

# AmEx targets gay and lesbian market

By Jeff Silver CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Margaret M. Graff, Senior Financial Advisor with American Express Financial Advisors, Inc., may not call herself a pioneer, but she has broken new ground in the business of targeted marketing.

From an unassuming office space in midtown, she has been instrumental in developing marketing campaigns aimed specifically at Atlanta's gay and lesbian community.

This specialization was an outgrowth of Graff's attempts to serve the people where she lives. "I live here in midtown so it was natural market for me to begin working with — people I knew from the neighborhood, from church, from all my social events," she explains.

The personal focus fit in well with American Express's efforts to fine-tune its reach into potential new markets, a combination that resulted in the company's establishing a "Learning Laboratory" in which different marketing and advertising ideas are developed and tested. The learning lab setting is also used to provide sensitivity training and technical expertise to financial advisors who are interested in working with gay and lesbian clients.

Peter S. Velardi, group vice president of American Express Financial Advisors, Inc., played a key role in gaining corporate recognition of her work. As Graff's office grew, Velardi alerted the corporate office about the opportunity to set up another learning lab. This official support came in mid-1996, and has included funds that have made

Graff and American Express' presences a fixture at gay and lesbian events. Last year's sponsorships included the Greater Atlanta Business Coalition's Business Expo and Positive Impact's "Making Change" fundraiser. More are in the works for 1997.

The Atlanta Learning Laboratory (one of two in the city — the other focuses on African-Americans) is part of a group of approximately 20 around the country. Each focuses on a different specialized market — including women, Hispanics and Asians. The labs, in turn, make their experience and expertise available company-wide through American Express' Diversity Newsletter, which is published each month out of the corporate office in Minneapolis.

Regardless of the targeted market, Graff summarizes the overall approach as one of sensitivity. Each lab emphasizes "learning how to treat clients the way they want to be treated." Participants are taught through varied means: video tape, roll playing and even field trips to a gay bar. (Atlanta has the third-largest gay and lesbian population of any American city, behind New York and San Francisco; the only other gay and lesbian learning laboratory is in New York.)

All of these events and activities have enabled the Atlanta lab to figure out what works and what doesn't. "That's why we call it a learning lab," Graff said. "There are certain efforts that sound great and are a lot of fun and gain zero clients. Others cost very little money and are much appreciated by the community and gain a lot of clients."

This willingness to experiment has paid off. "We've found that the response has been really tremendous in recognizing that we're sponsoring community organizations

and events. It's a strategy that's been much, much more successful than just running an ad," she said.

That perspective is supported by Jerrilyn Levetan, President of the Greater Atlanta Business Coalition, also known as The Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. "To my knowledge American Express is the only business [locally] that has contacted community leaders to find out what they could do to help different organizations. I cheer them and personally have chosen to do business with them because of their efforts."

Learning laboratories not only impart heightened sensitivities toward various client groups, they also provide essential technical training, Graff indicated. For example, working with homosexual couples requires an advisor to deal with laws and policies developed with heterosexual couples in mind. Therefore, clients require advice from a planner who is knowledgeable on how to deal with the differences that arise when partners cannot legally obtain a marriage license.

One of American Express' efforts in this area was to develop software that facilitates "Domestic Partner Analysis." The company believes this approach provides more appropriate planning by incorporating the different ways in which a gay or lesbian couple is likely to handle their finances. Graff characterizes it this way: "There's much less of an assumption they'll merge finances and do everything the way Ward and June Cleaver did it. So as an advisor, you have to understand how that works for each member of the couple and then make sure that each one is getting what they need, both financially and emotionally."



Margaret Graff: Teaches sensitivity to American Express financial advisers.

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