

**NATIONAL news**

# NAKED GUYS EMBRACING UNDER AN AMERICAN FLAG

**Gay.com ads cause furor in Boston**

by Sarah Dougher

The billboards have probably taken you by surprise—what are two naked men doing wrapped in an American flag? And why does it say “Come Together”? In a style of advertising generally relegated to the back pages of gay newspapers, the images are the work of Gay.com, a San Francisco-based online dating and news Web site. The billboards (one of which you can see above Embers on Northwest Broadway in downtown Portland) were the Web site’s summer ad campaign. Until a few days ago, they had not received any vocal complaints locally or nationally.

But a conservative group from the Boston area has placed a photograph of the ad on its Web site, along with instructions on calling Clear Channel, the media company that rents the billboards, to complain. The Web site read: “How much worse does it get? Two naked men embracing, wrapped in an American flag, advertising a pornographic homosexual ‘hookup’ Web site. This is where the gay movement is taking you, unless you take action.”

Global media company PlanetOut and its flagship site, Gay.com, launched a major market print and outdoor campaign in the United States in April featuring two gay men who “find understanding, love and comfort under the protection of the American flag,” according to a press release associated with the launch of the campaign.

The campaign, designed to promote the Gay.com brand, was featured on walls, billboards and transit shelters and in gay-focused print media in key markets including San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Boston, as well as in mid-sized markets including Houston, Dallas, Portland, Atlanta and San Diego.

“This is a message about inclusion in an environment of exclusion,” said Lowell Selvin, chairman and CEO of PlanetOut. “We strongly believe that gay people deserve to love, to be together and to enjoy all the ideals and privileges that the American flag represents. We also think that this campaign will elicit an emotional response in gay and straight people alike.”

According to the press release, the “Come Together” campaign was designed to make a strong, affirming statement, as well as to draw members and subscribers to Gay.com. The story of the campaign evolves through each of three executions. In the first, called “Anthem,” two men stand defiantly before the American flag, strong in their separate beliefs. Through the next two executions, called “Embody” and “Comfort,” the men unite, finding love and companionship.

“Come Together” was produced by an internal creative team including Christy Schaefer, director of PlanetOut’s Creative Services Group, and graphic designers Ivan Vargas and Donovan Smandra. The campaign was shot by San Francisco photographer Erik Butler.

“Gay issues were an emotional and polarizing force in the last election, and we wanted to

speak to that very relevant experience for our audience,” said Schaefer. “The campaign depicts two men who overcome their political division by finding a personal connection as they debate their passionate viewpoints. For our campaign, we chose the American flag as the object of debate and the hero.”

But the group in Boston has raised a stink. In reaction to a billboard in Cambridge, Mass., *The Boston Globe* reported July 28 that an organization called the Article 8 Alliance had been calling in complaints to the Clear Channel corporate headquarters. The alliance is an anti-gay group based in Waltham, Mass., that is actively working to overturn marriage rights in that state. Brian Camenker, director of the alliance, said people affiliated with his group made the complaints. There were about five protest calls, according to the *Globe*.

Apparently, the Gay.com ad was scheduled to come down anyway, but the company removed it immediately in part because of the



This billboard, one in a series of three, evoked outrage from conservatives and radicals alike.

complaints. The *Globe* reported that Spencer Moore, a spokesman for Gay.com, said the company was not upset the ad is coming down a day early.

The Article 8 Alliance, on the other hand, considered the action a victory, trumping: “One-day service!! Billboard company swiftly reacts to public outrage. Offensive sign came down immediately!”

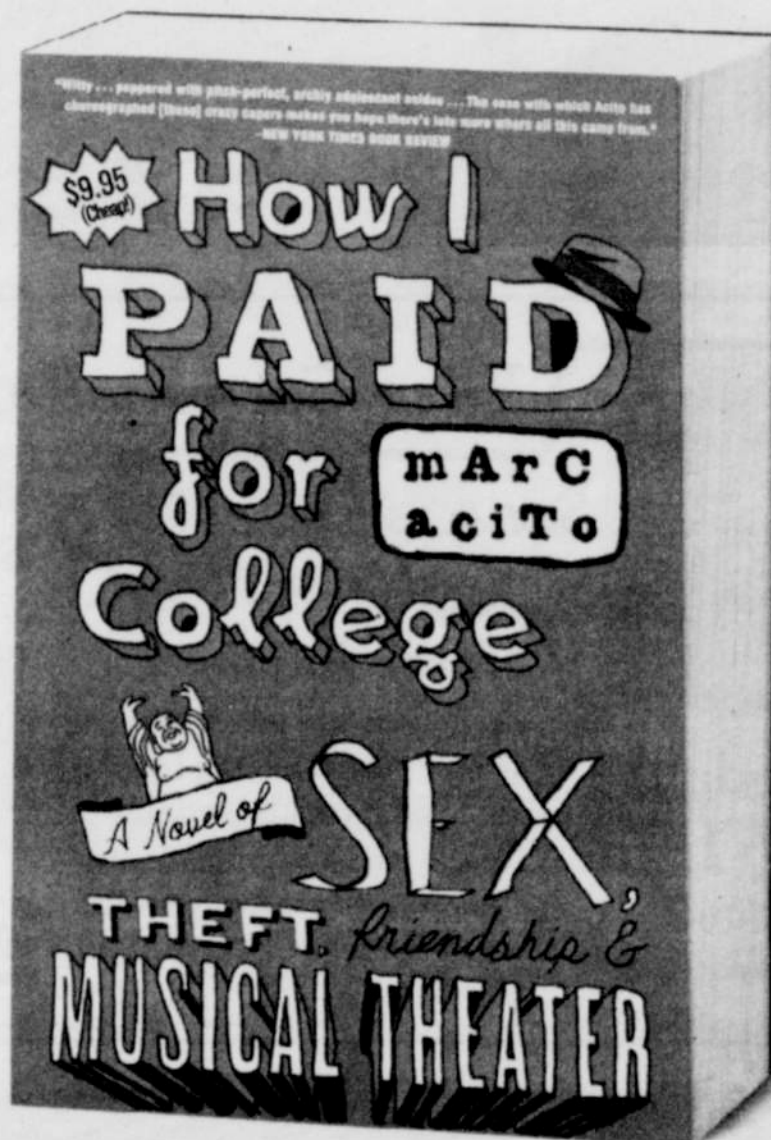
The conflict over the image of the American flag is certainly nothing new, and the risky and provocative images put forth by Gay.com beg wider questions within the queer community: What role does patriotism have in the image of the queer community? Is it appropriate for a flag to be displayed as it is in the advertisement? Should a flag be exploited to sell anything?

The popular queer Web log site Queer Day understood the impact of the advertising as meant to touch on emotions and had a negative reaction. Its editorial team wrote: “Our emotional response is outrage. With a government set on eliminating our rights, not to even mention all the blood on our flag these days, we now have reason to hate Gay.com beyond their continuing visual homage to body fascism.”

Just Out would love to hear what you think about these ads. Please e-mail News Editor SARAH DOUGHER with your comments at [sarah@justout.com](mailto:sarah@justout.com).

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