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Here come the groom and the groom



By Emma Jacobs



Taking the hitches out of getting hitched: Gino Meriano, founder of The Gay Wedding Show

On a drizzly Sunday morning, in the back of a hotel in north London, past the tourists sipping coffees in the lobby, a wedding show is under way. Couples planning their big day are ushered in to peruse the various stands: photographers, jewellers and tour operators specialising in honeymoons display their wares. The figurines on top of the tiered wedding cakes are not bride and groom, however, but bride and bride, groom and groom. The fair, the first to be held in London catering specifically to civil partnerships, is a sign that new businesses are forming and old ones are refashioning themselves in the hope of capitalising on social change.

Gino Meriano, the man behind the show, says the idea to help gay couples plan weddings – a term he uses interchangeably with civil partnership – came when he was trying to organise his own civil partnership, one of the first, in 2004. “None of this was planned. It was purely because I couldn’t find anything for Mike and me.” He points to his “husband” over at the registration desk: “We are so chalk and cheese . . . he’s calm, placid, and methodical. My family background is Italian so I’m hands in the air, shouting, screaming, but we seem to just work”. Together, they built the business after attending a traditional wedding fair that said it would issue a press release indicating that the show would “tolerate” same-sex couples. “Well, as soon as they said

tolerate my partner just went absolutely nuts and walked out and said you know where you can put ‘tolerate’.”

Since then the two have built the Gay Wedding Show and Pink Wedding, a website, magazine and wedding planning consultancy aimed at civil partnerships. It is a niche market that he estimates to be worth £55m a year in the UK alone.

Bernadette Coveney Smith, founder and president of wedding consultants 14 Stories and of the Gay Wedding Institute, decided to become a wedding planner when marriage equality became law in Massachusetts in 2004. “I literally saw hundreds of couples fighting for their rights, and I knew that there was a business opportunity using my event-planning expertise to help these couples navigate a very traditional and bride-focused wedding industry.”

She sees huge potential for her business, which has been a hit with professionals including lawyers and bankers, as same-sex marriage is legalised throughout the US.

The US Supreme Court last week heard two landmark gay marriage cases – the first questioned the meaning of marriage and the government’s role in defining it; the second weighs whether the state of California may ban same-sex nuptials. The hearings have been dissected to determine which way the court is likely to rule in June. Recent surveys show that most Americans support gay weddings, which are legal in some states in the US including New York and Washington. They are also legally recognised in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Iceland and Argentina. Britain is edging closer to legalising same-sex weddings, after civil partnerships between gay people were introduced in 2004. At least 20 other countries including Australia have done the same.

Same-sex spending power

- **The US census** calculates there are close to 800,000 same-sex couples living together in the US.

- **The Williams Institute**, part of UCLA, calculates that if gay marriage were legalised across the US about half of those couples would tie the knot within three years, providing a considerable financial boost to the wedding market. Forbes magazine calculates this as almost \$9bn extra in revenues.

Ms Coveney Smith says gay couples seek out socially progressive businesses: “Same-sex couples have to ‘come out’ to every vendor they call or email – and they may get mixed responses. Straight couples never have to come out.”

Legions of gay couples testify to intolerance they have experienced from traditional wedding businesses. Matt Turrell, a photographer specialising in civil partnerships, says: “Clients want someone that gets them. Photography is intimate and so people want someone who understands them. In the same way a parent might want a photographer who’s a parent to photograph their newborn.”

Chris Barker, founder of Pride and Prestige, a travel agency, says couples planning a honeymoon typically have to “phone venues up and check they are OK to have gay couples. They risk the

- **According to mayor** Michael Bloomberg, New York City reaped \$259m of economic benefits from same-sex marriages in the year after the legislation allowing gay weddings was introduced in 2011.

embarrassment of being refused. We find out beforehand.”

He warns that “some companies try to take advantage of the pink pound. I’ve come across gay travellers having to pay a premium for going on a gay cruise. The travel operator said that’s because the market is small and they can’t guarantee spaces will be filled, but normally cruises slash their prices nearer to the date because they need to fill the places – so it’s not true”.

Mr Turrell says that for the company that gets it right, civil partnerships and weddings provide an opportunity to target their services to a niche market. Before photographing his first civil partnership in 2010, he had marketed himself to “traditional straight weddings. The market for wedding photographers there is saturated. I was looking for a niche and this was perfect.” He has since rebranded his business as Boy Oh Boy, with targeted marketing displaying pictures taken of both brides and grooms getting ready for their big day rather than the traditional focus on the bride.

Part of Mr Meriano’s work has been advising companies including department stores (Debenhams, John Lewis), men’s formalwear (Moss Bros) and undertakers (Co-op Funeral Care) to ensure their brochures and services are gay-friendly.

The weddings he deals with fall into three bands: £5,000 to £7,000, £13,000 to £15,000 and more than £30,000. The more extravagant ones have featured a castle in Switzerland and private jets. One had a black-tie ceremony before everyone changed into jeans and T-shirts for a funfair.

Ms Coveney Smith declines to disclose her revenues aside from saying they are above \$150,000.

Businesses catering to gay weddings, says Mr Meriano, can afford to be more creative: “Straight weddings follow more of a template – there is much more room for innovation in the gay wedding market.”

Traditions, he points out, are often overturned: “At a gay wedding, who is the last person to walk down the aisle? What if there are no brides? These are the kinds of conversations I have with my clients and our solutions are often very creative . . . how about two aisles?” He points to the range of companies in the wedding show that have sprung up to cater to new traditions: a tailor for women who prefer a white suit to a big dress; a stationery company that pens invitations from the couple instead of the bride’s family.

“It is looking at the traditional wedding day but how do you jiggle it about a bit? We can play with it because then if you’ve got two girls they can both walk down an aisle or they could both

walk down two aisles if their parents, say the fathers, want to take the brides down. Then if you've got two boys, well then let the mothers take them down. So it's jiggling it a little bit.”

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