

A Quiet Media War

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-By Jonathon S. Feit

Meaningfully reaching the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender audience is a tricky but essential proposition. Rather than following the status quo, it is known for defining "the cool." To quote the oracle of modern metropolitan culture—Sex and the City—"first come the gays, then the girls and then the industry." Per capita, the GLBT audience is the country's wealthiest, most educated and most professional demographic, with purchasing power verging on \$690 billion, according to a 2007 study by Witeck-Combs Communications and MarketResearch.com. In short: diversity as a profound revenue turbine.

Like environmentalism before Al Gore, diversity was once dismissed as a topic endemic to former hippie communes. Yet consumer demand is a profound change agent capable of upheaving even entrenched industries. For example, consider the impact of Toyota's Prius on the car industry. According to one survey, the GLBT cohort "trusts brands more from progressive companies." Given its sheer economic and promotional power, longevity-minded CMOs know that bigotry is not something they can afford.

Early in 2007, a Travelocity print strategist at OMD told me that the online travel heavyweight—which is famous for its open-mindedness—"certainly looks to position themselves as a leader in GLBT travel community, [but] they are unfortunately not yet comfortable with all of the political issues surrounding gay marriage." The statement was immediately retracted by both chief marketer Jeffrey Glueck and Jack Hanrahan, the agency's former U.S. director of print strategy, who asked me to refrain from citing the strategist's name in coverage for fear of permanent career damage.

The same uproar resurfaced mid-March (as it did in 2005), when the American Family Association announced that the Ford Motor Company was pulling its advertising from all gay-oriented media. Ford denied the AFA's claim so swiftly that even Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a watchdog group, didn't feel the need to comment formally on the matter, according to a source there.

In *With This Ring* magazine, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom compared today's equality struggle with the civil rights battles of the mid-20th century. Two key distinctions separate the otherwise parallel culture shifts: On-demand and globally accessible media has utterly revolutionized how we galvanize opinion. And unlike the African-American community 50 years ago, today's GLBT community commands intellectual and tangible resources that make it a sprawling, amorphous, international and upwardly mobile gatekeeper.

Yet like every social minority, the GLBT community hungers for inclusion in the national conversation and an eradication of labels like "gay marriage" or "queer eye." Now, that's exactly what they're getting.

With the political furor over same-sex marriage cooling, major media companies like Viacom and Time Warner have tendered unexpected overtures to showcase their

newfound penchant for parity. While tackling thorny issues quietly to avoid nerve-racking conservative investors and advertisers, their engagement has been far from subtle.

Last August, Viacom cable network Logo hosted the first-ever presidential "forum," during which all the major Democratic candidates answered questions from a panel of concerned community leaders. The event was a watershed moment for GLBT "mainstreaming," as leveraging Viacom's CBS News brand elevated the forum from campaign kitsch to political talking point.

Time Warner promoted GLBT entrepreneurship twice within three months: Fortune Small Business (a joint venture with American Express) featured a lesbian couple in its February 2008 cover story on family business, and again in a five-page spread for the April issue. Richard Murphy, FSB's editorial director, described the decision: "In general, there's no conscious effort to go out and find gay entrepreneurs, just as there's no conscious effort to find Hispanic or African-American or female entrepreneurs...It's become increasingly clear to us as editors that we have to look for stories about entrepreneurship everywhere in the U.S. population, because it's happening everywhere. Gay Americans are no exception."

Such equalization is precisely what the GLBT community has been hoping for, and its timing is significant. Here! TV, a paid-subscription network, has secured carriage on Time Warner Cable's On-Demand service, placing its content alongside HBO, Starz and other premium mainstays. The company provides what Here! CEO Paul Colichman calls "gay media for gay people—not for advertisers, not for straight people—to promote self-esteem within our own community," and during a recent interview he intimated a newfound interest in the print market.

The gay media marketplace is growing and diversifying. PlanetOut—the public conglomerate that owns such vanguard titles as The Advocate and GAY.com, and indicated in January that its assets are "in play"—represents the key to establishing a near-monopoly on content directed at the GLBT community. With Here! carried by Time Warner and Logo owned by Viacom, battle lines are being drawn in an incomparably progressive game of corporate chess.

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