

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

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## **TEACHING NOTES**

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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.

## Teaching Note

*The teaching note is a guideline on how to introduce and present the case in a successful manner. The aim of this instruction is to give the presenter a greater insight in order to lead a discussion and successfully encourage engagement and interaction from others. This teaching note begins with a brief case synopsis in order to get a more holistic view of the case's topic and main issues, which is followed by the learning objectives. Furthermore, it proposes a selection of questions to help guide the overall case discussion. Finally, a time plan is presented which outlines the estimated time that should be spent on each stage.*

### Case Synopsis

Gillette's market share in the razor and shaving category is constantly decreasing and new disruptive competitors like Harry's and Dollar Shave Club operate below average category prices, with an online business model that works on a subscription basis. Especially the younger customer segment values convenience and low prices over the brand name and welcomed cheaper options that still provide the needed level of quality and fit their modern on-the-go lifestyle. This poses multiple challenges for Gillette as they are slowly being seen as a brand for the 'older' generation. In order to counteract the declining market share, a drop in sales and to become relevant for millennials again, Gillette had the idea to create an advertisement that takes a stand with regards to social issues and engage in CSR.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, 8 out of 10 consumers claim that they prefer brands that take a stand (Edelman, 2020). Based on this and P&G's history of addressing social issues, Gillette changed their 30 year old slogan "The best a man can get" to "The best a man can be" in order to tackle the stereotypical perceptions of what it means to be a man and to encourage men everywhere to take action to set the best possible example for the next generation. Their advertisement however started a major discussion and earned a lot of backlash and they lost many customers and were accused of making men out to be villains. Their action posed the question to this case whether Gillette should have gone public with this advertisement and what role a corporate brand has with regards to social and political issues.

### Learning Objectives

From the Gillette 'The Best a Man Can Be' case, the overall objective is that the students will gain a greater insight to corporate communications and the effect they can have on a brands reputation. However, more specific learning objectives are outlined below:

1. Understanding the process behind building a corporate brand and which factors and stakeholders to take into account when launching a new, controversial/sensitive campaign.

2. Uncover and evaluate potential opportunities and challenges faced by an organization when aligning their corporate brand identity with a new corporate communication strategy
3. Evaluate what role brands should take regarding CSR and politics in a world where the public involvement in these topics increases
4. Understanding the reasoning behind the decision-making process of management, through students' gained knowledge on the steps involved when tackling a case and by applying different models and frameworks learnt in the course

### Selection of Verbs

**Table 1** shows an overview of various levels of learning applicable to the students when working on the case. When students succeed in going through all these levels, this supports the learning objectives and resembles a successful case learning experience.

<i>Remembering</i>	Through brand communication an organisation aims to inform the consumer of who it is, what it does and what it stands for	Through Gillette's campaign 'The Best a Man Can Be', the brand communicates who Gillette is through portraying itself as a brand that encourages men to be their best.
<i>Understanding</i>	If companies should change with society and if they do, is the communication authentic and genuine or a failed attempt of ' <i>jumping on the bandwagon</i> '.	Gillette used their voice and market share to grab people's attention and start a discussion about the phenomenon of 'toxic masculinity', an issue that targets their main customer base directly.
<i>Analyzing</i>	The differences between earlier advertising campaigns and the modern age approach.	Gillette has switched to using emotional advertising in their campaigns
<i>Evaluating</i>	The potential effectiveness and challenges of the campaign and the impact on the brand.	The Corporate Reputation Identity Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016), The Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012).

**Table 1** - Selection of Verbs

### *Political Activism from Brands*

Companies that years ago would have held their tongue and maintained a neutral silence on politically and socially sensitive topics are now using their voices to weigh in on the conversations and arguments surrounding a range of issues. As well as voicing their opinion, they are developing their marketing strategies in line with this. In early literature, Pollay (1986), highlighted that advertising campaigns changed from being considered as a mere promotion of products to actually being able to deliver meaningful content. However, it is important that political activism is brand-aligned and that the brands find and adopt the right tone that remains true to the brand but also makes sense to the consumer (Moorman, 2018). In Gillette's case, there are inconsistencies that arise between their past and present positioning, how can a brand that has spent the last thirty years supporting gender stereotypes now call themselves a supporter of a more progressive masculinity? As a result of this, Gillette's authenticity and legitimacy can be called into question and critiqued.

### *Corporate Communications*

As highlighted by Roper and Fill (2012) an important question for a company to ask themselves is how it is being perceived by the public and whether the story the company is telling about itself through its campaigns is being interpreted correctly. They further state that complications and damage arise as a result of a gap or differences between the two messages i.e. the internal identity and the external image (Roper & Fill, 2012). Balmer and Greyser (2002) divide the corporate brand identity into five different types; firstly, the actual identity which refers to how the organisation sees themselves and is based on the values and attributes that are shared throughout the organisation. The second type is the communicated identity, this instead is portrayed through the advertisements and press releases. Thirdly, there is the conceived identity, here the consumers shape their own perceptions of the brand through the company's past, present and future activities which in turn reflect the reputation of the brand. This is an essential aspect for the Gillette 'The Best a Man Can Be' case as the advertisement supports ongoing social issues in society. Lastly, they describe the ideal identity and the desired identity. While the ideal identity reflects the best possible positioning in their given market at a given time, the desired identity describes the vision the corporate leaders have for the organisation, although these two identities can be seen as similar, the latter is actually more defined by the CEO's character traits.

As pointed out by Roper and Fill (2012) one of the strategic aims behind corporate communication is to develop stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, the focus of the corporate communications is not the products or services on offer but rather the organisation itself (Roper & Fill, 2012). This is clear in P&G's new corporate communications as many of its advertisements do not contain any product placement and rather focus on a powerful message that highlights social

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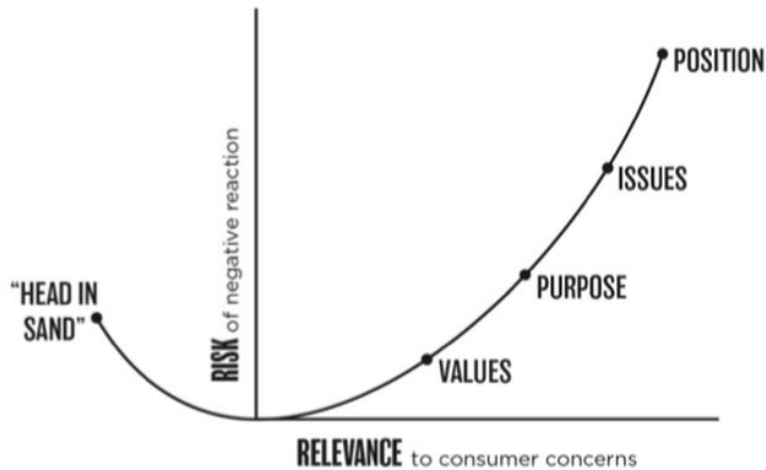
or political issues. According to Roper and Fill (2012) stakeholders such as consumers rely on the key messages received through communications such as advertisements in order to position the organisation in their minds. Van Riel & Fombrun (2007 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012) further point out the importance of these messages revolving around a central or core theme that should be “*authentic, transparent, consistent and credible*” (Roper & Fill, 2012, p. 252). Roper and Fill (2012) highlight five principal themes that can be established by an organisation; functional, expressive, emotional, general and first strike. For this specific case, focusing on the emotional aspect is especially important considering the emotionally-loaded advertisement. P&G as a company has a history of using emotional marketing and storytelling techniques from the ‘Thank You Mom’ campaign during the 2016 Olympics in Rio, to the ‘#LikeAGirl’ campaign from P&G brand Always to the ‘The Best a Man Can Be’ campaign of Gillette. Stories enable people to further understand an organisation’s motivations and allow consumers connect emotionally with a brand (Roper & Fill, 2012).

It is important to note that it is not the first time a P&G campaign used its market reach to highlight and create conversation about controversial issues but specifically about gender roles. P&G’s feminine hygiene brand Always was behind the campaign #LikeAGirl which challenges the stereotypical way girls ‘act’ while it’s diapers brand Pampers created an advertisement which shows fathers taking an equal role in parenting. In Gillette’s case, they have moved away from their stereotypical campaigns that highlight the males sexual prowess and physique to instead choosing to make their own mark on the issues that we are confronted with in today’s society. Their change in advertising style can be seen as a step forward for the brand as they imply that in today’s modern age, this should be considered the new model for what confident masculinity is. This follows what Roper and Fill (2012) describe as cause-related marketing, which is defined as developing a reputation that is positioned around a strong and socially oriented focus. Furthermore, being able to position the organisation as something beyond a purely profit-making entity and rather as a contributor to wider social problems allows it to achieve a stronger market position (Roper & Fill, 2012).

When a brand decides to take a stance on a social issue, however, it is important to assess the risk involved. The Brand Risk-Relevance Curve by (Horst, 2018), defines the choices a brand has when it is faced with whether it should engage and how it should engage with sensitive issues in today's society. These range from burying its head in the sand to taking a firm position which is considered the more proactive and risk associated choice (Horst, 2018).

### **Exhibit 1 - The Brand Risk-Relevance Curve**

## The Brand Risk-Relevance Curve



When addressing Gillette's campaign 'The Best a Man Can Be', Gillette clearly took a clear 'position' on the phenomenon of 'toxic masculinity' where it sided against the traditional male stereotype and his behaviours. This created controversy and shed light on the issue of 'toxic masculinity'. In turn this resulted in negative feedback from their target market amongst others, who felt attacked and insulted. As a result, the message was diluted and the clarity of what Gillette was trying to portray was somewhat lost.

### 'The Best a Man Can Be' by Gillette - The Sailboat framework

The Sailboat framework by Urde (2019), which discusses the effectiveness of corporate communications, can be used to examine the Gillette campaign. Firstly, it considers how long this idea would last or for how long it would work, i.e. *The Length*, secondly it analyses the intellectual height and how creative the campaign is i.e. *The Height*. Thirdly, it evaluates the intellectual depth, does the campaign make you think or does it make you just act and buy i.e. *The Depth*. Lastly, it examines whether the communication will help the entire portfolio i.e. *The Breadth*. Applying this framework could help students determine if Gillette should launch the campaign or not.

*Length* - The Gillette campaign 'The Best a Man Can Be' is one that will undoubtedly last, as Gillette takes a stance on voicing social issues surrounding its target market. Gillette has found an authentic voice and as a brand has a reasonability to challenge the stereotypes and toxic masculinity. In a time where movements such as #MeToo surrounding sexual harassment, cyber bullying and violence including domestic are becoming more and more frequent, it is important that brands show exactly what position they take. This campaign gained both praise and criticism, the latter showing the vital need for light to be shed on the phenomenon of toxic masculinity.

*Height* – This campaign is undeniably creative as it describes the phenomenon of ‘toxic masculinity’ in a narrative way and with a twist in the middle. It does not just show the ways in which the stereotypes are toxic but actually provides the viewer with today’s men showing better examples to the ‘men of tomorrow’.

*Depth* – Advertising campaigns should not only work towards selling products but also add a level of intellectual depth. Advertising is a very powerful tool that in Gillette’s case reaches a large market share, however, they do this while staying relevant for their target market and relevant to the brand they are promoting. The campaign has intellectual depth as it discusses a sensitive issue and challenges masculinity by portraying a strong message of ‘quit making excuses’. It stimulates the audience to think whether or not they agree with it and this is seen through the diverse reactions the campaign received.

*Breadth* – It is arguable whether this advertising campaign will pour over into the other products in the ‘Grooming’ segment of P&G as it is a shadow mother, thus people may be unaware of Braun and Venus falling under the same company as Gillette. This could also be determined by the media coverage and whether they highlight the connection between the brands.

## **Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation**

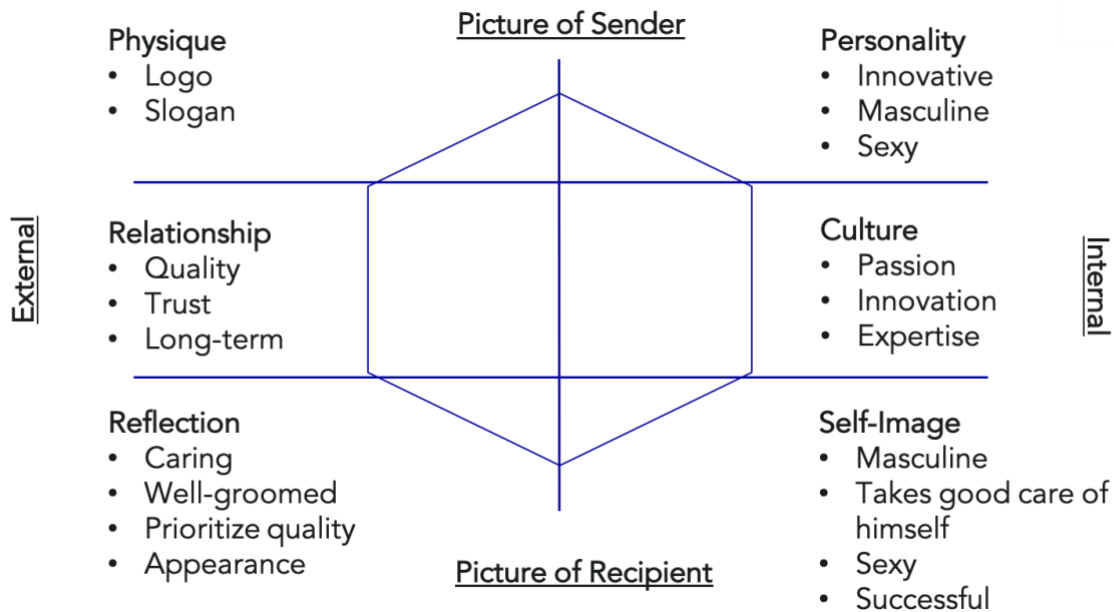
In order to determine whether the suggested campaign would be the right angle to take for Gillette, students could use both the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012) as well as the Corporate Reputation Identity Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016). These could be used from two different views; 1) By completing the prism or the matrix, students can check if the advertisement fits Gillette’s traditional core and values and if it is reflected in all the boxes. 2) Another way to look at it, is making a prospective model, as what would happen to the core, or other boxes, once this campaign is launched.

### *The Brand Identity Prism*

Students should realize that an important aspect to consider in this challenge is that Gillette’s aim is to be more than its products (razors). Having a strong brand identity is especially important to convey meaning and be of inspiration to its consumers. Moreover, having a strong brand identity makes it possible for consumers to identify with the brand’s characteristics, which is important for brand loyalty (Kapferer, 2012). The brand identity prism was developed by Kapferer (2012), which explains the six facets of brand identity. Using this prism could help students picture and/or establish the foundations of Gillette’s brand identity. A brand’s communication should be coherent and consistent with the brand’s identity. When they complete the prism, they can see whether the advertisement fits in, and if not, what should change? E.g. is it time for Gillette to change its core values? Or, considering their long brand history, should their core be remained and a certain piece in the advertisement should be changed to make sure it fits with their already established identity? Or, when remaining their brand identity, should

they not launch the advertisement at all and take another angle that makes a better fit? Another thing to consider is that change in positioning does not have to be equal to changing the brand's identity. "It is the degree of freedom between identity and positioning that enables a brand to change over time while still remaining itself" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 157). The key behind (re)positioning is staying true to the brand's essence.

**Exhibition 2 - Gillette's Brand Identity Prism**



*The Corporate Identity & Reputation Matrix*

When considering suitable corporate communication strategies, it is important to not only take an inside-out perspective, but also an outside-in perspective. This could especially be important to consider for this specific case since 1) Gillette is noticing that the external environment and the market is changing; 2) The potential campaign takes quite a strong stance on 'toxic masculinity' and customers can either hate it or love it. It should be taken into account that launching this commercial could lead to different opinions and spark a heated discussion between consumers. This is important since this can have a big impact on the corporation's reputation and brand image. This means that students should consider Gillette's core identity, while also considering the different external stakeholders' expectations and how they perceive the brand. Management should take into account what they want to convey, but also how it will be received by their external stakeholders.

Although the cause of Gillette's dilemma is caused by the outside - by the changing environment and changing customer needs - it would not be a good idea to just change everything and completely forget about their *raison d'être* and their long brand history. Internal and external elements should be compatible; students could recommend that Gillette stays true to themselves, to their core, while also



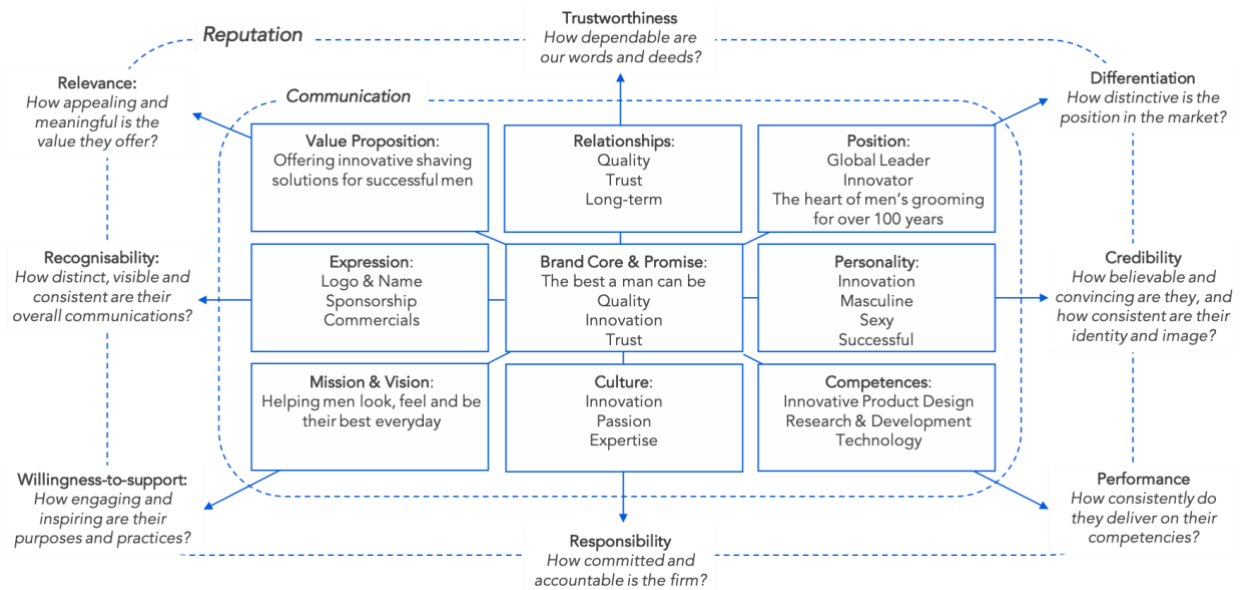
adapting to today's consumers. A great way for students to consider both internal and external factors would be to look at Urde and Greyser's Corporate Identity and Reputation Matrix (2016). This matrix integrates the concepts of corporate brand identity and reputation and is different from Kapferer's prism in the way that it adds extra reputational and communication layers. The additional reputational frame specifically includes the perspectives of external stakeholders. Constructing this matrix for Gillette could help students see whether the corporate brand identity would match the external perceptions of Gillette after launching such a campaign. Looking at the matrix, having a strong brand identity would entail that each element should be reflected in the other elements, with the core as basis. This also means that internally-oriented elements should echo the externally-oriented elements and the other way around.

Regarding the reputational dimension, it would for example be interesting to look from willingness-to-support to differentiation, which forms the 'strategy diagonal'. The diagonal goes through three different brand identity elements, e.g. are Gillette's mission and vision inspiring and engaging for external stakeholders? One could argue that no, maybe for the millennial segment it is not. Does this mean Gillette should change this element? Or maybe it just means they should not focus on millennials? Regarding strategy, it is also good to know what Gillette's (intended) position is in the market. Based on this position, are they differentiating themselves from competitors? With the earlier discussed 'young' competitors in mind, it could be argued that Gillette's core values make them distinct, especially with their focus on quality.

However, looking at the competition diagonal, are their values still relevant for their external stakeholders? For millennials, it seems less so, but for their older customers maybe they are. Gillette's competences lay in quality and constant innovations, accompanied by high performance. But when wanting to conquer the millennial segment, this might not be relevant. Lastly, focusing on the communication horizontal, Gillette's campaign might be a unique expression of their brand, however since products are not shown in the specific advertisement, the only aspect that makes it recognizably from Gillette is their logo appearing at the end and maybe the fact that the advertisement only entails men. Since this campaign touches upon a sensitive topic and moves along with the trend of companies being 'woke', an interesting question regarding the reputation element of credibility arises. When masculinity has been Gillette's core for so long, how believable is this contrasting campaign?

The CBRIM matrix can stimulate informed discussions and can help students effectively address important issues and uncover areas for improvement, with regards to the corporation's brand identity and reputation. It can especially help with identifying which elements would be affected by launching the new campaign.

### **Exhibit 3** – Gillette's Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix



## Teaching Suggestions

The aim of a case is to present the students with real life business scenarios where they are expected to challenge themselves and react to the situation presented in class in order to arrive at real life solutions and/or recommendations to solve the case. Therefore, when presenting a case, it is of paramount importance to engage with the class and encourage discussions in order to achieve these solutions.

### *Pre-Presentation and Introducing the Case*

Firstly, it is important to know the environment in which you are speaking, this can include steps such as understanding the microphone positioning and other basic elements to present the PowerPoint. Arriving to the room in advance and ensuring the presenters are comfortable will ensure a timely start and that the presentation runs smoothly. The presenters should also prepare in advance what other teaching tools they are going to use, such as the whiteboard, additional visual supports such as videos or images. This is recommended as it helps to engage the audience and can prompt interesting comments and discussions. The whiteboard further acts as a tool for the presenter to keep track of the audience's ideas, questions and potential recommendations. When introducing the case, it is suggested that the presenters present a brief background and outline what will be discussed and expected from the audience.

### *Case Discussion*

During this phase, the presenters should ask the audience to take the role of the management board for Gillette. By doing so, the audience should feel like they are working together to achieve possible solutions which will start the flow of conversation and ideas and overall encourage participation from the entire

audience. It is important to note however, that it is not the presenters' role to influence discussions, they must remain unbiased throughout the discussion and not share their personal views. Their role is to lead the discussion and encourage participation from the audience members to share their thoughts and make sure the discussion remains relevant and on track at all times. The presenters should also use previous Gillette campaigns to paint a view of the brand in the audience's mind and to highlight the difference to the newly proposed advertisement. Furthermore, by doing so it enables the audience to understand Gillette's positioning in today's market and the message it is trying to portray in comparison to the previously chosen advertising style.

In this phase, the presenter should also aim to structure the discussion by inviting the audience to focus their thoughts on three aspects; 'key challenges', 'alternatives' and 'actions'. This is in fact where the whiteboard becomes notably helpful, as it provides focus and it allows the presenters keep track of what is being said. Furthermore, it provides the audience with a visual representation of the case.

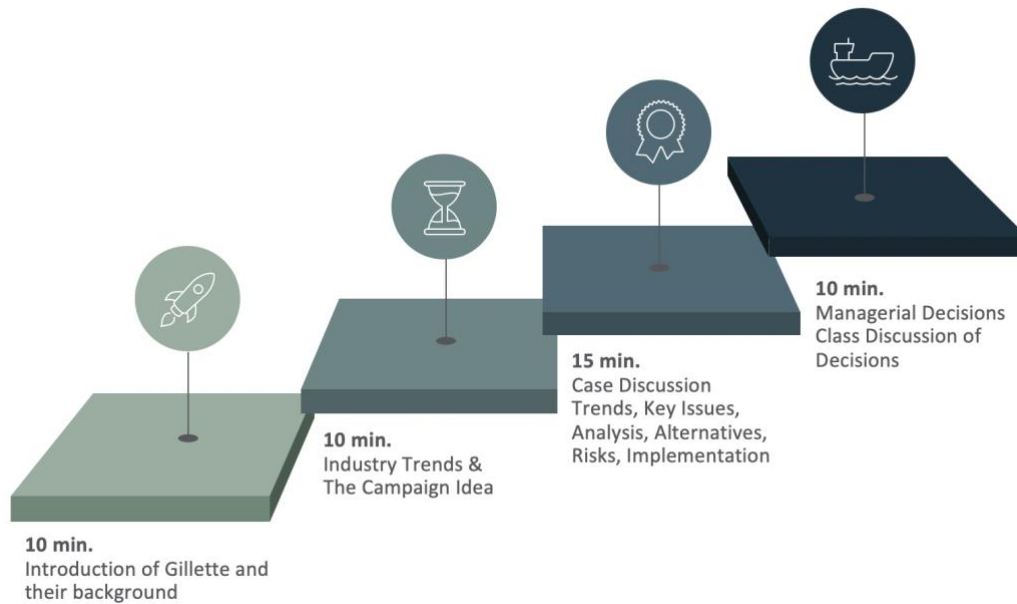
### *Closing the discussion and concluding*

As the discussion is drawing to a close, the presenters' objective should be to connect what is written on the whiteboard, allow for any open or remaining discussion to be finalized and then close the discussion. The presenters should then present the alternative managerial decisions as a result of the discussion to the audience. Lastly, the presenters should introduce the actual company decision. A comparison should be drawn between the alternatives raised in class and the actual company decision and look for similarities and differences, this gives the audience a chance to see the case from a different perspective. The presenters should end by thanking the audience for their participation.

## **Time plan**

The following time plan is a prediction of how much time the case should take to present with a breakdown of each phase. The estimated time needed for a full presentation of the case is 45 minutes. The time plan then continues to highlight the issues surrounding the case and specifications of the campaign. Next, before beginning the discussion, the presenters will ask the managerial question and then continue to lead the discussion as highlighted above. When the discussion has ended, the presenters will move forward and present the actual managerial decision taken by Gillette, the other alternatives will be highlighted in order to draw comparisons before thanking the audience.

### **Exhibit 4** - Suggested Time Plan



## Discussion Questions

*(Questions that might be used to open the case and other guiding questions)*

*Main questions:*

- *Would this campaign be the right choice to solve Gillette's issues in the market? Why?*
- *Do you think by focusing on CSR and social issues Gillette can tackle the competitors and adjust to the consumer's behavioural trends? Why?*
- *Which other direction(s) could Gillette take in order to increase sales and become one of the chosen brands for millennials?*

Since the information could be a bit overwhelming, especially when one is not familiar with the case, we could start with an easy question to open up the discussion and map different views.

*Assisting questions:*

- *What is your overall impression of the advertisement? Do you like it or not? Why so?*
- *What could be the main values of Gillette? How would you describe the brand?*
- *\*CBRIM\* Do you think the advertisement fits in with Gillette's image?*
- *When thinking about the case, what are the major challenges of Gillette?*
- *What could be potential outcomes of launching this advertisement?*
- *Do you think this advertisement could attract the younger generation? Do you consider it to be sincere?*

- *Considering the purpose is to attract the younger generation and competing with younger brands, can you think of better alternatives than this campaign/ad?*
- *Considering all the points we have discussed so far, what would be the best plan of action?*
- *Should companies change with society?*
- *Is it genuine and/or authentic to publicly engage in CSR through advertisement?*

If the students get stuck, we could assist them with different frameworks such as the sailboat. If students make a point, it is also good to ask them to elaborate a bit further to fully grasp their point of view.

## Reflection

We think this assignment was really interesting as it gave us a hands-on opportunity to apply the theories and models we learnt to real life cases. Initially it was hard to identify a case as there was a lot of flexibility in the assignment and we also had to keep in mind that it should be a relevant case and that it should be able to spark a discussion. Gillette formed an interesting case for us since they launched this campaign on ‘toxic masculinity’ while masculinity has been the essence of their core for so long. We found it interesting how a successful brand such as Gillette has so many issues attracting the younger generation to buy its products and engage with the brand. Moreover, we all found the topic of brands and political engagement very interesting. Looking at how the case evolved was also interesting for us since when we first watched the advertisement, we actually thought it conveyed a strong message. We would not have anticipated that this ad would have received so much negative and even hateful comments, let alone boycott initiators. We thought the case would spark discussion in class as in today’s society it is common that brands are ‘woke’ in relation to trending social issues and it usually makes the audience suspicious about their sincerity. Furthermore, everyone knows Gillette as a brand, which could encourage stronger and more informed opinions on the case.

Despite the negative comments, we think it is really strong that Gillette (and P&G) stood behind their message and decided to not remove the advertisement. This shows that they are genuinely concerned about the issue, and sticking to it despite all the negativity shows the true character of the corporation. The fine art in a situation such as this however, is to know when you should remove an advertisement and when you should stand behind it. We realized that this boundary is difficult to define. For example with the famous PepsiCo commercial with Kylie Jenner, the purpose was also to convey a strong, politically engaged message, but it was poorly executed and got a lot of negative comments. They decided to remove the advertisement since it was viewed as offensive and this was not their intention. Gillette’s commercial also seemed to offend some consumers or at least spark heated discussions, however, they decided to take a stance and stick to it.

When writing the case, it was hard to take a step back from our academic/student roles. We were very tempted to explain as much as possible and give too much information to the case solvers. However, taking the role as case writer was actually a breath of fresh air and it really sparked our creativity. It was hard to determine how much detailed information the students would really need in order to solve the case and taking the role of teachers required us to critically reflect on whether the students would understand what we are trying to convey and more importantly, if the way we conveyed the case and our questions would spark discussion. We learnt it is of great importance to revise, reread and test what we had in mind, in order to make sure it was phrased clearly and of course, if it was interesting enough and would result in a variety of opinions.

Even though we knew the advertisement was received poorly, we purposefully did not decide to take the angle of crisis management but took it a step back; to the time before the advertisement was launched. However, this did make it hard to come up with a relevant case-solving question. We really had to dive deep into the reason why Gillette decided to move into the direction of 'toxic masculinity'. It was interesting to learn how younger brands like Dollar Shave Club gained so much influence on the razor market and how it seems that today's millennials really do not care about the best razor with the highest performance but care more about low prices and convenience through an online service.

Initially, thinking of suitable models to use in this case was not hard. However, when we started to apply the models, we did struggle at times. We found that applying different models to the case was hard in the sense that there were many angles we could take. On the one hand, we could analyse the influence the advertisement could have on Gillette's original identity and reputation while on the other hand, we could analyse which elements of the model should be adjusted in order to align it with the campaign's message while sticking to its core. Moreover, once we applied the models to the case, while pretending to not know the outcome of the advertisement, we realized it is almost impossible to predict how external stakeholders would react to it. Unless a company conducts focus groups, and even with this foresight, a company can never be 100% sure how different stakeholders will react. The only thing that is sure, is that companies can prepare for potentially different outcomes.

From this case, we learnt that having a long brand history with a strong brand identity does not mean one can afford to be resistant to change. Building on old values and traditions could be a strength but could also easily be turned into a weakness, especially when new competitive brands start to appear. Brands should not be afraid to acknowledge that the world is changing and that maybe it is time to adopt a different angle. It is essential to take a combined outside-in and inside-out perspective to be able to adapt to the market while not losing sight of their core. Lastly, Gillette's case taught us that it is important for corporations and brands to be consistent in their messages to earn credibility. The fact that Gillette's campaign aligned with the overall equality campaign of its mother, P&G, helped this consistency. Even though P&G acts like a shadow mother to Gillette, we do think

it is important that the mother keeps protecting her daughter and that they are on the same page. This makes their politically and socially engaging messages more sincere.

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