

New Stripes Aquafresh fights back against

As VP of Innovation at GlaxoSmithKline, Donna J. Sturgess led the remarkably successful launch of Extreme Clean toothpaste. Following are verbatim excerpts from an exclusive conversation with Donna, in which she explains how she and her team “defied gravity” and created intense brand loyalty in the ostensibly boring toothpaste category.

Being number-three in any category is painful. You have to be highly differentiated as the third-tier player, because in toothpaste, like many other categories, the two very big brands—Crest and Colgate—are probably enough for most consumers. So, Aquafresh, as the third-place brand, has to work harder for its share.

Thirty years ago, when Aquafresh was launched as a striped toothpaste with a terrific flavor, it really was the birth of a “sensory” brand in the toothpaste category. It was colorful, it had a personality, and a lot of people gravitated to that because they were looking for a different kind of experience.

You have to remember that in toothpaste, people are using it two or three times a day. There are not a lot of categories where the consumer is interacting with a brand two or three times a day. In addition to that, you’re putting this product in your mouth. If you think about it that way, it’s a pretty intimate relationship that you have with your toothpaste. But at the same time, the category is not one that is on people’s minds very much.

If you take that high frequency of daily use, combined with not a lot of interest in toothpaste, there was an opportunity to appeal to people based on the

brand’s sensory attributes. It was time to get people to re-appraise the brand, to come back and have another look at it, and refresh its appeal as a sensory alternative in a dramatic way.

The heat between Crest and Colgate was intensifying. About three-and-a-half years ago, Crest was, for the first time, losing meaningful share to Colgate. The resulting combative marketing posture between Crest and Colgate created vertical pressure not only on Aquafresh as the number-three brand, but all the way down to the lesser brands in the category—down through brands 8, 9 and 10.

One way for Crest and Colgate to fight each other was to try to take business away from these smaller players. Their goal was to create a situation where the category literally would be left with just two brands of toothpaste, and they would offer 15 items under each brand. The assumption was that those would be all the toothpaste choices any retailer or consumer really needed.



Colgate and Crest by taking its brand identity to the edge.

In the face of that, Aquafresh was declining, and the imperative was to re-assert its place in the category based on its heritage as a sensory brand, but with far more drama than ever before. Actually, it not only had to be dramatic, but also have the ability to sell itself at-shelf. The spending in the category had become so extraordinary between Crest and Colgate, that the issue wasn't just about spending more money.

Extreme Clean had to be designed to exceed consumer perceptions. We had these two big players, Crest and Colgate, creating a lot of noise, throwing a lot of products into the marketplace and really fist-fighting with each other for share. We had to create that distinction through drama and experience, which was not a game either of them was playing.

The consumers we were after were looking for a much bigger experience.

Toothpaste brands up to that moment had all been about cavity protection and freshening your breath. But when we did our analysis, we found a place for the brand to "own" clean. We picked the name, *Extreme Clean*, as a way to over-dramatize our positioning. It wasn't that it didn't offer cavity protection and fresh breath—those attributes are a given. We were looking for something that tied the sensory dimension of Aquafresh into a space that it could own, and that proved to be "clean."

The challenge was how to make "clean" special. We constructed the product and its packaging through the eyes of women, because they are the primary purchasers of toothpaste. We looked at how women think about their bathrooms, where women often invest a lot of time in terms of its design or decoration. We wanted to make sure that this product "fit" in their bathrooms.

Everything we did with the packaging was a signal of "clean" and also something that made *Extreme Clean* special. For

example, the carton is made of a transparent plastic, not the usual cardboard. The tube is metallic to represent stainless steel, another expression of "clean." Even the cap was engineered, by our team in Germany, to close with a "click." It closes cleanly and also signals "quality." It's not a flip top with all that mess.

That may sound like a small thing, but it was all intended to have multiple touchpoints to express "clean" because that was what women told us made them feel really good about the brand. We were looking for a sensory signature.

The packaging was based on the "gotta have it" factor. To women, toothpaste tubes are gross and ugly. So, we gave them something they actually would want to show off. It was surprising how women responded to that. They would say: It's toothpaste, but I think it's *beautiful!*

The packaging actually elevated *Extreme Clean* to the realm of a cosmetic rather than a toothpaste. We've even had people call our 800-number and say that the *Extreme Clean* carton looks too nice to throw away! We tell them, well, then, don't throw it away. And it's like, oh, I could keep it in the carton on my counter, couldn't I? It's this little moment of discovery.

Color is one of the ways you can create that kind of desire. Color creates clear associations with what a product is about.

Think about brands that own a color, what that color does for them, and how iconic that becomes over time. In thinking about owning a color, orange was a) available; and b) it was pretty disruptive in the category.

And, oh, by the way, the color orange was a very direct signal to consumers to "clean." Think about how often orange is used in cleaning products! Now, that can have a downside because people might say that they don't want a detergent in their mouths. But orange was a color we could own and that could create a very clear association with "clean." We didn't have to work to explain that.

We needed a great non-mint flavor to express "clean" that wouldn't be boring. We played with a lot of flavors but we were looking for one where the consumer would say, "my mouth feels so clean." We rejected flavors that consumers liked but that didn't pay off on "clean." What we didn't want was just to find a favorite flavor. We needed a flavor that when people were done they said, "Now, that's clean!" In fact, there are people who use *Extreme Clean* who don't love the flavor, but the way their mouth feels when they're done brushing is why they're buying the product.

We also had a lingering feeling of "clean" built into the formulation. It doesn't just technically clean your teeth; your teeth feel really clean and that feel-→

Donna J. Sturgess is the vice president of innovation and strategic planning at **GlaxoSmithKline**, Consumer Healthcare. She is responsible for ideation and innovation, focusing on global brand assets. Donna focuses on thought leadership to drive new ways of working to develop vibrant and viable solutions to business and product challenges to deliver remarkable products to consumers. She is a co-author of "The Big Moo," by the Group of 33, edited by Seth Godin.



← ing lasts. We heightened that sensation with micro-active foam—*Extreme Clean* is more foaming than other toothpastes. It worked not only from a functional standpoint, and then on top of that was layered this exquisite experience while brushing.

It was really about layering into the brand all of the things we thought would create synergy across the senses to build something that people would find remarkable. We also broke a norm in the category in that the product had no flavor listed on the carton. We actually had named the flavor and then took the name off the box. We decided that if you wanted to know what *Extreme Clean* tasted like, you were going to have to buy it!

The orange stripes surprised a lot of people. Internally, everyone just assumed that Aquafresh could only be red, white and aqua, which were our traditional colors. In fact, the brand is about *stripes* and not necessarily about those colors, *per se*.

But if you do really good strategic work, define your brand tightly and you bring people along in that process, everybody understands what the brand really stands for. Does the brand stand for red, white and aqua? Or does the brand stand for *stripes*? There are no “correct” answers to those questions, but our conclusion was that the Aquafresh brand ultimately stands for *stripes*.

Consumers had no problem with changing the stripes to orange and white; in fact, it was a delightful surprise for them. Yes, some people thought we should at least have three stripes instead of just orange and white. If there had been a way to add a sparkly silver stripe we might have done that. But the brand doesn’t stand for three stripes. It stands for stripes.

The fresh identity affected how we marketed the brand. Because the product

is so visually impactful, we went into outdoor advertising in some countries and did more print advertising than we had done in the past because there’s a bit of a show-off quality to the product. We had large, three- or four-foot cartons made for retailers. It’s a little bit like designer dresses—you put it in the window because the product has that appeal visually.

The advertising that launched the product uses imagery that had an “Architectural Digest” look to it—the exquisite upscale bathroom with the product sitting there at the sink. We had the “shower box” campaign, where the notion was that *Extreme Clean* is a shower for your mouth. We had people showering inside the carton, for example. We paid a lot more attention

to the visuals and the icons associated with the launch than we had in the past.

Every touch-point of this product speaks to “clean”—the clean lines, the clean typography, and the clean color. When you architecturally construct a brand, the payoff is bigger than the sum of the parts. So it really did have a bit of a show-off quality to it, and it still does.

The cost-of-goods conversation is always a challenge. Adding these sensory elements does cost more. When you build so many special things into your product, you’re going to find yourself under some challenges. There’s always someone who will say that you could sell just as much without spending the extra money.

It can be very hard to come to terms with quantifying the value of something like a plastic box instead of a paper one, or a cap that clicks versus one that works like any other cap. Consumer feedback is not very helpful here. You have to rely on your sense of design and your sense of branding that says: This is a critical element of what this product has to stand for.

There’s always internal tension over

“why can’t you do it cheaper?” This product went through as much rigor as any new product launch with a bit more challenge around some things that you can certainly tell cost more money. But the result is that *Extreme Clean*, in some respects, is the growth part of the Aquafresh brand. It’s doing extremely well and it’s doing well wherever we launch it.

When we launched it in Japan, it became a “4” share in a very short period of time—which tells you that great ideas that connect particularly emotionally to people travel internationally. This brand can stand up and say that it creates an emotional link with the user. You won’t say that you weren’t sure you were awake when you brushed your teeth this morning if you brushed with *Extreme Clean*.

Extreme Clean is drawing in a lot of customers that Aquafresh didn’t have before—people who were looking for something more exciting, more interesting, and more enjoyable. Of all the toothpastes in the category, *Extreme Clean* enjoys extreme loyalty among consumers. When people find it, they stay with it.

Paying so much attention to product detail and design paid off as a driver of repeat sales for *Extreme Clean*. It enjoys much higher loyalty than anything else in the category. It’s that polarity showing up, again. If you’re on the polarized side of “I love this stuff,” other toothpastes just aren’t going to satisfy you. So, being polarizing has paid off in loyalty for Aquafresh.

Stay tuned, because we have some exciting things coming. *Extreme Clean* has done so well for us that it is now a benchmark for us in terms of how we build innovation, how we think strategically about where our brand is, and how to drive emotional connections to our brands.

Extreme Clean has taught us to think with some freedom, to think first about what the best idea could be, and then decide whether we have to make compromises. It has liberated some of our marketing thinking in really good ways. The impact on our culture has really been terrific. ■