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Shopping Looms Large for U.S. Visitors

By Cecily Hall

The Grand Canyon, Statue of Liberty and Lincoln Memorial are enticing, but a majority of international tourists have shopping in mind when they visit the U.S. — even in the recession.

A newly released survey on the behavior of visitors in the last 12 months found that 53 percent said shopping was either a key reason for their trip or a factor in choosing their destination cities.

The findings are based on responses from about 1,800 travelers polled in January by Alexandria, Va.-based Mandala Research & Consulting on behalf of Taubman Centers and Shop America Alliance, an organization representing 200 U.S. shopping destinations, with the support of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Travel & Tourism Industries.

The snapshot of the global consumer suggests that they are driven by value, particularly the favorable currency exchange rate. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed said good value was their top shopping priority, followed by 56 percent who cited a wide selection of brands. Other key motivators were: Helpful and friendly sales associates, 41 percent, availability of luxury brands, 35 percent, and special discounts for travelers, 26 percent.

The three most-sought-after labels were Nike, Levi's and Gap.

"The popularity of international travelers coming here specifically to shop really puts things into perspective, because it indicates a great marketing opportunity for retailers and brands," said Laura Mandala, managing director of Mandala Research. "If they enhance their own marketing strategies, they could actually grow their customer base by learning how to target these international shoppers more effectively."

Visitors' Most Coveted Brands

Brands	Rank
Nike	1
Levis	2
Gap	3
Polo Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger	4
Abercrombie & Fitch	5
Calvin Klein and Coach	6
Adidas, Chanel and Gucci	7
Armani, Banana Republic, Louis Vuitton and Sony	8
Apple, Prada and Victoria's Secret	9
American Eagle, Diesel, DKNY, Dolce & Gabbana, Hollister, Hugo Boss and Old Navy	10

International shopping travelers contribute an estimated \$38.6 billion to the U.S. economy annually, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce and Office of Travel & Tourism Industries.

The five countries that send the most tourists to the U.S. are Canada, Mexico, the U.K., Japan and Germany. Each respondent to the survey had visited the U.S. in the previous 12 months and spent a minimum of \$250 on shopping for gifts and souvenirs. The study catalogued total spending, including apparel, footwear, accessories and electronics as well as gifts and souvenirs, with each person spending at an average of \$1,063.

Average spending for tourists from the top five countries was: Canada, \$757; Mexico, \$1,310; the U.K., \$968; Japan, \$1,200, and Germany, \$1,085.

The study found 50 percent of respondents who have visited in the last 12 months are likely to return in the next year.

"What stood out to us, despite current economic conditions, is nearly 20 percent of these travelers surveyed had already booked a trip to the U.S. again in 2009," Mandala said.

Forty-four percent of the respondents said they would be very likely to attend a shopping festival — annual citywide celebrations highlighting culture and shopping. Another 29 percent stated they would be somewhat likely to attend, with their choice of destination influenced by a festival.

"This speaks volumes to the New York City shopping initiative, which was announced last month," Mandala said, referring to "Fashion's Night Out," a major retail push set for the start of New York Fashion Week. Stores in 12 major cities worldwide will band together to stage special events in an effort to get consumers back in the stores.

The study noted, "International shopping festivals are currently very successful tourism and retail drivers in more than 10 countries including Dubai, China, Japan, Thailand, India and Singapore."

