

EXECUTIVE STYLE

by [Romy Ribitzky](#)



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Gay Marriage Ban Lifts, Wallets Open

Now that a federal judge has tentatively [cleared the way for same-sex marriages to resume in California](#) beginning August 18, the wedding industry in California no doubt will gear up to welcome the happy couples.

Today, U.S. District Judge Vaughn R. Walker—the same judge who last week ruled that the state's ban on same-sex marriages was unconstitutional—determined that the marriages could start again next week. California allowed same-sex marriages for a five-month period in 2008 before a majority of voters said marriages should remain allowed only between a man and a woman. Walker set the start date a week away so that opponents would have time to appeal.

Massachusetts wedding planner Bernadette Coveney Smith has already seen the results a ruling like Walker's has had on her state. She tailored her small wedding planning business to gay couples. As president of Boston-based [14 Stories](#), she said hers was the first company in the country specifically to plan legal gay weddings.

"When it became legal for gay couples to marry in Massachusetts, there was a supply and demand issue," she says. "As a 27-year-old entrepreneur, I saw an opportunity."

The opportunity she saw was two-fold. One, to become the state's premiere same-sex wedding planner, and the other was to educate the business world in general and the wedding industry specifically, about the [economic benefits of gay marriage](#). The state of Massachusetts says that the state experienced \$111 million in economic value within the first five years of legalizing same-sex marriage.

With those kinds of figures in mind, it's a wonder that more companies aren't rushing to enter the sector. But since public opinion polls say half the nation opposes the idea of gay marriage, getting the

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word out on the economic benefits is key. And educating vendors on common misconceptions is an important first step.

“A big mistake that vendors make when it comes to planning a gay wedding is they treat it like a straight wedding,” Coveney Smith says.

So just what is the difference? Those who deal with gay couples should be ready for family drama that extends beyond a controlling mother of the bride. Many couples don't have the full support of their families and emotions can run even higher than usual on the big day.

Helping brides that don't want to wear wedding dresses for their nuptials is another challenge. For those who choose to don a suit, approximately 46 percent of lesbian couples opt for one suit and one dress, finding one that's occasion-appropriate is difficult. She either has to buy a men's suit and have it seriously altered, or she has to have it custom-made to fit, explains Coveney Smith.

Yet another challenge is finding gay-friendly vendors. According to data on the 14 Stories site, a vendor can legally say “**I don't want to work with gay couples**” in 28 states. The most common reason vendors are afraid to deal with the LGBT community is the fear of losing business, experts say.

Coveney Smith doesn't see it that way. “There are many ways to appeal to gay couples that don't include the cheesy or typical rainbow or two men kissing motifs. The reality is that there's money to be made here. And if your business isn't ready to deal with gay couples, someone else's is.”

Romy Ribitzky is an associate editor at Portfolio.com

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