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## Gay Weddings: Growing Opportunity?

**To a growing number of wedding photographers, same-sex weddings are a matter of good politics. And good business.**

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By David Walker



From a creative standpoint, same-sex wedding photography is really no different from straight wedding photography, as this portrait illustrates.

For wedding photographers, same-sex marriage shows signs of being good for business. Several states now allow gay marriages or civil unions. More states are likely to follow suit sooner or later, giving gay and lesbian couples across the country an impetus to throw weddings large and small.

Of course, they need photographers and other wedding vendors. But given the controversy around same-sex marriage, the gay and lesbian wedding business is somewhat fraught. Couples worry about which vendors are gay friendly. And photographers are apt to wonder whether they might alienate straight clients by shooting gay weddings.

Now a growing cadre of photographers, frequently driven by a strong sense of social justice, is actively marketing to gay clients. The photographers are counting on a growing acceptance of same-sex marriage around the country to help drive demand in the gay wedding industry.

Among them is photographer Charlotte Geary of Manitou Springs, Colorado, who shot her first same-sex wedding for a lesbian couple in 2006.

"I was a little dismayed when they told me several photographers had turned them down [because] they were lesbians," Geary says. "I'm in the business of documenting love and relationships, and I don't feel like anyone should be denied that."

Still, Geary worried about how the decision could affect her business. Manitou Springs is a suburb of Colorado Springs, which is a socially conservative military town. But she decided to stand up for her beliefs, and treat the job like any other wedding. She posted pictures on her blog afterwards, and to her surprise, she got a flood of positive comments.

"Lots of people want to see a photographer who isn't afraid. People want to see love in all shapes and sizes," Geary says. "After that, I realized I didn't have to be shy. Business didn't slow down at all."

On the other hand, Geary's decision didn't draw a flood of same-sex wedding work, either. She shot her second gay wedding last fall, and has another booked for this year. Gay wedding jobs turn out to be sporadic, even for photographers chasing that work in the northeast, where the states that recognize gay marriage are concentrated.

Clearly, same-sex wedding photography is a niche in development.

## **Sizing Up the Market**

According to U.S. Census data, about 1.2 million adults (600,000 couples) identified themselves as part of a same-sex couple household in 2000; the actual number is assumed to be higher, because many same-sex couples don't identify themselves as such on a census. How many would get married if given the chance is anyone's guess. A 2004 estimate from Congressional Budget Office put the likely-to-get-married number at 600,000 couples if gay marriage were legalized nationwide.

On a state-by-state basis, 11,300 same-sex couples have married in Massachusetts since it legalized gay marriage in October 2004, according to state department of health statistics. (By comparison, 141,400 straight couples married in the state during that period.) Connecticut reports slightly more than 2,000 same-sex civil unions since it legalized them in October 2005, and Vermont reports 8,891 since it legalized them in 2000.

New Jersey and New Hampshire also allow civil unions. The California Supreme Court declared civil unions legal in that state last May. Voters effectively reversed the decision in November by referendum, so gay marriage is in flux in that state. Still, the state allows same-sex couples to register as domestic partners, as do Maine, Oregon and Washington. And efforts are underway to legalize same-sex civil unions in New York.

## **Gay Wedding Spending**

Estimates of how much gay couples spend on their weddings vary widely.

Cindy Sproul, co-founder of RainbowWeddingNetwork.com, a resource for gay and lesbian weddings, says that in states where gay marriage is not legal, couples are spending "around \$17,000 on average for their commitment ceremonies." In states where civil unions are recognized legally, spending averages \$23-25,000. "It means something at the end of the day, so they go all out," she says.

But researchers at The Williams Institute of the UCLA School of Law estimated last June that same-sex couples spend less than \$10,000 on average. Their estimates were part of a study to project the contribution of gay wedding expenditures to the California economy over the next three years. The figure turned out to be \$683 million, based on a projection that a total of 51,000 in-state couples would spend an average of \$7,645 on their weddings, and 67,500 out-of-state couples would spend an average of \$4,314 on their weddings.

As the researchers noted, those averages are far lower than the \$30,580 that straight couples marrying in California

spend on average. The reason, researchers said, is because gay couples tend to pay for their own weddings, without help from their parents. And gay couples tend to have smaller weddings, says Sproul. "You're not inviting all of Dad's business contacts."

There may be other cultural reasons that gay couples spend more modestly on their weddings.

"A lot of the gay couples that decide to get married might have been together for years, so for them, they're a little less likely to want to put on some grand affair, spending 40 or 50 grand on a wedding," says photographer Laurence Kim of Seattle. "And it's not embedded in same-sex culture to have these big splashes."

## So Why Bother?

For photographers like Kim, the pursuit of same-sex wedding clients is not about quick returns, it's about future possibilities. He's been pursuing same-sex clients since 2006, and has shot only one gay wedding.

"I'm thinking down the road. Washington state could be one of the next states to allow same-sex marriage, and when they do, I want to have these images in my portfolio," he says. "Eventually I think it's going to be a great market, especially here in Seattle where gay couples tend to be dual income professionals."

Kim, whose wedding clients typically spend \$5,000 to \$7,000 on photography, is also counting on gay couples to spend more on their weddings in the future. "Hopefully as more states allow [same-sex marriage] and it becomes part of the norm, it will evolve to what it resembles on the straight side: meet, get engaged, have a big wedding."

Ryan Brenizer of White Plains, New York, has also been marketing to same-sex couples since 2006, after a couple called to ask him if he'd shoot their wedding. "I do it for the same reason that I do other weddings: it's a way to make a living and I enjoy these celebrations of love. It is also something I support politically."

And like Kim, he views same-sex weddings as an emerging business opportunity, with a lot of pent up demand. "When things become legal, there's a lot of instant business," he says. "You want to be ready when it happens."

As it turns out, the market is not easy to crack.

## Marketing to Same-Sex Couples

A quick, inexpensive way to get your name in front of same-sex couples is to get a listing on a gay wedding portal such as [gayweddings.com](http://gayweddings.com) or [rainbowweddingnetworks.com](http://rainbowweddingnetworks.com) (The Knot also has a [section for gay and lesbian weddings](#) on its Web site). The portals are meant to reduce the stress of finding gay-friendly vendors. Though the site owners claim that they send a lot of business to their advertisers, the effectiveness of portal ads is debatable.

Kim booked his first (and so far only) gay wedding client through an ad on [gayweddings.com](http://gayweddings.com). (He has also attended a same-sex wedding expo.) Brenizer, on the other hand, hasn't gotten any referrals from his listings. "Just registering as a gay-friendly vendor is very passive. It doesn't give you much advantage," he notes.

The key to booking same-sex clients, according to all the photographers we interviewed for this story, is being able to prove with portfolio images that you're comfortable working with gays. It's not enough just to show a portfolio of straight wedding photography.

Brenizer says he had inquiries that didn't turn into jobs because people were uneasy about his lack of experience. What finally got him past that was a portrait session he did for the gay brother of a bride who had hired him for her wedding.

"If you know same-sex couples, do a promotion," Brenizer advises. "Offer a lifestyle session or an engagement session. Show people that you can be comfortable and work with gays."

Bernadette Smith, owner of It's About Time—a wedding and event planning agency in Boston—suggests photographers "shoot some commitment ceremonies for free" to get the images they need in their portfolios, even if it means advertising on Craigslist to find willing couples.

Of course, photographers can build referrals by forging alliances with other gay friendly vendors. Smith refers her clients to five different photographers, and says she gets 50 calls a year from other photographers asking if she'd be willing to send business their way.

"Word of mouth is so huge," Brenizer says. A good way to get those referrals, he suggests, is to find out which ministers, judges and justices of the peace perform gay commitment ceremonies in your area. "It's usually a small pool of people who specialize in that."

### **Above or Below the Radar?**

In some parts of the country—particularly the northeast and northwest—the business risks of showing images of gay couples in your portfolio are minimal. Kim says that if straight clients don't hire him because of that, "then I probably don't care to have them as my client anyway."

Still, he thought about the risks—and concluded that gay images in his portfolio would probably boost his appeal among straight couples in Seattle, where attitudes toward same-sex marriage are more liberal. Brenizer, who markets himself in and around New York City, figures likewise. But Kim admits that if he lived in a more socially conservative part of the country, he probably wouldn't show the images in his portfolio. And Brenizer says, "You've got to make decision whether it's worth possibly alienating some conservative or religious clients."

Can you really have it both ways, though: marketing your services to same-sex couples, but hiding those efforts? Maybe.

Some photographers do hide their same-sex wedding work for business reasons, "but some same-sex couples see that as insulting. I can see why," Brenizer says.

Sproul, on the other hand, says, "We understand the reality if you live in a conservative town." She notes that [RainbowWeddingNetwork.com](http://RainbowWeddingNetwork.com), which is based in North Carolina, still gets plenty of hate mail.

Kathryn Hamm, president of [gayweddings.com](http://gayweddings.com), says she also understands the quandary of vendors in conservative markets. Some vendors who advertise on [gayweddings.com](http://gayweddings.com) have completely separate web sites for gay and straight clients, she says. But such caution is increasingly less necessary: as vendors market more openly to gay clients, she explains, "they're finding a whole new cadre of clients" that more than compensates for any business they might lose.

Still, if you have to be discreet, there are some ways to signal an openness to gay clients that most straight clients won't notice. One important way is to make the language on your Web site more inclusive, Hamm says.

For instance, make sure you mention civil unions and commitment ceremonies, she suggests. "And instead of referring over and over to bride and groom and husband and wife, use language that makes reference to the partners, or the engaged couple. In other words, reduce the direct reference to hetero couples."

Another strategy is to show wedding detail shots such as flowers or rings "that aren't necessarily straight or gay," or shoot wide angle shots so it's not obvious who is getting married, suggests Smith, the wedding and event planner. "The images you want to avoid are really highly posed formals with a bride and groom."

Of course, you can always just take pride in whatever work you do and be open about shooting gay weddings. Brenizer, Kim and Geary, the Colorado photographer, just matter-of-factly include same-sex couples on their Web sites or blogs.

"Promote the heck out of it, without treating it like a curiosity," Brenizer advises. "That can go against you. You can overdo the specialness of it. Gay couples just want to be normal. They don't want the huge thing about their wedding to be that they're gay. They want the huge thing about it to be that it's them."

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#### Links referenced within this article

gayweddings.com

<http://www.gayweddings.com/>

rainbowweddingnetworks.com

<http://www.rainbowweddingnetworks.com/>

section for gay and lesbian weddings

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