

News

No Bull: Coke targets clubs : Subtly branded slim can gets quiet tryout in New York nightlife spots

HILLARY CHURA

594 words

9 December 2002

Advertising Age

3

Vol: 73 Num: 49

English

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The latest fashion accessory among youth may just be a can of Coca-Cola.

Camouflaged in a slim new can reminiscent of red-hot Red Bull, Coca-Cola Co.'s flagship has been making the rounds among the chic elite during an underground test at select Manhattan clubs and boutiques. The slender 8.4-oz. can, which borrows the cachet of energy drinks and looks hipper than its stubby 12-ounce cylindrical sibling, also was spotted at last month's celebrity-soaked American Music Awards.

Coca-Cola declined to discuss the product, other than to confirm it was tested in New York.

But marketing observers said the idea is that young, jaded consumers are more likely to take to the 116-year-old product if they "discover" it in dark clubs, where it's offered only to trendsetters, than if it were promoted with a blowout ad campaign complete with TV, billboards and banners.

Coke tested the metallic red cans-which included an "original formula" note on the package but had only subtle reference to the name of the brand-at hot New York bars including Lit, Trust and Shine and at stores like Mac cosmetics and Diesel. It's not clear whether slim Coke is being consumed mainly straight up or, like Red Bull, as a mixer du jour.

"This audience in particular-a young audience-is attracted to [innovation] like bees to honey. They get bored very quickly. They get inundated," said one person familiar with the company. "Coke is such a recognized icon that to show it in an unexpected way is almost breaking the rules, which is exciting to people."

It's also part of Big Red's move to boost its bottom line via package innovations like the so-called fridge pack-a cardboard 12-pack box that nestles nicely into refrigerators. Coke has also experimented with labels consumers can tailor themselves and with bottles made from aluminum, which the company has in Japan.

"What the soft-drink companies have learned is that they have to create news and excitement to get growth. ... New brands are one way. New packages are another," said Beverage Digest Editor John Sicher.

Trendy packaging could be more important to carbonated soft drinks-and already is more prevalent-than are new products, said Lynn Dornblaser, editorial director of the global new products database at Mintel, which tracks new entries. "There is less potential for variety when it comes to carbonated soft drinks," she said. "There's not a lot of room for different types of products, where if you're talking candy or meals or bakery products, there is so much potential."

Should the test move beyond clubs to retailers, Coke's slender can likely would sell for more than a regular can of soda but less than the top-dollar energy drinks.

"If you want your product to be identified with trendy people, you've got to sell it to them in a contemporary package," said Candace Corlett, partner at WSL Strategic Retail, which tracks retail trends. "It certainly makes transitioning to a higher price easier if the packaging is fun."

Indeed, paying more for less is no impediment for young consumers like Winnie Heilmichael, a 23-year-old computer science student in Boston, who said she'd pick up the zippy little can. "People like to try different things if they taste the same."

Photo Caption: The skinny: Old formula, new look

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