



## Commercial Closet Association

# Best Practices: BUILDING GLBT AWARENESS AND INCLUSION IN MASS/BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS ADVERTISING

### PART I INTRODUCTION:

Advertising seeks to sell, not offend. It may seem difficult today not to upset someone, but few minority groups are ridiculed as often and openly as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people. We acknowledge that humor is an indispensable tool for creative professionals, yet while “political incorrectness” and irreverence may be assets to some in stand-up comedy, the goals of advertising are different—a laugh must also translate into sales from a wide variety of people. Over the years, hundreds of commercials have referred to GLBT people to spark attention and interest. Yet companies rarely consider what messages they may send inadvertently.

Although diversity and multicultural awareness are an increasing priority for corporations, and “sexual orientation” and “gender expression” concerns are addressed internally, these issues are often overlooked in general marketing communications. Advertising has not adapted to keep up with rapidly changing social attitudes of consumers, businesses, investors, employees, vendors and governments.

**The general population and media** are increasingly aware of diversity and are often uncomfortable with messages lacking sensitivity. At least 82% of Americans know someone gay,<sup>1</sup> 81% of consumers don’t care if products they regularly use are promoted to gays,<sup>2</sup> 75% of youth support same-sex marriages,<sup>3</sup> 54% of Americans support same-sex civil unions,<sup>4</sup> and 42% of heterosexuals would be less likely to buy a product advertised on an anti-gay program.<sup>5</sup> Viacom/MTV has launched 24-hour gay channel LOGO, primetime TV has featured up to 30 gay characters, the U.S. Supreme Court has confirmed gay protections, and same-sex couples have legal recognition in eight states, Canada and 21 other countries.

**Big business** increasingly protects its gay employees from discrimination (92.2% of Fortune 500),<sup>6</sup> offers equal benefits (51% of Fortune 500)<sup>7</sup> and explores gay marketing (36% of Fortune 100),<sup>8</sup> with \$235 million-plus invested annually in U.S. gay media, events and organizations.<sup>8</sup>

**Friends, family, and colleagues of GLBT people** are very vocal, active and sensitive allies 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).<sup>9</sup> They belong to nearly every family and company, and hold \$641 billion in buying power in 2006,<sup>9</sup> 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.

1 “Sexual Orientation and the Election, Eight in Ten Likely Voters Know Someone Who is Gay or Lesbian,” Harris Interactive/Gill Foundation, Nov. 2000

2 Opinion Research Corp./Fleishman-Hillard FH-Out Front, 2004

3 “High School Seniors Down on Abortion, Support Gay Marriage,” Hamilton College/Zogby International, Jan. 2006

4 Quinnipiac College Poll, July 2006

5 “Consumers Will Reject Advertisers Associated with Shows Like Dr. Laura,” Harris Interactive/Witeck-Combs Communications, June 2000

6 Equality Forum, June 2006

7 Human Rights Campaign, State of the Workplace Report, 2005-2006

8 Commercial Closet Association reports, 2004, 2005

9 Witeck-Combs Communications, Feb. 2006

## PART II

# ADVERTISING DOs & DON'Ts:

Effective advertising takes many creative forms and is intended to inspire, motivate, persuade and educate audiences—often in new and refreshing ways. Our “Do’s and Don’ts” are not intended to be dictates but useful tools to expand (rather than limit) creative thinking and enhance corporate messaging for all households and consumers, including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) individuals. The information is based on professional trial and analysis from industry leaders.

### DOs - Most Transformative

#### In Business/Strategy:

- Do integrate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people in general ad campaigns using the tested business rationales of showing diversity and welcoming all consumers. The power of inclusion works.
- Do create respectful GLBT-inclusive campaigns for both GLBT media and general media whenever possible.
- Do sponsor and work with GLBT nonprofits if your company supports nonprofit causes. Sponsorships signal shared values and support for GLBT sensibilities and community priorities.
- Do acknowledge that equal treatment of GLBT employees is associated with effective GLBT target marketing and GLBT-inclusive general marketing.
- Do understand the value of including openly GLBT participants in focus groups for all advertising review, regardless of target audience.
- Do provide expert GLBT awareness training for advertising and marketing staff.

#### In Creative:

- Do recognize that GLBT people come from all races, ages, ethnicities, nationalities, incomes, political and religious affiliations, professions, physical abilities and gender expressions, and incorporate such diversity into GLBT representations. One size does not fit all.
- Do consider putting a twist on clichés of GLBT stereotypes, homophobia and transphobia.
- Do integrate GLBT characters as individuals and couples into “slice-of-life” and “everyday” depictions reflecting our diverse society.
- Do include real, openly GLBT celebrities, athletes and everyday people.
- Do choose inclusive and appropriate references to romantic relationships, families and individuals that are not exclusively hetero-centric.

### DON'Ts - Most Damaging

#### In Business/Strategy:

- Don't engage social conservatives in debate regarding GLBT issues when criticized; business and respect for faith are separate issues.
- Don't waffle, modify or withdraw GLBT-friendly campaigns. Be consistent and principled.
- Don't avoid addressing missteps of legitimate GLBT concerns.
- Don't hyperventilate about backlash and boycott threats. Experience shows most provocation is politically motivated and intended for near-term shock and awe. Companies find that these episodes almost always blow over quickly.

#### In Creative:

- Don't use GLBT stereotypes, themes or people as devices to elicit shock, humor or titillation.
- Don't use horrified or violent revulsion to references of homosexuality or transgender people.
- Don't label or degrade gay men or lesbians as sexual predators.
- Don't use sexuality in a degrading way to characterize same-sex affection and intimacy – or associate sexual practices with gays and lesbians differently than with heterosexuals.
- Don't characterize transgender people as deceptive, scary or freakish.
- Don't characterize bisexuals as cheaters.

### DOs - Basic Standards

#### In Business/Strategy:

- Do understand that GLBT people are increasingly accepted by society and that insensitive messaging is ineffective, if not damaging.
- Do understand that few consumers will shun your brand for being GLBT-friendly.
- Do recognize that GLBT people already are your customers.
- Do learn more about GLBT people, their demographics, media habits and brand preferences through qualified market research.
- Do understand the importance of testing GLBT-themed ads, including those emphasizing masculine or feminine characteristics, with GLBT perspectives and focus groups.
- Do consider offering GLBT marketing strategies when appropriately pursuing niche/multicultural/diversity marketing.
- Do tap into GLBT employee groups and retain GLBT marketing specialists/agencies/consultants for experienced guidance.

- Do coordinate GLBT marketing campaigns with general marketing campaigns.
- Do prepare consistent, professional responses to media/consumer inquiries about GLBT-inclusive campaigns, focusing on business rationale, corporate values and the bottom line.
- Do identify the variety and number of business sectors creating GLBT-friendly campaigns.
- Do understand that best practices towards GLBT inclusion begin at the top, with the endorsement and participation of senior executives.

#### In Creative:

- Do avoid clichéd and alienating GLBT stereotypes, homophobia and transphobia.
- Do consider including GLBT characters or real people without sensationalism.
- Do become aware of the differences between cross dressers/transvestites, transsexuals, male-to-females, female-to-males, “bad drag,” androgyny, and female impersonators/drag queens.

### DON'Ts - Needing Improvement

#### In Business/Strategy:

- Don't create GLBT-sensitive messaging and imagery without testing independently with appropriate GLBT perspectives and/or focus groups.
- Don't limit campaign feedback to one or two GLBT employees.
- Don't simply conclude that the average person or mainstream, national audiences will reject GLBT-friendly ads.
- Don't presume GLBT-friendly campaigns require disproportionately large budgets.

#### In Creative:

- Don't use GLBT stereotypes without understanding the sensitivities and risks.
- Don't challenge the masculinity of men or femininity of women without understanding the sensitivities and risks.
- Don't use nonconformity to traditional gender roles for easy laughs.
- Don't marginalize and portray lesbians solely as straight-male fantasies.

## PART III FACING CREATIVE CHALLENGES:

Hundreds of companies and ad agencies represented in the CCA Library have created GLBT-inclusive ads. They've done so to be edgy, to appeal to youth, to be creatively fresh and to reflect the diversity of their customers. Here are some suggestions for creative challenges:

### • Are Stereotypes Ever Okay?

It is often said that there is some truth to stereotypes, and indeed there are feminine/campy men, leathermen and masculine/sporty women in the GLBT community. It would be exclusionary to say they should never be depicted. But remember: what is funny within a group of trusted friends or peers, or even in standup comedy, does not necessarily work for advertising. Such characterizations may be used with caution if the intent is not to use a GLBT stereotype for ridicule and its presence works best as incidental or ultimately to counter a stereotype.

### • Gays and lesbians can be shown without relying on stereotypes or clichés.

Try using:

- Real gay or lesbian individuals. Authenticity goes a long way.
- Openly gay or lesbian celebrities or athletes.
- Same-sex pairings in everyday situations, such as at home, driving, shopping or eating.
- Same-sex pairings with physical affection.
- Sexuality referenced through verbal, text, graphical or anthropomorphic mentions.
- Unexpected twists, countering time-worn clichés and the addition of other humor sources.
- A mix of masculine/feminine pairings for men or women as couples or friends: butch-femme (men or women), femme-femme (men), butch-butcht (women).



### • Bisexuals are rarely shown at all, and when they are, it is usually as duplicitous cheaters. How do you avoid that problem?

Try using:

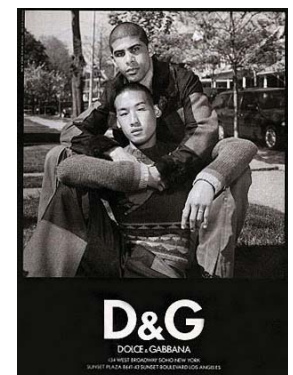
- Depictions without a defined relationship to another person. Keep it ambiguous.
- References through verbal, text, graphical or anthropomorphic mentions.



• **Transgender is an umbrella term covering a range of gender expressions, identities and situations:** male-to-females/M2F, female-to-males/F2M, drag queens/camp, “bad drag,” transsexuals, transvestites and androgyny. *Trans people are not necessarily gay/lesbian.* 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” and transvestites are 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 in ads 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:

- Incorporating transgender people in everyday situations with acceptance as a twist, or employing camp/kitsch fun.
- Using a real transgender person, or real female impersonator. Seek authenticity.
- Depicting female-to-male individuals, masculine/butch women and “drag kings.”



View the Best Practices online, illustrated by the interactive Ad Library at:

[www.commercialcloset.org](http://www.commercialcloset.org)

## PART IV

### WHY DO IT AND DOES IT WORK? WHAT ABOUT BACKLASH?

- 1. Lots of companies are already doing it.** Over 1000 corporations and 500 ad agencies are represented in the CCA Library, in categories such as alcohol/spirits, appliances, automotive, beauty, beverages, electronics, fashion, food, footwear, financial services, government, healthcare, media, packaged goods, restaurants, retail, soft drinks, telecommunications, travel and more. Specific data is difficult to come by, as companies rarely share proprietary information. But many marketers have repeatedly incorporated GLBT themes into mainstream commercials: *Viacom (81), Unilever (31), IKEA International (22), Virgin Group (17), Levi Strauss & Co. (15), Volkswagen (14), Coca-Cola Co. (13), Heineken (9), Diesel (8), SABMiller (7), Orbitz (4), Polaroid Corp. (4), American Express Co. (4), Hyundai Corp. (3), John Hancock Financial Services (2) and Visa International (2).* (Go to [CommercialCloset.org](http://CommercialCloset.org) to view these advertisers.)
- 2. Diversity that includes “sexual orientation” is increasingly important to companies, consumers, investors, employees, vendors and governments.** They will expect it. Written policies and laws addressing the matter have become commonplace.
- 3. Consider your target audience.** Are they religious conservatives and the lowest common denominator, or everyday people? Across many age groups, from Baby Boomers to Generation X and Generation Y, a majority of the population increasingly tolerant if not accepting of GLBT people. Don't forget that GLBT people are at least 7% of the population, representing \$641 billion in buying power, and they all have family, friends and colleagues who will act fiercely in their interests too.
- 4. GLBT themes and people in advertising reflect the true diversity of today's society and offer creative freshness and twists to old storylines.**
- 5. Fleishman-Hillard/FH OutFront surveys in 2004 and 2006 found 81% of American adults indicated it did not matter to them if a company whose products they regularly use are also promoted to the gay and lesbian community.** Asked what they would do if boycotts were initiated against companies promoting themselves to gays and lesbians, 46% said “do nothing” and another 19% said they would “speak out against the boycott.”

### ABOUT COMMERCIAL CLOSET ASSOCIATION

CCA 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 Ad Library with over 3,000 global video and print GLBT-themed ad samples.

The project is led 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.



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