

In the pink

Getting involved in the gay and lesbian travel market could prove to be a lucrative choice for agents, says Jennifer Thomas

LASER-LIKE MARKETING FOCUS and specialization are two factors credited to business growth, particularly in the travel agency arena. From luxury travel to honeymooners, to cruises and skiing, travel agents use lifestyle specializations to zero in on audiences they can tap to accelerate their business. The gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) audience was estimated to have \$690 billion in buying power in 2007 and represents a fantastic opportunity for the travel agent community.

This market has deep pockets and is growing. Research by Harris Interactive (HI) with the Travel Industry Association (TIA) shows that in 2006, lesbian and gay travelers took a projected total of 53.2 million leisure trips, spending an estimated \$40 billion. The 11th annual LGBT Travel Survey by Community Marketing Inc (CMI) estimates this number to be closer to \$55 billion.

And since its founding in 1983, the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) has experienced a 4,000%-plus growth of gay, lesbian and community-friendly travel professionals.

So how does a travel agent capture a percentage of this market? Just as they uncover market preferences of a niche group or special interest group, travel agents must

understand the interests and sensitivities when targeting the GLBT community and serving their needs.

To help travel agents understand the opportunities and challenges faced in selling travel to this audience, The Travel Institute (TI) offers its Gay & Lesbian Travel: A Lifestyle Specialist Course, written by Thomas Roth, CTC, and David Paisley, along with contributing author Mark Chestnut. By becoming a travel specialist in this market, agents have the opportunity to learn about gay-friendly destinations, characteristics of gay and lesbian travelers, marketing strategies and selling techniques.

According to Dan Howell, president, Dan Howell Travel, "the course covers every area of gay travel and has excellent resources. I wish I had this course back when I started in the gay travel business more than 15 years ago. Follow the marketing strategies outlined and you will be successful in this market."

Rob Koplin, of Koplin.meli Travel Management, says that despite tremendous progress made in the training arena and the many gay people employed in the hospitality and transportation fields, there continues to be a lack of understanding of the market.

"To that end, our company is in the throes of developing guidelines and gay sensitivity training programs for vendors as well as agents," Koplin says. "The Travel Institute's Gay & Lesbian course has the potential to become a useful tool, but it's the agent's individuality and experience that truly sells."

Hot spots

The top 10 gay-friendly destinations in a recent survey of gay travelers conducted by TIA in partnership with HI and Witeck-

Combs Communications (WCC) include: San Francisco, Key West, New York City, Fire Island (part of Long Island in New York), Provincetown, Los Angeles, Miami/South Beach, Las Vegas, New Orleans and Palm Springs/Palm Desert.

Philadelphia was recently recognized by the TIA in conjunction with *National Geographic Traveler* for its efforts in promoting the city as a gay-friendly destination. Marketing efforts connected tourists with gay-friendly businesses. Stemming from this outreach, more than 14 hotels offer the gay-friendly Philadelphia Freedom Hotel Package.

According to John Tanzella, executive director, IGLTA, destinations including Las Vegas, Key West, New York and Ft Lauderdale continue to reign as the top domestic gay-friendly destinations due to product offerings. These locations offer many GLBT hotels, restaurants and events catering to this growing market segment, he says.

When selecting a destination, nearly 50% of TIA survey respondents say a gay-friendly reputation matters. A place where "they can hold their partner's hand in public" without fear of harassment was cited as an example of something more than half of gay men and more than two-thirds of gay women look for when they are choosing a destination.

A sense of camaraderie and kinship is also desired among this travel segment. "GLBT travelers want the ability to feel comfortable in their own skin without fear of retaliation," Koplin says. "Access to predominately gay communities and neighborhoods is craved."

In fact, CMI's survey reveals 76% of respondents say they were more likely to choose travel destinations known for being gay-friendly.

This niche market has preferences for what they want to experience while traveling. TIA's Gay & Lesbian course highlights that lesbians indicate a greater preference for relaxation as a reason for traveling, while male respondents were more likely to choose a destination because they had been there before and liked



Fantasy Fest in Key West

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top 10 selling tips

To effectively sell travel to GLBT travelers, take these steps to increase your industry knowledge:

- 1. Travel:** Attend fam trips to experience GLBT travel products first-hand.
- 2. Professional associations:** Join IGLTA and TAG for access to industry-specific resources.
- 3. Specialize:** Become a Gay & Lesbian Lifestyle Specialist through The Travel Institute.
- 4. Read:** Peruse GLBT publications, including *OutTraveler* and *Passport Magazine*, to stay current on market trends.
- 5. Training:** Attend GLBT training events offered by IGLTA and others.
- 6. Get personal:** Talk to existing GLBT clients and assess their travel needs.
- 7. Data:** Review industry surveys including CMI's Annual LGBT Travel Survey.
- 8. Community:** Get involved with a local GLBT social organization to develop prospects.
- 9. Location:** Target key marketing and advertising efforts to retail outlets and publications inside the GLBT neighborhood.
- 10. Track:** Through a database program, collect relative preference information such as GLBT cruises, to ensure efficient outreach.

it. Additionally, gay and lesbian travelers are interested in history, culture, dining and shopping experiences.

According to research by CMI and Arizona State, more than half of the respondents indicate they are interested in attending gay pride events. Destinations including Key West boast gay-friendly events, including Fantasy Fest in October and Pride Fest in June, while Miami sports an annual Gay & Lesbian Film Festival and the White Party.

A 2006 GLBT survey conducted by HI in conjunction with WCC revealed 14% of gay and lesbian adults are planning to travel to an overseas destination, compared to only 7% of heterosexual adults. Prior to 2007 US passport regulations, 71% of gay men already

the GLBT market

- **Based on the** Travel Industry Association's estimate of the US travel market at \$1.3 trillion, the GLBT portion, at a low 5% population estimate, comes to \$65 billion.
- **Family or friends** is how 42% of lesbians and 39% of gay men research trip options.*
- **Search engines are** used for vacation planning by 29% of gay men and 28% of lesbians.*
- **Gay men believe** that Hilton (24%) is the most gay-friendly hotel chain, followed by Marriott (18%), Hyatt (18%) and Starwood (18%).*

*Source: GLBT Leisure Travel Study 2006

held a valid passport, with nearly 50% using it in the past year.

Outside the US, Montreal, Italy, Curaçao, Vancouver, Toronto, Buenos Aires and Paris are some of the most popular international destinations, Tanzella says.

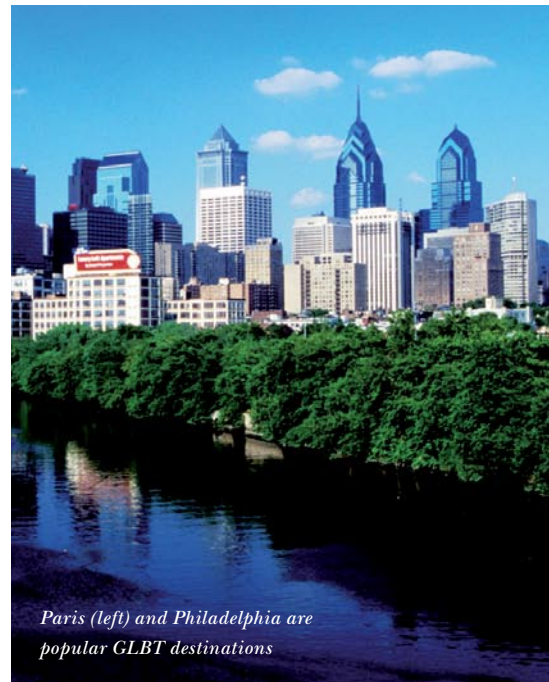
Additionally, South Africa is an up-and-coming international travel spot for the GLBT community. This is partly due to the new South African constitution in 1994, ushered in by Nelson Mandela, which included a 'freedom of sexuality' clause. South Africa offers adventure, stunning scenery, wine and cultural events. December is a popular time to visit Cape Town because of its annual Mother City Queer Projects costume party.

What attracts gays and lesbians to travel destinations differ among audiences. Gay nightlife, gay clubs and gay bars are regarded as important to 18% of lesbians, compared to 33% of gay men, according to the HI and WCC GLBT Survey.

Many of the popular gay-friendly travel destinations serve as an entree to gay-centric nightlife and culture and offer predisposed locations for annual Pride and GLBT circuit-party events, Koplín adds.

Booking travel

The gay and lesbian market uses a variety of sources when seeking an endorsement of a travel destination or provider that is gay-friendly, according to the GLBT survey. While personal experience, word of mouth and GLBT media ranked as the top three most trusted sources, 53% of gay respondents



Paris (left) and Philadelphia are popular GLBT destinations

and 49% of lesbian respondents trust a gay or gay-sensitive travel agent.

Many travel agents are involved in serving gay and lesbian clients, according to CMI's president Thomas Roth. He adds that an agent need not be gay or lesbian to serve the LGBT community, but they do have to be savvy, open-minded and well prepared.

"The era of the generalist travel agent has disappeared from the gay market," Roth says. "In the '90s, our research found that gay and lesbian travelers used the services of travel agents twice as much as their mainstream counterparts. Now this comparison has dropped to half the amount.

"What has changed, of course, is direct supplier sales and online search and booking. But agents who offer a specialty, such as safaris, cruises or adventure, can and do still thrive in the gay market."

Leisure travel is on the rise among the GLBT audience. CMI's survey shows 40% of

respondents indicate an increase in spending. The GLBT market spends more on individual travel than the heterosexual market, with gay men topping the chart followed by bisexuals with same sex partners.

The HI and WCC survey identifies that gay men's personal mean spending is \$800 when traveling alone, compared to \$540 spent by a heterosexual traveling solo. The CMI survey reveals \$1,139 as the mean spending for personal travel.

The HI and WCC study also discloses that when gay men reported their last trip traveling as a group, the average spending of their entire party was \$3,070, which was more than reported by heterosexual groups (\$2,870) or lesbians traveling together (\$2,740).

"With fewer children and somewhat higher discretionary income, gay and lesbian adults consistently index higher than their heterosexual counterparts," says Bob Witeck, CEO of WCC.

"We find GLBT travelers are not looking for special treatment, but instead expect consideration and equal respect given to all customers." Bob Witeck, CEO, Witeck-Combs Communications