

Coke's Kowtow

By Betsy Woodruff – January 24, 2013

So this is curious: Last week, Coca-Cola kicked off an ad campaign that handled the delicate subject of obesity. The cynical among us might scoff that of course a corporation with enough gall to profit off of the obesity epidemic would also try to profit off of fighting the obesity epidemic. But it's a serious question: Why would a profitable corporation invest so much time and energy in burnishing its decades-old reputation (a reputation that doesn't seem to have taken any significant hits as of late)? There are a few potential answers, including a) someone in the Coke marketing department finally watched Food, Inc.; b) someone in the Coke marketing department has a crush on Michelle Obama; and c) there's something a little more complex going on here. For the purposes of this article, we'll assume it's the third.

But first, let's take a look at the ads that have caused such a stir. The longer one, called "Coming Together," features old-timey shots of folks drinking Coke from long-necked bottles, clips of people recycling cans, and a lot of back-patting over the company's low- and no-calorie options and its new policy of listing calorie content on the front of bottles. Of course, there's nary an obese person in sight. The second ad is called "Be OK," and has a rather bizarre premise — it's basically about all the fun ways you can burn off the 140 calories in a Coke can, like walking your dog, laughing loudly for 75 seconds, or doing a victory dance after bowling a strike. That last item is especially notable since, in my limited experience with bowling alleys, they don't tend to attract the sveltest and most fitness-oriented cross-section of the population; an old college professor of mine used to recommend students take bowling to fulfill their PE requirement since it was the one form of exercise you could get while drinking and smoking. But I digress.

Needless to say, many Internet people pointed out that the odd Coca-Cola ads were, in fact, odd. Among them were Dodai Stewart at Jezebel ("Aren't people who love Coca-Cola aware that it's full of sugar? Isn't that why they like it?"), Mark Bittman at the New York Times ("Coke wants to be part of the solution. Which is too bad for them"), and the Huffington Post ("Detractors point out that it's a bit disingenuous to brag about cleaning up a problem that they were the source of"). One enterprising YouTube user made a different voice-over for the "Coming Together" ad, which concludes by saying, "Don't drink Coke. It is killing you and your family." And across the board, the ads' reception seems to be a combination of scratched heads and wrinkled upper lips.

Perhaps the oddest aspect of the campaign, though, is the precarious line it's forced to walk — between blithely ignoring the potential negative health consequences of drinking gallons of soda every day and discouraging potential customers from buying Coke's product. The campaign seems to aim to navigate that Scylla and Charybdis by bragging about its comparatively healthier options and encouraging people to exercise. That's nice of them, I guess, but it doesn't seem like it would be especially nice for their bottom line. So what does Coca-Cola stand to gain from this strange new spate of ads, besides more of the same nose-snubbing from Bittman types?

Patrick Basham of the Cato Institute has a theory. He holds that this supposedly voluntary public-health campaign is a bit more coerced than Atlanta might let on. Basham is an obesity-epidemic denier (and argued his case in his 2007 book *Diet Nation: Exposing the Obesity*

Crusade), but holds that even if America's weight problem is as grave as it sounds, government pressure on food companies is still problematic. And he argues that there's plenty of that pressure to go around. In this case, he theorizes that the corporation has put out the new ad campaign, changed its packaging, and tried to encourage soda-drinkers to exercise because if it doesn't, the regulatory consequences will be worse.

Washington has already tried to use nominally voluntary measures to control corporations' freedom to describe their products in the way they see fit. In a memo for the Heritage Foundation, Diane Katz pointed out that the Obama administration hasn't shrunk in the past from bullying companies into adopting its talking points. For instance, the Interagency Working Group — started in 2009 to make suggestions about how to curb childhood obesity — pushed for the establishment of voluntary limits on how many calories and grams of fat per serving would be permissible in food products advertised on children's television programs. It sounded fairly benign (who wouldn't want five-year-olds to spend less time mesmerized by ads for sugary drinks and candy?) but the truth was more insidious.

"The Federal Trade Commission, in fact, sought comment on whether the IWG guidelines would suffer from First Amendment issues if enacted into law," writes Katz. The guidelines appeared to be send a message to the food industry: Tighter strictures are coming, by hook or by crook, and your only decision is on whether you will adopt them voluntarily or involuntarily. As Katz asserts in her memo: "Government officials on more than one occasion have alluded to the potential for regulation if the industry does not voluntarily comply with advertising limits."

Basham argues — convincingly, in my opinion — that the black-helicopter mindset isn't totally far-fetched when it comes to subtle government intrusion regarding corporate free speech. And corporations' capitulation could jeopardize their grounds for defending their rights later.

"Each time you either accept or you volunteer for some kind of punishment in this way, some infringement of your corporate freedom, then the next time it's much harder to say, on principled grounds, 'We object to what you're telling us to do — or what you're advising us to do voluntarily,'" Basham says. Besides being obviously problematic for people who think the First Amendment is a good idea, this new trend could restrict consumer choices and minimize corporate responsibility. Food crusaders may have romantic notions about the good-heartedness of the Washington regulatory class, but that's mostly misplaced. The city's "cesspool of politics and deal-making and interest-group lobbying and all the rest of it," as Basham describes it, could undermine consumers' interests by making them vulnerable to the back-room dealings that often make regulations a cushy deal for the regulated. And giving that kind of influence to regulators undermines the direct line of communication between producer and customer, and moves the onus for product safety from the corporation to the government — eroding corporate responsibility.

So what seems to be a moment of awkward and uncharacteristic big-heartedness from the Coca-Cola company is probably anything but — it appears to be a kowtowing capitulation to an ever-expanding regulatory state that treats its inhabitants like children and its corporations like crooks.