

NO FAGS ALLOWED

A resort chain's heterosexual-couples-only policy is raising the ire of some activists by Gip Plaster

After an Atlanta man uncovered a prize that excluded gay and lesbian couples, some of the nation's largest travel and Internet companies were ensnared in a controversy over how far companies can go to create an exclusive environment.

A "romantic getaway" at the Sandals Dunn's River Resort in Jamaica was offered as a Valentine's prize promoted by the Internet search engine Yahoo! and on Microsoft's MSN Expedia Web site.

The problem arose because Sandals' 10 resorts allow only couples made up of one adult male and one adult female. Singles, children and same-sex couples are prohibited. The contro-

"We were not aware of the resort's policy," Yahoo! spokesperson Diane Hunt said via a written statement. "As soon as it was brought to our attention, we responded immediately by contacting our promotional clients to have the sweepstakes removed."

Although the sweepstakes was removed, links to Sandals still exist on Yahoo!

Rick Weintraub, a spokesperson for US Airways, says: "That promotion was withdrawn. We have a very firm written policy prohibiting discrimination."

He adds US Airways Vacations is a separate company that licenses the US Airways name.

Sandals has remained unapologetic throughout the incident and has pointed

From Sandals' official Internet home page



very widened when activists learned that Sandals is also promoted on the World Wide Web by US Airways Vacations, Travelocity, American Airlines Vacations, Online Vacation Mall and other sites.

"I was shopping for a vacation for my boyfriend and I," says Kirby Frank, a gay Atlanta man, explaining how he discovered the prohibition against gay and lesbian couples in the contest's fine print. "I'm a little bit of an activist and that just pissed me off. I really didn't think I could let them get away with that."

Frank says he was more upset with the U.S. companies that partnered with the exclusive resort than with Jamaica-based Sandals.

"I think it's a horrible policy, but at least Sandals is telling me up front that they don't want my business—that they don't want any of my money, ever."

He adds: "I think Sandals is offensive. I think they're a bunch of schmucks and they don't care that I care. But I think American Airlines should care. And I think US Airways should care."

Frank contacted his friend, John Aravosis, an online activist and the president of Wired Strategies, an Internet consulting company. Aravosis is the activist who first broke the story of Merriam-Webster's offensive synonyms for homosexual in its thesaurus.

Aravosis issued a press release and began contacting the companies involved.

"The fact that they would actually say that gay couples are not allowed is amazing," he says.

Aravosis is pleased with the quick response by Microsoft, which immediately removed all direct links to Sandals and distanced itself from the situation.

Suzi LeVine, product manager for MSN Expedia, says more than 30 brands advertise on the site, including Online Vacation Mall, which ran the contest.

She says Microsoft will re-evaluate its relationship with Sandals and notes that some of its advertisers may have links to Sandals, so it may be possible to reach Sandals indirectly from the site.

"As you know, Microsoft has very strong policies that are very pro-everyone," she maintains.

out that it also runs Beaches resorts, which allow children, singles and same-sex couples.

"The opposite-sex-only policy provided an atmosphere that a lot of our clients are looking for," explains Cathleen Decker, an employee of the public relations firm Jensen/Boga, which represents Sandals in the United States.

She argues that restrictive policies are common in the travel industry. "We really do think the couples we attract are looking for this exclusionary atmosphere. I don't think this policy is particularly unique.... The truth is, it is niche marketing. Sandals is very, very good at catering to this group of folks."

Art Spitzer, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, says it's not clear that any legal action can be taken against Sandals' policy of discrimination against same-sex couples.

"American law doesn't control conduct in the rest of the world," he says, referring to the fact that the resort chain is based in Jamaica.

Regarding whether the U.S. companies that advertised the discriminatory sweepstakes via the Internet should be subject to legal action, he responds: "The law on that is still very much in a developing state."

He notes that Microsoft, for example, is subject to the laws in its home state of Washington, which do not bar anti-gay discrimination. The law is not clear on whether the company could be successfully sued for advertising the contest in places where discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited.

On the other side of the niche marketing coin is Olivia Cruises, which caters to lesbians.

The company has had some heterosexual women on its cruises, usually sisters or close friends of lesbian cruisers, according to its director of marketing, Judy Werle.

No men have ever been passengers on an Olivia cruise, although some have asked. Werle says the men were told about the nature of the cruises and voluntarily agreed not to go.

"The cruises are designed for women. I don't think we can legally say that men can't go. I don't know that a gay man would feel comfortable on the cruise, though," she says.

Werle does not support Sandals' policy, however.

"I think niche marketing to heterosexual couples is based on discrimination," she says.

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