



THE BUSINESS IMPERATIVE FOR ‘INCLUSIVE HOSPITALITY’

Presented by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What could your business do with another billion customers? That's the number of people around the world who identify as disabled and who need a bit of extra accommodation when they travel. These individuals represent an enormous potential benefit to those companies that best care for their needs. By one estimate, as much as \$13 billion in annual travel spending is at stake.

Yet this report is about much more than hospitality for people with disabilities: Many different cohorts confront challenges when they travel — women, LGBTQ people, students — and often don't travel at all because of fears that leaving home won't be worth the stress or hassle. Many people who may be avid travelers at one stage in life may find challenges crop up as they age, have kids, or choose certain destinations that present unique challenges.

A number of travel firms — particularly in the hotel sector — have made great strides to empower vulnerable travelers, but much more needs to be done, experts told SkiftX. "Accessibility affects all of us," said Stephen Cluskey, CEO of Mobility Mojo, a consultancy.

The future of the travel industry, experts said, is one that lowers the barriers to exploring the world. What's needed is a move toward inclusive hospitality, wherein every guest is treated exceptionally, whatever that traveler's personal circumstances may be. "I do think there's a moral imperative," said Jeff Rutledge, CEO of AIG Travel. "But there's also a market for this. Vulnerable travelers need to know they can engage with companies who understand them."



EXECUTIVE LETTER

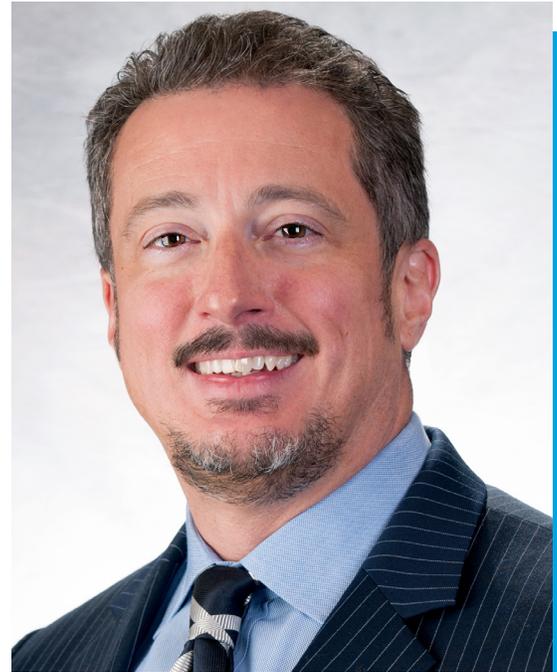
Over the past decade, the world has become a smaller place with more and more people traveling to even the most remote locations. But as travel has become more accessible from a financial perspective, there are still obstacles that can make travel difficult for many groups of travelers. Women, members of the LGBTQ community, the elderly, and those with physical or mental disabilities may often face challenges that limit their ability to travel without concern.

As the facilitators of travel, the entire travel and tourism industry should be concerned about anything that blocks freedom of travel. Together, we need to focus on those groups who face challenges or issues, then anticipate and solve for any situation that makes travel difficult, unpleasant, or puts up barriers to the ability to travel around the world.

We all know problems can arise for any traveler, from minor inconveniences to medical emergencies. But the question is how do we address more significant or ongoing issues? Holistically, how do we create consistency of access, medical care, and travel experience?

I believe it is our moral imperative to make sure that the engines of travel are moving for everyone, which, in turn, benefits societies and local economies. Not only is that the right thing to do, it's also a wise business decision, because travelers want to engage with companies who understand them and are thinking about their needs in advance.

Our collective end goal is a seamless experience for every traveler. But all members of the travel industry will need to participate in the solution. It's not just an issue to be addressed by destinations, it includes everyone in the journey — transportation and hospitality companies, the shared economy, and, yes, even travel insurers. Only a joint effort will address these barriers on a global basis.



Jeff Rutledge
President & CEO
AIG Travel

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▶ ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global CEOs and CMOs across travel, dining, and wellness sectors through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

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SkiftX is Skift's in-house content studio. SkiftX produced this report in partnership with AIG Travel.

▶ MASTHEAD

Vice President, SkiftX / Katherine Townsend
Director of Creative Strategy, SkiftX / Matt Heidkamp
Research Editor, SkiftX / Jeremy Kressmann
Editorial Strategist, SkiftX / Paul Brady
Editor, SkiftX / Alison McCarthy
Strategist, SkiftX / Sonali Sen
Associate Brand Strategist, SkiftX / Dawn Rzeznikiewicz
Project Manager, SkiftX / Gianna Greco
Video Producer, SkiftX / Jose Marmolejos
Designer / Joanna Gonzalez

INTRODUCTION



The travel sector prides itself on promoting the free movement of people and ideas. Yet for large segments of the population, travel isn't always easy: Many people find travel for business and leisure more difficult than it should be, for a vast number of reasons, including personal traits or the circumstances of a given itinerary.

The scale of the problem is made clear in a Centers for Disease Control [report](#) that looked specifically at disabilities: "One in four U.S. adults — 61 million Americans — have a disability that impacts major life activities," the CDC study revealed. That huge number of people is woefully underserved by the travel industry as it exists today, along with countless other individuals who might not have a disability

but could nevertheless be considered vulnerable travelers, experts said.

"We know that more than 50 percent of people with disabilities don't travel because of a lack of information and a fear of something going wrong," said Stephen Cluskey, CEO of Mobility Mojo, a company that helps hotels digitally promote their accessibility features. "That's half a billion people globally. It's a massive market that's being underserved because of this gap in knowledge and because of this gap in information. We haven't seen any of the major travel providers or hotel providers really provide adequate information around accessibility," Cluskey said [in an interview with Skift's Sarah Enelow-Snyder](#). "I think things are very stagnant, actually."

Why Vulnerable Travelers Matter

Cluskey's assessment applies beyond just those who might have physical disabilities or mobility challenges. Many individuals experience difficulties in taking trips — and many decide not to travel at all because of real or perceived impediments to having the sort of journey that others may take for granted. Among the groups of vulnerable travelers that SkiftX has identified are women, LGBTQ people, members of racial minorities, students, baby boomers, and other individuals with unseen but nevertheless real challenges related to experiencing new environments away from home.

The travel industry, experts said, has been slow to adapt — while sectors outside travel are recognizing both the need to care for all individuals and the market potential of inclusivity. “There are signs that some financial services companies are rethinking their approach to accessibility,” [the New York Times reported recently](#), highlighting the moves that retirement planning firms and other financial institutions are making to better serve investors who are deaf or blind. “Advocates say that the 61 million people living with disabilities in the United States constitute a significant market force that has largely been overlooked. It's also likely to expand.” (Less positively, some of the changes are driven in reaction to lawsuits filed by customers who claimed that financial firms violated terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which governs accessibility.)

Today, new entrants are challenging established players like Fidelity Investments and The Vanguard Group, the Times reported: “Lee Kramer, the founder of Kramer Wealth Managers, is deaf and says the mission of his firm is to ‘bridge the gap between the financial world and the deaf community by providing comprehensive wealth management services accessible in A.S.L.’”

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The accessible travel market is growing by 22 percent yearly.

— Denise Broadey, writing in Forbes

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“Mr. Kramer's staff is fluent in American Sign Language and often use videophones. Mr. Kramer said the firm's clientele included 85 percent deaf and 15 percent hearing customers, and unlike many firms, his does not require a minimum investment from any of them. ‘We feel we have a duty of service to the deaf community,’ he said,” according to the Times.

Those companies that do the right thing by taking a truly inclusive approach — that adopt new ways of caring for all their customers or guests — also stand to boost long-term revenues.

The Travel Sector Remains a Laggard

Indeed, academic research suggests that companies that embrace fully inclusive service stand to win market share. Writing in the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, researchers Simon Darcy and Tracey Dickson [reported](#) that “30 percent of a population will have access requirements at any point in time, and most people will have a disability at some stage during their life.” Billions of dollars of revenue are at stake, Darcy and Dickson wrote, as well as “the latent demand that could be further developed through a more considered approach to accessible tourism.” In the U.S. alone, better accommodating travelers with disabilities could bring up to \$13 billion annually in additional revenues.

When it comes to travel, leaders like Cluskey are calling for truly inclusive hospitality that will make all travelers — those with disabilities, those who don't look or sound like other guests, those who need accommodations that aren't in the training manual — feel welcome and taken care of. The move toward inclusive hospitality isn't just for show: Travelers are paying attention, as they demand brands in all sectors “stand for something,” [as AdWeek put it](#) because “consumers expect nothing less.”

Restaurant chains, floral brands, non-profits, and airlines are all embracing empathy, [according to a recent ICF Next article](#). “Acting with empathy doesn't have to be a complex, costly initiative,” the story said. “In fact, it's often the simple gestures that go the farthest, and can be the difference between a loyalty customer for life or one that swears off the brand forever. And it all starts by thinking about customers as humans with feelings.”

That sentiment is echoed by others in the industry. “We want travel companies to realize there are many different needs for various groups of people that are going unmet,” said Rhonda Sloan, senior vice president and global head of marketing and industry relations at AIG Travel.

There has been some early progress made. “I do think Airbnb is one of the more proactive groups in this area,” Cluskey said. While the booking site can't control the accessibility of the individual properties listed on the platform, what Airbnb can do is make information available. “I think it could be a lot better, but they're going in the right direction,” he said. “I know they've recruited specialists, and you can see the impact that's having on the platform.”

The future potential is massive. “The accessible travel market is growing by 22 percent yearly,” [according to a column by Forbes contributor Denise Brodey](#). “Open Doors, a Chicago non-profit, estimates that in a two-year span (2014-2016), people with disabilities took 73 million trips for business and pleasure.”

What other companies are having a positive impact on this massive community and other groups of underserved travelers? What kinds of training and technology go into making this shift? What are the business imperatives for implementing a truly inclusive model? We'll answer those questions in this SkiftX report on vulnerable travelers and the future of inclusive hospitality. ◆



DEFINING 'VULNERABLE TRAVELERS' AND THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S OPPORTUNITY



The default position for many travel brands is that they're broadly inclusive and open to all. "A lot of companies do LGBTQ marketing and that's great, the more the merrier," said Ed Salvato, the cofounder of HospitableMe, a consultancy that offers LGBTQ strategy, marketing, and training for the tourism and hospitality sectors. "But most companies will put the rainbow flag out, and then forget that 'Oh, queer people are going to show up.'" What they do at that point, Salvato said, is anybody's guess. "The industry has not trained staff to deal with this new reality," he said.

Today, organizations are just beginning to address many cohorts of vulnerable travelers, a category that can include those with disabilities, as well as baby boomers, students, and many other groups. Efforts to recognize the inherent humanity of people with disabilities are increasing, the World Health Organization [reported](#): "Disability is now understood to be a human rights issue. People are disabled by society, not just by their bodies. These barriers can be overcome, if governments, nongovernmental organizations, professionals, and people with disabilities and their families work together."

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The constant awareness of what kind of treatment I'll get for being born black and assigned female is often more exhausting than the time it takes to get to and from my destination.

— Morgan Jerkins, writing in Medium

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Yet for those with disabilities and for other individuals, challenges remain. Consider the hurdles faced by black people while traveling, as the Yale University professor [Claudia Rankine recounted in The New York Times Magazine](#): “I hesitated when I stood in line for a flight across the country, and a white man stepped in front of me. He was with another white man. ‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I am in this line.’ He stepped behind me but not before saying to his flight mate, ‘You never know who they’re letting into first class these days.’”

She continued: “Was his statement a defensive move meant to cover his rudeness and embarrassment, or were we sharing a joke? ... But he wasn’t laughing, not even a little, not even a smile. Deadpan.”

Rankine’s experience is not unique. “The constant awareness of what kind of treatment I’ll get for being born black and assigned female is often more exhausting than the time it takes to get to and from my destination,” [wrote Morgan Jerkins](#), in an essay introducing a Medium series called, simply, [Traveling While Black](#).

In a recent SkiftX survey of consumers, many individuals reported similar episodes of bias based on visible traits. About 16 percent of respondents said they felt “not appropriately accommodated by an

airline, hotel, or other travel company because of a disability.” About six percent of respondents reported that they’d experienced outright “discrimination from a travel company because of a disability you or your companions may have.”

Whatever a traveler’s personal characteristics, “we are all vulnerable” when traveling, said Sheryl Hill, the co-founder of Depart Smart, an organization focused on preparing students and others to travel abroad safely. She started the 501(c)3 group after her son Tyler Hill died while traveling in Japan. As a host mother for numerous study-abroad students, said Hill, “I absolutely adore the process of creating relationships that stand the test of time.”

“But I’m also the mother of a young man who lost his life in Japan,” Hill said. “So I understand on a very personal level the vulnerabilities and how lax the industry at large is in preparing anyone to travel with skills so that they can be safer. That’s what we fight for at Depart Smart.”

Hill believes that the travel industry should be doing more both to keep its guests and customers safe and to provide them the sort of inclusive and well-thought-out preparation they deserve.

“My background is in [health informatics](#), so when my son died, and I was trying to move along, my goal became to create more accountability in a study-abroad industry that’s worth \$300 billion,” Hill said. “And yet, you’ll not find anywhere any policy that advocates for consumer safety. You can buy a ticket to anywhere in the world, and they don’t have to tell you that the U.S. State Department advises you not to travel there.”

Other experts agreed that the travel industry itself can help mitigate risk and empower more people to explore the world. “Our hypothesis is if people could travel without worry, more people would travel,” said Sloan, of AIG Travel. “And while each person’s concerns

are different, if everyone knew that travel companies were doing their very best to address any issue a traveler might face, they might feel more confident traveling to places they might not otherwise have visited.”

For Salvato, the term vulnerable travelers is less about categories and more about opening the world and the joy of travel to everyone, safely. “This idea is beyond LGBTQ,” Salvato said. “It’s also physical — mobility challenges or any number of things. Or take baby boomers and the fact that as people are getting older they still want to travel, they still want to have active lifestyles, but maybe they can’t do the things that they once did.” ♦



Q&A WITH JEFF RUTLEDGE, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF AIG TRAVEL: INSIGHTS ON THE NEXT 10 YEARS OF INCLUSIVE HOSPITALITY



As the head of AIG Travel, Rutledge is in constant contact with the travel companies on the front lines of inclusive hospitality. He spoke with SkiftX on the progress that's being made and what future opportunities exist for the industry.

SkiftX: Lots of people know AIG, but can you orient us to the AIG Travel portion of the business?

Rutledge: We designed AIG Travel to be like an internal travel company within AIG, bringing together all things related to our travel insurance and assistance products that we provide to leisure

and business travelers. We're currently actively selling travel insurance products in 70 countries, providing services for travelers as they travel throughout the world. Our primary way of reaching those customers is through our travel industry partners: small travel agencies to large online travel agencies, global airlines, and all sectors of the travel industry.

We also reach our customers through banking partners and credit card associations through benefits that are embedded into the cards. And we provide the products and services for business travelers where corporations buy the products on behalf of their traveling employees.

What's sparked the interest in vulnerable travelers from the AIG perspective? How long have you been thinking about the challenges these groups face?

All sectors of the traveling population — in some way, shape, or form — have been or are vulnerable, and certainly some of them have been our customers. So we wanted to have an appropriate focus on those segments of travelers who have particular challenges or issues. I mean, that's our business, right? We're there to make sure that whatever hinders, stops, or makes any journey difficult or unpleasant — any barriers — that's our job to figure out and get people back on their way.

We also realize that we have a responsibility, along with our travel industry partners, to help educate — and to challenge everyone on the question of how

do you help people prepare so that they don't have to potentially encounter an unpleasant situation? Part of what we want to do for the industry is to work with our partners to understand what those vulnerabilities are.

Are there any travel brands that are doing a good job of this already? Who can the industry learn from today?

I'd refrain from calling on any specific brands, because I'd like all of them to be challenged in thinking about what they could do. Some, I think, are doing a very good job, particularly among those brands that care about and think about their own employees first. There's a baseline that starts with, "Do we inherently have that culture within who we are?" The hospitality industry tends to be a little bit more wired for this than maybe broader parts of the industry.

We often think about accessibility and inclusivity from the perspective of a moral imperative, but there is also a real business opportunity here. Can working toward inclusive hospitality be a win-win?

I agree with you. I think it's both. I do think there's a moral imperative — that there are certain things we just need to get on and do because they're the right thing to do. But there's also a market for this and there are people who actually do need answers to specific questions. They need to know that they can engage with companies who understand and have an appreciation for the things they have to think about.

In the past, AIG Travel has talked about women's safety when they travel. There are levels of vulnerability there that are very real and need to be addressed, and companies need to understand that. Hospitality companies, and others along the way, needed to provide education and support for women when they travel. The same thing also applies to the LBGTQ segment. We worked on a campaign to make sure

we were addressing a very unfortunate and difficult situation: Homosexuality is illegal in a number of countries. We want to make sure those travelers know what to do, how to work with medical care in a particular country to make sure that they're treated with the respect and dignity that they're due.

There is a market for it. We want to challenge every company, but those companies that have an ear to this and are listening and are making sure that they're providing information and services, they'll begin to capture more of these markets. I think it's very straightforward.

Where do you see the future of inclusive hospitality going? What comes next?

This is not something that any one company can do entirely on its own. In order for everything to become more seamless, you really have to have companies engaged all along the travel journey. So companies take it seriously, first of all, and then destinations take these types of things seriously — and are welcoming and want to ensure they're capturing this market.

And then the transportation companies to and from — whatever form of transportation that may be — as well as the hospitality companies that are part of every journey, it all has to incorporate multiple, seamless services. If there's something that's broken down in any part of that process, then you can't really address an individual's needs holistically. We need that level of thinking and adoption. It may not be something that every company wants to pursue, but we need aggregation of companies and destinations, whole cloth, in order to be able to really get to the next level. And I think with the right challenge that we can start to see those types of success. ◆

THE CHALLENGES TRAVELERS STILL FACE



Before the travel industry can address the needs of vulnerable travelers, it's important to understand what challenges those individuals face. The problem is bigger than any one group of people, experts said. Everyone is potentially at risk when away from home and in a new and unfamiliar environment, said Hill, the co-founder of Depart Smart.

"Safety and security has been the key focus of our marketing efforts for the past few years," said

Sloan, of AIG Travel. "We began researching travelers with physical disabilities, but quickly realized that vulnerable travelers could include other groups, such as the elderly or those with mental health issues."

Here's a look at a number of cohorts who can fall under the broad rubric of vulnerable — and what the travel industry needs to know to better accommodate them in the future.

Women

“No traveler is the same,” said Brittany Lewis, a security operations supervisor at AIG Travel. “But I think it’s important to recognize that there are certain profiles that may be perceived as vulnerable.” Women are one such group, experts said, and a critical one because of the sheer size of the cohort. “You see women traveling alone more often. You see women traveling in groups with other women, and even when they are traveling with their families, they’re making the vast majority of travel decisions,” Lewis said.

For travel companies, the key is to deliver on promises they’ve made to women travelers, Lewis said. “It’s fine if companies publicize that they’re taking part in initiatives to improve their safety practices and their awareness of vulnerable travelers,” Lewis said. “But it’s also important that they actually follow through with those things. It’s very important to think through the logistics of supporting vulnerable travelers — any marginalized groups that are getting out there more frequently.”

“One of the things that AIG Travel has done is we’ve created a separate women’s travel safety page that outlines the risks and how best to minimize some of those concerns,” Lewis added. “We’re really taking this information from people who have actually been on the ground and experienced these risks for themselves.”

LGBTQ Travelers

The U.S. travel industry has long been accommodating (if not accommodating enough) of LGBTQ travelers. Overseas, the story is different, particularly in parts of the world where people who identify as LGBTQ do not enjoy full protection of their rights.



“Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex travelers can face unique challenges when traveling abroad,” [according to the U.S. Department of State](#). “Laws and attitudes in some countries may affect safety and ease of travel. Legal protections vary from country to country. Many countries do not legally recognize same-sex marriage. More than 70 countries consider consensual same-sex sexual relations a crime, sometimes carrying severe punishment.” (According to [an authoritative 2019 report](#) from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, the current figure is 70 countries.)

For some individuals, just going to the airport can create difficult or traumatic experiences. “Shortcomings in the technology used by the TSA and insufficient training of the agency’s staff have made transgender and gender nonconforming travelers particularly vulnerable to invasive searches at airport checkpoints,” [a recent investigation by ProPublica and the Miami Herald found](#). “The TSA says that it is committed to treating all travelers equally and respectfully. But while the agency has known about the problems for several years, it still struggles to ensure the fair treatment of transgender and gender nonconforming people,” authors Brenda Medina and Lucas Waldron wrote in their investigation.

Baby Boomers

Many Americans are living longer and healthier, but that also means that older travelers are taking adventures they never would have in decades past. “We know for the last three years, there’s been a 24 percent increase, year over year, of people requiring special assistance at airports,” said Cluskey, of Mobility Mojo. “People are living longer. It’s the elderly parent with that bad hip, or a bad knee, who might need that assistance to get from A to B,” he added.

“The fact that everyone’s living longer is very exciting,” said Rutledge, of AIG Travel. “We’re all wanting to travel much later in life, and that’s fantastic for the entire industry. But there are specific issues that need to be looked at, thought about, and addressed to make sure that we’re supporting boomers as they continue to travel.”

Those with Mobility Challenges

The question goes beyond wheelchair users, as Cluskey explained on stage during Skift Forum Europe 2019. “There was a pedestrian bridge built in Venice a few years back by one of the most famous architectural firms in the world. A stunning bridge which took years of development. But when it was opened, it became obvious that there was a serious problem,” Cluskey said, describing the notorious Ponte della Costituzione, designed by Santiago Calatrava. The oddly shaped stairs on the bridge caused problems for countless people — including many who wouldn’t describe themselves as having mobility issues. “Those with suitcases couldn’t manage. And parents with strollers found it difficult,” he said. “Everyone was suing everyone.” It took five years before a solution was implemented, in the form of a small pod known locally as “the egg” that would ferry people over the span.

“I’m not telling you this story,” Cluskey said, “to scare you into thinking, ‘God, are my facilities good enough?’ Rather, I’m using the story to highlight the fact that accessibility affects all of us. There are 1 billion people globally with accessibility needs.”

There’s another consideration for companies: Mishandling customer relationships can expose travel firms to social media scrutiny or even full-blown public relations crises, as travelers find themselves empowered to share stories of “[bent](#)” wheelchairs and other “horror stories,” [as mobility activist Emily Ladau wrote in CNN](#).

The flip side of this is taking control of the narrative, like Booking Holdings has done with one spot highlighting its efforts to make travel easier for those with mobility challenges. In a 20-second ad, [Live Curious \(Freedom\)](#), a traveler is seen zipping through a well-manicured golf course at a sun-splashed resort, as Dolly Parton’s Here You Come Again plays. Viewers might assume he’s rollerblading or skateboarding — until the text “wheelchair accessible” pops up on screen near the end of the ad. Booking, the spot reveals, is all about “customized filters” that let all travelers find the perfect place to stay, whatever it is they’re looking for. *That’s* inclusivity.

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We know for the last three years, there’s been a 24 percent increase, year over year, of people requiring special assistance at airports.

— Stephen Cluskey, Mobility Mojo

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Students

Perhaps a surprising entrant on this list, students are often disadvantaged because of their relative inexperience with travel. They often have smaller budgets and take more risks than other traveler cohorts, further exposing themselves to incident.

“Students may not have a significant amount of global travel experience,” said Sloan, of AIG Travel. “In addition, their chosen activities, transportation, and housing all factor into their risk profile. We will generally see frugal students on shoestring budgets making compromises on transportation and housing — sometimes sharing with people they just met. In terms of activities, students are likely to be more adventurous and immersed in local culture, conduct more intra-country and regional travel, engage in nightlife activities, and be at their destinations for a lot longer than the typical business or leisure traveler.”

“Everybody’s vulnerable because no one teaches consumer-driven travel safety preparedness,” said Hill, of Depart Smart. “You have to have these skills to advocate for yourself. And if we all taught each other how to do it, we’d have much less trauma. My son would still be here because he would’ve known 119,” the emergency number in Japan that’s similar to 911 in the U.S., Hill said.

Black and Brown Travelers

People from minority racial groups in the U.S. often face challenges that white travelers don’t encounter, both domestically and abroad. (These travelers also face discrimination when returning home to the U.S.) A number of travel companies have implemented anti-bias training; nevertheless race-motivated incidents at hotels and aboard aircraft still generate headlines — and countless other incidents no doubt occur but don’t get covered at all.

“I’ve been traveling since I was a baby, and I’ve gotten used to the ways in which my body is surveilled both in and out of the airport,” wrote Jerkins, the author. “I’ve had a near run-in with neo-Nazis in Russia, landed in a taxi situation where I thought I could’ve been assaulted in the Bahamas, and had employees refuse to acknowledge me in domestic places like Florida.” It’s an experience that many travelers can relate to, [according to an Associated Press report from 2018](#) about the unique difficulties black people face while traveling. Little surprise, then, that communities like the Black Travel Movement have gained serious traction in the past several years, [according to Skift](#).

People Who Are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

“According to the World Health Organization, about 466 million people worldwide have a ‘disabling’ level of hearing loss, which comes to about five percent of the global population,” [CNN reported in July](#). And because there are hundreds of distinct sign languages worldwide, even those people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can have trouble communicating with other people who sign.

Travel companies, though, are taking steps to make individuals who use sign language more welcome: Delta Air Lines is now giving qualified crew the option to wear “sign language name bars, allowing customers to immediately identify and connect with Delta Air Lines team members who share the same signed language,” CEO Ed Bastian [said in a statement](#) describing the new pins that are similar to those that identify speakers of other languages. “It’s ... a powerful change as we seek to make the world a smaller, more inclusive place,” Bastian said of the effort, which Delta said was the first official move by an airline to make those who sign more visible.

Courtyard by Marriott is another brand that's marketing to individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. [A 2017 ad campaign called Golden Rule](#) included one video depicting a front-desk employee learning sign language to better communicate with a guest. Marriott [said](#) the campaign was inspired by "real stories from associates."

Travelers with Other Challenges

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) need particular attention from the travel industry. "People with ASD," [according to the National Institute of Mental Health](#), "have difficulty with communication and interaction with other people, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors, symptoms that hurt the person's ability to function properly in school, work, and other areas of life. Autism is known as a 'spectrum' disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. ASD occurs in all ethnic, racial, and economic groups. Although ASD is a lifelong disorder, treatments and services can improve a person's symptoms and ability to function."

Over the past two decades, more and more individuals have been diagnosed with ASD in the United States, [according to the CDC](#). In 2000, about 1 in 150 children were diagnosed. By 2014, about 1 in 59 children were identified as having ASD. (The disorder is typically first diagnosed in children.)



Yet at the same time, children have more influence than perhaps ever before over the ways that families travel. Close to half of parents and grandparents said they factor in kids' views on travel, according to a recent Expedia Group Media Solutions survey. "Though adults make the final decisions," [a SkiftX report on the survey said](#), children "are most likely to influence the destination chosen (64 percent) and the activities on the trip (57 percent)."

Travel companies are increasing their focus on travelers with autism, [The New York Times recently reported](#). "A growing number of theme parks, special attractions, and hotels are introducing autism training and sensory guides that highlight triggers, provide resources in times of need, and assure families they won't be judged," according to the Times.

One example not cited in the Times story was Pittsburgh International Airport, which opened this summer a new "sensory-friendly space" that helps travelers prepare for the flying experience. "We want to make flying accessible to everyone," said Pittsburgh International Airport CEO Christina Cassotis in a statement. "This room is an opportunity for special needs travelers from children to adults to have a place to decompress and get prepared to fly. This has been a multiyear process with engagement from more than 40 organizations and lots of parents."

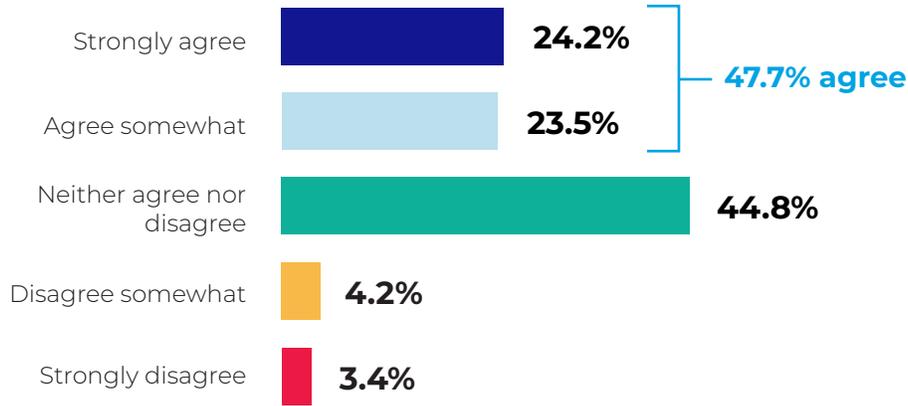
The airport is also leveraging a new network of Bluetooth beacons to make navigation easier for people who are blind. With the help of researchers from Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh International tested and deployed an app called NavCog that "gives audio directions to users. It relies on a map of the terminal that has been annotated with the locations of restrooms, restaurants, gates, entrances, and ticketing counters," according to the airport. "Most users were able to reach the ticketing counter in three minutes, traverse the terminal in about six minutes, go from the gate to a restroom in a minute and go from the gate to a restaurant in about four minutes," all significant improvements over the status quo. ◆

HOW CONSUMERS THINK ABOUT INCLUSIVITY AND TRAVEL RISKS



- ◆ To better understand consumer perceptions of vulnerability and their assessment of the travel industry's inclusivity efforts, SkiftX recently conducted a series of surveys among U.S. adults through the Google Surveys Publisher Network. Three surveys were conducted; all respondents had taken at least one overnight trip away from home in the past 12 months.
- ◆ In general, SkiftX found that more than half of respondents (52%) believe the travel industry is doing a good job of accommodating those with disabilities. Yet 48% said they agree that the industry has an issue, affirming that “travel companies could do more to accommodate” certain people. About 13% of respondents said “an unexpected issue with sickness or a disability” prevented them from taking a previously planned trip.

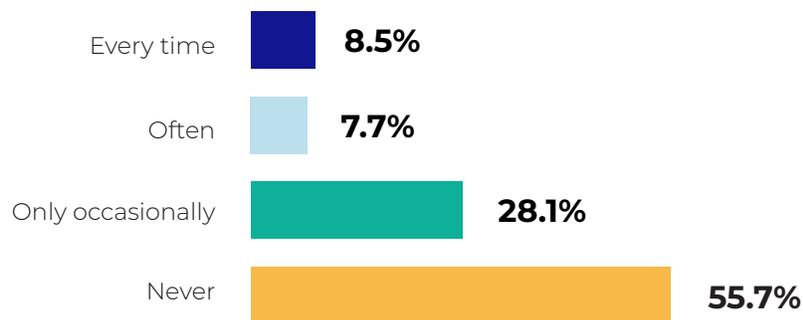
How do you feel about this statement: In general, travel companies could do more to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.



In the past 12 months, have you had an unexpected issue with sickness or a disability that prevented you from taking a trip you had planned?

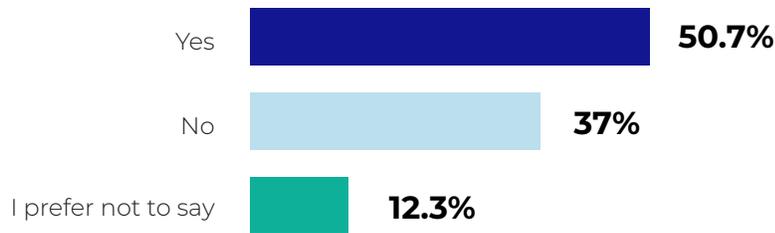


How often do you purchase travel insurance for your vacations?

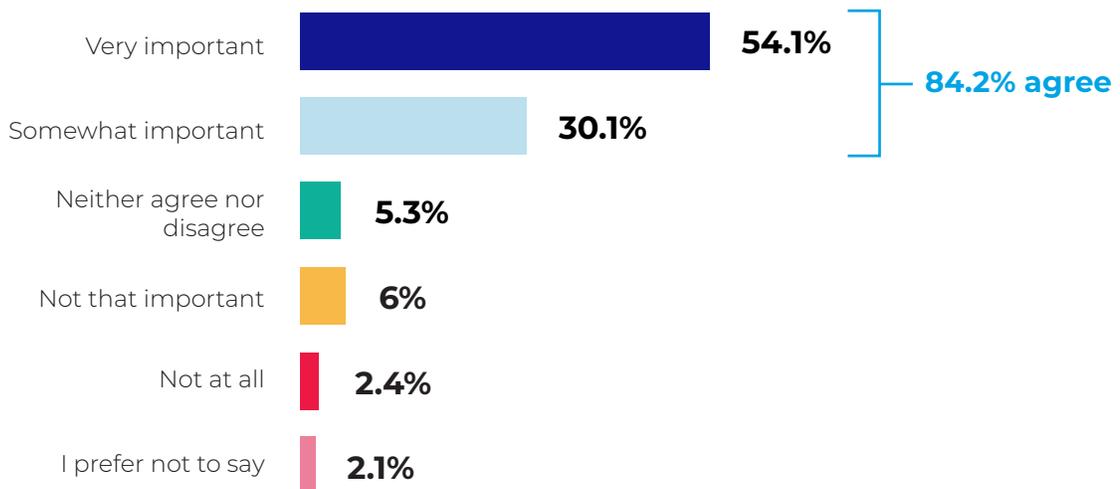


- ◆ Another survey was directed to those individuals who identify as LGBTQ. Of those respondents, a very slim majority (51%) agreed that travel companies are “doing enough to accommodate” LGBTQ individuals. More than half also said it’s “very important” for travel brands to “make clear efforts to accommodate LGBTQ people.”

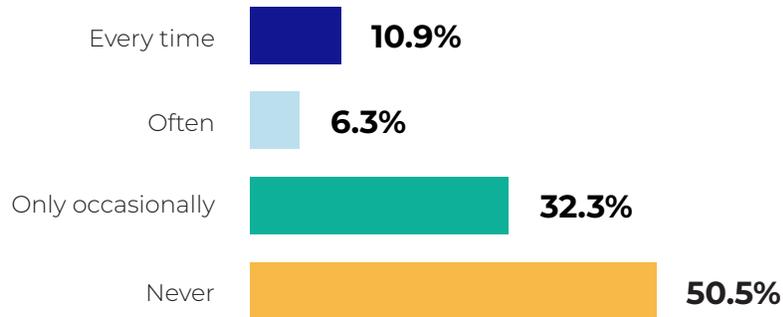
Do you feel travel companies including airlines, hotels, and cruise lines do enough to accommodate the needs of people who identify as LGBTQ?



How important is it to you that travel companies like airlines, hotels, and cruise lines make clear efforts to accommodate LGBTQ people?



How often do you purchase travel insurance for your vacations?



- ◆ A third survey looked at how travelers were treated by travel companies. Close to 16% said that they or their travel companions “were not appropriately accommodated” by a travel company “because of a disability.” A small but not insignificant portion of respondents, 12% and 6%, respectively, said they’d had “a poor experience” or experienced “discrimination” while traveling. That suggests further potential for — and work to be done by — the travel industry.

Have you ever felt that you or your travel companions were not appropriately accommodated by an airline, hotel, or other travel company because of disability?



Have you or your travel companions ever had a poor experience because a travel company seemed unfamiliar with a disability you or your companions may have?



Have you or your travel companions ever experienced discrimination from a travel company because of a disability you or your companions may have?



Q&A WITH ED SALVATO, FOUNDER OF HOSPITABLEME: WHAT COMES NEXT FOR THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY?



Ed Salvato is a co-founder of the firm HospitableMe, which offers strategic advice and training for travel and tourism brands seeking meaningful engagement with the LGBTQ segment. SkiftX asked him about the future of LGBTQ tourism, the challenges that the industry faces, and the potential of inclusive hospitality.

SkiftX: Walk us through the work of HospitableMe and how you assist travel companies with their inclusivity efforts.

Salvato: I've always thought of myself as a quiet activist in the sense that we're moving the needle, moving the conversation, but kind of quietly and through hospitality and tourism. A lot of companies do LGBTQ-specific marketing, and that's great. The

more, the merrier! But most companies will put a rainbow flag out and then forget that "Oh, queer people are going to show up." Staff members often don't know how to deal with gender non-conforming individuals. Is that hatred? No, I really think it's just ignorance.

The tourism and hospitality industries have done a disservice to their customer-facing staff by not training them to deal with this new reality: 50 percent of millennials and Gen Z identify as something other than straight. Over half! Over half know someone who uses a pronoun other than "he" or "she." Things are changing really rapidly. [There are 11 countries](#) that offer a third gender marker on their passport, including places like Pakistan and Malta.

What does HospitableMe training entail, and what can travel companies learn from your educational efforts?

You know what we think? It's not just "gays are different, treat them with velvet gloves, and treat them differently." We say take gender out of the equation. Take the sexuality out of the equation. Treat everyone equally with great service.

In this era of personalized, authentic, tech-enabled service, we're coming at it from the perspective of helping marketers complete that circle: You're marketing to gay people and then have to provide great service. That becomes a loop — otherwise you're setting yourself up for failure. The silver lining is that the bar is so low that brands can easily exceed it.

Can you give us an example?

Uniworld was one of our first clients three years ago. We developed the curriculum with them, and it was great. We trained more than a thousand people! I remember talking to Miroslav, the bartender from Bulgaria, who told me there were no gay people in his country. But he told the story of having two guests — two men — and he goes, “I want to give good service. But I didn’t know which was the mister and which was the missus.” That was a big aha moment. For 100 years in luxury travel it’s been about heterosexual couples, mostly from the U.S., mostly of a certain demographic, certain age, certain income, traveling together as romantic partners.

Suddenly, we’re saying “provide great service by treating everyone the same.” It throws the paradigm off. People who are in hospitality want to do the right thing. But how does Miroslav deal with the fact that he’s not sure whose chair to pull out first? We’re fighting against the 100-year-old notion of what service is, and obviously that’s really hard to do. The awareness of it is the first step.

Service standards have to change to address these new markets. In our training, we share some statistics about this new millennial, the new younger person, the new gender identity, the way things are changing. Other industries are doing much better, you know. Facebook offers 71 gender options when you first sign up — it’s really very accommodating.

Recognizing blind spots and encouraging more training would help. But what more can the travel industry do?

We elicit so much good feedback within these classes that there are so many great examples. One guy with a river cruise line, he just loves his job and

loves dealing with people, loves making people feel happy. So he tells the story about relying on tropes and stereotypes that he experienced on an itinerary. He’s aboard, and he saw this older woman, a grandmother with her grandchildren, and he says “Oh, good morning, princesses!” The grandmother just goes “That’s my grandson.” And he really could never recover from that, he said.

In the world of travel, there’s just so much gendered language. Don’t get me wrong. Some people love it: “Call me sir.” “Call me madam.” That’s fabulous. We’re not saying to blow that up but instead to be aware that there’s a new generation of people that are not comfortable with gendered language.

There’s one hotel brand we worked with, and during the training somebody said, “Well, we’re trained to say mister or missus.” And an HR person who was there said, “No, you’re trained to do whatever the customer would like.” Then the HR rep added, “But you’re right. We need to look at that policy and maybe we should change it.” So it’s very interesting. As an industry, we need to be better. It’s about empathy. It’s about awareness. It’s about checking yourself. ◆



CONCLUSIONS



A huge portion of the traveling public has unique needs that aren't presently being met — or fully met — by the service and standards of the travel industry. In fact, 16 percent of consumers surveyed by SkiftX said they “were not appropriately accommodated by an airline, hotel, or other travel company because of a disability,” a stat that should shock and disappoint an industry centered around hospitality. While the shortfall should be concerning to industry decision makers on its own, this reality also represents a huge opportunity for those companies that are able to better accommodate vulnerable travelers.

It's clear that a new model of inclusive hospitality has the potential to generate significant incremental revenue, but investment and training are needed before the industry can capitalize on the estimated billions of dollars of additional spending that vulnerable travelers could provide.

The challenge is real: “Don't expect that you will ever be completely finished making your business accessible — particularly if it has anything to do with technology,” reported Brodey, the health writer, in *Forbes*. “But don't think you have to go it alone either. ... Ask the experts — people with disabilities who travel. Instead of working around them, it's much

more satisfying for everyone to work together. There are also services that can offer advice on staying up to date on web accessibility, such as peatworks.org and traveltripper.com.”

Indeed, numerous experts pointed to the perils of going it alone or assuming that a company's internal staff-development teams can tackle these problems on their own. “The tourism and hospitality industry has done a disservice to their customer-facing staff,” Salvato said. “The industry has not trained staff to deal with this new reality: 50 percent of millennials and Gen Z identify as something other than straight. Over half!”

Experts suggest teaming up with training organizations, tapping resources from advocacy groups, and utilizing one of the oldest rules in hospitality: treating others like you'd want to be treated. The work, experts said, lies in broadening perspectives so that travel brands can anticipate even those needs they never even considered. As an industry, Salvato said, travel companies “need to be better. It's about empathy. It's about awareness. It's about checking yourself.” ◆

ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Adobe, Airbnb, Hyatt, Lyft, Mastercard, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email skiftx@skift.com.

The Skift logo is rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and closely spaced, with a period at the end of the word.

ABOUT AIG TRAVEL

AIG Travel, a member of American International Group, Inc. (NYSE: AIG), provides travel insurance and global assistance through innovative product offerings. Travel Guard® is the marketing name for its portfolio of travel insurance and travel-related services. From lost luggage to a medical emergency, our 24/7 multilingual assistance team is always just a phone call away, and we take pride in our transparent and fair approach to each and every claim. Through our global service centers and a network of experienced providers, we deliver medical and security assistance to help our customers travel with confidence.

AIG Travel is a socially responsible and inclusive organization that meets the diverse needs of leisure and corporate travelers alike. Learn more at www.aig.com/travel or www.travelguard.com, and follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

