

GLBT Expo

cont'd from p. 1

chase mutual funds from a guy whose advertisements showcase the rock-hard abs of a potentially available, but just out-of-reach Adonis; where the horny urges of lust can be satiated with a quick trip to the gay bookstore. What fabulous new thing have I been missing?

Heteros in Homoland

The Expo is produced by the RDP Group, a Connecticut-based marketing firm. Vendor booths are organized under various themes: The Passport Travel Pavilion, #1 Entertainment, a small-business area, and (my personal favorite) the Same-Sex Wedding Expo's Loveland, which helps attendees "discover the hottest trends in weddings and commitment ceremonies" because we must, "now more than ever support same-sex marriage rights."

The Expo is a showcase for businesses wanting a piece of the estimated \$35 billion gay market. Some businesses were gay-owned and operated; some were mainstream American companies. *Genre*, Provincetown Tourism, GLNation.com, A&U, Pride National Network, Cybersocket.com and other recognizably gay companies sat side-by-side with Fleet Bank, Prudential Finance, JP Morgan Chase, Bud Light, Hair Club for Men, Washington Mutual and a host of other major U.S. corporations. They sent representatives to staff booths, handed out key chains, and talked about how much they love gay people.

When asked why they attended the Expo, most bragged about their company's track record on diversity or said nice things about the queer community.

"They're a great community to work with," said Alba Cera, director of catering at the fancy W-Union Square Hotel. "W is a brand — pushing the envelope. For us, it's a natural thing" to reach out to gay and lesbian people.

Jennifer Jordon, Marketing Manager from Okamoto USA, the makers of Crown and Beyond Seven condoms was less subtle in her reasoning for attending the Expo.

"We hope to get a market we haven't had before and increase our sales," said Jordon. "We're here to market to the gay community because they use a lot of condoms." Yes, we do.

I generally find apple polishing and other sorts of sycophantic behavior off-putting, but not here. One of the things I learned about myself at the Expo was that I enjoyed being a target of sophisticated marketing. Is there anything special about Piper-Heidsieck cozing up to me in the hopes I'll buy their champagne? Not really. If I get a seven-colored knickknack or a lemon-scented aromatherapy candle out of it, so be it.

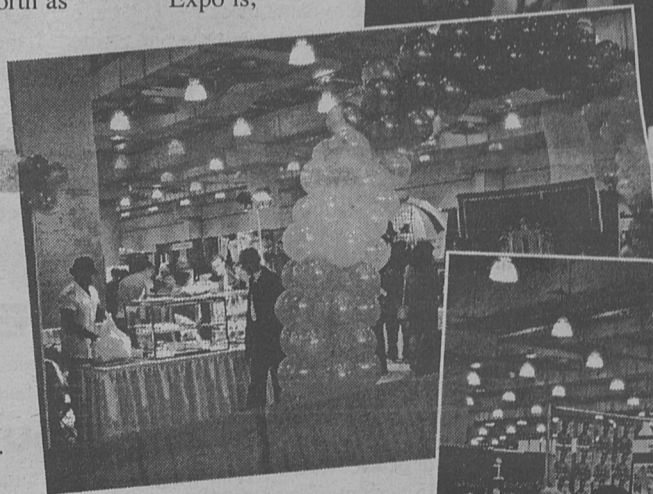
So what makes the Expo different from any other event of a similar nature? Why did 21,000 queer consumers from as far south as Florida to as far north as Maine pay twelve bucks to descend the escalator and walk through the rainbow arch? "It's a great opportunity to learn who's marketing to the gay community," said New York City resident Sandra Thomas. "It's nice to know who wants our business."

Stanley, who didn't want to give his last name, came down from Connecticut. He was enjoying seeing the

political terms.

"You have shown Mainstream America the economic and political power the GLBT Community wields," writes Wesler. "I encourage you to utilize the companies that support our cause and support them with your purchasing power."

Despite the potential for a complicated social and political context here, the power dynamic between queer consumers and big corporations is such that queer people are really second-class citizens, dependent on the whims of institutions to accept or not accept us. In my view, the exchange at the Expo is,



JP Morgan Chase, Bud Light, Hair Club for Men, and a host of other major U.S. corporations sent representatives to staff booths, hand out key chains, and talk about how much they love gay people.

"big companies next to the little companies all trying to make us happy." His friend, George, was liking all the free stuff.

Most simply, the quid pro quo being offered by companies at the Expo is "You scratch our back; We'll scratch yours." But I'm not sure it's that simple.

In a letter to the "Faithful and Fabulous Attendees" in the Expo's program, Steven Wesler, President of the RDP Group, casts attendance at the Expo in

"You buy our stuff and we'll treat you like a human being."

This is the secret to the Expo's huge number of attendees. No big surprise, queer people desperately want to be treated like human beings. The Expo is an exercise in being accepted. It feels great. All these companies, some with names you know, some with names you don't, act like they like you. It's refreshing to just put it all out there and say, "I'm here. I'm queer.

Sell me something." But this isn't social change. It's just good retail.

Shopping can feel like acceptance. What we buy often tells us something about ourselves. Buying my first home felt like adulthood in a way for which I was completely unprepared. Personally, the experience of buying leather affirms my own acceptance of sexuality, of being a sexual person who is interested in going beyond the limits. Imagine how many queer people's first act

of coming out was buying their first gay magazine. But this only explains half of what was going on at the Expo.

Economic Organizing: A Very Brief History

Queer people have been organizing around economic issues since the beginning of the movement. In the mid-twentieth century, queer people consolidated economic power by forming neighborhoods in urban areas. Gay bars, restaurants, and other businesses served as focal points and places to meet for the community. While many of these businesses weren't gay-owned or operated, a mutual, if silent, agreement often maintained a delicate balance between the community and the business.

As the **cont'd on p. 29**