

PRWeek

PRIDE
IN PR**CURTIS SPARRER**

Principal & cofounder, Bospar

In its most recent ranking, the *San Francisco Business Times* named Bospar the eighth-largest Bay Area LGBT-owned business.

Curtis Sparrer, the firm's principal and cofounder, started up the agency in 2015. He has represented brands and individuals including PayPal, Unisys, Tetris, George Takei and the alien hunters of the SETI Institute.

He is president of the San Francisco Press Club and is on the board of PRSA Silicon Valley. He is a lifetime member of the National Lesbian Gay Journalists Association and StartOut, a LGBTQ entrepreneurial organization.

In 2010, when Tyler Clementi killed himself after his sexuality was revealed in a live streaming video, Sparrer shared a similar experience that happened to him in college in an article for the Dallas Morning News.

Before going into PR in 2008 at Grayling, Sparrer was a journalist for mainstream press such as KRON-TV, KHOU, and WTOL as well as LGBTQ outlets including Gay.com and PlanetOut Partners.

In 2020, the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of the PRSA named Sparrer its PR Professional of the Year and the Los Angeles Times has dubbed him a “crisis management expert.”

He is married to Brice Stanek, an interior designer in San Francisco.

Preferred pronouns?

He/him/his

Celebrate the impact LGBTQ individuals have had on the PR industry in the U.S. and around the world.

It is underreported that Black Lives Matter was founded by Black lesbians. I can think of no other movement that, with its words and messaging, has profoundly changed the worldwide discourse on race.

To be able to effect that level of change is due in part to the shock of being gay: It’s like getting a crash course in PR at an early age. You quickly know your brand, differentiators, networks, and how to get noticed very quickly. That’s why LGBTQ people have an outsized microphone for being such a tiny percentage of the population. Being proud means knowing how to stand out and take ownership of your own brand.

How important is it for young LGBTQ PR pros to see people like them in the senior ranks of the industry as role models to emulate?

Everyone needs to see LGBTQ people as role models. For gay youth it’s easy to see why; they need to see their own career potential realized as a real human being, not as someone scripted on a television series or as an occasional outlier of chance.

For an LGBTQ person starting their career in public relations, politician Pete Buttigieg is just as helpful a role model as the character Will from *Will & Grace*.

But it’s just as important for straight people to see LGBTQ leaders as flesh and blood success stories — they need to see their friends and their gay children’s path forward. That vision is going to pave the way for the next generation of leaders.

What advice would you give young LGBTQ PR pros making their way in the industry?

Don’t let someone’s narrative of you go unchallenged. It’s an opportunity for learning on both sides. Growing up I was always told what a gay man must do, in terms of being patient, being less angry, or being more understanding of other people’s ignorance.

Perhaps the most insulting moment came when a client got all *Brave New World* on me and drunkenly told me that as a gay man it was my role as a “Beta” to support “Alphas” like him. I should have been sassy and snapped, “I thought we were all Alphas.” Instead, I was complicit by just dumbly laughing and letting the client have the last word.

PR is generally regarded as an LGBTQ-friendly industry. How true is that perception?

PR does not exist in a vacuum. For some companies, it connects to everything that matters, including facets that are not as rainbow-friendly.

That becomes a bigger deal in tech PR, where certain aspects of PR connect to programmers and developers. The tech scene has an infamous programmer culture that is opaque to women, people of color, and LGBTQ folk as well.

There are efforts underway to make the tech scene’s developer culture more accessible via organizations like *Girls Who Code* and *Black Girls Code* — but clearly the very existence of those organizations prove that more work is needed to be done.

What challenges, if any, did you face as an LGBTQ communicator working your way up in the PR profession?

I was told there was a CEO who loved my work but whose skin crawled whenever he heard my voice. I was told to butch it up and talk at least an octave lower whenever I was around him. And talk about sports.

Another time my boss told me I had to entertain the CEO of a light-bulb company with a night out at a baseball game. As soon as I opened my mouth, the CEO knew which team I played on and spent the entire game cracking jokes about me being a left-leaner and “Rachel Maddow seat-warmer.” Granted, I would be happy to play with Ms. Maddow, despite being talented in only two sports — chess and swimming.

If applicable, describe a specific example in your career where you faced discrimination based on your sexuality or gender identity?

The problem with many forms for LGBTQ discrimination is there is no Scooby Doo moment where the unmasked bad guy exclaims: “And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren’t for you meddling kids.”

Often I would be simply left to wonder whenever I had been excluded from an important team assignment or an overseas trip because of “team dynamics” or “chemistry.”