incentive travel was a long time coming. Graph 1 charts the long road to recovery in this market.

Graph 1: Average per-person incentive spending 2008-2016

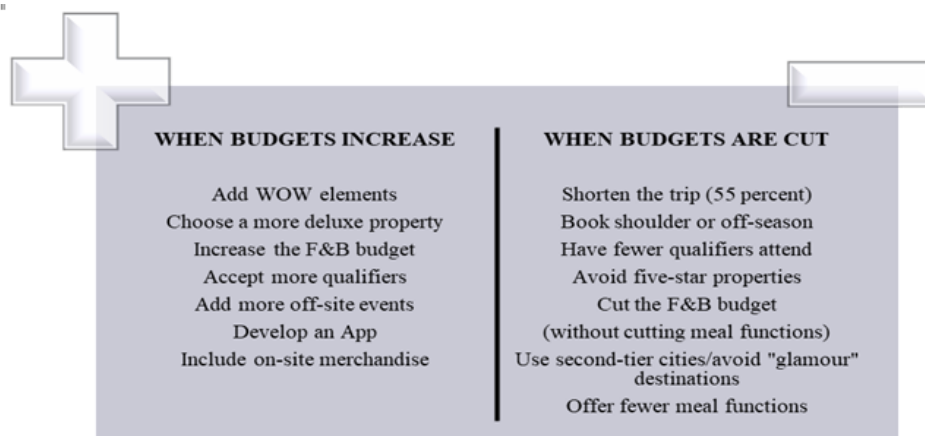


Source: Authors according ibtm World Trends Watch Report 2016
<http://theirf.org/am-site/media/meetingsnet-irf-survey.pdf>

In 2008, the MeetingsNet/IRF survey marked the average per-person spending on incentive travel programmes at US\$3,659, but it was all downhill from there. For seven years, spending took a steady dive, hitting a low of US\$2,397 in 2014. Finally, in 2015, things started to change in a positive direction, with rising budgets and rising per-person spending on incentive trips. In 2016, the recovery continues, with average per-person incentive spending at US\$3,165. This represents the largest year-over-year jump since the recession, an average incentive budget change in 2016 of + 2.69 percent.

It is interesting to note how planners use the extra resources when their incentive travel budgets grow. Figure 1 offers useful insights into how planners spend – or save – money as they adapt to changes in their budgets.

Figure 1: Incentive travel planners' strategies for dealing with budget changes



Source: Authors according The MeetingsNet/IRF 2016 incentive travel survey

The most common reaction when faced with a shrinking incentive travel budget is to shorten the length of the trip. But when budgets rise there are seven strategies more common than adding more room nights. Those strategies are: adding wow elements, choosing a more luxe property, increasing the F&B budget, accepting more qualifiers, adding more off-site events, developing an app and including an on-site merchandise experience. A good incentive program gives attendees some bragging rights and provides experiences that they couldn't or wouldn't be able to arrange on their own.

4. PROFESSIONAL INCENTIVE TRAVEL ORGANISERS

Worldwide, many companies organizing incentive trips, leave the organization to professionals, so called Incentive travel organizers (ITOs). The role of these professionals is much higher comparing to traditional travel agencies that are commonly involved in the organization of a trip. Professional organizers of incentive trips are included in the process of rewarding very early, working together with the client's company on solving problems of marketing, sales, productivity and motivation by using travel as a tool. The action of these professionals begins with the analysis of business and taking into account the particular forms of rewarding employees. The next step is to achieve the objectives and monitoring of employees, and in the end the selection of those who will be rewarded while organization of travel is only the last step in the overall process (Davidson and Cope, 2003, p.76).

All sectors of the tourism industry are involved in the organization of incentive trips. Transporters, hotels, tourist attractions, guides, local agencies - all contribute to the successful organization of incentive travel. The necessary characteristics of incentive trips are: uniqueness, exotic experience, exclusivity, originality (Davidson and Cope 2003, 79).

5. THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF INCENTIVE TRAVEL IN THE LAST 5 YEARS

In the years following the economic downturn of 2008, as the economy swings upward, and incentive travel programs continue to make their slow but steady comeback, few incentive travel trends have taken hold from 2013 to present days. These trends reflect a new economic realities that face businesses on a global scale. Professional organisers have become more focused on having programs that deliver more value overall. Based on an analysis of incentive tourism promotion specialists, especially professional incentive organizers (Paltier 2016; Boisner 2016; Ting 2013; Ting 2014) the most significant trends in the past five years are presented below.

One emerging trend in 2013 was the resurgence of family-inclusive itineraries. A younger salesforce or workforce coming wanted to include their families on the incentive trips. Rather than adhere to traditional incentive travel components such as golf and spa, many groups are opting to forge their own paths in creating programs that work best for their attendee mix, tracking of activities who are more suited for Gen Y and Millennial, or another one for the Boomers, or one for less-experienced travelers and one for those

that have traveled extensively. There's a different blend of activities because motivators differ for every person. Cruises are becoming a more popular option for incentive travel groups. There are a variety of ships and itineraries to choose from that make cruising particularly attractive for incentive groups. It's a very all-inclusive type of experience. Interest in international programs is growing. More companies are realizing that long-haul destinations are not a deterrent in motivating incentive winners. As long as the chosen incentive destination aligns well with attendees' preferences, perceptions, and appeal, longer travel times will not devalue the overall experience. Traditional notions of luxury no longer apply to incentive travel. According to incentive planners, luxury needs to be something much more authentic for clients. The inspiration and meaningfulness of unique activities should always align with the local culture, theme, and destination (Ting 2013).

In year 2014, as more organizations continue to bring back and invest in their incentive travel programs, the programs themselves are also beginning to evolve, placing a greater emphasis on one-of-a-kind experiences that encompass not just the trip itself but year-long engagement and motivation. It's about what will make the trip feel like a personal experience versus one that's one-size-fits-all. This effort is connected to planners seeking the greatest return from incentive travel and getting better at "articulating the purpose of the incentive trip" - an effort that also includes setting compliance policies and codes of ethics. It's about staying within budget while ensuring a rewarding experience for attendees to drive behaviour. In this push to get greater value from incentive programs, planners are also seeking ways to motivate participants before and after the trip itself. While there's greater emphasis on the overall incentive travel experience, budgets are still a deciding factor for many programs. As airfares and hotel rates continue to climb, increasing cost and decreasing hotel availability are impacting programs' bottom lines. Organizations have to look at how many room nights they want to load into the program plan because rates are higher than they have been in recent years. The air cost has driven up so high that the air travel component is also significantly affecting the way people plan, put together their budgets, and do their programs. All-inclusive resorts, like cruises, are also becoming a popular incentive travel program choice. Much like cruises, all-inclusive resorts have evolved to offer more luxurious, upscale experiences and value. Part of the equation for planners looking to boost incentive ROI (Return on Investment) is to incorporate business into the fun by making meeting experience something that enhances the participants' job or personal life so that it really makes that a benefit to them versus anyone else who might have not earned the trip. Customizing incentive experiences has become more important than ever (Ting 2014).

Year 2015 was the first time since the recession that more planners considered international destinations over domestic ones, with the Caribbean at the top. Incentives continue to move to international locations from domestic as the economic growth continues. The strength of the U.S. dollar, in particular, was also making it easier and more affordable for groups to travel abroad, especially in Europe, Canada, and Asia. More Millennial participants care less about the hotel room and more about the destination and the people they encounter on the trip. Participants don't need a big resort. They want to go out to restaurants that are in the neighborhood and they want more boutique-style hotels. When it comes to delivering the type of experience that incentive winners desire, it often boils down to freedom of choice. The right way is to give

participants free time, whether that's free and open, or just a little bit of unstructured time to relax or go for a walk. Some itineraries are just too crammed with activities for people to really enjoy the experience. For activities, there's a push to more personalized, customized experiences. Planners are often tasked with designing a program that appeals to the varying interests of the multigenerational guests who attend. Interest in golf seems to be down, while leisure time or "time on one's own" is growing in popularity among incentive programs. Attendees want to experience the destination their way, but at the company's expense. Clients are sort of getting away from those big formal dinners or activities and looking for a more laidback, no-stress atmosphere. Having a more relaxed itinerary and environment is becoming more popular. In a successful incentive travel program, personalization goes beyond activity choices. It extends to gift choices, as well. Clients are always looking to top the program from the prior year. A lot of well-known incentive destinations are creating new ways to attract the experiential participant.

For the first time since industrialization, in 2016 companies are now faced with a larger generation exiting the workforce than entering. As the Baby Boomers retire, Generation X is not large enough to replace them and is followed by a large, less experienced cohort – the Millennials. This structural change to workforce itself has helped drive employee rewards and recognition to center stage. Emerging technologies are being integrated into recognition and incentive programs to keep pace with the technologies participants adopt in private life. There is also a perception that Millennials are particularly engaged with technology tools and expect them in the workplace (Boisner 2016). Although driven primarily by an interest in engaging Millennials, corporate social responsibility also connects with other generations and again rose to the top as a popular enhancement to incentive and recognition programs. Having a social mission is a core expectation. Paralleling consumer trends, employees increasingly expect best-in-class organizations to be good corporate citizens. Incentive and recognition program planners are integrating CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) opportunities in the form of culture-building volunteer days or incentive travel team-building events (Van Dike 2016). Some companies consider the “green” practices of destination hotels and vendors. Likewise, Millennials are demanding “social impact travel” where fun and sun meets the ability to have a social impact as well. As an extension of social good, many organizations are expanding employee well-being programs which can include not only wellness, but also financial well-being, eldercare, and flexible schedules, among others. Incentive travel has always been rooted in the desirability and motivating power of the experience. A focus on user or guest experience is now part of a strategy to build relationships between organizations and their employees, channel partners, and customers across a wide range of incentive and recognition programs (Van Dike 2016).

In year 2017, technology continues to be a key game changer for all aspects of the incentives and recognition industry. Society's burgeoning acceptance of devices in all settings and situations is also leading to more organizations allowing employees to “BYOD” - bring their own device. In return, employees and channel partners have increased expectations for data transparency and accountability. While technology has long been an enabler of experiences for all types of reward and recognition programs, there are several major trends driving end user interest. Although hundreds of examples of each of these trends currently exist, the crux of these trends is fourfold. In sum, technology is becoming more social, wearable, predictive, and view altering. The

growing hotel demand and availability concerns are reflected in planners pushing out their booking, with over half of planners now booking more than a year out. Although Airbnb announced extended corporate travel integration in mid-2016, it still remains to be seen if this will impact incentive travel demands, which, by definition, require the planning organization to have a greater control over the ultimate experience than corporate travel departments do (Paltier 2016) Finally, the cruise market continues to see sustained growth for the second year in a row, with more programs moving from land to cruises than vice versa. This growth is supported not only by new ocean-going vessels, but also by new destinations for river cruising. As business in general continues to expand internationally, the same is true for incentive travel reward and recognition programs. Once thought of as only affecting the incentive travel side of the market, globalization now influences all types of reward and recognition programs - merchandise and gift cards included

CONCLUSION

An increasingly complex business environment creates more and more challenges. The industry is bombarded with such influencers as doing-more-with-less philosophies, constant mergers and acquisitions, prioritizing-until-it-hurts practices, demands for more work/life balance, integrating technology into our daily lives, media rhetoric and public scrutiny.

Incentive travel works. It has the proven ability to achieve many corporate objectives, but like most serious business strategies, it requires knowledgeable design and execution. The spirited intentions and business objectives of today's incentive travel programs are as diverse and unique as the participant base itself.

Traditional approaches can greatly impede an organization's ability to consistently and effectively drive targeted participant behaviours as a result. The urgency to identify and adopt new approaches has never been greater.

Corporate managers who identify objectives, skilled planners who can create the program to achieve those objectives and experts who can deliver a reward that will be meaningful, motivational and memorable, they all unite together to create an incentive travel experience that generates bottom line results for the client because incentives move business.

When executed well, incentive travel programs can reap a multitude of benefits for business. They improve business results by increasing sales and spurring innovation from employees or partners. They offer a wonderful opportunity for business to recognize top achievers within the company and facilitate a culture where employees or partners can thrive. Incentive travel programs also create and strengthen relationships among all parties involved. Creating a successful incentive travel program involves proper planning, strategic communication and a well thought out rewards mix that inspires participants to take action.

Incentive travel programs are an excellent way to motivate company employees, but they must be carefully thought out and executed well. The more diverse the attendees on an incentive travel are, the more diverse in program agendas need to be. In order to keep participants engaged, the unique experience has to be delivered to the right demographics and offer multiple components to meet the needs of the unique participants. From the desire for luxury, to expensive dinners and desire for staying in big resorts, participants of the incentive travel are turning toward CSR and authentic experiences of a small local communities. Conventional wisdom in the motivational events industry is that CSR events are necessary in order to have positive impact on Generation Y (Millennials). The traditional financial or business related measurement of values can yield a significant disconnect with incentive travel participants. For the motivational travel participants, their level of interest and engagement hinges on whether or not the opportunity for a travel experience is worth their added time and effort what can be identified as a Return on Experience or ROE model. The future will continue to demand a higher degree of customization and heightened experiences for participants.

It is important to acknowledge that as a conceptual article, the limitations are clear. The conceptual framework proposed above will need substantial empirical testing before any conclusions about its applicability to incentive travel can be drawn. Nonetheless, it offers a foundation for future research in an area which, until recently, has remained without a strong theoretical background. Future research could investigate the different dimensions of this framework and test it in the real sector through survey designed for company managers and their employees on incentive travel preferences. This would represent a significant advance in understanding the value of incentive travel as an employee motivator.

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