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## **Diet Coke: Brand Message In A 'Cottle'**

For consumers, emotional needs almost always trump practical benefits. Innovating within a category or responding to category trends can certainly drive growth for a consumer brand, but a broader view of societal trends and the consumer's emotional needs can lead to bigger long-term growth. Understanding a product's potential role in the evolution of cultural trends allows a brand to craft messaging and evolve product benefits in step with the evolution of the consumer and popular culture's emotion-driven needs and desires.

One solid example of a company that "gets it" is Coca-Cola. Its latest success--Diet Coke's rise in the United States to the No. 2 soft drink over Pepsi's traditional "sugared" offering--is more about the powerful social values that determine what we pull from the fridge, order in a restaurant, or carry around the office than about the competition between two soda titans. Yes, diet soda (or water) is an easy win when making an effort to stay healthy or fit. But as the culture that perfected the art of on-the-go eating and drinking, Americans tote their drink of choice as a message as to how they wish to be perceived. The ubiquitous can of diet soda not only conveys that we must have a desperate desire to stay hydrated, but additionally that we wish to be perceived as health-conscious and in-the-know.

In fact, shifting social values are what led to the invention of Coca-Cola in 1886 in the first place--Pepsi followed in 1898--when the early rumblings of what would eventually be called "The Noble Experiment" caused a pharmacist in Atlanta Georgia to replace the alcohol in his popular nerve tonic with sugar. The primary ingredient, cocaine, was not the problem. State by state, prohibition laws outlawing the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol were being passed. The public needed a new drink. Coca-Cola syrup mixed with carbonated water provided sober refreshment at a new and popular bar--the soda fountain.

Careful not to tarnish the brand, The Coca-Cola Company waited until 1982 to release Diet Coke, opting instead to launch artificially sweetened TaB in 1963. TaB, still around and recently given a "face-lift," seems to be holding on mainly out of nostalgia and the kitsch factor. Since the '80s, not only has Diet Coke--99 percent water itself--become an extremely successful sub-brand, it also has become a brand in its own right, retaining the equity and heritage of its parent company while conveying the cues of more current social values.

And while sugar is still the king of soda ingredients, with regular Coke continuing to outsell all other soft drinks, diet soda alternatives have continued to grow in overall market share. That's despite the recent troubled economy, during which most name-brand sodas (traditional and sugar-free) and waters have seen a dip in sales. Again, that underscores the power of the consumer mindset.

However, being the social creatures we are, we also can be socially awkward. As an extension of the bar culture and an evolution of the water cooler or coffee clutch, Coca-Cola understands how a can of Diet Coke provides us with the comforting social accessory or prop we crave. Though our inability to wean ourselves from "the bottle" might be perceived as a concern in several stages of Freudian development, we could safely agree that there is a comfort in having a drink in hand in most social situations. Like the dramatic pause taken by removing our glasses, taking a drag on a now mostly illegal cigarette, or pausing thoughtfully before saying something worth sharing, the can/bottle gives us that theatrical moment--the moment that seems to convey we are thinking important thoughts and cannot possibly continue until we are refreshed by our Diet Coke.

Of course, the aluminum can's friendly and recyclable persona has also escaped the growing concern that PET bottles--used since the '70s--will one day be responsible for the undoing of civilization. That's just another example of Coca-Cola being in sync with social mores.



So ... the can/bottle, the “cottle”--sounds like coddle or cuddle (which sort of works, right?)--has become the dominant social lifestyle accessory for both men and women. It both promotes and reinforces our drink of choice and adherence to popular social values, while giving us the physical prop we desire to be more comfortable and fluid around our peers. Diet Coke, coupled with the equity of the Coca-Cola name, has certainly benefited by being invited to almost every social gathering and business meeting, while accompanying us everywhere in between. Diet Coke is perceived as the smarter, more enlightened choice, and certainly the lesser evil when more flavor is needed in our lives.

Diet Coke has become a brand in its own right. Is it possible that in 10 years or less diet drinks will actually surpass the original in market share? If Diet Coke and the “cottle” remain part of our armor, then that day might very well be on its way.