

Business Events Pulse Check: The State of Meetings in Canada

November 2023

Canada



Quebec City Convention Centre

Quebec

CANADA 

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Toronto
Ontario

Credit:
Destination Toronto

Research Overview & Methodology

Destination Canada conducted five (5) focus groups which took place from September 4th – October 6th, 2023, with association leaders, financial meeting planners, incentive meeting planners, and corporate meeting planners across key industries who host business events. These focus groups included perspectives from Finance Insurance Convention Professionals (FICP), Council of Engineering and Scientific Society Executives (CESSE), the American Society of Association Activities (ASAE), as well as from the Professional Conference Organizers (PCO) representing the global associations segment industry.

These key audiences provided insights about the current state of business meetings and events, decision-making criteria, perceptions of Canada, as well as barriers and opportunities for attracting meetings and events to the country.

Additionally, secondary research was conducted, and insights were pulled from other business event industry resources, including - Incentive Research Foundation: [“Maximizing the Value of your Incentive Destination”](#) (Oct. 2023), Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA): “Destination Canada Business Events Research Study” (July 2023), and ASAE: “Destination Canada Member Survey” (July 2023). These insights are also included throughout this report to add context and detail.



St. John's
Newfoundland and Labrador

Key Findings & Executive Summary



Sunshine Coast

British Columbia

Key Findings

Key Findings & Executive Summary

1

Current Landscape

Event organizers and executive leaders are very positive about the industry

2

Outlook

Demand has returned, and in some cases increased

3

Decision-making

Destination partners need to provide support, education, and communication to decision-makers

4

Barriers

Cost and accessibility remain the biggest challenges

5

Opportunities

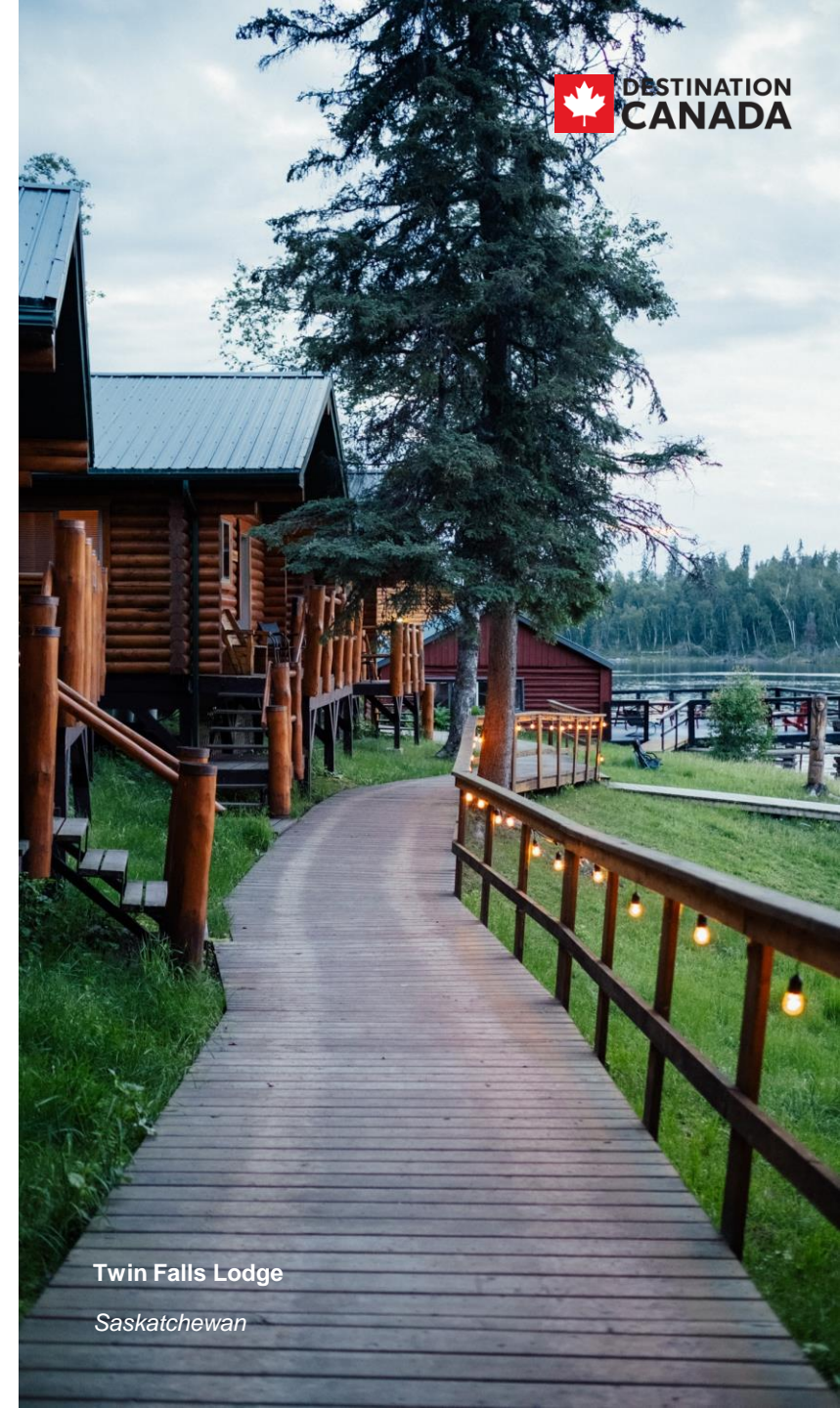
Destination partners should focus on Canada's value propositions and unique offerings

Executive Summary

Event organizers and executive leaders across segments of business events (i.e., associations, corporate meeting and incentive planners, etc.) continue to feel confident about the current state of the business events industry and largely have a positive outlook for the future.

The key findings, as they relate to the state of business events in Canada, are as follows:

- Sentiment towards Canada remains extremely positive
- Business is returning with near-term from U.S.-based organizations and longer-term from international ones
- Budget and costs continue to drive decisions
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) and sustainability remain important, but have little impact on selecting a destination
- Collaboration is needed to develop solutions for dealing with rising costs of doing business
- Destination partners need to work with their local partners to provide unique and creative solutions with current challenges
- Destination partners need to engage all of their partners to help develop creative solutions to current challenges



Twin Falls Lodge

Saskatchewan

Current Landscape & Outlook

Bistro Le Moque-Tortue

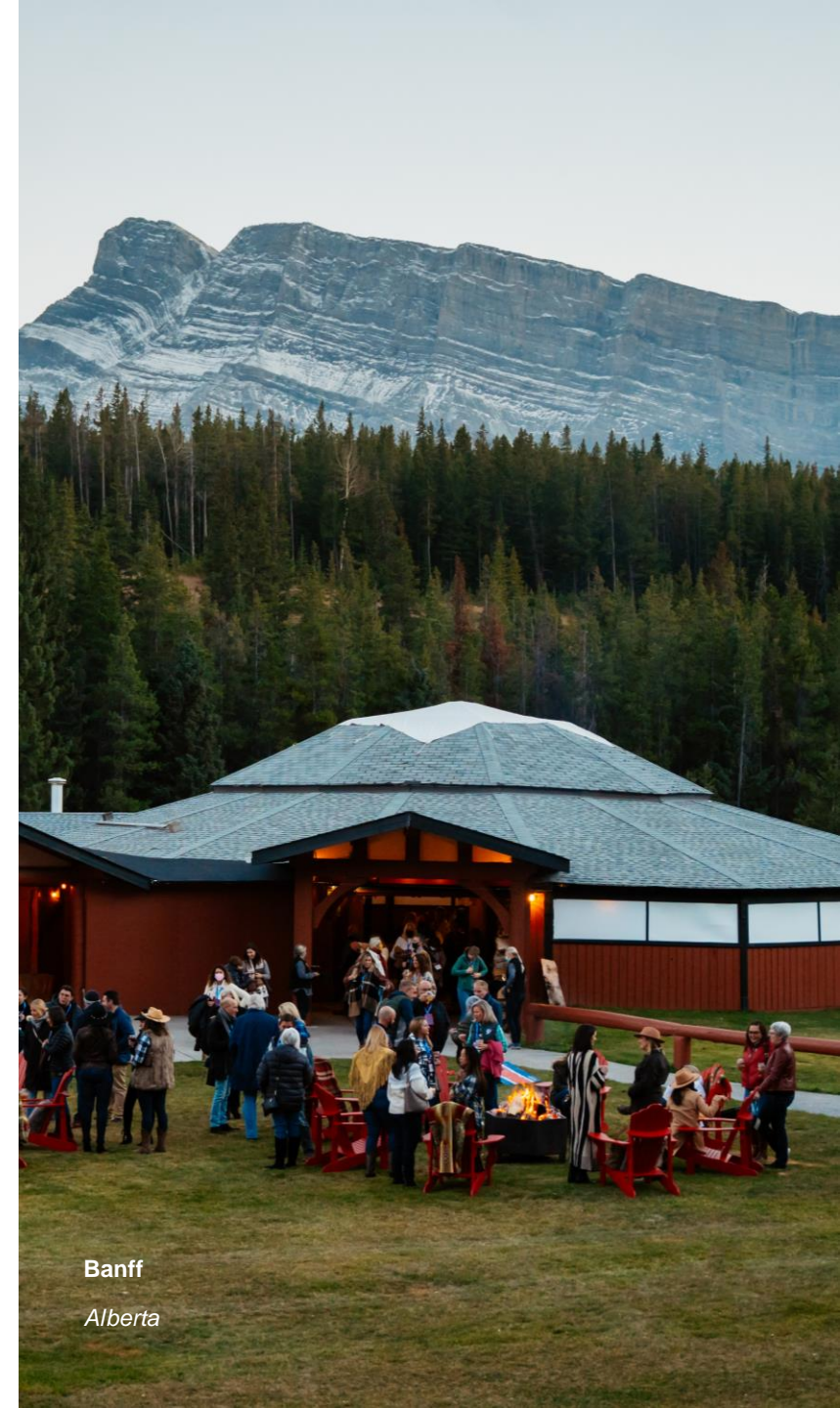
New Brunswick

Optimism remains high within the business events industry.

Many describe their outlook as very optimistic. Although overall future bookings are on the rise across all segments, booking events far ahead remains a challenge for event organizers and industry suppliers, because of the rising costs and uncertainty.

Event organizers, such as financial insurance meeting planners, have already begun sourcing for larger meetings and events to be held in 2025 and 2026 (some even in 2028), while smaller meetings and events tend to be planned in the year for the year. Although future business events are being booked, some association leaders (and their members) are cautious about locking into long-term deals and contracts. **Destination partners need to ensure that their RFP response time matches the pace of business.**

These findings mirror current global booking and leads for Canada, which show both climbing and nearing 2019 levels.



Banff

Alberta

The planning and execution of business events are changing.

The timeframe for planning and booking meetings and events is getting shorter, specifically noted by CESSE meeting planners. Although some larger business events are still being booked well in advance, it is not uncommon for meetings and events to be booked in the year for the year. **Destination partners' marketing and business development strategies and tactics should align with the changing business climate** of event industry.

Multi-year contracts are being considered more often in an effort to control costs.

Across all industries, meeting planners and associations are facing increased costs across all aspects of business events and are struggling with the current pricing models/solutions that are dictated by the venues and facilities. **Destination partners should assist local partners and suppliers to help event organizers optimize budgets and highlight added value.**

The dynamics of groups are changing, and attendees have a more diverse set of interests. Meeting planners, such as financial insurance meeting planners, state the increased desire for unique and authentic destinations and experiences. **Destination partners can help event organizers design events that prioritize connection and collaboration** over educational sessions, as well as provide itineraries that allow attendees more time for wellness and exploring the destination.

There is no consensus on virtual and hybrid meetings, as association leaders continue to see a decline in popularity as they are found to be less effective, while others believe that they will continue to be an integral (and more cost-effective) option for business events. For example, the majority of meeting planners significantly reduced the use of virtual platforms and returned to in-person events. These platforms are now being utilized as add-ons to live events where content is being offered on a continuous basis to complement events and/or to reach broader audiences.

“It's becoming a trend to mix business with leisure, and Canada's diverse destinations cater perfectly to that.”

Council of Engineering and Scientific Society Executive

DEI continues to be a key differentiator for Canada.

Overall, Canada has a positive image and is seen as being inclusive, diverse, and open - a distinct competitive advantage to the U.S. Event organizers, such as financial insurance meeting planners, note the importance of diversity not only in their partners (i.e., destinations, hotels, etc.), but also for suppliers, speakers, content, and session topics.

DEI is a key point of emphasis for meeting planners and associations and is “becoming a hot button” for incentive planners. Destination partners can help by crafting messaging that focuses on their destination’s DEI efforts and by proactively offering solutions to address their clients' needs and priorities around DEI issues.

Canada is seen as a socially conscious and politically neutral destination. Some organizations and corporate boards are asking to avoid destinations that could be politically charged or lead to internal and/or public disdain. Destination partners should provide turnkey solutions that focus on DEI efforts and proactively anticipates client needs, as clients do not know what they need at this time and are still figuring it out, so things like telling stories about the destination through the GDS index can be helpful.



Winnipeg
Manitoba

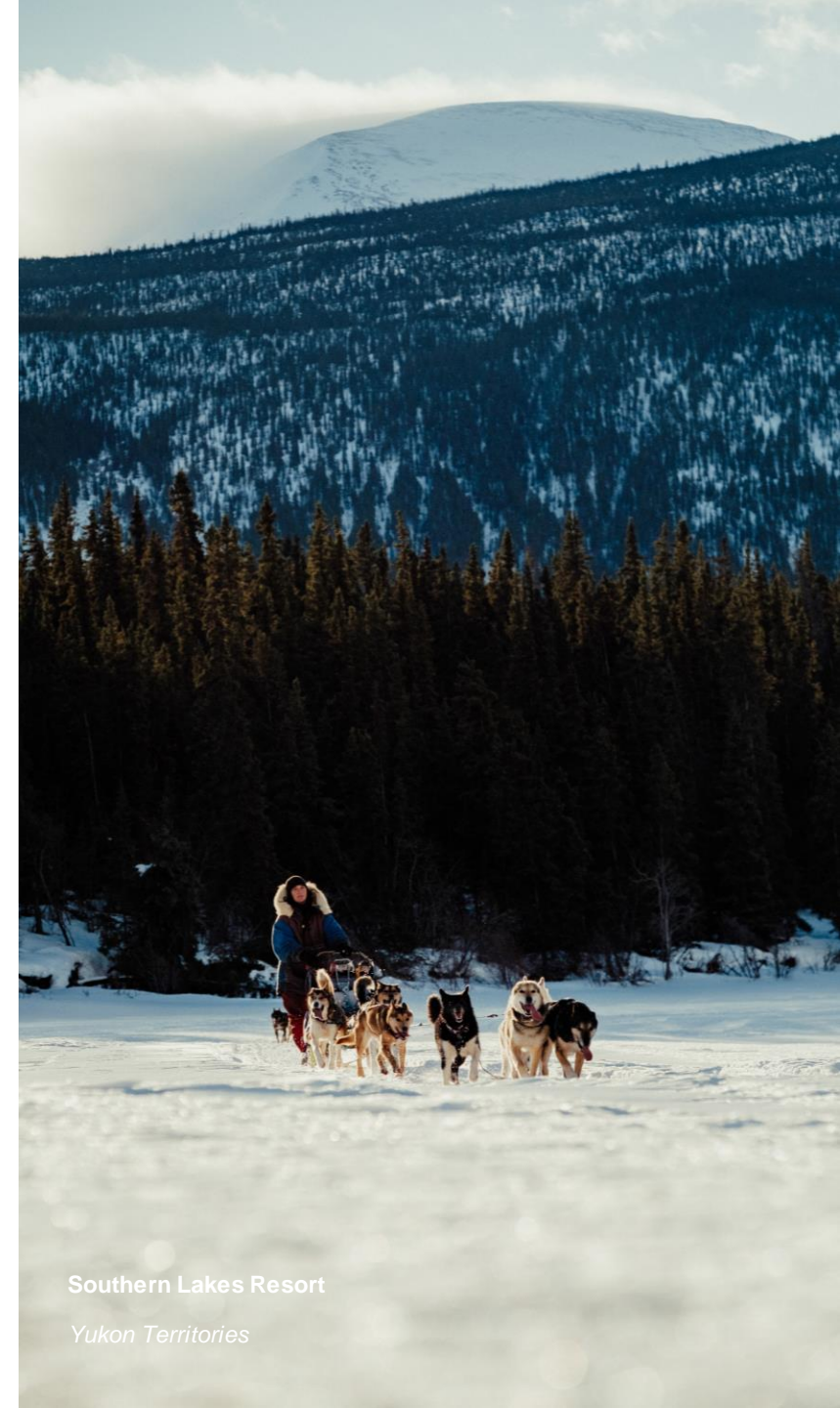
Sustainability remains as important as ever.

Event organizers, specifically larger CESSE organizations, are close to implementing policies and procedures that include tangible sustainability goals/targets for their meetings and events. There is an opportunity for destination partners to lead sustainability efforts within the industry by **openly and proactively sharing strategies and best practices** with meeting planners and associations.

However, sustainability continues to remain important, but is still emerging and gaining strength. Some believe that sustainability could impact the destination choice in the distant future, but for now cost and experiences are more important in the incentive segment, as well as among other meeting planners and associations. **Clients rely on destination partners to lead the industry on the topic of sustainability, as well as DEI.**

“There's a [focus] in our company on DEI, more so than sustainability.”

Financial Insurance Convention Professional (US)



Southern Lakes Resort

Yukon Territories

Decision-making & Selection Criteria

Montreal Biosphere Environment Museum

Quebec

Meeting planners and associations continue to be very cost-conscious.

There are several important factors that go into the decision to choose a destination for a meeting or event, the **most important of which is budget/cost**. Other factors include the perceived **quality of customer service, availability of new hotels and/or meeting spaces, and the age of existing hotels and/or meeting spaces**. Destination partners have an opportunity to be better partners by **providing timely updates** on new product developments and upgrades within their destinations, ensuring more informed choices.

Additionally, it is sensible that associations **plan business events in destinations where they have a large population of members** or in destinations that are easily accessible for a large population (i.e., non-stop flights). Destination partners can **highlight the convenience and/or ease of access to their destination** for the association industry (or supporting industries). Destination partners should also look for solutions to mitigate challenges getting to destinations.

“It is a question of looking at how you can stretch your budget and where you can cut costs.”

Professional Conference Organizer



Helicopter Tours

Northwest Territories

Destination partners can better support planners and associations.

Event organizers are no longer looking for the most interesting destination, but the one that can help them meet their financial goals and provide a greater value.

Destination partners can help their local partners make more informed decisions, and influence their choice to book Canada more often, by **sharing a competitive analyses of destinations** with them.

Associations expressed a need to share more data, and more detailed data, to help evaluate, qualify, and make decisions. Websites were mentioned as the preferred source for sharing this data/information. **Destinations and clients have an opportunity to collaborate more to create solutions for existing challenges.**

“Having collaborative sessions [with a trusted partner] where you can really dive deep into a topic, I think those are really valuable.”

Professional Conference Organizer



Barriers & Opportunities

Ottawa Convention Centre

Ontario

Cost and accessibility remain difficult challenges to overcome.

The largest barrier to hosting meetings and events in Canada is the cost. Several factors contribute to this challenge, including **rising airline prices (and taxes/fees), labor, as well as services such as food/beverage, technology, and other rentals.**

Destination partners can position their destinations as offering great value by promoting the financial benefits of hosting events in Canada, such as the favorable exchange rate, destination incentives, tax rebates, and unique and creative ways of combining corporate events with incentive/leisure travel experiences.

When meeting and event planners consider where to hold meetings, the affordability of travel is a major factor for delegates as the cost for a flight to Canada can be significantly more.

Destination partners should design marketing that:

- focuses on Canada's value propositions
- emphasizes the value and effectiveness of in-person business events
- can be used easily by event organizers with their clients
- provides creative solutions to mitigate challenges (e.g., offering transportation, including stops to engage in unique experiences, offering carbon offsets footprint, etc.)
- is proactive in helping with attendance building from an industry perspective



Whistler

British Columbia

Design marketing that focuses on Canada's value propositions.

Another challenge is that meetings and events in Canada are perceived to be less accessible. Business events held in Canada can often require longer travel times, larger budgets, and visa requirements. Visa requirements when returning to the U.S. were mentioned as creating timing and cost issues.

Cost and accessibility/logistics continues to impact the attendance of meetings and events in Canada, which overall is still lower than before the pandemic. Additionally remote/hybrid meetings, corporate policies, and the overall slower return of international business travel contribute to the lower attendance. Destination partners should help emphasize the value and effectiveness of in-person business events in a format that can be used by event organizers with their clients.

There is also an opportunity for Destination partners to continue to highlight the DEI and sustainability measures that are already in place such as meeting venues and facilities that have mothers' rooms, quiet spaces, gender neutral bathrooms, etc., along with offering carbon offsets, community volunteering opportunities, and local culture education.



Calgary Telus Convention Centre

Alberta

Credit:
Tourism Calgary

Consider outside the box solutions to support clients' needs.

Destination Canada can help destination partners overcome barriers by offering **resources for destination partners**. These resources should be tailored to specific sectors and focused on how destinations understand and align with the needs of event organizers in various industries and segments.

Some incentive planners want help **creating programs around unique experiences** (e.g., ice fishing, alpine skiing, etc.) in one-of-a-kind locations that will resonate with specific groups. Destination partners can influence their clients' choices in favor of Canada by **proactively offering new creative and unique experiences** and itineraries targeting specific interest groups.

Another area in which destination partners could **provide support or resources is with Value Added Tax/Goods & Services Tax (VAT/GST) recovery**, which some event organizers and meeting planners find to be a challenging process. VAT recovery remains a challenge for international event organizers, and any assistance and/or solutions that help alleviate the issue will be valued by event organizers and help destinations be better partners.

Destination partners can also help facilitate dialogue between suppliers and meeting planners. Furthermore, destination partners can **help bridge the information gap** between buyers and suppliers. There is an opportunity to reinforce the perception of being a true expert in the destinations, products, and demonstrate they understand their clients needs by using already available tools like our Canada sector brochures to inform your clients.

“[It is important to] understand what are we looking for and then come to the table with some solutions as a partner.”

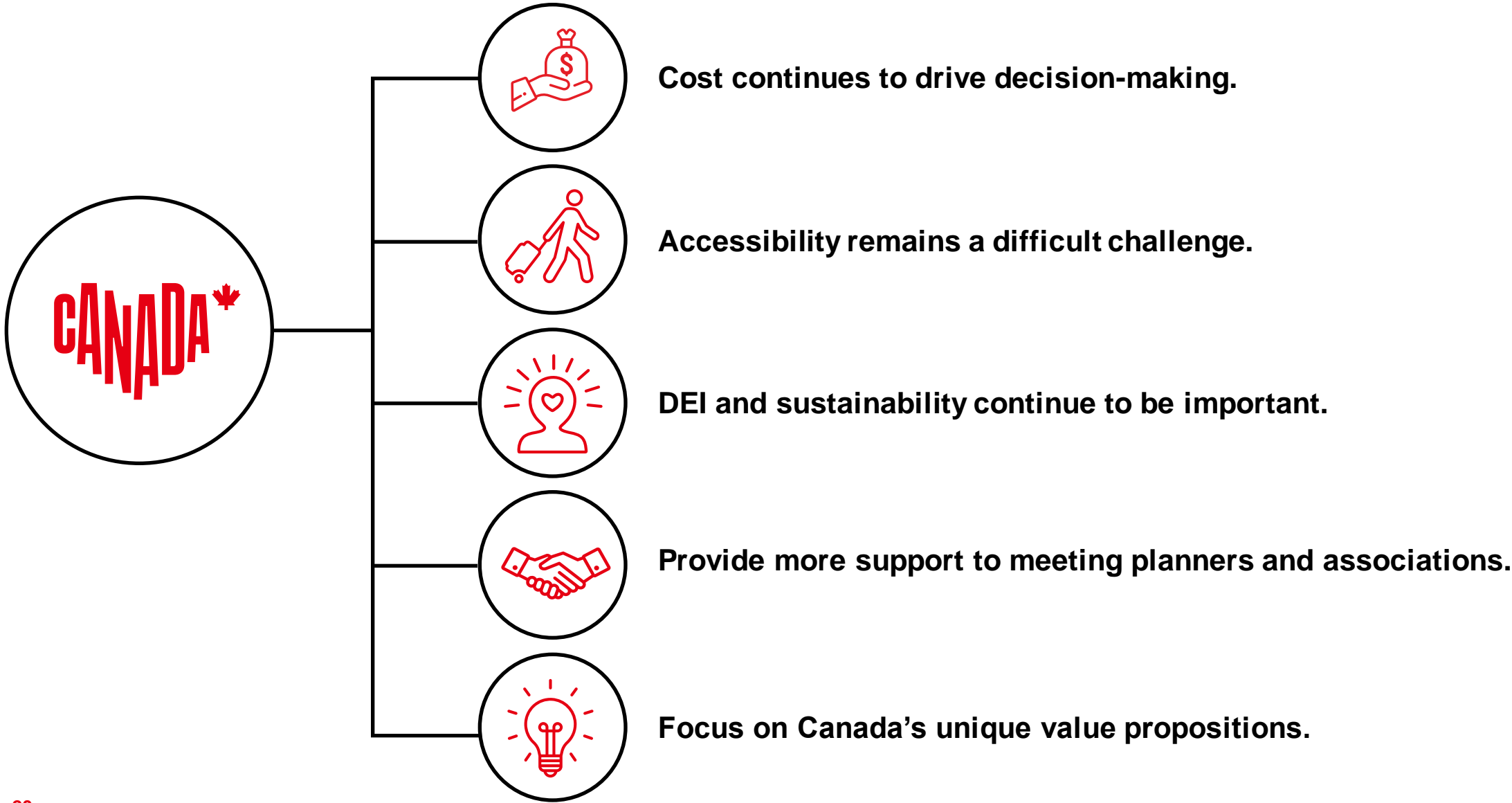
Financial Insurance Convention Professional

Closing

Prince Edward Island Convention Centre

Prince Edward Island

Summary of Findings



Merci! Thank you!

It is important that we keep a pulse on the business events industry as it continues to recover and evolve.

Destination Canada would like to thank all focus group participants and facilitators for taking the time to share their thoughtful feedback on the current state of the industry and how we can make an impact together moving forward. We would also like to thank Future Partners, Forum Destination Marketing, ASAE, CESSE, FICP and PCO for their partnership and support.

We will continue to monitor and gain new insights across the business events landscape through upcoming surveys and focus groups schedule throughout 2024 and beyond.



Hubbards

Nova Scotia