

Looking into the Gay Market...

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IN HER THOUGHT-PROVOKING book "*Money, Myths, and Change*," economist Sharon Badgett expresses serious doubt that gays and lesbians constitute a distinguishable "gay market" with different consumption patterns from those of heterosexuals. ...I disagree...

At most she allows that readers of gay newspapers, typical of newspaper readers generally, might have higher incomes and that gay men, particularly couples without children, might be a promising target market for upscale products.

Badgett seems to think that a distinguishable gay market would have to reflect "fundamentally" (her word) different product interests, a claim she later modifies to a more reasonable "stronger preferences for certain products or certain product characteristics." Let's see.....

There is little evidence about the consumer behaviour of all gays and lesbians. That research has not been done and may be impossible. It seems more useful to start with what we can observe, the paradigm case of **urban gay men**, then see how generalizable that model might be.

The most obvious sociological characteristics of urban gay men is that they are preponderantly childless and somewhat more likely than heterosexuals to be single.

Lacking children, they have more disposable income especially when coupled but even when single. And with fewer family obligations and constraints, they will have more time as well as money to spend on personal development, recreation and entertainment.

Since they are disproportionately single (or between relationships), they are more likely to be in the market for a partner/date, to meet friends and socialise in public, to patronize commercial entertainment offerings, and try to enhance their appeal to potential partners.

It is worth noticing that many partnered gay men continue their earlier socialising habits as partners simply because they have the time, find it convenient, can afford to, and see it as enjoyable.

Taken together, these suggest that urban gay men would be somewhat more likely to go out to bars and clubs at weekends, buy more alcohol, and see more movies, plays and concerts.

For at-home recreation they would have reason to buy more popular and classical CDs, more videos (including commercial porn), more computer-related products, more non-business related books.

They would likely have greater interest in fashionable leisure wear, body maintenance

from gym memberships to workout supplements, personal health and grooming products, cosmetic surgery, and so on.

Gay men seem to travel recreationally more, and not just on extended holidays. They may travel to visit an out-of-town partner they know or met on the Internet. Gays in smaller cities travel to larger cities on holiday weekends to look for partners, or escape a socially constricted environment.

Are urban gay men distinctively brand loyal? With greater disposable income they can afford higher quality brands rather than lower, brands with prestige or cachet, or brands with certain masculine or fashion associations, perhaps to impress themselves as much as other people.

Timberland work boots, Levi 501s, Marlboro cigarettes, and Absolut vodka are venerable examples. More current ones might include Calvin Klein and Armani, and anything with D&G on it.

Other brand loyalties seems more evanescent, driven by enclave fad or "pack behaviour," in a way best described by French sociologist Gabriel Tarde's "laws of social imitation."

The task for any marketer is to break into the market, create product differentiation, generate a reputation, cachet or fad, then retain a portion of that clientele when the next fad or quality competition comes along. Advertising can play a role there.

One change we can expect in the future is the slow aging of the "gay market" as gays who came out in the 70s and 80s are staying out, and AIDS does not claim the lives of so many men in their late 30s and 40s. This has noticeably begun to happen already.

With age, gay men's income will increase and their tastes and product needs will gradually shift. There will be a greater demand for real estate and for retirement and financial planning. They will develop more cultivated tastes in music and recreation, seek more interesting vacation destinations, and become more concerned with health maintenance.

They will likely prefer more impressive automobiles and better restaurants, do more home entertaining, drink more wine and less beer. The percentage of smokers will decline: After 30, more people stop smoking than start.

Currently gay men outside urban areas are probably influenced by urban gay consumer behaviour only partially and selectively. But that influence is likely to increase as coming out, travel, Internet communication, and gay visibility all increase.

Lesbians, however, seem to diverge considerably from gay men in being more coupled, having more children, earning less money, not being so concentrated in an enclave, and having different interests and socialising patterns. So we lack an adequate understanding of the "lesbian market" or their differentiable consumer behaviour.