

**Shaving off Toxic Masculinity**  
- Gillette's 'The Best A Man Can Get' Campaign

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**MANAGEMENT DECISION**

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The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

## **The Initial Motivators**

30 years ago Gillette launched a Superbowl advertisement with their tagline 'The Best A Man Can Get', positioning themselves as a premium brand, which enabled them to charge higher prices. Their premium reputation was highlighted by associations to sports and athletes but then they changed their slogan in early January 2019 to 'The Best A Man Can Be'. The reason for that was their plummeting sales and being perceived by millennials as the brand that their fathers would use. Gillette had lost touch with the younger generation and was slowly fading away<sup>1</sup>. Gillette tried to increase sales as the overall market predictions were showing a downward tendency by launching a campaign that was purely emotional and focused entirely on critiquing male stereotypes which is what Gillette called "toxic masculinity" and the social issue of #metoo. Moreover, it did not show a single Gillette product. The increasing competition from subscription models provided by competitors such as Dollar Shave Club, owned by Unilever or Harry's together with other providers of replenishing razor cartridges forced Gillette to drop their prices about 15% over the past years<sup>2</sup>.

## **The First Hours**

In January 2019 the Gillette team around Pankaj Bhalla, the North American brand director, published the new video fairly late in the evening with the best of intentions. They had agreed that they would start promoting the advertisement the next day to make sure that people saw it. In the early morning hours, Bhalla and his team were awoken and heard of the massive impact and public outrage their video had caused. Bhalla and multiple team members got death threats and he was sure that he would lose his job over this. He was very close to taking the advertisement offline as he was not sure anymore if he actually had done the right thing and managed to convey with the advertisement his initial thoughts.

## **The Decision**

However, he and his team and P&G decided to stick to the advertisement and to face the storm. Pankaj Bhalla argued that "*We expected debate. Actually a discussion is necessary. If we don't discuss and don't talk about it, I don't think real change will happen.*"<sup>2</sup>. Right after launching the campaign Gillette had to face a major backlash as customers and society in general reacted very emotional. There were people who applauded the company for raising awareness and taking a stance, but people also openly called for boycotts and threatened with razor-clogged toilets. Many of Gillette's customers boycotted purchasing their products as a result of feeling personally attacked by the "toxic masculinity" advertisement, which critiqued men and called on them to 'quit making excuses.'

Following a #boycottgillette hashtag on Twitter and social media thousands of customers posted pictures online throwing away their Gillette products and demanded an apology video by Gillette and P&G<sup>3</sup>. The advertisement was watched over 2 million times within 48 hours after publishing it. On the 15th of January 2019 ~~the video already had~~ 23,000 likes and 214,000 dislikes and was one of the most-

disliked videos on YouTube. On the 28th of February 2020, the video had received 810,000 likes and 1,5 million dislikes and was viewed over 33 million times.

Moreover, the video received a lot of negative comments (see Appendix A) and it was also speculated that negative comments were deleted and that Gillette bought additional likes to enhance online publicity (Appendix B) but Gillette has never responded to these accusations<sup>4</sup>. However, based on the analysis of social media analytics provider Sprout Social the overall resonance online was quite positive. During the time from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 63% of the 645,000 tweets about @Gillette have been positive, and 94% of the 246,000 tweets hash tagged #TheBestMenCanBe was positives.

Even though a lot of the reactions were negative and many famous people expressed their outrage, Gillette remained true to its intentions and also the mother brand P&G stayed loyal to the campaign and said that it is part of a wider project to promote gender equality in its business. Even half a year after the launch Gillette's CEO and president, Gary Coombe is still sure that losing and offending some people is a price worth paying and said *"I am absolutely of the view now that for the majority of people to fall more deeply in love with today's brands you have to risk upsetting a small minority and that's what we've done."*<sup>1</sup>

Gillette's goal was to be a positive influence for millennials and older generations and to turn around their dropping market share. Their intention with the new campaigns was to give more meaning and depths to their 30 year old claim and to try and make it more relevant to today's world. Damon Jones, Vice President, Global Communications and Advocacy at P&G says *"We're not saying all guys are bad. We're not trying to misrepresent any one individual. What we're saying is, as a collective group let's have a little less bad behavior and more good. That's the big message behind it,"*<sup>6</sup>.

The campaign "We Believe" harnesses the "The Best A Man Can Be" advertisement as its centerpiece but is accompanied by other advertisements trying to show and amplify this "bestness" from various angles. The negative comments on this centerpiece did not stop them from going through with their campaign. In may 2019, Gillette launched a follow-up advertisement called "First Shave", which portrayed a father teaching his transgender son how to shave. This advertisement was received very positively by many, including the transgender community.


To show that Gillette does not just want to jump on the bandwagon of corporate social responsibility and the trend that millennials give more credit to companies who engage in CSR, Gillette also promised to distribute 1 million US dollar each year to non-profit organizations that focus on executing impactful programs to help men achieve their personal best. Those range from child abuse intervention centers to the LGBTQ and recovery communities. Gillette and P&G actively decided to stick to these campaigns to take an active stance in the social issue discussion and to try and become advocates for a 'better world'.


## The Outlook


After the campaign, sales dropped in July 2019 and P&G had to do a non-cash write-down of 8 billion US Dollars of Gillette. Nevertheless, P&G stressed the fact that they do not believe the plummeting sales are a result of their #thebestamancanbe campaign but rather that of a general decline in the razor market due to currency fluctuations and the growing trend towards beard grooming.


In addition, the new disruptive competitors Harry's and Dollar Shave Club sell their products under the category average price which makes the category highly competitive. Despite this, P&G still sees it as an attractive category to compete in. Investors overall are not too concerned by the write-down as they mostly focus on the high earnings beating their estimates, the optimistic forecast for 2020 and the share price which is at a record high.<sup>7</sup>

## Appendix A (negative Youtube comments)


 **Chad Hartkopf** 1 week geleden  
gillette: the worst humanity can get  
👍 58 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**


 **Dave Wu** 3 weken geleden  
When a company attacks their main demographic. They need to die  
👍 142 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**

 **Neal Stevens** 2 weken geleden  
You've just lost a lifelong customer.  
👍 82 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**

 **sundin57** 1 jaar geleden  
Is toxic masculinity being a loyal husband and father?  
Is toxic masculinity being a strong member of the community?  
Is toxic masculinity working 12 hour days to provide for his family?  
Is toxic masculinity joining the military to serve his country?  
Is toxic masculinity striving to be better, setting an example, being a role model to those looking up to him?  
  
If so, then toxic I'll be.  
Minder weergeven  
👍 534 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**

## Appendix B (Accusations on Youtube)

 **Robledillo** 1 jaar geleden  
I feel bad for the guy working overtime having to delete all these comments  
👍 5,8K 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**

 **Wendell Ellis Edwards** 4 dagen geleden  
<Gillette: We're glad we started a conversation. Also Gillette: delete literally Millions of critical comments. Nah Gillette, I don't think what you are looking for is a conversation.>  
👍 10 🗨️ **BEANTWOORDEN**

## Endnotes

- 1 Fleming, M. (2019). Gillette boss: Alienating some consumers with #metoo campaign was a price worth paying, Available online: <https://www.marketingweek.com/gillette-metoo-campaign-fallout/> [Accessed February 19, 2020]
- 2 Taylor, C. (2019). Why Gillette's New Ad Campaign Is Toxic, Available online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charlesrtaylor/2019/01/15/why-gillettes-new-ad-campaign-is-toxic/#330055c65bc9> [Accessed February 19, 2020]
- 3 Baggs, M. (2019). Gillette faces backlash and boycott over '#MeToo advert', Available online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-46874617> [Accessed February 15, 2020]
- 4 Jain, A. (2019). Users Say Gillette Deleted Negative Comments On Its #MeToo Campaign, Available online: <https://www.valuewalk.com/2019/01/gillette-deleting-comments-metoo/> [Accessed February 21, 2020]
- 5 Berkowitz, J. (2019). Gillette responds to the backlash against its woke viral ad Available online: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90293402/gillette-responds-to-the-backlash-against-its-woke-viral-ad> [Accessed February 19, 2020]
- 6 King, M. (2019). Gillette Responds To Controversial Advert Challenging Toxic Masculinity, Available online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michelleking/2019/01/20/gillette-responds-to-controversial-advert-challenging-toxic-masculinity/#3d5c6e7a5bb7> [Accessed February 21, 2020]
- 7 Lucas, A. (2019). Procter & Gamble writes down Gillette business but remains confident in its future, Available online: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/30/procter-gamble-writes-down-gillette-business-but-remains-confident-in-its-future.html> [Accessed February 21, 2020]