

FT WEEKEND - LIVING: Fifth blade is the final stroke

By Linton Chiswick

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In February 2004 an online satirical magazine called the Onion announced a new five-blade razor system by Gillette. "What part of this don't you understand?" ran the mock interview. "If two blades is good, and three blades is better, obviously five blades would make us the best f***ing razor that ever existed." It would be launched with the slogan . . . "You'll be so smooth, I could snort lines off your chin."

Last month, commerce mimicked comedy and Gillette announced the Fusion - a razor with five blades, due for American distribution next year.

If there's an Onion journalist wondering whether he or she invented shaving's next big thing, he's the least of Gillette's problems. Because there are some people who believe that what we need is a very different kind of men's shaving revolution, organised and directed by a disparate group of American, Canadian and British professionals, using the internet as a tool for disruption and dissent. Let's call it Shave Club. And the first rule of Shave Club is: old equals good.

The movement tipped over into the mainstream earlier this year when an American television journalist called Corey Greenberg used his technology slot on NBC's Today show to demonstrate what he'd learned about old-fashioned razors, creams and brushes. Millions watched Greenberg sweep a table of modern gels, foams and razors into a dustbin.

Greenberg's live shave provoked an unprecedented response. Working men, tired of their morning slice and dice, demanded further information. He posted a detailed article, which remains a buzz item on the social bookmarking sites and has been linked to and quoted widely. (It's now the foundation for a blog - Shaveblog - in which he analyses his daily shave.) Very quickly, Trumbers shaving cream was flying from the shelves. Old razors - considered junk metal just a fortnight earlier - were fetching premium prices on eBay.

What the viewers didn't know was that Greenberg was already a Shave Club inductee. Everything he taught he'd learned from a raggedy collection of blogs, internet forums and discussion sites where engineers, economists, lawyers and doctors gather, late into the night, to share tips, compare blades and argue technique with a passion hard to believe.

What Greenberg did contribute is the term "shavegeek", now part of an underground lexicon that includes "the three Ts" (the high-end British shave companies Trumplers, Taylors and Truefitt & Hill), "DEs" (old-fashioned double-edge razors) and "faceturbation" (the habit of stroking one's face throughout the day in admiration of a perfect morning shave).

The movement's slightly controversial king of shaves is a charismatic Texan called Charles A. Roberts - a wetshaving philosopher whose series of 12 essays, *Shaving Graces*, goes well beyond putting blade to stubble and encompasses conservative social commentary, man's relationship with war and the squalor of corporate America. Roberts's own HydroLast products turn wetshaving into a precise science, and men have been known to board planes to attend the one-to-one shaving lessons he conducts at his shop in Austin.

Roberts is in no doubt whatsoever that this is the beginning of a sea change.

"There's been a very dramatic escalation of interest. I opened up the very first wet shavers' forum. I took it down about six months later, but six more popped up after that."

The philosophical core of Shave Club is a belief that a close, pain-free shave is achievable only with a badger brush and cream and a single-blade razor. Modern multi-blade cartridges are viewed with suspicion: aggressive, face-tearing rows of poor-quality blades that go blunt quickly but cost 10 times the best-quality generic "razor blade", accompanied by foams laced with topical numbing agents.

There's a social-nostalgic element, too: a nostalgia for the days of the barber shop shave, a need to connect with loved and respected fathers and grandfathers, whose brushes and razors a few have inherited.

It can get a little frightening. Photographs of shaving brushes and frothy creams get uploaded and downloaded like porn. Vintage razors are tweaked and modified like cars.

According to Ben Glazier, of London's venerable shaving institution Trumplers (where demand for barber shop shaves is at its highest since the invention of the cartridge razor), it's no wonder men take it seriously: "After 15 years of a burning face and blood on their collar, they learn there's a better way of doing this. It transforms every morning of their lives."

Charles Roberts also makes the serious point that this is the democratising, disruptive ability of the internet at its most basic. Gillette is a giant corporation that can put a product in every supermarket in the world but it can't stop the dissatisfied from meeting online and discussing alternatives.

The message has already seeped through to the men's magazines and, through them, to a portion of consumers. Robert Johnston, of barbershop and specialist shaving goods retailer The Gentleman's Shop, reports a 300 per cent increase in demand for double-edge razors following Greenberg's TV appearance.

Learning to shave with an old-fashioned razor isn't for the faint-hearted and nobody seriously foresees the death of the cartridge in the near future. But Roberts, for one, is determined that this revolution will at least be televised:

"I'm working on a wetshaving DVD. Because I can teach you how to do this thing properly; and then you can't improve on it. When you get done, your face is like a light bulb. I mean there's nothing on it at all. It's perfect."

A collection of Shave Club links can be found at:
www.wists.com/ftweekend/shaveclub