



EDITORIALS

Happy corporate holidays from Coca-Cola

Selling sugary drinks at Christmas

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I suppose we should have realised that Coca-Cola was up to something when it opened a head office next to the Royal Society of Medicine in Wimpole Street. The path of associating unhealthy products with health, wellbeing, and healthy lifestyles is one that has been well trodden down the years by the tobacco industry. The lessons have not been lost on Coca-Cola. In fact, you could argue that Coca-Cola started even earlier than tobacco.¹

And the stakes have never been higher for the UK sugary drinks industry. In October 2015, Public Health England (PHE) published a report stating that not only is the consumption of sugar sweetened drinks particularly high in school age children but tends to be highest among the most disadvantaged.² It suggested the introduction of a tax or levy on full sugar soft drinks. In August 2016, the government did just this, announcing a soft drinks industry levy as part of its childhood obesity strategy. The levy is scheduled for 2018.³

The PHE report noted that a successful programme to reduce sugar intake would include substantially reducing the opportunities to market and advertise high sugar food and drink products. In due course, after a consultation, the Committee of Advertising Practice announced further restrictions on the advertising of food and soft drink products high in fat, salt, and sugar from July 2017 to deliver what they described as “new protections to children”.⁴ However many health organisations think that the restrictions do not go far enough.⁵

Coca-Cola’s tactics in attempting to frame the debate around healthy weight have been documented elsewhere. Whether this is in shaping research,⁶ sponsorship of mega events,⁷ funding community sports activities,⁸ or even raising funds to distribute food for people in need,⁹ Coca-Cola’s mission is clearly both to promote its business and shape public opinion.

At Christmas, Coca-Cola’s marketing goes into overdrive as newspapers across the country regurgitate press releases for its Christmas truck tour, with advertorials promoting the truck as a Christmas tradition. And of course the truck is just the latest of Coca-Cola’s campaigns to become a holiday brand and, indeed, to help brand Santa Claus himself.¹⁰

This Christmas the truck visited five locations in north west England in the first week of December: two in Greater

Manchester plus Lancaster, Liverpool, and St Helens. The major local newspapers such as the *Liverpool Echo* and the *Manchester Evening News* provided substantial coverage over several days, including where to see the truck, live blogs, and reproducing images of the bright red truck with lights twinkling. They faithfully reported that you could have your photo taken with the vehicle while being given free product (including a 150 ml can of standard Coca-Cola containing 15.9 g of sugar—nearly four teaspoons).

With figures showing that 33.8% of 10 to 11 year olds in the north west are overweight or obese and that 33.4% of 5 years olds have tooth decay,¹¹ many public health departments have used their ever-squeezed budgets to launch campaigns about sugary drinks to try to help their communities reduce their consumption. So Coca-Cola’s campaign was scarcely welcomed by local directors of public health, medical professionals, educationalists, or indeed members of the public. Food Active, a healthy weight campaign based in north west England, organised a letter of concern stating “We can celebrate without allowing Coca-Cola to hijack Christmas by bringing false gifts of bad teeth.”¹² The 108 signatories included five public health directors and the current and past presidents of the Faculty of Public Health.

But neither the letter nor the accompanying press release received any coverage in either Liverpool or Manchester. As we wrote in follow-up letters to the *Liverpool Echo* and the *Manchester Evening News* that also went unpublished, it is of huge concern that no alternative views were provided in the face of a concerted commercial marketing campaign by Coca-Cola. Apparently Coca-Cola’s voice counts more than those of directors of public health.

Should this form of advertising and marketing be banned, given the growing evidence of the effect that marketing of unhealthy food and drink has on children?¹³ We believe it should and will continue to push for national action from organisations such as Public Health England to stop similar campaigns next Christmas.

Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare RI is the director of Food Active, a healthy weight programme. He is engaged in campaigns calling for

stronger controls in the marketing of food and drink products. JRA is past president of the Faculty of Public Health.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned, not externally peer reviewed.

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