

Why Wickes is building itself a reputation as an LGBT-friendly brand

Meet the Wickes store manager who initiated the DIY store's hook-up with Manchester Pride

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Author: David Hudson - Gay Star News



Wickes store manager James Cox - Photograph:Facebook

When Wickes store manager James Cox ventured out with some of his colleagues on Canal Street on the Friday night before Manchester Pride last year, he was unprepared for the reaction it would provoke.

'We were wearing our work uniforms and people were coming up to us saying, "What are you doing here? You're not that sort of company?" It was shocking, to be honest.'

Shocking because, to James, Wickes – one of the UK's leading providers of home improvement products and DIY goods – was exactly 'that' sort of company; it's what led him to convince his employer to have a presence at Manchester Pride.

'I started with Wickes when I was 18, which was nearly 17 years ago,' he told Gay Star News. Since that time, he has worked in a dozen of the brand's outlets in the UK and has risen to the position of store manager in the Rushden branch.

'I guess like many gay people, I didn't have a great time at school. When I went into the world of work, I was really nervous as I didn't want the same sort of life as I'd had at school.'

However, James quickly learned it was going to be very different to his years in education. He told his team that he was gay and says that their reaction was 'great'. He has subsequently been out to every team he's worked with and always found the reaction to be very supportive.

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'I think it's Wickes' worst-kept secret, but it's actually a really great employer. It's just a great place to work. I've never felt uncomfortable; quite the opposite. I got to thinking how we might be able to promote that fact.

'In the end, I approached the MD at an annual conference and asked for a meeting. We sat down, I told him the same story that I've told you, and how I thought that everyone at work deserves to feel comfortable to be themselves. And we need to promote that to our customers more.'



Wickes at Manchester Pride in 2014

The result was that Wickes took part in its first Pride festival last year, producing a float to take part in the main Manchester parade. Reassuringly – given their reputation as experts with a paintbrush and staple gun – they walked away with the prize for 'Best Commercial Float'. They will be returning this year.

Wickes began life in the North. Its first store opened in Manchester in 1972. It grew consistently throughout the 70s and 80s, before being acquired by Travis Perkins in 2005 – since which time it has continued to expand.

It now has over 200 stores across the UK, serving the public and building trade.

Because of its popularity with tradesmen and construction workers, the public perception of the stores has been that they're a male-dominated, macho environment. James says it has been male-dominated in the past, but its culture has changed greatly in the time he has worked there.



'I honestly couldn't give you an example where I've felt uncomfortable with other staff, customers or trade. And there are actually a lot of trade who are gay themselves.'

James says that he knows plenty of gay employees at Wickes, and since the company's involvement with Manchester Pride, several more have come out to him. He's also had support from across the wider company.

'You get support from unexpected quarters. People know it's the right thing to do. Other regional managers have told me they think what we did with Pride last year was great. Everyone knows someone who's gay nowadays; a family member or friend.'

'The driver I used last year for the float, I got him from our distribution center and didn't know him from Adam, but he told me afterwards, "My brother and sister were really proud of me for doing this." I said, "Why's that?", and he said, "Because they're both gay."'

Encouraging colleagues to be themselves at work would be reward enough, but Wickes is also not blind to the wider business case for diversity. James admits that following Manchester Pride last year, 'I had three gay couples come in over two days to buy kitchens.'

'People shop through loyalty, but I'm really proud if we've helped to change people's perceptions. It's helped change the face of a national company and given our own colleagues confidence to be themselves at work, which I think is really important. It's important for everyone.'

Expect another float, twice as big as last year's lorry and decorated with Wickes' particular 'Pride and care', to be creating a splash in Manchester on Saturday 29 August.

Link: www.gaystarnews.com/article/why-wickes-is-building-itself-a-reputation-as-an-lgbt-friendly-brand/