How the First Annual Lesbian Visibility Week Is Changing the Marketing Game

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Key insights:

- It’s hard to reach the lesbian community when “lesbian” is a blocked brand safety keyword.
- Having queer women in executive roles is critical to influence how brands interact with the LGBTQ community.

Monday marked the start of the first annual Lesbian Visibility Week, an effort launched in the U.K. that aims for global participation. While the event kicks off a new addition to an ever-evolving equality calendar of special days and occasions that recognize different underrepresented communities, there’s something genuinely unique about Lesbian Visibility Week: The organizers managed to get corporate sponsors.

Corporate backing is notoriously hard to come by in the lesbian community. From high-traffic queer women’s media outlets like Autostraddle struggling to sell ads to marketers wrestling with how to “place” lesbians, LGBTQ women’s media, events and nonprofits don’t see the kind of cash that’s thrown at marketing to gay men, at least anecdotally. It certainly doesn’t help that the word “lesbian” itself appears on negative keyword lists used by ad ops professionals to ensure brand safety.

But U.K.-based Diva magazine is flipping the script. Diva staff is behind the inaugural Lesbian Visibility Week, and the organizers decided that one of the goals of the event was to convince brands to increase support for queer women.

Lesbian Visibility Week

Publisher Linda Riley knows from experience that it isn’t easy to gain corporate sponsorship for lesbian-focused events and media. Even though Diva Media Group is the world’s largest lesbian entertainment company—the brand boasts 250,000 users each month—selling ads is still a struggle compared to ad sales for general interest LGBTQ publications that cater to men.

“I once opened a magazine [called] ‘Out in the City’ for LGBTQI men, and despite [Diva] already being a hugely successful and established women’s brand, people would pay double rates for an advert in the unknown male brand,” Riley told Adweek.

Riley said she's long struggled to sell tables and sponsorships for the annual Diva awards. But when she launched a similar event in 2019 called the Rainbow Honours that caters to the broader LGBTQ community, tables quickly sold out.

"Brands are more reluctant to cover LGBTQI women because of myths that we just don't have the money," said Riley.

All of that appears to be changing with the launch of Lesbian Visibility Week. It's sponsored by global brands such as Procter & Gamble, GlaxoSmithKline, L'Oréal and Getty Images. The event itself consists of a social media campaign titled #ThisIsMe, a pullout section in the Guardian profiling 100 lesbians and a virtual conference with multiple daytime and evening sessions taking place online that focus largely on LGBTQ women professionals.

Why brands often ignore LGBTQ women

Diva's partnership director Polly Shute said she was able to leverage some of her contacts from previous work with general interest LGBTQ initiatives like London Pride after noticing a lot of brands were working with men's events, but not women's events.

"The LGBTQ networks [at brands] are usually run by men," said Shute. "Gay men usually want to sponsor things they can go to, so it's been really difficult to get sponsorship for women's events."

Shute recalled being blunt in conversations with LGBTQ budget leaders at several brands. "I've literally pushed them and shamed them," she said.

Shute pointed out that very little, if any, of their LGBTQ budgets went to women and said one leader at a national food service corporation told her, "You're right, I looked at our portfolio, and we aren't doing anything for women."

In the queer women’s community, being ignored by advertisers has long been a subject of frustration. In 2016, a BuzzFeed story suggested that while lesbian, bisexual and pansexual women are relatively cheap to reach through queer women’s media, advertisers seem to have no idea how to approach the community.

The budget imbalance in the U.K. is a familiar refrain to lesbian media and other queer women’s groups in the U.S.

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