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Stop Thinking Gay! 7 Ways to Market to Today's LGBT Travelers

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During the recent New York Travel Festival, a travel conference and expo that takes place every year in New York City, I was invited to make two presentations: one for consumers and one for travel industry insiders. In the travel industry presentation, titled "Stop Thinking Gay: 7 Ways to Reach the New Gay Traveler," I highlighted how gay travel marketing has evolved, and what successful companies and destinations are doing to stay on top of this valuable market segment. Here is an excerpt from the presentation (you can also watch the video, which is a bit more detailed).

Gay travelers have evolved, and so has the way that travel organizations market to them. To get a clear picture about how to approach this valuable group of travelers (and I'm using the term "gay" interchangeably with "LGBT," or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender), the first thing you need to do is to FORGET THAT THESE TRAVELERS ARE GAY. Clearing the slate will make it easier to take in these suggestions about how to market to them. (That's because, in a lot of ways, the LGBT market is just as multifaceted -- and similar in its basic interests -- as any other group of travelers.)

So how do you as a business, destination or organization reach this audience? Consider these seven tips:

1. Diversify. As we know, the LGBT market isn't one big homogenous group, especially nowadays. You need to think of all these niches within the niche, and determine which make sense for you to target: Men, women, families with kids, multi-ethnic groups, international travelers are just a few of the possibilities (you'll find more in the video).

2. Integrate. Gay travelers feel more comfortable than ever with their straight counterparts, and vice versa. If you're a gay-specific business, you might already be expanding your strategy to include the mainstream straight market. If you're a so-called "mainstream" company, you should start seriously thinking about including your gay marketing materials with your other content, if you haven't already.

Take a look at the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB). Last year, they integrated their LGBT campaign into their mainstream marketing efforts. They incorporated gay content into their TV campaigns. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Association, meanwhile has taken a rather creative approach at integrating its advertising, with a new TV commercial that addresses several markets at once, with Vegas-style humor (you can see the full commercial in the video).

Lots of other destinations have upped the ante as well. Three Mexican destinations have made great strides in promoting themselves to the LGBT market. The most recent to join the effort is the Cancun CVB, which last year signed up with the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association. The Puerto Vallarta CVB already has a section on its Website proclaiming its gay-friendliness. And Mexico City's tourism site is especially detailed with gay travel information, including a 50-page gay travel guide, available in either English or Spanish, which you can download for free.

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Another good case study is American Airlines. Search for the word "gay" on the American Airlines Website, and three topics pop up: consumer travel, workplace equality and employee resource groups. They make it easy for everyone to see that they're dedicated to the market, and also that they treat their employees equally.

On the accommodation front, Preferred Hotel Group -- which represents more than 650 independent hotels -- has integrated its Preferred Pride content into its main Website, and also moved much of its LGBT advertising into mainstream media. They recognize that gay travelers are just as likely to read Conde Nast Traveler or the New York Times as they are Out or The Advocate.

3. Expand Your Products & Campaigns. Marriott International is another major player that has broadened its LGBT marketing efforts, with a microsite accessible in five languages. Hilton has a campaign called "Stay Hilton. Go Out" - and it's expanded to more than 460 hotel properties since debuting in 2012.

Or take a look again at Fort Lauderdale. They were one of the first U.S. cities to launch a gay-specific marketing campaign back in 1995, with a tiny budget of just \$35,000 -- that was matched by an equal contribution from local gay hotels for a series of co-op ads.

Today, that budget has jumped to over \$1 million a year. "17 years ago LGBT or gay was a niche market," according to Richard Gray, who's the LGBT director at the CVB. Now, he says, "it's now a full market in its own right." Last year, he says the city received 1.3 million LGBT visitors, who spent \$1.5 BILLION dollars.

To keep that momentum going, Fort Lauderdale is diversifying its approach and finding new opportunities. They're focusing especially hard on building the gay meetings and sporting events market, according to Gray. Here's his reasoning: "We feel confident that if we can get groups, we will also secure them as leisure travelers."

4. Know Your Media. Be aware of how people are getting information about your business -- that should influence both how you advertise and how you stay on top of what your customers are saying about you.

That's one thing that guides Bill Boeddiker, the owner of Parker Guest House, which is a bed-and-breakfast in San Francisco's Castro district. He says that when his hotel opened in 1997, they advertised exclusively in gay and lesbian media -- like the Damron Guide and Spartacus.

Boedikker says that he still uses gay-specific sites like Gay Cities, Purple Roofs and GayTravel.com, but the main source of his business now is Google, TripAdvisor and BedandBreakfast.com -- which has also helped increase the percentage of straight guests he has.

San Francisco Travel is another organization that's moved away from some print vehicles, according to Lynn Bruni, the organization's vice president of marketing communications -- at the same time, they've also moved away from strictly "vertical media" buys -- that means they no longer target gay travelers solely through LGBT media. Although, they have partnered with Gaycities.com -- as well as California cities like Palm Springs and West Hollywood -- to create joint promotions that benefit all of the destinations.

5. Create Excitement & Shareable Moments. When it comes down to it, we all want a lot of the same things when it comes to travel. So you need to appeal to some pretty basic emotions to motivate gay travelers to spend their time and money with you.

Communicate the value of the experiences, and make it easy for people to share their excitement through social media -- even if they haven't taken the trip yet. Keep the conversation going.

Among the more memorable examples: Air New Zealand gained not only social media shares, but lots of press coverage with its gay- friendly activities. In 2008, the airline staged a special "Pink Flight" that flew passengers from San Francisco to the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney, Australia. In 2013, on the same day that New Zealand's same-sex marriage law went into effect, the airline hosted a same-sex wedding in-flight. Jesse Tyler Ferguson, one of the stars of the TV show "Modern Family," was present for the ceremony.

The folks who run Marriott Residence Inns report success with their own publicity tactics. Last year, they named lesbian chef and television personality Cat Cora, as the chain's "Residence Mom of the Year," to help connect with traveling parents and families -- including same-sex couples. To drive home their point, last November, the hotel chain

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hosted its first-ever Twitter Party for LGBT parents traveling with kids. The company reports that their hash tag trended as one of the most popular that evening.

Tourisme Montreal has staged quirky LGBT tourism campaigns like its "Queer of the Year" contest, and even created its own Web series. The six-part series, "Montreal Boy: Some Strings Attached," debuted in April on LogoTV.com, in collaboration with Air Canada.

6. Provide Valuable Resources. I've been writing and managing custom content for years for various travel industry clients, from Orbitz and LAN Airlines, to the Mexico Tourism Board, various CVBs and hotels ranging from big chains to individual properties.

In addition to becoming more digital and oriented toward social, successful travel organizations are becoming subtler in the way they promote their destination, service or product.

You might call it custom content, native advertising or branded content, but the point is this: you'll often attract more people to your message if you package it with useful, compelling or cool information that they can use and share. Think beyond the self-promotional, and work with writers and social media experts who can help you create content that will get you noticed.

Preferred Hotel Group is among the newest entrants into this field; this year, they introduced the Preferred Pride blog, which provides insider travel tips and information about hotels, events and destinations in general.

7. Keep Your Eyes Open. You need to be on the lookout for the next big thing -- whether it's a new app to communicate with your customers, or a promising new niche within the LGBT market.

One of the fastest-growing niches right now, for example, is same-sex weddings and honeymoons -- thanks in no small part to the increasing number of destinations where it's legal. According to a new study released in April by the Williams Institute, extending marriage to same-sex couples just in the state of Oregon -- where it's not currently legal -- would generate nearly \$50 million in spending to the state economy. In Virginia, it could add up to \$60 million.

Travel companies and destinations are taking note, even in places where marriage isn't legal. In 2013, W Retreat & Spa on Vieques Island, in Puerto Rico, launched a partnership with wedding planner Bernadette Coveney Smith, founder of 14 Stories. Together, they offer same-sex destination-wedding packages. Marriott International has a Gay Weddings and Events section on its gay microsite. And Preferred Hotel Group is in the process of integrating same-sex wedding and honeymoon offerings into its other similar packages.

As the world integrates further and social media continue to expand, the opportunities and challenges are sure to keep things exciting.