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How queer went corporate: The 50-year evolution of LGBTQ+ marketing

Inclusion and diversity efforts grew in Sydney in that light beam gave from trailblazing to commonplace to commercialized in operation

Jessica Lee, Jan 12, 2022 **More than 2 years ago**

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By Jessica Lee

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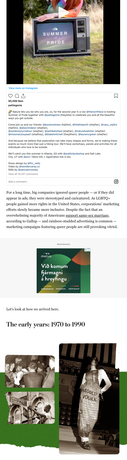
Although it was the second year that Pattie Gonia and the North Face had collaborated on Pride-theme advertising, the campaign had conservatives to call for a boycott of North Face products. Similar controversies have arisen in the past decade for companies like Chipotle such as Anheuser-Busch InBev, Dodge and Ram's decision to stop marketing and merchandising efforts that include queer people.



For a long time, big companies ignored queer people — or if they did appear in ads, they were stereotyped and caricatured. As LGBTQ+ people gained more rights in the United States, corporations' marketing efforts slowly became more inclusive. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of Americans accepted same-sex marriage, according to Gallup — and nationwide standard advertising is common — marketing campaigns featuring queer people are still provoking vitriol.

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Let's look at how we arrived here.

The early years: 1970 to 1990

Many corporations' earliest efforts to court queer consumers happened after the 1969 Stonewall uprising and the first Pride march in 1970, a major turning point in the visibility of LGBTQ+ people and the early years of the modern gay rights movement.

First came the spirits. Because of their presence in bars and nightclubs, queer community hot spots, alcohol companies were among the earliest to court queer consumers, according to Ian Johnson, principal consultant at Out Now, an LGBTQ+ business development consultancy.

In the late 1970s, brands such as Miller Lite, Budweiser, Coors Light and Algermeister started placing ads in regional queer newspapers. Swedish vodka brand Absolut followed suit in 1981.

Absolut's 1981 ad for the Swedish brand of vodka was the first example of a company targeting the gay community. (Absolut Company)

Catering to queer customers was risky in the early 1980s as the AIDS epidemic started to decimate the LGBTQ+ community, having its members isolated and ostracized. At the time, there was little insight into queer people's tastes and spending power, Johnson said. The risk of backlash for aligning a company's identity with queer people was significant.

But the mere proved fruitful for Absolut, which has maintained a constant presence in queer markets and has developed a deep partnership with GLAAD, the world's largest queer media advocacy group.

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"Absolut is proud to have been one of the first brands to unabashedly advertise to the LGBTQ+ community," Jim Brand said in a statement to The Washington Post, adding that holding community with queer consumers "made sense back in 1981, and it makes sense today."

Coming out: 1990 to 2000

The presence of more queer characters in sitcoms such as "Ellen," whose main character came out on TV in 1997, and "Will and Grace," which debuted in 1998, made visual LGBTQ+ people's visibility. Meanwhile, early research of queer populations and their spending power encouraged more big companies to go after the market.

Gradually, big companies branched out from queer publications. Ikea, the Swedish furniture company, became the first major corporation to run a U.S. TV commercial depicting a gay couple in 1994. The ad — which showed two men shopping for a bed, one of them pregnant and one only after it is in place, in New York and D.C. — was heralded as a groundbreaking gesture of queer representation. But its run was short-lived, as the ad was subjected to backlash, provoking calls for boycotts and hostile threats against Ikea stores.

The desire to court queer consumers while avoiding public blowback led to a strain of advertising known as "gay vague," using subtle elements that would register with LGBTQ+ people while flying over the heads of heterosexual audiences. These ads would often feature people of the same gender, sometimes without specifying the nature of their relationship.

President Bill Clinton, left, makes the representation of gay homosexuals in the White House a priority, including hosting a reception for gay and lesbian Democrats in Cincinnatian Dave Throne (Dave Throne Images)

After market research revealed that lesbians made up a pillar of Subaru's customer base, the Japanese company leaned into the "gay vague" approach. One such vague print campaign featured Subaru with the tagline "Love Is Out There." Another, for the Subaru Forester, a "dyke-friendly" car, where lesbian and "FORNICS" (a reference to Prostitutes, Mass., a popular queer vacation spot).

Once dozens "gay vague" commercial from German automaker Volkswagen debuted during the coming-out episode of "Ellen" in 1997. The ad featured two men driving in a neighborhood and spying a discarded armchair. While queer viewers interpreted the men as a couple, straight viewers saw them as friends or roommates.

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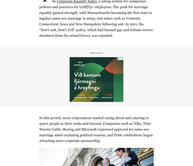
Though Volkswagen didn't intend for the ad to depict a gay couple, the company's response was unique because "they said they didn't mind if people read it that way," said Michael Wilke, a former Ad Age reporter and founder of AdReach, a nonprofit archive of queer representation in advertising. "That was a real switch for advertisers," Wilke said.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton declared June as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month, a gesture that ultimately ushered in a new era in queer marketing.

The rise of the rainbow: 2000 to 2014



The 1990s marked a turning point in cultural attitudes toward queer people. In 1993, the Human Rights Campaign introduced its Corporate Equality Index, a rating system for companies' policies and practices for LGBTQ+ employees. The push for marriage equality started in the 1990s, with Massachusetts becoming the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003, and states such as Vermont, Connecticut, Iowa and New Hampshire following suit. In 2011, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which had banned gay and lesbian service members from the armed forces, was repealed.

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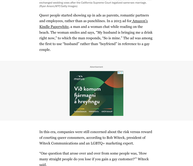
In this period, more corporations started joining alone and catering to queer people in their modes and beyond. Companies such as Nike, Time Warner Cable, Boeing and Microsoft expressed approval for same-sex marriage amid escalating political tension, and Pride celebrations began attracting more corporate sponsorship.



Left to right: Jack Nigro, Commissioner Jackie Cherry, Mayor Tom Menino, Lt. Governor Kerry Healey and Thomas Menino Jr. left to Ben Fishbone at June 27, 2004, Suffolk and Boston Gay Pride Parade in Boston, Mass. Fishbone, a Suffolk County Sheriff's Department officer, was killed in Afghanistan. (Dave Sherrill/Getty Images)

Queer people started showing up in ads as parents, romantic partners and employees, rather than as prostitutes. In a story ad for Amazon's Kindle Paperwhite, a man and a woman chat while reading on the Kindle and discuss their respective books. The woman's book is titled "right now," to which the man responds, "So is mine." The ad was among the first to use "husband" rather than "boyfriend" in reference to a gay couple.

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In this era, companies were still concerned about the risk versus reward of courting queer consumers, according to Bob Witeck, president of Witeck Communications and an LGBTQ+ marketing expert.

"One question that arose over and over from some people was, 'How many straight people do you lose if you gain a gay customer?'" Witeck said.

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The threat of backlash barely influenced the calculus. In 2014, Hallmark was applauded for rolling out catalogues for Mother's Day and Father's Day that featured real queer couples with their children, while the company faced a boycott from conservative group Focus Fifteen Moms.

Transgender inclusion: 2015 to today

The national legalization of same-sex marriage — through the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* — broke barriers for companies that had been reluctant to seek queer consumers, according to Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of GLAAD.

"It gave a permission slip to those who were just not giving it much thought," Ellis said.

Meanwhile, the rise of social media made it easier for advertisers to cater to specific audiences online. Plus, younger consumers grew up preferring media that was more inclusive and diverse. All these factors created an environment in which big corporations loudly signaled their support of queer communities during Pride month, rolling out rainbow-plastered products and partnerships with queer advocacy groups. Ads became more diverse and inclusive, with less reliance on stereotypes. Lesbians and transgender people began to appear more frequently.

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In 2019, Gillette made waves with a Facebook ad that showed a real transgender artist and activist, Samson Bonkesbanta Brown, being taught to shave by his father. The ad tenderly captured a significant moment in a transgender person's transition.

"As a company that holds respect and inclusivity as an important value, we have a responsibility to make sure we are embracing and promoting inclusive portrayals of gender," Gillette said in a statement at the time.

Years later, however, transgender representation in advertising has become contentious as anti-trans legislation and sentiment increases across the country. In March, Hershey faced blowback for including a transgender activist on packaging in Canada as part of a promotion celebrating International Women's Day.

Instagram

The link to this photo or video may be broken, or the post may have been removed.

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Bud Light's short-lived partnership with trans comedian and influencer Dylan Mulvaney — via an Instagram video in which she showed off beer cans with her likeness that the brand sent to commemorate a year of her transition to womanhood — was met with vitriol from some conservative consumers, who dumped cans of Bud Light and called for a boycott of parent company Anheuser-Busch InBev, a longtime partner of GLAAD. The brand's response, which didn't directly address the hate directed at Mulvaney, angered queer people, many of whom joined the boycott. Bud Light's sales have dipped so much that Modelo Especial has overtaken Bud Light as the country's most popular beer, and some analysts are projecting the controversy could permanently dent AB InBev's U.S. sales.

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In a June Instagram video, Mulvaney said the Bud Light ad had opened her up to more bullying and transphobia than she'd ever experienced. The brand has yet to reach out to her, despite the torrent of abuse she received.

"For a company to hire a trans person and then not publicly stand by them is worse, in my opinion, than not hiring a trans person at all," Mulvaney said in the video. "It gives customers permission to be as hateful and transphobic as they want."

In the lead-up to Pride this year, retailers such as Kohl's, Walmart, Nike, PetSmart and the North Face have also received blowback from the far right for stocking items that extol equal rights and acceptance for gay, lesbian and transgender people. By sticking to their guns, these companies have succeeded in brushing off the backlash, experts say.

Still, the prevalence of the pushback seems to have had a broader chilling effect on this year's Pride efforts from corporations. In earnings calls, corporate filings and presentations, companies referenced "Pride Month" nearly 40 percent less in 2023 than the previous year, according to analysis from Bloomberg News. That marked the first decline in five years, with references to other LGBTQ+ terms also showing significant drop-offs.

Though many companies consider queer-focused marketing a meaningful way to expand their brands' reach, Ellis said, representation is still lagging. Portrayals of bisexual and nonbinary people in ads remain rare. And the bulk of advertising featuring LGBTQ+ people still comes during June, Ellis said.

"We are grossly underrepresented as a community," Ellis said. Companies "have to do better."

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