



Travel and leisure customers, sports enthusiasts will need specific reassurances to return, new poll finds

Hesitancy to travel deeper than after 9/11 and during Great Recession

NEW YORK—A groundbreaking national survey comparing travel and leisure attitudes in September 2001 and July 2009 to today finds more consumer hesitancy now about returning to those activities. But the industry’s silver lining is a majority of customers will be willing to return to airplanes, hotels, and event venues once multiple conditions have been met. And approximately one-third of respondents would jump back into these activities without hesitation right now.

Getting customers back into hotels, commercial flights, casinos, cruise ships, sports arenas, and movie theaters will require various assurances. More than 75% of respondents in the forward-looking survey called the “Back-to-Normal Barometer” need more than one of the following conditions to be met, to return without hesitation:

- Assurance from the property or company that it is safe to do so
- Assurance from the U.S. government that it is safe to do so
- Assurance from a reputed U.S. medical authority that it was safe to do so
- Assurance from multiple media outlets that it was safe to do so
- Approval of a pharmaceutical protocol to mitigate the effects of COVID-19
- Approval of a COVID-19 vaccine

The most commonly-cited necessary conditions were the two related to medical breakthroughs.

Not all activities will recover as easily. The data show that once the necessary assurances are in place, movie theaters and live sports events face an easier recovery, while casinos, cruises, and theme parks are likeliest to lag.

Among survey respondents who engaged in the following activities in the past year, a sizable percentage would jump back into them right now if they could: 40% would stay in a hotel or resort; 40% would take a cruise vacation; 34% would attend a live sporting event; 34% would visit a casino; 33% would visit a theme park; 32% would take a commercial flight; and 32% would see a movie in a theater.

Looking at prior crises compared to today, 50% percent of respondents in late September 2001 said they “plan to spend just as much money on travel next year as I did in the past year;” 28% strongly agree now. Similarly, while 44% of respondents in July 2009 strongly agreed with the statement, “I’m planning to take a major vacation this year,” only 32% strongly agree now.

“Having tracked public opinion in this sector for the past 29 years, the present COVID-19 crisis has generated the strongest headwinds,” said Jon Last, President of the [Sports and Leisure Research Group](#), and a former national president of the Insights Association (MRA) and

Marketing Research Institute International. His firm conducted the most recent research, titled the “Back-to-Normal Barometer,” in partnership with [Engagious](#) and [ROKK Solutions](#). Last’s firm commissioned the 2009 study, and the Golf Digest Companies sponsored the 2001 work when he served as vice president of corporate marketing and research.

This 2020 survey is the first of several semi-monthly studies that Last and his colleagues will be producing as the crisis unfolds. Each survey will be paired with a series of one-on-one phone interviews and an extensive analysis of social media activity.

“Our ability to compare today’s findings to the prior crises of 2001 and 2009 makes our 2020 research particularly compelling,” said Rich Thau, President and co-founder of Engagious. Added Ron Bonjean, partner and co-founder of ROKK Solutions: “There’s no other research being conducted right now that’s like ours—research that both looks to the past as well as to the future, to peek around the corner and figure out what companies need to do to get ‘back to normal.’”

The 2020 survey included 513 respondents and had a sampling margin of error of +/- 4.4%. It was fielded Mar. 31 and April 1, 2020. It is comprised of a random sample of Americans who self-identify as participants in sports and leisure activities. Ten one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted April 7 & 8, 2020.

Sports and Leisure Research Group is a market research firm specializing in the sports, travel, and leisure sectors, based in White Plains, NY. Engagious is a bicoastal research firm specializing in corporate and public policy message testing and message refinement. ROKK Solutions is a Washington, DC-based bipartisan public affairs firm specializing in strategic communications, media engagement, digital and social strategy, message amplification and crisis management.

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