

Marketing Outlook Forum 2015— Open Doors Organization (ODO) Forecast

New ODO Market Study Finds Positive Trends in Accessible Travel

The Open Doors Organization (ODO) is pleased to report that while more American adults with disabilities than ever are traveling, fewer are experiencing major obstacles during their trips. In the past two years alone, 71% of adults with disabilities—more than 26 million people—traveled for pleasure and/or business, taking 73 million trips. Current spending on just their own travel is \$17.3 billion annually, up from \$13.6 billion in 2002.

The 2015 Market Study, conducted by Mandala Research, LLC is a follow-up to ODO's groundbreaking studies of 2002 and 2005 on the travel patterns and market scope of U.S. adult travelers with disabilities. The new data shows that travelers with disabilities have a greater impact than ever on the industry. The study also shines a light on factors still holding back the market. Twenty-five years after the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, many barriers to access still remain in air travel, hotels and restaurants, although these appear to have decreased significantly since the previous study in 2005.

The survey was conducted online in January and February 2015 among a national sample of 1,291 adults with disabilities aged 18 or over. Disability was defined as having blindness, deafness or a condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting or carrying. Individuals who also have cognitive disabilities were included as respondents as well. To insure comparability with the 2002 and 2005 studies, Mandala Research used Harris Interactive (now Harris, A Nielsen Company), who had conducted the earlier research, to carry out the online poll.

Travel Patterns and Expenditures

Although four out of ten interviewed travelers classify their disability as severe (40%), seven out of ten have traveled in the last two years (71%), unchanged since 2005 and 2002, indicating that demand has bounced back to pre-recession levels. The percentage traveling by air (31%) is also unchanged. Roughly two out of ten Americans with disabilities have taken six or more trips in the past two years, the same as in earlier studies, with an average trip length of 5 days. Nearly all the travelers have taken a leisure trip in the past two years (96%), though many have taken business trips as well (14%).

Each traveler with disabilities can be expected to spend \$500 per trip on average, a figure which does not include expenditures on or by friends, family members or other companions. Not only do travelers with disabilities rarely travel alone, the median travel party size has increased from 2 in 2002 to 2.7 in 2015 and now includes fewer children relative to adults. So the multiplier effect is now even stronger with total travel spending easily surpassing \$38 billion annually for this market segment.

Barriers to Access

The new research explores the extent and types of barriers still faced by a majority of travelers with disabilities. Among those who traveled by air, 72% said they encountered major obstacles with airlines and 65% with airports, down from 84% and 82% in 2005, respectively. The main obstacles cited at airports were long distances to gates, long lines, lack of seating and difficulty getting assistance with baggage, many of the same issues of concern to older travelers in general (*Airneeth Report 3: The impact of aging on aviation*, 2006). At hotels and restaurants, the percent reporting obstacles—physical barriers, problems with customer service or communication barriers—has decreased significantly as well.

Use of Technology

The Internet is, by far, the most common way individuals with disabilities book their trips. Six out of ten travelers with disabilities have booked online in the past two years (62%), up from five out of ten in 2005 (51%). By comparison, half as many placed calls to airlines and hotels (31%). Only 10% of respondents used a travel agent to book a trip, down from 16% in 2005. The Internet was also the primary source of information about accessible travel (58%), followed by previous experience (48%) and friends and family (38%). Brand loyalty and word of mouth remain very important to travelers with disabilities. Companies with inaccessible websites or who fail to post access information online are clearly missing opportunities in this market.

Six out of ten travelers with disabilities (58%) also use mobile devices to support their needs, most often to access hotel apps (32%) or airline and airport websites (27%). Many also use airline apps or text alerts, mobile boarding passes, ground transportation apps, video chat applications, and airport apps. This is a new topic in the ODO Market Study and belies the myth that people with disabilities are not tech savvy. The smart phone and mobile device industry will make a strong, positive impact on the quality of life for people with disabilities. While federal regulators are now focusing on the accessibility of websites, it is equally important for businesses to make their apps functional for all users.

Modes of Transportation

Like other Americans, travelers with disabilities primarily use their own private cars when taking trips. Eight out of ten drove on a trip in the past two years (79%), making an average of two such trips. Next in popularity is air travel, with four out of ten travelers with disabilities taking at least one flight in the past two years (43%). These 11 million air travelers took 23 million trips and spent a total of \$9 billion just on their own flights, up from \$5.8 billion over a 2-year period in 2005.

One in four have rented a car (26%), and slightly more than one in ten have taken a train or bus (12%). An additional one in ten has been on an organized tour (10%). The 2015 ODO Market Study also explored the use of ride share services for the first time, finding that 7% of travelers with disabilities have already used such a service.

Cruise Travel

Cruise holidays remain popular among adults with disabilities. In the past five years, 10% of adults with disabilities have taken a cruise, amounting to almost 4 million travelers taking 7 million trips and generating \$11 billion in spending on fares and \$1.5 billion in spending on excursions. In 2002 ODO found that 12% of adults with disabilities had taken a cruise over the 5-year period, which actually exceeded the 8% of the general population reported by the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). Unfortunately, a similar statistic is no longer available for comparison. The 2015 ODO Market Study also examines barriers to travel during cruises as well as how likely adults with disabilities are to cruise again in future.

Lodging

Three-quarters of travelers with disabilities have stayed in a hotel on at least one trip in the past two years (76%), holding steady since 2002. However, the number of hotel stays has declined slightly from 2005, slipping back from an average of 3 to 2, the level seen in 2002. Typical spending on accommodations is \$100 per day. Roughly half of travelers with disabilities encounter obstacles in hotels (46%), down from almost two-thirds of travelers (60%) in 2005. The key problems, however, remain the same: guest rooms that are inconveniently located, difficulty opening doors, and inaccessible shower facilities.

Popular Destinations

As in earlier studies, the 2015 research examines which destinations, in the US and overseas, are most popular among travelers with disabilities. From a list of more than 30 major destinations across the US, Las Vegas, Chicago, New York, Orlando, and Atlanta ranked highest, followed by Washington, DC and Los Angeles.

Nearly three out of ten travelers with disabilities have traveled to locations outside the U.S. in the last five years (28%). The most common destinations were the Caribbean, Europe, and South or Central America. Mexico and Canada—which topped the list in 2005—have now slipped to fifth and sixth place.

Conclusion

When Open Doors Organization carried out its first nationwide study in 2002, the goal was to wake up the travel industry to the importance of this mostly underserved market segment and provide hard numbers on which to base investment decisions. Now thirteen years later, the economic impact of the disability travel market is no longer a secret, especially in air travel. At large airports like Miami and Minneapolis St. Paul, airlines now provide more than 1 million wheelchair assists per year.

As the Baby Boomers continue to age, the market promises to keep growing for decades to come. From 2010 to 2030 the population 65 and older is projected to jump 78% and by 2050, more than 100% (U.S. Census Bureau, *65+ In the US: 2010*). These older adults may not self-identify as having a disability, but nonetheless 50% of those aged 65 and older have a disability, 37% a severe disability, according to the US Census Bureau (*Survey of Income and Program Participation, May-August 2010*).

How well will the travel industry keep up with this growing tide of individuals who need not only accessible facilities and sensitive, well-trained staff but also better, more detailed information in formats they can use? The 2015 ODO Market Study clearly indicates that the travel industry is currently moving in the right direction but still needs to pick up the pace. The challenge in great, but so, too, can be the rewards.

Copies of the 53-page ODO 2015 Market Study are available for sale through the Open Doors Organization website (opendoorsnfp.org) or by calling 773 388-8839 or e-mailing info@opendoorsnfp.org.

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