



# Why Your Channel Program Needs C-Suite Backing

What IRF and WorldatWork research shows about the structural difference between programs that earn dealer loyalty and those that quietly stop mattering — and why executive sponsorship is the non-negotiable foundation.

## IRF TOP PERFORMER STUDY • WORLDATEWORK 2026

<p><b>99%</b></p> <p>Of top-performing companies have active C-suite champions publicly backing their programs</p> <p>IRF TOP PERFORMER STUDY</p>	<p><b>61%</b></p> <p>Of organizations maintained or grew incentive budgets even under cost pressure</p> <p>WORLDATEWORK 2026</p>	<p><b>#1</b></p> <p>Structural differentiator between top-performing and average channel programs: executive sponsorship</p> <p>IRF TOP PERFORMER STUDY</p>
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## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- 1** 99% of top-performing companies have active C-suite champions who publicly back their incentive programs. This is not a correlation — it is a prerequisite. Programs that live only in sales ops or HR do not receive the investment, visibility, or executive sponsorship that makes dealer partners take them seriously.

— *IRF Top Performer Study*
- 2** Top-performing organizations treat program design as a strategic capability, not an administrative function. They measure ROI more rigorously, use non-cash rewards at significantly higher rates, and recognize a broader range of behaviors beyond pure volume.

— *IRF Top Performer Study*
- 3** 61% of organizations maintained or grew incentive budgets despite cost pressure — manufacturing and industrial companies among the most active investors. The organizations treating incentive design as a growth investment consistently outperform those that treat it as a cost line.

— *WorldatWork 2026*

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The manufacturers cutting incentive spend are the same ones now asking why channel penetration dropped. The math on what a trained field rep or long-standing dealer relationship costs to replace consistently favors protecting the program — even under earnings pressure.

— *WorldatWork 2026*

### PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE · NEXT LEVEL PERFORMANCE

The 99% stat reframes the internal conversation entirely. The question is not "should we have a recognition program" — it's "why does our leadership not champion ours the way top performers do?" Programs that live only in sales ops don't get the dealer visibility that makes them work. When a VP of Sales publicly recognizes top performers, it signals to every dealer in the network that this manufacturer values the relationship. That signal is what competitors cannot replicate with a rate sheet.

## WHAT TO DO WITH THIS

### ACTION

Identify the last time a C-suite leader at your organization publicly recognized a top dealer or distributor — in a communication that reached the broader channel. If you can't name one in the last 90 days, that's the gap to close first, before any program redesign.

### ACTION

Reframe your program budget conversation using WorldatWork's finding: organizations that protect incentive spend under cost pressure outperform on channel penetration and rep retention. The ask is not "spend more on recognition" — it's "protect the retention system that prevents replacement costs."

### ACTION

Map your current program against the IRF's top performer practices: ROI measurement rigor, non-cash reward utilization rate, and behavioral breadth beyond volume. Score yourself on each. The gaps tell you where to focus the executive conversation.

### QUESTION

Does your program have a named executive sponsor who is accountable for its performance — not just an approver of the budget line? If the answer is no, what would it take to create that role and make it visible to your dealer network?

### QUESTION

When your best dealers think about which manufacturer they'd push hardest in a competitive situation, is your leadership's visible commitment to them part of that calculation? If not, what would make it so?