
COCA-COLA GOES GREEN: THE LAUNCH OF COKE LIFE¹

Matthias Koch wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In June 2013, The Coca-Cola Company (TCCC) began a two-year initiative to launch Coke Life, a naturally sweetened carbonated soft drink with reduced sugar. Coke Life complemented TCCC's established product line consisting of Coca-Cola (also known as Coca-Cola Classic), Diet Coke, and Coke Zero. Coke Life substituted a portion of the sugar component with stevia leaf extract and contained 35 per cent less sugar than Coca-Cola Classic. TCCC claimed that "Coke Life is for adults looking for a great tasting Coke but [one that has] fewer kilojoules and [is] sweetened from natural sources."²

When TCCC launched Coke Life, the market for carbonated soft drinks was highly competitive and shrinking. Further, TCCC had its top brands positioned in this market already. So, why would TCCC add another drink to the mix?

THE COCA-COLA COMPANY

TCCC was the world's largest company in the non-alcoholic beverage industry.³ Soft drinks bearing the Coca-Cola trademark had been sold in the United States since 1886. TCCC distributed its products to more than 200 countries worldwide. Its brand portfolio consisted of over 500 non-alcoholic beverage brands, mainly sparkling drinks but also still beverages such as water, juice drinks, ready-to-drink teas and coffees, and sports and energy drinks.⁴ TCCC owned four of the top five drink brands in the world: Coca-Cola Classic, Diet Coke, Fanta, and Sprite (see Exhibit 1).

As of the end of 2014, TCCC had approximately 130,000 employees. In 2013, TCCC had total sales of US\$46.9 billion⁵ and a gross profit of \$28.4 billion (60.7 per cent). That year, TCCC realized earnings before taxes of \$11.5 billion (24.5 per cent) (see Exhibit 2).

THE GLOBAL SOFT DRINK MARKET

The beverages market was divided into alcoholic beverages (hard drinks) and non-alcoholic beverages (soft drinks). In 2014, the soft drink market grew by 3 per cent in volume and 6 per cent in sales to reach approximately \$650 billion.⁶ The U.S. market remained the world's largest market for soft drinks. In terms of volume growth, the Asia-Pacific region was ranked second, with volume expanding by 6.9 per cent.

The key categories within the soft drink market were carbonated soft drinks (CSDs), accounting for approximately 35 per cent, bottled water (25 per cent), and fruit drinks and juices (15 per cent). Other categories were ready-to-drink tea, sports and energy, and other (25 per cent).⁷

In the first half of 2014, CSD volumes in the United States decreased by approximately 1 per cent. In the same timeframe, non-alcoholic ready-to-drink (NARTD) beverages, sports and energy drinks, and bottled water grew strongly. The ready-to-drink coffee segment recorded growth of approximately 8 per cent.

The NARTD category was estimated to increase by 5 per cent between 2014 and 2017. Since 2010, NARTD retail value had grown by \$135 billion. Further, Euromonitor International projected that this market would grow by approximately \$200 billion by 2020. The market for diet soft drinks, on the other hand, had constantly decelerated over the last 10 years, even falling into decline in 2008 (see Exhibits 3 and 4).⁸

Within the CSD segment, TCCC had accumulated a market share of over 40 per cent.⁹ However, the non-alcoholic beverage segment was highly competitive, consisting of numerous players ranging from small and/or emerging companies to large and well-established manufacturers.¹⁰ PepsiCo Inc. was one of TCCC's primary competitors, with an approximately 27 per cent market share within the CSD segment. Other significant competitors were Nestlé S.A., Dr Pepper Snapple Group Inc., Groupe Danone, Mondelez International, Inc., Kraft Foods Group, Inc., Suntory Beverage & Food Limited, and the Unilever Group.

MARKET SEGMENTATION

The soft drink market spanned from bottled water to sugar-sweetened soft drinks, with cola being the dominating flavour.¹¹ On one end, bottled water was positioned as a tasteless and sugar-free option to satisfy the basic need of thirst. Bottled water represented the *health-oriented consumer* segment. Consumers in this segment valued a sugar-free, healthy drink that supported their healthy lifestyle.

Sugar-sweetened soft drinks were positioned on the other end of the spectrum. They were targeted towards *taste-oriented consumers*. Consumers in this segment valued the strong, natural, and pure taste of sugar. Coca-Cola Classic—branded red—and Pepsi Classic—branded blue—represented the original cola brands for the two key cola manufacturers. The drinks contained over 10 grams of sugar and over 40 calories per 100 millilitres. Over the last decades, TCCC and PepsiCo had launched more than a dozen cola products, including caffeine-free versions and cherry- and/or vanilla-flavoured versions.¹²

Based on the amount of sugar, two product categories had emerged within the cola segment of the CSD market:

- Full-sugar drinks: Coca-Cola Classic and Pepsi Classic
- No-sugar drinks: Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi; Coke Zero and Pepsi Max

TCCC and PepsiCo had launched diet versions of their classic products, branded silver. The diet versions contained no sugar and minimal calories. In 1993 and 2005, PepsiCo and TCCC introduced Pepsi Max and Coke Zero, respectively. Like the diet products, Pepsi Max and Coke Zero were sugar- and calorie-free. No-sugar soft drinks targeted a *hybrid consumer segment*—that is, consumers who valued both the sweet taste of soft drinks and their individual health.

All sugar-free drinks were artificially sweetened using acesulfame potassium and/or aspartame.¹³ Acesulfame potassium, also referred to as “Ace-K,” was a sugar substitute that contained very few calories and was approximately 200 times sweeter than sugar. Aspartame was mainly made of aspartic acid and phenylalanine.¹⁴ Some people had to avoid phenylalanine, as their metabolisms could not break it down (see Exhibit 5).

WICKED CONSUMER TRENDS, SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE, AND LEGISLATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Obesity and being overweight were considered major global threats to societal welfare.¹⁵ According to the World Health Organization, obesity had more than doubled worldwide since 1980. In 2014, almost two billion adults were overweight. In addition, 42 million children under the age of five were overweight or obese in 2013. Most of the world’s population lived in countries where overweight and obesity killed more people than underweight.

From the mid-2000s onwards, sugar-sweetened soft drinks had been heavily criticized for their negative impact on health. The long-term effects were thoroughly researched. The scientific evidence suggested that sugary drinks increased the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions. The World Health Organization had launched several initiatives, research studies, and educational documents encouraging adults and children to reduce their sugar intake.¹⁶ According to the Australia New Zealand Standards Code, a balanced diet for an average adult included 90 grams of sugar per day.¹⁷

As a result of the growing scientific evidence, policymakers worldwide had begun to intervene. The Mexican government, for example, introduced a nation-wide sugary drink tax that took effect in 2014. The policy aimed to help curb rising rates of obesity and diabetes in Mexico, which had overtaken the United States as the world’s most overweight country.¹⁸ Likewise, the Measure D soda tax was approved by 75 per cent of Berkeley, California, voters on November 4, 2014, and took effect on January 1, 2015, as the first such tax in the United States.¹⁹

Further, on July 9, 2015, San Francisco lawmakers decided that ads for carbonated soft drinks must include warning labels. Advertisements for sugary beverages would have to bear the message, “WARNING: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes, and tooth decay. This is a message from the City and County of San Francisco.”²⁰

In 2013, TCCC launched a controversial television ad showcasing TCCC’s achievements in fighting obesity.²¹

POSITIONING AND BRANDING OF COKE LIFE

Coke Life—branded green—complemented TCCC’s existing product line as a reduced-sugar version of Coca-Cola Classic. TCCC positioned its cola brands as follows:²²

- Coca-Cola Classic: the original brand valued by consumers for its great, natural taste;
- Coke Zero: designed for young adults with zero sugar;
- Diet Coke: distinct taste with zero sugar and low kilojoules; valued by dedicated drinkers; and
- Coke Life: for adults looking for a great-tasting Coke that was naturally sweetened and had fewer kilojoules.

Coke Life claimed to contain 35 per cent less sugar (6.6 grams per 100 millilitres) than Coca-Cola Classic. In contrast to Diet Coke and Coke Zero, Coke Life was naturally sweetened using stevia leaf extract as a substitute for sugar. Stevia was a sweetener extracted from the stevia plant leaves and contained zero calories.²³

Coke Life was the first branded Coke product to use stevia leaf extract. Geoff Parker of the Australian Beverages Council stated: “We know consumers are asking for more choice . . . particularly stevia-sweetened beverages. Coke Life is an innovation that is expected to really excite the category and draw people into the soft-drink category.”²⁴

TCCC described Coke Life’s brand identity as follows: “It delivers the best possible Coca-Cola taste with 35 per cent less sugar and kilojoules than Coca-Cola. To achieve a great-tasting, lower-kilojoule alternative to the original Coca-Cola drink, the company has combined sugar with stevia—a natural sweetener with minimal kilojoules. . . . With the addition of the much-anticipated Coca-Cola Life, the Coca-Cola family now has something for every taste: Coca-Cola; lower-kilojoule Coca-Cola Life; and two no-sugar options, Coca-Cola Zero and Diet Coke.”²⁵

The key product design elements reflected the brand identity of Coke Life. The dominant colour was green, the major graphical element was a small leaf, and “Life” was printed in italic font. The green packaging extended the familiar red (Coca-Cola Classic), silver (Diet Coke), and black (Coke Zero) product line offerings in a way that was easily understood.²⁶ Furthermore, TCCC had created an eco-friendly bottle, dubbed the “PlantBottle,” which was made from 100 per cent recyclable material.²⁷

TCCC had painfully experienced the importance of branding when the launch of “New Coke” in 1985 led to what was eventually known as the “New Coke debacle.”²⁸ When introducing New Coke, TCCC overrated the functional benefits—that is, the taste of the product—thereby neglecting the symbolic benefits of the product. TCCC commented on this event as follows: “The fabled secret formula for Coca-Cola was changed, adopting a formula preferred in taste tests of nearly 200,000 consumers. What these tests didn’t show, of course, was the bond consumers felt with their Coca-Cola—something they didn’t want anyone, including The Coca-Cola Company, tampering with.”²⁹

MARKETING OPERATIONS

TCCC decided to roll out Coke Life sequentially. Coke Life was launched in Argentina in June 2013; in Chile in November 2013; and in the United Kingdom in August 2014.³⁰ The United States, Mexico, and Sweden followed in September 2014. In the following months, Coke Life was introduced in Ireland (in December 2014); Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, and the Netherlands (in January 2015); Switzerland (in February 2015); Japan (in March 2015); and Australia and New Zealand (in April 2015).

TCCC used its existing indirect channels (bottler–distributor–merchant–consumer) to organize the distribution of Coke Life, with the main channel routes being supermarkets and general merchandisers (48 per cent), as well as food service and drinking places (20 per cent).³¹

The pricing strategy differed across countries. In Australia, Coke Life maintained stability with its identical price compared to other TCCC products.³² However, in the United Kingdom Coke Life started at a lower price compared to Diet Coke and was eventually priced higher than Diet Coke.³³

TCCC launched multimillion-dollar communication campaigns across multiple channels, including television, cinema, out-of-home, print, digital, public relations, and sampling.³⁴ In Australia, for instance, the campaign used the locally developed “Let Life Surprise You” claim to engage with customers, underlining that TCCC would make every effort to ensure that Coke Life was available for everyone, everywhere.³⁵ As part of its communication campaign, TCCC partnered with the two leading retailers and launched co-branded spots to introduce Coke Life.³⁶ Five months after the “Let Life Surprise You” campaign, TCCC launched the “Coke Come Alive” campaign featuring all its cola products, including Coke Life.

In Argentina, TCCC launched a commercial connecting Coke Life with parenting. The spot was uploaded onto YouTube with the following caption: “In a span of 60 seconds, Coke Argentina tells a true-to-life story of the highs and lows of early parenthood in this new spot by Santo Buenos Aires for Coke Life. We see a couple go through all the milestones after bringing home a baby—from sheer exhaustion to toddler mischief to the ‘Toys R Us has thrown up all over my house’ stage.”³⁷

COKE LIFE: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

In 2013, when Coke Life was introduced, TCCC sales dropped by 2.4 per cent compared to 2012. TCCC’s marketing director in Australia, Lisa Winn, for instance, hoped Coca-Cola Life would reverse the decline in soft drink sales. She said, “When they launched Coke Life in the United Kingdom last year, it created a halo around the whole trademark, lifting sales across all the product. Sales for the four to five months after launching were up 4.9 per cent for the whole trademark.”³⁸

On the other hand, Queensland University of Technology Professor Amanda Lee, former chair of Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council’s Dietary Guidelines Working Committee, criticized Coke Life’s marketing campaign: “It reminds me of the stage we were up at 30 years ago when manufacturers were making healthy cigarettes. I’m worried, it’s trying to make a product that’s intrinsically unhealthy, healthy.”³⁹

“We’ve made a commitment that by 2020, low- or no-calorie Cokes will account for 50 per cent of sales,” said Coca-Cola Enterprises general manager Leendert den Hollander.⁴⁰ What response would the launch of Coke Life trigger, and would it be successful?

EXHIBIT 1: MAJOR BRANDS OF THE COCA-COLA COMPANY

Coca-Cola	Minute Maid	Aquarius	Bonaqua / Bonaqa
Diet Coke / Coca-Cola Light	Georgia	Minute Maid Pulpy	Ayataka
Coca-Cola Zero	Powerade	Dasani	Gold Peak
Fanta	Del Valle	Simply	I LOHAS
Sprite	Schweppes	Glacéau Vitaminwater	FUZE TEA

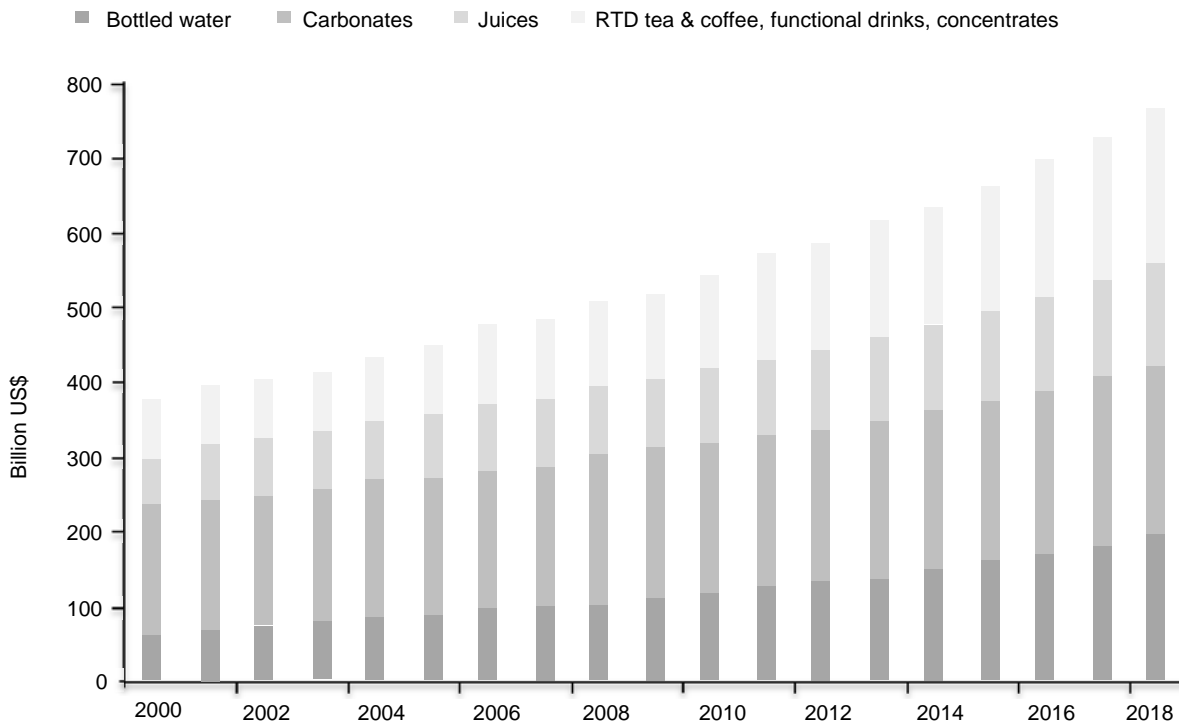
Source: The Coca-Cola Company, *Form 10-K 2013*, February 27, 2014, accessed November 5, 2015, www.coca-colacompany.com/content/dam/journey/us/en/private/fileassets/pdf/2014/02/2013-annual-report-on-form-10-k.pdf.

EXHIBIT 2: FINANCIAL FIGURES FOR THE COCA-COLA COMPANY, 2010–2013 (MILLIONS US\$)

Year Ended Dec. 31	2013	2012	2011	2010
Net operating revenue	46,854	48,017	46,542	35,119
Cost of goods sold	18,421	19,053	18,215	12,693
Gross profit	28,433	28,964	28,327	22,426
Gross profit margin (per cent)	60.7	60.3	60.9	63.9
Selling, general, admin. expense	17,310	17,738	17,422	13,194
Earnings before taxes	11,477	11,809	11,458	14,207

Source: The Coca-Cola Company, *Form 10-K 2013*, February 27, 2014, accessed November 5, 2015, www.coca-colacompany.com/content/dam/journey/us/en/private/fileassets/pdf/2014/02/2013-annual-report-on-form-10-k.pdf;
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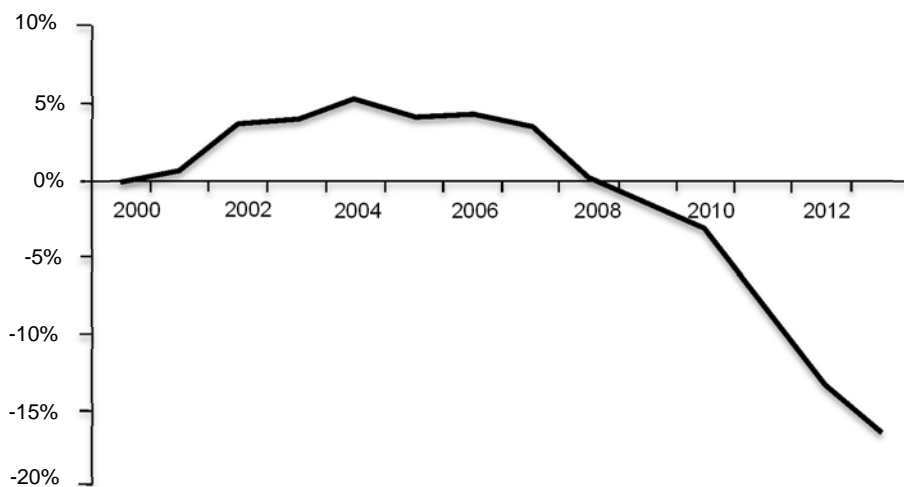
EXHIBIT 3: GLOBAL SOFT DRINK MARKET BY SEGMENT (US\$ BILLION)



Note: RTD = "Ready to drink."

Source: MarketLine, *Stevia - Sugar Substitute - New Trends in the Beverage Market*, October 2014, accessed April 10, 2016, http://store.marketline.com/Product/stevia_sugar_substitute_new_trends_in_the_beverage_market?productid=ML00017-053.

EXHIBIT 4: DIET COKE AND DIET PEPSI GROWTH INDEX



Source: MarketLine, *Stevia - Sugar Substitute - New Trends in the Beverage Market*, October 2014, accessed April 10, 2016, http://store.marketline.com/Product/stevia_sugar_substitute_new_trends_in_the_beverage_market?productid=ML00017-053.

EXHIBIT 5: COLA PRODUCT COMPARISON—TCCC VERSUS PEPSICO

TCCC	Classic	Diet	Zero
Colour	Red	Silver	Black
Carbohydrates/sugars per 100 ml	10.6 g	0 g	0 g
Calories	43	0.4	0.3

PepsiCo	Classic	Diet	Max
Colour	Blue	Silver	Black
Carbohydrates/sugars per 100 ml	11.7 g	0 g	0 g
Calories	45	0	0

Source: "Coca-Cola Life," The Coca-Cola Company, 2015, accessed November 5, 2015, www.coca-cola.com.au/cokelife; "The Facts about Your Favorite Beverages," PepsiCo, May 4, 2016, accessed May 11, 2016, www.pepsicobeveragefacts.com/Home/product?formula=35005*26*01-01&form=RTD&size=12.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This case has been written on the basis of published sources only. Consequently, the interpretation and perspectives presented in this case are not necessarily those of The Coca-Cola Company or any of its employees.
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- ⁵ All currency amounts are in U.S. dollars unless otherwise specified.
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