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*Photo courtesy of Chrisman Studios
Kevin Weinstein (left) and Ryan Sabin had a civil union ceremony in May.*

Illinois' wedding industry poised for profits from gay weddings

by **ASHLEY LAPIN**

Feb 07, 2013

As a proposal to legalize same-sex marriage continues to gain momentum in Illinois, some businesses are anticipating long and lasting profits from passage of the bill.

The local wedding industry is gearing up for increased demand for wedding-related services, such as event planners, photographers, hotels and other wedding venues.

There will likely be a rush to the altar, said Bernadette Coveney Smith, whose marketing seminar, "The Emerging Gay and Lesbian Wedding Industry," was held at McCormick Place last month during The Special Event, the largest trade show for event professionals.

Coveney Smith said there will be three types of same-sex couples who will rush to get their marriage licenses: established couples who have been together for years; couples of traditional marrying age, in their 20s and 30s; and people who come in from other states.

Destination weddings especially will have a significant impact on the state's economy, according to Coveney Smith, considered a leading expert in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender wedding market and the founder of The 14 Stories Gay Wedding Institute.

"There's a ton of money that's going to start to come into the area from other states," according to Coveney-Smith. "Enough money so much that it's going to create jobs in that state where gay marriage just became legal."

According to a study by Forbes.com, national legalization of same-sex marriage could infuse the economy with

about \$9.5 billion from gay weddings.

Kevin Weinstein, a wedding photographer in Chicago, says he has already seen a surge in his business since civil unions were legalized in Illinois in 2011.

"I think that over the next two to three and four years, we're going to see a huge rise in gay marriages. I mean, it's like, billions of dollars just waiting for the economy," said Weinstein.

Although Weinstein, 41, and his longtime partner, Ryan Sabin, 34, wed in a civil ceremony last spring, the couple want to be recognized as legally married.

"We spent a long time working on women's rights, working on civil rights for African-Americans, civil rights for women and we still, even today, continue to work on women and African-Americans and minorities and, you know, it's just, it's the gay people's turn."

The Illinois bill is expected to be voted on in the Senate by Valentine's Day. If it passes, the bill will then move to the House. Illinois would become the 10th U.S. state to perform and recognize same-sex marriages if the bill is approved.

Gov. Pat Quinn on Wednesday stood firm in his support for marriage equality.

"Today, civil unions are the law of our state. And nearly 5,200 couples across 94 counties have joined in a civil union," Quinn said in his State of the State address. "Now, it's time to take that step in achieving full equality."

There are several resources that can help the wedding industry prepare for the legalization of gay marriage, including organizations that provide marketing tips, LGBT wedding certification programs and gay-friendly professional associations.

One professional association, Community Marketing Inc., developed an approval rating for the hotel industry worldwide that can be used to find gay-friendly wedding venues.

A hotel can apply for TAG Approval to indicate it meets CMI's standards for being gay-friendly. Currently, Illinois has 54 TAG Approved hotels, 43 of which are in Chicago.

CMI Senior Projects Director David Paisley said Chicago has become the third most popular travel destination in the country for the LGBT community over the past six to seven years. He attributes this rapid rise to Illinois' progressive stance on the LGBT community, starting with the 2006 Gay Games held in Chicago.

In addition, he said that Illinois has done a good job of attracting the business of LGBT conventions. For example, the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association's 30th Annual Global Convention will be held in Chicago this May at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, a TAG Approved hotel.

Paisley said that if same-sex marriage is approved in Illinois, more hotels in rural and suburban Illinois areas will seek TAG Approval to attract a demographic not previously targeted.

Event planner Kerrie Gallagher, owner of Chicago-based Ellie Events, said she finds the Chicago wedding industry to be gay-friendly. However, she has seen a decline in civil union weddings because gay and lesbian couples are holding off on celebrations until they can legally marry.

Gallagher, who hopes to make LGBT weddings her niche, is beefing up her marketing efforts.

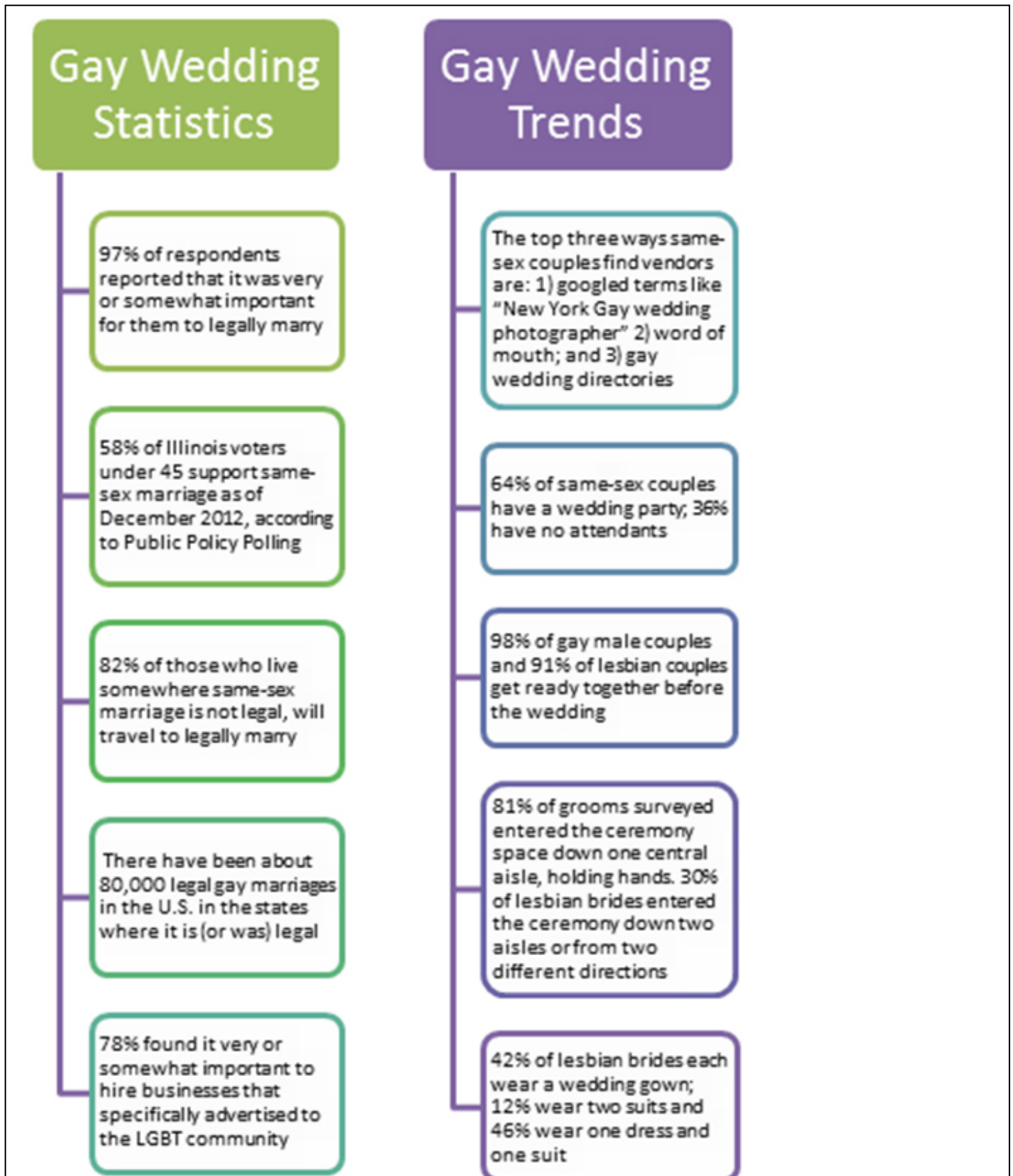
Fellow Chicago event planner Kristofer Sangari, of Events With a K, said with the legalization of civil unions and potentially same-sex marriages, the trend is toward bigger celebrations rather than the small-scale commitment ceremonies.

Like Gallagher, Sangari plans to market his services more to the LGBT community if same-sex marriages are legalized.

So what does this mean for the wedding industry and in particular, for same-sex marriages? Weinstein, the

photographer, is certain that the market can only go up from here.

"I think that over the next two to three to four years, we're going to see a huge rise in gay marriages. I mean, it's like, billions of dollars just waiting for the economy," Weinstein said. "I mean it's going to be fantastic for the economy. And I think the government is going to be very, very happy in the end with all that extra money."



The 14 Stories Gay Wedding Institute and Public Policy Polling
Ashley Lapin/MEDILL

Same-sex couples polled said that equality in marriage and a memorable wedding ceremony are important.

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