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# “Woke” advertising and The Best Men Can Be

31 Jan 2019

*Gillette’s latest ad has generated lots of conversation. But has the world’s largest shaving products brand lost more than it has gained?*

When Gillette launched its latest ad campaign with its “[We Believe: The Best Men Can Be](#)” commercial on January 13, it stirred up the proverbial hornets’ nest. Some men posted videos of themselves throwing away Gillette products on social media, swearing to never buy another. Other men lauded Gillette’s embracing of the #MeToo movement and calling out of ‘toxic masculinity’, while women mostly expressed approval amidst sporadic criticism to [leave men alone](#).

10 days later, Procter & Gamble – Gillette’s brand owner – Chief Financial Officer John Moeller said sales were “in-line with pre-campaign levels” and that the ad is “a part of our effort to connect more meaningfully with younger consumer groups”.

“These days, brands all want to reach out to Millennials,” pointed out **Hannah Chang**, Associate Professor of Marketing at the SMU Lee Kong Chian School of Business (LKCSB). “With Gillette, they definitely want to be on top of people’s minds. They’re spreading awareness and catching eyeballs, so from a PR perspective it helps.

“Going forward, what are they trying to do? Are they trying to expand to new consumer segments? Are they trying to attract the Millennials, which is the largest generational cohort among consumer segments around the world, and will only continue to be so at least for a decade?”

“Or maybe they’re trying to appeal to women. For a lot of these grooming products it’s the women who are doing the buying for their significant other.”

If the ad was specifically targeting women, Gillette appears to have made the right call. Data on social media conversations showed that [51 percent of women expressed joy about the ad](#). 28 percent expressed disgust but the sentiment was directed at the toxic masculinity portrayed, and not at the ad.

“Preliminary market research shows that it’s a win for many women,” Chang commented. “If they’re targeting the younger generation males whose significant others are buying the shaving products for them, then it’s a win. The receptivity appears to be quite high among women.”

## Good ad, bad execution?

But what about the ad itself? Did Gillette misread mainstream sentiment about the #MeToo movement? Or perhaps it messed up a good “woke” advertising idea with poor execution – like the Pepsi Black Lives Matter ad?

“The Pepsi ad, the intention was good but it wasn’t subtle,” observed **Srinivas Reddy**, Professor of Marketing at the SMU LKCSB. “It looks so blatant that it’s promoting a brand which had nothing to do with Black Lives Matter.

“The Gillette ad came across as being preachy. There needs to be some preparation for what your message is. In this case, if Gillette had prepared over the last year by saying, ‘OK this is the problem, #MeToo is a problem and men are involved in this, let’s educate,’ it would have helped.

“Maybe they could have run programmes in schools telling boys why they should respect girls and women. Or they could go to foundations focusing on female issues with the message: teach your kids about respecting women. I’ve not seen anything of that nature.”

He added: “But when the #MeToo movement started, Gillette decided to get on board [and] and now they’re saying, ‘Hey, men, rise above this and do something.’ Some preparation work could have helped them.”

Reddy cited Nike’s [Dream Crazy ad](#) as an example of “woke” advertising done right, moving beyond pitching a product’s functional economic value and “getting to something where they can have an emotional touch with the customers”. Agreeing, Chang highlighted how the target audience in both Nike’s and Gillette’s case – the Millennials – played a crucial role in their ads’ success or lack thereof.

“Millennials like brands that are authentic. They want brands to stand for something,” Chang elaborated. “But Nike’s move was quite successful if you look at the increase in sales mainly because their target audience is the young urbanite. The message works because Nike’s target audience, and those who still identify as its target audience going forward, support it. The demographic group who disagreed with the Nike ad were not their target audience.

“There is a fundamental difference between the two brands. Nike is targeting younger folks but Gillette’s core demographic for a long time is the middle-age to older group.”

So will Gillette’s latest campaign help or hurt the brand’s long-term future? The two professors offer differing viewpoints.

Chang: “[Shaving products] are traditionally habitual purchases. Unless you really absolutely disagree with what they are doing, and you feel offended that they took a stance in terms of how they redefined masculinity, it would be very hard to change your habits.”

Reddy: “Some of my students say that any publicity is good publicity, that they have thrown this out to generate controversy so that the brand will be talked about.

“One word of caution about that: this is not in the DNA of Gillette. There are brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Calvin Klein which are very controversial or pushes the envelope on messaging. That’s in the DNA of those companies, and they use such tactics to stay in the conversation. Gillette is not like that, so to say they’re doing this as a way of generating publicity does not make sense.”

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