THE MARKETING JOURNAL ABOUT INTERVIEWS ARTICLES VIDEOS BOOK

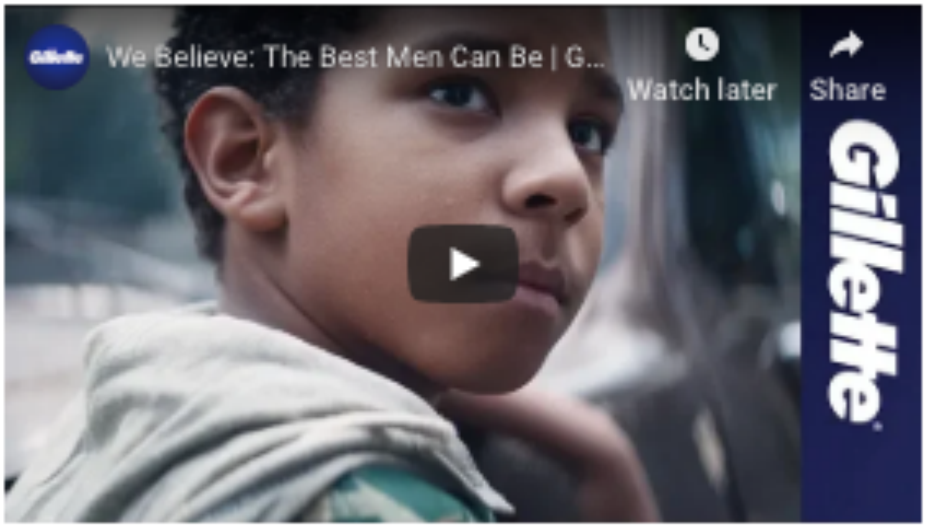
"Do Not Risk Your Brand To Build Your Reputation: A Lesson Learned From Gillette" – Jonathan Knowles

January 24, 2019

Gillette's new campaign "The Best Men Can Be" prioritizes social approval over customer demand. That's a strategic mistake.

Gillette's reinvention of its tagline "The Best A Man Can Get" as "The Best Men Can Be" has prompted a lot of controversy.

The company's "We Believe" short film has been viewed nearly 25 million times in the ten days since it launched and has motivated just under 2 million of those viewers to express their like/dislike:



As a point of comparison, Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" video with Colin Kaepernick has garnered 28 million views but only 200,000 like/dislike votes.

Controversy is not necessarily bad for brands. Controversy that reinforces the franchise of your brand in an authentic, sustainable way is a smart commercial decision (consider that Nike's most recent financial results revealed 14% revenue growth for the Nike brand division and an increase of nearly a full percentage point in the company's overall gross margin).

The question is whether Gillette has made a similarly astute move. To answer this, let's evaluate the campaign from the perspective of brand and reputation.

The first thing worth noting is that this is more than a campaign – it is a strategic response by Gillette to two pressing business challenges:

- The outdated nature of its "The Best a Man Can Get" brand positioning
- The threat from new entrants who are challenging whether Gillette is offering value for money in terms of the functional performance of its product

"The Best a Man Can Get" was launched 30 years ago and has always relied on the "alpha male" stereotype – exemplified recently by brand ambassadors such as Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Derek Jeter, Thierry Henry and David Beckham. Gillette clearly needed to update the brand and align it with contemporary social attitudes regarding gender and gender roles, especially given the increased diversity of its customer base.

Redefining “The Best a Man Can Get” in terms of purely functional shaving attributes was not a viable option given how effective new entrants into the male shaving market (such as Dollar Shave Club and Harry’s) have been in establishing the perception that the quality of their razors matches that of Gillette. Euromonitor reports that Gillette’s share of the US market fell below 50% in 2017, down from 70% a decade ago.

The articulation of a new brand purpose for Gillette was a way both to address the tired nature of the brand and to fend off competition.

From a reputational perspective, communicating that Gillette now stood for “The Best Men Can Be” must have seemed like a riskless move. It would be hard to imagine that any stakeholder would not approve of this quintessentially masculine brand distancing itself from “toxic masculinity” and its manifestation in bullying, sexism and sexual predation.

It is much less certain that this is the right decision from a brand perspective. Brands exist to sell and the task of any repositioning of the Gillette brand is to deepen the attachment of existing core customers to the brand, while also recruiting a new generation of users to Gillette.

There are two reasons to question whether “The Best Men Can Be” will achieve this:

- First, it is unclear that making a statement about social justice can be made into a sufficiently motivating factor in the purchase of razors and body products by either men or women given that these products are consumed privately (contrast this to the high visibility of branded athletic wear that provides a powerful opportunity for social signaling)
- Second, Gillette’s existing market share is high, meaning that the recruitment of new users to the franchise needs to be done in a way that does not risk alienating existing customers

Social media response to the campaign has been brutal – an analysis of nearly a million social media posts in the 48 hours by the firm **MavenMagnet** revealed twice the level of negative sentiment as positive (64% vs. 34%), and that the campaign was negatively viewed by 37% of women (as a point of comparison, the Nike campaign has a 7:1 positive to negative ratio as measured by likes/dislikes on YouTube).

Two issues have attracted the most commentary:

- Authenticity – Is it credible for Gillette to present itself as a champion of a progressive view of masculinity given that it has spent the past 30 years reinforcing gender stereotypes?
- Execution – Is it fair for a brand to present toxic masculinity as a structural feature of current society? Is it wise for a brand to portray a core segment of its customers as social Neanderthals?

I want to look past the issues of authenticity and execution to consider whether this was a well-conceived brand strategy. The sales results will be the ultimate judge of this question.

The Nike campaign succeeded because it was targeted squarely at its intended customers and focused on the attributes that generate strong engagement and purchase affinity among those customers. Nike successfully co-opted social justice issues into a compelling narrative about the importance of commitment, integrity and achievement. Nike took a reputational risk in pursuit of a clearly defined brand strategy. The early financial results indicate that this was a shrewd commercial decision.

It is much less clear how "The Best Men Can Be" will drive purchase behavior among target customers. By presenting a clear "reason to believe" but no clear "reason to buy", this campaign prioritizes social approval over customer demand. My conclusion is that Gillette has risked its brand in pursuit of its reputation.

Customers reward you with their business if they like what you do for them and how you make them feel. The campaign makes no reference to what Gillette does for its customers (the only image of a clean-shaven face is in the clip from the 1989 launch advertisement!) and the overall tone is distinctly downbeat. The MavenMagnet data shows that the net sentiment of the ad was minus 30 percent versus an average of positive 74 percent for the other 2,600+ brand campaigns in their database. It is hard to see how this will support sales growth.

It is critical for companies to recognize that the factors that drive customer demand are rarely the same as the factors that build legitimacy or social approval. Your organization's license to operate relies on achieving *buy-in* from a broad range of stakeholders, but your success as a business ultimately depends on engaging with customers in ways that motivate them to *buy*.

***"Virtue signaling"** is an important part of reputation management but it is only an effective brand strategy for companies (for example, Patagonia and Toms that target ecologically and socially conscious consumers) for whom their social mission is the basis for their brand differentiation.*

Companies have drawn an incomplete conclusion from the frequently-cited remark by Larry Fink (Chairman and CEO of BlackRock, the largest investment management company in the world) that "to prosper over time, every company must not only deliver financial performance, but also show how it makes a positive contribution to society" (2018 letter to shareholders). Brand purpose became one of the defining trends in 2018 because it appeared to offer a way of building brand and reputation simultaneously. Marketers need to be wiser. We specialize in how humans perceive value. We need to differentiate between the factors that are important to stakeholders and the factors that drive customer demand. We must recognize that, put simply, stakeholders care about what your company does for society whereas customers care about what you do for them.

Enjoying social approval (reputation) is a prerequisite for business success but what makes a successful business is having a compelling value proposition to its customers. That is why **companies need to avoid actions that sacrifice brand in pursuit of reputation**.

Jonathan Knowles *is an acknowledged authority on the role of brands in business strategy – specifically on the topics of customer outcomes, brand strategy during mergers, and the analysis of intangible value. He is the Founder and CEO of Type 2 Consulting that delivers business advice that integrates the perspectives of strategy, finance and marketing. He has a background in Finance (Bank of England), Strategy Consulting (Marakon Associates), Creative Brand Strategy (Wolff Olins), Brand Equity Measurement (Stern Stewart/Y&R's BrandEconomics) and Brand Valuation (Brand Finance). His articles have appeared in Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, the Wall Street Journal and other publications.*