

## Travelers with Disabilities: The Untapped Market

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When most people think about accommodating people with disabilities in their business they get a scared feeling in their gut and their mind scrambles to search for that all-important date when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) went into effect. It doesn't have to be that way! When business owners open their eyes and start to realize that there are literally billions of dollars to be made in the accessible travel market, I believe we will start to remove the fear associated with the ADA.

There are currently more than 50 million people with disabilities in the United States and 500 million worldwide, representing the single largest untapped tourist market in the world. According to a recent survey conducted by the Open Doors Organization, the 55 million people with disabilities in our country have a discretionary income of more than \$200 billion. In 2004, these people took 32 million trips and spent more than \$13.6 billion on travel (\$4.2 billion on hotels, \$3.3 billion on airfare, \$2.7 billion on food and beverage, and \$3.4 billion on retail, transportation, and other activities). This study suggested that these travelers would double their spending if some minor amenities were made available. Meet and greet programs at airports, preferred seating on airplanes, hotel rooms closer to amenities, and employees who go out of their way to accommodate guests with disabilities topped the list.

The current trends in adaptive travel show most of these travelers taking advantage of destinations that they know are already accessible such as cruise ships, Florida, and Las Vegas. The visitors' bureaus and businesses at these destinations that have gone to great lengths to ensure their visitors that there will not be any accessibility issues during their stay. From personal experience and years of traveling in a wheelchair, I can guarantee that these locations have built and will continue to build strong relationships with travelers with disabilities. This group is a very loyal one, who will often return to the same city, hotel, or activity provider year after year if they have a good experience. If everyone were to catch on to this we would see growth in the tourism industry like we have never seen!

With this in mind, it is a wonder that more business owners have not taken steps to make their accommodations more accessible and even start marketing to these travelers. If the staggering numbers listed above aren't proof enough, the U.S. Census Bureau recently stated that nearly 16.5% of all people with disabilities in the U.S. leave their home two days per week or less. That constitutes nearly 11 million people that are not traveling at all. Also keep in mind that there are millions of people in their golden years that are looking for accessible travel accommodations. Many of these people use canes or walkers, travel with oxygen tanks, or have other mobility impairments, and are not included in disability statistics.

With millions of people in need of accessible travel options, and with our Baby Boomers (almost 25% of our population) starting to reach retirement age as well now is the time to start thinking about improving marketing efforts to include people with disabilities and about better overall accessibility in general. By educating business owners on the benefits of marketing to people with disabilities and educating travel agents who are fighting a losing battle with the internet, we can begin to focus on this new target market.

If you want to take advantage of the rapidly growing adaptive travel market, get started now! I recommend hiring an expert to get your business rated and start removing barriers to access as soon as possible. Think about accessibility anytime you're planning a remodel or addition. These improvements will benefit everyone, not just people with disabilities. For those of you who have already taken steps to improve accessibility, start bragging about it.

### About the Author

Craig Kennedy is a published author, accessibility consultant, and motivational speaker with more than ten years of adaptive travel experience and more than 20 years of tourism and service industry expertise. He specializes in resort business growth and customer attraction through better overall accessibility, education, and marketing, and works with businesses who wish to become leaders in accessible travel and accommodation.

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