

## National News

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# AT&T reaches out to Gays

by Trey Graham

AT&T is reaching out to touch Gay consumers, and perhaps weighing into the growing national discourse on Gay issues in the process.

The giant communications company recently unveiled a Gay-targeted direct-mail advertising package, complete with photos of smiling same-sex couples, a letter touting the company's workplace nondiscrimination policy, and a flyer about its Gay employee group.

AT&T's new mailer, which will reach around 70,000 potential customers, comes in a lavender envelope adorned with a rainbow-colored telephone cord and the phrase "It's time for a change..."

Inside this colorful package is a letter signed by Margaret Burd and Arturo Nava, national co-chairs of AT&T LEAGUE (Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay United Employees), and by company executive Jody Geiger, urging the recipient to choose AT&T's long distance services. Also enclosed is a flyer bearing a brief history of AT&T LEAGUE, which the company says "has become a proud and visible leader at AT&T, serving as a resource for other Gay employee groups in other industries to follow."

All this comes on the heels of a nasty public dispute between the first Gay long-distance service, CommunitySpirit, and a newer competitor, Pride Network, over which company has the right to serve some 20,000 customers who originally signed on to CommunitySpirit. Each service has accused the other of misrepresenting facts, misleading customers, and failing to meet obligations; CommunitySpirit's Jeffrey J. Vitale said this week that litigation in the case is ongoing.

The new AT&T campaign was created with the help of Prime Access, a New York firm specializing in what's come to be known as "niche marketing" to the Gay community. Targeted recipients were picked from among subscribers to certain Gay publications and contributors to certain Gay groups, as well as from a list of survey respondents who had indicated interest in direct mailings from Gay-supportive organizations.

Prime Access president Howard Buford said AT&T's move is another in a series of recent signs pointing to growing corporate awareness of the power of the Gay dollar.

"I think there are a lot of benefits from what's happening in the marketing arena," Buford said. "My belief is that to a large extent this country is driven by popular culture, and a lot of that is advertising. To the extent that Gay men and Lesbians become real, visible people in that culture, it very much helps move public opinion."

"When a Fortune 100 company enters this market, we've really turned the tide," Buford continued, comparing AT&T's venture to previous Gay-targeted advertising efforts by companies like Hiram Walker & Sons and, more recently, IKEA.

"Obviously, it's more significant when a company with an extremely ubiquitous product or service enters this market."

Of course, the very omnipresence of AT&T's primary product — long distance telephone service — might make the company vulnerable to pressure from anti-Gay groups which might organize boycotts or call-in campaigns. "Obviously, there's some risk," Buford admitted.

It's a risk AT&T seems perfectly willing to take, though. "Our research indicated it would be a very good idea to market to the community," said company spokesperson Jon Mellor. "We have an obligation not only to that market but to our shareholders and our employees to take advantage of the business opportunities there. It would be foolish to ignore any market segment today."

Still, Buford said, customer support will be important to AT&T's evaluation of the campaign's success.

"Even if you're a current customer and you're already using AT&T, it's important you call and support the company," he said. "The Right is very well organized, and they're already sending calls in. There are many fronts in this battle, in politics and elsewhere, and this is one of them." ▼