

In gay marriage fight, some companies take a stand

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c. 2012 USA Today (RNS) In an unconventional move, a number of high-profile business executives have come out on the issue of gay marriage.

Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos is the latest to say "I do" to supporting same-sex unions. On Friday (July 27), Washington United for Marriage, a coalition that seeks to uphold a gay marriage law that passed in Washington, announced that Bezos and his wife MacKenzie will donate \$2.5 million to its cause.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates and CEO Steve Ballmer have each donated \$100,000 to the effort to keep gay marriage legal. Ken Powell, CEO of food behemoth General Mills, has publicly spoken out against Minnesota's proposed amendment that would ban gay marriage. And Paul Singer, founder of financial firm Elliott Management, recently contributed \$150,000 to Freedom to Marry, which fights for gay marriage across the nation.

In an opposite corner is Chick-fil-A President and Chief Operating Officer Dan Cathy, who recently told Baptist Press that Chick-fil-A is "very much supportive of the family -- the biblical definition of the family unit."

Cathy's perceived anti-gay marriage statements renewed the nation's debate on this hot-button topic.

The CEO of the Jim Henson Company responded. The company, which had a licensing agreement to supply toys for Chick-fil-A's kids' meals, said it will not partner with them on any future endeavors.

"Lisa Henson, our CEO, is personally a strong supporter of gay marriage and has directed us to donate the payment we received from Chick-Fil-A to (the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)," it said in a written statement.

In the case of Chick-fil-A, it's not just executives weighing in. Politicians are getting involved too.

On Thursday, San Francisco Mayor Edwin Lee tweeted that he is "very disappointed (Chick-fil-A) doesn't share San Francisco's values & strong commitment to equality for everyone."

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel also have criticized the private company.

Yet there are also many who support Chick-fil-A and Cathy.

For example, former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee says he's "incensed" by the negative feedback, and in turn has deemed Aug. 1 "Chick fil-A Appreciation Day," when he's asking consumers to support the chain by eating there.

Chick-fil-A didn't respond directly when asked for a comment on Cathy's statements but issued its own statement that said in part: "The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity and respect -- regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender."

In the Baptist Press interview, Cathy said his stance against same-sex marriage "might not be popular with everyone, but thank the Lord, we live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles."

While companies and their employees are free to openly share their feelings on highly polarizing matters such as gay marriage, such statements from top executives can affect the brand image, say marketing experts.

"Usually companies stay away from anything contentious," says Allen Adamson, managing director at branding firm Landor Associates and author of "BrandSimple: How the Best Brands Keep it Simple and Succeed."

"They want the focus and attention on their products and services."

As for Chick-fil-A, its reputation took a hit on the YouGov BrandIndex, which tracks consumer sentiment on 1,100 brands on a daily basis.

Before Cathy's statements, it ranked high with consumers. As the controversy expanded, the company's brand health has deteriorated.

In turn, that is likely to affect sales, says BrandIndex managing director Ted Marzilli.

"Some consumers might be very supportive of the brand or (Cathy's) position, but when we look at overall consumers ... this is going to have an impact," he says.

Gay marriage is a "political hot potato," he says, and executives "should be careful about dipping into the political waters."

J.C. Penney felt backlash when it hired openly gay Ellen DeGeneres as its spokeswoman early this year.

But despite criticism from conservative activist groups, the retailer stood by its decision and took it a step further by featuring same-sex parents in its promotions.

"J.C. Penney really showed us a turning point," says Michael Wilke, senior U.S. consultant for gay marketing firm Out Now. "Not only did they stand squarely behind (DeGeneres) in a public way, but then they took the unprecedented step of coming out with those Mother's Day and Father's Day same-sex ads that they put in their catalogs."

Adding more pressure to the corporate office is this reality: Any executive statement or action that is remotely controversial can spread to millions in seconds via social media.

"Everything is connected and everyone sees everything," says Adamson. "In today's media landscape, there is a magnifying glass. Anything you say or do is prime time."

Even before the Cathy controversy, Chick-fil-A saw how negative news could quickly disseminate.

Chick-fil-A -- which has used the ad slogan "Eat Mor Chikin" since 1995 -- tried to stop a small business owner's trademark application for "Eat More Kale," a catchphrase he had printed on shirts and stickers since 2001.

Thousands rallied to support that owner, Bo Muller-Moore, after word spread via social media streams.

For its part, Chick-fil-A is using social media to get its messages out as well. It didn't directly address the company stance on gay marriage, but last week it let its Facebook fans know that they are going to try to step out of the spotlight on the

issue.

"Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political arena," it said.