

## Cost of Business Travel Climbs Despite Economic Slowdown, Survey Results Reveal Factors Driving Spending Decisions

2008-02-07

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Industry Leaders from Best Western, JetBlue, National Business Travel Association and Advito/BCD Travel Offer Tips to Stem Financial Strain

Travel industry executives meeting last week addressed several ways companies and individual business travelers are curtailing expenses in this era of corporate belt-tightening and economic uncertainty.

Mary Ellen George, general manager of Advito, the consulting arm of BCD Travel, said that although high costs associated with business travel will not diminish any time soon, companies can use existing tools to keep their balance sheets in check.

'We're counseling clients to better enforce their company's travel policy to focus on what can be controlled,' George said.

Individual business travelers and corporate travel managers both realize financial savings and other vital benefits depending upon where they choose to sleep.

'A large number of travelers are taking advantage of the value-based, all-inclusive pricing model that we and other hotel chains in the midmarket category provide,' said Dorothy Dowling, senior vice president of marketing and sales for Best Western International. 'Amenities such as free high-speed Internet access - standard in all Best Westerns in North America - help people save on the bottom line. In addition, rich loyalty programs like our Gold Crown Club International help increase compliance with travel policies while rewarding travelers for their continued business.'

Corporate travel managers are positioning their companies to take advantage of high-value hotel options. According to the results of a new survey conducted in January by Best Western and the National Business Travel Association (NBTA), more than half (52 percent) of respondents said that complimentary high-speed Internet access is the most important amenity when considering a midmarket hotel chain. Internet access, regardless of fees, was second (16 percent) followed by the quality of bedding/towels (13 percent).

The survey also found that nearly two thirds (63 percent) of travel managers rate convenience and proximity to meeting locations as the most influential factor they consider when making individual hotel decisions. These choices can have a significant impact on transportation costs.

Bill Connors, executive director and chief operating officer for NBTA, said that companies will see a positive impact, financial and otherwise, from investing in the implementation and/or growth of their managed travel programs.

'Corporations will continue to seek out managed travel programs because they're worried about value, cost, security and, increasingly, liability,' he said. 'We're working very hard to help our members tackle these issues so they minimally affect their bottom line.' Taxes directed toward travelers and consolidation across multiple industry sectors, as well as infrastructure and travel facilitation issues, are also top-of-mind for the association this year.

Although business travelers are being impacted by the reduction in airline seat capacity and rising fuel costs, and will likely experience decreased route and pricing options as a result of pending airline mergers, a number of widespread initiatives are underway to make air travel less stressful and more productive.

The re-slotting of John F. Kennedy International Airport should ease congestion and delays for business travelers, according to Noreen Courtney-Wilds, vice president of sales for JetBlue Airways.

'In addition to our partnership with OPEN from American Express, its small business card program, we also just added a new refundable fare, and have plans to launch a meetings and conventions program as well as a product for the mid-sized corporate market later this year,' said Courtney-Wilds. 'These and other initiatives by other low-cost carriers to develop more offerings for business travelers will increase options and help keep last minute and walk-up fares competitive.'

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