iSeatz_®



THE TIPPING POINT:

HOW U.S. TRAVEL LOYALTY IS EVOLVING

A THREE-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

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ABOUT ISEATZ

iSeatz drives enduring brand loyalty through exceptional, connected experiences. Our digital commerce and loyalty tech solutions enable travel and lifestyle bookings that drive engagement and customer lifetime value. Our clients represent the best in travel, hospitality, and financial services, including American Express, IHG Hotels & Resorts, and Wyndham Hotels & Resorts. Backed by proven deliverability, reliable advanced analytics, and travel lifecycle expertise, iSeatz sets the bar for a superb journey from the very first search. Visit iSeatz.com to learn more.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is based on two online surveys conducted by iSeatz in November and December 2024. The first survey collected responses from 4,341 U.S. consumers enrolled in loyalty programs with travel-related rewards, focusing on their loyalty perceptions and travel preferences. Results were weighted to ensure demographic accuracy. The second survey, conducted during the same period, gathered input from 256 business respondents in the U.S., all working in loyalty or marketing roles at companies offering travel or lifestyle rewards. Unlike the consumer survey, business responses were not weighted.

This is one of two Tipping Point reports released this year. The second, **available here**, examines the Canadian travel loyalty market based on a similar survey of Canadian consumers and loyalty program professionals.

SHIFTING DYNAMICS IN U.S. TRAVEL LOYALTY PROGRAMS

This third edition of the Tipping Point sees a U.S. travel loyalty market on the rise. Travel loyalty program participation and availability have grown over the past year, driven by rising consumer demand, appreciation for travel rewards, and greater brand alignment with consumers' wants. As travel loyalty surges, the opportunities for brands to engage with their customers multiply. However, as this report shows, it also creates an imperative for travel loyalty programs to differentiate.

This year's Tipping Point draws on research from a survey of 256 loyalty program decision-makers offering travel rewards and 4,341 U.S. consumers participating in such programs. As this is the third annual report, three-year trend comparisons are possible for the U.S. market, offering deeper insights into shifting consumer preferences, their impact on travel loyalty, and loyalty programs' evolving challenges and priorities.

According to the <u>U.S. Travel Association</u>, total U.S. travel spending is projected to grow 3.9% to \$1.35 trillion in 2025, with additional growth to \$1.46 trillion (inflation-adjusted) by 2028. Even as 2024 saw record numbers of domestic air travelers, domestic leisure travel is forecast to increase another 3.9% this year.

Younger demographics are driving travel demand; a **2024 McKinsey survey** found that while 66% of all Americans are more interested in travel now than before 2020, Millennials and Gen Zers are traveling more and spending a higher share of their income on travel than their older counterparts.

This continued appetite for travel fuels concurrent growth in travel rewards among loyalty programs. For the first time, a majority (55%) of American consumers say they belong to a loyalty program that allows them to earn or redeem points for travel.

The number of loyalty programs offering travel booking capabilities has significantly increased, too. This is evident in the 8-point percentage increase of consumers who report being able to book travel with three to five of the loyalty programs they belong to. Yet with this growth comes the need for differentiation—brands must focus on delivering the value and experiences that resonate with their members to set themselves apart from a swelling sea of competitors.

As they have broadened their travel offerings, loyalty programs have also shifted their goals and performance metrics toward longer-term results, prioritizing customer lifetime value (LTV) and net promoter scores (NPS) as key benchmarks. In contrast, surveys from previous years found a greater emphasis on revenue generation and customer retention.

To meet these longer-term goals, loyalty programs must satisfy consumers' enduring craving for value—something travel loyalty programs have accomplished unevenly, according to this year's survey. This, however, creates an opportunity for differentiation: the loyalty program that provides the most recognizable value, either by offering the specific types of travel and lifestyle rewards consumers want or creating more attractive earning and redemption propositions, will become the clear choice in a crowded loyalty landscape.



YOUNGER DEMOGRAPHICS ARE DRIVING TRAVEL DEMAND

Millennials and Gen Zers are traveling more and spending a higher share of their income on travel than their older counterparts.

If consumers' prioritization of value is a carryover from previous Tipping Point findings, so is the persistent gap in how members and brands perceive loyalty programs' user experience. A significant majority (62%) of consumers are still frustrated by UX-related aspects of their programs, yet improving the user experience continues to appear near the bottom of brands' lists of loyalty program priorities (only 6% of brands ranked UX as a top loyalty-related challenge).

There is more agreement on the importance of sustainability. American consumers—especially those in the coveted high-income segment and families with children—want more sustainability reward options, and their loyalty programs are delivering. Loyalty program members are also becoming more comfortable using AI in their travel planning and loyalty program interactions, though brands are wrestling with how to integrate these capabilities most effectively.

Improving their sustainability offerings and AI capabilities are just two ways loyalty programs can better engage with critical consumer segments, including high-networth individuals (HNWIs), families with children, younger members (Gen Z and Millennials), and frequent travelers. These segments have outsized importance to many loyalty programs, especially those with more than 50 million members across North America, for which gold level/luxury consumers (64%) and HNWI (29%) are their primary targets.

Whether a brand is targeting high-income consumers or a broader section of the American population, travel loyalty is an essential tool for that purpose—which is why these programs are proliferating. However, as travel loyalty becomes a more commonplace component of attraction and retention strategies, execution emerges as the distinguishing factor. Those brands that do travel loyalty well are setting themselves apart, and it is only with the right mix of agile technology, exciting and unconventional rewards inventory, and productive partnerships that they can achieve vital differentiation.

BREAK INTO THE CANADIAN MARKET

Get your copy of The Tipping Point: Inside Canada's Changing Loyalty Landscape

DOWNLOAD HERE

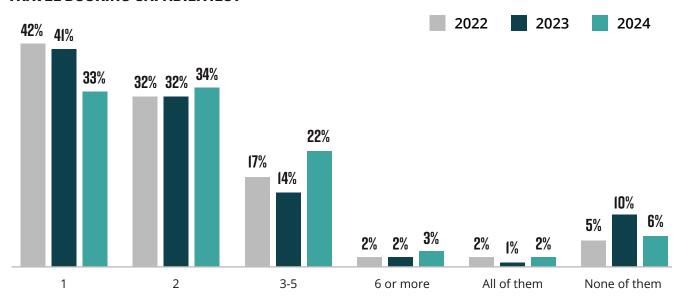


GROWTH CONTINUES IN THE U.S. TRAVEL REWARDS ECOSYSTEM

The U.S. travel loyalty market grew steadily in 2024, reflecting consumer demand and brands' increasing recognition of the appeal of travel rewards. Companies are broadening their travel benefits and booking options, showing a willingness to expand their portfolios to meet consumer expectations. Consumers, in turn, are demonstrating greater interest in using these benefits.

Consumers have reported seeing an increase in all types of travel rewards offered by their programs, with the most significant gains in earning points or miles that can be redeemed for travel and opportunities for travel-related rewards or prizes. American travelers also report that more of the loyalty programs they belong to offer travel booking capabilities; 34% say they can book travel with two of their loyalty programs, and 22% say that 3-5 of their programs offer that capability (in 2023, 41% reported that only one program supported travel booking).

HOW MANY OF THE LOYALTY PROGRAMS THAT YOU BELONG TO OFFER TRAVEL BOOKING CAPABILITIES?



Data from surveyed loyalty program professionals confirm the expansion of travel reward availability. Eighty-two percent of loyalty programs claim to offer travel rewards, a 19-point increase over 2023.

With travel rewards and booking options becoming more widespread among loyalty programs, more consumers are first turning to their programs when planning and purchasing travel. In 2024, 56% of consumers said they would look to their loyalty program first when booking travel, up from 51% in 2023. Additionally, the percentage of consumers who would not use their program has decreased from 13% to 7%.

HOW DO YOU USE YOUR CURRENT LOYALTY PROGRAMS TO BOOK TRAVEL?

| | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---|-------------|------|-------------|
| When considering travel, I visit my loyalty program website first | 51% | 51% | 56 % |
| I check other travel websites first, then see if my loyalty program offers a better deal | 34 % | 27% | 29% |
| I book some parts of my trip through my loyalty program and some with other sites or agents | 6% | 9% | 8% |
| I rarely book travel through my loyalty program | 9% | 13% | 7 % |

Increased access to these travel-related services contributes to the positive impact of travel rewards on consumers' relationships and spending habits with the brand. Forty percent say they interact with the brand more frequently because of their travel rewards program, and 36% tend to spend or transact more—both significant increases over the 2023 findings.

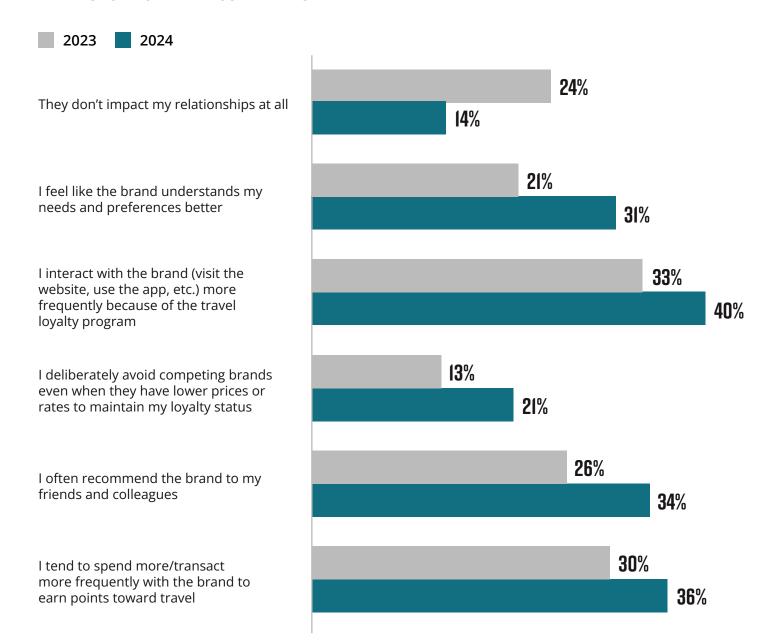
36% OF U.S. CONSUMERS SAY THAT THEIR TRAVEL LOYALTY PROGRAM INFLUENCES THEM TO SPEND OR TRANSACT MORE WITH THE BRAND IN ORDER TO EARN MORE POINTS TOWARD TRAVEL.

Yet even with broad alignment on travel reward availability and the positive correlation with interaction and spending, gaps remain, revealing room for further development. For example, 66% of brands think they are their members' first choice for travel booking, compared to only 56% of consumers who say they turn to their loyalty program first. This shows that brands can improve their programs' travel booking capabilities and become top-of-mind when their members are in their travel planning and purchasing stages.



DISCONNECT: 66% of brands think their loyalty program is their members' first choice for travel booking, but only 56% of consumers say the same.

HOW DO THE TRAVEL LOYALTY PROGRAMS YOU BELONG TO IMPACT YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THOSE BRANDS?



BRANDS ARE PLAYING THE LONG GAME

Improving travel booking capabilities will help brands achieve their loyalty program goals, which have shifted in a more consumer-centric direction. A growing emphasis on metrics such as customer lifetime value (CLV) and Net Promoter Score (NPS) reflects a shift in how U.S. brands approach loyalty programs. Previously centered on short-term goals like revenue and customer acquisition, brands are now prioritizing long-term profitability by focusing on metrics that directly link customer satisfaction to sustained growth.

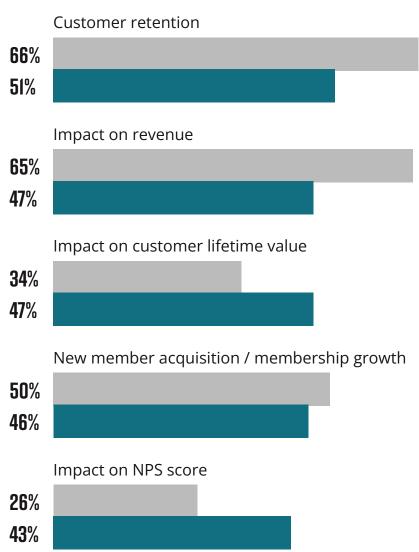
In 2023, the top two ways loyalty program professionals measured the success of their programs were customer retention (66%) and impact on revenue (65%). Retention (51%) remains in the top spot in 2024, but CLV (47%) and NPS (43%) soared by double digits over 2023. Notably, 79% of North American brands with over 50M members prioritize CLV as a program KPI. Having retention, customer lifetime value, and net promoter score as primary performance metrics compels brands to focus on quality and deliver better customer service, keeping members engaged and satisfied throughout their relationship with the brand.

Brands' goals for their loyalty programs also reflect this commitment to cultivating long-term customer satisfaction; the top-ranked goal this year was building a robust earnings and redemption portfolio (16%). A limited portfolio can be configured to maximize customer acquisition, but it will not hold members' attention for very long. Introducing a wider variety of rewards gives members more opportunities to interact and incentive to spend with the brand. Revenue generation is naturally still a priority for loyalty programs; 47% measure performance based on impact on revenue. Brands also see increasing their programs' capacity to earn revenue as their most urgent challenge—55% of brands (and 71% of hospitality brands) ranked this as their top challenge. This likely reflects mounting pressure to deliver stronger financial results and the trend toward investing in areas with long-term impact.

Brands' approach to loyalty technology also evokes a similar forward-looking stance. While last year's responses to "Which elements of your loyalty technology platform need improvement?" demonstrated a focus on flexibility, managing multiple inventory sources, and personalization, this year, the emphasis has shifted to adding new features, enhancing user experience, and driving program profitability. These all indicate long-term performance and fit with the current prioritization of CLV, NPS, and retention. To improve their travel and loyalty platforms in these ways, brands need to work with a partner that offers both the technology to deliver a consistently high-quality experience to members over time and provides access to the rewards inventory to give members the options they want.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE YOUR LOYALTY PROGRAM'S PERFORMANCE?





THE ECONOMY WEIGHS HEAVILY ON CONSUMER CHOICES

What are the options members want? As in prior Tipping Point studies, the answer is any reward that helps members save money. This year, the emphasis on value is heightened, as economic conditions affect what consumers want and how they behave. While brands generally acknowledge this, there is room to improve how travel loyalty programs deliver what consumers genuinely value.

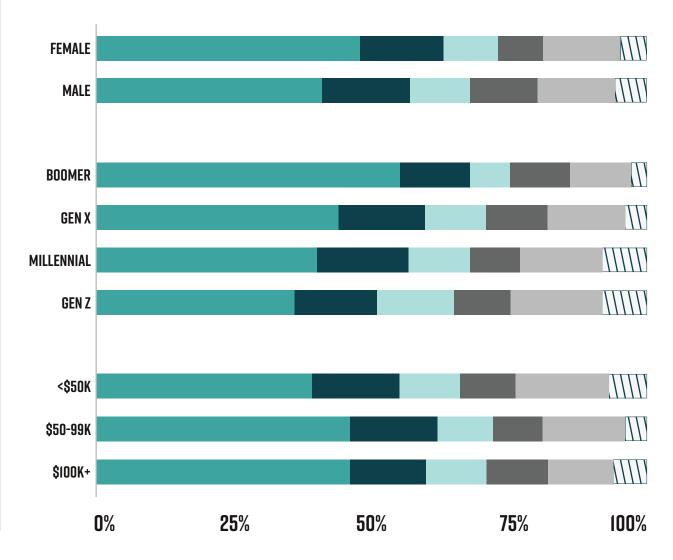
FOR THE THIRD YEAR IN A ROW, SAVING MONEY ON TRAVEL IS WHAT CONSUMERS VALUE MOST IN A LOYALTY PROGRAM, WITH 44% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAYING IT WAS THEIR TOP PRIORITY.

A shift in consumer demand for lifestyle rewards also likely reflects a changing economic reality for many loyalty program members. Preferred redemptions have moved from travel-enhancing rewards like tours and activities (21%, the #2 response in 2023) to savings on everyday essentials like groceries and gas (16% and 14%, respectively—the 2nd and 3rd place responses this year).

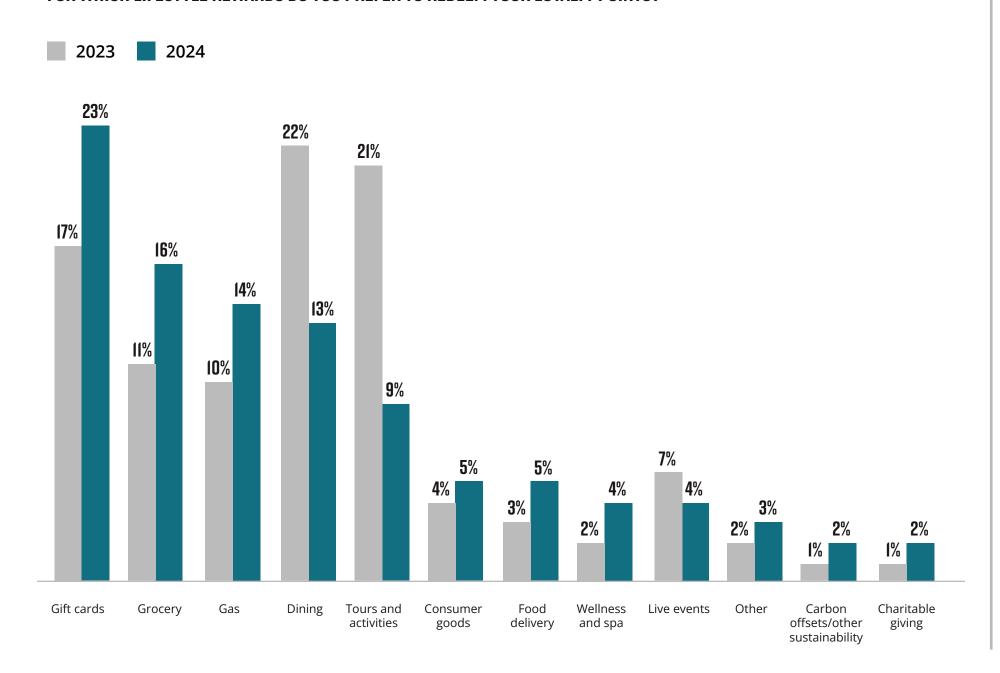
Brands recognize the importance of delivering value, though they have largely struggled to pivot their rewards portfolios to accommodate evolving consumer needs. Loyalty professionals cite these as their top two program challenges: competing with the perception that OTAs offer better deals (44%) and delivering rewards that customers find valuable (20%).

WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST IN A TRAVEL LOYALTY PROGRAM?





FOR WHICH LIFESTYLE REWARDS DO YOU PREFER TO REDEEM YOUR LOYALTY POINTS?



Currently, brands are focused on providing rewards for tours, activities, and wellness services over rewards that consumers prioritized in 2024, like grocery. But they are beginning to respond, with planned investments in grocery (32%) and food delivery (33%) rewards over the next 6-12 months. Yet this slow pace of change reveals a persistent gap between consumer demand and brand action. A configurable tech platform can address this issue, enabling brands to quickly adapt to sudden changes in consumer preferences.

Where brands are reacting swiftly to consumers' economic situation is in their targeting. More loyalty programs report that the general public (23%) and value-conscious consumers (35%) are their primary target markets, a notable increase over 2023. The largest loyalty programs are the exception; 64% of North American programs with more than 50 million members primarily target gold-level and luxury consumers, and 29% target HNWIs.

Brands have also been adding payment and financing tools favored by consumers that help mitigate the cost associated with travel and offer payment flexibility and convenience, including digital wallet acceptance (70% of programs either currently provide this capability or plan to within the next 6-12 months), split payments (58%), and price drop guarantee (57%).

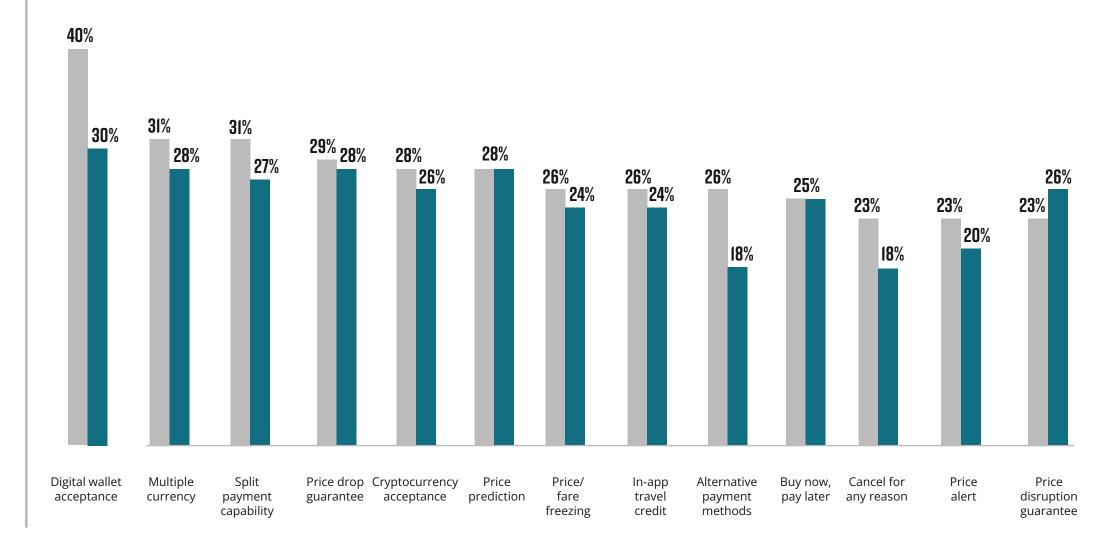
Altogether, investment in shopping, payment, and financing tools saw the largest year-over-year increase in brands' stated priorities, indicating a focus on driving conversions and increasing consumer confidence. If they haven't already, travel loyalty programs should consider integrating the full scope of these consumerfavorite capabilities.

Finally, the best way for travel loyalty programs to meet member demand for value in a challenging economic climate is by making it easier to earn and redeem points. Consumers want to maximize the points-based aspects of their loyalty programs, and 43% would engage more (and 37% would spend more) if earning points were more straightforward.

Additionally, 35% would book travel more often if it was easier to use their points. Combined, these findings reveal a direct connection between the relative ease of earning and redeeming points and conversions and revenue generation through the travel loyalty program.

WHAT TYPES OF FINTECH AND OTHER FINANCING TOOLS IS YOUR COMPANY USING/WILL YOUR ORGANIZATION BE INVESTING IN WITHIN THE NEXT 6-12 MONTHS?

Currently using Investing in over the next 6-12 months



THE PERSISTENT USER EXPERIENCE GAP

User experience continues to frustrate consumers, with 62% citing UX-related issues as the most challenging aspect of booking travel through their loyalty program. Just as in prior Tipping Point reports, this is a significant disconnect from brands' priorities, as just 6% of brands identify user experience as a loyalty program challenge, and just 29% prioritize UX improvements on their platforms.

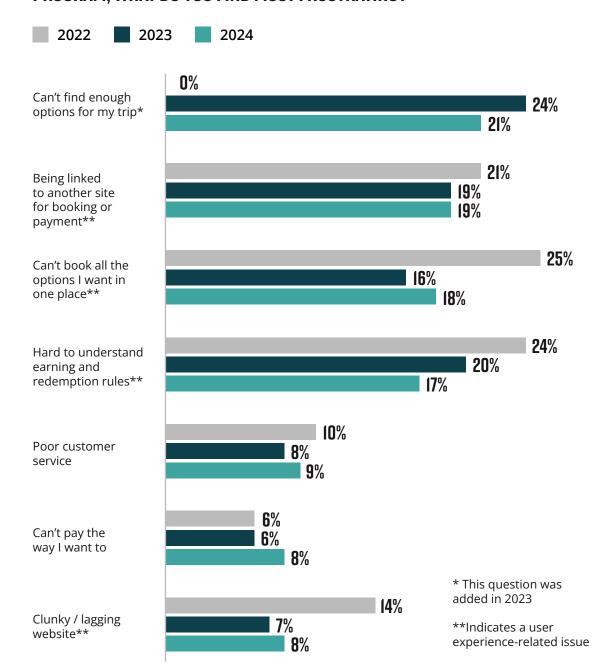


DISCONNECT: 62% of U.S. consumers are frustrated with user experience related issues when booking travel through their loyalty program, yet only 29% of brands think their platforms need UI/UX improvements and more configurable business rules.

This is a disconnect that must be bridged soon, especially for loyalty programs that target high-income consumers. Consumers who belong to luxury members-only loyalty programs like Founders Club and Inspirato (7% of the respondent pool, and the majority of whom earn more than \$100,000 per year) also report user experience-related frustrations, including 25% who say being redirected to another site for booking or payment is their #1 pain point.

Inventory and technology are essential to deliver a superior user experience to travel loyalty program members. Travel loyalty technology platforms can improve the user experience through their ability to expand reward or booking options quickly by integrating new suppliers and delivering tailored interactions to members. Staying relevant requires an agile, responsive, and configurable system capable of scaling efficiently and integrating seamlessly into existing technology stacks, including non-loyalty CRMs. A travel loyalty platform that prioritizes APIs over static approaches will enable this level of flexibility.

WHEN BOOKING TRAVEL THROUGH YOUR LOYALTY PROGRAM, WHAT DO YOU FIND MOST FRUSTRATING?



SUSTAINED GROWTH—AND INVESTMENT—IN SUSTAINABILITY

While the travel loyalty user experience remains disconnected, brands and consumers are closer together regarding the importance of sustainability options. Sustainable travel is rising in adoption and acceptance among Americans, with 82% agreeing that sustainable travel is important. The sustainable travel market in the U.S. is expected to grow from \$66.22 billion in 2023 to \$116.46 billion in 2029. With consumer attitudes toward sustainability firmly positive, brands are beginning to recognize the opportunity and act accordingly. However, there is still an opportunity to capture more sustainability-minded consumer spending by tailoring reward options to their preferences and making consumers more aware of them.

66% OF U.S. CONSUMERS WOULD CHOOSE A LOYALTY PROGRAM THAT PRIORITIZES SUSTAINABILITY OVER ONE THAT DOESN'T, UP FROM 55% IN 2023.

The percentage of loyalty programs offering sustainability-related rewards rose by 11%, from 62% in 2023 to 73% this year, with increases across all eco-friendly offerings. Younger loyalty program members are more likely to say that their loyalty programs make sustainable options available to them, and luxury program members favor eco-friendly hotels and flights.

Even as sustainability options become more widely available, loyalty program members do not always know about or recognize them. For example, 59% of loyalty programs say they communicate bonus or incentive offers for sustainable bookings, but only 41% of consumers say they receive them; 49% of brands say they can filter by sustainability criteria, but only 30% of consumers think that is possible. Improving the marketing and promotion of sustainability rewards will help travel loyalty programs boost conversions and meet the expectations of sustainability-minded members.

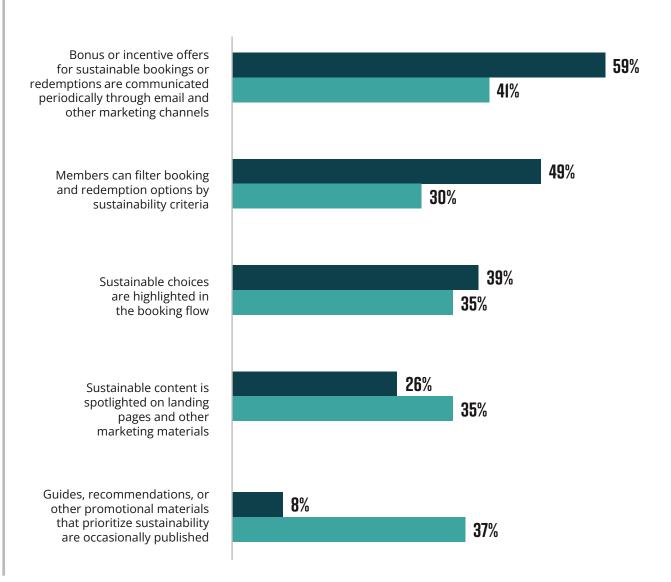
HOW ARE SUSTAINABILITY OPTIONS PROMOTED?*



We asked the brands: How do you promote or market these options to your members?



We asked the consumers: How do your loyalty programs make you aware of these sustainability options?



^{*}Note that there are two questions answered by the graph

THE IMMENSE YET UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF AI

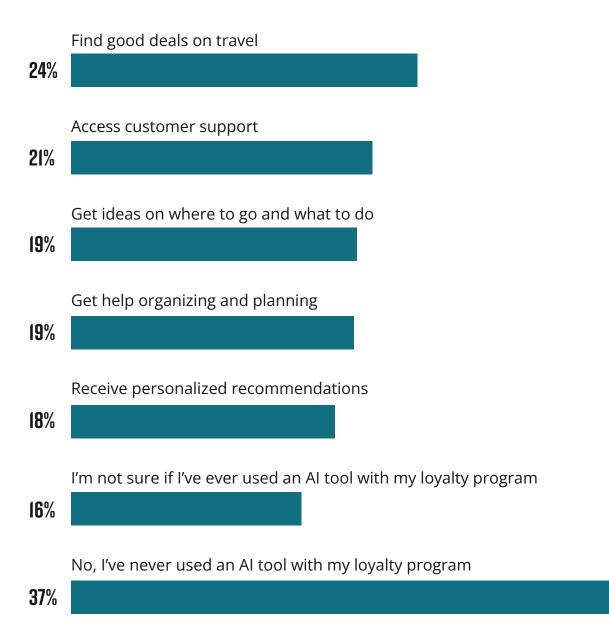
If sustainability is a *sustained* trend, then the newest development in the U.S. loyalty landscape is the emergence and implementation of Al. Increased consumer acceptance of Al as a helpful tool is making the technology central to loyalty program growth and engagement. Yet despite its immense potential, brands are not capitalizing on this opportunity to the extent they could be.

Interestingly, AI adoption among loyalty program members is driven by families. Nearly half of all respondents (49%) have used AI in some capacity during any online purchase, but 74% of families with children have. Similarly, 47% have used AI to plan travel within their loyalty program (64% of families versus 42% of households without children), with the primary uses being saving money and accessing customer support. This is a significant increase over last year when only 15% of consumers were sure they had used AI with their loyalty programs. The fact that families with children are utilizing this technology more frequently than other cohorts suggests that its most attractive applications are saving time and money.

47% OF CONSUMERS HAVE USED AI TO PLAN TRAVEL WITHIN THEIR LOYALTY PROGRAM. THE PRIMARY USES WERE SAVING MONEY AND ACCESSING CUSTOMER SUPPORT.

Brands seem to have a mixed view of AI as an element of their loyalty program. When asked about platform improvement priorities, "more AI capabilities" ranked 11th. At the same time, 45% of businesses identified "finding optimal ways to integrate AI into their loyalty strategy" as a top challenge. Whether this is because they are unsure exactly how to leverage AI to meet their loyalty program goals or if they are wary of the investment of resources necessary to implement it, working with a partner that is accomplished in developing tech-forward solutions for travel loyalty programs will help them overcome their hesitations.

HAVE YOU EVER USED AI TOOLS THROUGH YOUR LOYALTY PROGRAM TO:



SPECIFIC CONSUMER GROUPS PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED PROFITABILITY

Families with children (along with the more predictable Millennials and Gen Zers) are leading the way in Al adoption, but other key demographic segments displayed preferences and behaviors that diverged from the survey average distinctions that travel loyalty programs can capitalize on. These variations allow brands to tailor loyalty programs with differentiated offerings and targeted promotions. Success in this effort depends on access to the right supplier network to deliver the options that these groups value and the technology to deploy them efficiently. Personalization is another key to engaging these segments effectively and profitably. With consumers open to personalized experiences, using this approach to maximize results should be an obvious winning strategy for brands.



FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

As mentioned earlier, families with children are more likely to utilize AI tools to find deals and aid in their travel planning process. They are also more willing to recommend a brand to others if they have a good experience with the loyalty program.

78% of families with children would choose a sustainable loyalty program over one that doesn't prioritize sustainability, compared to **59%** of households without children

76% of households with children show a strong preference for personalization, compared to **54%** without children

91% of families with children would pay more to access travel rewards, vs. **74%** of households without children



LUXURY/HIGH INCOME MEMBERS

While many of the brands in our survey have shifted to target more budget customers, the largest loyalty programs (50M+ members) primarily target luxury and high-earning consumer segments. The highest income segment of consumers captured by the survey, those with annual earnings in excess of \$200,000 and luxury members-only loyalty program members (most of whom earn over \$100K per year), all display unique characteristics. Luxury program members prioritize higher-quality travel options above all else, with 47% identifying this as their top incentive for booking travel more frequently.

48% of luxury program members deliberately avoid competing brands, and **46%** feel that the brand understands them

90% of luxury program members expressed more concern about sustainability this year, while **84%** say receiving personalized offers is important to them

38% of respondents earning more than \$200,000 per year said higher quality travel options would encourage them to spend more money when using their loyalty programs to book a trip



U.S. PASSPORT HOLDERS

Individuals with a current U.S. passport, about 75% of respondents in our survey, tend to travel more frequently than other travel loyalty program members. They are also more likely to say that a travel loyalty program positively impacts their relationship with a brand than the survey average.

65% of U.S. passport holders say it is extremely or very important to receive travel loyalty program offers personalized to their needs

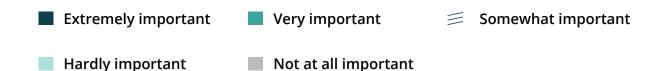
32% say access to higher quality travel options would encourage them to spend more with their loyalty programs

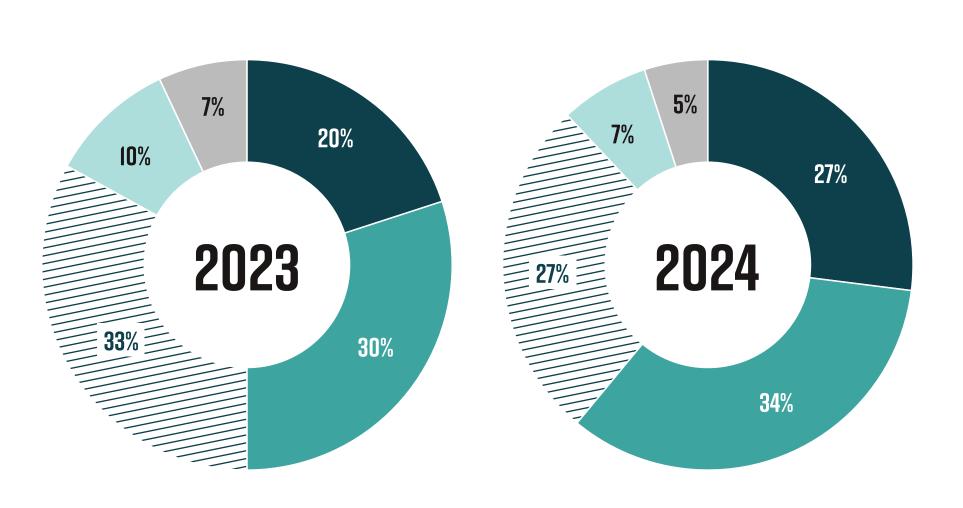
How can travel loyalty programs best engage these distinct segments? Through personalized content, offers, and experiences. Personalization creates deeper customer connections and increases the likelihood of reward redemption and travel booking. Personalized interactions can also significantly improve retention as members feel understood and valued by their travel loyalty program.

However, brands need to improve their personalization capabilities to engage individual members in their target consumer segments. While 39% of consumers report seeing personalized recommendations on loyalty sites—consistent with last year—only 23% encounter such offers during the booking process, the point when purchase intent is the strongest. Just 26% receive personalized offers before booking, and only 12% encounter them post-booking but before their trip. Brands are missing out on these key moments to boost revenues by offering additional core travel products like car rentals or extras like activities and dining during the booking process or in the lead-up to travel.

To capitalize on these moments, they need the right inventory to make available to members. This has been a challenge; "can't find enough options for my trip" (21%) remains one of consumers' main complaints about their programs. Without extensive inventory and supplier relationships, it is difficult for travel loyalty programs to deliver enough options to make personalization work.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOU TO RECEIVE TRAVEL LOYALTY PROGRAM OFFERS PERSONALIZED TO YOUR NEEDS?





THE NEXT LEVEL OF TRAVEL LOYALTY

At a time when Americans are traveling more than ever, it is unsurprising that travel loyalty programs are experiencing a boom. But with proliferation comes the risk of commodification; if every brand offers a travel loyalty program, what distinguishes one from another?

Put simply, execution. Travel loyalty programs that recognize (and meet) member desire for value, personalized engagement, a wide selection of rewards accessible through clear earning and redemption processes, and a pleasant, intuitive user experience will set themselves apart.

The fact that more brands are assessing their travel loyalty programs' performance on a longer timeline—as indicated by the shift toward CLV and NPS metrics—suggests that providing members with a better experience over the life of their relationship is a priority. Yet the disconnect on the user experience from the members' perspective belies this assumption. If brands are serious about achieving differentiation, a major initiative to improve UX would be a good place to start.

Whether they approach that initiative through increasing utilization of AI, expanding their rewards portfolio, or adjusting their program framework to target specific consumer segments, they will benefit from having a resourceful and reliable technology partner. A flexible, configurable travel platform delivered by a trusted partner can help travel loyalty programs establish new supplier connections to create a more diverse rewards pool, ready to be deployed for personalized experiences. A platform built for travel and incorporating the latest technological capabilities can instantly improve booking capabilities and make integrating new functionality—including fintech, payment, and AI tools—remarkably easy.

With the right technology and partners, brands can reach the next level of travel loyalty. And with it, the next level of long-term program performance.

Be sure to <u>download</u> our companion report in this year's Tipping Point series, examining the Canadian loyalty landscape.



FOR MEDIA AND ANALYSTS SEEKING DEEPER INSIGHTS
INTO OUR SURVEY DATA OR BRANDS LOOKING FOR
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