



95% of U.S. Travel Plans Held During Swine Flu Outbreak
Industry Response Was Immediate and Consumer-Friendly

New York, NY, May 19, 2009 - Although concerns surrounding the outbreak of novel influenza A (H1N1), also known as the Swine Flu, were prevalent among U.S. residents, 95% of those who had plans to travel between May to August, 2009, kept those plans intact. This is just one of the findings from an Ipsos survey conducted among 1,149 adult U.S. residents during the period May 1-5, 2009.

"All across the U.S. we found near universal awareness of Swine Flu," says Jim Quilty, Vice President of Travel and Tourism Research at Ipsos. "But when it comes to travel, we also found that the health concerns associated with this specific flu were not strong enough to convince Americans that it was necessary to cancel their immediate travel plans."

Just how aware were U.S. residents of the Swine Flu outbreak? Among those polled, 99% reported being Very or Somewhat Aware. To put this in context with other current world news events, 91% percent reported familiarity with the attacks by pirates on cruise and cargo ships off the Somali coast; compared with 78% who had awareness of both the North Korean missile tests and the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

The Swine Flu continues to expand in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, the number of confirmed cases in the U.S. has risen to 2,600 as reported among 44 states, resulting in three deaths. It's been widely reported that airlines closely monitored advanced bookings and cancellations – especially to Mexico – and several reduced capacity as a result.

In the wake of the Swine Flu, many travel companies, including airlines and hotels, offered consumer-friendly cancellation policies in direct response to the concerns of travelers.

How do consumers feel about how their travel partners and the nation responded to the situation? Thirty-seven percent (37%) of all respondents were aware of the cancellation policies offered by travel companies. Of those, 85% were Very/Somewhat satisfied with these policies.

"The travel partners responded quickly to this topic," adds Quilty. "The challenge to be consumer-friendly, timely, and weigh the cost-benefit of cancellations to specific geographic regions was a delicate balance."

When asked what else travel partners can do to help U.S. residents who travel over the coming weeks, 74% expect companies communicate actions they are taking to minimize the Swine Flu risk to travelers; 54% would like to see postings of travel advisories on company websites; followed closely by 53% who would like travel alerts via email.

How effectively did the nation respond to the Swine Flu situation? Among those polled, 66% reported that the U.S. was Very/Somewhat effective in its response. By comparison, when asked how Mexico – where the outbreak originated – responded, only 36% felt that nation had been as effective. When the same question was asked among those planning to travel within the U.S. during May-August, the ratings increased to 78% and 41%, respectively.

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Travel inclination if the Swine Flu continues

How will consumers respond should the Swine Flu situation worsen? Among those surveyed who had reservations or planned to travel, 13% responded they would cancel travel plans without question. Seventeen percent (17%) reported being willing to take a “wait-and-see” approach; and the remaining 70% intend to travel as planned.

At this point, Swine Flu concerns surrounding travel within the U.S. appear to have subsided; Swine Flu is not the leading barrier to travel. All respondents were asked what barriers exist to them booking any future plans for travel between May to August of this year. Concerns about the Swine Flu ranked 3rd – cited by 32% as a concern. Of greater importance were concerns over their lack of funding/personal financial situation (63%); followed by concerns about the economy (49%).

While the Swine Flu is top of mind for most, consumers are evaluating its potential ongoing risk, and their future travel plans, in the context of other challenges and concerns they face.

These are the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted from May 1 - 5, 2009. This online survey of 1,149 U.S. adults (18+) was conducted via Ipsos' Voice of America online panel. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate within 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult population in the U.S. been polled. The margin of error for sub-samples may be higher.

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