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# Should Brands Try to Change the World?

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A Creative Excellence **Point of View**  
by Pedr Howard and Tyler Colligan • January 2019

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# Should Brands Try to Change the World?

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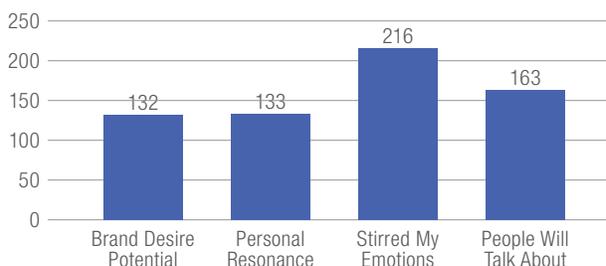
It is the job of advertising to elicit a reaction from consumers. It is the job of advertisers to plot the course on how to do this. Recently Gillette, a P&G brand, has chosen to use its significant reach to address an issue that has been increasingly top of mind for many over the last decade. With the release of a short film titled *'We Believe: The Best Men Can Be'*, the brand took a firm stance on the need for an evolution from 'boys will be boys' to a more positive definition of masculinity. One thing is clear—this choice has certainly elicited a reaction!

It is also clear that the reaction is not universally and immediately positive, as evidenced by over one million dislikes on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> A sentiment analysis of social media commentary by Ipsos shows 36% negative, compared to 16% positive, about the campaign in the days following its release. Many detractors don't like the perceived stereotyping of male behavior and accuse the company of trying to 'shame' all men. There are also consumers who feel Gillette should 'stick to razors' and feel the brand is capitalizing on the #metoo movement to boost sales.

However, all may not be lost for Gillette. Supporters of the campaign, while in a minority on social media up to now, applaud Gillette for "making people think" and urge detractors to reflect on why it makes them mad. Many also defend the ad saying that it is simply calling for men to be better human beings.

In fact, ad testing done by Ipsos indicates the commercial could reap rewards for the brand, long after the negative social media backlash has passed.

## Gillette's 'We Believe' Indexed to 100



The analysis shows that the ad has done quite well to address themes that matter personally to consumers, and pull at the heart strings. From this comes two outcomes: perhaps most importantly, a strong desire for the brand; and of course, a buzz-worthy piece of content. Consumers also rate their agreement with the social message, on aggregate, as a 7.5 out of 10. The ad certainly isn't perfect—it is considered confusing to some, and the brand linkage to Gillette seems low. These issues seem related, as many question what the ad has to do with Gillette, or shaving. There is also evidence of the negative reactions showing up in the testing, with some direct comments from consumers echoing the irritations heard in social media. A significant minority find the ad offensive and strongly disagree with the social message. Not surprisingly, much of this feedback originates from men, with their average rating of the ad's offensiveness 13 points higher than that of women.<sup>2</sup> There is also a skew to negative reactions coming from those who are older, and those who vote Republican.

However, among a broad representation of consumers in the US, this immediate response is outweighed to indicate a potential net-positive impact in the long term.

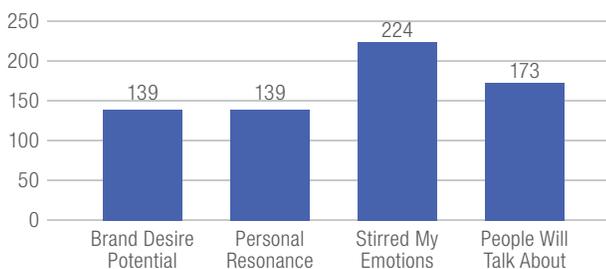
So here we have a commercial from a major advertiser, taking a somewhat controversial stance on a social issue, that seems to perform well in an ad-testing vacuum, receiving a large amount of polarized response on social media in the days after launch. People questioning whether the wider

corporate activity matches the proud stance the brand takes in public. Sound familiar? It certainly does to us.

Much of this summary falls in line with the firestorm that surrounded Nike's *'Dream Crazy'* spot, featuring Colin Kaepernick. Social response was similar to the early returns for Gillette, with Nike seeing a big spike in interaction—and far more of it negative than positive.<sup>3</sup> There were calls from some for boycotts, just as Gillette is now facing. Replace photos of razors in the garbage, with videos of people burning sneakers.

### Nike's 'Dream Crazy'

Indexed to 100



Interestingly, ad testing of the Nike video also shows similar positive results to the *'We Believe'* ad.<sup>4</sup> The Nike ad is a little stronger overall, driven by better branding—it has a natural fit with Nike positioning, and better integration of Nike equipment, sports-wear, and brand ambassadors.

Time, and the markets, have shown this campaign to be a success for Nike, despite the early objections from some critics. So, should we expect the same win for Gillette, once the social media backlash moves on to the next target?

Not so fast. It's too early to say that Gillette's campaign is going to be a surefire win for the brand. Gillette and Nike are very different brands. They have distinct heritages, operate in very different categories, and have varied consumer bases.

Nike's brand purpose, brought to life by its established *'Just Do It'* slogan, promises bold action, which the brand lived up to with full support of the campaign despite its detractors. They famously target youth, who are much more aligned with the message. Nike's status as a lifestyle brand gives it an edge as well, with the potential for growth through fandom. There is a loose upper limit on how much Nike gear a fan will buy, but unfortunately for Gillette, even with improved relationships with their consumers, the rate at which people need to replace razors does not increase. People are unlikely to wear Gillette branded apparel as a badge of honor, so there seems less obvious upside in immediate sales. They may not be able to afford to target some men at the expense of losing others. So while increasing loyalty is a possible outcome, as well as defending their youth share against challenger brands like Dollar Shave Club, they may not be as well positioned as Nike to capitalize on this social stance.

One thing is clear, and that is that Gillette must ensure its call for men to *"be the best they can be"* strikes the right tone with consumers and is not seen as just a cynical piece of marketing. Now that the brand has garnered a reaction, in the end, the success of this campaign will come down to how well Gillette connects its brand, and products, with their stated ideal. The commitment to donating millions to non-profits is a start, but that could equally be seen as a gesture. It will be fascinating to see how much this transforms the brand's activity, or not. Will they address the famous "pink tax" that has been raised by some objectors, who claim that female razors are priced higher than comparable male razors, for example? Decisions like these, at the intersection of brand purpose and business strategy, offer ways to really "walk the walk" and amplify the stance that Gillette is taking.

## What Does This Mean for Brands?

As more and more brands take on social issues, acceptance of short-term backlash, particularly through social media, will be par for the course. The reality that the world is increasingly becoming more polarized will also need to be accepted. Further, both the potential and ability of those most opposed to any given cause to make the most noise are great. Marketers opting to take on a mantle for social change will need strong commitment to their strategic objectives, and a longer-term perspective than the immediate noise generated on social media.

This is reminiscent of a quote heard recently at AdWeek,<sup>5</sup> of “the difficulty of long-term thinking in a short-term world.” Marketing is becoming more and more about immediacy of impact—changing carefully crafted campaigns based on views, clicks and likes. Validating success to the direct click-through to a sale. There is seemingly never enough time. But building meaningful brands takes time, effort, commitment and yes, a few risks. Numerous studies have shown that long-term strategies can be more successful than short-term strategies, for example shown here. Brands should not divert from their chosen path based on an immediate social media backlash alone.

### Short-term campaigns deliver strong transient effects but weak long-term growth



Time will tell whether this works out for Gillette, or not. But if they *think* it will, and they back the work they have done to get to this point, then they should stay the course.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gillette official YT channel 1/18/19
- <sup>2</sup> Ipsos ASI: Check study among A18-54 in the US 1/15/19: 22% for women, 35% for men
- <sup>3</sup> Data sourced from Crimson Hexagon – June – Sept 2018
- <sup>4</sup> Ipsos ASI: Check study among A18-54 in the US 1/15/19
- <sup>5</sup> IPA, *Selling Creativity Short*, 2016

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## About Ipsos

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With offices in 89 countries, Ipsos delivers insightful expertise across five research specializations: brand, advertising and media; customer loyalty; marketing; public affairs research; and survey management.

Ipsos researchers assess market potential and interpret market trends. They develop and build brands. They help clients build long-term relationships with their customers. They test advertising and study audience responses to various media and they measure public opinion around the globe.

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GAME CHANGERS

