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Understanding the Consumer Who is Driving Green Trends

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Use of the term “sustainable” has been increasing in the business world, especially in tourism. By definition, “to sustain” means to give support or relief. “Sustainable” businesses function to maintain or improve the present and future quality of people’s lives. Companies continue to realize that consumers are spending their money consciously, considering more than just the material goods they take home from the store.

Consumers are beginning to realize that when they support sustainable businesses, their dollars can impact social and environmental concerns. This group of influential and leading-edge thinkers, representing LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), seeks out companies that share their health, social and environmental interests and priorities.

In the United States, LOHAS consumers make up a \$200+ billion (and growing) marketplace for goods and services. LOHAS consumers are also commonly referred to as “Cultural Creatives,” a term coined in 1996 by Paul Ray, a sociologist, and Sherry Anderson, a psychologist, who conducted a study of American values and identified this emerging societal group. Ray and Anderson determined that Cultural Creatives value health, the environment, social justice, personal development and sustainable living. This group represents approximately 40 million people.

This LOHAS marketplace is expected to grow to \$425 billion in three years and \$845 billion by 2015, according to research conducted by the Natural Marketing Institute.

Travelers’ Expectations are Changing

Why is this important? Because it is no longer about just operating your lodging facility as you once did before. You are now being judged by a group of people who want to maintain their healthy, green lifestyle while traveling. They want to stay at environmentally friendly facilities and ones that recognize the connection between green and health. Ones that offer healthier eating options, serve organic and/or local cuisine, use environmentally friendly cleaning products and talk about what they are doing to conserve natural resources.

Times have definitely changed. This consumer group, comprised of the key influencers of the green and health trends, knows that it is important to conserve natural resources. They are demanding that businesses do their part and become good environmental stewards.

They are the most critical and demanding consumers, yet the most brand loyal. Willing to not only support your inn, hotel or lodge, but convince their friends and family to stay there as well. They'll also spend 20 percent more than your average traveler for facilities that meet their values and lifestyle. To them, the company and brand are inseparable.

American (and international) lodging facilities are beginning to recognize the importance of making decisions that consider their economic, environmental and social impact in order to capture the LOHAS audience. Although sustainable businesses represent only a small percentage of the national business community, this percentage is a fast-growing segment of the national marketplace.

Consumers Pushing for Stronger Standards

As many as eight states had green certification programs in 2007; today, 12 states have certification programs in place. There are also certification programs available through organizations such as Sustainable Travel International. The American Hotel & Lodging Assn. is also working on a national certification program. Do you think this is by chance? No. It is in large part because of the demand from the leaders within the LOHAS category pushing toward higher, greener standards.

Do you realize that LOHAS consumers in the citizen action groups pushed Wal-Mart to become more environmentally friendly? The leaders are very involved and pushing for change to create a healthier lifestyle and environment for themselves and for future generations.

Do you have to be certified as green to acquire these LOHAS travelers? Do you have to be this "perfect" green facility? No, but you cannot pretend that you are, either. These are the same consumers who are creating the greenwashing (pretending to be environmentally sound when you are not) lists. In the same respect, the more environmentally friendly, socially responsible and healthier you are as a facility, the easier it will be for these LOHAS consumers to find you. There are many green communities and resources available today to connect LOHAS travelers with LOHAS businesses.

To get and stay ahead as a travel facility, it is important that you recognize the true influencers of the green and health trends. The sooner you acknowledge them and connect your values with theirs, the sooner you'll succeed in capturing them as your customers.

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