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FOUNDATION

Redefining LGBTQ+ Travel:

Engaging 'Innovation Agents'
to Effect Change

An IGLTA Foundation Leadership Think Tank Report

2025 IGLTA Global Convention
Palm Springs, California



Executive Summary

In today's climate, LGBTQ+ inclusion has become both a symbol of progress and a lightning rod for backlash. To address the challenges created by these volatile conditions, the IGLTA Foundation gathered thought leaders for a Think Tank during the 2025 IGLTA Global Convention in Palm Springs, California.

Top global innovators and strategic allies within the LGBTQ+ travel space examined how organizations can continue advancing equity and inclusion—not through performative gestures, but through operationalized, human-centered strategies that sustain long-term impact.

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

- “Innovation agents” reengineer possibilities, letting go of performative activities, and moving beyond the comfort zone to find strategies that are measurable for collective success.
- Education is the most effective tool for strengthening the LGBTQ+ travel sector in an era where human rights are politicized and inclusion is treated as a threat.
- Storytelling is key to reaching the LGBTQ+ travel market—but there’s no “one size fits all” for our very diverse community, where intersectionality is also a major consideration.
- When certifying LGBTQ+ travel friendliness and safety, follow-up and verification are crucial, but too often missing, particularly in these uncertain times.
- Departmental name changes away from “DEI” can actually be liberating and an opportunity for growth. New titles allow organizations to reflect more deeply on the work ahead and define a clearer, more precise scope and spirit for this essential work.



Introduction

The Think Tank's interactive session invited participants to identify the barriers that organizations face today in navigating the withdrawal of support for LGBTQ+ communities.

The facilitators asked the participants to break into smaller groups to ensure balanced dialogue while focusing on co-creating solutions that reinforce resilience, authenticity, and safety across the tourism ecosystem. The aim was to explore how organizations can adapt their approaches—whether by operating more strategically, embedding standards, or maintaining momentum in a strategic yet courageous manner that centers humanity over politics. Each group chose a note-taker and a spokesperson to convey the group's input to the entire Think Tank at the end of each discussion. The topic was broken into three sections: **Business Strategy, Operational Strategy,** and **Implementation + Measurement Strategy,** with an additional introductory exploration of **Champion of DEI Versus “Innovation Agent.”**

Within each section, groups used an informal framework to guide their discussion: Identify the challenge, propose innovative and adaptive solutions, then consider the necessary resources, allies and implementation plan. At the end of each discussion, each group's spokesperson shared key insights highlighting actionable strategies.

At the outset of the Think Tank, participants were advised to be candid, creative, and compassionate in their discussions, and reminded that the goal was to build alignment on sustainable, inclusive business practices that endure beyond social trends or political cycles.

The Think Tank was held under the Chatham House Rule, so this report serves as a summary and analysis of the discussion, with unattributed quotations.

The IGLTA Foundation thanks everyone who joined the Think Tank and extends special appreciation to Visit Greater Palm Springs, Simpleview, and our host venue, the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, with respect and acknowledgment of the native lands on which this global gathering took place.

Champion Versus 'Innovation Agent'

Companies, organizations and destinations in the LGBTQ+ travel sector face myriad challenges in today's unstable political environment, including those related to marketing, legislative, and workforce. Successfully navigating and solving these challenges requires more from a leader than traditional championing—it demands the fresh approach of an innovation agent.

As the facilitators explained, an innovation agent is a leader who goes beyond advocacy to use education, engineering-minded problem-solving, and courageous re-imagining to redesign what's possible for LGBTQ+ travel, especially in a political climate where human rights are under attack.

"We have all the data points to prove that the power of the LGBTQ+ traveler globally is strong, but **what happens when being an ally or a champion is no longer enough?**" one of the facilitators asked the participants. "We want you to process the term 'innovation agent' and adapt it to your own situation, your own organization. Think about the people you work with. Think about the challenges you might have, whether it's internally, whether it's in the community, whether it's in board stakeholders. Take a few minutes to think about that term in the context of your situation."





“With innovation comes an understanding of how to implement the change that you want to see,” offered the other facilitator. “For me, innovation takes place through education and thinking about a problem with an engineer’s mindset. How is it currently working? What needs to be sustained? What needs to improve? What are the outcomes that I’m trying to see, and how am I going to measure that? What is the metric for success?”

The facilitators asked the participants to break into smaller groups for a discussion exploring the contrasts between champions and innovation agents.

“The main difference is that a champion just follows the law and the structure of what’s demanded for every task,” the spokesperson for one group shared after the discussion. “On the other hand, the innovation agent always tries to find new ways to be one step beyond, understanding the needs of the people, of the stakeholders, and trying to get out of the zone of comfort of the daily work, always trying to find some new challenges in order to help people.”

Another group focused on the power of education to innovate within the LGBTQ+ community. “We have to be a family, but there are terrible gaps between gay, lesbian and bisexual folks—and then trans folks, who are also gay, lesbian and bisexual, not to mention all the other intersectionalities,” said the group’s spokesperson. “So **to be an innovative leader means to let go of the privilege** that you might know you have—or if you don’t know, you then have the courage to take educational trainings and understand what it’s like to be the other person that’s in your family, so you know how you can support them.”

One member of this group added that in this turbulent time, critical lessons can be learned from the advances of smaller nations. “I think it’s important to look at some of the incredible innovation that has been going on in some of the destinations and countries around the world, from small movements to big movements that are shifting the gear, but also making a huge impact in terms of challenging criminalizing laws and institutions that regress on DEI or implement draconian laws,” the participant said. “These small movements can help us stock-take and come together and really think about, **How do we engineer the future and reimagine travel as a whole?**”

The global perspective also resonated with another group. “Champions defend what exists, **while innovation agents redesign what is possible,**” said the group’s spokesperson. “When we look at that in context, particularly to what’s happening here in the U.S. at the moment, where it feels like everything is under attack, the ripple effect of what happens in America to the rest of the world is huge. So when that happens, the natural instinct for all of us is to go back into activism. But as powerful as activism is, it keeps us all in survival mode, so it becomes a reactionary energy—and if you’re always reacting, you can’t redesign the system. So in our opinion, inclusion doesn’t need more champions or cheerleaders, what it really needs is engineers. Right now, innovation leaders don’t ask for permission. They build prototypes for the future in the ruins of the past.”

Another group reiterated that innovation agents are more likely to educate themselves beyond their own identities. “A champion is someone who often is the one out front leading an initiative,” the group’s spokesperson shared. “Oftentimes, our experience is that when the champion is leading, they’re more than likely doing so from the lens of their own personal experience. As a result, there are inevitably people with various diverse identities left behind or left in the shelves. An innovation agent is someone who understands that the conversation is bigger than them—and they are saying, ‘How can we pull people into the conversation?’”



Business Strategy:

Visibility, Authenticity & Sustainable Market Positioning

The Think Tank's first section focused on Business Strategy, a topic encompassing:

- The role of innovation agents
- Data-informed and inspired decisions
- Actualized LGBTQ+ consumer research
- Geographic and identity segmentation
- Supporting the community/audience
- Brand marketing investment levels
- Marketing strategy and channels
- Digital media and communications

A facilitator opened the section by pointing out that in the current environment, performative support for the LGBTQ+ community is rapidly vanishing. “Whether brands chose to remove support of Pride events and sponsorships or whether they were forced to do it, we want to think deeper and differently about what being an innovation agent here can mean,” the facilitator explained.

Facilitators asked participants to break into new groups to discuss Business Strategy by choosing from one of two prompts:

- **How can you help organizations transform performative "rainbow capitalism" into year-round storytelling that builds genuine trust and loyalty with LGBTQ+ travelers and residents?**
- **What strategies can you recommend for refining audience segmentation and brand investments to reflect local realities and diverse sub-communities within LGBTQ+ tourism?**

After the discussion period, each group's spokesperson shared highlights from their conversations.

One group discussed some of the challenges in helping organizations implement year-round support of the LGBTQ+ community. “We talked about budget being a big challenge these days,” the group’s spokesperson shared. “I think we’ve all heard about many of the Pride organizations and event organizations that are getting their funding cut—and who’s going to fill that gap? But the other challenge is the political climate. Many of those companies that have been supporting organizations at least in Pride month—can they continue to be as out with their sponsorships as they used to be, or do they have to go underground?”

A key solution to these issues is creating an action plan, said the spokesperson. “From whatever perspective is your starting point, **really understand those challenges and create an action plan around them to address them.** Some of those actions you can do is have an employee base that is reflective of your customer base to be able to better represent diverse opinions. You can use customer segmentation to understand who you’re serving, and then bring that data forward to leaders in your organization.”

Another group discussed the danger of treating LGBTQ+ travelers as a monolith in marketing campaigns. “How do we really create more storytelling so that the brand of our prospective businesses or destination really comes to the sense of belonging and welcoming and inclusivity, but also speaks to individual interests?” the group’s spokesperson asked. **“There’s no one size fits all.** We talked about using research to determine what those travel insights are, and then from there, create storytelling to address those through authentic voices.”



Strategic Solutions

- **Budget Cuts**

Innovation agents understand that when budgets shrink, workforce diversity is more vital than ever, ensuring that decision-makers understand the lived realities of all travelers. This in turn can help organizations find new revenue strategies and redirect existing marketing dollars toward audiences like LGBTQ+ travelers with proven engagement and economic value.

- **Political Instability**

Data becomes even more critical in a climate where public support for the LGBTQ+ community seems unstable. Segmenting customers and mapping their buying power helps leaders clearly see that support for undervalued communities is not only ethically sound, it is economically essential. Executives armed with this knowledge have confidence to stay visible even when rhetoric rises.

- **Funding Uncertainty**

An innovation agent can help their organization earmark dedicated funds with strict usage criteria to prevent reduction or reallocation when political pressure rises. This proactive structure creates a financial buffer, ensuring year-round support for LGBTQ+ initiatives even in turbulent times, and providing stability for long-term planning rather than mere crisis reaction.




Operational Strategy:

Policies, Protocols & Systemic Shifts

The Think Tank's next section focused on Operational Strategy, a topic encompassing:

- LGBTQ+ product development
- Organizational resourcing
- Standards and certifications
- Gender-diverse-forward policy and education
- Supplier diversity
- Giving
- Workforce and talent development



The facilitators asked the participants to break back into groups to discuss Operational Strategy by choosing from one of two prompts:

- How can organizations move from isolated DEI training sessions to codified standards—for example, external certifications, mandatory education, or inclusive policy audits—that ensure consistent progress?
- What collaborative safety frameworks (across hotels, DMOs, law enforcement, and community organizations) could better protect LGBTQ+ travelers while ensuring staff are empowered and protocols are proactive, not reactive?

After the discussion period, the facilitators again asked each group spokesperson to share the highlights of their group’s conversation.

One group discussed safety frameworks and their challenges. “We talked about my specific challenge, which is having nine municipalities, all with different safety protocols and aggregating those, determining who’s responsible for sharing that information,” the group’s spokesperson said. “At the end of the day, we decided that the majority of the solution-based ways to get through this is through education and training. We talked a little bit about SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures)—and although those are important, we need to allow for individuality and different ways to express those things, **not making it so robotic and mechanical** in checking a box, and really creating those authentic training experiences that are more meaningful.”

Training sessions and codifying standards were also the focus for another group. “I do Trans 101 training for any industry, any department,” the group’s spokesperson shared. “We go through the training and I tell them, these are the steps that we’re going to take. And after you learn the basics, we’re going to invite you to show us your policies and procedures, and we have a set that we show as an example. Together they choose how they want to implement that into their policies and procedures. Some people already have it, and some people don’t.”

Another group discussed examples of discrimination that they've experienced themselves. "One of those is getting to your hotel room with your husband, and there's a smaller robe and a larger robe that is meant for a man and a woman," the group's spokesperson said. "It's not just about having policies in place, it's also about pushing that through and training your staff. **You can't just slap a rainbow on a logo and think that you have to have these policies in place.** Training and education has to go through all of the parts of your business and be worked into your SOP."

One participant added that companies with LGBTQ+ friendly certifications need to be periodically verified for compliance. **"They can say they're doing it to check the box, but who's checking the behaviors?"** the participant asked. "That is the missing key to all of this. Because we can do certifications all day long, but the end of the day, if we're not implementing what we got certified in, and nobody's coming behind us to trust-but-verify that you're doing what you say you are going to do, then I feel like we just dropped the ball."

Strategic Solutions

Staff Training

A concise training program ensures that every staff member—from front desk to housekeeping to management—understands how to use inclusive language, respond to bias incidents, and welcome LGBTQ+ guests with confidence. Scenario-based exercises are fundamental to staff understanding, and annual refreshers keep education fresh and alive instead of a one-off event.



SOP Integration

By updating Standard Operating Procedures, travel organizations embed inclusion into every touchpoint—reservations, check-in, room assignments, housekeeping, guest satisfaction, and concierge interactions. Written protocols help eliminate guesswork and personal bias, making inclusion reliable and consistent while also creating the foundation for certifications and partner verification systems.

Inclusive Amenities

Embracing gender neutrality in amenities is a simple and economical way to reduce the subtle discrimination often still encountered by LGBTQ+ travelers. When amenities are designed free from gendered assumptions, organizations can replace outdated norms with operational practices that affirm all guests.

Implementation + Measurement Strategy:

Accountability, Data Integrity & Shared Success

The Think Tank's final section focused on Implementation + Measurement Strategy, a topic encompassing:

- Cross-functional ownership and accountability
- Organizational planning benchmarks
- Redefining the process
- Measuring sentiment (qualitative)
- Measuring product and distribution (supplier diversity)
- Measuring marketing and communications integration
- Measuring workforce and diverse talent pipelines

For this call-to-action section, facilitators asked participants to directly share their thoughts on Implementation + Measurement Strategy, first focusing on the prompt:

- **How can you help your clients define shared KPIs that capture measurable progress—such as verified LGBTQ+ supplier spend, traveler sentiment, or workforce diversity pipelines?**

“I think one of the challenges that we have, in many respects and with AI coming, is **we’re still selling travel in 2025 like it’s 2005**,” one participant shared. “It’s also based on KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) that have been developed years and years ago, which often speak to numbers and profitability rather than impact or inclusivity. I can give you some examples from Africa of how we’ve started to shift that narrative, because we believe **that profit and purpose are inseparable**, number one. Then if you build KPIs off that, we measure impact per guest. So how much conservation? How much community upliftment? How much education? How much consciousness we’ve created by people traveling with us? Because what we start to realize is that likes, reach, hashtags—that’s all applause, that’s non-progress in terms of how we move the needle in travel.”

The facilitators next asked the participants to focus on this prompt:

- **What tools, data, or storytelling techniques can you as Innovation Agents equip internal champions to influence leadership decisions—especially when they must act discreetly or in politically sensitive environments?**



“We’re one of those organizations that reluctantly changed our department name from ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ to ‘Engagement, Opportunity and Impact,’” one participant shared. “We’re not changing anything on our website, and I made it clear to the staff we’re still using the word inclusion, we’re still using the word belonging, we’re still doing the same work that we’ve been doing. But we get funding from the state, and that was in jeopardy if we didn’t do something.”

Another participant shared that their organization had also recently changed the name of its DEI department. “Now we’re ‘Culture, Community and Engagement,’” the participant said. “For a person who is very passionate about this work, this was a fine line of ethics for me. What mattered the most was, is the work going to get done? That was my determination. It didn’t matter what you call it, I didn’t care. All that mattered to me was if the work was going to continue. So I loved the name change because to me, it became more inclusive of how the impact of the work was going to be relative. Community, culture—I think those are agnostic of affinity. They represent all, so it didn’t matter.”

Another participant talked about the challenges of starting a new LGBTQ+ travel business and “getting the buy-in” from emerging destinations. “One of the things that I learned from TUI Futureshapers [TUI Futureshapers Global: LGBTQIA+ Travel Innovators Program] was that some specific destinations around the world have opened the market without the support of the government,” the participant shared. “So how can I learn from that and then really tailor it to this specific political/economic/social landscape of emerging destinations? Because I’m not yet getting that buy-in, but I am willing to be not just an innovative agent, but to be a strategic disruptor.”

“You’re absolutely in the right space and place,” one of the facilitators responded, “and what I’ve seen from IGLTA going across the globe is individuals like you. You are the solution I’ve seen time and again—whether it’s in Japan, whether it’s Puerto Rico, that one entrepreneur has led the fight.”

“To bring it back to this session about innovation agents, you are the innovation agent for that. I think there are so many pathways for you. Finding the champions, finding those agency people, the airlines, the tour operators here in the U.S., the travel agents who believe in that, and creating a link for yourself. **That’s the whole point of today—finding solutions that are rooted in innovation and thinking differently.** Sometimes that requires us to be really brave. It’s daunting to say, ‘I’m going to be the one person to innovate.’ But it’s what we’re all capable of doing.”

Strategic Solutions

Redefining KPIs

Innovation agents help organizations redefine success by combining profit with purpose, moving beyond vanity metrics like hashtags and likes. They focus on KPIs that measure real impact—traveler sentiment, LGBTQ+ supplier spend, conservation outcomes, and community uplift. By including metrics that reflect both economic results and social benefits, organizations can capture the full story of traveler experience and the positive effects on local communities.

To go further, it’s worth exploring how to quantify community uplift—for example, tracking local employment created, support for LGBTQ+ businesses, community engagement initiatives, or improvements in social services. Sharing these insights can provide IGLTA members with concrete ways to demonstrate the broader impact of inclusive travel.





Equipping Champions

In environments where DEI language is politically fraught, innovation agents steer organizations toward subtle tools that can protect both integrity and impact, like reframing departmental names without abandoning inclusive values, and deploying storytelling to communicate belonging without triggering political backlash

Strategic Disruption

By studying global case examples, innovation agents learn from destinations where LGBTQ+ travel markets have grown despite political resistance and adapt those lessons to local contexts. By identifying allies across airlines, tour operators and DMOs, partnerships can be cultivated that bypass traditional gatekeepers and create new market pathways where none existed.

About the IGLTA Foundation

The IGLTA Foundation empowers LGBTQ+ welcoming travel businesses globally through leadership, research and education. Founded in 2012, the foundation is the 501(c)3 publiccharity subsidiary of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) and supports initiatives for industry organizations, leaders, and communities to advance LGBTQ+ travel around the world.

Our foundation has a long-standing commitment to promoting equality and diversity within the travel industry. We believe that everyone deserves to travel freely and without fear of discrimination, and we are dedicated to creating a world where LGBTQ+ individuals feel welcomed and valued, no matter where they choose to travel.

We work closely with industry organizations, leaders, and communities to achieve our mission. Our efforts are focused on providing resources, research, and educational opportunities that help businesses become more inclusive and welcoming to all travelers.

Whether you are an individual, a travel business, or a community organization, we invite you to join us in our mission. Together, we can make a difference and build a more inclusive and welcoming world for all LGBTQ+ travelers.



2025 IGLTA Foundation Think Tank Participants

Co-Facilitators:

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Santiago García-Dils (he/him), International Promotion Senior Executive, Sevilla Tourism Board

Jake Graf (he/him), Writer/Influencer, Trans Family Travel

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Thomas Nichols (he/him), Chief Operating Officer, Arcus Foundation

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IGLTA Foundation 2025 Global Convention Fellowship Recipients:

Laticia Jacobs (she/her), Founder, Travel Concierge Partners

Denise Lang (she/her), Owner, Reach for the Magic Destinations

Lizzy Monroe (she/her), Founder, Rainbow Routes

Jess Osborn (he/they), Founder & Creative Director, GenderChill Fashion Show

Sulique Venus Waqa (she/her), Owner, South Pacific LGBTQ+ Travel

About the Author:

Dan Allen (any) is a longtime LGBTQ+ travel and culture journalist for outlets across the globe, including NBC News, Nat Geo Travel, Condé Nast Traveller, Out, Passport, and Attitude. Follow @danquests on LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok.

