

Where Have All The Gay People Gone?

There is an interesting phenomenon sweeping the gay community these days. Although there is a lot of discussion and conjecture as to what is going on, to date no one has quite been able to put their finger on it. That phenomenon, quite simply is, "where have all the gay people gone?"

You may be confused, telling yourself you know where they all are - they're in the gay villages all throughout urban centers across the world. The reality is that they are not... at least not in the numbers that we have seen in the 80's and 90's, when gay life really came into its own. During that time numbers were high in several national gay publications and multiple local gay newspapers in regions such as Los Angeles, New York and even Louisville, Kentucky. In the late 90's, the GLBT websites hit the scene, with *PlanetOut.com*, *GayWired.com* and *Gay.com* taking an early lead in what had become a global phenomenon in its own right. This phenomenon, the rise of the Internet, affected gays & straights in an almost equal fashion.

Today, we have several GLBT radio stations, both online and over the airwaves. We have 2 specific GLBT television networks in the US, here! Networks and Logo; and most consider Bravo to be the next in line in terms of "gayness" for its feature shows including *Project Runway*, *Kathy Griffin's Life on the D-List* and the pioneering *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. It has been Bravo and so many of the other more mainstream networks, newspapers, magazines and movies which have progressively educated and made being gay or lesbian almost a non-issue, especially to the younger generations. In some ways, the real pioneers for mainstream acceptance of gays & lesbians have been the hit show *Will and Grace* and MTV's *The Real World*. They brought gay and lesbian people into the households of millions without being overt, preachy and in-your-face. They have helped to debunk many of the stereotypes people had been carrying with them about gays and lesbians from generation to generation.

So it should come as no surprise that our younger generations, the Millennials or Generation Y (defined as individuals born from the late 1970s to the early 1990s), look at someone being gay as a non-issue. This is a change from a decade ago when folks who considered themselves hip and cutting edge found having gay friends made them "cool." It is this new-found sentiment, currently manifesting itself even today in the California and Massachusetts gay marriage initiatives, which should cause anyone marketing to the gay & lesbian community to take a step back. One needs to understand this new, current landscape of changing attitudes, changing buying habits and even more importantly, changing



"social" habits.

So Where Did They Go?

It is this "social" aspect that is most poignant and easier to see in a wide variety of examples today, if we know where to look. First, gay bar owners are lamenting from coast to coast that gays and lesbians are no longer frequenting their bars the way they used to 10 years ago. Their first target to blame is the Internet, where they have come to the conclusion that if a gay man wishes to "hook up", what used to be the exclusive realm of gay bars has now migrated to sites such as *Gay.com*, *Manhunt.net*, *Adam4Adam.com* and other similar sites.

It can be argued that these gay bars are seeing a drop in attendance based upon the fact that their reason to exist is becoming diminished year to year by the changing attitudes of society today. What we are seeing is not that the under-30 crowd is not going out... what we are seeing is that they are going to more alternative-oriented clubs spread out all throughout their cities. At these

clubs they can actually party and hang out with their real friends rather than feel pressured to go to a gay bar and try to make new friends just because they are gay. It is in these more alternative clubs and bars that gay & straight people mix much more freely than they did 10 years ago. One can also see them pouring out on the streets at 2:00 am after the clubs have closed and be pleasantly surprised that the straight guys are not seeking out and picking on the gay guys. A decade ago, this was a real fear for anyone, gay or lesbian, who went into an environment such as this and wanted to just "be themselves."

In the September 2007 Entrepreneur Magazine article entitled "10 Businesses Facing Extinction in 10 Years" (<http://www.entrepreneur.com/extinction/index.html>) and found in audio by NPR here http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2008/04/25/gay_bars/), quotes range from "It's a busy weekend night at a gay bar in Los Angeles," "Actor Jason Dottley says gay bars don't just cater to a gay clientele anymore," and "The scene has become a lot more mixed." Jerry McHugh of Community Marketing, Inc. was quoted as saying "Generation X people and Generation Y people are less concerned about gay-exclusive socialization, and they're more interested in a more-diverse environment." McHugh says that for gay boomers, bars used to function like community centers.



Another interesting phenomenon related to the social migration of gay and lesbian people is the 2000 Census figures, which for the first time counted same-sex individuals living together in a household. Armed with this information, it was "discovered" that many gays & lesbians "moved" to the suburbs. Previously it was always assumed gay men and lesbian women congregated in the safety of modern urban environments. Most people realize today that this was no discovery at all... these gays & lesbians have always been living in the suburbs. It was a combination of two factors that allowed this fact to come to light... the actual counting of same-sex households in a national census, and the growing comfort of these suburban gays & lesbians to "out" themselves to the census taker.

Who Should Be Marketing Themselves to this Community?

At the end of the day, it is the word "social" that is most important when it comes to understanding where the gay & lesbian market is going, and it is no coincidence that the new waves of Internet communities being embraced by gays & lesbians today are based upon the concept of "social networking." It is a combination of the changing attitudes amongst society, along with the new tools and opportunities available to everyone, gay and straight, that has allowed what is happening in the "real world" in terms of overall acceptance to spill over into the "cyber world" of Facebook, MySpace, blogs and more.

In a few years time, marketers will realize that gay men and lesbian women have only one thing in common that binds them together. Social. They may have absolutely nothing else in common with each other... one person may love volleyball and taking romantic walks on the beach. Another person might like late night clubbing and hanging out in coffee houses during the day. In the end, the only thing all of these people have in common, if they are gay or lesbian, is the social aspect of their lives. It is this premise that provides both the opportunity and failure in gay & lesbian marketing campaigns today and in the coming years, as this phenomenon takes hold across more and more generational spectrums of society.

We have seen many products marketed to gay people because marketers have been told that if you develop a product or service unique to this community and market it to this community, they will be loyal to you and spend their extra discretionary income on your product or service. For every gay wine company that has been launched, a failed company can

be found. It is surprising that no one has tried gay toothpaste yet!

On the positive side, pride festivals and other GLBT events are still growing despite the lessening need for activists and their friends to come out and march for GLBT rights. Events such as the Palm Springs Dinah Shore weekend for the girls and the White Party for the boys grow every year by leaps and bounds. It is because this environment is the ultimate in social interaction.

Some of the more traditional companies marketing themselves to the GLBT community are still valid in today's market, although to stay in front of where the eyeballs are going, some marketing tactics will need to be revised. Let's take travel as an example. Travel is still one of the primary industries marketing to the GLBT community today, and their relevance to this changing market could not be greater. Travel, by definition for most, is a social event. Some like to just travel with friends, others with their partner, and even more like to do the larger travel packages including going on a cruise with several thousand gay men as their travel companions. Is does not get any more social than this!

The airline industry has even made some attempts to jump into the social aspect of travel, including Air New Zealand's Pink Flight to the Sydney Mardi Gras in 2008. This was a plane chartered just for this event and was full of but gay men and drag queen stewardesses, with Kathy Griffin entertaining the entire way.

In the world of entertainment, the gay aspect will always be strong... there is something very special and social about enjoying a gay film with others, either in the theater or at home. And with the growth of more and more gay & lesbian television series, films and movies coming out every year, this speaks volumes as to the continuing growth and relevance of entertainment marketing to the GLBT community. In addition, "Coming Out" films and other gay- and lesbian-genre films still allow gays and lesbians to feel connected to aspects of society that they may not have yet come into contact with. The power of the arts in the GLBT community, especially film, cannot be understated.

In other markets, including finance and health, there are certain products or services that can be successfully marketed to the gay & lesbian community while keeping the social aspect in mind. Visa is doing a mainstream marketing campaign on Facebook at the time this article was written, focusing on the aspect of business social connections brought together by Visa on Facebook. Other business people can then use the Facebook site for more of their business networking needs. This is very social, but from a business perspective. Some health products, especially those related to HIV and AIDS, are by their very nature best suited for being marketed to the gay community. Modifying a campaign to touch on the social aspect of a health product could incorporate more real world stories and interviews about individuals who have successfully used the product.

As can be seen, each scenario is custom in its own right, and most marketers can adapt their marketing message to this social networking environment.

There are not-so-obvious exceptions to the concept of products being marketed to the gay & lesbian community that don't seem to have a direct connection to one's social life. Gay swimwear and underwear have been quite successful and seem to be growing in popularity every year, with companies including Andrew Christian and GO Softwear leading the way. It can be argued that wearing gay specific swimwear or underwear makes a statement, allowing an individual to enhance his or her "cool" factor in the gay world, and being "cool" is definitely a social phenomenon, especially at White Party when you're lounging around poolside. The same analogy has applied to jewelry and even cosmetics.

How Do I Do It?

So how does one market to this ever-changing group of individuals who are aging into their 30s and having more discretionary income in their pockets? That is where the understanding of how to market in the world of social networking becomes more important month by month. Placing an ad in a magazine or website and marketing "to" an individual is being replaced by the concept of entering into the social conversations of one's target marketing and speaking "with" a group of individuals. Facebook has made this into a science with the creation of their News Feed, one of the biggest online developments in the past few years, and how this News Feed aggregates a user's life in text, photos and video for all of his or her friends to see has revolutionized this realm. The Facebook train has left the station and more and more individuals and marketers are jumping on board, trying to figure out how to make it work best for them.

Regarding Facebook, unarguably the leader in social networking and the top website where the "eyeballs" we wish to be in front of are migrating to and spending more of their time each day, the trick is how to enter into and become part of the social conversations happening on this site. The key is to place your business not necessarily in the forefront, but simply as part of the overall fabric of day to day life being played out on Facebook today. To learn more about how this can be done, please check out the article entitled "Advanced Online Marketing" at this link location:
<http://www.pinkbananamedia.com/storydetail.cfm?storyid=6>.

As quoted by David Carr in the NY Times article of July 21, 2008 entitled "Hey, Friend, Do I Know You?"
 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/21/business/media/21carr.html>):

"Not that long ago, I needed some advice on the book business and thought to ask my friend Buzz Bissinger, the author of "Friday Night Lights" and "A Prayer for the City." The only sticking point was, we'd never met.

Although he used to be a reporter, we are not what I would call peers. He wrote one of the greatest sports books ever, and oh, one of the best books about city government ever. "Friday Night Lights" became a movie and then a television series and apart from me being a hopeless fanboy of the show, we have nothing in common.

Other than Facebook, of course, where we are "friends," after he was referred by our mutual friend Vernon Loeb of The Philadelphia Inquirer. Taking that supplied noun as a permission, I sent Mr. Bissinger a message on Facebook and asked for advice. We got on the phone and I found out exactly, precisely what I wanted to know from, as they say in the Web world, a highly trusted source. Isn't "friendship" wonderful?"

As a side note, this is how one uses Facebook for business-to-business social networking, a space thus far reserved by LinkedIn.com and Plaxo.com

Blogs are also a big part of the social world of communication online. In a blog, one can post an article or story, but more importantly, the audience can talk back in the form of comments, thus making that article interactive. It is this concept which has given rise to some incredibly popular blogs including *TowleRoad.com* and *OhLaLaMag.com*, just to name a few. These blogs have web traffic (as measured by a variety of sources including Alexa.com) that far surpasses that found on some of the largest online GLBT community sites today.

For more details on the "how" in the world of Social Marketing to the GLBT Community, read this article published in June 2008, which delves into more detail on the various aspects of marketing on Facebook, MySpace, Blogs, YouTube and more. It is entitled "Advanced Online Marketing" and can be found at this link location:
<http://www.pinkbananamedia.com/storydetail.cfm?storyid=6>.

In summary, it is not the Internet which has taken gays and lesbians off the streets and kept them hidden behind their computers at home. It is the combination of changing attitudes about gays and lesbians in society today merged with the new-found tools of social networking brought on by Friendster, MySpace and especially Facebook that have allowed gays and lesbians to become a more integral part of society's mosaic. This causes them to not be ostracized and forced to find their social needs in just one safe part of their city, the gay village that has predominated gay urban life for the past 20 to 30 years. People using Facebook aren't replacing social interactions with Internet chat... they're simply finding out where their friends are going that night, which parties seem the coolest and arranging their social calendar accordingly! The marketer's job is to position his or her product or service into this space without being overt in the advertising... as more and more companies are finding out, each company's solution is a unique and custom puzzle in terms of finding the right social networking marketing mix that's right for them. There's no unique right or wrong answer, but when it is done correctly, the rewards are compounded by the fact that the marketer's company is now at the forefront and one of the leaders in the new wave of online social network marketing today, and will be perceived as such while the competitors' perceptions fall behind.