

TEST DRIVE

Auto shopping checklist: Before you buy a car, check out the gay-related policies of the big manufacturers by Gip Plaster

A lot of eyes stay focused on the world's top automakers simply because they are some of the biggest and oldest companies around. But how do the top three—General Motors, Ford Motor Co., and newly formed DaimlerChrysler—handle gay and lesbian employee issues?

The good news is that all three companies have gay and lesbian employee groups. The bad news is that none of the companies offer domestic partner benefits to their U.S. employees.

General Motors, the No. 1 car producer in the world, makes many popular brands, including Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, GMC, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, and the "we like being different" brand, Saturn. It also produces cars for some foreign makers, including Isuzu and Saab.

The company recently bought Volvo, making it the No. 2 automobile manufacturer in Europe. Ford owns most of the No. 1 rental company, Hertz, and Ford's subsidiary Ford Motor Credit is the top auto finance company. (The Ford family, by the way, owns about 34 percent of the company.)

Ford's nondiscrimination policy protects gay and lesbian employees.

"We restated it in 1996 to include sexual orientation," says spokeswoman Francine Romine.

The company also mentions gay and lesbian issues in its diversity training, a standard four-hour program introduced two years ago that has reached 95 percent of employees.

There is a company-recognized gay and lesbian employee group. Its spokeswoman, Cindy Clardy, notes that the attitude toward gay men and lesbians in Ford offices is pretty good, but

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The company, which makes about a third of its sales outside the United States, operates more than a hundred facilities worldwide.

GM offers domestic partner benefits to Canadian workers, and some see that as a step toward getting the benefits for U.S. workers.

"In 1996, same-sex benefits were granted to hourly workers in Canada as part of a labor negotiation," explains company spokeswoman Marcia McGee. "Salaried workers are also now covered."

As for when benefits could be available in the States, McGee's answer is vague: "We're looking at other companies that offer them. It's being researched right now."

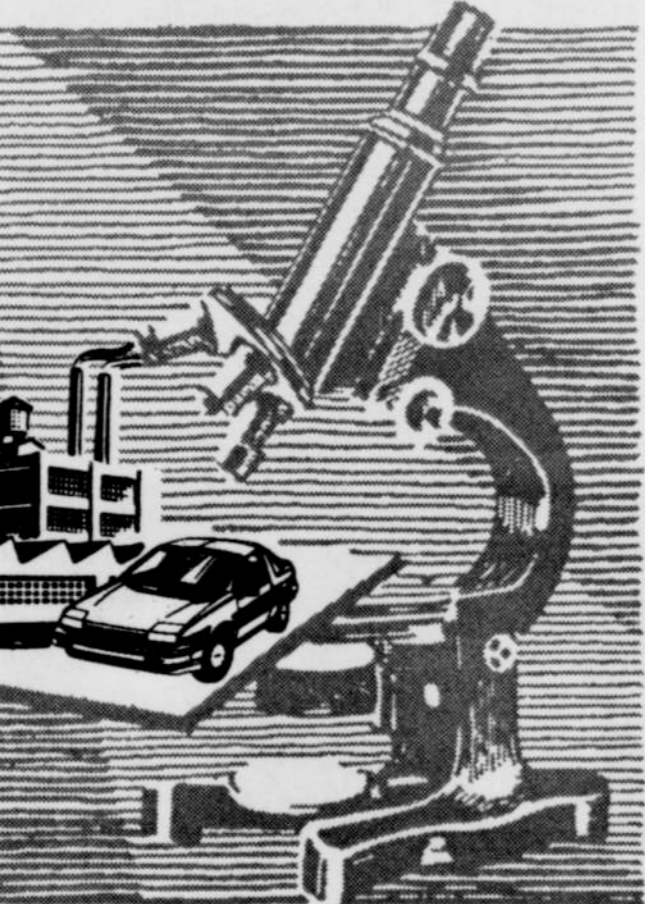
McGee adds that the company discusses gay and lesbian issues in its diversity training.

Bret Scott, a spokesman for the company-recognized gay and lesbian employee group, says the group began informally in 1994 and now works to get domestic partner benefits.

Sexual orientation was recently added to the company's nondiscrimination policy.

"Making changes in a company as large as GM is not easy," Scott says.

Ford Motor Co. makes more trucks than any other company and is the No. 2 automaker overall. In addition to Ford, its brands include Astin Martin, Jaguar, Lincoln and Mercury. It also has a controlling interest in the Japanese carmaker Mazda.



she says much improvement is needed on the factory floor.

"Ninety percent of anti-gay harassment complaints come from the plant," she says.

That aside, Clardy is fairly pleased with the company for which she works.

"Ford has done pretty well in being supportive of gay and lesbian employees," she says.

DaimlerChrysler, the third largest automaker, was formed in 1998 when Daimler-Benz, maker of the Mercedes, paid \$37 million for Chrysler, known for its minivans. The German-owned company also produces brands that include Dodge, Eagle, Jeep and Plymouth.

As DaimlerChrysler continues the merging process, everything is subject to change. At the moment, however, spokeswoman Megan Giles says the company includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy, but it does not discuss gay and lesbian issues in diversity training.

About two years ago, Chrysler employees formed a company-recognized gay and lesbian group, called People of Diversity, that remains in place since the merger. Member Michelle Walters notes the same trend seen at Ford of acceptance in offices and nonacceptance in plants.

"My experience has been a very positive one, as has been the experience of many others who work in the corporate environment," she says.

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