CHAPTER EIGHT

Out of the Closet and Into Ads: Gays and Lesbians as a Target Market

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On May 9, 2012, viewers of *Good Morning America* heard wedding bells striking a slightly different tune, when President Barack Obama proclaimed, "I think same-sex couples should be able to get married."[1] Almost exactly one month later, ABC News reported that the Boy Scouts of America was opening a review of its longstanding policy prohibiting openly gay men and lesbians from serving in the organization.[2] The Girl Scouts supported a transgendered girl refused by a local troop, stating, "If a child identifies as a girl and the child's family presents her as a girl, Girl Scouts of Colorado welcomes her as a Girl Scout."[3] Similarly, transgender contestants have been permitted to compete in the Miss Universe Canada[4] and Miss England[5] beauty pageants. Retailer J. C. Penney recruited out talk show host Ellen DeGeneres to be the new face of its brand, while the Gap launched its "Be Bright, Be One" campaign, hinging on the visual of two gay boys embracing sweetly, dressed together in one, single Gap T-shirt.[6]

It seems as if 2012 stood as a banner year for LGBT visibility. Still, critics have been vocal and have rallied against LGBT inclusion. One Million Moms (OMM), an offshoot of the American Family Association, suggested not one, not two, but three boycotts of J. C. Penney—one for the use of DeGeneres as spokesperson, a second for depicting gay moms in its Mother's Day campaign, and a third for depicting gay dads in its Father's Day campaign. OMM also suggested action against the Gap for its "Be One" campaign, and Macy's for running a "two groom" advertisement.[7] What makes

2012 different is the respo[illegible]marketers to this vocal antigay segment. All the brands mentioned here—the Girl Scouts, J. C. Penney, the Gap, and Macy's—chose to stand by their marketing communications decisions. "Corporate America has found that it's a smart business decision to stand with the majority of Americans who support gay and lesbian couples," said Rich Ferraro, vice president of communications at the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).[8] In the past, brands were not as bold, crumbling under the fear of alienating their customers and subsequently caving in to antigay sentiment. Today, brands recognize that LGBT folk *are* their customers, and that they must take great pains to include them within their marketing communications. This chapter endeavors to trace the history of the LGBT market, along with the advertising efforts made to communicate with this segment. The importance of LGBT visibility as both an economic and social imperative of advertising will be discussed, and past and present strategies will be evaluated on their ability to deliver on these imperatives.

LGBT Visibility: The Social Imperative of LGBT Advertising

At the 2005 "Reaching Out" conference, Michael Wilke, founder and executive director of the Commercial Closet Association cited the success of shows such as *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, plus the launch of LOGO (the "gay network") as evidence that gays and lesbians have "gone from being invisible to inescapable" on television.[9]

By 2012, these shows had long left the airwaves, but new gay and lesbian characters and storylines had popped up in shows such as *Glee*, *True Blood*, *The Good Wife*, *Modern Family*, and *Grey's Anatomy*. "Visibility," according to Matt Farber, founder of LGBT cable network LOGO, "is leading to more acceptance in the mainstream."[10] Still, GLAAD's "Where We Are On TV" reports that LGBT characters accounted for only 2.9 percent of scripted series regulars in the 2011–2012 season, down from 3.9 percent in the previous year.[11]

Visibility, thus, comes in fits and starts, and is never a completed process. Similarly, while the blanket term "visibility" is favored in discourse, it is important to distinguish between political/social visibility and consumer visibility. Social critics would value the former, while condemning the latter; marketers, generally, attempt to conflate the two. The term becomes even more complicated when we distinguish it in another way—between the visibility of LGBT folk, and the visibility of the brands that court them. The former may seek visibility, while the latter may not.

Generally speaking, targeted minority groups, and the general market audiences that are exposed to minority targeted ads, see the ads as an indication that the minority is a viable segment of society. In their ubiquity, ads can provide social capital to minority groups in new and unique ways. "TV commercials are a culturally powerful force, shaping society and giving voice to those outside the mainstream . . . product advertising can move public opinion faster, and farther, than any other influencing factor."[12] This places a twofold pressure on advertisers, who must carry the "political weight" of LGBT visibility.[13] First, LGBT individuals must be represented in such a way as to provide *favorable* visibility. Second, the brand must balance its own visibility, as a LGBT marketer, in order to preserve its brand image and bottom line. In many cases, the fear of "unwanted visibility" for the marketer leads to "conditional" or "contained" visibility for the LGBT community,[14] which does little to move LGBT people forward politically and socially. Brands must also be weary not to be found to be "exploiting" visibility, or simply chasing the dollars of LGBT consumers, with no care for nurturing the LGBT community.

As LGBT visibility grows, not only does social acceptance of LGBT folk grow in the broader, mainstream society, but also the attractiveness of the LGBT community grows as a target market. Now that marketers can better see LGBT folk, they get a better sense of how targeting them makes economic sense for their brands.

The LGBT Market: Delineating the Economic Imperative of LGBT Advertising

Despite increases in visibility, researching the demographic and projecting market potential has still been a difficult task. Researchers must not only find openly LGBT individuals who feel comfortable enough to provide data, but they must also find the right media through which to reach them. Even when these difficulties are overcome, researchers must then consider whether self-selected, "openly" LGBT individuals are representative of the LGBT population as a whole.

Even simple population estimates have been challenging. Findings appear to be all over the map—ranging from estimates of 2 percent of the overall population, to the 10 percent estimated by Kinsey in his seminal work in the 1940s. More recently, research from Packaged Facts found the LGBT population to be 16 million in size, and with $743 billion in buying power.[15] The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy found a significantly lower number—9 million LGBT population, or, approximately 3.8 percent of the overall population.[16] Despite the

disparities in population estimates, marketers still have strong reasons to believe that LGBT consumers form an attractive target market.

Even though the widely held belief in "gay affluence" has been proven myth, Shullman and Kraus find that there are indeed affluent LGBT folk who are, when compared to their non-LGBT counterparts, a unique and attractive market.[17] LGBT affluents were not only "more affluent" but also younger, and more likely to be social and cultural leaders (i.e., active voters, theater/museum/concert goers) than hetero-identified affluents. LGBT affluents were also more likely to use new media platforms such as smartphones and tablets, be interested in new and luxury products and brands, and be willing to pay more for brands that fit their values and beliefs (i.e., organic or environmentally friendly) and deliver higher quality. Further, LGBT consumers have been found to be more brand loyal[18] and more likely to actively advocate for or against brands that they feel address, or do not address, issues that are important to them.[19]

Recognizing, and Attending to, the LGBT Market: A Brief History

Much of the literature surrounding marketing to LGBT consumers notes how far brands have come since the beginnings of "gay" advertising in the 1970s.[20] Attention paid to this segment—in ways that can be measured and recognized—has come in fits and starts, with steps forward often followed by a few steps back. Still, several key moments, and examples, illustrate how the practice of strategic marketing communications with LGBT audiences has moved from low profile/least involvement to a more prominent role in the strategies enacted by a wide variety of brands.

Peering through the Gay Window

Even before it had a name—"gay vague," "gay window," or "purposive polysemy"—the strategy of embedding implicit or ambiguous homosexual cues in mainstream communications[21] brought homosexual images onto the pages of some of the most broadly circulated magazines in the United States. J. C. Leyendecker's 1917 advertisement for Ivory Soap is often noted as the earliest example, which features an athlete peering in on the half-naked bodies of his teammates as they shower. The copy suggests, "Not the least of the pleasures of a hard game is the bath that follows it."[22]

For much of the early history of gay advertising, gay vague was less a strategic decision, and more of an imperative. With publications such as the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, and *Esquire* magazine refusing ads that used the words "gay" or "homosexual," and a national gay press

still in its nascent stages into the mid-to-late 1970s, advertisers had no other option than to address the LGBT audience (really, gay men) with a wink and a nudge.[23]

Bold, Yet Cautious

Management change at the *Advocate* not only transformed the publication into a vehicle in which national brands could feel comfortable buying ad space (by removing most, if not all, sexual and political content), but also transformed the way brands perceived gay men, and the way gay men perceived themselves. The gay male specimen was placed under the microscope and proclaimed to be "stylish, trendsetting, and affluent," with "A convertible . . . Some fabulous wardrobe . . . vacations . . . a second home" on its list of "must-haves"[24]

By the 1980s, brands were becoming more comfortable with the gay press. Alcohol brands were early suitors of the market, with Absolut vodka emerging as the most attentive. Even when other brands known for courting LGBT consumers turned their backs as the AIDS crisis became more and more devastating in the mid-to-late 1980s, Absolut maintained its voice in the gay press and its support of the LGBT community.

Absolut's first forays into the pages of the gay press hint at the underlying contradictions of LGBT marketing. The ads were, at once, bold *and* cautious. As the first cases of AIDS were emerging and almost exclusively linked to gay men, it was quite bold for a brand to openly affiliate with the community. The choice of execution, however, was cautious. The brand chose to run its mainstream "Absolut Perfection" ad featuring the infamous Absolut bottle, capped with an angelic halo, rather than develop a gay-specific ad for the back cover of the *Advocate*.[25]

Moving into the mid-to-late 1990s, Absolut strengthened its commitment to the LGBT market by coming "out" to mainstream audiences, even if it still leaned more toward the "cautious" rather than the "bold." Ads such as Absolut Au Kurant, and Absolut Haring, supposedly embedded with gay cues, ran in both mainstream and gay media. This "gay vague" strategy allowed for LGBT audiences to read "gay pride" in the purple laces and leather of the corset in the Au Kurant ad. Similarly, what hetero-audiences saw as cool pop art in the Haring ad, LGBT folks saw as the credentials of a famed out artist and AIDS activist.

Absolut's commitment to the LGBT market has been solidified into the twenty-first century, as the brand came "out" in bold ways. It developed gay-specific ads for gay-specific media, and gay-themed packaging

for retailers in key "gay" cities. In 2001, the brand customized an ad for the gay press that transformed the iconic bottle into a lava lamp, with the GLAAD logo rising in blobs. It was the first time Absolut had done so for any of its not-for-profit partners.[26] In 2008, gay-specific executions were created as part of the broader "In an Absolut World" campaign,[27] and in 2009, they brought a rainbow bottle to market, in celebration of gay pride.[28] In 2011, Absolut celebrated its 30-year anniversary with the LGBT market, highlighted by its Absolut Outrageous execution, which ran in gay publications—*Out*, the *Advocate*, and *Instinct*—along with mainstream titles *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. The creative included "fantastic images—featuring closets, divas, disco turntables, the performance artist Amanda Lepore and unicorns."[29]

Trading Closets for Living Rooms

Unlike print media, which tended to include some LGBT representation early on, representation on network television took longer to emerge. When it did, it did so in a big way, bypassing the ambiguity of gay vague/gay window and moving directly to an overt, openly gay-themed ad.

In 1994, Swedish furniture marketer IKEA presented an ad that documented a gay male couple's quest for a dining room table. The execution itself was somewhat mundane—the men were positioned a safe distance away from one another at all times, and nothing more than a pat on the back was included by way of physical contact. Despite the nonthreatening nonsexual images of gay men engaged in a very heteronormative activity, angry protests and bomb threats led the retailer to pull the ad,[30] even though they vowed it would "continue to air over the next year."[31]

Whether a direct consequence of IKEA's experience or not, the non example of LGBT imagery in mainstream advertising was far less explicit and led to the formal coining of the term "gay vague." Volkswagen's infamous "Da, Da, Da" ad followed two nondescript men as they drove around a city aimlessly one afternoon. The men find, and take, an armchair discarded at the curb. Their precipitous find is soon found to be aromatically unpleasant, and the chair is promptly discarded on some other curb. With no physical contact, no longing glances, or sly smiles, it is hard to imagine how or why this execution would be read as "gay" by so many, but it did, and it touched off the "gay vague" trend in mainstream advertising that remains today. An interesting wrinkle that impacts how an ad is read, however, is the media placement, and in this case it is telling—the ad debuted the same time the "real" Ellen did, during her coming-out episode.[32]

It is hard to tell whether the success of gay vague executions in the late 1990s gave advertisers extra courage to push the envelope of LGBT messaging in mainstream media. Regardless, in 2000, financial services firm John Hancock ran an ad during the U.S. gymnastics championship that featured two women and a baby passing through immigration. Their conversation, an exchange almost whispered against the loud airport setting:

"Do you have her papers?"
"They're in the diaper bag."
"Can you believe this?"
"We're a family."
"You're going to make a great mom."
"So are you."

After airing once, John Hancock quickly edited the spot, removing the last lines that make explicit the relationship of the women as both mothers to the child. Once again, the step forward, taken by a brand trying to bring LGBT depictions into the mainstream, resulted in two steps back into the closet.

Trading the Closet for the Gridiron

Who better to bust LGBT depictions out of the commercial closet than "Fab Five" (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) cast member Carson Kressley, and what better stage for him to do it on than the 2005 Super Bowl? Kressley's role in Diet Pepsi's "Lady's Man" spot is brief, but hard hitting when it comes to a global brand's willingness to recognize same-sex attraction in an ad that will reach hundreds of millions of people. The ad follows a "hot guy" walking down the street to the tune of "Stayin' Alive" and drinking a Diet Pepsi. He captures the gaze of women, who begin to follow him, as if he were the Pied Piper. He passes "hot chick" Cindy Crawford, who lowers her sunglasses seductively to get a better look. As the action reaches its climax, he passes Carson Kressley, who stops in his tracks, lowers his own shades, and uncontrollably drops his jaw in awe and admiration. He promptly turns and begins following the "hot guy" as the Bee Gees carry us out of the spot, and carry LGBT imagery in advertising out of the closet on TV.

Or did it? As with John Hancock, Pepsi subsequently ran a different edited version as part of its regular TV buys. That edited version minimized the role of Mr. Kressley to a passing shot of his back, and focused more heavily on Cindy Crawford and her heterosexual, heteronormative, attraction to the "hot guy."

Out Online

The Internet has created a plethora of opportunity for marketers to reach LGBT audiences in spaces that feel "safer" and more "private" than mainstream media or overtly gay media like *Out*, the *Advocate*, or LOGO. Early online communications with LGBT folk emphasized gay websites, newsletters, and other gay-specific online vehicles. As social media exploded in the years leading up to 2012, brands have tested the waters with being more "out" on their own social media sites. On June 26, 2012, for instance, Oreo posted a photo on its Facebook Wall of an Oreo filled with seven layers of cream, corresponding to the colors of the rainbow. The photo included simple copy—June 25 | Pride—and the status comment, "Proudly support love!" Within 12 hours, the posting received 142,414 "Likes," 32,625 "Shares," and 17,730 "Comments." A nonscientific review of the comments left the general impression that positive feedback was more prevalent, although there was quite a spirited debate and exchange of "I will eat more Oreos because of this" versus, "I have eaten my last Oreo because of this."

Constructing a New Closet

The rise in gay-specific media opportunities—crowned by the launch of the gay cable TV network LOGO in 2005—is indicative of the boom and bust of more pointed attention from marketers. Gay-specific media, while allowing advertisers to speak directly to LGBT consumers with messages that are "in culture," also allows advertisers to leverage a "commercial closet" and avoid making tough decisions about including LGBT cues and sources in more mainstream vehicles. By relegating messages and attention to gay media alone, the possibility of social progress through economic validation is minimized. It has been recognized that inclusion in advertising—which is a pervasive persuasive, and consciousness tool—may be a path to social, political, and cultural empowerment for LGBT folk.

In modern advertising history, brands have proven quite comfortable with communicating directly with LGBT consumers through gay-specific messages in gay-specific media. The 2009 Gay Press Report found that ad revenue in the gay and lesbian press grew more than 10 times faster than that in the mainstream press.[33] Similarly, almost 90 percent of the ads in national LGBT magazines were gay-specific, indicating that national brands are tailoring their messages, and committing to, the market. When it comes to including LGBT imagery in mainstream vehicles, however, brands have proven far less comfortable. In fact, they have proven to be downright uncomfortable, preferring to closet LGBT imagery and appeals in the

subtext, via a "gay vague" strategy; or, worse, to draw on stereotypes that present the LGBT individual, or their "gayness," as a foil or comic relief. These forms of representation fail in delivering either the social or economic imperative required from advertising.

For social good or not, brands must rethink the commercial closet they have created. Even though gay publications and other gay media deliver respectable audience sizes, these media are still thought to deliver less than 50 percent of the overall LGBT population.[34] Most LGBT folk, it seems, consume mainstream media, just like their heterosexual counterparts. The challenge becomes, how do advertisers represent the LGBT community in mainstream advertising? Recent examples from 2011 and 2012 provide a mixed-bag in terms of representation.

J. C. Penney's Father's Day print ad showcasing two dads with their kids offers a heartfelt look at gay parenting—"What makes Dad so cool? He's the swim coach, tent maker, best friend, bike fixer and hug giver—all rolled into one. Or two."[35] Despite, or perhaps as a result of, complaints by One Million Moms, feedback on the ad gleaned from Web comments was mostly positive. In May 2012, J. C. Penney also included lesbian moms in its Mother's Day weekly mailing, a move that raised J. C. Penney's BrandIndex, determined by online market research group YouGov, by eight points, surpassing industry rival Kohl's.[36] The Gap's "Be Bright, Be One" execution is the second exemplary ad on a very short list of exemplars. The placement of a gay-themed ad via outdoor vehicles (billboards, buses) brings LGBT imagery and relationships out of the closet and onto Main Street.

Other advertisers have struggled to find the right imagery to connect with the LGBT market. The problem of misrepresentation is rampant, but perhaps more chilling are situations in which a brand could have included or represented, but chose not to. Consider, for example, a recent "Got Milk" ad starring "the Dunphys" from the hit ABC sitcom *Modern Family*. The show features several "families," however, which *could have* been used in the ad. In addition to the Dunphys (hetero married couple with three kids), there is also Jay and Gloria, a May-December interracial couple who are raising Gloria's son, Manny; and Mitchell and Cameron, same-sex partners raising Lily, an adopted daughter. The "Why Milk?" website describes the Dunphys as "a typical modern family."[37] Eschewing the diversity embraced by the show itself, the Milk group puts clear-cut bounds on what family is and how one should look.

A similar exclusion occurs in Sealy Mattress' Super Bowl ad, which features a diverse array of hetero couples falling back in bed in ecstasy to the tune of Dusty Springfield's *Just a Little Lovin'*. The ad carries Sealy's familiar slogan, "Whatever you do in bed, Sealy supports it." Consider how much

more powerful the slogan would be if Sealy actually *did* support whatever *you* do in bed. Another missed opportunity for representation, which not only would have appealed to the LGBT community but would have also strengthened the resonance of the message with mainstream consumers. Despite advertisers' fears, research has shown that gays and lesbians respond positively to gay brand positioning, while heterosexuals respond neutrally at worst, but even showed somewhat positive responses.[38]

Conclusion

As more becomes known about the gay market, and its potential becomes better understood, directly appealing to the LGBT consumers via marketing communications becomes not only a necessity for brands, but also a challenge. Unlike general market consumers, who are more likely to interpret and evaluate messages based on the product itself,[39] LGBT consumers are more holistic and include consideration of whether a brand is "gay friendly"—that is, "proactive in respecting and addressing the needs of gays"[40] through advertising, employment practices, and event sponsorships.[41] Whether brands like it or not, LGBT consumers, and advocacy groups like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), are "watching to see if the businesses they patronize understand and honor issues important to them, giving buying power to issues [like] LGBT inclusiveness."[42] Each year, HRC rates businesses on their workplace policies, and publishes its findings in a Buyer's Guide distributed on its website, and as a smartphone application. These ratings have real ramifications for brands, as LGBT consumers not only prefer gay-friendly brands, but also actively avoid brands perceived to be anti-gay-friendly. Perhaps more importantly, however, heterosexuals also seem to have favorable feelings, responding neutrally at worst, somewhat positively at best, to gay-friendly positioning. This opens up a space for brands to be more visible in their approaches to, and representations of, the LGBT market.

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