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Gays, women call for boycotts

One-day actions designed to show economic muscle

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Get ready for an economic "flu" of sorts.

The Atlanta-based Boycott For Equality is asking gays, lesbians and sympathetic heterosexuals nationwide to skip work, halt shopping, turn off cellphones and send an \$80 ATM receipt to elected officials today — all to showcase their spending power.

Then, on Oct. 19, a New York-based women's business group, 85 Broads, has called for a one-day nationwide spending boycott to demonstrate the economic prowess of women.

The gay-rights boycotters want to show their monetary strength as they advocate for job protection for homosexuals and protest national and state proposals to make gay marriages unconstitutional. On Nov. 2, Georgians will vote on adding a gay-marriage ban to the state constitution.

85 Broads wants more women in corporate boardrooms. Only eight women chief executives were listed in Fortune's 2003 ranking of America's 500 largest firms.

But economists say consumer boycotts — once one of the strongest tools available to groups pushing for political, economic and social change — offer little more than symbolic gestures now.

A global economy has changed the way businesses buy and sell and how consumers shop. It's one thing to boycott your locally owned hardware store, economists say, but it's vastly harder to successfully boycott a multinational retailer like Home Depot.

"The crux of the problem is that in a complex operation spanning several countries, it's much less likely that you can hit the core," said Usha C.V. Haley, a management and international business professor at the University of New Haven in Connecticut.

Plus, economists say, groups formed around gender and sexual preferences lack the cohesiveness of labor unions, which in the 1970s used boycotts to force change.

Members in a welders union, for example, largely share economic interests, said Laurence S. Moss, editor of the American Journal of Economics and Sociology.

"They might be black, they might be women, they might be white, but they're all welders," Moss said. A group of women or gays may have vastly different economic interests, so their boycott is less likely to be successful, he said.

Evolving methods

These days, hitting a company's bottom line through exclusion from government contracts, punitive regulations and taxes is the best way to force change.

That's what toppled South Africa's apartheid system in 1994, Haley said. She researched the effects of boycotts and sanctions on U.S. companies in South Africa.

The most effective strategies, she said, were local, state and federal contracts unavailable to U.S. companies operating in South Africa. Federal laws that banned the companies from making new investments in South Africa also worked.

Stockholder resolutions and boycotts were symbolic but rarely effective, she said.

"There's nothing wrong with symbolism," Haley said. "Getting the help of the government and legislation is very helpful."

Boycott participants and organizers say they don't expect immediate results. This is simply one tool, they say, to advance their causes.

Aline Cristesco, an Atlanta transportation researcher who plans to join in the women's boycott, acknowledged a one-day protest isn't likely to create more than an economic blip. She stressed that a boycott, like voting or lobbying, is only one strategy for pushing corporate America to include more women, who control an estimated \$6 trillion a year in consumer spending.

Discussion expected

Dale Duncan, an Atlanta music teacher who organized the gay boycott, said: "We don't expect on Saturday morning to wake up and suddenly, everything is going to be changed for our community.

"We do know that people will be discussing what we're doing, and that's never a bad thing, even if they disagree," he said.

Michael Knight plans to close his East Atlanta furniture and home accessories store as part of the gay boycott.

"One day may not do it — the Montgomery bus strikes were months long," Knight said, describing the 1955 citywide boycott of Montgomery's transit buses by that city's black residents.

"But whatever we do will show people we do have some effect, and we're important to this country," he said.

Closing Traders, which he owns with Shawn Ertle, his partner of 12 years, will mean a loss of about \$2,000 in revenue, Knight said.

But, he said, that underscores the impact businesses and consumers concerned about gay rights can have. Gay spending power was estimated at \$485 billion last year.

"We're a vital part of the community; we're a vital part of the American economy," Knight said.

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Michael Knight (left) and Shawn Ergle plan to close their East Atlanta furniture and home store today to support the gay boycott.