

THE GILLETTE COMPETITION

Ferdinando Frega — Nando the Scribe

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No corporate analysis ever really talks about it, because the competitor is always just a manufacturer trying to grab market space, without culture or professionalism, basing its knowledge only on needs — and its judgment never touches the customer's real necessities.

In Gillette meetings in the '80s, the first item every sales circular presented concerned market share, where consumption data was expressed in sell-out — meaning what had actually been sold and delivered to consumers, tracked by the leading American research agency called NIELSEN — though no one ever knew which sample points of sale in Italy they were based on.

It was the Bible of data: nothing else could represent a more real number.

Inside were consumption figures by product type, market share by volume, first split into 4 standard Italian areas — NORTHWEST, NORTHEAST, CENTER, SOUTH-ISLANDS — and later, to better understand what was happening, Gillette Europe's London headquarters requested sub-area data as well, to see in detail where the sales phenomenon was hitting unexpected points and why consumption kept rising.

Corporate analysis never found the weak points, the way certain biological medical clinics do, where instruments often measure not just the numerical values but the invisible effects — the kind of thing only mother Gillette knew how to do on the market.

We were often called "the blade people," market leader with 92% market share — at least in shaving systems — where the malicious ones insisted loudly that we were just order-takers, not sellers, the way the Catholic Church collects from its benefactors through charity.

Amid the blade data, one presence stood out awkwardly: BIC in disposable razors, where their single-blade numbers marked them as market leader, and we remained only second in that market.

When asked why we should settle for second place, management replied that it wasn't a market of real interest and that we'd be pulling the product from the market shortly anyway — in fact, they wanted to know how to clear out the current stock immediately and make room for other products.

The idea didn't take long to arrive, when someone in Boston said: "Contact FREGA — he'll be the one delegated for this kind of magic."

The warehouses were emptied in short order, but the sad part is that six months later the market data showed us as brand leader: BIC had become second, and everyone tried to hide it, because it was one of

those cases where success creates discomfort — since it proves the decision that had been made was wrong.

Then there was toiletries, in particular shaving foam and shaving cream; the tune of the Italian market-share numbers changed considerably — we held 28-30% on foam and 18-20% on cream — but the Gillette men of Southern Italy, by nature, were always loyal and particularly proud, and none of them ever passed up the chance to put their own stamp on it, to carve out their role, the way a mother teaches her son.

I remember the first meeting with the new Area Manager, a P&G man, Sicily, just arrived at Gillette, who said right away: "The music is fine, but every violin has to play its own melody, and the sound will be that of shifting market share."

The older salesmen looked at him with friendly suspicion and attention, and I — the only young note in the group — immediately understood that my gladiator wasn't asking for revenge, but for legitimacy, inside and outside the arena, and together we built a new empire.

That's when the first trucks started running straight from London to Calabria, shaving foam only, and this wasn't noise — it was simply the success that later led to the marriage of Gillette and P&G.; We had only gotten there first, and then someone else copied it.

But as with anything new you do, this too sent shaving foam market share rocketing to 44%, a figure never before recorded in Italy; and just when everyone thought we'd arrived, the P&G manager told me: "Now FREGA, we need to improve the market share of TUBE SHAVING CREAM," where COLGATE PALMOLIVE was the absolute leader with a 70% share. But no one ever said it was impossible, because capable men never complain in front of an obvious wound — they put their heads down and get on with the work.

The first request went to Boston, where we were asked to align the format with COLGATE's 100 ml, eliminating the two 75-150 ml formats in the Gillette lineup.

Now we were playing on equal terms, and prices always stayed premium: no one gave anything away or engaged in unfair trade practices — it wasn't the style of company men.

The COLGATE people were focused on selling their detergents, and the TUBE SHAVING CREAM product was a battering ram in a market where the leader doesn't just play the market — it is the market.

This wasn't about volume — a modest product, where unit sales represented low numbers — but a matter of character and principle, and the new manager never hid his ambition for both of us.

To put it simply: in a single year, for the first time in company history, on that exact brand, we went from a regional market share of 22% to 48%, and the managers at Colgate Palmolive's Rome headquarters tried to reach out and understand how the hell we'd pulled it off.

But the story doesn't end there: twenty years had passed since I'd left the company, and one day I found myself in a shopping mall, where there was a car dealership, and my wife's aunt wanted to buy a car on financing.

The manager of that dealership was a former Colgate Palmolive Area Head who knew me well, and every time he never missed the chance to shout my name in mocking jest, but I never took it personally — it was just a game.

He greeted me right away, and after the aunt had finished the paperwork for the car, he pulled me aside and said that to approve it, he'd need a guarantor's signature — and mine would do.

He handed me the form, and I signed it: ROMAN POLASKI. Then I walked away, smiling.

The car was delivered, and that signature was never checked: he was just a Colgate man, someone I'd kept beating — never really my competition, just someone who watched me and asked: "Who the hell are you?"

And I said: "Just someone you didn't expect."

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