

## Can't Tell Your Cokes Apart? Sue Someone

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REMEMBER the Three Stooges routine about the law firm called Dewey, Cheatem & Howe? Although the Coca-Cola Company is not using that particular fictional firm, it is updating the make-fun-of-lawyers shtick for new generations in a nontraditional campaign for Coke Zero.

The campaign is based on an oddball thought, that the executives at Coca-Cola who sell the flagship Coke Classic brand want to hire lawyers to sue their co-workers who sell Coke Zero. The grounds for the imaginary lawsuits would be “taste infringement” — that is, it annoys the Coke Classic executives that no-calorie Coke Zero tastes so much like their sugared soft drink.

In one commercial, a person identified as an actual lawyer who is not in on the joke, tells two actors portraying Coke Classic executives: “It’ll be dismissed. You’ll be humiliated.”

Other ads in the same litigious vein ask if you are “a victim of taste confusion,” offer to help you “sue a friend” and even assert that “Coke Zero stole the taste of Coke.”

The campaign, by Crispin Porter & Bogusky in Miami, part of MDC Partners, relies largely on new-media efforts like e-mail marketing, video clips posted on Web sites and digital banner advertising. The goal is to suggest through the contemporary nature of the media choices that Coke Zero is a contemporary brand.

That is important because Coke Zero is aimed primarily at soda drinkers who are ages 18 to 34, with a tilt toward men. To underscore those intentions, Coca-Cola describes Coke Zero as a “calorie-free cola” rather than a “diet cola.”

The word “diet” is avoided because it implies — particularly to younger men — that a beverage is meant only for older, female consumers.

“We’re playing with the Coke equities in a way that makes you think about Coke Zero differently: not as a diet product and more associated with the taste of Coke,” said Alex Bogusky, vice chairman and executive creative director at Crispin Porter, which also creates offbeat ads for brands like Burger King, Haggard, Miller Lite, Orville Redenbacher and Volkswagen.

The “notion is to show what happens inside the company when the company sees people getting confused between Coke and Coke Zero,” Mr. Bogusky said.

"People just love the fact this company is making fun of itself," he added. "There was some trepidation, but it's a fun idea."

The media plans for the Coke Zero campaign, which carries the theme "Enjoy Coke-ness," are also indicative of changing attitudes at Coca-Cola. The company once concentrated its media budget almost entirely in traditional outlets like television. Now, there is a growing interest in nontraditional media, including the Internet.

"Media is getting much more careful thought," said Katie Bayne, senior vice president for Coca-Cola brands in North America at Coca-Cola in Atlanta. "It's not just about a television spot."

That is "especially true" for Coke Zero, she added, "as we look at where we need to be to connect with" the target audience.

The significant shifts at Coca-Cola were typified last year in the about-face over a popular online video clip, "Experiment 137," created by two performance artists, Fritz Grobe and Stephen Voltz, which demonstrated how mixing Diet Coke and Mentos candies can produce awesomely cool explosions.

Coca-Cola, not eager to share control of a big brand with outsiders, distanced itself from the pair and their Web site (eepybird.com).

By comparison, the maker of Mentos, Perfetti Van Melle USA, embraced the videographers, posting the minimovie on the Mentos Web site (mentos.com) and sponsoring a "Mentos geyser video" contest.

Months — and millions of video views — later, the Coca-Cola executives had a change of heart. Mr. Grobe and Mr. Voltz were invited to stage an explosive demonstration at the company headquarters. The result, "Experiment 214," went up on a company Web site (coca-cola.com), and inspired a contest asking consumers to produce video clips about unconventional uses for common household objects.

"When that first happened, we didn't know what to do with it," Ms. Bayne said of the eepybird video. "Over time, as we saw people have fun with it, we realized it's important to be in the moment."

Since its introduction in June 2005, Coke Zero has gained more traction in the competitive category of carbonated soft drinks than other recent newcomers like Diet Coke with Lemon or Vanilla Coke. Its market share in retail outlets reached 0.8 percent last year, according to the trade publication Beverage Digest, exceeding much older brands like Diet 7Up.

"It's too early to call this a real and permanent success," said John D. Sicher Jr., editor and publisher at Beverage Digest, "but it looks like it's off to a strong start."

A principal reason is the marketing angle that "Coke Zero is designed to taste like a no-calorie version of Coke Classic," Mr. Sicher said, compared with Diet Coke, which has a different cola formulation from Coke Classic.

As a result, "45 percent of Coke Zero sales are incremental" rather than borrowed from Diet Coke, he added, which is encouraging because Coca-Cola initially worried about cannibalization.

The ability of Coke Zero to thrive would help Coca-Cola executives in "pursuing a three-cola strategy," Mr. Sicher said, "which is something I thought was highly unlikely just three years ago." Rival Pepsi-Cola seems to have the same idea, bringing out Pepsi Max (and soon, Diet Pepsi Max) to accompany Pepsi-Cola and Diet Pepsi.

The Coke Zero legal-palooza began with Crispin Porter quietly seeding seven video clips, some as long as two and a half minutes, on file-sharing Web sites like BitTorrent, eDonkey, Kazaa and LimeWire. They also went up on cokezero.com and YouTube.

Some feature people who are identified as "actual lawyers on hidden camera" and some are actors. In three commercials running on television, the company and agency say, all the lawyers are the real thing.

The digital ad banners started appearing Feb. 15 on AOL, followed days later by ads that invited computer users to "sue a friend" through a series of mock-serious e-mail messages.

Outdoor signs went up last week in many large cities, where radio commercials also began running that ask listeners to call 877-SUE-ZERO and leave messages in the voice mailbox of a make-believe law firm, Covet & Yourminy.

More ads are scheduled to coincide with the Final Four games of the men's basketball tournament of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, to be played in Atlanta on March 31 and April 2.

Plans include personal appearances by the actors who play the Coke Classic executives, Ms. Bayne said, urging fans to "stop Coke Zero" and join them in fighting the "clear case of taste infringement."

**Disponível em:** <<http://www.nytimes.com/>>. Acesso em 5 mar. 2007.