

Is Your Event Diverse & Inclusive?

By Gary Van Horn Jr.



There isn't a day that goes by that we don't hear about diversity and inclusion. But what does it really mean to be inclusive and diverse and how can we, as festival and event producers, make sure that our events are? In the

politically charged atmosphere that we are in today, it is more important than ever to make sure your events are welcoming and diverse.

Let's start with diversity. The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual. Think of a world where we all looked the same, acted the same, liked the same things and even loved the same type of people. Personally I would think that would be a very boring world.

Inclusion is a little bit trickier. Inclusion is recognizing, valuing and fully leveraging the diversity of others to create an atmosphere that promotes

equality and delivers results. It is the very act of celebrating and utilizing people's differences, not merely tolerating them. Nobody really wants to be tolerated...they want to be included. You can be diverse and not inclusive.

I will tell you right now that inclusion is hard. It's hard for people to understand and it's hard to do. But in a world where every word or action can become news instantly due to social networking, it is more important than ever to look at your festival and events and make sure that everyone feels welcome. The last thing we want as event organizers is to be on the front page news because we had a lapse in judgement and weren't as inclusive and diverse as we should have been.

Diversity and inclusion isn't just hard, it is almost like a bank. When you are present and work with diverse communities you build relationships. You get credit for the work you do

in welcoming different people to the event. You make deposits with leaders within different groups of people.

Then something happens! A volunteer, staff member, vendor or security person does something or says something that is not “inclusive or diverse” and you have to go to the bank and do a withdrawal. If you haven’t made any deposits you are sitting there with an empty checking account and now on the front page news all alone. If you had made deposits and were inclusive you have credibility with diverse communities and you will have allies that will stand up with you and denounce the action but support you, your event and the work you have done with those diverse communities.

Making small adjustments to your event can set an example for attendees, staff, vendors and volunteers that treating everyone with dignity and respect is a core value of your event or festival. Real change can continue to happen as a result of strong leadership in the event industry and beyond.

Embracing diversity and inclusion is about more than just societal expectations. A diverse group of individuals from different background brings a diverse array of insights and I encourage you to include these individuals on your Board and in the planning of your events as well.

Let’s take some time to discuss specifically the lesbian, gay, bisexual

and transgender (LGBT) community and ways to be inclusive with this community. This community is yearning for acceptance and inclusion and there isn’t a news cycle that goes by that this community isn’t represented.

While laws, legislation and policies are on the rise in favor of the LGBT community, personal acceptance and inclusion is just starting to happen. Daily we continue to see hearts and minds change but there is still work to be done.

While the LGBT community loves to use acronyms, (you have probably seen GLBT, LBGTQIA+ etc.) we must first understand that the LGBT community is very diverse. Think about the “LGB” and how it deals with a person’s sexuality or whom they love vs the “T” deals with a person’s gender or whom they identify as. On top of that, the LGBT community is truly a rainbow as you can be a member of the LGBT community and be a different race, religion, ethnic origin, etc.

Marriage equality has been the law of the United States since June 26, 2015 and today more than ever this community is longing to be included. What is your event doing to attract members of the LGBT community? What is a typical family today? Is it one with a mother & father and two children or could there be two fathers or mothers and two kids? What marketing material are you using to attract members of the LGBT community to your events and festivals?



Many studies have looked at the LGBT community. These studies have shown that they tend to have higher disposable incomes than their heterosexual counterparts. They also are willing to take bigger risks in living in urban areas because many are empty nesters although that is changing with many same-sex couples are now adopting children.

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Here Are 6 Simple Tips to Make Your Event More Inclusive:

1. Use gender-neutral terms such as they, them, their, partner(s), significant other(s), Ind. (individual), Mx. (gender neutral Mr./Ms.), he/she or s/he, and avoid all binary gender language in general.
2. Display and publicize a non-discrimination statement on your website and at your event. For example: "The _____ Festival welcomes everyone regardless of people's age, disability, gender, gender identity, race, religion or belief or sexual orientation."
3. If you're documenting sex or gender at your event always include an opt-out option and ensure confidentiality to all staff, volunteers and attendees unless they personally choose to be 'out.' Confidentiality may also be a matter of personal safety rather than purely about privacy.
4. Implement zero tolerance for racist homophobic or transphobic language at your event.
5. Provide training for all staff and volunteers on trans issues and encourage them to enforce the event's zero-tolerance policy for negative comments, slang or jokes about the trans community. Contact your local LGBT center for help with accessing organizations who can help you with this training.
6. Taking the time to review all of your planning and policies is not only good business, but it sets an example for attendees. Take a look at anything that includes gender and ask yourself how you can change the language to be more inclusive.

Welcoming more and diverse attendees can only make your festival and events even better. Do your part to build relationships with diverse communities including the LGBT community. You are in a unique position to make the world a better place by changing one heart at a time and show what a truly diverse and inclusive event or festival is!

When planning your festival and events build relations with members of the LGBT community to understand what will attract them to come to your festival and events and also show them that they will be welcome.

Perhaps the most under-served and marginalized community right now is the transgender community. From Caitlyn Jenner and Chaz Bono to anti-transgender legislation in North Carolina and Texas and our 45th President tweeting about this community and the military, this community has taken center stage over the past few years and is perhaps the most misunderstood which often leads to fear from many.

Let's take a second to understand what being transgender or trans for short means. Webster's defines transgender as "denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex." For many of us, it is hard to understand the fact that some people's brain and how they feel don't match what their

body looks like. As an advocate for the LGBT community who works with the transgender population, it is even hard for me to truly grasp. One thing I have learned is the world is a very diverse place and once you take off your rose-colored glasses and meet different people that aren't in your circle of friends, you really see how interesting the world is. To further complicate the discussion, scientists are now looking at gender as spectrum rather than a binary male/female. Please note that a person's gender has nothing to do with their sexuality or who they are attracted to.

When most people talk about the trans community, the first point of discussion is always around bathrooms. There are many myths that have been spread by politicians regarding the trans community and bathrooms. First know that every trans person just wants to use the bathroom like everyone else. Nobody wants to "hang out" in the bathroom. They want to do their businesses and move on.

Many events today already have single use bathrooms, or Porta Potty rentals, so in essence you already provide all-gender bathrooms, by definition. One simple way to make the trans community feel welcome is to change signage from the standard male/female on the exterior to more inclusive language such as all-gender restrooms. At a large festival in New York City, they took it a step further and sold a sponsorship that included inclusive and welcoming signage on the Porta Pottys. If you are using directional signage for restrooms throughout your festival, be sure to consider changing the standard male/female symbols to an all gender friendly symbol.

If your event is using permanent bathrooms, consider designating one of them as all-gender. If you are holding your event at a newer facility, there may already be a family restroom. If you wish to be truly inclusive, considering updating the signage to all-gender.

Another area to review is your safety and security planning. Many of us are experiencing increased procedures being required by our law enforcement partners at our festivals and events. These may include walk-thru metal detectors. It is important that you have a plan in place for secondary screening procedures which may include hand-held metal detectors (or wands) and/or pat-down body searches. Your attendees should be given the opportunity to choose who and how they wish to be searched and you should have a private area available if someone doesn't feel comfortable being searched in the open.

If you are doing any type of surveying at your festival and event, pay attention to the questions you are asking. If you are asking people to identify their gender, be sure to include an option for "transgender" or "gender queer." At minimum include a "prefer not to say" or "opt out" option.

Gary Van Horn is the President of the Delta Foundation of Pittsburgh, the leading non-profit organization in Western Pennsylvania whose mission is to promote and advocate for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. The organization produces events and supports projects that help make Pittsburgh a vibrant and exciting city that is attractive to the LGBT community including Pittsburgh Pride, the largest LGBT event in Pennsylvania and the 4th largest special event in the city with over 175,000 attendees in 2017.