



case study | celebrating 10+ years of **MY GAY HOUSTON**

For decades, the LGBT community has been fighting for equality. Civil rights leaders have worked tirelessly to drive the movement forward, demanding equal rights in the workplace, representation in the media and inclusion in society.

One place the LGBT community has been decidedly underserved? The travel and tourism industry.

A report co-published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA), the world's leading global travel network dedicated to connecting and educating LGBT travelers, paints the LGBTQ community as a "diverse and burgeoning segment of consumers." This is reflected in the community's frequent travel and tendency to demonstrate higher-than-average spending patterns, due to the higher levels of disposable income members possess.

Travel-savvy individuals with substantive spending power, who are being largely ignored by the tourism industry. **Why has this been the case?**

A CONTENTIOUS RELATIONSHIP

To answer this question, let's rewind to 2009. While American society has made great strides when it comes to diversity and inclusion, it wasn't nearly as accepting of the LGBT community a decade ago as it is now.

In 2009, only five states recognized same-sex marriage: Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Maine and Vermont. Maine would vote to overturn its ruling legalizing same-sex marriage later that same year. In Iowa, three of the four judges that voted to legalize same-sex marriage in The Hawkeye State were later removed from the bench by voters. In fact, same-sex marriage wouldn't be formally legalized by the United States Supreme Court for another six years.

Not on this list in 2009? Texas.

At best, the LGBT community and Texas' courtship the past few decades can be described as contentious.

1997

The Texas Legislature prohibited the issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

2003

The Texas Legislature enacted a statute that voided any same-sex marriage or civil union in the state.

2005

Texans approved a proposition that amended the Texas Constitution to define marriage as consisting "only of the union of one man and one woman."

While far from the poster child for diversity and inclusion in the 2000s, Texas possessed swaths of citizens who recognized that equal rights for the LGBT community was a moral imperative. And its largest city, Houston, was home to an organization that would successfully market to the underserved LGBT community and pave the way for inclusivity in the tourism industry for years to come.

A DIFFERENT SIDE OF H-TOWN

The Houston First Corporation (Houston First) is a marketing and service organization tasked with positioning America's fourth-largest city and surrounding areas as the best place in the world for leisure and business travelers. Via the promotion of Houston's myriad dining, arts, hotel, shopping and nightlife offerings, the organization ensures the region's continued growth as a travel and tourism destination.

Inclusion has been at the heart of this growth; Houston is open for business and welcomes everyone. In 2009, the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau (now Houston First) launched a website featuring a different side of Houston with a spotlight on diversity, charm and culture. The site would frame Greater Houston as a LGBT-friendly leisure and convention destination.

Ultimately, a site that spoke directly to members of the LGBT community.

A study done by Community Marketing & Insights (CMI), found that LGBT participants took an average of:



3.2
leisure trips

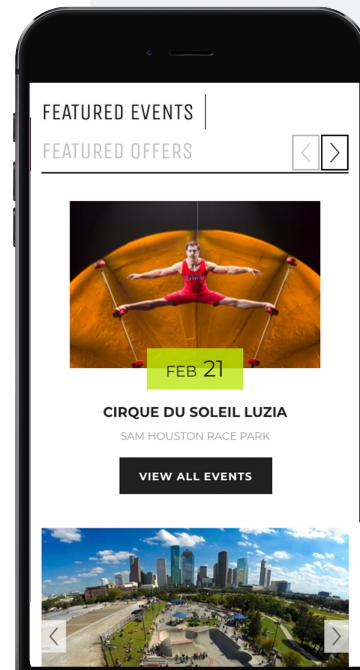


1.4
business trips



10.5
nights in paid accommodation annually

The same study also found them to be avid international travelers, reporting that **77 percent of survey participants** held valid passports, compared to just **36 percent of the general U.S. population** (as reported by the U.S. State Department). Among passport holders, **53 percent used their passport** in the past year to travel to a foreign country.



The challenge for Houston was significant. The DMO's team, led by Holly Clapham, then- and now-chief marketing officer at Houston First, knew they'd receive a copious amount of pushback from the community and industry if they began marketing Houston as a LGBT-friendly destination. Clapham recalls receiving numerous "ugly" faxes from concerned citizens voicing their opposition to the initiative, and to Clapham herself. Nevertheless, they proceeded with their plans for MyGayHouston.com.

Not long after announcing its intent to build the website, Clapham was called to go before members of city council and defend her decision to lead the project. There, she explained the site was not only a positive step for Houston's brand perception, but also a valuable business proposition that would increase tourism revenue for the city.



If nothing else, it's provocative. It's not expected that a city in Texas would have made a commitment to this market, much less 10 years ago."



– **HOLLY CLAPHAM**
Chief Marketing Officer, Visit Houston

WELCOME TO MYGAYHOUSTON.COM

From the outset, the team wanted to create a new, standalone website independent of the Visit Houston site. Rather than just add a few pages to the existing site, the team wanted to fully commit to the initiative with an entirely new one. One that would be integral in marketing the Houston experience to LGBT visitors, as well as locals looking for entertainment and activities.

The team also made a conscious decision to use the URL "MyGayHouston.com." The decision to use "gay" in the URL was a controversial one and the first of its kind in the tourism industry. But for Clapham, it was the only way to go: "I'm not going to hide behind rainbows and acronyms. We're putting the word 'gay' in the URL," she said at the time.

For these reasons, the team budgeted for a dedicated advertising campaign that would launch alongside the new website. The campaign would feature Houston residents representing various sexual orientations, gender identities and ethnicities. While diversity is often a cornerstone, if not a social requirement, of modern ad campaigns, that definitely wasn't the case in 2009.

The campaign was designed to capture the attention of LGBT travelers and create intrigue, while the website would demonstrate the region's ongoing commitment to the LGBT community.

In an effort to create a safe space for LGBT travelers, they committed to working with LGBT freelancers to ensure authenticity of voice. Additionally, they wanted the site to be a place where they could communicate directly to their audience in times of uncertainty and social tension.



When ordinances pass that are not LGBT friendly, we use this website to say 'we can't help what's happening in the city and the state, but we have a commitment to the community.'"

– **HOLLY CLAPHAM**
Chief Marketing Officer,
Visit Houston

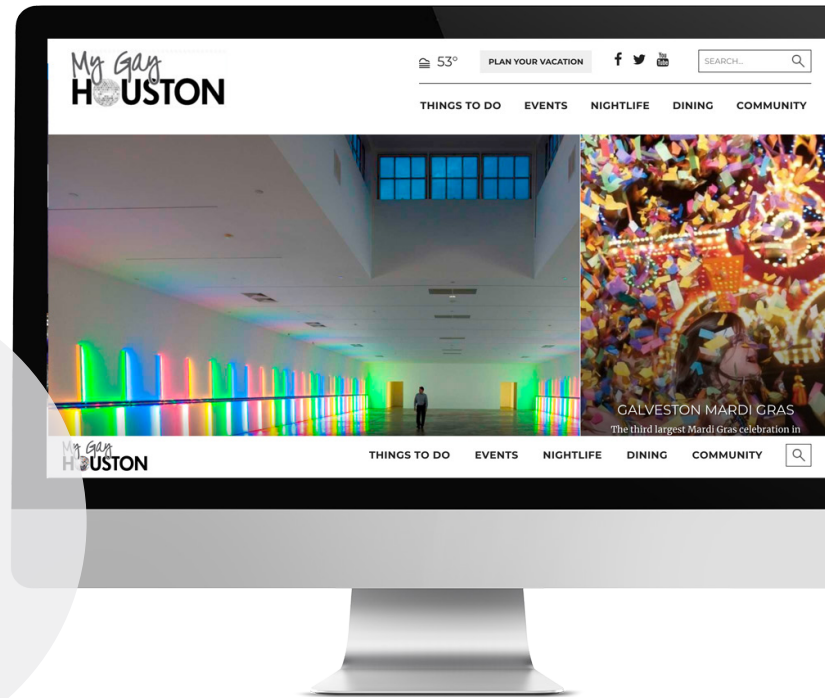
Decisions were backed equally by their own gut feelings and data. The team knew the market was there, and it was obvious it was sorely underrepresented. Research conducted by UNWTO/IGLTA showed that 45 percent of LGBT travelers rated LGBT-friendliness as an important attribute when choosing a destination.

Of course, it was no small statement that they were making. Clapham and team knew this project had the potential to change the tourism industry in Houston and set an example for DMOs around the country. As one of the first destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to openly market to the LGBT community, they hoped to pave the way for inclusivity in the tourism industry for years to come.

DATA QUANTIFIES THE SUCCESS THE DMO'S ACHIEVED

More than **200,000**
unique visitors engage
with the site annually,
spurring a substantial
increase in tourism in
the city.

The numbers don't
lie: in the past decade,
MyGayHouston's
organic traffic has
increased by more
than **2,000%**



10 YEARS LATER

Over the past decade, the conversation around the LGBT community has shifted significantly, especially in Texas. Once a controversial site, MyGayHouston.com now stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the Houston sites, and is part of regular conversation within Houston First.

For Clapham, this is the biggest indicator of the site's success. Reflecting on the site's history, she's had several conversations with other industry professionals and associations who inquired about the site and understand the value proposition of the LGBT community.

Clapham is proud to look back at the DMOs work and identify times when they were way ahead of the curve on issues that wouldn't become mainstream until years later. Even back in 2009, when the DMO cast a transgender model in their first advertising campaign, the team was able to recognize the importance of representation in advertising, another issue that wouldn't make its way into the mainstream until much later.

Going forward, Clapham and team hope the site continue to pave the way for diversity and inclusion in the travel industry, and serves as a valuable resource for Houston's LGBT community and beyond.