Irony Alert: Coca-Cola Ad Says It’s Helping to Fight Obesity

[Brandi, selected from Diets in Review](http://www.care2.com/greenliving/author/dietsinreview)

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In an effort to soften its reputation as being [one of the main causes of the childhood obesity epidemic](http://www.care2.com/greenliving/soft-drink-industry-big-tobacco.html), this week Coca-Cola released a new series of ads directly addressing the issue. It is the first time the company has used ads to comment on its side of the story about the link between obesity rates and sugary drinks.

The [two-minute commercial](http://livepositively.com/comingtogether/) will air during the highest-rated shows on MSNBC, Fox News and CNN. Another 30-second spot will air during “American Idol” and right before the Super Bowl, and features ways for Americans to burn off the calories found in a can of Coke.

The ad features a montage of happy people drinking Coke and doing everyday activities. It begins, “For over 125 years, we’ve been bringing people together. Today we’d like people to come together on something that concerns all of us – obesity,” the soft spoken narrator says.

But does the company who told us to “open an ice cold Coca-Cola and choose happiness” really have the public’s best interest in mind with these new advertisements?

Coca-Cola says that it wanted to run the ads in order to tell its story, not as a reaction to negative public sentiment about sugary drinks. However, it looks an awful lot like the soft drink giant is looking for some positive PR in the wake of study upon study proclaiming there is a direct correlation between sugary drinks and obesity as well as a [host of other health problems](http://www.care2.com/causes/is-your-diet-drink-making-you-depressed.html). If Coke doesn’t become active in telling their story about what causes obesity now, perhaps they know that soon they’ll be struggling to stay afloat.

Recent legislation surely has something to do with the beverage company’s decision to begin an aggressive ad campaign. [New York City’s ban on the sale of sodas](http://www.care2.com/greenliving/drink-downsizing-is-the-proposed-nyc-soda-ban-a-good-thing.html) larger than sixteen ounces was a bold step, one that the soft drink industry vigorously campaigned against. Other policy approaches like beverage taxes may soon follow.

The Coca-Cola commercial proclaims, “Beating obesity will take action by all of us based on one simple, common sense fact: all calories count, no matter where they come from, including Coca-Cola and everything else with calories. And if you eat and drink more calories than you burn off, you’ll gain weight.”

This is true, to an extent. But the other side of the equation is that if a person gets their daily recommended calories exclusively or even mostly from sugary beverages, their weight will skyrocket. **Not all calories are created equal.** One must factor in nutrition when considering calories, and soft drinks contain very few vitamins and an overdose of sugar. And [marketing to children](http://www.dietsinreview.com/diet_column/06/junk-food-ads-during-kids-programming-in-the-crosshairs/) certainly makes obesity rates go up as they learn to reach for a soda instead of water or juice.

Another [ad campaign that went viral late in 2012](http://www.care2.com/causes/polar-bears-telling-it-like-it-is.html) shares what Coca-Cola doesn’t:

* The largest source of calories in our diet come from sugary drinks
* A child’s risk of diabetes goes up sixty percent with each extra soda per day
* One or two soft drinks per day increases anyone’s risk of diabetes by twenty five percent

Called “The Real Bears,” the video released by the Center for Science in the Public Interest is a satire on Coca-Cola’s polar bear ads. In the CSPI’s version, a polar bear family suffers from diabetes, erectile dysfunction, rotting teeth, and other health problems as a result of their reliance on Coke, all the while being bombarded with messages about how Coke brings happiness.

Two very different ads telling completely different stories – which one do you believe?

[Why Coke and Pepsi Will Talk Obesity, but Not Diabetes](http://www.mediabistro.com/prnewser/why-coke-and-pepsi-will-talk-obesity-but-not-diabetes_b77051)

By [Elizabeth S. Mitchell](http://www.mediabistro.com/prnewser/author/emitchell) on November 7, 2013

PR Newser



We’ve all seen **Coke** and **Pepsi**‘s pro-health, obesity-prevention campaigns that insist their sweet beverages can be a part of an active, healthy lifestyle, especially given their calorie-free options. But these ads never seem to mention diabetes, which is quickly becoming an even bigger PR problem for sugary brands than obesity. As it turns out, there’s a reason for the glaring omission.

*Adweek* [reports that information released](http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/coke-and-pepsi-face-diabetes-backlash-153613) by Wall Street bank **Credit Suisse** and research done by **Georgetown University** show that most people who saw a sugary soda ad with a pro-exercise, anti-obesity message reacted with a positive attitude toward the products’ parent brand. When the ad was changed to send an anti-diabetes message, however, participants’ attitudes toward the brand became 37 percent more negative.

That’s a huge shift in reaction.

“People are not willing to punish the brand for obesity, which seems like a lifestyle problem. But diabetes is considered a disease, and many consumers see the parent brand as contributing to it,” [said](http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/coke-and-pepsi-face-diabetes-backlash-153613) Kurt Carlson, a Georgetown marketing professor who oversaw the study.

Though trying to sugar-coat the diabetes issue (no pun intended) seems to rub consumers the wrong way, the brands’ decision to simply ignore the issue won’t make it go away, either; Doctors are increasingly linking sugary beverages to diabetes, and consumers are taking heed. “We found that 90 percent of doctors in the United States, U.K. and Asia are convinced that excessive sugar consumption causes Type 2 diabetes,” said Stefano Natella, head of Global Equity Research at Credit Suisse. The report also says that about 43 percent of added sugars in our diets come from sweetened beverages.

A Pepsi rep had this [to say](http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/coke-and-pepsi-face-diabetes-backlash-153613) on the subject, “We offer a diverse portfolio of beverage choices to meet a range of consumer needs.”

Enlightening.

Meanwhile, a rep for Coke said that the company is helping build 100 fitness centers in U.S. schools to promote physical activity. The big “D word” was skirted altogether (and not too gracefully), as both companies declined to say if they will address diabetes concerns in future marketing.

Though it’s risky to address something that consumers so clearly react negatively toward, ignoring the elephant in the room will likely only cause it to grow larger and larger until the brands’ options are only two: address it, or let it crush them.

How far will Big Soda go to keep people from drinking water?

**by** [**William Dietz**](http://www.bmsg.org/blog/2282) **and** [**Lori Dorfman**](http://www.bmsg.org/blog/13)

BMSG Blog

posted on 02/26/2014

Soda companies have no shortage of slick tactics to get people — especially kids — to buy their products. They spend billions to infiltrate schools, plastering buses and billboards with their logos; they track and target youth online; they even send ads straight to teens' cell phones. And although research has shown that sugary drinks are linked to diabetes and other chronic diseases, instead of doing the responsible thing and reining in their marketing, soda companies have been doing the opposite, and ratcheting up efforts not only to sell their products but also to discourage people from drinking water.



One of the most shameful examples is Gatorade's recent ["Bolt" video game](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZqDOJSa7Uo&feature=youtu.be). Part of an ad campaign that ran during 2013, the game features an avatar of champion Olympic sprinter Usain Bolt running a course in which getting hit by water slows him down and gathering Gatorade makes him go faster. The company explained that this portrayed "Gatorade as the hero, helping fuel a better performance and higher score, and water as the enemy, a choice that will hinder your performance."

Although "Bolt" received some advertising industry awards, it should be recognized for what it really is: a misleading, cynical and potentially damaging attempt to downgrade the healthful properties of water and promote the use of an expensive and, for most people, unnecessary sugar drink.

The advergame has been downloaded several million times, and played 87 million times, mostly by Gatorade's key demographic, 13-24 year olds. Marketers boast that the advergame "drive(s) home the messaging that Gatorade helps you perform better than water."

To undermine the benefits of water is irresponsible. It goes over the line.

Gatorade seeks to diminish the value of water because water is Gatorade's biggest competitor. However, in doing so, Gatorade promotes the largest single source of sugar in the diets of U.S. children and adolescents, accounting for 240 calories per day among 2-19 year old sugar drink consumers. The consequences are dire: precursors of diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are already present in obese youth. Compelling randomized studies have demonstrated a clear association of sugar drinks with pediatric obesity, and decreased intake of sugar drinks reduces weight gain and obesity.

Although Gatorade's Bolt entry was [removed last month](http://civileats.com/2014/01/07/water-is-the-enemy-gatorade-mobile-game-tells-youth/) from the Interactive Advertising Bureau's award winners gallery — likely because of an [outcry](http://abcnews.go.com/Health/gatorade-mobile-game-referred-water-enemy/story?id=21469072&singlePage=true) from public health advocates — the company's other marketing tactics remain problematic. Gatorade is especially aggressive when it comes to targeting African American youth. Out of all sugary drink websites, Gatorade.com contains the most pages featuring black actors, and 38% of Gatorade TV ads feature black celebrity athletes only. Such targeted advertising reflects an effort to increase consumption among a subgroup of children whose rates of obesity and risks of obesity-related diseases are already substantially higher than those of other populations.

A 2007 report from the Institute of Medicine stated that sports drink consumption should be restricted to athletes only during prolonged, vigorous activities. Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that pediatricians warn their patients and parents that "routine ingestion of carbohydrate-containing sports drinks by children and adolescents should be avoided or restricted" because they increase the risk of obesity. The Academy urged pediatricians to promote water, not sports drinks, as the principal source of hydration for children and adolescents. Water is free, contains no calories, and is what the body needs. Water is not the enemy.



PepsiCo, the parent company of Gatorade, is not alone in its effort to downgrade water consumption. Coca Cola's "Cap the Tap" campaign is equally culpable. The campaign urges restaurants not to offer water in order to increase sugar drink sales.

Big Soda's programs to promote sugar drinks over water are hypocritical and contradict the companies' avowed commitment to wellness. Both Coca-Cola and PepsiCo support Michelle Obama's "Drink up!" campaign, which is designed to promote the consumption of water. Furthermore, the Bolt advergame belies PepsiCo's assertions that "major food companies such as PepsiCo are in a unique position to be leaders in health and wellness." PepsiCo's VP of corporate affairs in Mexico, Jorge Meyer, has recently said, "We don't want to be seen as the guilty ones. We want to be seen as part of the solution." It is hard to understand how campaigns that diminish water — a fundamental pillar of nutrition and health — help accomplish that goal. Although the goals of public health may be at odds with market share and stock prices today, public values and purchasing patterns are shifting. A misleading marketing strategy at odds with core values will undermine trust.

Most marketers will likely dismiss our concerns, even if they agree that kids should drink more water. Or they'll simply make empty promises to do better. But it's hard to take Big Soda's word seriously when we see campaigns like Bolt and Cap the Tap. PepsiCo needs to honor its commitment to health and wellness in word and deed, and strive to win awards for advertising campaigns that help rather than hinder parents' efforts to raise healthy children.

Coca-Cola giving $1.5M to S.A. for health and wellness

BY JESSICA BELASCO

June 27, 2013

A soda giant is investing in health and wellness initiatives in San Antonio.

The Coca-Cola Foundation is giving $1.5 million in grants to San Antonio Sports and the San Antonio Food Bank to fund the Mobilizing Health and Fitness Resources to Neighborhoods Project, Mayor [Julián Castro](http://www.mysanantonio.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Juli%C3%A1n+Castro%22) announced Wednesday morning.

The money will support several initiatives, including Mobile Fit San Antonio, which will bring fitness coaches, exercise equipment and a health kiosk to locations across the community, and Ride-to-Own, which will distribute 450 bicycles to 15 community centers and offer cycling safety lessons.

The money also will support the San Antonio Sports Afterschool Program, which serves low-income youths, and the San Antonio Food Bank's Mobile Food Market and Nutrition Education on the Move programs, which increase access to fruits and vegetables and provide free nutrition education.

The initiatives funded by the grant are existing programs that will be expanded to reach more members of the community, said [Mary Ullmann Japhet](http://www.mysanantonio.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Mary+Ullmann+Japhet%22), chairwoman of the Mayor's [Fitness Council](http://www.mysanantonio.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Fitness+Council%22) and San Antonio Sports spokeswoman.

“They're all grass-roots programs, right in the neighborhood, and getting those resources into those neighborhoods is what's really critical to eliminate barriers to participation,” she said.

The grants will help the city reach its SA2020 goal of cutting adult obesity by 10 percent and childhood obesity by 25 percent by 2020 to reduce chronic health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, Castro said during a news conference at Roosevelt Park.

“This collaboration is a commitment among all of us as policymakers, as parents, as folks who care about San Antonio to change the trajectory of health in our community,” Castro said.

The grant also will support the Coca-Cola Troops for Fitness program, which hires U.S. veterans to teach military-style fitness classes to the community. The veterans will serve as Mobile Fit coaches and instructors for other fitness events in parks.

Coca-Cola has come under attack from consumer advocates and obesity experts who say high-calorie, sugary drinks contribute to America's obesity problem.

Asked if he had any qualms in accepting money from the beverage company, Castro said, “It's a strong partnership, the operation of which is controlled by the Food Bank and San Antonio Sports, so I feel good that these dollars will be effectively spent to encourage good nutrition and physical activity, and I do appreciate Coca-Cola's contribution.”

[Sonya Soutus](http://www.mysanantonio.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Sonya+Soutus%22), senior vice president of public affairs and communications at Coca-Cola North America Group, said that “the Coca-Cola Co. stands for balanced, active living. We believe that all foods fit in a healthy diet, and that there are times when you can have Coca-Cola if you've done your exercise, if you are balancing your diet and you're not overindulging in any one food or beverage. That is a balanced lifestyle, and that is the kind of city we want to help San Antonio create.”

She added that Coca-Cola makes more than 700 products, including beverages with zero calories.

**PHI and BMSG Statement on In-School Marketing Guidelines**

February 25, 2014

Statement by Lori Dorfman, DrPH, MPH, Director, Berkeley Media Studies Group

The Public Health Institute and PHI’s [Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG)](http://www.phi.org/focus-areas/?program=berkeley-media-studies-group) applaud the White House and USDA’s announcement of bold new guidelines to eliminate the marketing of junk food and sugary drinks in schools. The proposed rules, part of First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Lets Move” initiative, will help to strengthen school wellness policies, support children’s health, and ensure that schools are a place of learning, not a customer-recruiting tool for food and beverage companies.

Yet, today, that’s [exactly what they have become](http://www.foodmarketing.org/resources/food-marketing-in-schools/marketing-of-low-nutrition-foods-and-beverages-in-schools/): According to a national survey, most schools contain marketing for foods that are high in fat or sugar. In 2009 alone, food companies spent $150 million on in-school marketing, such as vending machines, ads on school buses and scoreboards, branded sports uniforms, and corporate-sponsored school supplies. Research shows that such marketing affects what kids are willing to eat and can influence their diets and health into adulthood.

As the First Lady noted, schools "should be healthy places where kids are not bombarded with ads for junk food." The proposed regulations underscore the government’s essential role in protecting kids’ health. PHI and BMSG have a [long history](http://www.phi.org/about-phi/phi50/) of working to build a healthier world for children, and we strongly support the new standards.

Is Your Diet Drink Making You Depressed?

by [Steve Williams](http://www.care2.com/causes/author/stevebwilliams)

January 13, 2013



Diet drinks, once billed as a healthy alternative to regular soft drinks, have long been assailed for their misleading name. Now, researchers think that diet drinks, and in particular diet sodas, may lead to a higher risk of depression.

The study, presented this week at the [American Academy of Neurology’s](http://www.aan.com/) 65th Annual Meeting in San Diego, demonstrated a potential link between sweetened drinks, [already known to be damaging](http://www.care2.com/causes/yet-another-reason-to-avoid-soda-prostate-cancer.html), and an increased risk of depression.

Honglei Chen, MD, PhD, with the National Institutes of Health in Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, and team took 263,925 people between the ages of 50 and 71 and then, between 1995 to 1996, assessed their consumption of drinks such as soda, tea, fruit punch and coffee.

A decade on, the researchers returned to assess whether participants had been diagnosed with depression since the year 2000. A total of 11,311 such diagnoses were made.

While the causes of depression are many, the researchers were able to extrapolate that people who drank more than four cans or cups of soda per day were 30% more like to have been diagnosed with depression compared to those who did not drink soda.

Drinking four cans of sweetened fruit punch was shown to have a 38% increase when compared to no sweetened drinks at all.

What was interesting about these findings, and as noted above, is that the risk seemed to increase when people consumed the “diet” option over the regular version.

There is some good news to come out of this study however. Drinking four cups of unsweetened coffee was shown to present a 10% decrease in the likelihood of developing depression. This sits alongside existing research such as a 2011 study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine which suggested that [women who drank fully caffeinated coffee had a lower risk of depression than non-coffee drinkers.](http://shine.yahoo.com/healthy-living/7-surprising-health-facts-coffee-162900281.html;_ylt=AsYoEXa1HNBfOHxiwIOD3WNlbqU5;_ylu=X3oDMTFoNXNiNGczBG1pdANCbG9nUG9zdEJvZHkEcG9zAzEwBHNlYwNNZWRpYUJsb2dCb2R5QXNzZW1ibHk-;_ylg=X3oDMTMwNmVidjNzBGludGwDdXMEbGFuZwNlbi11cwRwc3RhaWQDMzZiMjBiZGItYzA4NS0zZGRkLTkzZTQtMDM3NjVjNzU0N2ZlBHBzdGNhdANoZWFsdGh5bGl2aW5nBHB0A3N0b3J5cGFnZQ--;_ylv=3)

These findings are preliminary, which means there is still a lot of work to do to establish a direct link, however one of the culprits researchers are keen to investigate is the role of [aspartame](http://www.food.gov.uk/policy-advice/additivesbranch/55174#.UO62PM51F8E).

In summing up the study Chen says:

[The results] are intriguing and consistent with a small but growing body of evidence suggesting that artificially sweetened beverages may be associated with poor health outcomes.

Our research suggests that cutting out or down on sweetened diet drinks or replacing them with unsweetened coffee may naturally help lower your depression risk. More research is needed to confirm these findings, and people with depression should continue to take depression medications prescribed by their doctors.

To be clear, the researchers didn’t establish a causal link between sweetened drinks and depression. It is likely that sweetened drinks are just one aspect of a lifestyle that leads to increased risk of depression, other known factors that are relevant here including being overweight, poor diet and a lack of exercise.

However, this study does perhaps offer that excessive soft drink consumption should be seen as a warning sign for a potentially increased risk of depression, and does once again emphasize that choosing the “diet” option isn’t the healthy choice you might have thought.