

ENG 180: First Place

Billie: Keep the Old, in With the New

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Standing out in the world of advertisement is a tedious endeavor in any department, but the world of women's cosmetics is especially known for using targeted and strategic ads that all have the same overarching message: *Using this product will make you look and feel better, just like these models and celebrities*. Because of how many of these advertisements we see and how similar they all are, we can almost direct our own marketing campaign in our heads: soothing music, a smooth-skinned, thin, white model, a bright background, a phrase about looking healthy or feeling fresh, and the brand name. This format has been used by companies for years, and it still works well if its continued use is any indication. However, there is a new company that has decided to try something different.

Billie, a razor and hygiene brand, launched an ad campaign just over a year ago that didn't focus on the smoothness that results from using their products, as most women's razor and shaving cream commercials do. Instead, Billie "became the first women's razor brand to ever show body hair," according to themselves and various articles across the internet. Billie saw what other companies were doing, listened to what their audience was saying, and decided to change the game. This campaign is not just an advertisement; it's also part of a discourse, a reply to the standards other beauty companies have cultivated since they began. In order to analyze Billie's campaign, we have to analyze the rhetorical situation as well—in this case, the changing cultural context around beauty standards for women.

In the past, most cosmetic or hygiene advertisements aimed towards women focused on creating the idea of the perfect woman and urging the viewer to conform to it using *this* face

wash and *that* razor and *those* soaps. Though this strategy has certainly been resisted over the years, the beauty industry persisted so stubbornly and for so long that these ideas became imbued in society as a whole. This created the rhetorical situation that Billie is responding to. According to Keith Grant-Davie of Utah State University, a rhetorical situation involves at least four elements: exigence, audience(s), rhetors, and constraints. By looking at how these parts of a rhetorical situation apply to Billie's ad campaign we can better understand the goals—and the pitfalls—of their strategy.

The first part of the rhetorical situation is exigence, or the motivation and purpose of the rhetor. It is often an issue or problem which the rhetor aims to change people's minds about. Most beauty companies would claim that their purpose is to both improve the appearance and hygiene of women, based on standards which their industry set, and to sell their product. More recently, their buyers have begun to think they care more about making money than improving the lives of those who buy their products.

This brings us to the audience, which is not only the people who see and interact with the rhetoric, but the “real or imagined” people who the rhetor has addressed the work to. In general, beauty companies attempt to cater towards women who want to look more beautiful or feminine. Over time, their real audience has begun to resist the ideas of beauty shown in these advertisements.

Another element of the rhetorical situation is the rhetor, or the identity and role of the person, group, or company speaking, which can often include the personas which people employ. This would be the brand being advertised, those who appear in the advertisements including models and celebrities, and anybody who contributed to the production or creative process of the advertisement. Most of the rhetors who we see from beauty companies are thin, white women

even though by contrast women make up only 29% of the executive and board positions in the beauty industry (Cheng). Companies often build a persona based on their perception of what the audience wants to see.

The last element is the constraints, which encompass the people, ideas, and concepts with the ability to affect any action being taken regarding an exigence. Positive constraints are used to further the rhetor's point while negative constraints hinder the rhetor's argument. Within the past few years, a new negative constraint has risen to the surface for beauty companies.

Beauty campaigns have used pathos, or an emotional appeal, to scare people into conforming to their standards for years. This is a practice that the scholars at Purdue OWL warn about, stating that "an argument should never use emotion to misrepresent the topic or frighten people." As time has gone on, more and more people have seen through this strategy and spoken up about it. Now, real women are demanding accurate representation for themselves in the media, and especially in the beauty industry.

Billie's ad campaign is an answer to these demands. They state multiple purposes: to show real women and real bodies in the media, to normalize body hair on women, and to sell their products at a comparable price to men's personal care products. The rhetor is the company, but they are attempting to speak for all the women who can't stand up to the beauty industry's unrealistic standards on their own. Their audience is all women of all appearances and all mindsets. The negative constraints are society's views on how women should care for their bodies, though this negative constraint is the foundation of the rhetoric's success. Billie used the building conflict centered around this constraint to their advantage, giving people an alternative to the companies which have ruled the beauty world and set up the norm. Their campaign is both

advertising and activism. Regardless of whether or not those things should go together, it's a great marketing strategy if carried out well.

However, Billie may not have implemented this strategy as effectively as they could have. The appeals they employed are mainly emotional, and by using a social movement which focuses on an individual's choices, namely the choice of "however, whenever, and if ever to shave," they used personal and social appeals. This made a big impact on me when I watched it for the first time, so much so that I remembered it nearly a year later. However, they may have relied too heavily on the activism aspect of the campaign; they didn't advertise their product or their brand well enough. To find the ad, I had to search "razor advertisement with body hair" because I couldn't remember the name of the company. Billie has other, better balanced advertisements, but I hadn't seen them before looking up the brand.

Rhetorical situations and appeals are extremely important in advertising, as well as all other types of media. Even advertisements and campaigns which attempt to go outside of the box can be broken down using these elements, the same elements as the advertisements they try to differ from. Billie used emotional appeals, just like many beauty companies. The only difference is Billie used social and personal appeals, or what they hoped were positive appeals, while in the past beauty companies have used mainly fear appeals to push people towards their idea of beauty. Billie's campaign is similar to others in another way as well. All advertisements wish to sell something, whether it costs money or is free, whether it's an idea or a physical object. Billie is no different: they are a company selling a product. But they do prove that by responding to an existing rhetorical situation, it's possible to stand out in the world of advertising even while using the same strategies as their competitors.

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