



MAXIMIZING THE VALUE OF YOUR INCENTIVE DESTINATION

Incentive travel is about motivation and destination. It's a reward for outstanding performance. For a broader pool of employees or salespeople, that same incentive trip serves to motivate current and future performance. An incentive trip's impact depends on the attendees' full experience, how memorable the trip is, and the buzz it creates throughout the company. Making the most of the selected destination is central to the lasting impact of the incentive.

To explore how to maximize the value of a destination, in partnership with Destination Canada, we gathered industry professionals at the iconic Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, the landmark luxury hotel of Quebec City, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most beautiful, and walkable, cities in the world. With its cobbled streets lined with centuries-old buildings, top-notch restaurants, and European atmosphere, Québec City offered the most unique and unexpected scenery to inspire our roundtable discussions. The group included a mix of corporate program owners and third-party representatives from the US and UK.

Over two days, the group discussed how to position and develop programming around a destination for impact, and how resources like Destination Management Organizations, Hoteliers, DMCs and others can be used to maximum effect, while experiencing Quebec City first-hand during incentive-style activities. Their insights and perspectives, shared in this paper, help shed light on how to partner with suppliers to harness the motivational power of the destination, how to position destinations to senior leaders and attendees, and how to create lasting impact among attendees.

Inspired by Quebec City's history, culture, and specific sense of place, the incentive professionals immediately discussed authenticity as a key element to a special destination. The group had sampled local cuisine, gone on walking city tours, and participated in a moccasin sewing activity. Their welcome dinner showcased locally-sourced ingredients transformed with creativity and innovations by Chef Gabriel Molleur-Langevin of Champlain restaurant during a dramatic Dinner in Darkness at Fairmont Le Château Frontenac. A cultural highlight had been experiencing a storytelling session in a traditional longhouse at the Huron-Wendat Museum located a short walk from Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations in Wendake, an indigenous owned hotel on the Huron-Wendat Nation. The group discussed how these types of authentic experiences, that give a true sense of history and place, could create lasting memories for incentive travel participants.



Understanding & Navigating Client Priorities

In working to maximize all a destination has to offer, it's important to understand the perspective of the audience and decision makers. Are they hungry for adventure? Curious about history? Or do they simply want to skim the surface? Surveying program qualifiers, analyzing feedback from previous participants, and discussions with leadership all play a role in determining what works for the specific audience. A program owner recommended focusing questions on “what do you want to do” rather than “where do you want to go” in order to develop a list of potential destinations where memorable experiences could take place and then design a program that delivers on attendee desires.



It was noted that in today's competitive business landscape, the c-suite has an increased desire to understand what competitors are doing as incentives are increasingly focused on talent retention. They need their incentives to be a “big win” and a “sure thing” especially when those leaders are new to an organization. Program owners agreed that leaders are definitely spending more in order to outdo the competition.

Yet leadership often proceeds with caution, contributing to the struggle between selecting a new, unique destination, which IRF research has shown to be in demand among attendees, versus the known and reliable. Incentive program owners are trying to break out of traditional incentive destinations focused on “sun and fun,” but budgets are restrictive, so all-inclusive resorts and pricing continue to drive choice.

The roundtable participants agreed that unique destinations and authentic experiences appeal to well-travelled, well-compensated participants. Authenticity matters to people who have participated in previous incentive trips, are looking for something unique, and are excited by “money can’t buy” experiences.

Third party contributors noted that their clients want to hear about the new and different (and are asking for it constantly). Even within tried-and-true destinations, it is important to present new experiences to avoid programs that become stale or expected. Roundtable participants felt it was important to be able to approach these moments with facts and data. They will provide clear, logical reasons why a destination or activity may not be right for the group, but they aren’t always able to sway the decision. This was also where discussions about maximizing supplier resources like a strong DMO or CVB were noted as important.



Maximizing Destination Value

As one program owner clearly stated, “The destination has to make the trip exciting.” As DE&I takes more of a center stage, so does the demand for sense of place. From pre-event communications to onsite experience to post-trip follow-up, incentive travel planners showcase the destination as the cornerstone of the experience.

Education and storytelling about the unique destination are typically built in throughout the program. Attendees want to know what is unique about the destination, from both a historical perspective as well as what’s special now. In Quebec City, our roundtable group was treated to a walking tour by a local resident who spent her whole life in a city she loved. She not only told the history of the city, she shared her experiences as a schoolgirl growing up, used an app on her phone to bring a piece of local art to life, and recommended the “best hot chocolate you’ll ever drink.” A third party said of the tour, “Providing context really adds depth and helps us absorb the culture.”

The group learned about the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac has pursued its mission to create lasting memories for its guests for more than 130 years. Many celebrities, royalty, politicians, and artists have made it hotel their home away from home for years. The hotel has a starring role in many historic events, and it has a collection of heritage suites named after famous people who have changed world history.

Culture is memorable, and the things attendees learn and experience on incentive trips stay with them long after they return home. A program owner noted that they are “more attached to creating a local experience and being tied to local culture.” The group experienced the indigenous culture with a visit to Wendake, a First Nations reserve that has been inhabited by the Huron-Wendat people for over 1,000 years. They explored the community’s rich cultural heritage, experienced traditional cuisine, and took part in a longhouse ceremony.



A program owner noted that you must be sensitive to the local culture. Sometimes you want to give authenticity, but the group may not recognize what you’re doing as authentic based on stereotypes or expectations. Delivering next level authenticity feels more important to our discussion participants, but not every group will get it. As one program owner said, “Most people attending our programs want hula dancers in Hawaii. That’s one of those expectations.” Another program owner noted they try to strike the balance by having an experience that might lean a little into the stereotypes but marry that with education around the associated history or customs. For example, while many people make the cliched association of Canada with maple syrup, that can be an opportunity to take participants to a traditional sugar shack and learn how they extract the sap from the maple trees and have a curated cooking lesson to incorporate the ingredient. Leaning into destination resources can help program owners strike the balance in a way that is culturally sensitive and resonates with attendees.

When a destination has a wealth of exciting and authentic opportunities, pacing of the program is particularly important. Offering free time, adding in smaller experiences, and incorporating relaxing activities gives participants time to recharge and absorb the experience. The group discussed whether they’re seeing attendees push to go explore on their own, or if they just prefer to follow the program.

Program owners noted that in some destinations, they would be absolutely comfortable with having attendees explore on their own and experience what they are most interested in. In fact, several of our attendees in Quebec ventured out to find that “best hot chocolate” the tour guide told them about – and were not disappointed! However, some destinations are simply not suited for independent exploration, and program owners will then default to keeping participants in “the resort bubble” and bringing more of the history or culture of the destination to them.



While much of the discussion centered around exciting new destinations with ample opportunities for authentic experiences, the group acknowledged that many incentive travel trips were still returning to tried and true destinations. These are the programs where it is critical to overcome the “yawn factor” and seek out new ways to experience the destination. One third party explained that DMCs are key to reimagining the experience, but they often need to be pushed to deliver options that are notably distinct from the previous trip.

Gifting is seen as a huge opportunity to extend the impact of the incentive trip. Incentive planners often rely on destination resources to provide suggestions around local products and artisans. Program owners are leaning more into destination branded gifts or experiential gifts – local art, crafts, and food, or items they can customize or personalize – over company-branded swag. Locally sourced gifts can be unique and special, not something that can be purchased at home or even online. Local artisan markets are popular choices and help infuse a sense of place, along with opportunities for personalization. This can be taken to a next level with entertainment, story tellers, and “approachable education” about the destination or item. Quality is important when it comes to gifting, and planners want to be realistic about reuse and make sure the gift will be taken home. It’s important to invest time into choices as this is a great way to bring the destination to life, and help attendees take a piece of the destination home.



Maximizing Supplier Resources

Given that a top priority of incentive travel is to create memorable experiences, it is important for program owners to bring all the resources a destination has to offer into the process. The group discussed optimal use of destination resources including DMOs, CVBs, and DMCs.

Many of our roundtable attendees' first step when researching what destinations have to offer is to talk to industry colleagues. And while word of mouth is powerful, industry events and gatherings are go-to venues to learn about what's new, which our group agrees is even more important in a post-pandemic world. Social media, including YouTube and TikTok also provide visually appealing, quick-hit introductions to fashionable new destinations.

Buyers noted that they preferred the educational content provided during a group presentation over one-on-one meetings, which often feel too sales focused. Our group noted that FAM trips enable the planner to experience the destination firsthand, with a program owner noting that they only commit to the FAM trip when there is potential to bring her group there, and they have not personally experienced the location.



DMO and CVBs are Underutilized Resources

There seems to be some disconnect among our group when it comes to when to involve a DMO or CVB in the incentives process. Some note they rarely utilize them, while others indicate they bring them in if there are challenges, but it's often too late in the process.

Third parties felt that they should be reaching out more to the CVBs and DMOs when they are putting proposals together to understand if there are any offers that can help particularly during times of budget compression and inflation. A program owner noted that with budget being a top concern, incentives offered by CVBs and DMOs can be an important decision driver.

A program owner spoke to the value of a national tourism organization, saying “we get a bespoke professional point of view, with impartial information.” A DMO can help inform, educate and guide conversations and design experiences or services that align with the group. Planners expect DMOs to clearly point to the “can’t miss” opportunities in the destination, since they may have seen something else work with a different program of the same or similar size or profile. A CVB representative noted they may also be able to suggest equivalent hotels, offer speaker services, offer receptions or décor, etc. They noted that DMOs are also impartial to their partners and want the best offering for their client.



DMOs assist on a macro level and work towards a common goal of bringing a group into their destination and highlight the amazing offerings. A good DMO has great relationships with their local DMCs as they need to work collectively to highlight the destination. A DMC's primary goal is to manage the program from start to finish, and they are more involved in planning, contracting, negotiations and logistical/operational planning.

CVBs and DMOs also help “connect the dots” around all the benefits of a destination. For example, the group viewed the fact that Fairmont Le Château Frontenac is the first historic hotel in Canada to achieve net-zero carbon emissions as a strong selling point. This data point will be even more powerful when presented with the overall sustainability plan for Quebec City. Destination Canada is currently executing its Sustainability Plan which provides turnkey economic, social, and environmental sustainability programs to global clients by working with each of their 16 Canadian partners. Program owners expect this to become more important and more of a force in decision-making as organizations work to address sustainability goals.

Some program owners felt that their programs are likely too small for CVBs/DMOs to care about. Third parties and program owners suggested CVBs reach out more to let them know how they can assist with incentives. There is generally a sense that CVBs are only for city-wide events. A CVB representative noted they would like to be included as cc on all RFPs coming into the market, which can be done through Cvent. It's both good to know who is considering, but they may have offerings that are not published but are available.

Overall, it feels like CVBs / DMOs continue to be under-utilized, but deeper engagement and education would be valuable and well-received by the program owners and third parties. Strong engagement from a DMO like Destination Canada goes a long way to getting cities into the consideration set that had not been previously contemplated.

The Importance of a Good DMC

Third parties and program owners both noted they heavily rely on DMCs for destination information. DMCs are viewed as the “boots on the ground” who have the knowledge and connections to make planning more efficient and the attendee experience richer.

Several planners discussed the importance of working with a DMC from the very beginning of the project. While transportation, restaurant, and activity recommendation were at the top the list, they were quick to point out the DMCs to help plan and advise on important logistics, such as security plans, assisting attendees through customs, passport requirements, how to deal with lost passports, travel restrictions, and event insurance. One program owner shared that their DMC contact met with hotel F&B staff prior to the event to review and ensure all dietary and allergy requirements were properly understood and met.

Clients and third parties are both looking for opportunities to surprise and delight their attendees. They will usually rely on the DMC for this. They connect planners to local knowledge, truly authentic experiences, trusted vendors, and proven value. DMCs help connect planners to local culture and to new opportunities that cannot be found in the destination’s travel book. Private tours conducted by local tour guides, access to historic sites, restaurants with locally sourced produce, local artisans, and off-the-beaten path treasures are just a few examples of how DMCs can connect planners to resources and experiences unique to the destination.



Another important resource that planners expect from DMCs and DMOs is access to photos, videos, and marketing copy that generates excitement about the destination. Visuals are very important, and the ability to easily add destination photos and videos to the company's branded communications helps planners promote a destination. Several planners share slick destination-specific social media posts and reels created by DMCs when presenting new destination options to leadership or generating pre-trip enthusiasm among attendees.

Engaging All Resources

With the bar higher than ever to deliver a compelling program in a challenging economic environment, planners see the need to reach out to every available resource within a given destination. Collaboration among suppliers helps incentive travel planners bring a destination to life for their attendees.

There was a feeling among the group that DMCs and CVBs / DMOs could be working more closely together across all destinations. It was noted that some destinations seem to have more of a harmonious or cohesive relationship between DMCs and CVBs / DMOs. In others, there is a sense of competition that creates confusion for program owners. Where it works well, the program owners note significant benefit exists that could help planners maximize budgets, experience design, and resources.

As we wrapped up our conversation, the participants expressed appreciation to Destination Canada for bringing them together and showcasing Quebec City. They noted that they were more aware of the value a DMO can bring to the destination selection and program planning process, and are more committed to involving them both more consistently and earlier in the process to have a neutral voice at the table.





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