

Wedding Vendor Guide: Working with LGBT Couples

by Lara Swanson, Kelly Prizel and Natalie Prizel
of So You're EnGAYged

This guide is for wedding vendors who are interested in making their business LGBT-friendly. It is especially useful for those who want to revamp the language they use on their website and contracts, and those who have questions about interacting with their LGBT clients.

Table of Contents

1. Things to look for in your client-facing materials..... p2
2. Interacting with LGBT clients..... p4
3. Training your staffp7
4. Five things not to say to a gay couple getting wed..... p8
5. What's legal in your state? p10

Chapter 1: Things to look for in your client-facing materials

Imagine you are newly engaged, looking through potential photographer's websites. You see a multitude of different styles, price ranges, Flash pages and splash pages. You get to the contact page, and it requests the bride and groom's names. The problem? There is no groom, and you're reminded that this photographer may be tripped up by your wife-to-be.

Repeatedly, vendors use heteronormative language and imagery, which is language or imagery that assumes that everyone is heterosexual. As heterosexual couples pervade advertisements, wedding forums, and usually comprise the majority of a wedding vendor's clientele, it's a common mistake.

From using an icon of a man and wife holding hands to link to your wedding portfolio to listing "bride's name and groom's name" in your contract, using heteronormative language can be off-putting to LGBT couples. Below, find checklists to go through for your website, marketing materials, contract and other client documents, and then learn how to improve each to be inclusive for your potential clients in chapter 2.

On your website and marketing materials

Your website and marketing will typically be the first impression for potential clients. The following checklist focuses on both the language used as well as the imagery presented. Primarily:

- Does the language or imagery assume that the client is a heterosexual person?
- Do the language and imagery assume that the client is getting married to someone of the opposite sex?
- Do the language and imagery assume that the client identifies as more feminine or masculine?

Here are some specific things to look for:

- Are the words "bride" and "groom" paired together in any text that isn't referring to an actual client of yours?

- On your website or in your marketing and advertisements, are there a spectrum of couples shown, including diversity in age, race, and sexual orientation?
- On your website's contact form, is the information organized by gender?
- Do you have separate sections of your website for men and women?
- Do you use language about a wedding being a "girl's dream", a bride "feeling like a princess", or other similar text?
- Do you speak only to "brides"? For example: "we work with brides", "photograph your dress", "attend your dress fitting", or "brides love us"?
- Do you segregate language geared towards LGBT couples from the rest of the site, such as creating a separate page for LGBT visitors?

Inclusive options

When referring generally to a couple getting married (and you're not talking about a specific couple), we recommend using "the couple", "the client" or "you". Even easier is "brides and grooms", which is still great for your SEO!

"Bridal party" can be updated to "wedding attendants" or "wedding party".

The romance doesn't need to leave your site when you update your language to be more inclusive. "Your other half", "the love of your life", "your partner in crime" are all great options for referring to your audience's partner.

On separating LGBT-focused content

We recommend that you do not separate LGBT-geared text/pictures into a separate part of your site, as all visitors should be treated equally, and your client-facing materials should be uniformly inclusive.

In the contract and follow-up materials

When you're getting ready to book your clients, they will feel significantly more at-ease if the legal language regarding your services is inclusive. In many states, same-sex marriage is still not legal, and legalese can often be heteronormative.

Similarly, you may have follow-up materials, like a photographer's shotlist or a coordinator's "to do" list which you craft with your clients. Ensure the language in these documents is also gender-neutral.

Use this checklist to examine your contract and other documents, and then see chapter 2 on how to make them more LGBT-friendly.

- Is the word "bride" and/or "groom" mentioned in any part of the document?
- Does your document organize attendants and family members using "bride" and "groom", or "bride's side" and "groom's side"? Does the client have the ability to change or rename the individuals included in the list?
- Does your document assume there will be attendants, and that they will be referred to as bridesmaids and groomsmen?
- Are you filing the document or saving it with the name of the more "femme" individual? (If you send it via email, the client will see the file name.)

Note that heterosexual couples will also appreciate gender-neutral language in documents, since it will allow them to customize the language to suit their wedding.

Chapter 2: Interacting with LGBT Couples

The number one assumption to avoid while working with LGBT couples is that one identifies as “femme” and the other “butch”. Just as there are many different ways to identify one’s sexual orientation, there’s a rainbow of personalities, gender expressions and orientations, and personal styles that any individual may present.

Brides and Grooms

“Bride” and “Groom” may be the easiest language to change in your materials and when speaking with the couple. Some options include:

- Client and Partner
- Two spaces for Partner Names (could label Partner A and Partner B if you refer to them later)
- Two spaces for Client Names (could label Client A and Client B if you refer to them later)
- Blank area for clients to write in their own information
- Use bride/groom twice and allow clients to indicate the appropriate title
- If you’re referring to a bride and groom together, use “couple” or “partners”.

Ceremony

Ask your clients how they are referring to their ceremony so that you may use the same language. Are they calling it a wedding? A union? A celebration? Your clients may call it a wedding though it is not legally recognized as a wedding by the State (see more in Chapter 4). By asking your clients what language they are using, you can begin using it as well when speaking with them about their day and plans. You can lead off with “wedding” to show your appreciation for many couples’ claiming of that word.

Many couples, gay and straight, have religious ceremonies. It is not the vendor’s place (unless you are an officiant) to question the religious validity of any given couple’s marriage. While LGBT couples are fighting for civil marriage, many choose religious ceremonies and negotiate their own paths in their communities of faith.

Similarly, don't assume that one will want flowers and the other will not, which side each person will stand on during the ceremony, etc. Follow your clients' lead by simply asking them to tell you about themselves and their ceremony.

Attire

Two brides? It doesn't mean one will wear a dress and the other a suit – they could just as easily both choose to wear a suit or both choose to wear a dress. The same principle applies for two grooms. Unless this is something that you know they want documented (if you're a photographer or videographer), there's no need to ask your clients about it.

Also, don't make gender-based assumptions based on your clients' attire, like posing them in heterosexual poses (one masculine, one feminine). Get to know your clients; in the posing scenario, a photographer should ask the clients about what poses they feel are flattering.

Wedding parties

We're seeing a new trend in wedding parties: they're not split down gender roles. Don't assume that there will be bridesmaids and groomsmen; instead, allow the couple to identify these individuals and how they are referring to them. We've heard everything from "bridesmen and groomswomen" to "Executive Vice President In Charge of Bridal Affairs" and "agents of awesome". The key is to let your clients define their attendants – you may get a kick out of it too!

Parents and family

Parents and other family members may choose varied ways to participate in your clients' wedding. As with any wedding (heterosexual or same-sex), there may be sensitive issues or questions that arise which you'll interact with – who walks whom down the aisle, who stands next to whom in a photo, who may be noticeably absent from the day. Approach any scenario by listening to your clients' needs and taking the lead from how they are handling the sensitive situation.

Outness

We encourage vendors to openly display LGBT couples on their websites and in promotional materials in the same way and place they would display heterosexual couples. That said, for employment and other personal reasons, some LGBT couples cannot have their images, likenesses, or names publicized. You should be willing to accommodate and bring up the issue of publicized material.

Chapter 3: Training Your Staff

You may not be the only individual coming in contact on your clients during the planning process and on their wedding day. For this reason, it is important to talk with your staff about the importance of inclusiveness and not making assumptions based on gender stereotypes.

For example, if it is your assistant's responsibility to dole out the flowers for the day, make sure that he or she does not assume that the more "masculine" individual of the couple will be wearing a boutonniere, or that the more "feminine" of the couple will be holding a bouquet. I would also prepare your staff with appropriate pronouns to use after learning how the couple identifies before the wedding day – if a client chooses a different gender pronoun ("he" or "she"), ensure your staff respects that.

Lastly, your staff may struggle to find the right words on their wedding day ("Can I call it a wedding?") so simply talking with them beforehand may help them become more confident about their job. Having a conversation about the day, the couple, and answering any questions they may have will make any wedding, LGBT or not, go more smoothly!

Chapter 4: Five things not to say to a gay couple getting wed

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, especially when it comes to LGBT weddings. Even those who want to be supportive often come down with severe foot-in-mouth disease. Here are just a few no-no's that your couples may encounter- and to which you should be attuned.

1. You're getting married? Is that legal?

The legal niceties of same-sex marriage are often not so nice. When someone tells you they're about to publicly declare their love and commitment to another person, they don't want you or the State to rain on their parade. If you're trying to educate yourself on the legal status of same-sex marriage, check out [HRC's website](#). If you are burning to know right at that moment, at least preface your question with a hearty "Congratulations".

2. You're wearing a suit. Does that mean you're more like the guy?

Rule of thumb: don't make assumptions. Gender expression and identity vary widely in the LGBT community. If a woman chooses to wear a suit to her wedding, it may be because she identifies as butch or trans* or she hates dresses, or a multitude of other reasons. When you get to know a couple well, you may or may not come to some kind of understanding of how gender works in their relationship. Then again, the mysteries of gender play out in a myriad of ways in all relationships, LGBT and heterosexual.

*Note: if you are unsure of someone's gender identity (i.e. whether a person identifies as male, female, transgender, genderqueer, or something else), I think it is most often better to ask "How do you identify in terms of gender?" or "What pronouns would you prefer we use?" than making an assumption. Some people will be surprised and maybe upset you asked, but a genuinely well-intentioned question, with the goal of treating a person the way he or she wants to be treated is never wrong.

3. Do the Jews/Christians/Muslims/Wiccans allow that?

Didn't your mother tell you not to talk about religion or politics? We don't buy into that but we do think that discussions about religion should be approached delicately. Religion can be a beautiful thing in the lives of LGBT people, but it can also be a painful one. If you ask, "Are you having a religious ceremony of any kind?", most people will explain the ways in which religion and sexuality are being incorporated/reconciled in their wedding. If they don't, wait till the wedding to find out. And if you're not invited, I guess you'll never know.

4. That's nice that you're having a celebration, but it's not a real wedding.

This is just mean. What makes a wedding real? A marriage license? A minister? A \$75,000 floral budget? How about love, commitment, and community.

5. Isn't marriage just a heterosexist and patriarchal institution? Why would you buy into it?

This question most often comes from within the LGBT community. LGBT people like straight people choose to marry for a variety of reasons: religious, personal, social, societal, etc. Also, LGBT people, like straight people, choose NOT to marry for a similar variety of reasons. You might not embrace marriage in your personal life or as a worthwhile goal of LGBT activism. But when someone important to you tells you they are going to celebrate their love for another, again, the correct response is "Congratulations". Everyone should have the right and capability to choose.

Chapter 5: What's legal in your state?

At the time of this writing, same-sex couples can get legally married in five states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, and New Hampshire). Three states (Maryland, Rhode Island, and New York) "officially pledge non-discrimination against marriages between same-sex couples from other states" ([Freedom to Marry](#)).

Visit Freedom to Marry's website to view up-to-date information on the latest developments for your state: <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states.php>