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Eric Johnson

U 1232B fuck school
of bus



New technology lets companies add excitement and a premium price to some old consumer categories.

Creating a
buzzzzzz

effectively than they could the old-fashioned way
Gillette's teeth become sharp in the middle
The battery-powered technology in the head

CONSUMER PRODUCTS GROUP

MH 1232B Tucker School of Bus

By Naomi Aoki
GLOBE STAFF

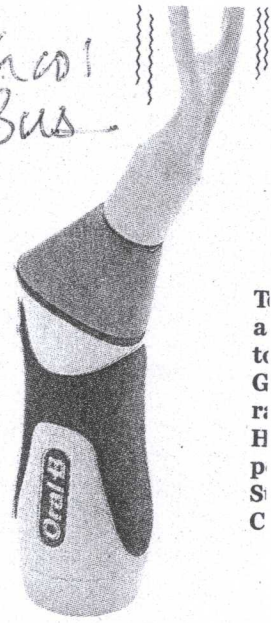
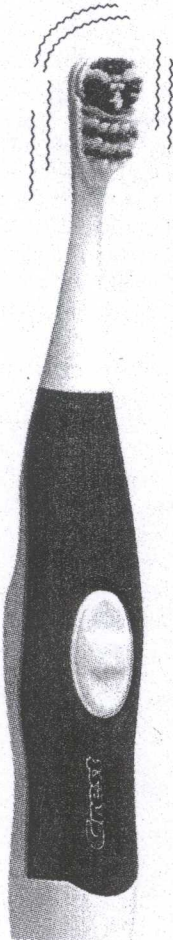
The new way to generate buzz in consumer products: Put a battery in it. From toothbrushes to dish scrubs, a growing number of familiar consumer products are being reborn as battery-powered devices that oscillate, rotate, spin, pulsate, and vibrate, all in the name of making life's daily chores just a little less mundane.

The newest addition to the list, the Gillette Co.'s M3Power, is a battery-powered razor with a pulsating handle, coming this week to a store near you.

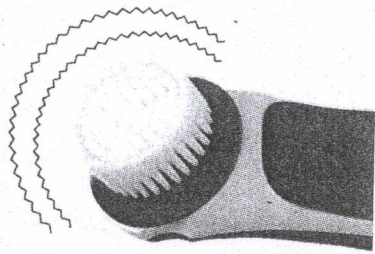
"Most of these things are a lot of to-do over a little advantage," said Tucker Viemeister, a New York designer who among other things helped create OXO Good Grips kitchen utensils.

The battery-powered products hitting the market in recent months pose the question: Is this innovation or a consumer-products fad? The companies making the products argue that they let people scrub, brush, launder, and shave more easily and effectively than they could the old-fashioned way. Others say the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

The battery-powered technology inside the prod-



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Creating a buzz in consumer products

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ucts isn't necessarily new. But because of advances in consumer electronics, battery-powered motors are now cheap enough to be practical even for relatively inexpensive products. Even so, at \$5 to \$15, the powered implements are pricier than their manual counterparts, giving companies the chance to charge a premium for commodities as ordinary as dish scrubs, toothbrushes, dental floss, and razors.

The buzzing, pulsating, spinning devices also add excitement to otherwise mundane product categories and drive demand for refills and accessories. Two head replacements for Procter & Gamble Co.'s battery-powered Crest SpinBrush cost as much as the \$5 brush itself. At \$10.99, a package of four M3Power razor blade cartridges cost just \$4 less than the pulsating handle.

The companies defend the premium prices, saying they reflect improved performance. P&G said its studies show that brushing with Crest SpinBrush leaves teeth cleaner than manual brushing. Gillette said M3Power outperformed its top-selling Mach3 Turbo in consumer tests on 68 measures, including closeness, smoothness, and comfort. The Boston firm said the new razor, an addition to the Mach3 family, brings a new dimension to shaving: the feeling of being massaged.

"Gillette's responsibility to consumers is to manufacture products that perform at the highest levels," said spokesman Eric Kraus. "If we can make shaving better by combining a pulsating handle with the best blades we've ever produced, that is clearly innovation. We are not trying to be a part of some fad."

Consumers will prove the ultimate judges. But a wide range of industry professionals point out potential pitfalls.

Barbara Bund, a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, questions whether companies are caught up in a frenzy brought on by the success of battery-powered toothbrushes (now a \$600 million market worldwide).

Product designer Glen Walter, a partner at Boston firm (Eleven), wonders if the buzz is more about driving sales of refills, batteries, and laundry detergent than making better products.

New York designer Viemeister worries about batteries and spare parts piling up in landfills.

Brookline dental hygienist Caryn Keegan and North Carolina cleaning guru Marla Cilley, better known by the moniker FlyLady, argue that a little elbow grease may be simpler and more effective than these high-tech gadgets. On the other hand, they said, if a little spinning and vibrating makes people clean, floss, or brush more often, then the battery-powered devices might be worth the buzz.

"I do believe that if you make it fun, you will get the job done," the FlyLady said. "But a lot of people buy the latest cleaning potion or magic wand to get them motivated, and all it ever does is sit in the cabinet and never get used."

The popularity of battery-powered consumer goods can be traced to Crest SpinBrush. Just a year after Procter & Gamble bought the technology in 2000 from a small company called Dr. John's Products, the SpinBrush was amassing sales of more than \$200 million a year. Priced at \$5, SpinBrush brought the power of electric toothbrushes within reach of the average consumer.

The Cincinnati company looked across its portfolio to see what else might benefit from a shake, rattle, or roll. In March, P&G introduced the Dawn Power Dish Brush. An 11.5 inch potscrubbing gizmo with rotating bristles powered by four AA bat-

teries, the dish scrub retails for \$7. The same month, the company launched Tide StainBrush, a small brush with a spinning head of "bristles that comes with two AA batteries and a 5-ounce bottle of Tide in a \$5.50 starter kit.

"Clearly the SpinBrush being so successful was an inspiration within P&G," said David Dintenfuss, the company's brand manager for Crest toothbrushes in North America.

The oscillating toothbrush also seems to have inspired competitors. Gillette — the maker of Mach3 and Venus razors, Duracell batteries and Oral-B toothbrushes — introduced its Braun Oral-B Cross Action Power toothbrush in 2001. The Cross Action is now the second-best-selling battery-powered toothbrush, behind Crest SpinBrush and ahead of Colgate-Palmolive Co.'s Actibrush. In March, Gillette launched Oral-B Hummingbird, a battery-powered vibrating device armed with dental floss. Johnson & Johnson launched its Reach Access Power Flosser the same month.

Now, Gillette is powering up yet another category with its newest addition to the \$7.5 billion razor-and-blade market. A battery-powered motor inside the handle of M3Power causes the razor to vibrate gently in the hand. According to Gillette, the pulsations pull the skin taut, allowing the razor to cut closer to the hair. They also make hairs stand on end, eliminating the need for repeated strokes to cut stubble lying flat against the skin or growing in different directions.

The company said it spent years developing the new razor, though it won't say how many years or how much money. The new razor, packaged with two AAA batteries and two razor cartridges, will cost \$14.99, compared to \$8.99 for Mach3 Turbo. The price is a far cry from the \$2.95 charged for Trac II, the

world's first twin-blade razor, when it came out 33 years ago.

"This isn't about any specific technology breakthrough, it's about the relentless improvement of technology," said Eric Johnson, director of the center for digital strategies at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business. "The products may be real improvements or just cool gimmicks, but the little extra allows you to take a commodity product and charge more for it."

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