

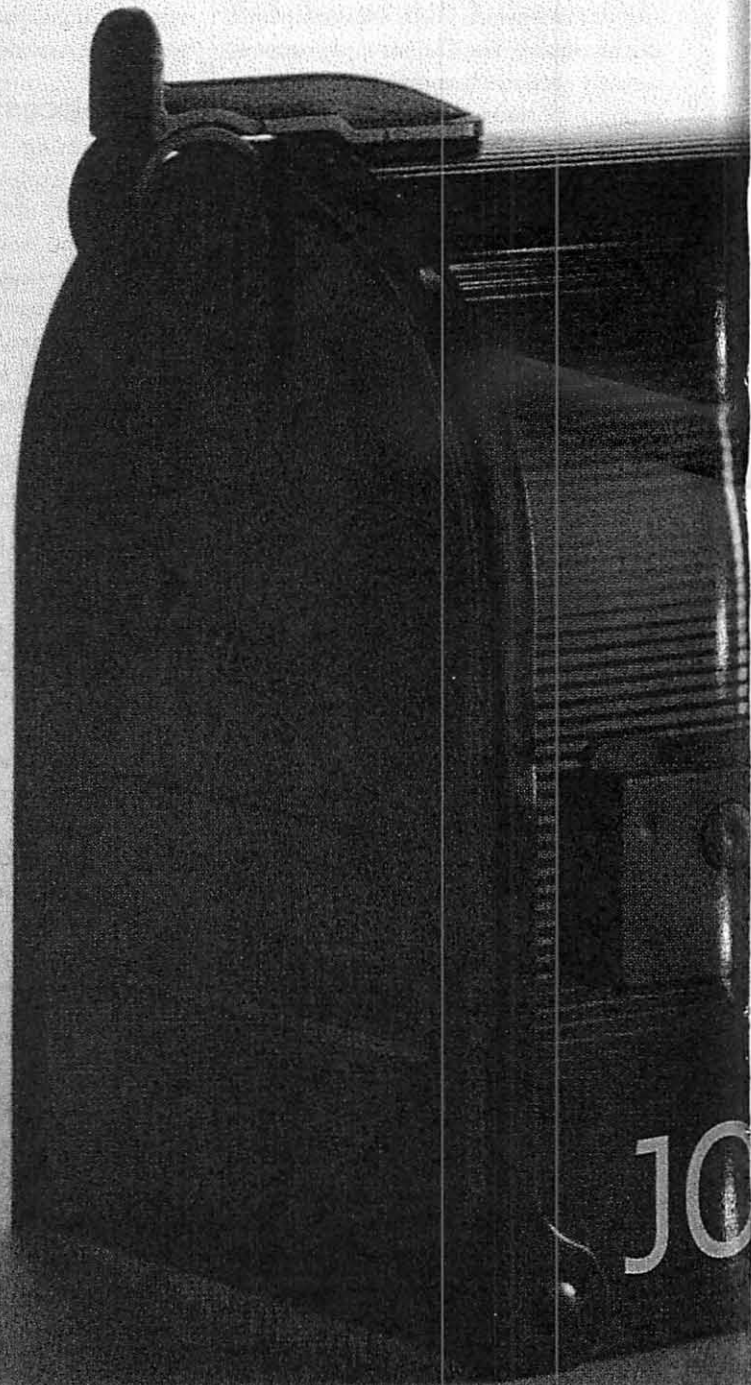
# UNMARRIED

A growing number of Americans today choose not to marry, yet they are far from "single."

**A**t the age of 11, while other girls dreamed of wedding dresses and engagement rings, Ruth Radetsky already knew she'd never let herself be bound by matrimony. "When I was first asked, 'Will you ever marry?' my immediate and instinctive reaction was 'No!'" says the now 42-year-old teacher from San Francisco. "I didn't want to be any man's property."

Even now, after spending almost half her life with partner Edward Hasbrouck, 40—with whom she celebrates 19 years of unmarried bliss this month—she remains true to her childhood instincts. "Our relationship has lasted longer than those of any of our friends near our own age—married or not," Radetsky says. "We are actually looked up to as a model [couple]. I don't want to mess with what works."

But unmarried life is not so easily lived. As an unmarried couple in a husband-and-wife world, Radetsky and Hasbrouck have faced everything from alienation to discrimination from businesses that fail to provide for or acknowledge their special—but by no means unique—situation. When renting a car during a trip to Hawaii, for example, the couple was forced to pay an additional \$5 per day in extra driver fees because they weren't married. Similarly, when they shopped for a home, they had difficulty finding a professional who understood the laws related to unmarried dual-ownership. "Lawyers advertise 'alternative-family services' in gay publications but not in straight ones," says Radetsky. "But all committed, unmarried couples have larger than usual needs for financial and legal services. Where are the ads tailored to our needs?"



# ED BLISS

It's time that marketers acknowledge unmarried couples as consumers. By Rebecca Gardyn



JOHN SMITH & MARY JONES

Today, there are nearly 8.5 million Americans living with an opposite-sex partner, up from 878,000 in 1960. While for many, cohabitation is a temporary step toward marriage, there is a growing subsegment—currently estimated at between 1 million and 2 million people—who are living with significant others in very committed, long-term relationships. These numbers are expected to explode in the coming decades for a variety of reasons, from the changing demographics of cohabitators to society's waning reverence for marital bliss and waxing valuation of individual independence. Because there is no default marriage contract for unmarried unions, these consumers have a greater demand for tailored financial, legal, tax, insurance, health care, and estate planning, and for some, even prenatal and day-care services. Yet for the most part, businesses have failed to notice their special needs, whether because of moral disagreement, ignorance, or the inability to find data or media outlets that define and reach this consumer group.

Companies that continue to ignore these trends, however, are missing out on a potentially lucrative marketing opportunity. The demographics of cohabitators are changing, and so too are their needs as consumers. "It used to be that unmarrieds were on the fringe—they were hippies, poor, or gay—and they didn't accumulate a lot of property," says Frederick Hertz, a real estate attorney from Oakland, California, and co-author of *The Living Together Kit: A Legal Guide for Unmarried Couples*, due out this month from Nolo Press. "Now my clients are anything from 70-year-olds who choose not to remarry because they don't want to lose Medicare benefits, to young, highly successful professionals who want to keep their independence and yet own a business and two homes with their partner. There has been an economic maturation of unmarried couples."

**N**ot only are these couples accumulating more assets, they're getting older and wiser as well. "We always think of cohabitators as 20-year-olds, but there has been a real demographic shift," says Elizabeth Lewin, a certified financial planner and author of *Financial Fitness for Living Together*. "Twenty years ago, grandma might have looked down on the practice, but now she is doing it herself." While the biggest chunk of cohabitators today are in the 25- to 34-year-old range (38.2 percent), a substantial number (23 percent) are over the age of 45, and 4.4 percent are over the age of 65, up from practically zero in 1960.

Since about two-thirds of divorced people choose cohabitation over remarriage after a break-up, part of this trend can be linked to the growing divorce rate—up from 9 divorces per 1,000 married women in 1960 to almost 20 today. And as the 78 million Baby Boomers age, the number of older unmarried couples is poised to boom as well: 58 percent of all current divorced people are Boomers (aged 36 to 54).

**MANY HETEROSEXUAL  
COUPLES TURN TO—AND  
ARE WELCOMED BY—GAY  
PROFESSIONALS WHO  
ARE BETTER EQUIPPED TO  
NAVIGATE THE COMPLEX  
LEGAL AND FINANCIAL  
ISSUES THAT UNMARRIED  
COUPLES OFTEN FACE.**

In her book, Lewin notes that Boomer women are particularly likely to seek out these types of alternative living arrangements in their middle and later years because of this segment's tendency to have more divorces, longer lives, less children, and less predictable retirement incomes than other groups. Financial incentives to pass on remarriage as one gets older—including the ability to protect the inheritance of children from former marriages and the loss of certain social security payments—are also likely to persuade more older folks to engage in unmarried partnerships.

Despite this group's huge market potential, however, marketers have been slow to reach out to these consumers. When Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller—both twentysomething and happily unmarried for eight years—applied for joint tenants insurance in Boston, they were told by a local agent that their only choice was to apply for individual policies at almost twice the cost. They decided to shop around, and eventually found an agency catering to the gay and lesbian community, which signed them up for joint tenants and auto insurance with no problem. In fact, many heterosexual couples turn to—and are welcomed by—gay professionals who are better equipped to navigate the complex legal and financial issues that unmarried couples often face.

"But not all heterosexuals have access to or are comfortable with gay and lesbian businesses," says Miller, who is co-founder with Solot of the Alternatives to Marriage Project (ATMP), a national organization for unmarried couples. "That is why there is such a great marketing opportunity to reach a much wider audience."

The main reason marketers have so far ignored this segment is quite simple: Most have never thought of unmarried, opposite-sex couples as a consumer demographic. American Express, for example, has been using its proprietary dual-client analysis software to help unmarried couples create tax

and estate plans for ten years. But its marketing efforts for such services have so far been limited to the gay and lesbian community. The company has placed ads in national gay publications and has employed advisors around the country who actively network within this constituency at a local level. But there are about 2.5 times as many opposite-sex cohabiting couples as there are of the same-sex variety (4.2 million compared with 1.7 million). Why not market to them as well? "That's a good question," says James Law, branch manager of American Express Financial Advisors in New York City. "I guess because the marketplace doesn't segment consumers that way. We target African Americans, Hispanics, women, gays, but 'unmarried, straight people' is a very diffused target."

Indeed, even if businesses wished to target this group, they're likely to encounter major difficulties, both in identifying and accessing them through the usual media and networking channels. "How would you even get to those people?" asks Maria Elgar, a financial consultant at Merrill Lynch in Westport, Connecticut, who works extensively with unmarried couples in the gay and lesbian community. Elgar solicits many of her clients through her involvement with various AIDS fundraisers and through musicians and entertainers at the club she owns in Los Angeles. However, Elgar says she's never heard of anyone specifically targeting the unmarried, straight-couple market. "Where would you ever find yourself in a natural community of unmarried couples like that?"

The lack of media outlets and organizations specifically tailored to this demographic impedes marketers who might benefit from reaching them. (Besides ATMP and the American Association for Single People [AASP] in Los Angeles,

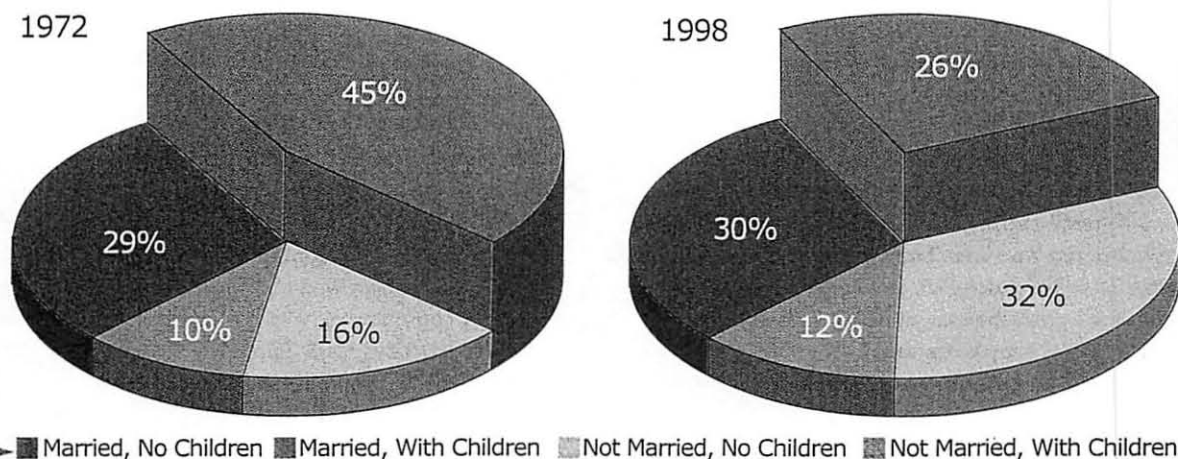
there are few, if any, other groups and no known media outlets specifically targeting this category.) Marsha Stewart, an editor at Nolo Press, which sells a variety of do-it-yourself legal advice books for the living-together market, explains that the wide range of ages and situations which compose the unmarried couple group makes getting the message out to all of them nearly impossible.

As such, the publisher takes a very broad marketing approach by arranging bookstore signings and author interviews with the press. With the latest edition of *The Living Together Kit* due out this month, Stewart expects that Nolo Press will use more online marketing, by linking its site, [www.nolopress.com](http://www.nolopress.com)—where the book can be downloaded—with niche Web sites such as [www.unmarried.org](http://www.unmarried.org) (ATMP's site) and [www.singlesrights.com](http://www.singlesrights.com) (AASP's site). But Nolo does very little paid media advertising or direct marketing to this group of consumers, simply because data on them is extremely difficult to come by.

"The data doesn't exist because the right questions aren't asked," says ATMP's Miller, who, when forced to check a "single" or "married" box on a marketing form, will usually draw a box that says "partnered." "Sometimes I'll check both, just to give them something to ponder," he admits. Miller laughs about how much direct mail he and Solot get about singles events and about all the telemarketing calls that ask for Mr. Solot or Mrs. Miller. If companies really want to understand who their clients and consumers are, they need to ask more specific questions, he says. "There are big differences between a single woman who's interested in a singles cruise and one who'd be more interested in a Disney vacation with

## BYE-BYE, OZZIE AND HARRIET

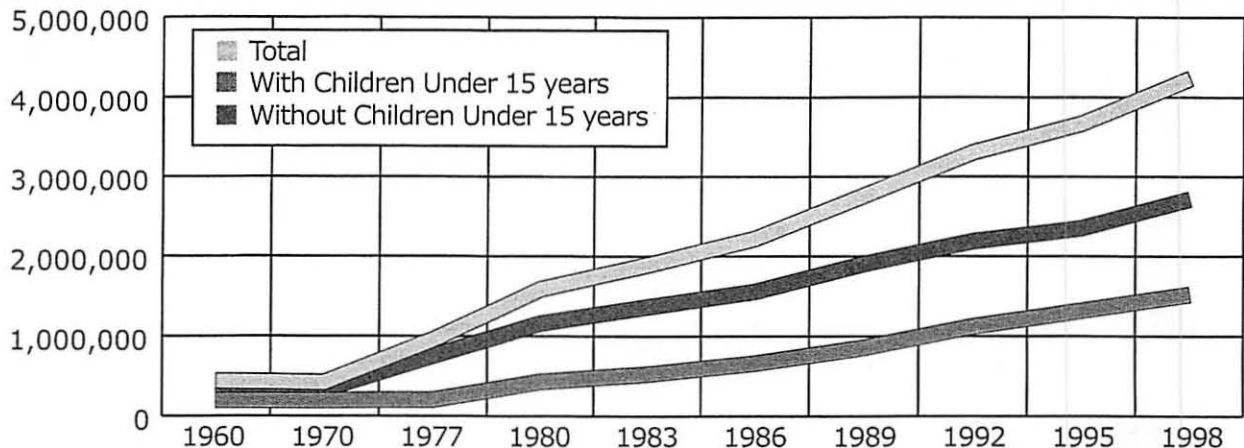
The most common household composition in the United States today consists of an unmarried couple without children (32 percent). Only 26 percent of households match the so-called "traditional family" arrangement, compared with 45 percent that did so in 1972.



Source: National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, University of Chicago

## WE ARE FAMILY

The number of unmarried, heterosexual-couple households has increased almost tenfold between 1960 and 1998. Some 1.5 million of them have children under the age of 15.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

her partner and three kids."

The U.S. Census Bureau deserves at least partial blame for the lack of information available on this segment. The decennial Census only began to include "unmarried partner" as a category on the "relationship to householder" question in 1990, and on the Current Population Survey in 1995. While the 2000 Census figures should provide more details about this population, changes need to be made in the presentation of this data to the public. "Most of the published data by the Census Bureau ignores cohabitation completely, except maybe for one or two tables about households," says Dr. Pamela Smock, a sociologist and demographer at the University of Michigan. "But you get no sense that this trend is happening if you look at income or labor market data tables."

One of the first changes that should be made is this country's definition of "family," says Smock. The Census still defines the term as "any group of two or more people related by birth, marriage, or adoption, and residing together." For comparison, in Canada, a family is "a married or common-law couple (defined as any cohabiting nonmarried couple) living together...with or without children." In fact, Canada recently passed legislation giving cohabitants who have been living together for one year or more the same federal rights and responsibilities as married couples, and all published Canadian statistics include breakouts for cohabiting couples as well as married ones.

Yet despite all the roadblocks, some marketers are beginning to take baby steps toward change. Most hotel chains, for example, no longer have policies asking couples for their marital status. The majority of credit card companies ask for a "co-applicant" instead of "spouse" on applications. Airlines

now tout "companion" rather than "family" fares. The AAA Automobile Club of Southern California, among others, has expanded its multiple car "family" discounts to unmarried partners living in the same residence. Employment benefit policies at many institutions are also shifting. As of August, 3,572 private companies, colleges, universities, and state and local governments offer—or announced that they will soon offer—domestic partner health insurance to their employees, up from 2,856 employers last year, according to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

The Hartford, a financial services and insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut, is one of the few companies that took it one step further and created a magazine print campaign promoting its services to all unmarried couples. The ad, which ran in 1998, showed three sets of paired cars facing each other, front bumper to front bumper, as if they were kissing. Under the first pair of cars—both red—the tagline said, "The Hartford offers auto insurance discounts to gay couples." Under the next set of cars—both white—the tag read: "We also offer discounts to lesbian couples." And beneath the final two cars—one red, one white—it read: "Heck, we even offer discounts to heterosexual couples (Not that there's anything wrong with that)."

The majority of companies, however, are still lagging when it comes to sending appropriate and sensitive messages to this group. While most won't admit it, the top tiers of leadership are still very conservative, which may be getting in the way of good business practices, says Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of the AASP. "Companies that might benefit from targeting this group—banks, lawyers, etc.—don't want to be viewed as doing anything that undermines marriage because they could be viewed as promoting an uncommitted lifestyle," he says.

That could very well be one of the reasons why The Hart-

➤ ➤ **CANADA RECENTLY PASSED LEGISLATION GIVING COHABITANTS WHO HAVE BEEN LIVING TOGETHER FOR ONE YEAR OR MORE THE SAME FEDERAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS MARRIED COUPLES.**

ford has since discontinued the "kissing cars" print ad it created just 2 years ago. Sue Honeyman, a spokesperson for the company, says that while The Hartford still offers the same discounts to both married and unmarried partners, it no longer runs that print campaign because the firm decided to focus its advertising efforts on general branding rather than on promoting individual services. However, this year, The Hartford appears to be backtracking. The company launched a television commercial with a blatant "marital" theme. In an ad entitled "Bouquet," a bridesmaid falls after an overly ambitious attempt to catch the bouquet.

The nonmarried set, however, doesn't necessarily appreciate such 'til-death-do-us-part imagery. "The marital images are so ubiquitous that if I tried to boycott every company that used them, I don't think there'd be many products for me to buy," says ATMP's Sopot. "But it would be so refreshing to see an ad occasionally that feels like it represents my life. I'd love to hear companies say they realize 'It's not the ring that matters' or 'We know that families today come in all shapes and sizes.'"

Beyond making changes to the advertising of current services, there's also room for the creation of new ones tailored to the unmarried-couple market. ATMP receives numerous calls from partners who wish to celebrate their unions with large wedding-type celebrations, but aside from a few books on the subject, the party planning industry has very little to offer.

Similarly, as the cohabiting population ages, there are increased opportunities to provide specialized retirement, tax, and estate planning services to these older consumers.

There is also room for companies who can offer supportive child-care services. An estimated 40 percent of children who are born to so-called "single mothers" in this country are actually born to cohabiting parents. What's more, 40 percent of all U.S. children today are likely to spend some portion of their years as a member of a family with unmarried partners.

**THE UNMARRIEDS**

About 23 percent of cohabiting, unmarried, heterosexual couples in 1998 were 45 years old or older, and 35 percent of them were previously divorced.

	Number of unmarried couples*	Percentage of total
<b>Age</b>		
Under 25	777	18.3%
25-34	1,618	38.2%
35-44	857	20.2%
45-64	797	18.8%
65 and older	188	4.4%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Never married	2,270	53.6%
Divorced	1,467	34.6%
Separated	209	4.9%
Widowed	179	4.2%
Other	111	2.6%

\*in thousands

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Overall, companies need to become more sensitive in their marketing efforts and recognize the changing shape of today's families, regardless of whether or not the powers-that-be like it. Three-quarters of U.S. households are comprised of living arrangements other than that of the "traditional" nuclear family: The percentage of "married with children" households has decreased from 45 percent in 1972 to 26 percent in 1999, according to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Hallmark Cards has recognized these changes, and responded last spring with the launch of "Ties That Bind," a line of greeting cards aimed at various nontraditional unions—from step-families to adopted child households to unmarried partnerships. "Our cards reflect the times," says Marita Wesely-Clough, trend group manager at Hallmark. "Relationships today are so nebulous that they are hard to pin down, but in creating products, we have to be aware that they are there. Companies need to respect and be sensitive to how people are truly living their lives now, and not how they might wish or hope for them to live." ■