



FOUR- AND FIVE-BLADE RAZORS:

Smoother Shaves or High-Priced HOOEY?



*Braving the
**BATTLE OF
THE BLADES,**
our intrepid
reporter risks
nicks, cuts, and
razor burn to
sharpen your
savings*

BY DAVID APPELL

Occam's Razor is a venerable concept holding that when it comes to explaining stuff, simpler is usually better. In the brave new world of 21st-century razors, though—such a dope, that Occam. Just over a century since a bottlecap salesman named King Camp Gillette invented the safety razor, the competition is more cut-throat than ever as the men's-wet-shaving arms race that picked up in the 1970's continues to slash its way onward and upward. Hit any drug store and you'll face a bewildering array of options, from 17¢ single-blade store-brand disposables to the latest big-brand escalation, the \$10-\$12 secret weapon unveiled several months ago by the company crafty old King named after himself. The silver-and-blue Gillette Fusion is a gem of gimcrackery that's become the Hummer of wet-shaving

razors by upping the blade ante to five—count 'em, 1-2-3-4-5. And that doesn't even include the sixth blade on the back side for "precision work," sideburn and goatee moments that call for a Mini Cooper instead of an H1.

Way cool, I thought—and then laid eyes on a sleek, orange-accented chrome-and-gray contraption crouched virilely within lurid orange packaging, like a mysterious marvel of NASA tech. The "Fusion Power" (\$12) vibrates, further souped up with a microchip and AAA battery, and according to Gillette it "creates a shaving surface that distributes the shaving force across the blades for significantly less irritation and more comfort." Eager to experience this holy grail, I finally hacked open the stiff plastic, reached for the shiny object of my desire—and sliced the crap out of my thumb on

PHOTOS BY DANIEL PORTNOY

the backside blade, practically invisible amid all that orange and chrome. Much bleeding ensued. Note to Gillette: how about sticking some kind of cover on that sucker, dudes?

Once ready to do the actual deed, I admit that eying all that hyper-sharp steel descend upon my tender visage freaked me out slightly. But it rode smoothly, bracketed by a grooved rubber “comfort guard” below and an aloe/vitamin-E “lubrastrip” above. The vibrations did nothing for me, but overall the shave was very smooth indeed, and the single blade on the back did work well for sideburns. But...a-dozen-smackers-plus-\$3.44-per-refill-cartridge worth of good? Better than the regular Fusion, or even the Mach3 Turbo I’ve been happily using for years? Eh, not so much.

And where, for pity’s sake, will it all end? “It won’t be long before we have a wall of blades you rub your face against,” deadpans Seth Porges, products editor of *Men’s Health* (which nonetheless has just bestowed its 2006 award for best new shaving product on the Fusion). Adds radio and newspaper commentator Lionel Waxman, “...the day is coming when razors will be custom-built to fit the man’s face. They will be filled with blades strategically placed so that one deft movement would shave the entire face at once. They will have indicator lights and probably make appropriate sounds. They will cost hundreds of dollars and will offer no refills. Mark my words.”

TRIUMPH OF THE SHILL

So are the new mega-razors just another case of clever marketing trumping common sense? Certainly America’s Big Two, Gillette and Schick, have long been expert in finding ever new, creative, and above all lucrative ways to tempt the 74 million wet shavers in America into constantly trading up, even when said ways start to seem a little silly (Bic is French and makes only humble disposables). Any oldtimers remember how *Saturday Night Live* ribbed Gillette back in 1975 with a spoof commercial for the “Triple-Trac” (“Because you’ll believe anything”)?

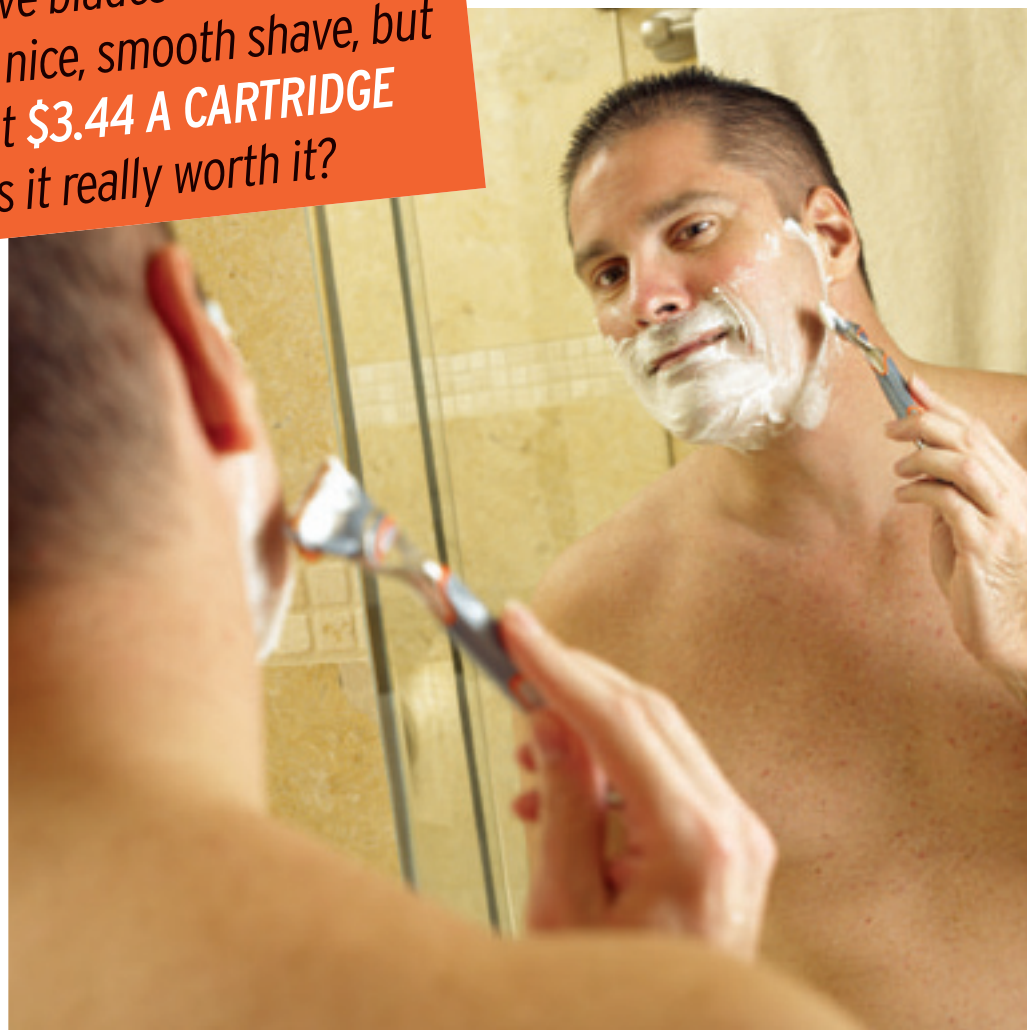
What about last year’s article supposedly penned by Gillette’s CEO for *The Onion*, a whole year before the Fusion (“Sure, we could go to four blades next, like the competition. Well, [expletive deleted] it. We’re going to five blades. Just key the music and call the chorus girls, because we’re on the edge—the razor’s edge—and I feel like dancing.”)?

OK, so who’s giggling now? Even disposables are bristling with three blades these days, and at least one is up to four (Old Spice H.E. 4x4, \$1.66 a pop). Today’s guys, more interested in grooming than previous generations, are in fact buying these things; one market research group estimated that the U.S. shaving products market increased nearly 15 percent between 1998 and 2003. As for whether

any of these blade-a-ramas are actually worth the extra dough, the answer isn’t so clear cut. Porges of *Men’s Health* points out that it totally depends on skin sensitivity and beard type. “If your face grows coarse, curlyish hair and is more prone to ingrown hairs,” he asserts, “five blades is not a good idea. If you have thinner hair and lighter, fairer skin, it could be right for you.”

I got another opinion from the chaps over at the South Florida branch of the decade-old Art of Shaving (800/493-2212, www.theartofshaving.com), a New Age-meets-stripped-pole “barber spa.” Master barber John Yasso charges a cool \$35 to wield an old-fashioned straight-edge on you, but on himself he uses the \$8.79 Gillette Mach3 and doesn’t necessarily see the utility in four and five blades, let alone battery power. On the other hand, Yasso says, “You’ll probably

Five blades can make for a nice, smooth shave, but at \$3.44 A CARTRIDGE is it really worth it?



want more than one blade, because people are more likely to get razor burn with lighter, single-blade razors. They end up having to press too hard.”

Then there’s also the little matter that, as a Gillette marketing exec once observed, “There’s a lot of psychology to shaving.” Well, hello. In America today, newer is better, more is best, and boys love toys. So slap on more sharp stuff, toss ‘em a buzzy button to push, and you can get some blokes to pony up for anything, right?

CARVING OUT ANSWERS

On the off chance I was being flip and unfair, I decided to take an informal poll among men of my acquaintance, as well



Despite those who vouch for them, our testing found single blades to be good for **NOTHING BUT PAIN!**

as test-drive with an open mind various razors I bought at Walgreens, both disposable—60 percent of the market—and those taking refill cartridges (interestingly, I had to hunt to track down

even one double-blade cartridge model, and there wasn’t an Atra or Trac II in sight; I suspect they’re being phased out in favor of 3+ blades). None of it’s scientific in the slightest, but I felt it would give a better sense of how many blades is too few, too many, and just right. I

left out old-fashioned safety and straight razors; you can’t find them in most drugstores, and though they’re available online as specialty items, you’ll typically shell out \$26 and up for a

safety razor (whose refills typically sell for \$4-\$5 per ten-pack) and \$60 and up for a straight razor (all you have to do is keep it sharpened). In the box you can compare the prices and features of the models I tested and their refills (that’s where they

Making the Cut

SINGLE BLADES CAN FALL SHORT, WHILE 4-5 IS OVERKILL; PASS ON “POWER” VERSIONS; TRIPLE BLADES SEEM TO DELIVER THE BEST BALANCE OF SHAVE QUALITY AND PRICE

RAZOR	COST	(PER RAZOR OR REFILL)	FEATURES	NOTES
SINGLE BLADES				
WALGREENS Single Blade disposable	12-pack \$1.99	17¢	1 blade; straight hard plastic handle (shortest of all tested); no frills.	Needed more passes than Bic Sensitive below, didn’t catch hairs under chin. Almost like not shaving.
BIC Sensitive disposable	12-pack \$3.49	29¢	1 blade; straight hard plastic handle; no frills.	Decent, but some nicks/ razor burn; stubble evident below skin; early 5 o’clock shadow.
DOUBLE BLADES				
WALGREENS Twin disposable	10-pack \$2.99	30¢	2 blades; straight hard plastic handle; “Plus” version adds lube strip.	OK, no nicks, but plenty of stubbles evident under skin. No difference between lube strip/plain.
BIC Twin Select disposable	10-pack \$3.49	35¢	2 blades; straight hard plastic handle.	Smooth, no nicks, but still felt some stubble beneath.
WALGREENS Comfort Touch disposable	5-pack \$2.99	60¢	2 blades; pivot head; lubricating strip; rubberized handle.	No nicks, but snags a bit; more stubble under skin than usual.
SCHICK SlimTwin disposable	10-pack \$6.99	70¢	2 blades; lube strip; “one-touch cleaning” button ; rubberized handle.	Though decent results/no nicks, too light/less close than similar Bic/Gillette. But like that cleaning button!
GILLETTE Good News! disposable	12-pack \$8.49	71¢	2 blades; straight hard plastic handle; regular and “Pivot Plus” versions.	Smooth, but stubble evident below skin; 5 o’clock shadow appeared early.
GILLETTE Custom Plus disposable	10-pack \$8.49	85¢	2 blades; pivot head; straight rubberized handle.	Smooth, but slight nicks. Feel some stubble left against grain.
BIC Comfort Twin disposable	2-pack \$1.79	90¢	2 blades; lube strip; rubberized handle.	Smooth, a couple of nicks, minimal stubble still felt.
GILLETTE Sensor Excel cartridge	10-pack \$12.49	\$1.25	2 blades; lube strip; handle with rubberized strips \$7.69 w/2 refills.	No nicks, but less smooth/close than any 3-blade & most other 2-blades.
TRIPLE BLADES				
WALGREENS Speed 3 disposable	6-pack \$4.99	83¢	3 blades; pivot head; lube strip; ridged/rubberized handle.	No nicks; as smooth/close as any 2-blade, but not 3-blade disposables.
WALGREENS Triple Blade cartridge	5-pack \$4.99	\$1.00	3 blades; lube strip; partly rubberized handle \$4.99 w/3 refills.	Smooth, no nicks; some stubble beneath, but generally as good as most 3-blade disposables.

always get you)—as well as my reactions to each, for what they're worth.

As for my little poll, my 20 gents more or less split down the middle between two and three blades; half were just dandy with various twin-bladers (Gillette Atra Plus and Sensor, Bic and Gillette Good News! disposables), while nine agreed with me that three were the way to go (whether Mach3 or store brands); meanwhile, my lawyer friend John remained unwholesomely attached to his Norelco. Nobody liked the single-edges ("shreds my skin and draws blood every time," griped Ed the writer), but on the opposite end, a couple who'd tried the four-blade Schick Quattro didn't find much difference from the Mach3, and nobody gave a flying dingdong about the five-blade Fusion. Nor did my respondents opine that the vibration gimmick made any real difference (seconding a

January 2005 *Consumer Reports* verdict on the Mach3 regular versus "power" version: "no need to spend an extra \$7 for a little buzz to the beard"). In fact, for some it was, as my bud Sebastian most succinctly put it, "bloody distracting and annoying."

So after all that shaving and polling, do I have any words of wisdom? Like my buddies and John Yasso, I'd avoid the single-blade (available only in disposables these days), unless you really need to save the cash or have a really light beard. On moderate to heavy growth, they can tend to nick and snag more, and need more pressure and elbow grease to scrape the hair off (usually leading to irritation and razor burn). In double-blade models, I prefer cartridge over disposable and I like something with a little more heft than a plastic throwaway, as well as a handle that's not just hard plastic but is partly

rubberized and/or molded to make it an easier hold. My favorite is still the triple-blade cartridge razor (some three-blade disposables do a pretty decent job, too); add a fourth or fifth or tenth blade, and you're simply forking over more moolah for drastically diminishing returns (indeed, say many dermatologists, the more blades, the more friction).

But that's just me, guys. Ultimately, it all boils down to the subjective tastes and needs of you and your follicles, along with a good dose of trial and error. On the other hand, I can offer one last morsel of food for thought:

The New York Times style section would now have us believe that big ol' bushy beards are on their way back...

Miami-based David Appell wrote about online custom-tailored suits in the spring 2006 issue of Smart Shopping.

RAZOR	COST	(PER RAZOR OR REFILL)	FEATURES	NOTES
TRIPLE BLADES (CONTINUED)				
BIC Comfort 3 disposable	4-pack \$4.29	\$1.07	3 blades; lubricating strip; straight rubberized handle.	Smooth, no nicks; a bit of stubble underneath.
BIC Comfort 3 Advance disp.	4-pack \$5.79	\$1.45	3 blades; pivot head; lube strip; molded rubberized handle.	Smooth, but several nicks; some stubble beneath.
SCHICK Xtreme 3 disposable	8-pack \$11.99	\$1.50	3 blades; regular version w/vitamin E strip, "sensitive skin" w/aloe strip.	Smooth, no nicks; some stubble beneath.
GILLETTE Sensor 3 Excel cartridge	10-pack \$15.99	\$1.60	3 blades; lube strip; pivot head; handle with rubberized strips \$8.29 w/2 refills.	Smooth, no nicks; a bit more stubble than with Mach3.
GILLETTE Sensor 3 disposable	4-pack \$7.49	\$1.87	3 blades; spring-mounted pivot head; lube strip; "sensitive skin" version.	Smooth, no nicks; some stubble beneath.
GILLETTE Mach3 cartridge	12-pack \$23.99	\$2.00	3 blades; pivot head; lube strip; handle with rubberized strips \$8.79 w/2 refills.	Smooth, no nicks; minimal stubble underneath.
GILLETTE Mach3 Turbo Nitro cartridge	8-pack \$18.99	\$2.37	3 blades; pivot head; lube strip. rubberized handle \$9.49 w/1 refill.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to Mach3 regular.
GILLETTE Mach3 Power cartridge	8-pack \$21.99	\$2.75	3 vibrating blades; pivot head; lube strip; partly rubberized handle \$11.99 w/1 refill.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to above Mach3s. Thicker/longer than regular; battery chamber design awkward.
QUADRUPLE BLADES				
SCHICK Quattro cartridge	8-pack \$11.99	\$1.50	4 blades; 2 lube strips; partly rubberized handle \$9.99 w/2 refills.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to Mach3.
OLD SPICE H.E. 4x4 disposable	3-pack \$4.99	\$1.66	4 blades; pivot head; lube strips; partly rubberized/unusually arched handle.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to 3-blade disposables.
SCHICK Quattro Power cartridge	8-pack \$21.99	\$2.75	4 vibrating blades; 1 skin-stretching+ 2 lube strips; handle \$11.99 w/2 refills.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to regular Quattro. Partly rubberized handle longer/thicker than regular.
QUINTUPLE BLADES				
GILLETTE Fusion cartridge	8-pack \$23.99	\$3.12	5 blades; 1 blade on back; lube strips; rubberized handle \$9.99 w/1 refill.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to Mach3. Single blade on back helps a bit.
GILLETTE Fusion Power cartridge	8-pack \$27.49	\$3.44	5 vibrating blades; 1 blade on back; lube strips; handle \$11.99 w/1 refill.	Smooth, no nicks; similar to regular Fusion. Partly rubberized handle longer/thicker than regular.