

# The Tipping Point in our *Rearview* Mirror

*By Bob Witeck, CEO, Witeck-Combs Communications, Inc.*

Though hardly an original idea, the notion of a “tipping point” was popularized best by writer Malcolm Gladwell just a few years ago. In his book by the same name, he reported how emerging attitudes, trends and social changes simmer and evolve before they truly become popularized and widely accepted. Gladwell describes trends in fashion, social attitudes, behaviors and the key role of connectors.

Have we now reached a tipping point in America’s basic attitudes towards gays and lesbians and same-sex couples, as well as bisexuals and transgender people? If so, how can we tell?

I believe the evidence is in. The benchmarks now may be found in public opinion polls, in business milestones, in popular culture and perhaps most important, in the sea change we find today in how straight Americans are not merely comfortable but increasingly motivated to speak up for their gay friends and family members.

For years, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people perhaps felt they alone occupied the “closet.” The real truth is that straight family members and friends have long felt just as closeted, and often in denial about those closest to them. Without any real conversation and openness, the closet kept many of us in its grip.

Openness and visibility change everything, and that means heterosexuals now feel more liberated to speak up and acknowledge all the people in their lives, the relationships they honor and the friends and co-workers they trust.

*Consider:*

- The Gallup Poll this year reported that nearly 6 out of 10 Americans (57%) -- the highest benchmark in its polling history – believe homosexual relations should be legal. This caps a trend of two decades in growing public support.
- ABC News and the Washington Post also report this year that a majority (55%) of all Americans favor allowing same-sex couples to form legally recognized civil unions with *all the rights of married couples*.
- In 2006, with our research partner, Harris Interactive, we polled over 2,000 heterosexuals, to determine that 7 out of 10 now say they *know someone gay*. This year, some polls put that proportion at closer to 8 out of 10.
- Likewise, this year when conducting our annual benchmark about America's workplace attitudes with our colleagues at Out & Equal Workplace Associates, Harris Interactive surveyed a cross-section of 2,500 adults about their feelings towards their GLBT co-workers. Eight out of ten (79%) felt that sexual orientation should not be a standard in judging job performance, and two-thirds agreed that transgender employees should also be held to this same fairness standard. Regrettably, however, 60% of heterosexuals are not yet aware that there is no federal civil rights protection yet in place to protect employees on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Consistent national polls (CNN, Pew, Boston Globe) report that vast majorities of Americans along with America's military service members favor ending the onerous *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy now in place, and instead favor permitting gay men and lesbians to serve openly in our armed forces.

These attitudes, of course, do not change overnight. The data does signal real trends in how GLBT people are seen and valued by those around them. Consider the ripple effects of urban leaders like Chicago's Democratic Mayor Richard Daley and GOP San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders who boldly offered their commitment to legal marriage for same-sex couples. Or the tidal influence and reach that someone like Dear Abby who publicly voiced her support for same-sex marriage this fall, and by standing side by side with PFLAG to empower all straight allies to speak up.

In October 2007, PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) kicked open the doors very wide to all Americans to become "straight allies." In addition to launching their newest campaign, Straight for Equality ([www.straightforequality.org](http://www.straightforequality.org)), they partnered with Harris Interactive to poll over 2,000 American adults to learn that over half of all heterosexuals (56%) think people ought to speak up a lot or a little more on behalf of lesbians and gays. (That majority

goes up to 60% when adults between the ages of 18 and 44 were asked – and tellingly, only 12% of younger Americans thought there was no reason to speak up.)

This past month, we followed up PFLAG’s investigation with a survey question of our own – and to really find out how deep is Dear Abby’s impact on the thinking of other straight Americans.

With our research partner, Harris Interactive, we learned that a majority of heterosexuals (60%) said her comments made no difference one way or the other, however, by a clear two to one margin, more Americans appear to be favorably influenced and encouraged by her. Twenty percent of all straight adults stated that they were “glad she spoke up” and either simply agreed with Dear Abby or labeled themselves as “straight allies” too – contrasted with merely 10% of straight adults who said they “do not agree” with Dear Abby.

What do these tipping points mean? They can help explain today why the Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index (CEI) – a measure of fairness, inclusion and acceptance of gay workplace policies today revealed 195 U.S. corporations achieving the highest possible score of 100% -- and that 433 major companies among the Fortune 500 today offer nondiscrimination policies on sexual orientation (as well as 26 state governments and 570 universities and colleges.)

In the marketplace, these trends are watched closely by the Commercial Closet Association ([www.commercialcloset.org](http://www.commercialcloset.org)). Year over year, we see this visibility in the growing numbers of trusted corporations that have invested in sales, marketing and advertising to gay households – last year, that included 183 Fortune 500 brands (up from 150 in 2004) and with a combined print advertising expenditure of \$223 million (up 5.2% from 2005 – and a higher acceleration in growth than ad spending in all consumer advertising.)

According to the Gay Press Report (thanks to our friends at Prime Access and Rivendell Media), gay print media now reaches nearly 4 million people in the United States. Online and broadcast gay media, of course, takes a quantum leap greater in reaching these households. The market is growing, and companies have more channels to reach gay consumers.

In 2008, it is safe to predict that all of these social, economic and business trends will advance and even accelerate. However, there is one lagging cautionary note. Despite the unmistakable progress made on many other stages, it also seems just as likely that the political trends must still struggle to catch up given America’s deep partisan divides. Despite the favorable moods in American society, it is problematic for elected officials and for Congress to embrace legislative

policies that reflect these attitudes – such as the failure in 2007 to adopt the Employment Non-Discrimination Act with trans-inclusive language as well as this year’s push to enact federal hate crimes law reforms contained in the Matthew Shepard Act that includes sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and disability status.

In much of the work we love, however, especially helping bridge the GLBT community through America’s mainstream – we have witnessed the power of communication to accelerate understanding and acceptance. The good news is that, given the invitation, the American people so often choose to be a generous, fair-minded and inclusive society. The better news is that we have met this tipping point and as we grow and move forward, we will see it recede in our rear view mirror.