



Brrr on the Coke side of life

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Published: May 25, 2008 - *Iconic cold drink keeps getting the plaudits but its people are taking nothing for granted.*

There is a rare kind of elevation some brands achieve. At this pinnacle it would seem almost unthinkable to suffer a fall from grace or to put a foot wrong. It's easy to take these brands for granted, yet all the regular pitfalls and rules of brand management apply.

While Coca-Cola was voted coolest cold drink and second- coolest company in this year's Generation Next survey, its surge up the coolest brand stakes from sixth place last year to first this year is an overwhelming demonstration of its tremendous staying power. How does Coke make it look so easy?

According to Coca-Cola SA's marketing and commercial leadership director Ilan Sobel, the consumer is still king.

"We have a mind-set which ensures that we are always focused on our consumers and continuously looking for ways to better understand them, their needs, their desires and behaviours."

"We do this so that we can more effectively meet their wide range of beverage needs and continue to build long-lasting relationships between consumers and our brands."

Long-lasting relationships indeed. As 23-year-old Nape Nkademeng puts it: "Coca-Cola is the mother of all brands, it's what branding should be about. They are the blueprint for branding and every brand wants to be like Coca- Cola."

Lethabo Ngakane, 21, explains why: "The brand touches us everywhere, it appeals to our emotions, physically it refreshes us, it delivers what it promises in terms of quality, bonding us

together with advertising and community projects. They are everywhere and they make us happy.”

Given that its products are generally affordable and widely available, it would be easy to assume that its perception as a culture and class-crossing unifier is a foregone conclusion. But, consider the repeated attempts by Pepsi and other challengers to wrest Coke's crown in one of the global brand's 10 most successful territories, and the real picture begins to emerge.

“We stay ahead with the youth and remain popular by ensuring that we remain relevant and aspirational. As marketers, our job is to understand the psyche and heartbeat of the youth like no other brand,” says Sobel.

“To do this, we need to immerse ourselves in our consumers' worlds — understand their wants and desires and what they are passionate about, and what gets their adrenalin pumping. We do this through extensive consumer research and observation.

“Last year was a big one for Coca- Cola, with a number of major integrated programmes launched to tap into the heartbeat of South African youth like never before. We continue to drive strong, double- digit growth in the more competitive sparkling beverage category and we are confident that we will continue to build the love for our brand in South Africa.”

Brand expert Jeremy Sampson emphasises that no brand can stay on top without continuous effort. “What is interesting is that Coca- Cola has not fallen back on international advertising campaigns. Much of its iconic advertising, such as the latest Brr campaign, is all locally produced and relevant. It captures local attention and stays fresh while maintaining the international brand's core values.”

Sobel says Coke's blend of iconic marketing, backed up by strong local content and its system strength in combination with its bottling partners, means the cool drink is within arm's reach of every South African. “This has built the South African business into one which represents ‘best in class’ within the Coca-Cola global system across many important dimensions of our business.”

Sampson partially attributes Coca-Cola's rise up the coolest brand rankings to a refusal to cut marketing spend, even during economic downturns. “They have big spending muscle and can eke out market share in bad times. It's an important lesson: you cut advertising and marketing spend at your peril.

“Coca-Cola is very smart with what they spend and act in cost-effective ways, especially given that there is such a competitive market. Eventually, the bigger spenders will erode the market position of their competitors.”

Coke’s adroitness in bringing multiple facets into its marketing strategy is legendary, says Sampson. “They employ a range of tools, but each retains focus and they don’t slack off. Their main strength is in sponsorships.

“Around the world Coke is recognised as safe and trusted drinking, but especially in regions like South Africa, where tuck-shop signage and so forth is allowed, Coke is entrenching in the rural areas. They are a class act because they are so old, yet so new and still so dominant.”

According to Sobel, the company focuses on “passion points”, which include romance, friendship, music and football.

“We integrate brand Coca-Cola into these passion points in relevant and credible ways. This is something that, as a brand, we have consistently delivered throughout Coke’s development over the past 120 years. The bottom line is that we can never be complacent.

“Over the past year we have continued to push the envelope as far as the unique programmes we have brought to consumers across these passion points. We have also spent a significant amount of time learning what is working and what is not working, and how we can continue to innovate across all elements of the marketing mix to further strengthen the impact of our programmes with consumers.”

Coca-Cola’s position as the second-coolest company indicates an idolising of the company by South Africa’s youth, something Sampson claims is down to the company getting the best out of bright graduates.

“Coca-Cola, like all large international corporates, scours South Africa for talent and it really is a dogfight for skills. Fortunately, Coca-Cola is seen as a fun place to go and a good place to work. Their sheer professionalism, range of products and focus is maintained through global best practice, a high level of knowledge and expertise, as well as a policy of shuffling talent around the globe to keep things fresh and interesting.”

Besides appealing to consumers’ tastes, Sobel said the company’s efforts to make a difference in South Africa, such as its Message in a Bottle campaign to tackle Aids, are hitting home.

“Being the world’s most loved brand comes with deep responsibilities and all 66000 direct and indirect employees in Coca-Cola South Africa take this responsibility very seriously,” he adds.

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