

# Think pink

“The subject matter was the last bastion of ‘No sex please, we’re British’”

**T**here can be few conference organisers who cite ‘corporate homophobia’ as the single biggest obstacle to planning their event.

And with Britain’s reputation as a socially tolerant society, it was a factor Jean Collingwood, chief executive of the Ingenious Group, hadn’t anticipated when putting together The Pink Pound conference, a marketer’s guide to understanding and attracting the gay consumer. “It’s an emotive subject and still such a taboo - we would have liked to think that people have got over it,” she says.

“It appeared this subject matter was the last bastion of “no sex please, we’re British” which bore a stark contrast to companies like Hilton and BT, both highly experienced in creating authentic engagement with gay consumers in the knowledge that it sells products and creates an inclusive brand offering with their staff and customer base.”

Even marketing the event itself - producing the single fuchsia-pink pound coin which appeared on the conference’s promotional literature - looked set to create a royal problem. “One of the first challenges was going to the Royal Mint to gain permission to reproduce a pink coin in all our marketing material,” Collingwood explains. “This hinged on discussions on whether it met the Royal Mint’s criteria. Firstly in the very British matter of ‘being of good taste’ and secondly, whether it was a true likeness of the Queen. It was put to



Open discussions: The expert panel discuss Gay Consumer Marketing - the future

## Katherine Simmons finds out how The Ingenious Group broke the last taboo

us that the Queen was not pink - but we enjoyed some light hearted discussion in pointing out that the Queen wasn’t actually bronze either!”

But exactly how do you start putting together a programme surrounded by so much controversy and sensitivity? And convince the community involved of the sincerity of your intentions? Ingenious’ staff have social marketing backgrounds and the company is independent of shareholders or mass marketed conferences. Ingenious’ ‘Marketing for Good’ conference won the CEA Awards

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### Case notes

- The event:** The Pink Pound - The marketers guide to understanding and attracting the gay consumer, June 22, 2006.
- Organisers:** Ingenious Group Ltd
- The objective:** To provide a focal point for marketers on the issue of how to engage with gay consumers, a market segment worth an estimated £70 billion in the UK.
- The delegates:** 160 marketers from some of the UK biggest companies from pharmaceutical, banking and finance, automotive, drinks and alcohol, IT, travel, hotel and leisure sectors plus academics and media. Delegates ranged from managing directors, marketing and brand managers to diversity champions.
- The venue:** The Lewis Media Centre, Millbank, London.

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Corporate Events Association and Events Magazine National Awards for Best UK Event last year.

"From being the darlings of 'Marketing for Good,' this was quite a big departure for us - a debate as social marketers who deliver, through conferences, a subject matter we wanted to lead in," says Collingwood.

"We took a strong position from the onset that we were not experts in gay consumer marketing, but experts in seeking out the truth and answering the real questions marketers today need answers to."

Ingenious spent January to June 2006 researching the subject matter - from political correctness and previous discussion on the subject, to exploring the market worldwide. The organisers spoke to a number of advertisers from New York, Los Angeles and Australia who gave help and support.

"We engaged the gay community from the start. Firstly with establishing relationships



*Speaking out: Presenters came from companies including BT, Hilton and Egg*

with trusted thought leaders and representatives from Stonewall, Out Now Consulting, Pride and Diva magazine. To ensure delegates understood our sincerity in not only exploring, but improving marketing progress in this area, we played a leading role in not just reporting but shaping critical debate. This was carried out on several fronts firstly through a series of high profile media interviews, press releases including the BBC and CNN," explains Collingwood.

Discussions centred on aligning the subject matter with new legislation to be introduced the month after the conference, outlawing the discrimination of goods, services and marketing to gay consumers.

From the outset, delegates were encouraged to shape their own agenda. Feedback gained from community leaders; questions, issues and viewpoints were put to the marketing community to see if they agreed, disagreed or had more pressing concerns. Discussion results and emerging viewpoints were posted online, inviting delegates to comment on or question the statements online. Website responses shaped the contents of the final programme, creating a learning experience based on current thinking rather than perceptions. The interactive nature of the planning process resulted in what Collingwood calls a "100 per cent delegate-centric conference experience."

"We took the view that our approach should be 'How would we explain this issue if we

were talking to someone from Mars? Let's think about the key issues of the marketer of toilet rolls in Bradford, who wants a fast track view of how to include and promote their product to gay consumers.' What we wanted was for someone to get to grips with every single issue involved in marketing to this group."

But there were widespread difficulties ahead - Ingenious ran into many brick walls seeking out and convincing speakers to address the conference, even those known to be advanced in marketing to this consumer target group. "Companies were unwilling to discuss this, let alone present, despite reminding them this was not about gay issues. Everyone we spoke to felt the need to define their own sexual preferences which usually began with 'Well I am not gay myself of course,' 'I know a gay person' or 'I am married with two children.'"

Collingwood adds some of those contacted didn't know how to respond to their requests,

“Everyone we spoke to felt the need to define their own sexual preferences which usually began with ‘Well I am not gay myself of course’”

citing a leading car manufacturer with a 'customer insight team' of 22 staff dedicated to consumer marketing as an example: "Following a series of phone calls, unprompted silences and inappropriate remarks, finally the marketing director's assistant called us to say 'We don't do marketing to gays.' When asked, if given at least 3 million people in the UK are gay, did they not consider any of these people might be their customers or staff, this was affirmed - negative."

Language used to make the presentations was a major concern for speakers from the mainstream marketing community. They were asked to use language used in their workplace to create a true and honest picture of gay consumer marketing in the UK. However it was still a cause for concern for some.

Collingwood says: "Despite first class presentation skills, some speakers were petrified of causing offence by using inappropriate language. We addressed this by providing full copies of all research and articles used in the

lead up to the programme. This featured language endorsed by the gay community and media."

Interactive voting systems and roaming microphones were used during the conference. The Pink Pound was also the first event in the UK to use US Mediasite Technology - speakers were fully synchronised in a split screen with their presentations. "This protected the integrity and content of a highly emotive and sensitive subject with the truth about what was said when, why and by whom," explains Collingwood. "Due to the homophobic nature of the subject matter it equally became an important marketing and learning tool for delegates to take back to the office to their more unenlightened and less adventurous colleagues."

In its most basic terms, the conference was aimed at marketing to an affluent audience sector, just as brands target the 'grey pound' of wealthy pensioners or the youth market. But, even so, Collingwood says there was some embarrassment on the part of the delegates with many booking in secret. But despite the issues and challenges, the Pink Pound achieved full capacity, attracting delegates from world leading brands. "We got through the day without any major boo-boos and achieved our objectives of creating open, honest debate, keeping it real and moving on a marketing society that had never had the platform to discuss, examine or challenge behaviour in the overuse of inappropriate, outdated, stereotypes."



*Network success: organisers had a job to get delegates to leave*

Collingwood knew the objectives had been achieved, when they were faced with a rare problem for conference organisers. "We couldn't get people to go home," she laughs. "There was a drinks reception afterwards and people were buzzing. It was very unusual. There were many who felt uneasy about the way people are treated in marketing terms and how crucial to the market these customers are."

"From an organiser's point of view it was well worth doing, we succeeded in moving from the darlings of the corporate and charity world into proving we can handle more high risk, edgy content - we are going to be the most talked about people for a long time! The gay community embraced what we were trying to do, not just as a conference organiser trying to do something controversial, but our commitment to the truth."

**M&I**