



# BOB WITECK

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## SMALL LGBT BUSINESS LEADERS WITH GREAT ASPIRATIONS

The life and times of Harvey Milk, through books and an Oscar-winning film, tell the story of a fearless gay civil rights martyr and political leader. Perhaps what helped make Milk fearless, however, was his personal decision to transplant his New York roots and to open his small, street front camera store in San Francisco. As many of us today understand, opening and running a small business takes no small amounts of courage too.

Milk, of course, will never be remembered merely as a gay man who sold film and cameras, but instead as a larger-than-life-sized change agent and political evangelist. Nonetheless, Milk's story is much like many other lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people over decades.

In mid and late 20th Century America, large corporations and employers were generally places where we were invited and recruited – on the strict condition that we fit in, conform or merely hide those characteristics that made us different from others.

It is no wonder that straight, white men were captains of industry and found their way to the executive suites for generations. For

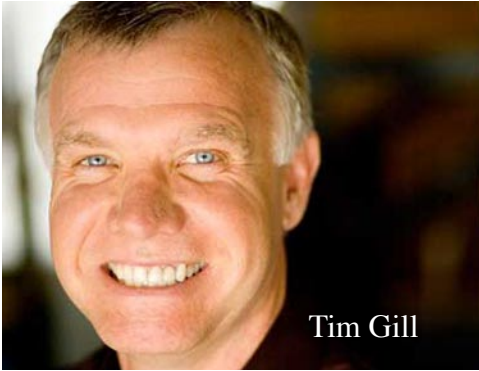
women, people of color, different ethnicities and faiths, along with LGBT people, we often took other paths – or, if gay, we fit in by remaining in the closet.

### **The Beginnings**

It's not surprising therefore, that small business owners invented the sense of community, safety and closeness that earlier gay generations embraced and may have taken for granted.

These business owners were the men and women who operated private clubs, bars and coffee houses, started independent community newspapers and ran gay bookstores to serve our own. If we were not often welcome in many other places (especially outside of our jobs and our own families), these enterprising businesses gave us places to meet and be ourselves, to connect unafraid, to organize politically and to learn about whom we really are.

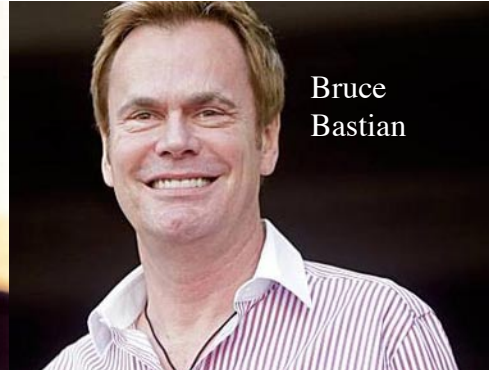
What of businesses and professions that are often thought as gay stereotypes? Are gay men and women destined to own florists, catering businesses and hair salons? Many proudly have followed their interests and styles to pursue these businesses – simply



Tim Gill



David Bohnett



Bruce Bastian

perhaps because they realized they could be themselves at work and everywhere in the community. That freedom is intoxicating for everyone, and perhaps added confirmation that being truly out and happy at work helps us to excel in all we do.

Some start-ups like the one Harvey Milk began were also such expressions of independence, and reflect a real hunger to be original and beyond judgment of others. Some research suggests that LGBT people may have a stronger propensity to become entrepreneurs and to own their own businesses because of these needs and other motivations.

Gay enterprise always has gravitated towards America's cities where it has long been an economic magnet and community-builder. Today with the rise and greater visibility of gay owned small and mid-sized businesses, we are transforming that urban soul into a national economic and political force throughout the United States.

#### Trends for LGBT Business Today

Gay business growth and enterprise throughout the United States is now visible in all sectors and growth areas of the economy. With American investment and dominance as a world leader in information, software, computing and digital technology – LGBT men and women have been among the top performers and innovators in many advanced fields.

Consider the successful rise in the 1990s of Tim Gill (Quark), David Bohnett (GeoCities) and Bruce Bastian (WordPerfect) for instance. All three, and other men and women like them, established enduring brands and amassed significant wealth that today they apply generously to LGBT causes and political engagement. Consider others such as Meghan Smith, a co-founder of PlanetOut, who is today leading Google's Foundation and its partnership with nonprofit America, or the public spirited Chris Hughes who helped launch Facebook, then turned his social network talent to electing President Obama in 2008. Today Hughes is putting this experience to work to build an online social philanthropy movement called Juma.

Other remarkable LGBT movement builders include furniture design executive Mitchell Gold and his determination to launch Faith in America, a national nonprofit that aims to transform religion as a positive rather than deadly influence in the lives of

gay kids – as well as former RSVP travel executive Charlie Rounds who works to connect travel and human rights causes.

#### Strength in Numbers, Power in Influence

Economic power and influence arises not merely because of celebrated business leaders of course. It is also found in the emergence of the LGBT chamber movement, beginning with the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce which is today affiliated with over 48 chambers in the United States as well as others around the world.

Like other ethnic chambers before us, independent and small business owners have joined forces to extend their reach and audiences to elected officials and to giant corporations. In 2004, for instance, I made sure that our own business was the first LGBT-owned company in Washington, D.C. certified by the NGLCC. Soon afterwards, we joined forces to work with the city's insurance commissioner to persuade our private health insurance carrier to permit companies of our size to purchase health coverage that finally enabled us to offer equal domestic partner benefits to our own employees.

The gay chambers in major cities also accelerate the opportunities for smaller businesses to be named eligible as vendors and suppliers to many major corporations – through their diversity supplier programs. That relationship, combined with our participation in NGLCC, has supported the consulting work that we perform both for American Airlines and Marriott International, two major hospitality and travel leaders that are recognized for their outreach to marginalized, diverse and underserved communities and businesses.

Significantly, we also have seen recent examples where major corporations look to their chamber partners as allies and supporters on business initiatives and public affairs challenges. To woo and win the endorsement of an LGBT chamber is yet another way to help persuade the openly LGBT men and women (and non-gay allies) who serve frequently on city councils, planning boards, and as mayors of U.S. towns and cities.

As Richard Florida, the celebrated academic and business critic reminds us, America's cities that are destined to be economic winners will be those that embrace everyone including the LGBT community and our own entrepreneurs.