

Commercial closet

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Same-sex marriage ads dominate 2004

Anti-gay marriage amendments to the federal and state constitutions flourished in 11 states and nationally, all supported by advertising that reflected the hostility that most Americans and politicians felt about the idea, as well as gay organizations fighting for it. Altogether, with politicians, gay and anti-gay organizations, as well as several corporate advertisers, over 100 ads posited a position on same-sex marriage in 2004 alone.

In fact, due in large part to the negative politicking, negative-rated commercials in the Commercial Closet archive nearly doubled for 2004, with an increase of 90 percent. Of the 87 ads rated by Commercial Closet for last year, 40 (45.9 percent) fell into the Negative category, compared to only 21 (19 percent) in 2003. Oregon was an advertising-heavy battleground, with a strong TV presence by both gay and anti-gay forces, while other states such as



It was a hot year for gay marriage in advertising — as evidenced by spots from both the Radisson and W Hotels.

North Carolina, Oklahoma, Utah, Georgia, Louisiana and Tennessee fared with mostly negative ads.

Over and over again, political candidates running for state or national office — Republican and Democrat, male and female — touted in their ads that they voted against gay marriage or worked to “protect the sanctity of marriage.” More negative ads chimed in from anti-gay forces including Focus on the Family and Americans United to Preserve Marriage, a so-called 527 organization from fundamentalist Gary Bauer, against presidential hopeful John Kerry.

Left-leaning MoveOn.org and LGBT organizations fought back, lead by the Human Rights Campaign with 22 ads alone, along with GLAAD, MassEquality.org in Massachusetts, Stonewall Columbus in Ohio and the Constitution Defense League in Missouri. Up north, where full marriage for lesbians and gays is expected to be approved nationally soon, pro-gay organizations Canadians for Equal Marriage and Equal Marriage for Same-Sex Couples have pushed for the cause.

MTV addressed the marriage issue in

its ongoing, diversity-oriented Fight for Your Rights series. One of the six featured a young man stopping people everywhere, asking them for “permission to marry Megan.” The ending asks viewers, “How would you feel if you had to ask 260 million people for the right to marry?” Others in the series perversely linked piercing, and pairs of hot dogs and donuts to same-sex marriage.

Some corporations see opportunity too

Responding to the hot topic, some corporate advertisers chimed in too. Fashion brand Kenneth Cole created a print ad showing two men holding hands, saying, “52 percent of Americans think same-sex marriage doesn’t deserve a good reception. Are you putting us on?” Of course, the text has a double meaning and the men wear a watch and black shirts by the designer, with their wedding bands.

Kenneth Cole’s gay marriage ad is part of a larger issues-driven campaign that looks at HIV, affirmative action, the deficit, censorship, and the presidential election (partisanship was carefully avoided). The marriage ad ran in both gay media and GQ, though it is still rare for advertisers to run gay-specific ads in both general media and gay media. Since 1994, Kenneth Cole has created advertising sensitive to AIDS and gay issues, positioned as clever one-liner comments from Cole himself.

Specific properties of Radisson and W Hotels have carried advertisements featuring same-sex wedding ceremonies, a source of business for them.

Promoting its “WOW Vows, the W Los Angeles showed two grooms atop a wedding cake with the headline, “Come celebrate your vows...in a romantic world of wonder.”

Radisson Hotel New Orleans showed two men holding hands wearing a wedding band with the headline “Committed,” though the individual hotel’s web site only reflects opposite-sex weddings. Since 2003, W Hotels have also run corporate advertising in the gay market, but Radisson has not.

Two-hundred-year-old Boston jeweler Shreve Crump & Low ran print ads featuring wedding bands and carrying the headline, “This Is Love. It’s Not Up For A Vote.” Two years earlier, the store initiated ads in the gay community with a headline putting a twist on old conventional wisdom, “Not all the good ones are gay or taken. Some are both.”

Faced with a difficult political situation and a difficult history to overcome, Coors Brewing Co. placed ads in gay media explicitly stating, “Let’s be clear. We don’t support amending the Constitution.” In addition, it explained, “This election year, there’s a lot of national debate on issues that are important to the LGBT community, including the *Federal Marriage Amendment*. And, as a political candidate, Pete Coors has expressed his personal position on this issue. Coors Brewing Company’s position on this issue differs from Pete Coors.”

With the reintroduction of the *Federal Marriage Amendment*, and several more states preparing to vote on amending their constitutions to address the issue, more debate via advertising is surely on the way. Will corporate advertisers continue to follow as well?

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