

Businesses should step up for marriage equality

By Joe Solmonese and Bob Page

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It is fitting and timely that the Democratic National Convention is convening in North Carolina this week, at a time when the country is debating equality under the law for women and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans. For the first time in any party's history, the Democratic platform stands for full marriage equality, as does President Barack Obama. And it's all happening in the shadow of a heartbreaking approval of the constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in this state.

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At the Republican Convention in Tampa last week, the narrative suggested that discussions about women's issues and LGBT equality were attempts by Democrats to shift attention away from economic issues. Women and LGBT Americans aren't buying it. They know that creating an equitable and fair environment for everyone is good for America and even better for our economic bottom line. For the most part, corporate America knows it as well. And yet the way corporate America has approached the public policy debate around marriage equality – in other words, in putting its values of inclusion into practice – has been mixed at best.

Consider Minnesota-based Target, which scored high marks on the Human Rights Campaign's corporate equality index in recognition of its fair treatment of LGBT employees. It straddled the fence by donating to an anti-gay gubernatorial candidate two years ago, but sponsored gay pride activities in Minneapolis. It has shied away from Minnesota's November referendum on same-sex marriage.

U.S. corporations have a long history of shaping public opinion and influencing the hearts and minds of the American people. There is precedent for involvement in social and civil rights concerns by business leaders. Double-sided vending machines reinforcing segregation during the Jim Crow era by many soft drink manufacturers gave way to Pepsi's mid-century recognition that a better future could be secured in elevating, and serving, an African-American middle class. While we may wonder how leaders who came before us struggled so mightily over matters of fair treatment, those coming after us will again stand in judgment of corporations who don't use their enormous influence to take a stand for equality. On the other hand, those who speak as a matter of corporate responsibility will find that they amplify the voices of a growing majority who cherish the promise of equality for all.

A reward for courageous corporate leaders will be in learning, as Pepsi did, that standing up for fairness is ultimately good for business. While it's true that some initially reacted negatively when Replacements, Ltd., put our company's resources behind trying to defeat North Carolina's same-sex marriage amendment, the impact to our business has since been overwhelmingly positive. We attribute that to a growing number of consumers learning about our position. Likewise, Starbucks threw its support behind Washington state's marriage equality push. The company came out in support of diversity, respect for all, and providing a work environment that is inclusive and

supportive. In so doing, they reaffirmed their customers' trust that Starbucks is worthy of their business, creating long-term strength and, for many, undying respect for the Starbucks brand.

The uproar created when Chick-fil-A's president and CEO, Dan T. Cathy, voiced his opposition to marriage equality was due, in part, to the notion that Mr. Cathy was condemned for expressing what he believes. Mr. Cathy is free to believe and speak as he chooses. But in how a CEO leads, experience matters more than personal belief. If a CEO understands differences among us and conducts business in such a way that all feel valued and none feel judged or marginalized, that CEO will have added value to the bottom line and to the communities he serves.

To test our point, consider that life experience led N.C. native John Mack, as chairman of Morgan Stanley, to advocate for marriage equality in New York. For him, it was a matter of principle and good business. While he wanted to ensure he could attract and retain a talented, diverse workforce, he was also moved by witnessing racial discrimination in his youth and seeing that LGBT persons are treated inequitably today. Mr. Mack's support no doubt conflicted with the beliefs of some of his employees or customers, but in speaking out against discrimination of any kind, he affirmed a universal principle that stands the test of time: equality for all, regardless of differences in our beliefs.

So, what's next? The time has come for more corporations to lead in affirming the fundamental right to marry. As Emma Lazarus, whose words are inscribed upon the Statue of Liberty wrote, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free." Upcoming referenda on marriage equality in Maryland, Minnesota, Maine and Washington will provide corporations with the opportunity to take a bold leadership role. We urge them to affirm their commitment to equal rights for all. It will be good for our country, and good for the bottom line.

Joe Solmonese is the former president of the Human Rights Campaign. Bob Page is founder and chairman of Replacements, Ltd. in McLeansville, N.C.



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