



Hotel Hotsheet
Megg Mueller Schulte

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Marketing courts a diverse crowd

Hotels are in business to please customers. Exhaustive studies, focus groups and customer-feedback cards all serve one purpose: Know your clientele.

The caption on Wyndham's ad reads 'I want extra blankets because my partner always hogs the covers.'
Courtesy Wyndham Hotels

So it's not surprising that we see hotels cater to women with spa packages, figure-friendly menus and brand-name toiletries. Advertisements reflect the changing face of America; both guests and staff are shown in a rainbow of colors representative of our country. And while it's not exactly a novel idea, hoteliers are taking their first steps toward wooing an often-overlooked group: the gay traveler.



As Massachusetts opens its courtrooms to same-sex couples tying the knot, newlyweds will be planning honeymoons and booking cruises. And to pick up on this trend, Wyndham and W hotels have taken the lead in marketing their chain to gays.

Advertisements for Wyndham's "By Request" feature — which provides guests with customized room amenities such as snacks and drinks — now include photos of a good-looking young man with a tag line that reads: "I want foam pillows for me and feather ones for my partner — he's like that." You won't find these ads in mainstream publications — yet. Even so, the company doesn't view its strategy as daring. Wyndham's Andrew Jordan, executive vice president and chief marketing officer, told the Gay Financial Network (GFN): "This isn't something we thought was bold. Our internal reaction was 'Why didn't we do this before?'"

Billy Axelrod is a fairly typical gay traveler. He heads out on the road for business a few times a year, with leisure travel sprinkled in whenever he gets the chance. His reaction to seeing the Wyndham ads was mostly positive. "I actually like when mainstream companies target gay and lesbian consumers, even if the ads are not 100% on-target," he said. "It shows that the company is savvy enough to balance the value of appealing to a wider, and possibly 'hipper,' audience with the small risk of alienating traditional customers."

Marketing to gays is nothing new for W Hotels, part of Starwood Hotels boutique group. It started catering to same-sex couples in 1998. But last year, openly gay chief marketing officer Ross Klein encouraged the company to step up its efforts by diversifying its "Willow & William" campaign to include "Walter & Ward" and "Whitney & Wilma," reports *GFN*.

The chain didn't stop there; it also trained its front desk staff how to react (or, rather, not react) when gay partners request a single bed. That's a small thing, it seems, but when I check into a hotel with my husband, we are asked "one bed or two." Anyone should be able to respond to the same question without their answer raising any eyebrows.

In the end, it's all about the bottom line, isn't it? Cities still struggling since the tragedies of 9/11 have realized that niche marketing is the way to increase revenue during lean times. As a result, women, Latinos, African-Americans and now gays are all demographics the travel industry as a whole has decided to target. Specifically, hoteliers, car rental companies and cruise lines are actively seeking to garner their share of this popular market.

"It's just running a smart business," Axlerod said. "Even though I'm not looking for a car, I thought it was great to see Subaru in all the gay and lesbian magazines. And now Volvo is on gay.com. I think of them as being on the vanguard, and I have a positive image of the brand just for being first, even when the message is not dead-on."

But why seek the gay traveler's business? Just look at the numbers: They spend 70% of their travel dollars online, as opposed to 59% of heterosexuals. And 84% of gay travelers have a passport, as opposed to the 29% that is the national average, according to the *New York Times*).

So many passports, so many ways for companies to say we'd love to take your money. At least the business world has always believed in equality.