

The issue market

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

Many people have asked me lately why homosexuality has replaced abortion as the hot issue. Stumped, I did some research and developed numerous hypotheses. But along the way I stumbled on to what might well be the fattest clue in our market economy of religion. It has to do with niche marketing, trend-spotting and entrepreneurship.

Ralph Reed, the former leader of the Christian Coalition, supplied the clue. It came in the course of his comment on Janet L. Folger, the crusading director of the Center for Reclaiming America, a force behind controversial newspaper advertisements for "ex-gay" ministries.

Folger is "an issue entrepreneur," Reed says. "Some entrepreneurs," he adds, "try to figure out what the new hot stocks are. Janet is an ideological entrepreneur, someone who tries to pick the hot new issues." Reed goes on to say (*New York Times*, August 13): "She's looking for a way to influence the debate, and she's smart enough to know that it's easier to dive into a topic that people are already talking about than to try and start a new conversation."

That notion of "issue and ideological entrepreneurship" helps explain why homosexuality is a central concern in the battle for the soul of the Republican Party. But the entrepreneurship explanation works only if "people are already talking" about the issue, something that is demonstrably the case. The way interest groups lined up to back the recent advertisements for "ex-gay" ministries indicates their awareness that this is a "new hot stock" and that their leaders can pick "the hot new issues."

The antihomosexuality crusade may also be an effort by religious conservatives to stake out new ground. The unsettled abortion conflict that served them well is old; there is little rallying power in it. This has happened with other conservative causes. Social scientists point out that even evangelical churches have by and large given up on holding the line against divorce--too many church-people get divorced to make this work. They have also retreated on alcohol use and sabbath-breaking,

since so many members take a little wine at dinner and many work or shop at the mall on Sunday. But antihomosexuality has energy; it's a good new stock.

I picture Martin Luther King Jr. assessing the market. After considering a range of issues, he decided the public was ready for him to dive into civil rights. Entrepreneurially, he picked the hot new issue and both civil-rights stock and his own went bullish.

Or consider the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He picked the hot new issue of anti-Hitlerism. He found his market niche.

So it may have been with the prophets of old. Social thinkers say that movements start when someone assesses what is on the public mind and steps forward to give voice to it. Such gifted people put a name on what ails a constituency, provide a negative label for the enemy and start rallying people. If the *New York Times* report is accurate, Folger is ambitious to lead and gifted at spotting the "hot new issues" and providing the "new hot stocks" to which others have to relate.

I've found my niche as a spotter of spotters.