



Protecting the world's biggest brand with a smile

Gold | Global Effie | Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) | 2022

Brand/Client: **Colgate/Colgate Palmolive**

Lead Agency: **WPP Red Fuse**

Contributing Companies: **Wavemaker, Design Bridge**

(This case study has been edited by the entrant to remove confidential information)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We proved that growing brand health can effectively protect business value. In most countries, Colgate leads the oral care market. But erosion had begun, driven by autopilot-buying behavior with no emotional connection.

The business risk was significant- each global share point represents hundreds of millions of dollars. Without changing course, we could lose that within 3 years.

So, we took a risk and it paid off! We shifted investment from sub-brands to equity-building, reinventing Colgate as the Champion of Optimism, inspiring people to "Smile Strong." Share declines stopped, preserving brand value by increasing our distinctiveness and emotional bond.

THE CHALLENGE

Protect Colgate's leadership against competitive erosion by disrupting the category commoditization we helped create, with a universally relevant brand reinvention.

THE INSIGHT

In the face of rising pessimism, optimism is a powerful choice; a smile has the strength to better your world.

THE STRATEGIC IDEA/BUILD

Stop selling functional benefits. Start building an emotional connection to the Colgate Smile, making our brand famous for choosing optimism!

BRINGING THE IDEA TO LIFE

Rebrand Colgate as the Champion of Optimism, inspiring people to find the courage to “Smile Strong” and move forward.

THE RESULTS

We stopped global share decline, preserving hundreds of millions in value, by significantly increasing our brand distinctiveness and emotional bond.

THE CHALLENGE

STATE OF THE MARKETPLACE & BRAND’S BUSINESS

It may surprise you, but Colgate is the most penetrated brand in the world—in more houses than Coca-Cola!¹ In most regions (except US & China), Colgate holds Oral Care (OC) market leadership, primarily driven by toothpaste sales.

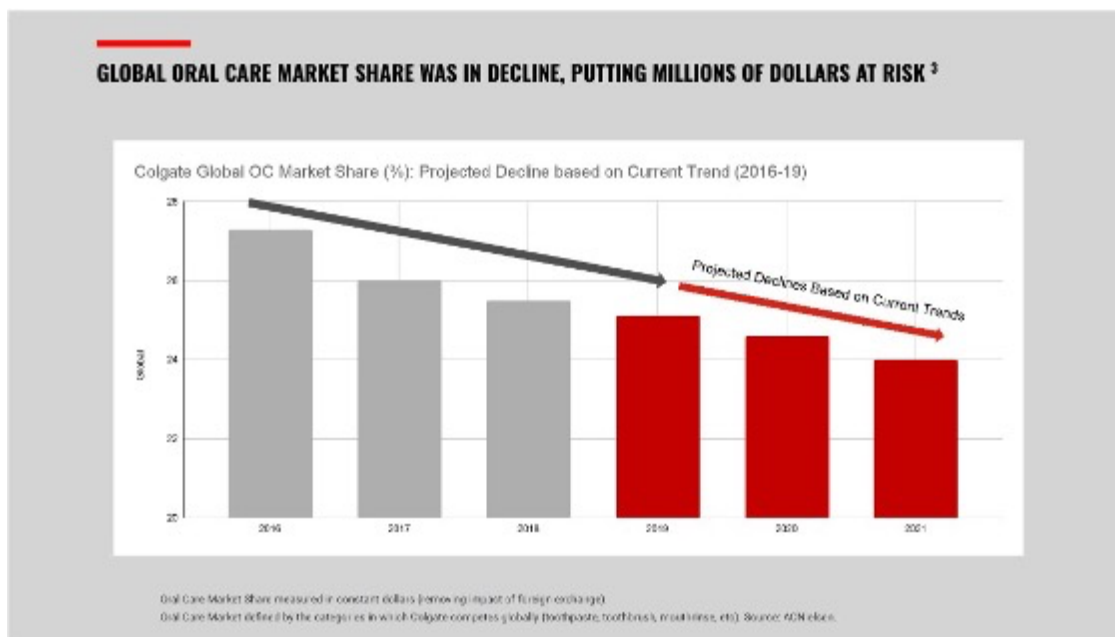
But we started to lose our stronghold when key market dynamics evolved: A rise in e-commerce with subsequent commoditization of global brands like ours, a rise in local brands with emotional appeal, and a rise in premium OC product categories outside toothpaste (whitening, power toothbrushes). Our global share in toothpaste and OC sharply declined.^{2,3}

For decades, Colgate and other global competitors had hammered away at functional product RTBs in sub-brand launches to differentiate ourselves—but instead, we blurred brand distinctiveness without building emotional salience.⁴ What good was being everywhere if Colgate looked and sounded like every other

brand? All our sub-brand advertising was no longer enough to drive growth. People's buying behavior went on autopilot, just when we needed brand affinity to work harder across our portfolio.

The business risk was real. From 2016 to 2019, our global OC market share dropped several points.³ With each point worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually, we stood to lose this if trends continued.³

We needed a dramatic change to stop global OC share decline and protect brand value: to reignite growth by building equity with a strong emotional bond that would halo beyond toothpaste, into premium and unsupported categories across the portfolio.



GLOBAL MARKETING CHALLENGE

Declines in Colgate's global OC market share significantly threatened current business—there was nowhere to go but down! But even more threatening long-term was erosion in our brand health. While Colgate identified as “trusted,” our brand distinctiveness and emotional bond were suffering,⁴ directly affecting our sales.

This forced us to reevaluate our communications strategy. A big risk was

necessary—reversing our habit of always spreading investment across multiple sub-brand launches, which were not adding up; instead, directing 30%+ of investment toward equity-building, to create brand affinity that would drive sales across the portfolio.

What's more, we wanted to elevate Colgate to iconic brand status with a single insight and campaign everywhere. Not just a couple of regions, but all geographies and generations. As the world's most penetrated brand, we connect across more cultures than other global brands, like Dove or Gillette, who often resort to slightly different insights and campaigns in different regions.

Finally, just as we launched, so did the global pandemic! This added the headwind of slower category growth (people spent less on oral hygiene for Zoom calls).³ An already low-interest category got worse. Our idea needed to really hit home with a universal human truth to protect the business.

OBJECTIVES & KPIs

We had 3 core objectives:

- 1. Our primary objective was to protect brand value by stopping global share decline.** Since different markets had different competitive situations, this required a combination of maintaining growth in some markets (e.g. Brazil, South Africa) and slowing declines in others (UK, Thailand). With each share point worth hundreds of millions annually, we stood to lose this if trends continued.³ **Our first KPI: maintain global OC market share at or above the current %.**
- 2. Our second KPI: increase Colgate Distinctiveness and Emotional Bond.** Our functional sub-brand campaigns were no longer breaking through category noise. We needed to build a strong emotional connection with people as a foundation for future growth that would halo across our portfolio, including unsupported and premium categories.
- 3. Our third KPI: increase media margin ROI and create a halo impact across our portfolio.** We aimed not only to beat the media margin ROI of sub-brand

conversion campaigns with equity advertising but also to demonstrate impact across unsupported categories (e.g toothbrush, mouthwash)-despite pandemic-driven cuts in media spend.

Sources

1. Kantar Worldpanel 2018 Brand Footprint Report
2. Colgate Data on File. Toothpaste Share Report, January 2022
3. ACNielsen, Global Oral Care Market Data
4. Colgate Data on File, Kantar Equity Tracker Report, November 2018
5. Colgate Data on File, Equity Growth Principles Update, November 2021

INSIGHTS & STRATEGY

AUDIENCE

Colgate often jokes that our target is “everyone with a mouth.” But there is often truth in humor. We have a wide portfolio of products relevant to an even wider array of targets in all regions: from Millennial parents raising healthy kids to Gen-Zers being trolled by influencer-driven brands to loyal older generations raised on Colgate. Our equity campaign, therefore, had to walk the line between attracting younger generations of new consumers without alienating our loyal base- and do it everywhere!

With older consumers, Colgate's brand perception was relatively stable. However, many had begun purchasing oral care products on autopilot.

Research suggested brands were not always important to their purchase journey (“I buy the red one.”).¹ Most couldn’t name a specific Colgate sub-brand (e.g. Colgate Total) we had advertised- they were just buying “Colgate”.¹ This encouraged us to think that investing in stronger Colgate equity was exactly what was needed!

For Millennial and Gen Z audiences, however, there was more of a gap in brand perception. While they see Colgate as “trustworthy”, we didn’t fare as well on “modern” and “worth paying more.”² Our functional communication of expertise wasn’t breaking through with these new shoppers. We realized it was

perhaps because this audience demands more of brands than just performance. They also care about shared values,³ and ours were not clearly being communicated. We needed to build real emotional salience for Colgate to get them to buy!

Our challenge was to find a single emotional connection to build a compelling equity umbrella across all these audiences. We needed an equity campaign to focus on deduplicated reach for the brand, under which sub-brand advertising could refocus on conversion against targeted audiences. Not to mention, it had to be based on a human insight that worked across all global cultures.

THE INSIGHT

In our search for a universal oral care insight, we didn't need to look too far. In fact, it was right under our noses—our smile! There's nothing more fundamental to human expression than smiling. It's common to every culture, every region.

We knew Colgate needed to "own the smile." But not just any smile. Smiling may be universal, but smiles have many forms and meanings. Some are fake, others forced. Some show joy, others courage. A Colgate Smile needed a specific emotional connection that transcended geographies and generations. So we looked to culture.

Through social listening, desk research, and regional workshops, we discovered that in today's world, we all live with challenges, big and small, that can cause paralyzing amounts of pessimism.⁴ From climate crisis to discrimination to personal disabilities— even the pandemic itself— daily negativity can create a sense of helplessness that stops us from moving forward. Truth is, it is getting harder to smile about the future. Colgate needed to help people stay optimistic. But how?

We then conducted an investigation of optimism across cultures, including a workshop with optimism guru, Matt Pepper (*Happiness: The Inside Job*).⁵ We examined how it's defined, shared, and what holds it back. What we uncovered

surprised us!

Optimism is not a feeling. It's a choice. One that people make to find and draw on that positive force within us, to fight against negativity that holds us back. And nothing makes that choice easier than the strength of a smile!

The meaning of a Colgate Smile became clear: to protect and inspire more smiles with the strength to overcome obstacles and change our lives and our world for the better. Because when we smile courageously within ourselves or share our smile with others, we find the strength to move forward.

THE STRATEGIC IDEA/BUILD

As the Champion of Optimism, Colgate empowers people to “Smile Strong” and choose optimism –much more powerful than you think!

THE GLOBAL EVOLUTION OF THE STRATEGIC IDEA

“Smile Strong” became a universal rallying cry for the brand. But each market approached expressing Colgate’s role as a Champion of Optimism differently to fit their culture: matching the vibrance of Brazil, reflecting the hopeful stoicism of the UK, or supporting the collectively purposeful ethos of Thailand and South Africa.

What forced our strategy to evolve the most was the global pandemic, which put optimism into stark relief. Each region shifted the expression of our tension as sources of pessimism evolved: from loneliness in lockdown to anxiety and fear in resurgence to mental health realities in the “new normal.”

Sources

1. Colgate Data on File. Global Oral Care Customer Journeys, 2018-19.
2. Colgate Data on File. Kantar Northstar Equity Tracker report, November 2018.
3. Kantar Purpose 2020 Study, November 2019.
4. Stephen Pinker, The Psychology of Pessimism, Cato’s Letters, The Cato Institute. Winter 2015.
5. Matt Pepper, Happiness the Inside Job. Cabin Press. January 2018.

KEY BUILDING BLOCKS

What remained consistent, along with new branding, was the format of sharing real stories of Smile Strong “Muses” who represent the power of choosing optimism. Each region found authentic stories reflecting cultural priorities related to pessimism, which evolved during the pandemic. Taglines varied according to cultural interpretations of optimism.

We learned that individual muses were more compelling than vignettes of multiple stories, especially when they included “mirror moments” when individuals face themselves and Colgate products remind them to smile and choose optimism.

We also learned that once established, digital-first media effectively maintained engagement; helpful when budget cuts hit.

STRATEGY

In Brazil, optimism is a way of life. Smile Strong fit naturally with Brazilian positivity, but also allowed us to shine a light where it fell short.¹ TVCs highlighted stories of marginalized people who smiled despite discrimination, from women with curly hair to single dads. Our inclusiveness was bold for a family brand, demonstrating just how serious we were about helping everyone smile strong. As pandemic lockdowns spread, the need to share smiles was felt more keenly. So we shifted to social media to share the power smiles have to unite people even when they are apart.

In the UK, stoicism is more prevalent than optimism. It takes trusted expertise to spark hope for a brighter future.² Fortunately, Colgate already held a place of trust in most households as oral care experts. In the face of uncertainty during the pandemic, we needed to spread that trust beyond mouth health to help people maintain emotional resilience. We did this by authentically demonstrating the power of courageous smiles to prevail in the face of adversity. With the help of an optimism expert, we prepared compelling content, including a Masterclass in Optimism taught by kids, that convinced the country to smile

strong and carry on.

In Thailand, Colgate was losing relevance with younger Thais to local brands, at a time when Thailand was being divided by progressive ideals in the form of hard-hitting protests.³ But modernizing wasn't going to be easy; we couldn't afford to alienate our older stronghold. By celebrating the Thai Yimsu (courageous) smile, our campaign bridged the growing gap between young and old by featuring authentic stories of modern Thais living activism without disrespecting tradition, seen even in our choice of media- with riveting presence in newspapers and TikTok!

In South Africa, there's an innate belief that positive change for individuals is only achieved through collective effort. This is crystallized in the idea of Ubuntu- "we thrive as individuals only when we all thrive as a people".⁴ Stories lose resonance when people feel they come from a perspective of western savior guilt or "poverty porn", so our message needed to feel authentically South African to inspire self-empowerment and collective action in addressing social ills. Therefore, we chose stories of people who were fighting for the collective good, like the #SeaTheBiggerPicture Ocean Initiative to educate youth about ocean conservation, and shared them in media like OOH to reach across socioeconomic classes.

Sources

1. Colgate Data of File. Optimism in LatAm: Social Listening Reports, 2019-2021.
2. Colgate Data of File. Optimism in EU: Social Listening Reports, 2019-2021.
3. Colgate Data of File. Optimism in Thailand: Social Listening Reports, 2019-2021.
4. Colgate Data of File. Optimism in South Africa: Social Listening Reports, 2019- 2021.

RESULTS

RESULTS OVERVIEW

All 3 of our stated objectives/KPIs were met:

1. **We maintained our global oral care market share above the current %,**

preserving brand value.¹ We went from losing global OC share points over 4 years to gaining share, ending 2021 slightly above 2019 levels.¹ Hundreds of millions of dollars in brand value were preserved, and this upward trend continues.

This result required a mix of accelerating growth in growing markets like Brazil and South Africa while slowing declines in markets like Thailand and the UK. These four markets exemplify the range of competitive situations we face, yet we achieved healthy organic growth in all,¹ despite budget cuts during the pandemic.

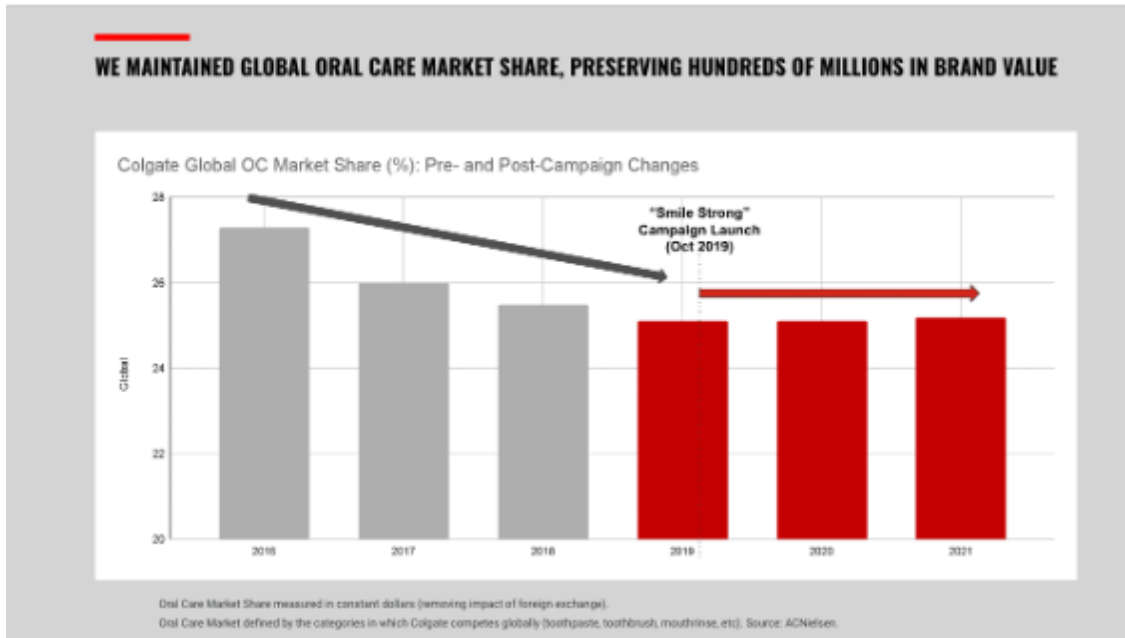
Other indicators of success included outperforming category growth, as well as healthy organic growth. Colgate had been performing significantly below global category growth since 2017.¹ In 2021, we outperformed the category by over 20%.¹ Organic growth also increased in key markets in 2021 vs 2019 (prior to the campaign launch).¹

2. We improved brand health by creating an emotional connection.² In all four markets, we increased brand distinctiveness and emotional bond compared to the period before the campaign; even in Brazil where we started high to begin with!²

3. The ROI of our equity campaign significantly outperformed all sub-brand ads and demonstrated a halo effect across the portfolio. Based on marketing mix modeling, the margin ROI of Colgate Equity advertising was higher than our product advertising, by an index of 261 in Brazil, 258 in Thailand, and 123 in the UK.³ (RSA data not available). It directly contributed to sales across the product portfolio- as a multiplier of growth in unsupported and premium product categories beyond toothpaste.³

What's more, this campaign not only drove business results but also made the Colgate Smile famous. We received accolades in local news and trade press.

Colgate was cited as a brand that “got pandemic advertising right.” We won a Cannes Lion for our UK work. We even received commendations from the Thai government as a social change agent. We could not be prouder.



“SMILE STRONG” CAMPAIGN MADE THE COLGATE SMILES FAMOUS AS A CHAMPION OF OPTIMISM

CANNES LIONS
INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF CREATIVITY
BRONZE LION

Gerety AWARDS
2 BRONZES

LIA
LONDON INTERNATIONAL AWARDS
2 SILVER
4 BRONZE

AD AGE
MOST POPULAR

STRATÉGIES GRAND PRIX
1 SILVER
1 BRONZE

AD STARS
BRONZE

COLGATE AIMS FOR POST-PANDEMIC SMILES IN RARE BRANDING CAMPAIGN

Colgate Launches World Smile Day Campaign in Thailand

UNE CAMPAGNE EN NOIR ET BLANC MAIS TOUT SOURIRE POUR COLGATE

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

- Natural Events (e.g. weather, natural phenomenon, etc.)

- Societal or Economic Events (e.g. changes in economic, political, social factors)

The Pandemic Effect: During the pandemic, one dynamic we noticed was that “trusted” brands were getting early preference from consumers. Some of our positive share gains may have been accelerated by a predisposition to choose more familiar brands in the personal care category. Trust was something Colgate already owned.

However, we also noted that as the pandemic continued, the opposite dynamic emerged. People started experimenting with new brands that they discovered as they spent more time online, especially in areas of low risk or interest (like oral care). In markets like Thailand, for example, the local competitor enjoyed the tailwind of online presence to drive their message, especially with the younger audience. The pandemic also globally fueled the localism that had been one of our headwinds from the start.

Sources

1. ACNielsen Data, 2021.
2. Colgate Data of File. Kantar Northstar Equity Tracker Report, December 2021.
3. Colgate Data of File. Analytics Partners Marketing Mix Model Reports, 2019- 2021.
4. Colgate Data of File. Consumer Sentiment During COVID-19: Social Listening Reports, April 2020-Jan 2021.

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