

## **Changing Tastes: The Case of Strategic Rebranding at Old Spice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Throughout their lifecycles, brands often undergo periods of transformation to broaden their appeal to new customers. In 2019, the Old Spice brand of deodorant and personal care products faced a reckoning for several years, the brand had successfully used advertising copy that utilized gendered norms. However, as the decade drew to a close there was significant pressure to cease the use of these techniques. Just as the brand faced criticism from using gendered marketing terminology in their ads, many companies faced significant consumer backlash for ceasing the practice. Advertisers and brands were caught in a lose-lose situation. This time period marked by increased cultural polarization, widespread complaint behavior, and consumer boycotts has since been named the “Age of Outrage.” The lessons learned during this time have widespread implications for marketing practice to this day.

This case explores advertising in the Age of Outrage and looks specifically reviews:

- Strategic rebranding.
- The tactical requirements of rebranding and develop advertising copy.
- The communications strategies needed to implement new brand messaging that resonates with new customers without alienating existing customers.

Keywords: Marketing Strategy, Brand Repositioning, Gendered Marketing, Advertising, Branding, Target Marketing, Buyers and Users Analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, the marketing managers for Proctor and Gamble's Old Spice brand of personal care products faced a significant dilemma. In the United States and abroad, brand managers were undergoing a period of reckoning and reflection as the #MeToo Movement forced them to consider their roles in the broader social dialogue around gender norms in contemporary society. This discussion had significant implications for the team at Old Spice and the managers knew that the decisions that they made over the next few months would ensure the brand's survival or contribute to its demise. The weight of the brand rested upon their shoulders.

### The Social and Business Situation of 2019

The waning years of the 2010s saw an acceleration of social unrest, political polarization, and a growing sense that the status quo of corporate advertising behavior would be challenged. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that this time period was the dawn of the aptly named "Age of Outrage." Some scholars have described the Age of Outrage as a societal epoch marked by broad social polarization, anger, and a demand for change (Ramanna, 2023). Perhaps the biggest hallmark of the Age of Outrage is the rise of digital tribalism and the perpetuation of hate speech and disinformation in social media groups (Frechette, 2019). As consumers became angrier, brand managers had to be more conscious of their advertising practices than ever (Levitt, 2018). Language that most consumers once considered harmless jokes became sources of great personal insult. Many companies had become the subject of online furor over their advertisements.

It was within the broader context of the Age of Outrage that Old Spice's managers had to contend with a movement and a countermovement that would define their business for years to come.

### The #MeToo Movement

The #MeToo Movement gained widespread attention in 2017 as many women bravely came forward to share their experiences with sexual harassment and in some tragic cases, sexual violence (Brown, 2022). As the movement gained steam, a broader national discourse surrounding the perpetuation of gender norms in media and advertising began to emerge (Hsu, 2019). Many consumers began to seriously question the merits of advertising products that reinforced gender stereotypes. Some more vocal groups of consumers pressured companies to stop the practice, and they were even influential enough to get a government watchdog agency to outright ban the practice in the United Kingdom (BBC News, 2019).

In response to the consumer outrage over the use of gender stereotypes in marketing and regulatory pressure against their use, some companies have begun to cease the practice of advertising and have moved to gender-neutral messaging. These moves appeased many consumers that were unhappy with the status quo. However, managers soon discovered that pleasing one group of consumers can cause others to become angry.

## **The Anti #MeToo Movement**

As the Old Spice team wrestled with the implications of the #MeToo Movement and tried to incorporate the movement's ideals into their marketing campaigns, a countermovement was beginning that could not be ignored. As companies looked to make their advertising messages more inclusive and empowering for women, some groups of male consumers felt that they were being victimized and ignored (Lisnek, Wilkins, Wilson, & Ekstrom, 2022). The consumers considered themselves a part of the #AntiMeToo Movement.

The members of #AntiMeToo Movement prided themselves on traditionally masculine values and they promoted the prominent display of masculine symbols and behaviors in media and advertising. The group saw advertisements that were critical of men as an affront to their identities and worked to influence brands to keep from criticizing masculine traits (Lisnek, Wilkins, Wilson, & Ekstrom, 2022).

## **A Lesson from A Corporate Relative**

As the Old Spice team planned their next moves, the experiences of the marketing team at Gillette, a corporate relative of Old Spice, (both brands are owned by Procter and Gamble) were not far from their collective memory. In January of 2019, Gillette clashed with the #AntiMeToo movement after releasing an advertisement that many of the brand's male users found to be offensive (Baggs, 2019). The advertisement featured a coy play of words using Gillette's famous slogan, "The best a man can get!" The ad consisted of video footage of men inflicting acts of sexual harassment on women and ended with a terse question, "Is this really the best a man can get?" (Toppings, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019).

In response, some of the Gillette's male customers were livid at the ad and felt that the company was being demeaning to them. Some male customers took to social media and expressed their feelings that the ad represented all men as violent predators. The response to the advertisement was so strong that some customers even staged protests and held boycotts of the brand (Toppings, Lyons, & Weaver, 2019; Baggs, 2019).

The Old Spice team was clearly in a precarious position, caught squarely between two opposing forces for which there was little common ground. Further complicating matters for the team was the brand's history and use of marketing strategies and tactics.

## **Old Spice Through the Decades**

Old Spice's corporate history is replete with stories of reimagination, change, and renewal. From its humble beginnings as a women's perfume brand in the Great Depression to its makeover as a "Manly Man's" brand in the 1960s to its notoriety as "Granddad's After Shave" in the late 1990s and early 2000s marketing staff at Old Spice have consistently evolved their brand persona and remained relevant in the minds of consumers (Sestric, 2021). This fact was not lost on Old Spice's team.

Indeed, a few years before, at the end of the 2000s, the brand had successfully reinvented itself (Moore, 2020). In the later part of the 2000s, internal market research began to show that the brand lacked relevance to the youth market. Young people saw the brand as stale, and it was deeply unpopular with them. Some youth customers derisively called Old Spice "a grandfather's" product and said that the brand's product smelled like "old people." The team at Old Spice knew that it had to act to save the brand and change its fortunes.

In 2010, the Old Spice team devised and launched a highly successful campaign that reintroduced Old Spice to a new generation. The campaign was entitled, *The man your man could smell like*. The campaign drew heavily on classical ideals of western masculinity to demonstrate that Old Spice was a man's product and that using Old Spice somehow made a man even manlier. One commercial used the imagery of an ex-football player riding a horse shirtless on a tropical beach to express the message that the smell of Old Spice and manliness were inexorably linked. Yet another advertisement in the series explicitly called for men to "smell like a man and not like a lady." (Fernandez, 2011). The response to the ad campaign was tremendous. Nearly overnight, Old Spice had gone from the depths of irrelevance to being the most popular deodorant and bodywash scent in the industry and sales increased 125% (Fernandez, 2011; Moore, 2020).

The success of the 2010 marketing campaign and the successful reinvention of the brand in years before demonstrated to Old Spice's team that gendered marketing was a crucial component of their brand's continued success.

### **Gendered Marketing**

Gendered marketing is the practice of using traditional gender stereotypes to create appeal for products and promote them to consumers (Crittenden, 2015). Gendered marketing creates appeal for consumers by leaning into social gender roles and using them to make a product seem quintessentially masculine or feminine. In fact, there's probably no coincidence that the oldest known example of an advertisement, a copper plate from the Song Dynasty of China dating to approximately 1,000 CE advertising sewing needles made by the Lui family, used a rabbit, the Chinese symbol of beauty and elegance, as its logo (Lee, 2023). Just as modern marketers want to imply social conformity by gendering their products, the Luis wanted the women in their small village to associate their sewing needles with the feminine qualities of beauty and grace.

While gendered marketing may be as old as marketing itself, the practice has not gone without modern criticism. By 2019, there were calls for marketers to cease using the practice (Powers, 2019), and as mentioned before, there are even regulations banning the practice in some jurisdictions (BBC News, 2019). Most of these calls are because the practice is seen as out of alignment with contemporary social norms, but some researchers have claimed that gendered marketing causes actual harm when used to market children's products (Fine & Rush, 2018).

Regardless of how the team felt about the effects of gendered marketing, in late 2019 it was abundantly clear that they had a choice to make. The team had to answer the question, "Should we stick to our current strategy and continue to use the practices of gendered marketing in our advertising, or should we abandon the practice?"

### **Buyers and Users**

In the late 2000s when the brand was reinventing itself, the same market research that discovered that the brand was viewed as being out of touch yielded another considerable insight to the Old Spice team. 60% of the people who purchased Old Spice were women (Fernandez, 2011). This piece of information guided the team as they launched the "*The man your man could smell like*." campaign. This one piece of information led the team to a remarkable discovery that



would rewrite the fortunes of their brand. Old Spice has to reach two groups with their advertising messages, the women who buy their products and the men who use them.

In consumer marketing, it is always important to consider that the buyer of a product might not be its ultimate user. In Old Spice's competitive marketplace, the personal care segment of the Consumer-Packaged Goods (CPG) industry, being mindful of this fact is particularly acute if brand managers want to be successful (Bhatia, Moshary, & Tuchman, 2021; Numerator, 2023). The personal care segment of the CPG industry consists of products like razors, beauty care, soaps, body washes, and deodorants. These goods are consumed at a regular rate; thus, they are frequently purchased by households in their weekly grocery shopping. In most households of more than one person, there is one primary shopper that buys CPGs for the entire family during their weekly trip to the supermarket. Research has shown repeatedly that most household primary shoppers are women, even in today's age when traditional gender roles are less defined than in eras past (Numerator, 2023).

In the 2010 campaign, the Old Spice team pulled off a feat of tactical and strategic marketing genius, they were able to devise an ad campaign that created a persona who the brand's male users wanted to be, and who the brand's female buyers wanted to date and communicate it to a mass audience. The brand took a stereotype of masculinity and made it appealing to both men and women. Take a closer look at the campaign's title with a key phrase underlined for emphasis. *The man your man could smell like*. While the ad campaign used hypermasculine imagery and motifs, the target for these messages was not men, it was the women who are buying deodorant for "their" man. The team at Old Spice had mastered the art of marketing to both buyers and users in 2010 and used it to great effect.

### **A Critical Inflection Point**

As the Old Spice team decided their next marketing actions in late 2019, they knew that 78% of women say that they are the primary shopper for their family. They also knew that 67% of women bought men's deodorant for their partners, and 12% reported buying men's deodorant for their male children. They also learned a new data point that challenged some of their traditional thinking, studies began to indicate that there was a distinct group of women that bought men's deodorant for their own personal use (Super Market News, 2023). Research showed that 1 in 5 women preferred to use men's deodorant.

The team also knew that no matter how they decided to approach their next marketing campaign, they ran the risk of alienating consumers on both sides of the #MeToo debate. Further complicating their decision, the team knew that they would draw the ire of Proctor and Gamble's senior leadership and shareholders if they abandoned the marketing tactics that had led them from irrelevancy to being the leader of the industry just a few years before. To say that the team had some tough decisions ahead of them is quite an understatement.

## Case Questions

1. What is gendered marketing and how is it used to create and enhance a consumer's appeal for a product?
2. Why is it important for business decision makers to clearly understand the group that is buying their product, the group that is using their product and any points of difference between the two groups?
3. When considering the practice of marketing in the "Age of Outrage" what must managers consider and how should they navigate the complex us vs. them dynamics in modern society?
4. Based on your knowledge of marketing and the information presented in the case, what factors do you believe led to the brand's 2010, *The man your man could smell like*, campaign's success?
5. If the team continues to use the practices and language from the *The man your man could smell like* campaign, what are the likely reactions from each of the following groups:
  - a. Consumers who identify with the values of the #MeToo Movement.
  - b. Consumers who identify with the values of the #AntiMeToo Movement.
  - c. Proctor and Gamble shareholders and managers who experienced the financial benefits of the initial campaign.
6. If the team ceases to use the practices and language from the *The man your man could smell like* campaign, what are the likely reactions from each of the following groups:
  - a. Consumers who identify with the values of the #MeToo Movement.
  - b. Consumers who identify with the values of the #AntiMeToo Movement.
  - c. Proctor and Gamble shareholders and managers who experienced the financial benefits of the initial campaign.
7. If you were on the Old Spice team, what would you do? Would you continue with the brand's tried and true recipe for success, or would you change the brand's message to get with the times?
  - a. Support your decision with a logical argument that articulates your anticipated reactions of various stakeholder groups and why you feel that your choice is best even if it will provoke a strong reaction from some consumers.

## Epilogue

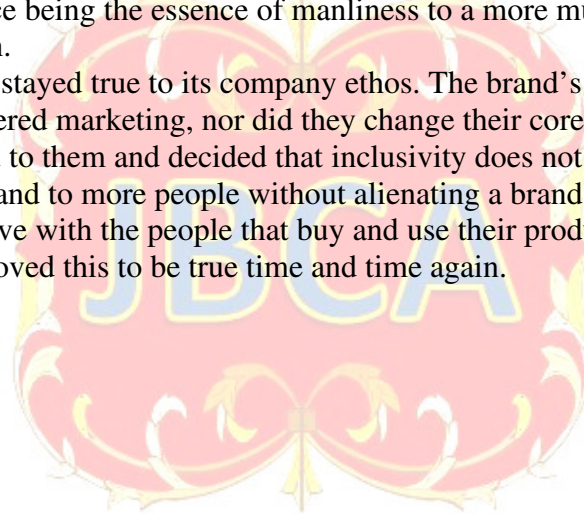
In the end, the team at Old Spice found another creative path forward that managed to make everyone pleased. The team did change their messaging, but they did so without angering either side of the #MeToo debate and they even grew their sales and broadened their appeal.

The team took a three-pronged approach to their problem. First, the team decided to make a brand extension that developed a gender-neutral skincare line. The new line is called The Gentleman's Blend, and the packaging uses a gender-neutral white color scheme with subdued fonts and scents that appeal to men and women alike. The subsequent ad campaign for the new line features scenes of women stealing their male partner's Old Spice and proclaiming that everyone deserves a product as good as Old Spice for their skin care needs. Reviews of the ads were largely positive, and consumers viewed the ads favorably.

Second, the team continued using gendered marketing for their existing lines, albeit in a much more subdued form. Old Spice's core men's products have kept their distinctive red color scheme and nautical-themed fonts and imagery. The brand's messaging around these products has continued to focus on traditional notions of masculinity, but the tone of the brand's messages has shifted from Old Spice being the essence of manliness to a more muted Old Spice is an excellent product for men.

Lastly, Old Spice stayed true to its company ethos. The brand's team did not apologize for their past use of gendered marketing, nor did they change their core message. The team took the opportunity presented to them and decided that inclusivity does not have to be controversial, it is possible to open a brand to more people without alienating a brand's existing customers.

A brand can evolve with the people that buy and use their products. Old Spice's management team has proved this to be true time and time again.



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