

GAY AND LESBIAN TRAVEL

A LIFESTYLE SPECIALIST COURSE





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**LESSON
1**

Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Travel

▶ LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- ✓ Explain what gay and lesbian travel is and why it is an attractive niche for travel professionals.
- ✓ Identify general characteristics of gay and lesbian travelers and what motivates them to travel.
- ✓ Serve gay and lesbian travelers by getting to know the market and creating a gay-friendly environment.

BRAINSTORMING

Please answer these brainstorming questions **before** you read the lesson. At the end of the lesson, review your answers and make changes as needed based on what you learned.

1. How is the gay and lesbian travel niche similar to other niches? How is it different?

2. Are your products and services attractive to gay and lesbian travelers? How do you know?

3. What do you currently do to make gay and lesbian clients feel welcome in your place of business? What else could you do to create a gay-friendly environment?

What Is Gay and Lesbian Travel?

The term “gay and lesbian travel” is often used by retailers and suppliers. But what does it mean? How can “travel”—boarding a plane, booking a hotel, or joining a tour—be “gay and lesbian”? After all, the activity of travel (and the act of booking travel for clients) is essentially the same, regardless of who’s doing the travel.

Obviously, *gay and lesbian travel* is defined by the person doing the traveling and includes any travel undertaken by people who are gay or lesbian. Just as other minority and special-interest groups—such as senior citizens, African Americans, and sports enthusiasts—have certain needs that tie them together, so do gay and lesbian travelers. Understanding the interests, preferences, and sensitivities of those travelers is key to serving their needs.

As with any niche, generalizations aren’t always accurate. The gay and lesbian market, for example, in some ways parallels the mainstream market. But there are certain characteristics of gay and lesbian travelers—their general needs, concerns, interests, and habits—that make it easier for agents and suppliers to understand, and therefore focus on, this market more effectively.

In this lesson, you will find valuable information about the demographics and preferences of gay and lesbian travelers, based on recent research. You will also learn how to prepare to serve this valuable niche market and to determine initial strategic steps that can serve you as you develop your gay and lesbian travel specialty.

Characteristics of Gay and Lesbian Travelers

Demographic Profile

Even if you haven’t actively pursued this market yet, you have undoubtedly heard that gay and lesbian travel can be a valuable niche, one that travel agencies and other travel-related companies can rely on to shore up business.

But why? What makes gay and lesbian travelers an attractive target market for your business? If you look at recent surveys, it all comes down to numbers—disposable income, for example. Several surveys in recent years have shown that gay and lesbian consumers have a relatively high amount of disposable income, compared to their straight counterparts. Higher

disposable income, largely without the responsibilities of raising children, leaves far more resources for travel.

The conclusions of the 8th Annual Gay & Lesbian Travel Survey provide some of the most current and interesting demographic information. This survey was conducted in 2003 by Community Marketing, Inc., a San Francisco–based gay and lesbian tourism consulting and communications firm, and Arizona State University.

The 8th Annual Gay and Lesbian Travel Survey polled residents of 47 U.S. states, as well as a small number of citizens of 20 other nations. Gay men accounted for 74 percent of survey respondents, while lesbians accounted for 21 percent; the remaining respondents identified themselves as bisexual, transgender, or straight.

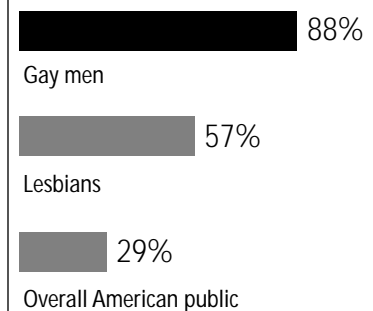
The majority of travelers surveyed fell between the ages of 35 and 50, held college or postgraduate-level degrees, and had incomes ranging from \$40,000 to \$74,000 (with household incomes averaging well over \$100,000). In addition, the majority held a professional or executive position in their careers and are comparatively—and increasingly—Internet savvy.

The survey also showed that 59 percent of gay and lesbian respondents reported being in a committed relationship. Lesbian respondents were statistically more likely to be in a committed relationship, while gay men were more likely to be single. The majority of respondents (59 percent) live in urban neighborhoods, while 22 percent live in suburban areas, 11 percent live in small towns, and 8 percent live in rural areas. In general, gay males indicated a preference for living in urban and suburban areas, while lesbians indicated a preference for small towns and rural areas.

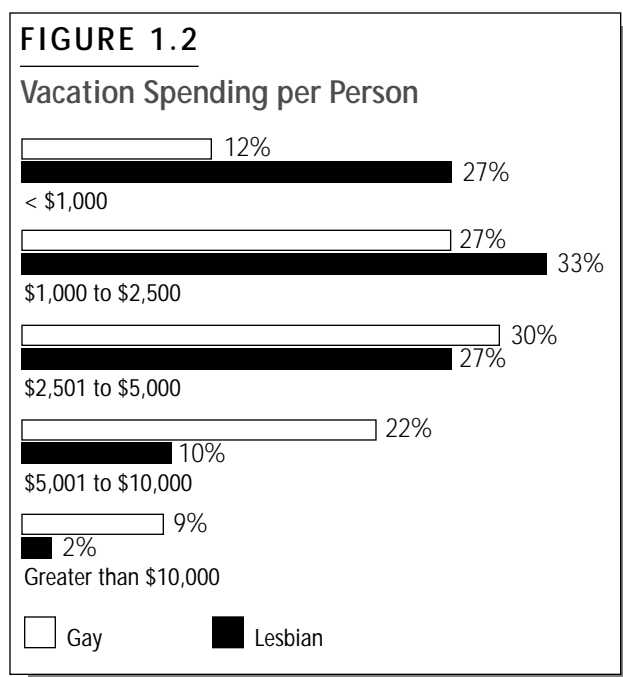
According to the survey, the average gay traveler has a valid passport—57 percent of lesbians, in fact, and 88 percent of gay men (see Figure 1.1). If you compare this to a 2001 Plog Research survey that found that 29 percent of the overall American public has a valid passport, you see why the gay and lesbian market is particularly attractive for travel professionals.

The amount of money spent on vacations according to the survey is also impressive (see Figure 1.2). The majority of women (60 percent) tend to spend between \$1,000 and \$5,000 per person per vacation, with 39 percent spending more than \$2,500 per person per vacation. The majority of men (52 percent)

FIGURE 1.1
Travelers with Valid Passports



Sources: 8th Annual Gay & Lesbian Travel Survey, conducted by Community Marketing, Inc., and Arizona State University, 2003; *Travel Weekly* survey conducted by Plog Research, 2001.



Source: 8th Annual Gay & Lesbian Travel Survey, conducted by Community Marketing, Inc., and Arizona State University, 2003.

spend between \$2,500 and \$10,000 per person per vacation, with more than 30 percent spending more than \$5,000 per person per vacation.

The travel plans of the respondents are also indicative of the value of the market. Forty-five percent of those surveyed indicated an intention to vacation at least once in Europe in the next 12 months, and 32 percent planned to visit Canada.

For experienced gay and lesbian travelers, international vacation planning is “no big deal.” They ask their friends, read guidebooks and Web sites, and go. If the itinerary is complex or involves an organized tour, they are more likely to discuss options with a travel agent—but the savvy agent knows how to provide valuable services to gay and lesbian clients regardless of travel plans.

Travel Preferences, Interests, and Sensitivities

There are more options now for gay travelers than ever before. This alone is proof of the variety of tastes that gay and lesbian travelers have.

Indeed, there is no single set of interests that applies to every gay or lesbian traveler. Still, there are some common concerns when it comes to vacation (and even business) travel. These concerns are part of what makes the market distinct from the “mainstream” market. Briefly, these concerns may include the following:

- Gay and lesbian travelers need to feel safe and comfortable in their vacation environment, which is not always possible in a mainstream setting.
- Gay and lesbian travelers sometimes have to hide their sexual orientation at work or with some family members, so they are likely to want an environment where they can be open and relaxed about who they are, without fear of discrimination.
- Gay and lesbian travelers often want to interact with other gay people.

Of course, the above may apply to varying degrees based on the client and the trip or may not apply at all. This is why understanding the diversity of your potential clientele, and qualifying them individually, is important.