

Gay TV Ad Shows Tide Turns for Marketers

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By Michele Gershberg

NEW YORK (Reuters) - "You can cruise for women; we'll cruise for men," quips Carson Kressley, the flamboyant fashion consultant on cable television channel Bravo's new smash hit, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," to his straight companion.

It is a message not lost on advertisers, who are taking a closer look at reaching the gay and lesbian market with a batch of summer programs highlighting gay-versus-straight themes.

Bravo's "Queer Eye," in which five gay experts on style come to the rescue of a hapless straight slob, is a prime example. In addition to ads by major brands such as L'Oreal and Whirlpool, the show became a venue for the first TV spot directly targeting gay consumers by Internet travel reservation site Orbitz.

Advertisers have spent years, and millions, cultivating diversity in their campaigns to sell products across a spectrum of American society, but mostly stopped short of including openly gay representations in mainstream pitches.

Industry watchers say they are surprised it has taken the advertising sector so long to invest in a community whose estimated spending power amounts to \$500 billion.

Major companies "probably spend more on paper clips than they do on the gay market," said Michael Wilke, executive director of the Commercial Closet Association, which tracks representations of the gay community in advertising.

"Typically a company may come into the market, but in a very inexpensive way. ... Now that television is starting to become an option, this requires a rethinking of their budgets," he said. "There's still a lingering concern about the past taboo of what the gay community means to people, combined with a lack of information about the market."

ADVERTISERS SEE SHIFT IN ATTITUDE

But the tides are shifting, as gay characters or themed programming become entrenched for broadcast and cable networks, built on the success of shows such as NBC's "Will & Grace."

Interest is also buoyed by political developments, such as Canada's move toward legalizing gay marriages and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn sodomy laws.

"There has been tremendous growth and interest in reaching lesbians and gay men on the part of advertisers," said Howard Buford, chief executive of ad agency Prime Access, which has created gay-targeted print campaigns for major companies.

"When one company goes in there, then there's pressure on its competitor (to do the same)," he said. He noted a "dramatic" increase of gay-specific ads in niche publications and expects more gay portrayals in mainstream spots.

Buford said the shift also gets a push from the cultural buzz around "metrosexuals" -- a new definition for young, urban straight men "who are looking to the gay community to be arbiters of good taste."

In addition to "Queer Eye," Bravo will premiere next week "Boy Meets Boy," a reality dating show in which a gay man searches for love among male contestants. Bravo, owned by the NBC unit of General Electric, has long put a special emphasis on programs for the gay community.

Satellite provider DirecTV will debut in August a new pay-per-view service for gay and lesbian viewers offering movies and special programming.

MTV Networks and Showtime, owned by Viacom Inc., have also mulled building a network dedicated to gay viewers, but no plans have been finalized, an MTV spokeswoman said.

NO MORE WINKS AT THE AUDIENCE

Many advertisers took their first stab at marketing in the gay community by placing their mainstream ads in publications such "Out" and "The Advocate" or online. The main industries involved include automakers, financial services, travel and more recently, skin and beauty care.

"What the recent change for us is saying now that we've got a little more resources, a little more refinement, we'd like to do tailored ads in targeted publications," said John Maloney, vice president of communications for Volvo cars North America.

Volvo has a customized campaign inviting gay and lesbian families to tell their stories and compete for a weekend vacation under the slogan "Safety. Security. Family."

On television, some advertisers sought to pique interest with spots underpinned by more or less sexually ambiguous subtexts between two male or female characters.

"It's kind of fun for gay people, because we figure them out and a lot of straight people probably don't," said Ted Allen, a contributing editor to Esquire magazine and a member of the "Queer Eye" team advising on food and wine.

The Orbitz ad, however, pulls no punches. Using marionettes, it shows a travel agent booking reservations for a Miami hotel.

The scene switches to a couple standing on the balcony of their hotel room, where the woman comments on the beautiful view. The man, spying a muscular male sunbather at the pool with his binoculars, heartily agrees.

"By having gay content and not being afraid to do so...the gay community honestly will reward you with their business," said Jeffrey Marsh, director of marketing strategy at Orbitz.