

# Should brands take a stand?





Gary Coombe leads P&G's global grooming business, including the biggest shaving brands in the world—Gillette, Venus, Braun, Joy and The Art of Shaving. The grooming business is responsible for 10% of total company revenue, serving nearly 800 million consumers around the world.

Since joining P&G in 1986 as a sales representative in the U.K., Gary has been at the heart of the consumer goods industry, working on some of P&G's most recognizable and successful brands, including regional and global leadership roles in two of P&G's biggest categories: fabric care and home care. Gary was also responsible for global innovation and new business development on P&G's fabric and air care businesses, leading the creation of the Tide Dry Cleaners franchise, growing Febreze to billion-dollar-brand status and leading the acquisition of Ambi Pur. Appointed President of Europe in 2014, Gary was responsible for one-third of P&G's global workforce and a quarter of total company sales and profit.

Gary is passionate about coaching the next generation of leaders in and outside of P&G. He is a strong advocate of servant leadership and dedicates much of his time to coaching, leadership training and guest-lecturing at universities. He is an active champion for diversity and inclusion, acting as executive sponsor for P&G's gender equality and LGBT+ affinity groups during his time in Europe and now in Boston, and is a leading voice in the industry on men's role in gender equality—recognized in 2018 on *Management Today's* Agents of Change Power List.

**The Brands Lecture**  
**25<sup>th</sup> July 2019**

# **Should brands take a stand?**

**Gary Coombe**  
CEO, Gillette



Thank you, British Brands Group, for the invitation to be here today and for all the work you do on behalf of brands in the UK.

I want to start by talking about breaking the golden rule.

I have been with P&G for 33 years and in brand marketing for most of that time. Throughout this career there was one golden rule that we were always taught and that I taught others, and I am sure you have all been taught it as well, and that is 'don't piss off the consumer.'

Make an ad. Make it compelling. Make it enjoyable. In my early days, put it on one of four TV channels. Keep it vanilla. Talk about the product benefit. Don't annoy anybody.

Today, I am going to tell you the story of how all that changed, particularly for me, starting with a voicemail I received on Monday January 14<sup>th</sup> 2019 at 9.52am...

Let's talk about what led up to this by taking a long step back in time.

The Gillette company has been around since 1903 when King C. Gillette invented his safety razor. For many years it grew very steadily and very successfully on a well-proven formula and well-proven business model.

Gillette now sells razors in every country in the world where it is legally allowed. We are the brand leader in every single country in the world bar one, and we are working on that one! We have a business worth approximately \$6.5 billion in

annual revenue and close to 10,000 employees working around the world. A truly successful example of brand building.

But like many companies, we have more recently suffered as things have disrupted around us. These will be things that, as brand owners, you will all be familiar with. For us, this included the emergence of new technologies and new business models like direct-to-consumer selling and subscriptions, lower prices, falling barriers to entry along with changes in societal trends away from clean shaving.

Worse still, through that period we also started to lose connection with the millennial generation. Gillette was quickly becoming the brand of the millennial generations' dads. We were losing

share, penetration and awareness among this key consumer group. Something had to be done.

This millennial generation expects brands to play a broader role in society than has ever been true in the past. It was very simple in the old days. Your brand delivered a functional benefit. You created a piece of advertising to demonstrate that on TV and you moved on. You didn't really comment on anything else, actively avoiding it in fact.

That is simply not the case any more. There is an expectation that brands play a broader role in society and that is backed up by very reliable data.

9 out of 10 consumers say they have a more positive view of a brand when it stands for something, either a social cause or an environmental cause.

“

... there was one golden rule that we were always taught ... 'don't piss off the consumer'.

”

**9/10**

have more positive  
view of a brand

**50%**

Say it influences their  
purchase decisions

**65%**

of Millennials find it unacceptable for  
a brand to be silent on  
societal issues



“ We needed a more drastic and dramatic transformation than that and that is what we set about doing, inspired to a large extent by the younger generations working for the Gillette company. ”

50% say it influences their purchase decisions.

65% of millennials find it unacceptable for a brand not to stand for something more than the delivery of the functional product benefit.

We needed to commit to a transformation on the Gillette brand and the Gillette business. We couldn't approach this incrementally. I don't believe we could do this carefully or softly. We needed a more drastic and dramatic transformation than that and that is what we set about doing, inspired to a large extent by the younger generations working for the Gillette company. They spoke to me very clearly and told me that our brand and our work wasn't connecting with this generation and that they wanted our brand to do more, to say more and play a more active role in important conversations happening in their lives.

This involved more than just producing a film. It was a complete transformation of a brand, a business model, even an organisation and culture. But for now, let's focus on the first film that got so much attention. It was the beginning of the journey.



It was a 1 minute 39 seconds long short film uploaded to YouTube on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> January 2019 called "[We Believe: The Best Men Can Be](#)". The backlash was immediate and extreme.

What we subsequently discovered was that we were being targeted by (mainly) two ultra-right-wing groups in the U.S. who chose to use this film as a cause célèbre for their own campaigns, using a coordinated and sophisticated effort (including bots and fake accounts) to generate multiple very negative comments and multiple dislikes on the film in the early hours.



Consequently, because the majority of people and media look at YouTube and assume it is a representative poll of society, there was an initial reaction that this film was deeply unpopular amongst the majority of people, and the news cycle followed this. You can see some of the headlines above.

I can tell you, it is comfortable looking back and talking about it now but when you step into the fray and do something like this, this is an extreme moment.

It was a very difficult 24 hours. I was initially concerned about consumer reaction, as you might imagine, but learned very quickly that, in a situation like this, there are multiple stakeholders to worry about. We had an employee base who saw what happened on YouTube and were concerned. We had retail customers who had questions and wanted to understand our plans. I had a board of directors who had concerns. And we had shareholders who were contacting us to express their views.

As you might imagine, we had a crisis meeting every hour for those first few days. We had the best industry experts to advise us.

I felt that the Nike Kaepernick ad, which had suffered a similar backlash from these groups, would be a good benchmark for us. We had good data on the Nike ad against which we tracked our scores and metrics in real-time.

That first morning we had a couple of big decisions to make.

The first, which some advised, was to take the film down or to turn comments off on YouTube. And I nearly did that. There was a moment when I cleared my office and sat down to watch the film again on my own. I tried to watch it with an open mind but as I reflected, I just didn't believe that most people would find it offensive.

The message of the film is clear to me.

That if you see bullying in the world, it is no longer enough to say: 'I'm not a bully so it's OK'. No, you should do something about it. Or if you see sexual

harassment in the workplace or on the street or anywhere else, that it is no longer enough to say, 'I don't sexually harass people so I'm fine.' No, you should step in and do something about it.

So I felt it was the right message and one we should stand behind.

I also believed that talking about men and masculinity was perfectly appropriate, relevant and authentic for the Gillette brand. We spend close to a billion dollars in advertising every year to men. We have spent a century defining masculinity in these ads. We choose how to portray men in these films and this comes with a big responsibility. We could portray men in a negative, stereotypical, dated fashion or we could make heroes of modern men doing great things in society and I believed our film was doing the latter.

I received reassurance from some unlikely places. My son texted me that morning. He spent his high-school years in the U.S. and has a lot of friends there and he had received messages from those friends saying: 'I've seen the ad your Dad made and it's amazing.' So Brynn, my son, and those messages gave me even greater resolve.

I also uploaded the film to LinkedIn on the Monday. I would typically receive something around 10,000 views of a normal post on LinkedIn which, I believe, makes me the most micro of all micro-influencers.

“

... I felt it was the right message and one we should stand behind.

”

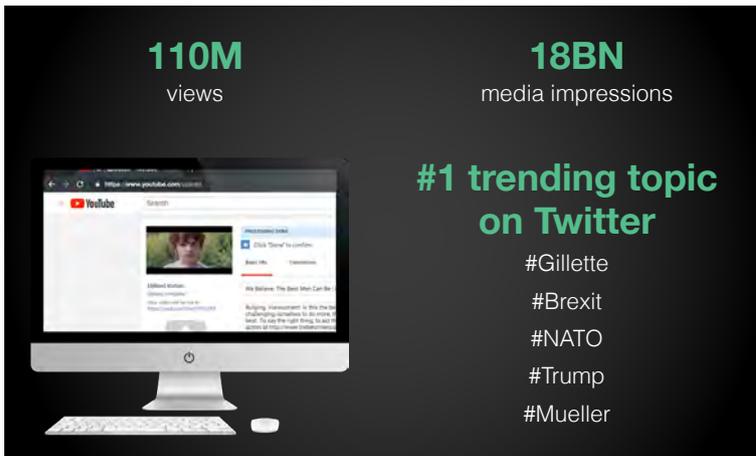
Within 24 hours, I had upwards of 250,000 views and, in the comments section and in private messages, I had everything ranging from an invitation to speak at the U.N. to a death threat ... and everything in between. It was a remarkable time.

As a consequence of all this, we stayed the course, even though it was a bumpy ride.

One decision we did make was on media budgets. We had a media allocation prepared for boosting this film and increasing reach on social platforms. The first thing we did on the Monday morning was ask the Marketing Director to pull the media spend, not being sure we needed to spend to get views on this film. Unfortunately, I was too late. We had spent \$104. By the end of the week we had 110 million views around the world. Great value.

“ We had spent \$104. By the end of the week we had 110 million views around the world. Great value.

”



We trended number one on Twitter ahead of #Brexit, #Mueller and #Trump.

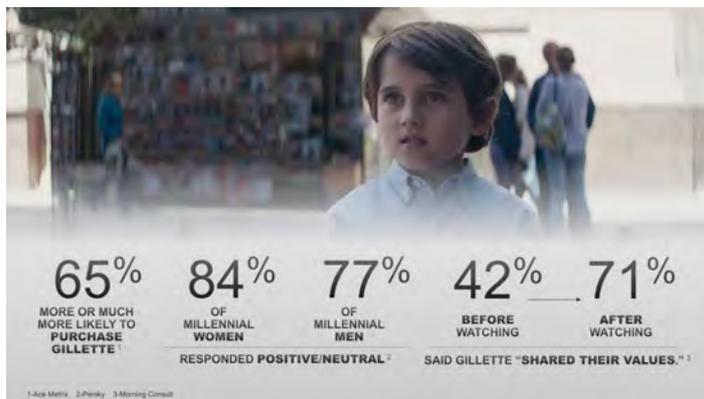
I should add, my son texted me again on the Thursday with lots of smiley emojis to inform me that #firegarycoombe was also trending on Twitter.

But what really happened as that week unfolded was the silent majority stepped up and defended the work on our behalf. The backlash to the backlash came to defend our film, our brand and the message.



We had sparked a global conversation about masculinity and the role of men in society, and about the future of brands and businesses in this new world.

The conversation began to turn in our favour and the media headlines followed. We also started to receive real data on people's reaction... and it is so important to obtain this, to distinguish between actual consumer sentiment and some of the overheated social media rhetoric that disproportionately amplifies controversy.



In fact, independent research from multiple sources point to a far more positive response than if you just look at YouTube comments or the media reports on the YouTube comments.

65% of people more or much more likely to purchase Gillette after seeing the film.

80% of millennial consumers reacted positively to the film.

Before watching the film, 42% of consumers said Gillette shared their values. This went up to 71% after watching. These are very, very good numbers and showed we were on the right track.

What is undeniably true is that whilst we reconnected with the millennial generation and did it very quickly, building awareness with positive emotional equity, there were a group of consumers, typically over-50 white men, who simply were offended.

But this is one of the realities of brands taking a stand. That by talking about more than the

delivery of their functional benefit, there will be people who disagree with you. But I strongly believe it is worth it because if you get this right, the majority of people will fall much more deeply in love with your brand.

I think I am right in saying we had also created the most liked ad in YouTube history, but also the most dis-liked. So, I hold both records but it shows my point.

However, I know the question you are all asking. What did it do for our results?

We have a direct-to-consumer business in the U.S. (and now the UK), so we see our sales numbers in real-time. I can tell you that sales built very strongly across that first week and have continued to build ever since. We have grown sales and users online every month since the film. We grew our total sales around the world +4% in the first full quarter after the film was released. And we have returned to share growth in the U.S. which we hadn't done for a long time before the campaign.

“

... this is one of the realities of brands taking a stand. That by talking about more than the delivery of their functional benefit, there will be people who disagree with you.

”



“  
... perhaps most rewarding is hearing how the film is being used in school classrooms, universities, youth clubs and churches to educate and encourage discussion on masculinity ...

”

But the success of films like this are not judged by a month or a quarter of sales and it is much more than just an advertising campaign. This is a commitment to contribute to positive change through our voice as an advertiser and our actions as a brand and a company. We are supporting non-profit partners and charities around the world in the important work they do to inspire, educate and help men of all ages achieve their personal best and become role models for the next generation.

We have also picked up a few Cannes awards along the way as well but perhaps most rewarding is hearing how the film is being used in school classrooms, universities, youth clubs and churches to educate and encourage discussion on masculinity... or just simple anecdotes about how the film started a conversation around the family dinner table.

I have no doubt that we took a very successful first step in our objective to spark a conversation about what being a great man today means.

And we WILL keep going because although this is a hard conversation, it is one that needs to be had. Because conversation leads to understanding. Understanding leads to attitude change. And attitude change leads to positive behaviour change.

I strongly disagree with those who say the film is an attack on masculinity or all men. On the contrary. It simply rejects the bad behaviour of a few and celebrates all the men taking positive action. That is the kind of masculinity the world needs and that a brand like Gillette should champion.

This film was the beginning of a much bigger campaign and a much bigger movement and we are certain that it is the right stance for the Gillette brand to take.

We are now rolling out this message with different creative executions around the world. I cannot show them all but we have ground-breaking work in UK, Spain and Germany. In India we had a fantastic film produced that is now the most-watched Indian ad on YouTube. One of the new films was produced in Canada during PRIDE. It is called [“First Shave”](#) and tells Samson’s story.



For many years we have dramatised people’s first shave. It is an emotionally powerful moment between a father and son that Gillette is often part of, but this is the first time we have portrayed it with a transgender male and we are very proud of it.



GILLETTE IS A 118-YEAR-OLD COMPANY ACTING LIKE IT WANTS TO BE AROUND FOR ANOTHER 100 OR SO

*Chicago Tribune*

Of course this film had its detractors and critics as well but the reaction was overwhelmingly positive overall. I believe we are doing the right thing for a progressive, modern world and the vast majority of people around the world agree.

Gillette is now being talked about in mainstream media in a very positive way and being seen and thought about meaningfully by the millennial generation. That simply was not happening before. This achieves something that, in conventional marketing terms, would have taken 5 years and \$300 million. But by having the courage to take a stand and speak up for the values we believe in, as a brand and the people behind it, I feel we have been able to do this very quickly.

“

Gillette is now being talked about in mainstream media in a very positive way and being seen and thought about meaningfully by the millennial generation.

”



THE NEXT GENERATION OF MEN IS WATCHING.

“

Brands and advertisers have a powerful voice and this comes with an obligation to use it responsibly, whether we like it or not.

”

This is all a story of brand transformation really, driven by the younger generations in our organisation who are so passionate about the brand but also the role that brands like Gillette can and should play in society.

The heat we faced, and continue to face, from our most vocal critics is a moment of truth. And we are choosing to keep going, because the voices of brands like Gillette matter.

And let's face it, whether deliberate or not, brands have always had an impact on social norms and culture. The images and portrayals of people in advertising affect perceptions because they embed memories that, in turn, form bias.

Brands and advertisers have a powerful voice and this comes with an obligation to use it responsibly, whether we like it or not.

Brands have always been and still are the most pervasive force in the world for business growth and they can also be a force for good. I am absolutely convinced that brands need to play both roles to survive and thrive in the future.

Not everyone will agree with a brand's point of view and we must accept that. But if intentions are good, brands should step up, take the heat and keep going. Those good intentions will eventually prevail.

This is our belief and I know we are not alone. Brands and companies all over the world are recognising that we have to do more, say more and stand for more.

This work is not without risk. It takes courage, conviction and a very thick skin. But when done right, it is incredibly powerful.

This is the future of brands and brand building...

Our voice and our actions matter. What we say, the people we show in our ads, the stories we tell, the heroes we create all matter, because the next generation of men and women are watching.

Thank you.

This is the eighteenth in the Brands Lecture series. Previous lectures include:

[Are brands good for Britain?](#)

Tim Ambler, London Business School

[Posh Spice and Persil](#)

Jeremy Bullmore, WPP Group

[100% marketing](#)

Rob Malcolm, Diageo

[Hybrids, the heavenly bed  
and purple ketchup](#)

David Aaker, Prophet

[Brands beyond business](#)

Simon Anholt, Earthspeak

[The Lovemarks effect](#)

Kevin Roberts, Saatchi & Saatchi

[They think it's all over...](#)

Martin Glenn, Birds Eye Iglo Group Limited

[In brands we trust](#)

Lord Bilimoria CBE DL, Cobra Beer

[Can brands save the world?  
Let's hope so.](#)

Richard Reed, Innocent Drinks

[Brand new: Innovation in a  
challenging world](#)

Fiona Dawson, Mars Chocolate

[Accountability is not enough...](#)

Rory Sutherland, Ogilvy Group UK

[Sports marketing – unleashing  
the passion](#)

Austin Lally, Braun and Appliances and  
The Procter & Gamble Company

[Brands, capital and crises](#)

Rita Clifton CBE, BrandCap

[Consumers, brands and trust: happy  
bedfellows or a new pyramid of conflict?](#)

Peter Vicary-Smith, Which?

[Brands & CEOs](#)

Professor Patrick Barwise, London Business School

[Never mind the quality, feel the  
personalisation. The future of retailing](#)

Alan Giles, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

[Are brands a form of corporate bullsh\\*t?](#)

Evan Davis, Economist, journalist and BBC presenter

---

Hard copies of each Brands Lecture are available from the British Brands Group and are downloadable in electronic form from the website at [www.britishbrandsgroup.org.uk](http://www.britishbrandsgroup.org.uk).



British Brands 100 Victoria Embankment, London EC4Y 0DH

01730 821212 | [info@britishbrandsgroup.org.uk](mailto:info@britishbrandsgroup.org.uk) | [www.britishbrandsgroup.org.uk](http://www.britishbrandsgroup.org.uk)