

## Gays and lesbians still big travelers, despite recession

A survey conducted by Harris Interactive in 2008 shows that, despite the severe economic downturn that has many travelers pinching pennies or not traveling at all, gays and lesbians are still making travel plans, and not scrimping too much.

The survey found that a majority (55%) of all U.S. adults believe that they will be adversely affected by the current economic downturn, but that U.S. gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) consumers appear to cut back less in their personal travel budgets than heterosexuals and continue to be extremely brand loyal in choosing hotels and airlines.

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.

This alone is a godsend to travel, which, along with just about every other industry, is facing rocky times. With approximately 16 million American adults self identifying as gay or lesbian, the U.S. GLBT market wields over \$712 billion in aggregate buying power.

Are gays more profligate? Or they don't see the gloom that everyone else does? No. They tend to travel more and place a high degree of importance on travel. 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.

According to 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:

“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,” 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.”

Brand loyalty among GLBT consumers is one thing the travel industry is exploiting as well. But it's not just about flying on the 'hip' airline or staying at the gay-friendly hotel. It's about whether gays perceive that the company really does care about gay issues (in terms of anti-discrimination policies, hiring policies, etc).

“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.”

One of biggest beneficiaries of gay loyalty is Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants. The company 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.

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