

Some firms improve in HRC's 'Buying Guide'

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by Lisa Keen

Just in time to help LGBT consumers with their holiday shopping, the Human Rights Campaign has released its annual guide on how to vote with your dollars, and there have been some changes since last year.

Barbie's up, G.I. Joe is down. Whole Foods is up, Kroger is down. Federal Express and UPS are both down, but UPS is higher.

Coca-Cola is up. Ben & Jerry's ice cream is down. Borders Bookstores stands alone in its category – a perfect 100. Toys R Us is down – from 57 last year to 45 this year.

HRC's annual "Buying for Equality" guide lists more than a 1,000 brand name products and how the corporations who produce them rate in terms what they do to ensure "fair treatment" for their LGBT employees.

Corporations are ranked on a scale of zero to 100, with 100 being the top score, based on 11 criteria (up from seven last year) concerning their non-discrimination policies, benefits, advertising, and charitable giving. HRC based its scores on responses provided by companies to a survey sent out in February. HRC doubled the number of corporations it sent the survey to this year – 1,520, compared to 755 last year. The percentage of companies responding to the survey was down – only 21 percent responded this year, compared to 31 percent in 2005. However, the number of companies providing responses was up – from 236 this year to 318 this year. And the number of companies to which HRC gave ratings was also up this year – from 402 last year to 446 this year.

The biggest change in criteria – and perhaps the reason why the scores of so many companies dipped – was the addition of two questions (10 points) concerning the degree to which employers were sensitive to transgender people and two questions (10 points) to identify just how equal the benefits were to employees with same-sex partners, compared to employees with heterosexual spouses.

Ben & Jerry's, the famed Vermont ice cream makers who have an international reputation for progressive corporate policies, dropped from a 71 rating in 2005 to a 50 rating this year. Twenty of the 21-point fall was due to a zero score on the new questions.

Whole Foods, which bills itself as the "World's Leading Natural and Organic Foods Supermarket," rose from a 57-point score for two years in a row to a 95 this year. Much of the boost came from answering positively to the new questions, but it also came from its new willingness to support a gay employee group and adding gender identity to its non-discrimination policy.

The guide goes a long way to distinguish companies that are in competition. For instance, LGBT consumers who are searching for electronic gifts for themselves or loved ones will almost certainly be attracted by Best Buy's 100 rating, compared to Radio Shack's 40 or Circuit City's 55. If faced with a dilemma over whether to go to Kmart, Target, or Wal-Mart, politically savvy LGBT consumers will choose Kmart (which earned a perfect 100) or Target (with a respectable 80 that puts it in HRC's highest ranking "green zone") rather than Wal-Mart (in the yellow zone with a 65).

The decision gets even easier when it comes to filling up at the gas station: Exxon and Mobile (a.k.a. ExxonMobil) are all alone in a sort of "don't buy here" red zone – they rated a zero score –

down from 14 of last year. Meanwhile, nearly every other fuel pump provides a "green zone" alternative.

Gay organizations have attempted to keep track of corporate relations with the gay community since 1976, when the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force launched the first national survey of American corporations on gay-related issues. At that time, the group sent out surveys to 850 businesses but got back responses from only 238. The results, published in 1981, showed that only 41 percent said they did not discriminate based on sexual orientation. But some of the corporations that had the worst track records on gay equality then – such as the Levi Strauss company – did complete turnarounds. Levi Strauss is now considered one of the most gay-friendly companies and scored a perfect 100 on HRC's corporate scorecard for 2006.

Bob Witeck, a marketing specialist working with HRC, estimated the size of the LGBT consumer market as between 6 percent and 7 percent of all American adults (about 15 million people), based on sampling done through the Harris Poll over the last six years. The collective spending power of that LGBT market, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics data, is about \$641 billion in 2006.

Some limits

As in past years, the guide has its limits. Because many corporations simply didn't respond to the survey, LGBT consumers can't always do comparison shopping. McDonald's is the only fast food place that's got a score (85). Domino's pizza (in the red zone with a 45) is the only deliver-to-your-door pizza provider rated; the guide suggests LGBT consumers make their own at home with Kraft's DiGiorno.

And, as in past years, HRC's scoring system does not factor in whether a corporation's political action committee contributes money to gay friendly or anti-gay candidates. The American Express company scored a perfect 100 on corporate workplace criteria, as it has since 2004. But its corporate political action committee contributed to the re-election campaigns of such notoriously anti-gay legislators as Senators George Allen (R-Virginia) and Conrad Burns (R-Montana), both of whom rated a worst possible score of zero on HRC's legislative scorecard for the last session. (And both lost re-election earlier this month.) But the company has also contributed to openly gay U.S. Congressman Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts) every year since at least 2003.

The Ford Motor Company continues to rate a perfect 100, even though last year, just days after HRC released its buyers guide, reports started circulating that Ford had come to a secret agreement with the anti-gay American Family Association to stop advertising in gay publications. But within a month, after hearing from HRC, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and others gay groups, Ford issued a statement indicating it would continue and expand its advertising to the gay community.

Microsoft, which got into hot water with its gay employees and consumers early last year after reports emerged that it was going to remain neutral concerning the Washington state gay civil rights bill, scored 100 last year and this year. The company eventually threw its support behind the statewide bill, which passed this year.

And if all this decision-making is making you feel sick to your stomach, not to worry: Both Roloids and Tums score a perfect 100. Just stay away from the Alka-Seltzer (15).

The 36-page HRC "Buying for Equality 2007" guide is available online at www.hrc.org and can be requested in print form by calling HRC at (202) 628-4160.