
Cox News Service

Sugary-Beverage Industry to Fire Back With Ads

October 13, 2005

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Retrieved 11/15/05 from

http://www.statesman.com/money/content/shared/money/stories/BEVERAGE_ADS_1013_COX.html

ATLANTA — The beverage industry is getting ready to spend millions of dollars on an ad campaign to publicize its new policy restricting soft drink sales in school vending machines.

Pilot television commercials, created by public relations firm Porter Novelli, feature parents talking about the policy. These commercials, being tested in focus groups, likely will air at the first of next year.

The campaign is designed to increase awareness not only about the policy but about the industry's efforts "to contribute to the larger societal challenge" of childhood obesity, says Susan Neely, president of the American Beverage Association.

Neely, who took the helm of the ABA in April, inherited a problem. Lawmakers, concerned about childhood obesity, were taking aim at beverage companies for selling sugary soft drinks in schools.

Across the country, state legislatures this year considered, and in some cases passed, legislation banning or restricting soft drink sales in schools. Also, the Center for Science in the Public Interest this summer urged the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to require a health warning on sweet carbonated soft drinks.

Neely wanted to take an aggressive approach. She pushed Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other members of the ABA to enact a voluntary policy to try to head off stricter regulations and make the industry look good. The board of the ABA, composed of executives from major beverage companies and their bottlers, approved the policy in August. It received widespread media attention.

Under the voluntary policy, the industry can sell water and 100 percent fruit juices in elementary schools. In middle schools, during school hours, vending machines may sell diet soft drinks, water, 100 percent fruit juices, dairy-based beverages and diet juice drinks. At high schools, no more than 50 percent of the vending slots may be filled with carbonated soft drinks.

Neely said the commercials are issue-oriented and will not have the flashy quality typical of soft drink ad. She would not disclose the exact cost of the campaign.

Neely is no stranger to issue campaigns. She is best known as creator of the "Harry and Louise" ads that helped kill President Clinton's health care plan a little more than a decade ago. Her most recent job, before joining the ABA, was assistant secretary for public affairs at the Department of Homeland Security.

Neely said in an interview that school vending is just one of several key items on her agenda.

Also on the health and wellness front, she is beginning to focus on concerns raised by some critics about the ingredients in diet soft drinks. She plans to "reach out" to the health community for help in combating any negative perceptions.

Separately, Neely is preparing for a water usage debate, which she predicts will intensify as the infrastructure in major cities continues to age. Because the beverage industry uses a lot of water in producing not only bottled water but all drinks, the industry may be called on to play a significant role in funding infrastructure improvements.

"The debate is not going to go away," Neely said. "I want us to be in on the ground floor."

Caroline Wilbert writes for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.