

How to Avoid Rainbow Washing During Pride Month

In many American localities, Pride Month is an explosively colorful time of the year. Hosts of Pride flags and rainbow decor seem to appear overnight to ensure city streets and department store windows are appropriately adorned by June 1. Businesses are also quick to demonstrate their support for the holiday, and everything from shampoo to tennis shoes gets a month-long repackaging in Pride flag paraphernalia.

An outside observer may initially be moved by these outward displays of solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community. However, a closer inspection reveals that, for many organizations, the rainbow packaging is simply a veneer of support used to sidestep responsibility for fostering authentic LGBTQ+ inclusion. This “rainbow washing” allows businesses to say they value inclusion without having to address the systemic barriers that stand in the way of that inclusion. In its mildest form, rainbow washing is a marketing ploy that appropriates Pride imagery to sell products without providing tangible support for LGBTQ+ individuals. In worse manifestations, businesses may even sell Pride merchandise while actively supporting anti-LGBTQ+ organizations.

How Companies Can Avoid Rainbow Washing

If rainbow washing is all about optics that aren’t backed by action, then the best way for organizations to avoid the appearance of rainbow washing is by demonstrating substantive support for the LGBTQ+ community. The following best practices offer strategies for companies to champion LGBTQ+ inclusion in meaningful ways.

Go Beyond Token Gestures

Even though Pride-themed branding is often the target of claims of rainbow washing, using Pride imagery is not inherently problematic. In fact, public

displays of solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community can be an important signal to LGBTQ+ employees that they are seen and valued for who they are.

As Nicki Covey, an employee at Toyota North America (No. 4 on the 2023 Top 50 Companies list and No. 1 on the Top Companies for LGBTQ+ Employees list) said, “to the community, Toyota flies the progressive Pride flag at every location. That is huge for us in the Southern states.”

However, today’s cultural climate renders these gestures much more widely accepted than in years past. In some cases, such public displays may even be expected from certain organizations, and their public image may be impacted by not adopting Pride imagery during June.

Because of this, Pride imagery alone can be an example of tokenism and rainbow washing if it isn’t accompanied by more substantive allyship efforts. Organizations must go beyond these symbolic gestures to demonstrate meaningful support for the LGBTQ+ community.



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Organizational leaders can directly involve themselves in Pride Month programming to make more effective steps toward developing an inclusive workplace. This bolsters Pride Month displays with tangible action from executives who are in a position to drive organizational culture. Covey described this very kind of commitment from leaders at Toyota.

“We have a Pride Flag ceremony on June 1 each year that includes comments from our president. That is huge for visibility. In addition, executives come out on Saturday to actually work the booth at Lexington Pride. This isn’t a ‘shake hands and kiss babies’ event for executives; they are side by side with us sweating in June spreading inclusion.”

Donate to Pro-LGBTQ+ Causes

One of the most common critiques levied at organizations partaking in rainbow washing is that they are leveraging Pride iconography to generate greater profits for themselves without substantively supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Donating to pro-LGBTQ+ organizations, especially if those donations are raised through Pride merchandise, is a straightforward, productive way for organizations

to respond positively to this criticism. For example, Wells Fargo (No. 15 on the Top Companies for LGBTQ+ Employees list and No. 32 on the 2023 Top 50 Companies list) has donated \$750,000 since 2020 to SAGECents—a digital wellness platform designed to help older LGBTQ+ adults develop financial stability.

It’s important for the scale of philanthropic giving to reflect a meaningful commitment to supporting the LGBTQ+ community. Even well-meaning financial contributions can be perceived as rainbow washing if they aren’t significant enough to meaningfully support the recipient organization. Gap Inc. received some criticism in 2021 for a \$50,000 donation to GLAAD—a pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy organization with over \$14 million in annual expenses. Despite the good intentions behind that donation, critics noted that it totaled just 0.0002% of Gap Inc.’s \$16.7 billion in revenue that year. To avoid rainbow washing, companies should measure the impact of their efforts, not just their intentions.

Philanthropic donations from Top 10 companies averaged 1.8% of company revenue in 2023. Of those donations, 2.9% were directed toward organizations that formally support LGBTQ+ causes.



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Elevate LGBTQ+ Voices

In pursuing true inclusion, it's essential to give agency to underrepresented groups in charting a path toward equality. Members of the LGBTQ+ community are intimately familiar with the discrimination and bias they face on a daily basis, so they must be involved in developing strategies to address those challenges. Much of the criticism levied at organizations accused of rainbow washing revolves around the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in leadership or even the overall workforce. A report from the [Medical University of South Carolina](#) found that just 0.3% of senior leaders at Fortune 500 companies identified as LGBTQ+. At Top 10 companies, 2.1% of the overall workforce and 1.6% of management identify as LGBTQ+.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are another avenue that organizations can leverage to give LGBTQ+ employees a voice. These groups provide a direct feedback line to leadership that gives LGBTQ+ employees a platform to address the specific challenges they face in the workplace. All Top 10 companies have a resource group for LGBTQ+ employees.

For Covey, the combination of leadership representation and available resource groups is an essential component of what makes Toyota such an inclusive organization.

“At a surface level, you see representation in executives at Toyota who are LGBTQ+ and strong allies ... on a more molecular level, LGBTQ+ support is built into our cultural DNA through respect for people. We don't hear or use the word 'tolerance' here because Toyota goes beyond the basic belief that people should settle for being tolerated. Here at Toyota, through Business Partnering Groups, we have an avenue to support our LGBTQ+ members and allies as well as branch out to community events, such as Kentucky Black Pride.”

Champion a Culture of Inclusion and Belonging

Despite strides made toward broad cultural acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, discrimination is still significant in many parts of the U.S. This discrimination can be explicitly hostile and poses a very real danger to LGBTQ+ Americans in terms of both physical safety and mental health. Organizations that embody the ideals of Pride Month throughout the entire year can become a safe place for employees to embrace their authentic identities.

“Pride, the rainbows, the flamboyant expressions and the celebration of Pride is necessary,” Covey said. “It gives VISIBILITY to kids much like my younger self, drowning in shame, that it gets better. That ‘better’ could mean the difference in taking their own life. If you read or hear nothing more, please know that family rejection is actively killing our LGBTQ+ youth.”

When leaders set an example of inclusion, it invites all employees to become allies to underrepresented groups, allowing LGBTQ+ employees to find a supportive community within the organization. For some employees, that may be the only community they have that sees and values them for who they are. The importance that a sense of belonging has on an employee's mental and emotional health cannot be overstated. In Covey's case, her coworkers at Toyota came to fill a familial need that wasn't able to be met elsewhere in her life.



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“When I joined [Toyota] in 2013, it played a huge role in who I am and who I felt comfortable to be. It was the first workplace that I could be open about who I am,” Covey said. “The coworkers who were willing to be allies and waded out into the sometimes uncomfortable culture norm of acceptance made a world of difference for me. Coming from a family that was not supportive, when my wife and I married in 2016, it was my Toyota coworkers who filled the seats where my family should’ve been.”

These manifestations of allyship are the kinds of inclusive efforts that should back Pride Month branding and imagery. When an organization takes systemic steps toward embracing and celebrating the identities of their LGBTQ+ team members, that signifies genuine support rather than rainbow washing.

Acknowledge LGBTQ+ History

Rainbow washing can be a form of LGBTQ+ erasure, where the colorful branding and Pride-themed products overshadow the historic struggle for

equality fought for by LGBTQ+ Americans. The celebratory atmosphere that companies seek to create for Pride Month should not come at the cost of understanding and acknowledging the difficult history of LGBTQ+ exclusion in the U.S., which is still very much alive in many places in the country. Pride Month is a celebration of overcoming that exclusion, and organizations should incorporate education on the significance of LGBTQ+ history into their Pride Month programming.

“Pride honors the history of brave Black transgender women who fought back in the riots of 1969 to make sure that a family like mine could even exist today. Yet, the rates of transgender hate crimes have quadrupled since 2017,” Covey said. “Pride honors the memory of millions lost during the 90s during a health crisis that lacked proper support. Pride exists as that celebration amidst the hate-filled rhetoric that seems to encourage violence against us, seeking to roll back protections. I am proud to work for a company that values who I am and gives me a safe space to exist and thrive.”

