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Making a Business Case for Marriage Equality

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The 2012 Democratic National Convention kicks off next week in Charlotte, N.C., and for the first time, marriage equality is on the platform. The president of the United States supports it, yet, ironically, we are gathering in a state to vote on gay marriage in a May referendum. Plenty has been said -- and will continue to be said -- about this situation. At the very least, it is a wry commentary on our mixed-up world.

"Why should corporate America's support of marriage equality be so inconsistent?" My business partner has been posing this question to me for months now. Ted is a Certified Turnaround Professional; he is in the top 100 companies. He is an expert in finding equitable solutions for organizations' creditors and stakeholders. Credibility and rationality are the touchstones to his approach in business situations that are often highly charged. It is no surprise that Ted has a clear-eyed and pragmatic view of what companies need to do now with regard to marriage equality.

Ted's position and mine is that companies that live in the past will not thrive and grow in the future. A company with equal rights is the future. So why can't American businesses accept this and move on?

Companies across America have been making groundbreaking (and risky) decisions, founded over the past 100 years. Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company set an early example in 2004, when it began offering equal benefits to all employees. That same year it received a 100-percent rating on the [Corporate Equality Index](#) of the [Corporate Equality Campaign](#). In the state of Washington, Boeing was also an early adopter, offering same-sex benefits to all employees. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz says that his company's pro-gay positions are about making its employees feel valued with its corporate values. In Minnesota General Mills reinforced its support of gay marriage by opposing the state's ban on gay marriage, which will be voted on in November.

It is curious, though, that while major companies like REI, Google, and Amazon announced their support, many others remain silent, or come up just short of committing their support. Marriott Corporation is a good example; it demonstrates brilliant thinking in [a recent Businessweek interview](#) in which he says, "This church has brought great joy and happiness to my life. But that didn't mean gay employees had any less of a right to work here. We take care of our people, regardless of their sexual orientation or anything else." Bill, it's time for Marriott to take a step!

Even here in North Carolina, where Bank of America provides its 200,000-plus employees with excellent benefits, the company remained silent before, during, and after the May vote. Why? What were the reasons?

My friend Bob Page, president of Greensboro, N.C.-based Replacements, Ltd., took a big risk and publicly opposed the state's ban on gay marriage. He built his company on a business model of diversity. His business partner have been together for 14 years, and Bob has grown Replacements into an \$80-million company with 100 employees. Bob's public support resulted in a downturn in his North Carolina sales, but it was just a temporary setback. His bottom line was not affected, and his company is doing better than ever.

So what do we want? We want Corporate America to support marriage equality, of course, but not just because it is the right thing to do, but because ultimately it makes good business sense. As companies strive to attract top talent in a global marketplace, to clearly reflect their community, customer, and employee population, and to demonstrate value to their shareholders' support for "progressive" issues such as marriage equality, it makes sense to support it when the opportunity arises.

