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November 10, 2012

Hearing the ka-ching of gay wedding bells

Maine businesses are positioning themselves to benefit from the increased opportunities that the approval of same-sex marriage will bring.

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As election returns rolled in Tuesday night and it became clear that Question 1 would pass, Jason Sandifer quickly went online and purchased the domain name

gaymainewedding.com

Sandifer and his wife, Emilie Sommer, own Emilie Inc., a wedding photography company in Cumberland Foreside that handled 60 weddings this year, 90 percent of them involving couples from out of state.

They are also in the process of revamping their marketing materials.

"It's so common to say 'bride and groom,'" Sommer said. "We've changed everything to 'our couples' and 'our clients.'"

Sandifer and Sommer are banking on the legalization of same-sex marriage in Maine to provide a boost to their business. They're hoping that when gay couples hold a wedding here, they will hire Emilie Inc. to document their happily-ever-after moments.

"Maine is a hot-spot destination location for weddings," Sommer said. "(The new law is) going to do tremendous things for the wedding business in Maine."

As soon as election results were announced Tuesday night, businesses throughout Maine began positioning themselves to take



Jason Parent, a floral designer at Harmon's & Barton's flower shop in Portland, makes up boutonnières and bouquets for an upcoming wedding. Maine's florists are among the businesses that expect to benefit from same-sex marriages being conducted in the state following passage of Question 1.

Photos by John Ewing/Staff Photographer



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advantage of the increased opportunities that will come with the legalization of same-sex marriage. They are reconsidering how they market their services, and scrambling to launch new websites or make their current ones more gay-friendly.

The approval of same-sex marriage is expected to unleash a lot of pent-up demand as gay couples who live in the state head to the altar for the first time or to renew their vows and make their commitment legally binding.

Out-of-state couples are also expected to flock to the state for destination weddings that capture what Portland wedding planner Diane York calls the "mystique" of Maine.

"It's really going to impact the industry tremendously, and not only with the weddings," York said. "When you have a destination wedding, you have many people that come for a three-day weekend, which means hotel accommodations. So as a whole, it's going to be very good for Maine, I think."

DESTINATION WEDDINGS

Maine businesses hope that legalization of same-sex marriage here will have a similar impact as that in Massachusetts, where gay couples have been allowed to legally marry since 2007.

Marriage licenses in Massachusetts aren't tracked by whether they're for gay or straight couples, but Betsy Wall, director of the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism, said the state has seen an increase in gay marriages over same-sex commitment ceremonies.

"It's been another nice way we've been able to attract visitors," Wall said.

Noting that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender "travel in the United States is considered a \$70 billion annual business," Wall said her department maintains a website devoted to gay travelers.

With more New England states legalizing same-sex marriage, it may dilute the number of out-of-state couples who choose to get married in any particular state, Wall said. But she added that it also adds to New England's allure as a whole.

"I think it's great for New England to have so many states that are welcoming in this way," Wall said.

While it's difficult to attach a figure to the potential economic impact that same-sex marriages will have on Maine, businesses and tourism bureaus are excited about the prospect of the potential for a boost in revenue coming to everything from retail businesses and restaurants to hotels and tourist attractions.

York said the average cost of a wedding in Maine with 120 guests is \$23,000; the national average is \$27,000. Destination weddings can push that figure up to \$75,000 to \$100,000, says Barbara Whitten, president of the Greater Portland Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"I think we would probably gain also in the honeymooning side of things," Whitten said. "Maine is a beautiful place to honeymoon. People like to go where they feel comfortable and where they feel welcome, and I think that sends a message not only for weddings but for honeymoons."

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