



GIANTS IN THE BATHROOM

‘Find out what consumers want
and then give it to them.’

William Procter may have had a spring in his step as he walked through the London streets that morning in 1832. Certainly, the prospect of a hard day’s work held no fears for him. As a boy he’d been an apprentice in a general store, where he’d learned to make candles, a process known as ‘dipping’ from the way the wick was plunged into the wax. Now he was in his early 30s, and the future seemed brighter than a thousand candles. Just a day earlier, Procter had opened his own store selling woollen textiles and clothing. It was his first entrepreneurial venture and he had no reason to doubt that it would be a success.

Approaching the store, Procter noticed something wrong. The door appeared to be ajar, and there was a crack in the pane. A few moments later, his worst fears were confirmed: thieves had broken in. The shelves were empty. The

burglary left Procter £8,000 in debt – a vast sum at the time. He had been ruined overnight.

Driven by either shame or undimmed optimism, Procter decided to start again in the New World. He and his wife left for the United States. When they arrived, they followed the example of many pioneers before them – and headed West. But bad luck hadn't quite finished with William Procter. As they journeyed down the Ohio River, his wife became ill, forcing him to seek medical attention in Cincinnati. She died a few months later.

Seemingly unable to move on, Procter got a job in a Cincinnati bank. Labouring to pay off his debts, he turned to candle-making in his spare time. This was a logical step, given the ready availability of oil and fat as a by-product of the city's most prominent trade: meat-packing. Soon Procter had abandoned the bank and was running a profitable one-man business.

Although he never left the town where his first wife had died, he recovered enough to court and marry a young woman named Olivia Norris, the daughter of prominent candle-maker Alexander Norris. Olivia's sister, Elizabeth Ann, was married to an Irishman, a soap-maker whose family had emigrated to the United States in 1819. By coincidence, this young man's illness had originally delayed his family in Cincinnati. When he recovered, they decided to stay. By the time William Procter met him, his soap and candle manufacturing business was doing passably well. His name was James Gamble.

PROCTER & GAMBLE: UNITED BY FATE

Alexander Norris was clearly a shrewd man. One imagines him sitting with his sons-in-law around the fire, perhaps smoking an after-dinner pipe. In any event, he had good advice for them. He observed that they were competing for the same raw materials. Why didn't they go into business together? Procter & Gamble was founded on 31 October 1837. Total assets: \$7,192.24. (The story is recounted in a different form in the group's 2006 publication *P&G, A Company History: 1837 – today*.)

It was not, strictly speaking, a beauty company. Its success was built largely on soap, especially after the light bulb put candles in the shade. But like the beauty pioneers, Procter and Gamble were experts at branding – both instinctively and out of necessity.

The concept of branding emerged during the industrial revolution, when shopkeepers who had previously sold their products over the counter began shipping them far and wide, thanks to the age of steam. With access to both the railroad and the Ohio River, Procter and Gamble were ideally placed to profit from this new era. In common with other manufacturers, they were obliged to mark their crates with a symbol that would enable the often illiterate stevedores and freight handlers to identify them. The original P&G trademark was an encircled star. Eventually, William Procter added the moon and 13 stars, for the 13 first US colonies. The logo was to remain largely unchanged until the 1930s. And the company that it symbolized was already a million-dollar business by the end of the 1850s.

P&G proved skilled at spotting opportunities. Soap manufacturing depended on a substance called rosin, a solid resin extracted from pine sap. Amid rumours of an impending civil war, the sons of the founders – James Norris Gamble and William Alexander Procter – travelled south to procure a huge supply of rosin, negotiating a bulk discount into the bargain. Meanwhile, the company began building a new plant to keep pace with increased sales. Sure enough, in 1862, while other manufacturers were forced to stand by helplessly as rosin supplies dwindled away, Procter & Gamble won contracts to supply soap and candles to the Union army.

This new generation also came up with one of the company's most enduring brand names. Ivory soap was developed by James Norris Gamble and another of Procter's sons, Harley. A happy accident in the mixing process had whisked more air into the product than usual, with the result that the bars of soap floated. The name was inspired by a line from the Bible that Harley Procter had spotted while in church: 'out of the ivory palaces'. It also had psychological power: in those days, the use of soap was often associated not only with cleanliness, but with fair skin.

Advertising at that time had a dismal reputation in the United States. It was thought of as glorified 'snake oil' salesmanship – fancy language designed to fool naïve consumers into purchasing dubious goods, the modern equivalent of the medicine man stepping off a stagecoach with a chinking bagful of

ineffective potions. But Harley Procter felt that Ivory's unique properties would lend themselves well to an advertising campaign. He persuaded the partners to set aside an impressive budget of US\$11,000. The miraculous soap, 'so pure it floats', was advertised in the *Independent* newspaper nationwide in 1882. It was destined for immense popularity. P&G later took advantage of the emergence of women's illustrated magazines, placing its first full-colour ad in *Cosmopolitan* in 1896.

As P&G raced toward the 20th century, it began to take on some of the shape of the company we know today. In 1886 it constructed a vast, ultra-modern factory called Ivorydale a few miles north of downtown Cincinnati. Four years later, this became home to one of the first product research labs in the United States, dedicated to devising better soap formulas and manufacturing methods. But a breakthrough in 1911 took P&G out of the bathroom altogether. The company had been experimenting with hydrogenated cotton seed oil, which stays solid at room temperature, as a raw material for soap. Along the way, it invented an alternative to conventional cooking fat. It marketed the product as Crisco, the healthier shortening. P&G boosted sales in 1912 by producing a cookbook containing recipes that required the use of Crisco.

Needless to say, the First World War barely troubled the company, which had once again prepared itself for tougher times. As the United States entered the consumer boom of the Roaring Twenties, P&G was in excellent shape to invest in a powerful new medium: radio. Crisco sponsored cooking shows, while Oxydol washing powder later attached its name to a serial called *Ma Perkins*. The sponsorship was so successful that P&G repeated the tactic with other brands. You certainly don't need me to tell you that this was the birth of the soap opera.

REDEFINING BEAUTIFUL

The desire to understand how consumers responded to its advertising led Procter & Gamble to innovate in another way. In 1924, it set up one of the first market research departments. Until that time, product development had been a largely instinctive, seat-of-the-pants affair. But P&G was determined to meet the quotidian needs of its customers – and to do that it needed more information about their lives.

The department was led by an economist named Paul ‘Doc’ Smelser. The (2000) book *American Business, 1920–2000: How it worked*, by Thomas K McGraw, portrays Doc as ‘a small, feisty, serious man’ whose dapper sports jackets and ties clashed with the sombre attire of most P&G executives. He would further provoke them by walking up to them and ‘asking them, out of the blue, questions such as “What percentage of Ivory soap is used for face and hands and what percentage for dishwashing?” Often, nobody knew the answer.’

Doc ran the market research department for 34 years, building it into ‘perhaps the most sophisticated unit of its kind in the world’. His staff of researchers swelled to hundreds. He recruited thousands of door-to-door interviewers, many of them women who were required to wear ‘a conservative dress, high heels and a hat’. They gently quizzed interviewees about their cooking, laundry and housework habits. During this process ‘they were to carry no lists, forms, or writing materials’ in order not to intimidate their subjects. This meant that they had to dash back to their cars to write down what they’d heard.

From the swathes of intelligence coming into his department, Doc discovered ‘almost everything that could be learned about how the company’s products and competing items were being used, how they might be used, and what consumers liked or disliked about them’. In addition, he concerned himself with media research. ‘He liked to surprise managers of radio stations by giving them precise statistics about the size of their audience, statistics they themselves did not possess.’

With Doc’s help, P&G could fulfil its mission: ‘Find out what consumers want and then give it to them.’ But that particular phrase was coined by another pioneer within the group. His name was Neil McElroy – and he was the inventor of brand management.

McElroy had joined P&G straight from Harvard in 1925. Six years later, he was working on an advertising campaign for Camay soap when it occurred to him that there might be a more effective way of running the marketing department. He fired off a three-page memo suggesting that, rather than having its marketing people work across several different brands, the company should establish dedicated teams for each brand. These would be run as separate businesses, with a small group of employees reporting to a brand manager. As well as marketing, they would be responsible for sales,

product development and all other tasks related to ensuring the success of the brand. Each brand would compete with all the others within P&G, as well as with those outside. This would drive innovation and force brands to discover new niches.

Procter & Gamble adopted McElroy's proposal. It was a forerunner of the technique that Lindsay Owen-Jones would use many years later to create internal competition at L'Oréal. 'Brand management as a business technique was one of the signal innovations in American marketing during the twentieth century,' confirms McGraw.

By the end of the Second World War, P&G was a true leviathan. Its competitiveness had created a tough corporate culture. McGraw sees it as 'tightly knit, secretive, ambitious [and] marketing-obsessed'. Through a series of new launches and acquisitions, it seemed to insinuate itself into every aspect of consumers' daily lives. The roster of brands launched in the second half of the 20th century reads like a weekly shopping list: Tide detergent (1946), Crest toothpaste (1955), Charmin toilet paper (1957), Pampers diapers (1961), Head & Shoulders shampoo (1961), Ariel detergent (1967), Pringle's potato chips (1968), Bounce fabric softener (1972) and Always sanitary pads (1983).

It extended its reach into the beauty sector with the acquisition of Richardson-Vicks (Oil of Olay, Pantene and Vidal Sassoon) in 1985, Noxell (maker of CoverGirl and Noxzema) in 1989, Old Spice a year later and Max Factor and Ellen Betrix cosmetics the year after that.

These purchases encouraged it to develop its fragrance business with the launch of Giorgio Beverly Hills; eventually it would produce scents for Dolce & Gabbana, Dunhill, Escada, Gucci, Hugo Boss, Lacoste and Puma, among others.

The company's market research and brand management techniques made it a formidable machine. One of its goals, according to Tom McGraw, was to double its sales every 10 years. To do this, it set billions aside for advertising, mostly on television. By 1993 its sales exceeded US\$30 billion – more than half of those outside the United States.

But despite its interests in the beauty sector, P&G was still a mass consumer goods company dabbling in the beauty business. As Geoffrey Jones describes

in *Beauty Imagined*, all that changed in the early 1990s. In 1992, P&G chief executive Ed Artzt gave a speech called ‘Redefining beautiful’, in which he opined that beauty was ‘the most dynamic sector’ that the company operated in, as well as the one ‘with the most potential for growth’. Explaining why a ‘155-year-old soap and detergent company would want to venture into the world of fashion and glamour’, he pointed out that the beauty business was increasingly driven by research and technology, which made it ‘our kind of business’.

Less than a decade later, P&G was headed by AG Lafley, who had previously run the company’s beauty management group. He understood that the high margins of beauty products delivered impressive returns on investment. Beauty also chimed, writes Jones, ‘with P&G’s strengths in branding and innovation, and the company’s deep knowledge of the discount, drug and grocery store channels’. It began to pile advertising money behind the dormant Oil of Olay brand and expand its hair care business, buying hair colorant maker Clairol.

Then, in 2005, it acquired Gillette for US\$57 billion, creating at a stroke the world’s largest consumer goods group. The move gave it access not only to Gillette’s shaving products, but also to Braun electrical appliances, Right Guard deodorant and Duracell batteries. And the deal gave P&G strength in an area where it had been somewhat lacking: the male grooming market (‘P&G to buy Gillette for US\$57 billion’, Associated Press, 28 January 2005).

By the end of the decade, Procter & Gamble had shape-shifted from ‘a soap and detergent company’ to one that owed half of its total sales to beauty, personal care and health.

UNILEVER: CONTRIBUTING TO PERSONAL ATTRACTIVENESS

P&G has other competitors in the household goods and personal care categories. You’ll be familiar with Colgate-Palmolive, Reckitt Benckiser and Johnson & Johnson, all of which are present in our bathrooms in one

form or another, from toothpaste and headache tablets to shampoo and baby powder. But let's take a closer look at Unilever, which has a handful of major brands in Dove, Lux, Pond's, Lifebuoy, Sunsilk, TIGI, Vaseline and the cheeky men's fragrance brand Axe (known as Lynx in the United Kingdom).

It also had a major impact on the history of personal hygiene. In the late 19th century, one of the founders of the company that became Unilever, an Englishman named William Hesketh Lever, had an idea that was to revolutionize the way people bought and used soap.

Born in Bolton in 1851, Lever was the son of a grocer, and as was the way of things he naturally followed his father into that trade. In those days, soap was sold to grocers in large blocks, which the shopkeeper cut into smaller chunks for each customer. Young William Lever began wondering if it wouldn't be possible to sell soap in individual bars. He started his own business, initially marketing soap from other manufacturers.

Convinced that the quality of soap could be improved, he began reinvesting his profits into research. With his brother James, he leased a factory in Warrington in the name of Lever Brothers. (James never played a role in the business – Adam Macqueen's 2005 book *The King of Sunlight: How William Lever cleaned up the world*, suggests that he had diabetes, a poorly understood illness at the time, which may have led to him being regarded as mentally unstable.)

At Warrington, Lever experimented with various formulas before arriving at a blend of palm kernel oil, cotton seed oil, resin and tallow. He marketed it as Sunlight soap, wrapping each bar in colourful, eye-catching packaging. This was affordable, unfussy, mass-produced cleanliness. Sales rose so rapidly that Lever was obliged to open a larger factory beside the River Mersey in Cheshire. In an echo of Procter & Gamble's Ivorydale, he called the new premises Port Sunlight. By 1895, it was producing 40,000 tons of soap a year.

Lever saw himself as more than a mere entrepreneur. He aimed to improve the lives of everyday Victorians, 'to make cleanliness commonplace; to lessen work for women; to foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life would be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products' (www.unilever.com).

He also strove to ensure that his workers led happy, comfortable lives. Port Sunlight was not just a factory – it was a village, with housing and amenities for all those who worked there. This had the built-in disadvantage that, if you lost your job, you also lost your home.

Adam Macqueen writes that Lever's workers

lived in great style, their spacious houses an extraordinary mishmash of architectural details and chocolate-box tweekness built according to Lever's peculiar tastes, but every aspect of their lifestyle was strictly prescribed. They ate together in vast, segregated dining halls under the gaze of Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces, the overflow of Lever's personal art collection. They exercised together in the village gymnasium or swam in the open-air swimming pool next to the village green. They worshipped at the fake medieval church, drank at the Temperance Inn and sat together through 'absolutely compulsory' lessons in history, languages and literature.

(‘The king of sunlight’, *Times*, 13 May 2004)

This paternalist approach extended to their social lives. In their spare time they were expected to engage in one of the activities laid on by the village, from a philharmonic orchestra to an amateur dramatic society ‘complete with its own 1000-seater auditorium’. Women had to ask permission from the ‘social department’ if they wished to attend the weekly dance at the town hall with a male colleague. Rule-breakers or those who did not fit in could be fired. Lever was by no means the first to equate physical cleanliness with enlightenment and probity, but few took the idea to such extremes.

At work, Lever kept a beady eye on proceedings, peering out over the factory floor from his glassed-in office. Nevertheless – like their homes and their works canteen – the eight-hour day, pension schemes, and unemployment and sickness benefits enjoyed by his employees were practically unheard of elsewhere. Writes Macqueen:

In 1888, the year Port Sunlight was founded, more than 1,000 workers at the Bryant & May match factory in East London went on strike over being forced to work unbroken 14-hour shifts handling yellow phosphorous, a carcinogen that literally rotted away the faces of those exposed to it. Most factory staff were expected to pay for their own

overalls and tools out of their meagre wages, and even to stump up for the cost of heating the factory.

(Ibid)

Not all of Lever's innovations attracted universal praise. In 1906 he joined forces with other soap manufacturers to form a monopoly 'soap trust', with the idea that consumers as well as manufacturers would benefit from economies of scale in terms of raw materials, production and advertising. But such monopolies had already come under attack in the United States, and Lever's move was harshly criticized by the British press. A newspaper cartoon in the *Daily Mirror* parodied his empire as 'Port Moonshine' and depicted a greedy soap tycoon telling a cowed customer: 'I'm boss of the situation, nobody else can make soap but me and I can raise the price to what I like.' Similar accusations by the *Daily Mail* prompted Lever to sue. He won to the tune of £50,000, but the monopoly was dismantled before the year was out.

This setback did not prevent Lever from expanding his company. In 1910 he acquired Pears soap. The popular brand had been launched in London at the end of the 18th century by a Soho barber named Andrew Pears. Many of Pears's customers complained about the effects of harsh soap on their skin, so he began experimenting with natural, gentler ingredients, finally creating a product based on glycerine. The soap's transparency and floral aroma proved highly appealing, although it was only at the instigation of Andrew's grandson, Francis Pears, that it became the basis of a business under the name A & F Pears Limited.

Francis Pears was aided by an early marketing genius in the form of his son-in-law, Thomas J Barrett. In a famous moment from advertising history, Barrett convinced the pre-Raphaelite artist Sir John Everett Millais to sell him a sentimental painting of an angelic young boy gazing at rising soap bubbles. He even persuaded Millais to add a bar of Pears soap to the image. 'Bubbles' became an icon – the kind of advertisement that people hung on their walls at home. In addition, Barrett secured one of the first celebrity endorsements – from Lillie Langtry, actress, courtesan and mistress of the Prince of Wales.

When Lever got his hands on Pears, he moved production to Port Sunlight. He also took a leaf out of Barrett's book, acquiring paintings and transforming them into advertisements for his goods. Unlike Barrett, he did not always ask permission.

Lever took a unique approach to advertising by creating what was effectively an internal agency: Lever International Advertising Services, better known as Lintas. Though it later broke away from its parent to become an independent agency, it remained heavily dependent on its creator for decades, until its name eventually dissolved in the advertising industry's endless churn of acquisitions and consolidations.

The altruistic approach that William Lever had adopted in Great Britain did not extend to his palm oil operation in the Belgian Congo, where he took advantage of a horrifying forced labour system introduced by the colonizers. The atmosphere was more *Heart of Darkness* than Port Sunlight. Today such practices would provoke consumer outrage and a boycott, but the colonial era operated under different moral rules, and Lever maintained his reputation as a philanthropist. He was made Baron Leverhulme in 1917, and Viscount Leverhulme in 1922. He died of pneumonia in 1925.

Five years later, palm oil formed the slippery foundations of a new entity. Lever Brothers joined forces with Dutch margarine producer Margarine Unie, which also depended on palm oil to make its product. Together, they could import bulk quantities more efficiently and economically. The merged company was named Unilever.

The company weathered the Great Depression of the 1930s, partly by riding a trend away from the use of 'hard soap' in household cleaning towards flakes and powders. Additionally, it ran campaigns vaunting the merits of vitamin-enriched margarine, driving sales to an all-time high. In 1941, during the Blitz in London, Unilever's Lifebuoy soap sponsored a free emergency washing service. Lifebuoy-branded vans equipped with hot showers, soap and towels sped to areas whose water supply had been knocked out by the bombing.

From 1950 onwards, Unilever's progress closely resembled that of Procter & Gamble. At Port Sunlight, there was an increased focus on research, as laboratories were set up to analyse consumer trends and technological advances in the fields of hygiene and nutrition. The same decade saw the launch of two of Unilever's most successful brands: Sunsilk shampoo and Dove soap.

When Sunsilk first began advertising on TV in 1955, the message was that – unlike rival brands – it required just one application, washing out fewer

natural oils. But the brand's advertising really got into its stride in 1967, thanks to Bond movie soundtrack composer John Barry, who provided a melody called 'The girl with the sun in her hair'. The ads themselves were evocative enough. In one, a fresh-faced young woman is rowed across a lake by her boyfriend: 'A face without make-up proves it – a girl's most important cosmetic is her shampoo... it's part of the art of beauty.' But true classiness was bestowed on them by Barry's haunting theme, which proved so popular that it became a hit single.

Stricken by the oil crisis, the 1970s were tough for everyone, but for Unilever the general ambience of struggle was exacerbated by the rise of the supermarket chains, whose buying clout sapped it of its negotiating power. Unilever struck back: pushing into the United States with the purchase of National Starch and becoming one of the world's biggest providers of tea by adding Lipton International. The deodorant brand Impulse ('Men can't help acting on impulse') was also launched during this period. Like P&G at the time, though, Unilever was still a consumer goods company with some beauty interests.

That situation changed, for a time, in the 1980s, when Unilever sold off non-core activities – such as transport and packaging – and went shopping for the kind of businesses it liked best: detergents, food and toiletries. Amidst this spree it snapped up Chesebrough-Pond's in the United States, owner of Vaseline Intensive Care, Pond's Cold Cream and, somewhat incongruously, Ragù spaghetti sauce.

A trio of acquisitions in 1989 made Unilever a major player in the perfume and cosmetics sector. In swift succession it bought Schering-Plough's European fragrance business, Calvin Klein and Fabergé Inc, which included the Elizabeth Arden brand and the fragrances of Chloé, Lagerfeld and Fendi. Like P&G, Unilever reasoned that beauty was a high-margins business, and one that it needed to be big in. Seven years later it added Helen Curtis Industries, the Chicago-based company whose body and hair care brands included Suave, Finesse and Salon Selectives.

By 2000 it had merged all its beauty interests into a separate company called Unilever Cosmetics International. Ironically, that move marked the beginning of the end of its flirtation with prestige beauty.

REAL BEAUTY

In 2005, Unilever once again decided to rationalize its brand portfolio. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the company's volume growth had averaged a lacklustre 2.5 per cent. At the turn of the millennium it had implemented a strategy called 'Path to Growth', but while this delivered efficiencies in areas like the buying of raw materials it failed to move the needle on sales growth.

This was because Unilever had not changed with the times. Historically it had 'acted local' rather than global, with largely autonomous companies managing their own brand portfolios in each market. As the world became smaller, a more focused top-down strategy was needed. Unilever would become a global business with a single global message and strong global brands.

As part of the new approach, Unilever would make a clear-eyed assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and sell off underperforming brands. Its analysis showed that fast-growing areas in the personal care sector were deodorants, skincare and hair. Note here the absence of the word 'fragrances'. In the end, Unilever was more at home with the likes of Sunsilk and Dove than with high-end fashion brands like Vera Wang and Cerruti. So Unilever Cosmetics International had to go – sold to the giant US fragrance company Coty for US\$800 million ('Unilever parts with perfume names', news.bbc.co.uk, 20 May 2005).

At around the same time, Unilever launched a new mission, announcing that its goal was to 'meet everyday needs for nutrition, hygiene and personal care with brands that help people look good, feel good and get more out of life'. This policy of 'bringing vitality to life' would influence everything it did.

It certainly had a dramatic effect on one particular brand: Dove.

As we've established in the preceding chapters, the oldest marketing tactic in the book for beauty brands is to make consumers paranoid about their looks. Something is wrong with you – acne, dry skin, oily skin, signs of ageing, *especially* signs of ageing – and they can fix it. But what if Dove positioned itself as the skincare range for people who refused to buy into this emotional blackmail? What if Dove made you feel good about being you?

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was launched in 2004, with creative work from the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather and PR support from Edelman Public Relations. Its flagship was a press and poster campaign shot by the fashion photographer Rankin. The images showed ordinary women – some of them recruited via newspaper advertisements – posing self-confidently in their underwear in all their imperfect glory. Though they were perfectly lit and displayed to their best advantage, they were clearly not supermodels. For a start, they had breasts and thighs – and even tummies. The campaign stood out so strongly in a sector populated by digitally enhanced naiads that it immediately attracted a slew of press coverage.

Another successful element of the campaign was a 2007 online video called ‘Evolution’. This showed an ordinary, rather spotty teenage girl facing the camera. A time-lapse sequence demonstrates how make-up, hair styling and – crucially – Photoshop alterations transform her from the girl next door into the kind of goddess we’re used to seeing in beauty ads. ‘No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted’ comments the end-line, before providing a link to Dove’s ‘Self-Esteem Fund’. This was created by Unilever ‘to support different initiatives that help educate and inspire girls on a wider definition of beauty’. For example, it has partnered with the Butterfly Association, an Australian organization helping people with eating disorders.

‘Evolution’ won two Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions – the ad industry’s equivalent of the Oscars – but it also prompted some observers to look harder at the ethics behind the Dove campaign. There were suggestions that the print ads themselves were not entirely free of Photoshop tampering. It was also pointed out that Unilever makes skin lightening cream Fair & Lovely for the Asian market – and that its ads for male personal care brand Axe (Lynx in the UK) are based on the premise that the smell of the product is irresistible to the impossibly sexy babes who queue up to get it on with the hero.

The journalist Alicia Clegg had considered the ethical dilemma of the campaign in an earlier piece for Interbrand’s Brand Channel website. ‘The campaign... has an implied moral purpose,’ she wrote, ‘one that takes on the ethical issues of consumerism: the psychology of self-esteem, the supposed link between the pressure to conform and eating disorders and the various stigmas attaching to old age and disfigurement.’ And yet, she opined, ‘Dove’s marketing is the reality of reality TV, not of everyday life. The models – though not glamorous – have all been given the glamour treatment... Just as a reality TV turns ordinary Joes into stars for a day, so

Dove's campaign elevates ordinary women into honorary beauties' ('Dove gets real', brandchannel.com, 18 April 2005).

The clincher, of course, was that the entire purpose of the campaign was to sell beauty products. The original ads shot by Rankin were for 'skin firming creams' designed to 'visibly reduce the appearance of cellulite'. If the ethical approach was not hypocritical, it was at least disingenuous.

But it worked. It gave Dove a purpose that demarcated it from competing brands, it significantly increased sales (by as much as 700 per cent in some markets) and it reaped millions of dollars' worth of free media coverage.

After the initial spike, however, sales began to flatten out. A new debate began about whether women really wanted to look at 'realistic' portrayals of themselves. Perhaps what they actually wanted to hear was that 'fabulous' women – the actresses and the supermodels – shared some of their problems and insecurities? And that beauty products helped them be the best they could be?

A French advertising professional told me: 'The problem with the Dove campaign is that it does not offer hope, which is what beauty advertising is all about. People buy beauty products because they haven't given up on themselves. They don't want to look 'ordinary'. They want to look extraordinary. They want something transformative. Morally and intellectually, women approve of Dove's message. But when they're in the store, their heart tells them something else. So they reach for the product that promises to make them more beautiful.'

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST SKINCARE BRAND

Another brand in our bathroom cabinets has long occupied the 'healthy and natural' territory partly encroached upon by Dove. According to the researcher Euromonitor, it is the world's top-selling name in skincare. It comes from Germany and it is, of course, Nivea.

Compared to some of the more upmarket beauty brands, Nivea feels innocuous, friendly, almost innocent. As it reaps more than €5 billion in annual sales, there is every reason to believe that this is the result of a consistent marketing effort.

Nivea was launched in 1911. According to its website, it has always been ‘fuelled by... a mixture of research, creativity and business know-how’, all of which recall the ‘golden triangle’ described by L’Oréal’s Charles Zviak.

The brand is owned by Beiersdorf, but it was not created by that company’s founder, Paul Carl Beiersdorf. Not that Beiersdorf was not innovative in his own right. A pharmacist by trade, he set up shop in Hamburg in 1880 and worked with a researcher named Paul Gerson Unna to develop the first sticking plaster. It was based on gutta-percha natural latex, obtained from the sap of the tropical plant that gave it its name. The invention was patented in 1882.

In 1890, Beiersdorf sold the business to another pharmacist, Dr Oscar Troplowitz. This was the man who would turn Beiersdorf into a global branded goods company. He combined an entrepreneurial spirit with a shrewd understanding of customers and an ability to translate their needs into products.

Paul Beiersdorf’s former scientific adviser, Paul Gerson Unna, told Troplowitz about a new emulsifying agent called Eucerit, derived from lanolin, which made it possible to create a stable oil-and-water-based cream and manufacture it in industrial quantities. Swiftly buying the patent for the product, as well as the factory that made it, Troplowitz used it as the basis for Nivea. The name derived from the Latin for ‘snow’, *nix*, *nivis*. As well as the Eucerit that bonded oils with water, the cream also included ‘glycerine, a little citric acid and, to lend it a delicate scent, oil of rose and lily of the valley’. The recipe has changed little.

The product’s pure white colour and subtle fragrance hint at Troplowitz’s marketing savvy. He understood that skincare was not just about efficacy, but also about emotion. Early advertisements featured a vulnerable ‘femme fragile’. Their style, though, was contemporary and dynamic – the work of Hans Rudi Erdt, one of a new generation of artists specializing in commercial art.

Troplowitz died in 1918, but his successors proved equally visionary. Long before the likes of L’Oréal, P&G and Unilever espoused the

‘mega-brand’ approach, the Nivea name was stretched to embrace a multiplicity of personal care products: soap, shampoo, powder and shaving cream.

The ‘femme fragile’ survived until the 1920s, when the emergence of short-haired, athletic, automobile-driving lasses began to make her look distinctly out of date. ‘Youth and freshness’ were adopted as brand values for changing times. In addition, the cream was positioned as a multi-purpose product for all the family – as good for softening a man’s beard as it was a woman’s skin. This approach was underlined by a print ad featuring three fresh-faced young boys grinning at the camera. At the same time, the brand launched a competition to find ‘the Nivea girls’. The copy exhorted: ‘We don’t want beauties or belles of the ball... but you should be healthy, clean and fresh and simply gorgeous girls.’

This was also the moment when the brand adopted its iconic blue and white colouring: pure and uncomplicated.

In the late 1930s, responsibility for the brand’s advertising was handed to the talented Elly Heuss-Knapp, who became one of the most famous women in the field. She took Nivea outdoors, associating it with blue skies and the sporting life in illustrations of athletic young women who had nothing to envy the Gibson girls. Significantly, she was forced to steer the brand’s image through the Nazi era.

Jewish members of Beiersdorf’s management – including chairman Willy Jacobsohn – fled soon after the Nazis took power. Control of the company passed to Carl Claussen, who had married one of Tropolowitz’s nieces. The Nivea brand was further safeguarded by licensing it to manufacturers abroad – a strategy that caused problems after the war, when licensees’ differing marketing strategies threatened to dilute the image of the brand. Decades would pass before Beiersdorf was able to bring Nivea back under central control. It patched up the problem by liaising closely with foreign owners to ensure that branding messages were in sync.

In the meantime, writes Geoffrey Jones, Heuss-Knapp’s ads performed ‘a delicate balancing act’. They might ‘be interpreted as aligned with the Nazi ideology about the superiority of blonde and blue-eyed Nordic natural beauty, but they also built on the long-established brand identity, which emphasized health and athleticism for the liberated modern woman’.

Thanks to its diplomatic manoeuvring and the ambiguity of its image, Beiersdorf survived the war intact. It entered the 1950s optimistic that Nivea remained a much-loved brand and that there were still plenty of areas into which it could expand. It did not have to wait long. As economic prosperity returned and international travel grew more common, Beiersdorf responded to the trend for overseas beach holidays with a range of Nivea sun care creams.

As the global skincare market became increasingly competitive, Beiersdorf emphasized Nivea's heritage with claims of unrivalled quality, effectiveness and honesty. 'La crème de la crème', read one of its print ads in 1971, with an unadorned picture of the classic blue tin. No models, no opulent backdrops; rather than trying to compete with luxury brands, the ad seemed to be mocking their pretentiousness – a subtle way of asking: 'Why pay more?'

Beiersdorf owns other brands – notably the luxury brand La Prairie, about which we'll hear more in Chapter 9 – but Nivea is a phenomenon. The unwavering focus that Beiersdorf kept on it, as well as the equity of trust it enjoyed among consumers, enabled it to thrive in a globalized environment. It now embraces some 500 different products for women, men, babies, skin, hair, hand, bath and sun. It offers shaving creams and anti-ageing products, hair styling gels and facial cleansers. Its research department in Hamburg is as advanced as those of its rivals. It is sold in 170 countries, and in Germany it has a brand recognition of 100 per cent. Above all, no matter what the brand extension, its marketing has steadfastly maintained the fresh, optimistic, family-oriented approach that it adopted in the 1920s. Neither promoting the 'ordinariness' of Dove's real women nor the 'extraordinariness' of L'Oréal's glossy superstars, it exists to soothe us, in almost any circumstances.

Nivea exudes a halo of reliability that one would be hard pressed to find among more prestigious brands. Consider whether you would rub a cream labelled Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent into an infant's skin. This is perhaps because Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent are associated first and foremost with perfumes: potent, tangy, faintly sinful, irredeemably adult.

BEAUTY TIPS

- * In the 19th century, Procter & Gamble in the United States and Unilever in the UK brought hygiene to the masses.
- * Initially relying on the savvy of their founders, they later developed advanced scientific and marketing research departments.
- * Their goal was to deliver products that exactly matched the quotidian needs of specific target groups of consumers.
- * Mainly concerned with fast-moving consumer goods, P&G and Unilever moved into beauty because it offered high margins.
- * Unilever pulled out of the prestige fragrance sector to concentrate on mass brands that make consumers 'feel good about life'.
- * One example of this is Dove, which was cunningly repositioned as a brand that promotes 'real beauty'.
- * Beiersdorf turned Nivea into the world's biggest skincare brand by ruthlessly focusing on its healthy, wholesome, family image.
- * Consistent branding and a legacy of trust have enabled the 100-year-old Nivea to expand into many areas of skincare and beauty.
- * Very early on, the 'bathroom giants' realized that selling beauty products is not just about efficacy, but also about expectancy, emotion and experience.