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All-Powerful Coke

I don't drink Coke. Call me picky for disliking the soda's saccharine aftertaste. Call me cheap for choosing a water fountain over a twelve-ounce aluminum can that costs a dollar from a vending machine but only pennies to produce. Even call me unpatriotic for rejecting the potable god that over the last century has come to represent all the enjoyment and ease to be found in our American way of life. But don't call me a hypocrite when I admit that I still identify with Coke and the Coca-Cola culture.

I have a favorite T-shirt that says "Drink Coca-Cola Classic" in Hebrew. It's Israel's standard tourist fare, like little nested dolls in Russia or painted horses in Scandinavia, and before setting foot in the Promised Land three years ago, I knew where I could find one. The T-shirt shop in the central block of a Jerusalem shopping center did offer other shirt designs ("Macabee Beer" was a favorite), but that Coca-Cola shirt was what drew in most of the dollar-carrying tourists. I waited almost twenty minutes for mine, and I watched nearly everyone ahead of me say "the Coke shirt" (and "thanks" in Hebrew).

At the time, I never asked why I wanted the shirt. I do know, though, that the reason I wear it often, despite a hole in the right sleeve, has to do with its power as a conversation piece. Few people notice it without asking something like, "Does that say Coke?" I usually smile and nod. They mumble a compliment and we go our separate ways. But rarely does anyone want to know what language the world's most famous logo is written in. And why should they? Perhaps because Coca-Cola is a cultural icon

that shapes American identity.

Throughout the Company's history, marketing strategies have centered on putting Coca-Cola in scenes of the happy, carefree American life we never stop striving for. What 1950's teenage girl wouldn't long to see herself in the soda shop pictured in a Coca-Cola ad appearing in the 1957 issue of Seventeen magazine? A clean-cut, handsome man flirts with a pair of smiling girls as they laugh and drink Coca-Colas. And any girls who couldn't put themselves in that perfect, happy scene, could at least buy a Coke for consolation. The malt shop--complete with a soda jerk in a white jacket and paper hat--is a theme that, even today, remains a symbol of Americana.

But while countless campaigns with this general strategy have together shaped the Coca-Cola image, presenting a product as key to a happy life represents a fairly typical approach to advertising everything from Fords to Tylenol. Coca-Cola's advertising is truly unique, however, for the original way the beverage giant has utilized specific advertising media--namely magazines and television--to drive home this message.

One of the earliest and best known examples of this strategy is artist Haddon Sundblom's masterpiece of Santa Claus. Prior to Coca-Cola's Santa campaign of 1931, Saint Nicholas took many different forms, although he was usually quite slim and came in a wide variety of colors. **[LOOK FOR A PICTURE OF THIS ORIGINAL COKE SANTA.]** The round, jolly, Coca-Cola red-and-white American icon who today receives the authority of any biblical hero was born when Sundblom (ironically, a Swede) decided to use himself as a model. But the success of Santa Claus goes far beyond Sundblom's magazine advertisements depicting a warm, happy grandfather figure delighting in an ice cold Coke after a tiring night of delivering presents. The

way in which Coca-Cola advertisers presented that inviting image represents Coca-Cola's brilliant manipulation of the medium itself.

In today's world of CNN, e-journals, and newsweek.com, it is often easy to forget how pervasive a medium the magazine was prior to the advent of television. Until the late 1950s, American households of diverse backgrounds and geographic locations subscribed loyally to general subject weeklies and monthlies such as Life and the Saturday Evening Post. These publications provided the primary source of news, entertainment, and other cultural information to families nationwide. This large and constant group of subscribers enabled Coca-Cola to build a perennial Christmastime advertising campaign that used an extremely limited number of ads [**“DESIGNS” BETTER WORD?**] [ADD SOURCE], which Americans soon came to look forward to and seek out each holiday season. The marketing strategy was not to capture consumers with a few color drawings, but rather to make them wait eagerly by the mailbox each December so that they could flip through the Saturday Evening Post to find the latest scene featuring Santa gulping a Coke. For this strategy to be successful, the advertisements had to be seen by many, but also be just hard enough to come by to be exciting. What better location for this than the December issue of an immensely popular magazine?

There is no denying that this strategy worked brilliantly, as this inviting image of Santa Claus graduated from the pages of Saturday Evening Post to become the central figure of the most celebrated and beloved season of the year. Travel to any strip mall in the United States during December (or even November--that's how much we love Christmas!) and you will no doubt run into Santa clones left and right, punched out of

cardboard and sculpted in tinsel hung atop lampposts, all in Coca-Cola red and white. And while, in today's nonmagazine world, Coca-Cola must celebrate Christmas with specially designed diet Coke cans and television commercials, the Coca-Cola Santa Claus will forever epitomize the former power of the magazine advertising in America.

[AM I GETTING OFF TRACK HERE?]

In other words, Coca-Cola has hammered itself into our perceptions--both conscious and subconscious--of an American cultural identity by equating itself with media that define American culture. When the omnipresent general magazine that marked the earlier part of the century fell by the wayside under television's power, Coke was there from the beginning. In its 1996 recap of the previous fifty years in industry history, the publication Beverage Industry cites Coca-Cola as a frontrunner in the very first form of television advertising: sponsorship of entire programs such as, in the case of Coke, The Bob Dixon Show and The Adventures of Kit Carson. Just as today, we associate national patriotic events such as the 2002 Olympics with their list of corporate sponsors (which in this case, includes the Coca-Cola company), viewers of early television programs will forever equate them with Coke.

When networks switched from offering sponsorships to selling exclusive commercial time in short increments (a format modeled after magazine advertisements), Coca-Cola strove to distinguish itself once again, this time by producing new formats and technologies for these commercials. **[THIS SENTENCE IS WAY TOO LONG!]** Early attempts at this--such as choppy "stop motion" animation, where photographs of objects such as Coke bottles move without the intervention of actors--attracted much attention, according to the Library of Congress

Motion Picture Archives. Coca-Cola also experimented with color advertisements early enough that the excitement of color advertising technology drew additional attention to these commercials.

But the Coke advertising campaign, that perhaps best illustrates the ability of Coca-Cola advertisers to equate their product with a medium/technology **[REWORD!]**, did not appear until 1993. Who can forget the completely digitally animated polar bears, that roll, swim, snuggle, slide, and gurgle about, in a computerized South **[?]** Pole and finish off the playful experience with a swig of Coke? This campaign captured America's attention and held it for six separate commercials, and not because the bears are cute and cuddly. Their main draw--and the reason they remain in our minds--was the groundbreaking technology used to create them. In 1993, two years before the release of Toy Story, these were some of the very first widely viewed digital films. With these bears, as with other campaigns, Coke didn't just utilize the latest technology--Coke introduced the latest technology.

As a result of this brilliant advertising, a beverage which I do not even let enter my mouth **[REWORD!]** 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 Coca-Cola collectibles industry--demonstrates the power of **[SOMETHING ABOUT COKE CONNECTING ITSELF WITH THE AMERICAN IDEAL OF A LIFE OF DIVERSION AND LIGHTHEARTEDNESS.]** Seeing the logo that embodies all of this halfway around the world gave me an opportunity to affirm a part of my American identity.

The red-and-white logo's ability to appeal to Americans even in such a foreign context speaks to Coke advertisers' success at creating this association. A 1999 American television commercial described by the Library of Congress archive as highly successful is set in Kenya, with dialogue in a local dialect and English subtitles. In it, two Kenyan boys taste their first Cokes and comment that the experience is much like the way they imagine kissing a girl will be. This image appeals to Americans because it enables us to use the symbol of Coca-Cola to make ourselves comfortable even in the most unfamiliar situations. And if that can't sell your product, nothing can.