

U.S. Gays and Lesbians Continue to Travel Despite Economic Downturn

[\(Posted: 03/02/09\)](#) Strong consumer insight and understanding remain critical for tapping this \$712 billion market.

February 3, 2009 – According to survey research released by Harris Interactive in late 2008, a majority (55%) of all U.S. adults believe that they will be adversely affected by the current economic downturn. However, as many Americans react to the economic forecast by reprioritizing costs and altering spending habits, the study also suggests that U.S. gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) consumers appear to cut back less in their personal travel budgets than heterosexuals – a trend that underscores the importance for tourism industry professionals to build strong connections with this characteristically brand loyal market.

Today, it is estimated that – with approximately 16 million American adults self identifying as part of this still-emerging segment – the U.S. GLBT market wields over \$712 billion in aggregate buying power (2008 projection). However, because three out of four GLBT Americans live in households without children under the age of 18, consumers in this segment typically have more discretionary income to spend than the average U.S. household.

In a national online survey conducted in May 2008, Harris Interactive found that – despite sluggish economic conditions – 38% of U.S. gay and lesbian adults planned to vacation as planned, compared with 34% of heterosexuals. Additionally, one quarter (25%) of GLBT respondents indicated that they were either “*absolutely certain*” or “*very likely*” to vacation by air, while only 19% of heterosexuals indicated that they would do the same.

“These findings help confirm what market research has been telling us for several years now: America’s GLBT market represents a resilient and distinct growth opportunity for tourism professionals,” said Bob Witeck, founder and CEO of Witeck-Combs Communications, a Washington, D.C.-based marketing consulting firm that partners with Harris Interactive to profile America’s GLBT households. *“Different market segments respond to fluctuations in the economy in different ways. Though U.S. GLBT consumers are in no way exempt from the downturn, several factors – such as higher than average per capita buying power – are keeping them on the road and in the air for vacation.”*

Another demographic further differentiating American GLBT consumers in today’s marketplace is the degree to which they choose to do business with allies of their community that make a concerted effort to understand their lives.

“Many tourism and hospitality leaders have learned that American GLBT consumers do not merely respond to same-sex images in an advertisement,” said John Tanzella, executive director of the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA). *“Even in difficult financial times, this is a sophisticated market that identifies a genuine connection between your product and their needs. This is, among many reasons, why IGLTA has thrived in its 26 years. People come to us to when they really want to understand and engage with GLBT travelers.”*

Tanzella cites Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants as a company that has not only recognized these traits in GLBT customers, but has built a groundbreaking marketing campaign that has resulted in over 13,000 GLBT travelers joining its guest loyalty program. In 2004, Kimpton became the first hotel group to achieve a 100% Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index score, and for the past two years, it has won the PlanetOut Hotel Group of the Year Award at IGLTA’s annual convention. Kimpton was also the first lodging company to join forces with IGLTA on a property-wide level, with each of its 45+ hotels in Canada and the U.S. becoming active members of the organization.

“Kimpton continues to not only set the industry standard for what it means to be truly inclusive of all travelers, but to demonstrate what that inclusiveness can do for a company’s bottom line,” Tanzella said. *“Success stories like theirs show that nothing is more valuable in this industry than consumer insight.”*

George Carrancho, global manager of American Airlines’ well-respected Rainbow Sales and Marketing TeAAM, echoes this message. *“For nearly 15 years, we have worked to establish strong affinity with lesbian and gay travelers, and to establish deeper loyalty by communicating our inclusion and welcome. Year over year, despite an increasingly competitive market, we see our sales and popularity rise in line with the loyalty we express in return to GLBT travelers.”*

Throughout the year, IGLTA provides its growing membership of 2,000 with numerous networking and professional development opportunities, all of which are designed to promote a better understanding of and a stronger connection to GLBT travelers. The organization's upcoming annual convention – the 26th of its kind – is a tailor-made introduction to the GLBT market in today's economic climate. Themed "Seek Chic," the conference will explore how technology can be used to increase outreach to gay and lesbian travelers at a time when every marketing dollar counts. In addition to numerous educational breakout sessions, the meeting also features popular annual offerings like a consumer trade show, the organization's gala dinner and awards ceremony, and networking receptions for convention first-timers, women, tour operators/travel agents and media.

"Our annual gathering is a small but reflective sample of what IGLTA has to offer its members year round," Tanzella said. *"At the end of the day, this organization is about connections, both with colleagues and with the GLBT market that so many companies so regularly seek to tap."*

For more information about IGLTA and its 2009 conference, which will be held May 7-10 in Toronto, Canada, please visit the organization's Web site, www.iglta.org/convention.

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