

The change that is bringing opportunity

By Brecken Branstrator

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New York--Last summer, the United States Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, opening the door for citizens and states to begin fighting for marriage equality for same-gender couples across the country.

As of press time, 19 states plus Washington, D.C. had passed marriage equality laws and judges in an additional 12 states have issued rulings in favor of marriage equality, meaning that same-sex marriage now is legal, or at least under consideration, in a total of 31 states.

While the figure continually is changing as new laws are made and others struck down, the numbers continue to trend in favor of marriage equality for same-gender couples. This has, among other things, provided a bump for the wedding market, and an opportunity for retailers open to change.

According to a recent survey by Community Marketing & Insights, an LGBT consumer research company, about 76 percent of same-gender couples feel that it is important to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-friendly businesses when they're planning their wedding.

Companies across many consumer categories -- including in fine jewelry -- are beginning to understand this, targeting the LGBT community with marketing that will speak to them and show their support.

Ben Bridge Jewelers and Rogers & Hollands both opted to being carrying an LGBT-specific bridal line within the past year.

And, even more recently, retail giant Macy's showed its support for National LGBT Pride Month in June through in-store events, specialty merchandise, sponsorships, advertising and a gift registry service that "warmly welcomes all couples."

New selling opportunities

The opportunity for same-gender couples to legally wed means that new experiences are being opened to them, as they decide if they want an engagement ring for one or both partners, styles for their wedding bands and more.

Community Marketing & Insights' survey showed that female same-sex couples are more likely to buy engagement rings while both men and women are likely to buy wedding bands.

The bump in sales from same-gender couples is especially, and not surprisingly, seen in metropolitan areas, which generally are more diverse and culturally open. Evans Siskel of DVVS Fine Jewelry, who runs the store with his partner James Corry, said that the store's location in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City has led to an organic growth in sales that the store does for same-gender couples.

But even in states where same-gender marriage is not recognized by law, couples still can be found buying their bridal jewelry at local gay-friendly stores, perhaps before taking a trip to a state where they legally can wed.

In Texas, for example, Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry in El Paso has seen an uptick in sales to same-gender couples.

"We're open to selling to anyone who is in love and wants to buy a piece of jewelry. I don't really care who it is," owner Susan Eisen said, adding that she hasn't yet had any problems from other customers about her store's choice to welcome sales from the LGBT community.

Regarding buying trends for same-gender couples, she said women tend to know what they want when come into the store, opting for something a little different or a custom piece, while most men usually have less of an idea in their heads when they start shopping.

Eisen also noted that some male same-gender couples have been buying matching watches as an alternative to the traditional bridal jewelry.

In Arkansas, another state where gay marriage is not legal, Kelly Newton of Newton's Jewelers in Fort Smith said that while the store has never done a great amount of business to same-gender couples, the changes in the marriage equality laws over the last few years have brought more into the store.

"We're very open-minded, and it's just business as usual for us," Newton said. "We live in a pretty small town in the Midwest, and we've never thought anything about it."

The trends at Newton's Jewelers fall in line with what Eisen said, including that the women who come in are more inclined for something unique, he said.

--Editor-in-Chief Michelle Graff contributed to this report.

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