

# Three Mistakes Gillette Made That Super Bowl Advertisers Should Avoid

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Super Bowl advertisers that don't want to waste their \$5+ million investment should learn from the backlash to Gillette's recent "The Best A Man Can Be" ad. Gillette said it intended its campaign to "challenge the stereotypes and expectations of what it means to be a man" today and to call men to a higher standard of behavior, in the wake of all the recent sexual misconduct and discrimination controversies. In a similar fashion, many advertisers will use their Super Bowl spots to promote their socially- or environmentally-responsible efforts, align themselves with a social cause, or make a social statement. During last year's show, for example, Budweiser highlighted how it was providing water to places impacted by natural disasters and 84 Lumber ran a provocative spot about immigration.

But Gillette's ad ended up prompting widespread criticism and generated far greater more negative reactions than positive ones (e.g., according to the Washington Post, within a day, it had received 223,000 downvotes on YouTube, compared with about 25,000 favorable reaction.) That's not the kind of reception Super Bowl advertisers can afford, given the amount of money they're spending and the widespread brand awareness (good or bad) that Super Bowl ads receive. Where did Gillette go wrong? Here are three lessons that this year's Super Bowl advertisers, and any company that wants to involve itself in social activism, should learn from Gillette's mistakes.



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## 1. Don't make your customer the villain.

Many have criticized Gillette's efforts because, they say, a brand that sells something as banal as men's razors should not be engaged in promoting social causes. They believe companies should know their place and taking on such a significant issue was inappropriate for a commonplace brand like Gillette. This criticism is wrong. Consider the successes experienced by Dove, which sells soap and skincare, with its [Campaign for Real Beauty](#), and Always, a maker of feminine care products, with its [Like a Girl](#) effort.

Gillette's cause is timely, important, and relevant for a 115-year-old brand that has been [valued](#) at \$57 billion. Wanting to engage customers on the issue is not inappropriate for Gillette. The problem is with its approach – specifically with the enemy it chose to call out. It put the blame for wrongful attitudes and behaviors on its customers, telling them, "You can't laugh it off, making the same old excuses..." Gillette went against what great brands know they should do: make the customer the hero.

Gillette could have blamed the entertainment industry for encouraging and even celebrating "toxic masculinity", or it could have called out high-profile offenders such as Harvey Weinstein or Kevin Spacey for setting a poor example. The point – that men can and should be better than that – could still have been made; customers are smart enough to have gotten the message. And by making someone or something other than its customer the enemy, Gillette would have put itself and customers on the same side of the issue – a more persuasive stance from which to encourage today's customers to take action. Although the truth may be that the average man is as much to blame as these others influences, it's no surprise that the average man took offense to being called out.

Great brands know better than to villainize their customers.

## 2. Understand that today's brands are partners, not dictators.

Years ago, a brand could assume an authoritative role and issue manifestos to its customers. Nike's famous slogan "Just Do It", for example, gained popularity during a time when customers were fine with brands telling them what to do or think. And some brands, particularly those in luxury or high-tech categories, can still pull off the trick of assuming a "we know best" role. But most customers today respond to brands that play more of a partner or friend role (e.g., Home Depot told its customers "You Can Do It, We Can Help"; Samsung's tagline is "Everyone's Invited.")

By using an old school corporate voiceover approach and reading the riot act to viewers, Gillette seemed to be positioning itself as the arbiter of right and wrong instead of a supporter or encourager of positive social change. Its message would have been better received if it had come from someone other than Gillette – an average guy or even a celebrity – and in a less contrived manner. The reason why Nike was so successful with the [campaign](#) it ran last year highlighting Colin Kaepernick and his taking a stand on racial issues is because it celebrated

what Kaepernick was already doing and allowed customers to decide for themselves if and how they would respond to the message that it is the right thing to do.

Great brands know the most convincing role they can play is one of an equal to their customers, respecting and participating alongside them.

### **3. Deliver the message through meaningful action.**

People are tired of companies saying one thing and then doing another – or only proclaiming to believe something but really just using the stance as a façade or marketing ploy. If an advertiser wants to promote a social cause, it must back up its message with meaningful action if it has any hope of engendering people’s trust and support.

Although Gillette has committed to donate \$1 million per year to non-profits running programs that address the issues referenced in the ad, the company’s promise – given how paltry it is in dollar amount and how passive it is in nature – lacks the substance and integrity that people want and expect from companies these days. Consider how REI would have been much less effective with its [#OptOutside campaign](#), through which it encouraged people to enjoy the outdoors, if it had merely issued a missive about the importance of outdoor activity and made a charitable donation to national parks instead of closing its stores on Black Friday. Similarly, people believe that Patagonia is committed to protecting the environment in part because it was willing to sacrifice sales by running [ads](#) that said “Don’t Buy This Jacket” and discouraging wasteful consumption.

Great brands assure customers of the integrity of their convictions by taking meaningful action that backs up their message. Better yet, they take the action first and then promote it.

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It’s too late for this year’s Super Bowl advertisers to change their ads based on the lessons learned from Gillette’s mistakes, but there’s still time for them to adjust their digital marketing efforts that normally supplement the TV commercials and their efforts that continue on after the show. And all companies – even those that don’t use such a large and visible platform – can apply these lessons whether they’re promoting a social cause or simply appealing to customers in general. They should respect their customers, engage them as partners, and take meaningful action to align with their values – that’s what great brands do.