



Business advocacy group gives LGBT **voices a** **megaphone**

By Douglas J. Guth

If Cleveland's LGBT community is made up of a "kaleidoscope of colors and a variety of voices," then Plexus is an organization dedicated to putting those colors in focus and giving those voices a megaphone, said group co-founder Eric Lutzo.



Eric Lutzo, co-founder, Plexus
Photo by Dan Martinez



Plexus, a word meaning “network,” acts as a chamber of commerce for the region’s LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) businesspeople. The organization connects gay-run and gay-friendly businesses, links certified LGBT businesses to supplier diversity offices and

Acting as a strategic partner in the economic development of Northeast Ohio, Plexus leadership understands that these businesses want to tap into LGBT buying power. A 2010 study by Witeck-Combs Communications, a gay-focused marketing firm, estimated that purchasing

unique certification, particularly in an era when different lifestyles are receiving acceptance from the general consensus. Lutzto points to Linear Creative, a web marketing firm that promoted its LGBT certification during an extensive statewide campaign. The company now has contracts with the Cleveland Clinic and Travelers Insurance.

“Having that sense of ownership and accepting who you are can make you unstoppable,” said Lutzto.

improves the workplace environment for LGBT employees. Plexus currently has 80 members and 1,600 followers through its website (www.thinkplexus.org). The organization has also assisted in the membership of eight LGBT-certified businesses locally.

“We want to show the larger community that this voice exists,” said Lutzto, 43, an entrepreneur and Cleveland advocate who founded Plexus in 2006 with business owner David Ream. “These are people who are contributing socially and economically. We’re showing off a different face of the LGBT community.”

The resources, programs and services that help LGBT businesses grow are just the “tactical items” of the Plexus package, said Lutzto, of Tremont. Having a space to discuss the issues gay entrepreneurs face is a boon in and of itself.

“It’s a gathering place for people to come up with these ideas,” Lutzto said.

Empowering gay business owners has gotten easier as public opinion has shifted in favor of gay rights. Plexus has formed partnerships with corporations including American Greetings, the Cleveland Clinic and Charter One. Plexus is also an affiliate of the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, a group that represents the interests of more than 1.4 million LGBT businesses and entrepreneurs.

proceed at about \$743 billion.

Plexus works from a supplier diversity standpoint as well. In recent years, corporations have been building relationships with minority businesses, traditionally owned by women or racial minorities. These days, however, more corporations have been requesting bids from LGBT-owned enterprises, proving how the business world is leading the way when it comes to inclusivity.

Whatever means it takes to get to that all-encompassing end, Lutzto is happy to push along the process. “There are minority owners in every area of business,” he said. “People will want to buy from the gay community as well.”

Gay entrepreneurs certainly want a friendly environment in which to ply their trade, but that doesn’t mean they are necessarily interested in identifying their business as LGBT-certified, noted Lutzto, founder of Forward Thought, a Tremont-based coaching and leadership development practice.

For example, a gay web designer who’s the best in his or her space may have no reason to trumpet a special qualification. “Some people want to be identified by their profession, not their orientation,” Lutzto said. “They can be the best professional they can be, who just happens to be gay.”

Still, Plexus in no way discourages gay entrepreneurs from publicizing their

“Having that sense of ownership and accepting who you are can make you unstoppable,” said Lutzto. “It really depends on how a person wants to position their business. The certification can be used as a channel to build what they have.”

The Plexus founder believes in “a simple and powerful truth,” he said. “Equality doesn’t happen by staying silent.”

As a key member of an organization that strengthens the LGBT voice, Lutzto is thrilled to show off Cleveland as an enclave of progressive thought and business practices. The city is not generally thought of as a gay-friendly environment, but Lutzto believes Plexus’ work, combined with increasing corporate recognition of the LGBT community, has started to open some eyes.

“I’ve met people from San Francisco and Los Angeles who’ve come here and said, ‘Wow, you guys are doing some amazing work’ in the area of LGBT businesses,” Lutzto said. “We’re creating ambassadors for Cleveland from all over. That makes me feel good.”

Of course, there is still work to be done, said Lutzto, who enjoys yoga, meditation and travel when not advocating for the rights of LGBT workers. Acceptance must come to factory lines and other non-traditional areas for Plexus’ mission to be truly accomplished.

“The ultimate success is when we don’t have to have this conversation at all,” he said. Until then, “we’ll continue to give voice to an underserved minority that doesn’t have one.” 