



WHAT TOP PERFORMING EUROPEAN COMPANIES DO DIFFERENTLY

How Top Performing European Companies Are More Effectively Leveraging Incentive Travel and Reward Strategies



Introduction

In the evolving landscape of incentive travel and reward strategies, understanding the practices that distinguish top-performing organizations has become increasingly important. *The 2026 European Top Performers Study*, conducted by the Incentive Research Foundation, provides a comprehensive view of how leading companies across Europe design, implement, and manage incentive travel programs that drive measurable business outcomes.

Building on a cornerstone IRF model, this study captures the latest insights into strategic priorities, leadership support, program structures, and participant engagement tactics that distinguish high-achieving organizations. As companies operate in an increasingly complex environment shaped by shifting political landscapes, economic pressures, regulatory considerations, and evolving participant expectations, top-performing organizations demonstrate a clear commitment to innovation, personalization, and alignment with broader business objectives.

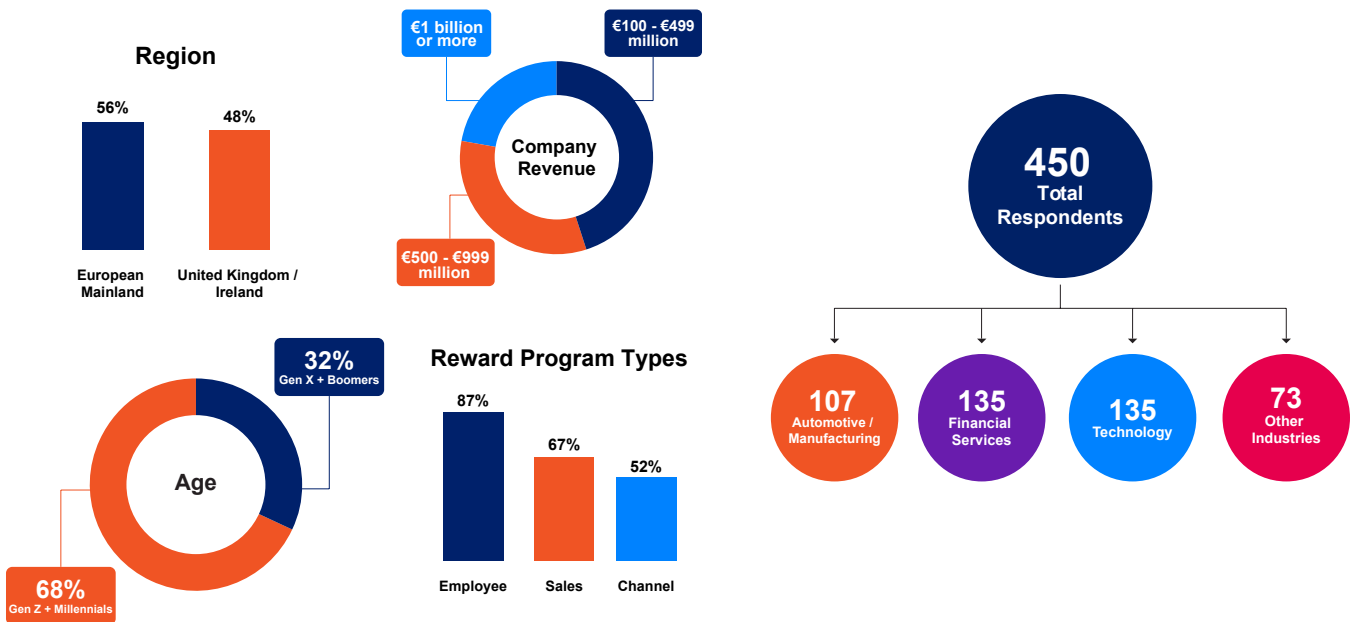
This report is designed to equip organizations, suppliers, and industry stakeholders with the insights needed to refine their approaches, adopt emerging best practices, and unlock the full potential of incentive travel as a strategic driver of growth, loyalty, and organizational culture.

Research Methodology & Respondent Profile

The 2026 European Top Performers Study was conducted through a comprehensive survey of incentive travel professionals across Europe, with responses collected in December 2025 and January 2026. Participants were full-time professionals with significant influence over incentive travel, rewards, and recognition programs at companies generating at least €100 million in annual revenue.

Regionally, 56% of organizations reported operating programs within mainland Europe, while 48% hosted programs in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 65 and represented a diverse cross-section of industries, including automotive and manufacturing, financial services, and technology.

The research captured a broad range of program audiences. Employee incentive travel programs were the most common and were managed by 87% of respondents. Sales incentive travel initiatives were reported by 67%, while 52% supported channel partner incentive programs, including distributors, retail or dealer partners. This distribution ensured that the findings reflected a wide variety of incentive travel strategies and program objectives across the European market.



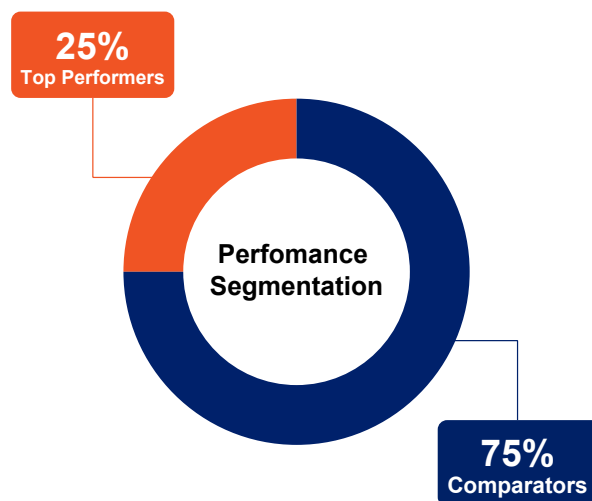
While the study reflects a broad cross-section of the incentive travel industry, its primary purpose was to identify the practices that differentiate top performing organizations from their peers. A defined set of performance indicators including revenue growth, customer expansion, and talent attraction and retention was used to establish the criteria that distinguish high-achieving companies.

Organizations were categorized as Top Performers if they reported that they:

- Achieved significant revenue growth over the previous year
- Expanded their total customer base over the previous year
- Increased their employee base over the previous year
- Consider themselves successful in:
 - Meeting key performance goals (financial, growth, etc.)
 - Acquiring new customers and retaining existing ones
 - Attracting and retaining high-performing talent
 - Establishing and maintaining a reputation as a desirable workplace

Companies that did not meet this full set of indicators were categorized as Comparators. This segmentation provides a practical, data-driven lens for analyzing the incentive travel practices most closely associated with stronger organizational outcomes.

Among all participating organizations, 25.1% qualified as Top Performers, while 74.9% were designated as Comparators.

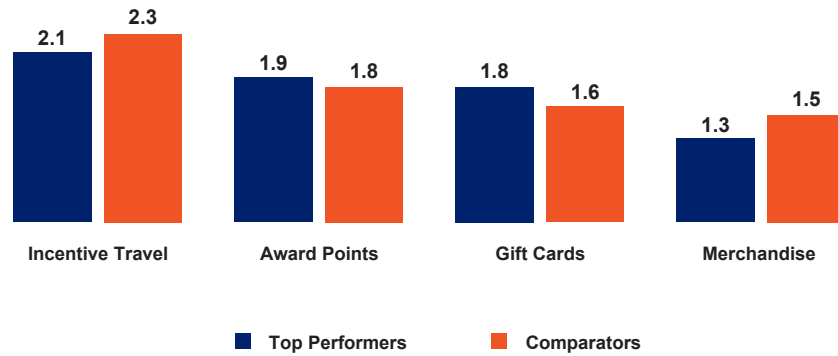


Key Findings

Incentive Travel Programs Drive Impact

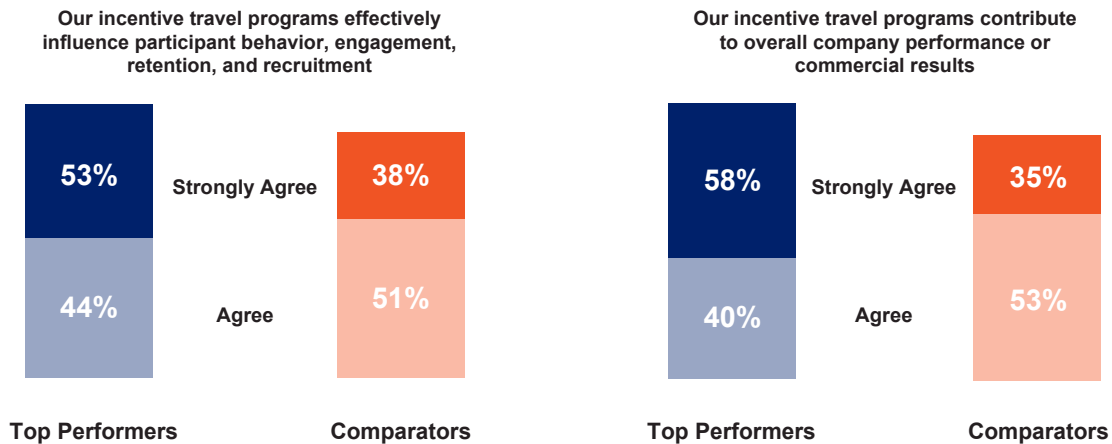
European organizations consistently report that incentive travel is the most impactful reward type for influencing participant engagement, performance, and broader business outcomes. Both Top Performers and Comparators recognize its value in driving sales growth, employee retention, and customer satisfaction, with the effect particularly pronounced in technology and financial services, where structured incentive travel programs play a central role in motivating high-performing teams.

Impact on Key Business Outcomes



Q25: Please rank each of the following reward types in terms of impact on key business outcomes (e.g., sales growth, retention, customer satisfaction). Scores are calculated by reversing average rank values so that higher bars reflect greater impact

Incentive Travel Program Impact



53% of Top Performers strongly agree that their incentive travel programs effectively drive participant engagement and retention, 15% higher than Comparators. They also hold a stronger belief that their programs contribute meaningfully to overall business performance (58% to 35%). Additionally, 63% of Top Performers strongly agree that their incentive travel programs deliver measurable long-term value for both participants and the company, over double that of Comparator organizations.

These results indicate that Top Performers are not only executing incentive travel programs but are doing so with strategic intent, ensuring rewards directly influence desired behaviors while producing measurable organizational benefits. For these companies, incentive travel is more than a motivational perk; it is a strategic lever for driving performance, sustaining engagement, and reinforcing long-term business objectives.

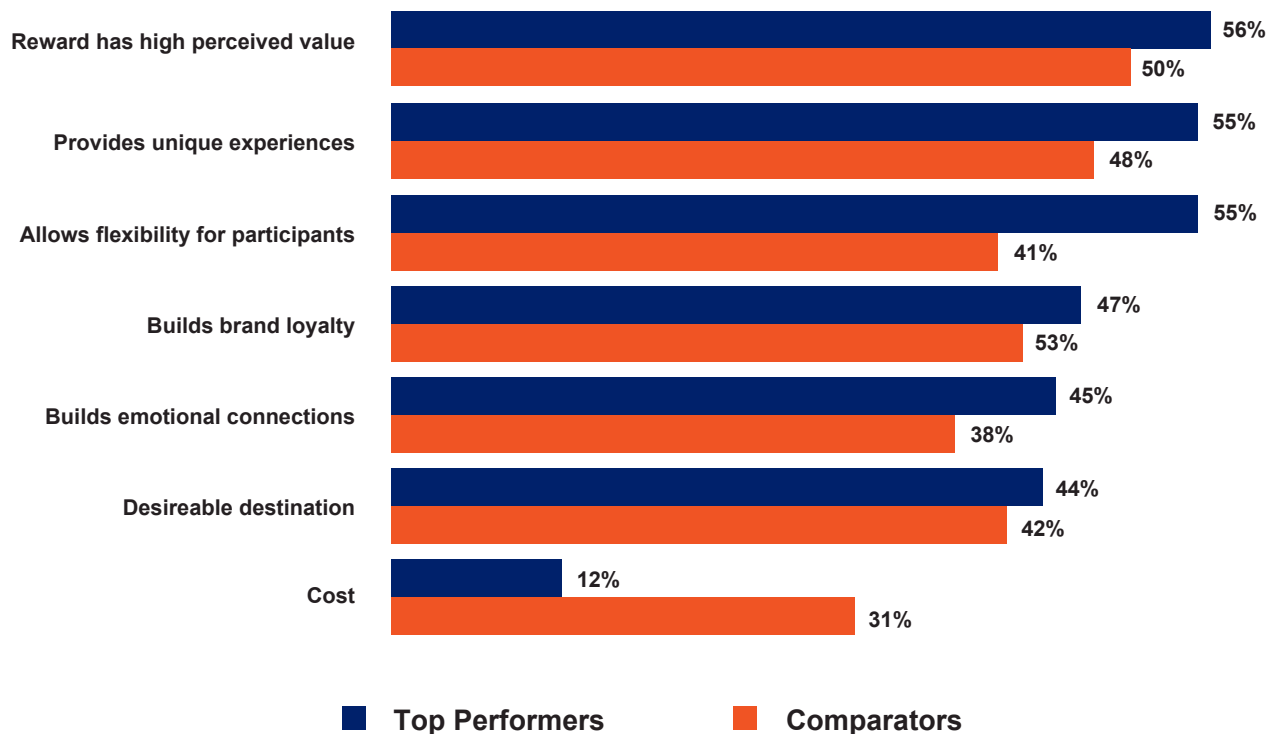
Top Performers Leverage Incentive Travel More Effectively

Top Performers take a broader, more strategic view of incentive travel, using it to reinforce both organizational identity and business objectives. Nearly all Top Performers (98%) design their programs to reflect the company's culture and values, ensuring rewards are meaningful and aligned with brand identity. They are also more likely than Comparators to link incentive travel to customer loyalty and satisfaction (73% versus 56%) and to business growth and sales performance (65% versus 58%), demonstrating a more holistic approach that extends beyond engagement to measurable business impact.

Top Performers Prioritize the Participant

Top Performers center incentive travel design on the participant experience, emphasizing high perceived value (56%), unique experiences (55%), and flexibility (55%), all higher than Comparators. High perceived value is particularly emphasized in the financial services and technology industries. Top-achieving companies also focus on building brand loyalty, emotional connections, and destination appeal, while cost is less of a priority (12% versus 31% for Comparators), reflecting a strategic emphasis on impact over expense.

Incentive Travel Design Priorities



Q19: For your incentive travel program(s), which of the following design priorities are most important?



To further engage participants, 71% of Top Performers implement special qualification rules for new participants, giving them a better chance to qualify and ensuring early momentum while maintaining aspirational program goals. These approaches demonstrate that Top Performers deliberately design incentive travel to maximize participant motivation, satisfaction, and long-term program impact.

Strong Leadership Support Provides a Stable Foundation

Top Performers consistently report higher levels of executive and internal support for their incentive travel programs compared with Comparators. 90% of high-achieving organizations describe executive sponsorship as strong and actively advocating for program funding, with 69% rating executive support as excellent, compared to 44% of Comparators. This backing drives greater management participation and buy-in, with 54% of Top Performers rating these factors as excellent, 9% higher than their counterparts.

Strong leadership support also translates into more effective staffing and internal program resources, with 64% of Top Performers rating staffing and internal support as excellent, nearly 20% higher than Comparators. These advantages provide a stable foundation for program execution, ensuring incentive travel initiatives are adequately funded, well-staffed, and aligned with business objectives, ultimately enhancing both program effectiveness and participant impact.

Top Performers Invest Selectively

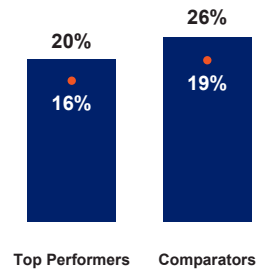
High-achieving organizations take a focused approach to incentive travel, qualifying a smaller share of participants while offering higher-value rewards. On average, only 20% of participants in Top Performer programs are selected for incentive trips each year, compared to 26% for Comparators, reflecting a deliberate emphasis on exclusivity. Selection rates also vary by program type, with sales programs (26%) qualifying more participants than employee (24%) or channel programs (22%), and by industry, where Financial Services (26%) and Technology (27%) programs target a larger share than Automotive / Manufacturing (21%) or other sectors (22%).

Top Performers also invest significantly more per trip, offering incentive travel with an average value per person of €5,564 and top-tier trips reaching €13,183. In comparison, Comparators offer an average of €3,852 and top rewards of €9,181 per person. This nearly 1.5x higher investment highlights a strategy of delivering exclusive experiences linked to engagement, performance, and a strong emotional connection to the organization.

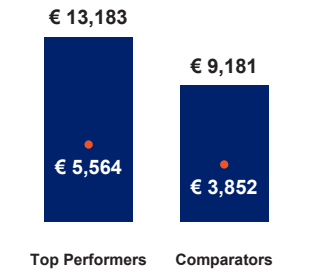
Reward values vary across regions, industries, and program types, providing insight into where budget allocation is most critical. Programs in the United Kingdom and Ireland offer nearly €1,000 higher average reward value and almost €4,000 greater top-tier value compared with the European Mainland. Sales programs also provide higher-value trips than employee or channel programs, indicating that Top Performers strategically concentrate resources where they are likely to have the greatest performance impact.

OVERALL

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



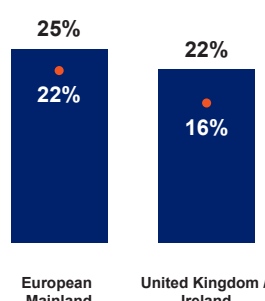
Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



■ Average ● Median ■ Top Reward Value ● Average Reward Value

BY REGION

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



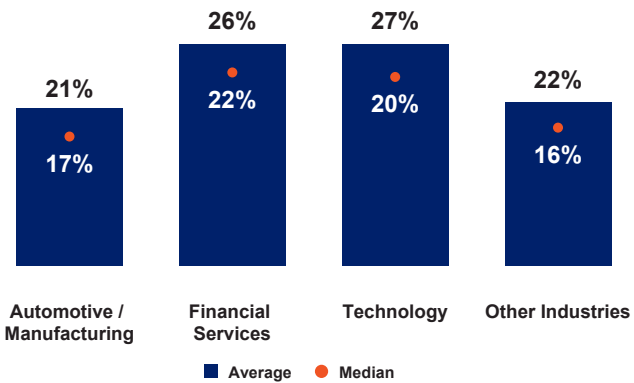
Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



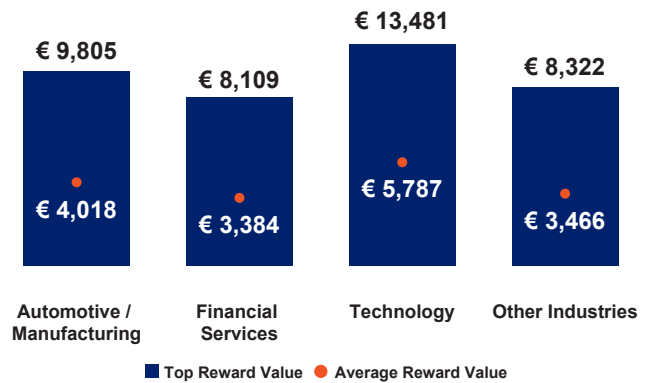
■ Average ● Median ■ Top Reward Value ● Average Reward Value

BY INDUSTRY

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



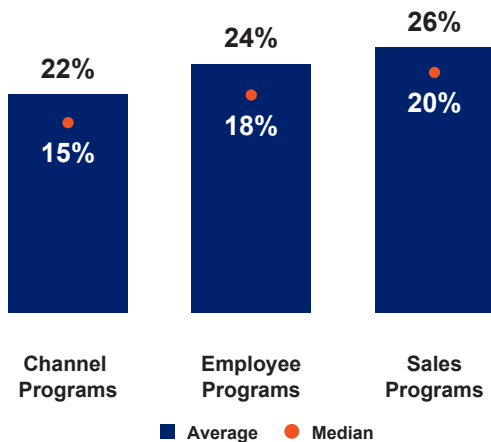
Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



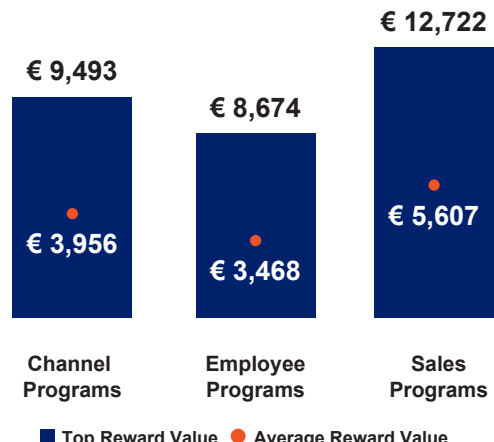
■ Average ● Median ■ Top Reward Value ● Average Reward Value

BY PROGRAM TYPE

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



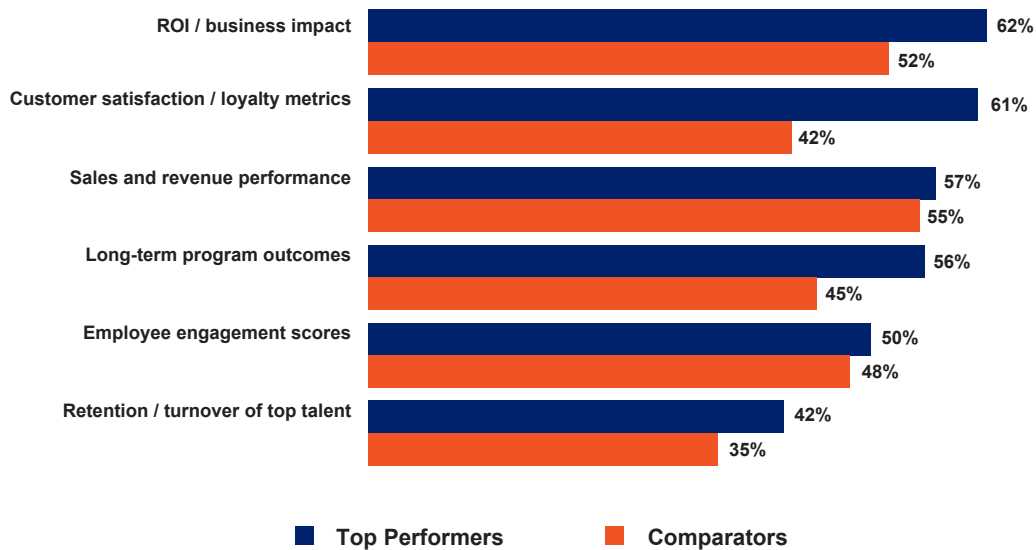
■ Average ● Median ■ Top Reward Value ● Average Reward Value

Q34: Approximately what percentage of your [channel partners/employees/salespeople] are selected for an incentive trip each year?
 Q35: What are the average and top reward values for incentive trips in your [channel/employee/sales] rewards program?

Measurement Discipline Separates Top Performers

Top Performers take a disciplined, outcomes-driven approach to incentive travel, systematically measuring program effectiveness to inform decisions and demonstrate impact. They track a wide range of metrics, including ROI and business performance (62%), customer satisfaction and loyalty (61%), sales or revenue performance (57%), and long-term program outcomes (56%), consistently outperforming Comparators in most areas.

KPIs and Metric Assessment



Q27: Which KPIs or metrics do you track to assess your incentive travel program's success?

This measurement discipline translates into high confidence in demonstrating ROI. Nearly all Top Performers (97%) report being confident in showing measurable results, with 67% very confident, compared with just 39% of Comparators. By linking incentive travel programs to both participant outcomes and organizational impact, Top Performers ensure that rewards deliver strategic value, reinforce desired behaviors, and drive tangible business results.

Continuous Program Optimization Generates Results

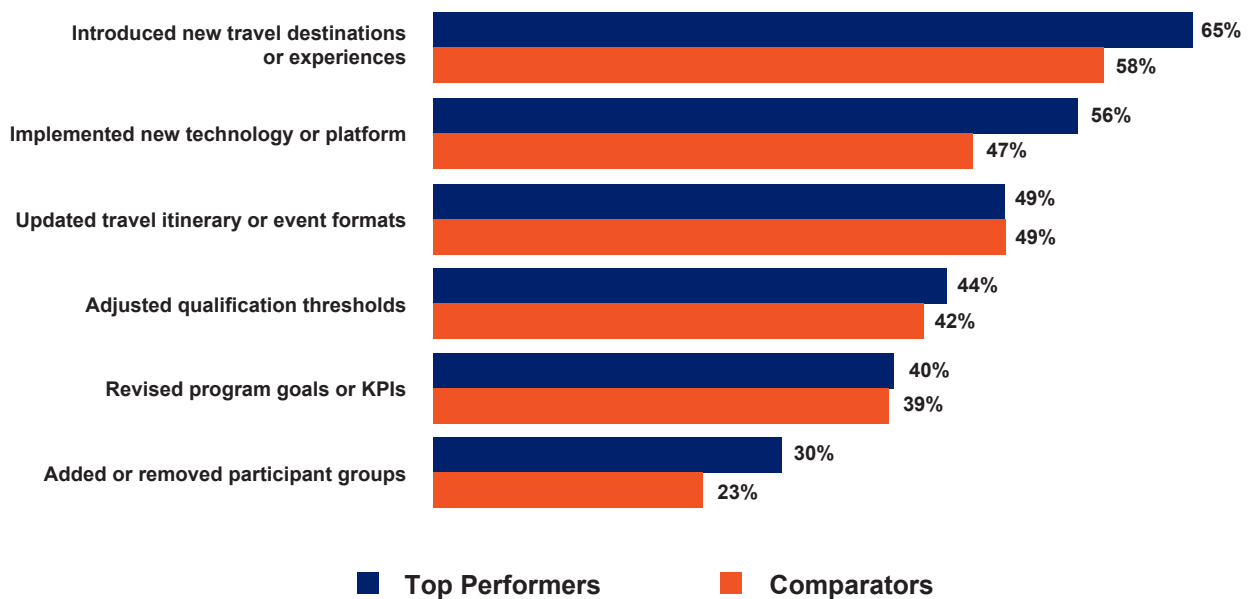
High-achieving organizations consistently review and update their incentive travel programs more frequently than Comparators, ensuring that their initiatives remain engaging, innovative, and aligned with participant needs. Most Top Performers evaluate results on a monthly (25%) or quarterly (45%) basis, reflecting a proactive and disciplined approach to program management.

This focus on continuous improvement extends to the adoption of new technologies and experiences. 57% of Top Performers strongly agree that they leverage technology and external expertise effectively, compared with 33% of Comparators. Similarly, 57% strongly agree that they continually review their programs to maximize effectiveness, 17% higher than others. Over the past 12 months, Top Performers were more likely to introduce new travel destinations or

experiences (65% vs. 58%) and implement new technology platforms (56% vs. 47%), while also updating itineraries, adjusting qualification thresholds, and revising program goals and KPIs.

By systematically using data and feedback to refine program design, Top Performers ensure their incentive travel remains a strategic, motivating tool, sustaining engagement, reinforcing desired behaviors, and generating measurable organizational impact. Continuous program optimization allows these companies to maintain relevance and excitement, maximize participant satisfaction, and deliver tangible business outcomes over time.

Incentive Travel Program Adjustments



Q21: Which of the following changes have you made to your incentive travel program(s) in the past 12 months?

Summary

The 2026 European Top Performers Study highlights how leading organizations use incentive travel as a strategic tool to drive engagement, performance, and measurable business results. Top-performing companies distinguish themselves through thoughtful program design, strong leadership support, disciplined measurement, and continuous optimization, creating programs that influence participant behavior while reinforcing broader organizational goals.

High-achieving organizations view incentive travel as more than a reward. They leverage it to align with business objectives, reflect company culture, and motivate high-performing teams. Programs are deliberately designed to prioritize the participant experience, emphasizing



perceived value, unique experiences, and flexibility, while strategically investing in higher-value trips for a focused group of participants. Top Performers also take a holistic approach to qualification, considering customer satisfaction and loyalty alongside traditional financial and activity-based performance indicators.

Strong executive sponsorship and internal support provide a stable foundation for success. Top Performers report higher levels of leadership advocacy, cross-functional collaboration, and staffing resources than Comparators, ensuring programs are well-funded, effectively executed, and aligned with strategic objectives. Measurement discipline further separates Top Performers, with nearly all reporting confidence in demonstrating ROI and linking incentive travel to long-term organizational and participant benefits.

Continuous program optimization ensures that incentive travel remains relevant, engaging, and impactful. Top Performers frequently review program results, introduce new destinations and experiences, and implement technology platforms that enhance program delivery. By combining strategic intent, participant focus, disciplined measurement, and ongoing refinement, these organizations create incentive travel programs that deliver both emotional and business value, reinforcing desired behaviors, sustaining engagement, and driving long-term organizational success. This framework serves as a blueprint for organizations aiming to elevate the impact of their reward and recognition programs.

Thank you to our Research Advocacy Partners

