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Red, White, and Everywhere

America, I have a confession to make: I don't drink Coke. But don't call me a hypocrite just because I am still the proud owner of a bright red shirt that advertises it. Just call me an American.

Even before setting foot in Israel three years ago, I knew exactly where I could find the Coke T-shirt. The tiny shop in the central block of Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street did offer other designs, but the one with a bright white "Drink Coca-Cola Classic" written in Hebrew cursive across the chest was what drew in most of the dollar-carrying tourists. While waiting almost twenty minutes for my shirt (depicted in fig. 1), I watched nearly every customer ahead of me ask for "the Coke shirt, *todah rabah* [thank you very much]."

Fig. 1. Hebrew Coca-Cola T-shirt. Personal photograph by author.

At the time, I never thought it strange that I wanted one, too. After having absorbed sixteen years of Coca-Cola propaganda through everything from NBC's Saturday morning cartoon lineup to the concession stand at Camden Yards (the Baltimore Orioles' ballpark), I associated the shirt with singing along to the "Just for the Taste

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).
This project follows the style guidelines in the *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed. (2016).

of It" jingle and with America's favorite pastime, not with a brown fizzy beverage I refused to consume. When I later realized the immensity of Coke's corporate power, I felt somewhat manipulated, but that didn't stop me from wearing the shirt. I still don it often, despite the growing hole in the right sleeve, because of its power as a conversation piece. Few Americans notice it without asking something like "Does that say Coke?" I usually smile and nod. Then they mumble a one-word compliment, and we go our separate ways. But rarely do they want to know what language the internationally recognized logo is written in. And why should they? They are interested in what they can relate to as Americans: a familiar red-and-white logo, not a foreign language. Through nearly a century of brilliant advertising strategies, the Coca-Cola Company has given Americans not only a thirst-quenching beverage but a cultural icon that we have come to claim as our own.

Throughout the company's history, its marketing strategies have centered on putting Coca-Cola in scenes of the happy, carefree existence Americans are supposedly striving for. What 1950s teenage girl, for example, wouldn't long to see herself in the Coca-Cola ad that appeared in a 1958 issue of *Seventeen* magazine? A clean-cut, handsome man flirts with a pair of smiling girls as they laugh and drink Cokes at a soda-shop counter. Even a girl who couldn't picture herself in that idealized role could at least buy a Coke for consolation. The malt shop, complete with a soda jerk in a white jacket and paper hat and a Coca-Cola fountain, is a theme that, even today, remains a piece of Americana (Ikuta 74).

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

But while countless campaigns with this general strategy have together shaped the Coca-Cola image, presenting a product as key to a happy life is a fairly typical approach to advertising everything from Allstate insurance to Ziploc bags. Coca-Cola's advertising strategy is unique, however, for the original way the beverage giant has used the specific advertising media of magazines and television to drive home this message. As a result, Coca-Cola has become associated not only with the images of Americana portrayed in specific advertisements but also with the general forms of advertising media that dominate American culture.

One of the earliest and best-known examples of this strategy is artist Haddon Sundblom's rendering of Santa Claus. Using the description of Santa in Clement Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" — and his own rosy-cheeked face as a model — Sundblom contributed to the round, jolly image of this American icon, who just happens to delight in an ice-cold Coke after a tiring night of delivering presents ("True"). Coca-Cola utilized the concept of the magazine to present this inviting image in a brilliant manipulation of the medium (Pendergrast 181).

Today, it's easy to forget how pervasive a medium the magazine was before television became readily available to all. Well into the 1960s, households of diverse backgrounds all across America subscribed loyally to general-subject weeklies and monthlies such as *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, which provided news and entertainment to families nationwide. This large and constant group of subscribers enabled Coca-Cola to build an annual Christmastime campaign that used an extremely limited number of advertisements. According to the Coca-Cola Company's

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

Web site, Sundblom created only around forty images of Santa Claus during the campaign's duration from 1931 to 1964 ("True"). As a result, Americans soon began to seek out the ads each holiday season. The marketing strategy was to make consumers wait eagerly by the mailbox each December to see the latest *Saturday Evening Post* ad featuring Santa gulping a Coke. For this strategy to succeed, the advertisements had to be seen by many, but they also had to be just hard enough to come by to seem special. What better way to achieve these goals than to place an advertisement in the December issue of an immensely popular magazine?

Effective magazine advertising is just one example of the media strategies Coca-Cola has used to encourage us to equate Coke with the "happy life" element of American identity. As the magazine gave way to television, Coke was there. In a 1996 recap of the previous fifty years in industry history, *Beverage Industry* cites Coca-Cola as a frontrunner in the very first form of television advertising: sponsorship of entire programs such as *The Bob Dixon Show* and *The Adventures of Kit Carson* ("Fabulous" 16). Just as we now associate sports stadiums with their corporate sponsors, viewers of early television programs will forever equate those programs with Coke.

When networks switched from offering sponsorships to selling exclusive commercial time in short increments, Coca-Cola strove to distinguish itself once again, this time by experimenting with new formats and technologies for those commercials. Early attempts — such as choppy "stop motion" animation, where photographs of objects such as Coke bottles move without the

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

intervention of actors — attracted much attention, according to the Library of Congress Motion Picture Archives Web site. Coca-Cola was also a pioneer in color television; after a series of experimental reels, the company produced its first color commercial in 1964 ("Highlights"). While the subject matter of these original commercials was not particularly memorable (Coca-Cola cans and bottles inside a refrigerator), the hype surrounding the use of new technologies helped draw attention to the product.

But the advertising campaign that perhaps best illustrates the ability of Coca-Cola advertisers to tie their product to a groundbreaking technology did not appear until 1993. For the 1994 Winter Olympics, Coke created six television commercials featuring digitally animated polar bears rolling, swimming, snuggling, and sliding about in a computerized North Pole — and finishing off the playful experience with a swig of Coke. In 1993, two years before the release of *Toy Story*, these commercials were some of the very first widely viewed digital films ("Highlights"). As with Sundblom's Santa Clauses, television viewers looked forward to their next sighting of the cute, cuddly, cutting-edge bears, who created a natural association between Coca-Cola and digital animation. Once again, Coke didn't just use the latest technology — Coke defined it.

As a result of all of this brilliant advertising, a beverage I never even drink is a significant part of my American cultural identity. That's why I spent thirty Israeli shekels and twenty minutes in a tourist trap I would ordinarily avoid buying my Hebrew Coca-Cola shirt. That shirt, along with the rest of the enormous Coca-Cola collectibles industry, demonstrates Coke's

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

power to identify itself with the American ideal of a lighthearted life of diversion and pleasure. Standing in line halfway around the world for the logo that embodies these values gave me an opportunity to affirm a part of my American identity.

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

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