

GILLETTE TAKES A STAND: TOXIC MASCULINITY AND #THEBESTMENCANBE¹

Drs. Stefanie Beninger and Karen Robson wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Gillette, owned by Procter & Gamble (P&G), was a global powerhouse in the shaving and grooming product category. However, in 2019 the brand ignited controversy when it released an advertisement (ad) that challenged men to be the best version of themselves.² In doing so, the ad brought up questions and issues related to sexual harassment, bullying, and the attitude that “boys will be boys,” which angered many viewers. In the era of #MeToo (an international movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault), a brand that had built a reputation around masculinity was walking a fine line between empowering or offending its customers—some applauded the move; others decried it.³ What was next for the brand?

GILLETTE

Gillette was founded in 1901 when King C. Gillette invented the safety cartridge razor and subsequently attached a small straightedge razor to a handle. This device allowed men to get a close shave at home, rather than having to rely on skilled barbers. The results of Gillette’s innovation were noticeable: the easy to replace product gave customers more control over their shave, resulting in fewer cuts and closer shaves.⁴

Gillette’s innovations in razors continued over the following decades with changes to the cartridge shape and blades, and the introduction of a pivot placed between the razor blades and the handle. In 1971, Gillette began to increase the number of blades in its razors; by 2019, its razors were made with five blades. A pivoting head was launched in the 1970s, and spring mounted blades with lubricating strips came onto the market in the 1980s.⁵ The 1990s proved to be a boon for Gillette, leading to P&G’s 2005 acquisition of the brand.⁶

By 2019, P&G managed multiple major brands in the category of razors and blades—Braun, Gillette, and Venus—but the most successful of these was the Gillette brand.⁷ Gillette offered men a wide range of refillable razors and razor blades under six product lines: the Fusion5, Mach3, G5, ProShield, ProGlide, and SkinGuard. These products retailed from US\$10 to \$20⁸ each and typically came with three razor refills.⁹ Gillette’s disposable razor line was composed of Sensor3 razors, which were sold in packs of eight for \$10. In addition to these offerings, Gillette offered a premium-heated razor for \$200, for which razor refills cost \$25 each. The brand also sold a range of shaving-related accessories and products including shaving creams, face creams and washes, beard conditioners, body washes, deodorants, and other grooming products for men.¹⁰

THE MEN'S RAZOR AND RAZOR BLADE INDUSTRY IN 2019

Millennials and Generation X made up the majority of customers of men's razors, blades, and related products. Millennials—consumers under 36 years old—made up the largest customer group (approximately 30–40 per cent) for most brands, while Generation X—consumers between 36 and 55 years old—typically comprised a lower percent of sales (approximately 30 per cent).¹¹

Cultural norms and expectations regarding men's physical appearances had a major impact on the razor and razor blade industry. Prior to the 2000s, career-oriented men in the United States were generally expected to arrive at the office clean-shaven; after the beginning of the new millennium, however, these expectations all but disappeared. Massimiliano Menozzi, the vice president of Gillette North America said: "Today, men are not judged negatively when they skip a shave—it is not considered lazy or disrespectful."¹² Instead of shaving every day, more men were growing full beards or maintaining stubble. As a result, between 2008 and 2018, the average number of times men shaved each month decreased by two.¹³

At the same time as norms and expectations regarding facial hair were changing, so too were the players involved in the industry. Specifically, a number of new entrants emerged into the market in the 2000s and 2010s—most notably Dollar Shave Club and Harry's. In the years after their launch, Unilever acquired Dollar Shave Club in 2016¹⁴ and Edgewell Personal Care was set to close on its acquisition of Harry's in 2020.¹⁵

Sales of razors and blades occurred both online and in retail outlets. In retail sales, the biggest player in the United States market was Gillette, which generated sales of \$1.4 billion in 2016; the next three biggest brands were Schick (\$400 million), Dollar Shave Club (\$200 million), and Harry's (\$111 million).¹⁶ The biggest brand in the online market was Dollar Shave Club: in 2016, roughly 52 per cent of online razor sales in the United States were for Dollar Shave Club products, followed by about 21 per cent for Gillette products, and about 9 per cent for Harry's. Thus, between retail and online sales, the four main brands in the industry were Gillette, Dollar Shave Club, Schick, and Harry's.¹⁷

Changes to consumer shaving behaviour as well as to the industry players had a noticeable impact on incumbents such as Gillette. In 2010, for example, 70 per cent of all razors sold in the United States were from Gillette; by 2019, that number had dropped to below 50 per cent.¹⁸ In response to industry changes, Gillette began online razor subscriptions in 2014,¹⁹ dropped its prices by up to 20 per cent in 2017,²⁰ and expanded its product mix to include a wider range of low cost razors.²¹

Dollar Shave Club

Dollar Shave Club was founded in 2009 and used a direct, online, subscription-based sales approach, which began with consumers choosing between the twin blade, four-blade, or six-blade razor options; once a decision was made, the company shipped a box of the selected razors directly to the consumer. Replacement blades were thereafter automatically shipped at a frequency chosen by the consumer. The subscription service could be cancelled at any time, and the company had a 100 per cent money back promise in the event that consumers were unhappy with their order for any reason. The monthly subscription fee for Dollar Shave Club was between \$4 and \$10 a month depending on razor quality. The company also sold a range of shaving-related products including shave butter, prep scrub, post-shave cream, and other grooming products such as deodorant, wipes, cologne, and hair care products. Ultimately, the company's goal was "to make sure you always have everything you need to look, feel, and smell your best."²²

Since its founding, Dollar Shave Club had amassed an extensive membership base of 3.9 million subscribers, increasing at a rate of about 10 per cent per year. Its success led Unilever to purchase the brand for \$1 billion in 2016—an amount that was five times its projected yearly revenue.²³

Schick

Schick was founded in the 1920s by Colonel Jacob Schick who developed both a novel safety razor and an electric razor.²⁴ In 2019, the brand sold a diverse array of disposable and refillable razors for men under four main product lines: the Edge, Hydro, Quattro, and Xtreme. Across the product mix, razors retailed for between \$12 and \$14, with a refill of four blades costing about \$12.²⁵ Unlike other brands, Schick did not provide a wide range of shaving-related products, selling only blades, razors, and shaving cream. The brand sold its products online via Amazon and the Schick website, as well as in traditional retail outlets including Target, Walmart, Walgreens, CVS, and Kroger.²⁶

Schick was the official shaving sponsor of Movember, an organization that encouraged men to grow a moustache in the month of November to raise awareness of men's health issues with a focus on prostate cancer, testicular cancer, mental health, and suicide prevention.²⁷ As partners, Schick and Movember worked together to raise awareness and funds for these causes.²⁸

Harry's

Harry's, another new entrant to the razor and razor blade market, was created in 2013 by Jeff Raider and Andy Katz-Mayfield, who were frustrated with overpaying for razors and founded Harry's out of the belief that men deserved "a great shave at a fair price."²⁹

All of Harry's German-produced five-blade razors came with a special blade at the top of the razor to easily trim sideburns and under noses. In contrast to other brands, Harry's had a relatively limited product mix, selling only one type of blade, two types of handles, and one option each for shave gel and shave cream.³⁰ In addition to individual sales, Harry's offered a shave plan that delivered razors for \$2.50 or less per razor. Although Harry's primarily sold its products online, the company was available in some stores including Target. By 2016, the company had over 2 million customers.³¹

The two Harry's founders sought to "make products for all men, thoughtfully . . . [and] embrace the messiness of masculinity."³² They continued: "One way we try to do this is by talking about the things that don't get talked about as much as they should. Men today are equally as comfortable being nurturing as they are strong, accepting of others as they are self-assured."³³

Beyond selling razors and blades, Harry's had a social mission that was a key factor to the company: to support men's mental health. The company began with the goal of helping half a million men by 2012, and donated 1 per cent of its income to men's mental and physical health-related organizations in support of this goal, including organizations aimed at supporting homeless men, military veterans, male athletes, and LGBTQ youth.³⁴

GILLETTE: FROM "THE BEST A MAN CAN GET" TO "THE BEST A MAN CAN BE"

Historically, Gillette's promotional approach had focused on sports and masculinity; in 1910, Gillette started using baseball stars in its print ads, and by 1939, the company focused on football as well.³⁵ In 1989, Gillette's famous tagline "The best a man can get" was aimed at "the alpha male . . . working for Wall

Street . . . [who] always got the girl in the end.”³⁶ For example, a 1989 ad celebrated men getting married, being fathers, engaging in business activities, getting promotions, being involved in romantic encounters, and playing sports.³⁷

The company’s focus on sports continued into the 1970s, with sponsorship of teams in soccer, cricket, and car racing. In 2004, Gillette partnered with world renowned soccer star David Beckham in a global advertising and promotional campaign. Since then, the brand continued to foster relationships with star athletes. In 2007, for example, a Gillette “Champions” campaign was launched, which featured and celebrated three leading athletes: Roger Federer, Thierry Henry, and Tiger Woods, and eventually spanned 150 markets worldwide. Over time, this approach contributed to a reputation of being a performance brand.³⁸

Gillette’s promotional activities branched out in the 2010s. In 2012, the company also partnered with Movember to raise awareness of prostate cancer and other men’s health issues.³⁹ This partnership included setting up a 1940s-style barber shop to offer free moustache trims and style advice, as well as luxury shaving with the newly introduced Gillette Fusion Proglide Styler. The barber shop also doubled as a gentleman’s club hosting a bar and games room featuring pool and poker, whisky tastings, and live entertainment.⁴⁰

In 2017, Gillette sought to reach teens and fathers simultaneously through a campaign on Father’s Day, which was a leading sales time in grooming.⁴¹ Learning to shave was often seen as an important father–son bonding moment, event though only a small percentage of boys (13 per cent) asked their fathers to teach them; instead, boys were turning to the Internet for advice. Thus, Gillette sought to encourage teens to “Go Ask Dad” in a video showing fathers arriving to help their teenage sons as they struggled to learn from Internet how-to videos. Gillette used Google’s services to show branded ads and its video whenever teen boys searched the top how-to videos. Within two weeks, the Gillette video gained almost 20 million views, various media coverage, and praise for its likeability and relevance.⁴²

In 2018, Gillette began a move toward portraying “a richer, more updated and relevant depiction of men,”⁴³ and targeted a campaign at new fathers, trying to encourage them to have soft, clean-shaven faces for their newborn babies.⁴⁴ Gillette used haptic technology for touchscreens, which allowed men to tactically experience how facial hair felt, compared to a smooth shave. The company also joined up with P&G’s Pampers to offer a “daddy pack” that included diapers and razors, and launched an online dad’s club.⁴⁵

Gillette: We Believe

On January 13, 2019, Gillette released the short film “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” on YouTube. The video addressed issues including toxic masculinity, the #MeToo movement, sexual harassment, and bullying. Its hashtags were #TheBestMenCanBe and #Gillette, and it came with the following summary:

Bullying. Harassment. Is this the best a man can get? It’s only by challenging ourselves to do more, that we can get closer to our best. To say the right thing, to act the right way. We are taking action at <https://gillette.com/en-us/about/the-best-men-can-be>. Join us. . . . This Gillette commercial is about our belief in the best in men.⁴⁶

The video showed boys and men bullying each other and harassing and catcalling women before asking if this is “the best a man can get.” The video continued with men calling out this behaviour. Ultimately, the ad asked men to ditch the mentality that “boys being boys” was an acceptable excuse for bullying, sexual harassment, or other such behaviours, and challenged men to be the best version of themselves. It ended with a call for the future, cautioning that “the boys watching today will be the men of tomorrow.”

Reactions to the ad were diverse and passionate. By August 2019, the short film had been viewed over 31 million times and generated nearly 800,000 likes and 1.5 million dislikes.⁴⁷ Many of those who liked the ad praised it for challenging the culture of privilege built on the idea that “boys will be boys will be boys will be boys,” and argued that the ad was “pro-humanity” more than it was “anti-male.”⁴⁸ In addition, many viewers suggested that men who were outraged by the ad were precisely the men who needed to hear Gillette’s message.⁴⁹

Many of those viewers who disliked the ad criticized it for being patronizing toward men.⁵⁰ Some noted that while the ad scolded men in general for their treatment of women, most men were decent people who did not deserve to be stereotyped and grouped with other men whose treatment of women was genuinely problematic.⁵¹ Gillette was threatened with boycotts.⁵²

Gillette defended its campaign. Pankaj Bhalla, director of Gillette North America, stated that Gillette had progressed but needed to do more.⁵³ According to Bhalla, “There were many things that Gillette was doing well for 120 years. And [when] you look back on its history there was one thing it taught us: father and son, son and father, [and] how to be a better man.”⁵⁴

According to Gary Coombe, chief executive officer of P&G’s Global Grooming business, “the vast majority of people expect brands to have a point of view on important social matters, so I’m glad we’ve shown that.”⁵⁵ Coombe’s statement was well founded in research—over 60 per cent of consumers worldwide wanted brands to take a stand on various social issues, and the number of these so-called belief-driven buyers had increased by 13 per cent from 2017 to 2018.⁵⁶ In addition, research suggested that millennials wanted to know what companies were doing to improve the world.⁵⁷

Further, market research revealed that women who were purchasing razors and blades for their partners accounted for 45 per cent of Gillette’s purchases⁵⁸ and wished for men to be more empathetic. On the other hand, men were found to still be focused on the value of success.⁵⁹ Gillette also uncovered that most women thought men were not bullied, while 45 per cent of men reported being bullied. In the words of Bhalla, “One of the best ways to be empathetic—one of the best ways to treat women with respect, one of the best ways to try to equalize society—is to teach your young son to be better.” He continued:

As far as selling products to men, I play a very small, but very visible, role in shaping how men look in society, in pop culture, in advertising, in marketing materials . . . Now, I recognize, I’m one brand, in one country, with one small role to play. Like voting, no single entity can make the total impact. But every entity has to make some impact. And so, as an entity, we’re asking ourselves: How should we show men? How should we show men in society today?⁶⁰

Following on this theme, and even in the face of the backlash the brand received for releasing its controversial video, Gillette made a commitment to donate \$1 million per year over the course of three years to non-profits in the United States who encouraged men to become role models, based on inspiring respect and accountability for future generations.⁶¹ In May 2019, Gillette ran a video online showing a father teaching his transgender son how to shave for the first time, gaining mostly positive reactions online.⁶²

Harry’s, Schick, and Dollar Shave Club Advertising

Gillette was not the only shaving brand to use a modern take on masculinity in its advertising. Harry’s promotional approach, for example, reflected the brand’s social mission to support men’s mental health. In summer 2018, Harry’s YouTube channel featured a number of spots with people from the LGBTQ+ community

talking about their lives, including Jonathan Van Ness from the hit Netflix series *Queer Eye*.⁶³ Later, in early 2019, Harry's did a series of videos of founder Harry Kane talking about mental health with the famous sports psychiatrist Dr. Steve Peers.⁶⁴ In April 2019, the company launched a more traditional YouTube spot called "Shave, or Don't." This video featured men of diverse ages, life stages, and races demonstrating that shaving was a choice for men and encouraged them to make the choice that was best for them.⁶⁵

Similarly, in 2018 a number of Schick promotions used the tagline "The Man I Am" and celebrated "all expressions of what it means to be a man."⁶⁶ Schick's ads in 2018 featured men whose singing and dancing had gone viral. Men such as Willie Spence, Kevin Carroll, and ZU-nA participated in a video telling viewers that "you don't get to tell me who to be . . . this is the man I am."⁶⁷ This campaign, focused on positive and modern masculinity, was a result of Schick finding that a majority of its target consumers between the ages of 18 and 34 years felt pressure to act "like men" and felt that the media failed to accurately portray them.⁶⁸ Patrick Kane, group marketing director for Edgewell Personal Care said:

There's been a lot of change in the category with guys and trying to find a way to define on their own what it means to be a man today. It has been topical; the old adages don't seem to apply. A lot of times, men are getting frustrated with some of the depictions of what it means to be masculine.⁶⁹

Schick also launched a web series called *Locker Room Talk* featuring professional basketball player and mental health advocate Kevin Love, who discussed topics such as toxic masculinity with other notable athletes such as swimmer Michael Phelps.⁷⁰

Dollar Shave Club promotions also featured a diverse range of men. For example, a 2018 spot featured a drag queen getting ready, two men bathing together, and a man having a beer in a candle-lit bubble bath; the extended version of the video had 3.3 million views on YouTube, while the shorter version had almost 5 million views.⁷¹ In June 2019, a Dollar Shave Club Father's Day ad, "Manifique," focused on diverse body shapes and featured primarily middle-aged men, dressed in white underwear and towels, performing a choreographed music routine.⁷²

LOOKING FORWARD

Although all major brands in the industry had showcased various depictions of modern men, Gillette's "We Believe" ad garnered the most negative customer reactions. John Moeller, P&G's chief financial officer, noted that despite all the unprecedented media coverage and discussion of the controversial ad, retail sales of Gillette products showed no change immediately following the release of the ad.⁷³ Months later, Coombe says both brand affinity and sales jumped after the ad, despite the fact that, in his words, "A small proportion of men interpreted our advert to be a slur on masculinity." Coombe argued that the campaign was "starting a new dialogue about a more modern, positive view of masculinity, and acknowledging the role our brand has played in defining previous male stereotypes over generations."⁷⁴ But, questions still remained about Gillette's new direction and whether this approach ultimately helped or hindered the brand. What should Gillette do next?

ENDNOTES

¹ This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of Gillette, Procter & Gamble or any of its employees.

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