Commercial Closet Association Best Practices:

Integrating GLBT Sensitivity and Diversity Into Mainstream/Business-To-Business Advertising

PART I
INTRODUCTION:

Advertising seeks to sell, not offend. Over the years, hundreds of commercials have referred to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people for a variety of reasons, yet companies rarely consider what messages they send. While it may seem difficult today not to upset someone, few groups are ridiculed as often and openly as GLBT people. Although “diversity” and “multicultural” concerns are a priority for corporations, and “sexual orientation” and “gender expression” are increasingly addressed internally, these issues are often overlooked in general marketing communications. Advertising has not kept up with rapidly changing social attitudes of Consumers, Businesses, Investors and Employees.

- The general population and media are increasingly aware of diversity and uncomfortable with messages lacking sensitivity. At least 82% of Americans know someone gay, 42% of heterosexuals would be less likely to buy a product advertised on an anti-gay program, and 81% of consumers don't care if products they regularly use are also promoted to gays. Viacom/MTV launched 24-hour gay channel LOGO, primetime TV featured up to 30 gay characters, the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed gay protections, same-sex marriage is legal in Massachusetts, Canada and overseas, and 54% of Americans support civil unions.

- Big business increasingly protects its gay employees from discrimination (82% of Fortune 500), offers equal benefits (43.2% of Fortune 500), and explores gay marketing (36% of Fortune 100) with $200-$250 million invested annually in U.S. gay media, events and organizations.

- Friends, family, and colleagues of GLBT people are very vocal, active, and sensitive to diversity issues, with national groups like PFLAG, GLSEN, and gay-straight alliances in schools.

- GLBT people consistently self-identify in broad online surveys as 7% of the population (15 million-plus American adults). They belong to nearly every family and company, and held $610 billion in buying power in 2005, growing annually. They vary in race, age, religion, national origin, gender expression, ability, politics, profession, and class. About 1.2 million reported to the 2000 U.S. Census they are partnered in rural areas, suburbs and cities, appearing in 99% of counties nationwide, and 1 in 5 have children.
PART II
BEST PRACTICES:

This document is a tool to assist executives in creating effective, inclusive mainstream and business-to-business advertising that is respectful of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people, while promoting creativity, sales, and image goals. Drawing upon reporting observations, trial, and analysis from industry leaders, Commercial Closet Association recommends the following points:

1. **Be inclusive and diverse.** Whenever people are shown, integrate GLBT individuals/family members/friends/couples, reflecting varied ages, races, genders, etc. Language references to family, relationships or gender should not be hetero-centric.

2. **Be sensitive to GLBT stereotypes, and avoid positioning homosexuality/transgender as a threat or demeaning references to gay/lesbian sexual practice, for humor.** Advertising often stereotypes, but beware of complications. Feminine gay men is an old idea that alienates many. Straight-male-fantasy “lipstick lesbians,” duplicitous bisexuals, and deceitful/scary transgender people are narrow clichés lacking creativity.

3. **Avoid insults to masculinity or femininity.** GLBT people are frequently attacked in life for not meeting gender expectations.

4. **Do good research.** When conducting general research or forming new mainstream campaigns, GLBT perspectives should be considered and included as often as possible. Don’t limit their input only to gay-targeted messages.

5. **Be consistent and confident.** Modifying or withdrawing ads suggests waffling and creates further trouble. Respond to criticism with business rationales, like diversity and the bottom line. Avoid time-restricted airings of material unless ads legitimately deal with sexual situations inappropriate to youth.

PART III
EXECUTION OF BEST PRACTICES:

1. Senior executives should visibly endorse and disseminate the Best Practices to all appropriate internal marketing and supporting ad agency staffs.

2. Because of GLBT diversity, focus groups are encouraged for guidance – avoid limiting to just one or two GLBT individuals. Tap into agencies and consultants with established gay-market expertise, as well as GLBT employee groups, for feedback and targeted efforts.

3. Incorporate GLBT inclusion into mainstream ad diversity representations. Integrate plans for targeted diversity marketing campaigns with gay and lesbian marketing.

4. Prepare consistent responses to media and consumer inquiries about the campaign.

5. Schedule professional, annual GLBT sensitivity training exclusively for ad and marketing staffs, and incorporate GLBT issues into general staff diversity trainings.
PART IV
FACING CREATIVE CHALLENGES:

- **Gays & Lesbians**: how do you represent them without stereotypes or clichés? Try using:
  a. Real gay or lesbian individuals. Authenticity goes a long way.
  b. Openly gay celebrities or athletes.
  c. Same-sex pairings in everyday situations, such as at home, driving, shopping, eating.
  d. Same-sex pairings with physical affection.
  e. Sexuality can be referenced through verbal, text, graphical, or anthropomorphic mentions.
  f. Unexpected twists, counter time-worn clichés, and add other humor sources.
  g. A mix of masculine/feminine pairings for men or women as couples or friends: butch-femme (men or women), femme-femme (men), butch-butch (women).

- **Bisexuals** are rarely shown at all, but when they are it is usually as duplicitous cheaters. How do you avoid that problem? Try using:
  a. Depictions without a defined relationship to another person, keep it ambiguous.
  b. References through verbal, text, graphical, or anthropomorphic mentions.

- **Transgender** is an umbrella term covering a range of identities: male-to-females/M2F, female-to-males/F2M, drag queens, “bad drag,” transsexuals, transvestites and androgyny. Most common in advertising are male-to-females, who typically show up as “deceptive” if they pass as women, or “frightening” if they do not. “Bad drag” refers to intentionally unconvincing straight men half-dressed as women, for example wearing wigs and mustaches simultaneously, as a joke or with a mock-subversive motive like spying. Transvestites are depicted as heterosexual men “caught” cross-dressing in women’s undergarments. Drag queens are portrayed as campy men impersonating women. Transsexuals have had a sex-change operation. Female-to-males and androgyny – ambiguous gender – are rarely depicted in advertising. Why not try:
  a. Incorporating transgender people in everyday situations, not as a punch line, but with acceptance as a twist.
  b. Using a real transgender person, or real female impersonator. Seek authenticity.
  c. Depicting female-to-male/F2M individuals, masculine/butch women and “drag kings.”

PART V
DOES IT WORK?

Specific internal data is difficult to come by, as companies rarely share proprietary information. But many marketers have repeatedly incorporated GLBT themes into mainstream ads: Viacom (62), Unilever (26), IKEA International (21), Levi Strauss & Co. (14), Volkswagen (14), Virgin Group (13), Coca-Cola Co. (10), Heineken (8), SABMiller (7), Polaroid Corp. (4), American Express Co. (4), Hyundai Corp. (3), Orbitz (3), John Hancock Financial Services (2), Visa International (2).

And 68% of American adults surveyed indicate that knowing a company promotes its products or services to gays and lesbians has no effect on how they feel about the company³.
About Commercial Closet Association

Commercial Closet is a nonprofit that educates advertisers, ad agencies, academics, the media, and consumers for more effective and informed references to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in advertising, creating a more accepting place for GLBT people in society. The organization provides tools, years of reporting on approaches that have and haven't worked, research, consumer feedback and input from marketing, advertising, media and education leaders, and an online library over 2,500 global video and print GLBT-themed ad samples.

The project is lead by a board of marketing, media and advertising professionals. Project founder and veteran advertising journalist Michael Wilke began covering gay marketing at its nascence over a decade ago. He has written extensively for Advertising Age, along with Adweek, The New York Times, The Advocate and appeared extensively on network TV.

View the Best Practices online with links to examples:
www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html?page=best


Footnotes
2 Consumers Will Reject Advertisers Associated with Shows Like Dr. Laura; Harris Interactive/Witeck-Combs, 2000.
7 Witeck-Combs Communications, 2005.

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