Showing up at the parade

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The entertainment industry has been leading the way in a gender-fluid society, but challenging gender norms is not just another box to be ticked, says Jeremy Bouwer, brand consultant and executive coach.

The entertainment industry has given society a window into different cultures, orientations and tribes, which has led to many audiences becoming more aware, accepting (tolerant), informed and embracing of others. Just look at the Netflix slate. Shows like *Atypical, Schitt's Creek, Unorthodox, Bonding* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, to name but a few, have given us a different perspective on the world – educating some and reflecting the everyday to others.

Many of these shows, along with stalwarts like *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family* and even *The Golden Girls*, which offered a progressive outlook on LGBTQ rights for its time, and is now being rerun in the United Kingdom, have played a fundamental role in not only informing around queer culture, but also providing a platform to explore bigger themes around humanity.

Learning self-acceptance

In 2019, *Fortune* magazine noted that RuPaul was 'easily the world's most famous' drag queen, and that same year his show garnered a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Competition. The show's mantra of self-love (if you can't love yourself, how the hell are you going to love anyone else?) and self-acceptance struck a chord with many viewers from different walks of life, helping people to accept themselves and define their purpose. Today, this once niche show has transcended mainstream media with a variety of spin-offs – on different platforms – from extravagant experiences, to podcasts – appealing to a far-wider audience than anticipated.

This shift in cultural acceptance has been further amplified and accelerated by social media, providing many actors, sportspeople and influencers with a platform to speak out and champion movements of self-love and self-acceptance. This is how narratives shift from cult status to an intrinsic part of pop culture.

The entertainment industry is particularly powerful, and one need only look at the wave of support and thanks shows like *Schitt's Creek* and *Will & Grace* got during their previous seasons. I feel the sentiment is best summed up by Dan Levy's (David in *Schitt's Creek*) mother in this tweet:

As these cultural shifts take place, they are providing new, fruitful territories and opportunities for brands, marketers and advertisers.

Don't jump on the bandwagon just to be seen at the parade.

Just like with marketing to any new market, you need to define the opportunity, think about the need you hope to fulfill, the value you are going to add and the impact of the investment.

Examine your brand purpose and ask yourself if there's an opportunity to amplify it or have it land with a previously untapped audience to which it can make a meaningful difference.

Is there longevity in the strategy? How long can you ride the wave? Or should you be riding it at all? Think about the story you are going to tell, and what impact it will have on your greater brand narrative. Are you certain it will resonate?

Clever collaborations are often an effective gateway to test and gain fast traction into segments of popular culture. MAC Cosmetics does this really well by collaborating with brands like Nicopanda from award-winning fashion designer and creative director Nicola Formichetti, as well as superstar artist Lady Gaga. Nicola's gender-neutral cosmetic line, for example, allows consumers to play with cosmetics in an accepting, 'freestyle' environment.

We have also seen the rise of beyond-gender ranges by the fragrance industry, with Tom Ford and Comme des Garçons, amongst others, bringing out gender-neutral ranges.

Volvo has been actively targetting the global gay community since 2001, when it launched its first print campaign aimed specifically at gay and lesbian communities. In 2018 they did it again with an ad that portrayed the modern reality of families, not the traditional stereotype, to illustrate its tagline: 'protect what's important to you'.

Well-thought-through executions make the alignment appear to be seamless. June 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, which is considered the birth of the modern LGBTQ movement, but June is also the month when many fashion brands turned out special-edition LGBTQ rainbow collections. From Lacoste and Calvin Klein to Salvatore Ferragamo and Michael Kors, these brands all delivered campaigns that were timeous and had a purpose. Not only was it a show of support for the queer community, it was underpinned by the narrative of why pride is celebrated, and it allowed brands to take that narrative to a broader audience.

Sometimes you don't just need to jump on the bandwagon and be on the float at the parade; sometimes it may just be an opportunity for your brand to be more aware and supportive of subcultures – giving them a safe space to grow and thrive. After all, what's the point of having a parade if there is no audience to support it?

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