



Post Gillette: other brands are better at matching practice with talk, but don't get the publicity

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Gillette backed up its campaign by US\$3 million in charitable donations, but the brand has been criticised for appropriating the #MeToo movement. Proctor & Gamble, CC BY-ND

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First it was [burning running shoes](#), and now it's [boycotting razors](#). This is how some customers are responding to recent brand activism initiatives.

[Read more: Razor burned. Why Gillette's campaign against toxic masculinity missed the mark](#)

Brand activism is becoming increasingly prevalent as brands try to stand out in a cluttered and fragmented marketplace, driven in part by heightened consumer expectations of a brand's power and duty to do good. In this emerging space, brands have a choice when and how they decide to take a stand, what causes they choose to engage with, and what sort of message they send about this support.

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Disclosure statement

Procter & Gamble razor brand Gillette's viral campaign against toxic masculinity is an interesting case study.

The campaign

Gillette's campaign "The Best Men Can Be" plays on their slogan "The Best a Man Can Get". It is backed by \$3 million in charitable donations over three years to causes such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

Gillette's financial support remains ambiguous beyond the initial donations. Our current research indicates that backing up a brand activism marketing message with authentic practice makes it appear less like "woke washing". When combined with positive and visible socio-political practices, a brand's message can increase perceptions of authenticity.

In the case of Gillette, criticism has centred around the seemingly insignificant amount to be donated, compared with the heft of Gillette's annual profits. Others have criticised Gillette's "pink tax" gender-based price discrimination and have called out the brand for seemingly appropriating the #MeToo cause while charging more for women's products.

Despite making a visible effort to match messaging with practice through donations, the leveraging of a gender-driven "pink tax" demonstrates inconsistency with actual corporate practice.

Read more: [Gillette's corporate calculation shows just how far the #metoo movement has come](#)

Actions over words

Another campaign released around the same time received less publicity. In response to the recent US government shutdown, Kraft sought to make a [meaningful difference](#). The Kraft campaign, “Kraft Now, Pay Later” provided food for federal government workers and doubled down on this message by asking consumers to donate to a charity of their choice, instead of paying the company.

This ad was not accompanied by a high-budget advertisement or celebrity endorser such as [Nike's campaign](#) featuring Colin Kaepernick. For the most part, it forwent the marketing messaging aspect entirely, focusing instead on authentic practice. It is high on action, and therefore authenticity of practice, and low on marketing as a brand activism initiative.

According to our [research](#), Kraft could have benefited from publicising their actions through brand activism marketing, creating positive brand sentiment and loyalty. From a marketing perspective, Kraft may have left some money on the table with their approach but scored authenticity points for not appearing to appropriate a cause. But authenticity may not be enough to catch consumer attention.

Intentionally provocative

If a brand's goal is to insert itself in a topical conversation, garnering media attention and engaging in a provocative way can have its merits. While this is a risky tactic, the brand's gamble is wagered on the potential to find intensely positive resonance with a subset of consumers rather than mildly favourable reactions from the masses.

The message framing of the Gillette ad serves as a good example of this phenomenon. Historically, positive appeals have been more successful than negative appeals. Think of the empowering Dove "Real Beauty" campaigns or the stirring "Thank you Mom" advertisements aired in conjunction with the Olympic Games. Both garnered favourable reactions from the general public.

However, in a marketplace increasingly flooded with companies' good intentions, acting in a way that is unexpected, surprising or even shocking has become necessary to gain attention (and go viral). Links to causes or a socially conscious image that previously provided clear brand differentiation have increasingly become points-of-parity, common across many brands, thus diluting the impact.

Surprising or incongruous advertisements elicit deeper levels of consumer processing because of the unanticipated nature of the message. The more a consumer is prompted to think about an ad, the more likely that consumer is to engage with the brand.

Incongruence can be demonstrated through unexpected alignment between brand and cause. While this can be a successful strategy if properly executed, Pepsi's unsuccessful attempt to engage in the anti-police brutality conversation using supermodel Kendall Jenner clearly backfired.

Gillette instead used the strategy of negatively framed messaging, leading with examples of “toxic masculinity” such as bullying and sexual harassment. Although they went on to show more desirable examples of positive masculinity, for many, the negative frame was inflammatory enough to spark outrage and anger at the brand. But it has started a conversation about toxic masculinity. Had Gillette focused on the positive and employed a motivational style of ad, general sentiment towards the brand may have been more positive — but it likely wouldn’t have had the same impact.

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