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IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GREEN: THE ECONOMICALLY DRIVEN GREENWASHING PRACTICES OF COCA-COLA

BY KYLIE R. LANTHORN

ABSTRACT: In a warming world where environmentally friendly corporations and products are undeniably a necessary component of mitigation, it is important to examine how this need may be exploited for profit. This research examines three print and one online advertisement for Coca-Cola's Dasani plantbottles to discern what rhetorical and visual appeals were used to mark the product as "green." Analysis reveals that cultural meanings of nature were drawn on to create symbols that were appealing and represented the product as clean, fresh, and natural. This research then examines how consumers use these symbols to label themselves as environmentally conscious. Portrayals of the plantbottles and how they are depicted through advertising is also compared to the actual ecological impact of plantbottles, with resultant findings that they are not an environmentally friendly product as their image would lead one to believe. Future research is needed to continue identifying deceptive green advertising campaigns and the methods they use to mislead the public. This research will contribute to an understanding of how environmental ads utilize shared natural symbols, the types of information corporations promote and conceal about their environmental impact, and facilitate informed advocacy for stricter eco-labeling.

Keywords: Coca-Cola, Dasani, plantbottle, greenwashing, nature, visual rhetoric

Introduction

Approximately three-quarters of United States citizens consider themselves to be environmentalists (Beder, 2002), and many corporations have responded to this rising public interest in the environment by carefully constructing advertisements and product packaging in a more “green” fashion. Companies meticulously manage their image through tactics such as expensive public relations (PR) and advertising campaigns in order to positively influence customers’ perceptions of their products. Because corporations fastidiously regulate their image, when considering a powerful company such as Coca-Cola one has to delve beneath the surface to uncover the reality behind their greenwashed façade. These constructed representations and environmentalist rhetoric are often misleading and do not correspond with corporate reality because, as Sharon Beder (2002) notes, “it is easier and less costly to change the way people think about reality than it is to change reality” (p. 109), and so companies engage in greenwashing to alter public perceptions of reality.

While advertisements are undeniably packed with commentary on and assumptions about society, their banal nature creates a certain sense of obviousness which often leaves consumers unable to identify their deeper messages (Fowles, 1996). However, “advertising and popular culture, for all the slickness of their deceptive surfaces, are highly complex messages and deserve careful exploration, a teasing out of the deep structures” (Fowles, 1996, p. 20) in order to look beyond the obvious, a necessity when considering such a major marketing campaign. This paper will examine one online and three print examples of green advertising by Coca-Cola in order to analyze the visuals and rhetoric used to persuade the audience of their environmentally-friendly practices, and then evaluate how precisely these messages reflect the realities of the company’s environmental impact. The four ads attempt to promote new “plantbottles:” Dasani water bottles produced by Coca-Cola made from up to 30% plant-materials, released in 2011. Research within communications on marketing is integral to promoting a critical perspective of how advertisements sell products by branding them with nature. It is also important to uncover consumer misconceptions, precipitated by greenwashed images, that purchase of these products benefits the environment. Analysis of plant-bottle advertisements reveals compositions of visuals and rhetoric designed to promote an environmentally responsible corporate image and allow consumers to label themselves as “green.” However, the reality is that plantbottles are an example of greenwashing because their appearance conceals the economic (versus environmental) priority of Coca-Cola’s profit-driven commercial frame.

Methodology

As environmental issues have moved to the forefront of public consciousness, many corporations have responded by engaging in “greenwashing,” defined by Jacob Vos as: “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image... the deception often lies in the emphasis corporations place on their ecological projects, rather than in the existence of the projects themselves” (2009, p. 673-74). Increasingly, “more and more consumers and investors are mindful of the environmental ethics of the companies they support” (p. 680), so companies must be vigilant in the management of their environmental image in order to remain profitable. Gallup’s annual Earth Day poll in 2003 revealed that Americans were less likely than in the past to favor aggressively addressing environmental problems, although they shared an increasingly negative opinion of the state of these issues (Corbett, 2006). Greenwashing gives the appearance that corporations are responsible and commit pro-environmental actions voluntarily, suggesting the problematic notion that environmental activism and laws are no longer needed because of self-regulating companies (Corbett, 2006). Dasani’s plantbottles brand themselves as environmentally responsible through the use of green labels, defined as: “markers which are presented to customers or professional buyers, and which symbolize beneficial consumer choices in terms of environmental, health, quality, solidarity or other matters” (Boström & Klintman, 2008, p. 28-29). Based on this greenwashing framework of appearance versus reality, the responsible image projected by the plantbottle advertising will be compared to the actuality of the bottles’ impact.

Analysis of advertising methods used to achieve greenwashing will produce greater awareness of the deep-seated cultural packages, or reservoirs of meaning (Hansen, 2010), that ads such as Coca-Cola’s draw upon in order to make the audience feel a certain way about the product. As Fowles (1996) notes, “the act of understanding or interpreting only takes place when symbols find an affinity within a person’s store of symbolic references” (p. 21). The advertisements capitalize on perhaps one of the largest collections of these references because “the natural world is full of cultural meanings with which to associate products” (Corbett, 2006, p. 164). These ingrained cultural associations make certain implicit connections, such as the color green with the environment. Coca-Cola takes advantage of these cultural packages by employing advertising methods designed to invoke associations with nature.

By utilizing themes of nature, Coca-Cola engages in the advertising strategy of “brandscaping.” As Otto Riewoldt states, “the primary objective [of brandscaping] is not to sell the product but to generate a fascination with the brand; to get the customer to identify with the world of the brand, creating a brand awareness

and providing it with a deep set emotional core” (Barber, 2007, p. 166). Within Coca-Cola’s plantbottle advertisements, the ideological power of nature in advertising is conjured as this emotional core, “selling products or corporate images by invoking the qualities of goodness, purity, authenticity, genuineness, [and] non-negotiability” (Hansen, 2010, p. 137-38), rather than focusing on the water itself. The specific cultural meanings drawn upon by the Coca-Cola advertisements will be evaluated through applying semiotic analysis, which entails the study of signs and meanings, drawing from semiotic theories of use and dimensions of color, connotation, iconographic symbolism (Machin, 2007), and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Analysis

When one thinks of Coca-Cola, the image likely to come to mind is of a red can with vertically scrawled large white lettering. However, the less obvious association of plastic beverage bottles is perhaps more significant because they are not tied as prominently to the corporation. The first advertisement to consider is an image of a clear plastic Coca-Cola bottle centered in the frame and sitting partially in some open green leaves, as if the bottle is a living, growing extension of the plant (Figure 1). The background shows a small green, grassy hill behind and below the bottle with some flowers and plants, and the sky is a light blue with some fluffy white clouds. This ad utilizes color, symbolism, and metaphor to construct the Coca-Cola bottle as natural and divine. The bottle emerging from the leaves marks the product as a stand-in for a flower or food that would grow inside such leaves in a natural environment. This symbolism creates the metaphor that Coca-Cola plantbottles are natural, or a fruit of nature. The vertical line the bottle creates gives the impression that the motion of the bottle continues upward and creates an orientational metaphor that associates Coca-Cola with virtue, prosperity, and happiness (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This metaphor rests on the “physical basis for well-being: happiness, health, life, and control—the things that principally characterize what is good for a person—are all up” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 16). The light blue sky has a washed-out, ethereal appearance, which also contributes to the light, blissful tone of the ad. As Machin (2007) notes, “the meaning potential of brightness rests on the fundamental experiences we have with light and dark” (p. 70), such as the association of brightness with clarity, contributing to the feeling of transparency and truth in the ad. The position of the bottle produces the feeling that it is being elevated into the clouds, and the use of the sky framing the bottle also adds to the sensation of the product being wholesome and worthy of divinity by offering it up to the sky and evoking the heavens above which seem to be shining down on the bottle. Combined, these symbolic visual elements create a meaning

around the Coca-Cola bottle as natural and enchanting.

The second advertisement displays a similar image of a clear plastic Dasani bottle, centered and filling most of the frame, coming out of some green leaves with dew drops on them (Figure 2). The bottle has a green lid, and because it is a “plantbottle” the label features a green recycle symbol, appropriating the usual three arrows with a leaf replacing the lower left arrow and a green bottle in the center. The background is a clean white, and some text is shown in the upper and lower right corners but this text will not be analyzed. The “Dasani bottle” advertisement is similar to the “Coca-Cola bottle” advertisement in using the leaves as metaphor featuring a Dasani plantbottle emerging from them but with a different use of color to construct the bottle as a part of nature. This use of leaves connotes the same message that the product is natural, but this is further accentuated by the small dew drops. Dew is a product of nature, evocative of the dawn of a new day, and its presence further signifies the plantbottle as wholly natural while also joining the image with a sense of freshness. The droplets of water also connect the water in the bottle with the associations of fresh dew to extend these connotations to the product itself. The bottle is thus an implied natural sourcing of pure, clean water. Wilk (2006) argues this point by saying, “water is more than a symbol of the natural world; it is usually seen as the very substance of the natural world” (p. 308).

A similar message of cleanliness and simplicity is also achieved through the use of color in the advertisement. The white background is pure and spotless which contributes to the associated purity of the water. The background is simple, just as bottled water should be: pure, with no external contamination. The entire ad also features a low differentiation of color composition of mainly green and white, meaning that “the hue and other values of the colour themselves carry the meaning” (Machin, 2007, p. 78). The prominence of the white color connotes cleanliness and purity, and the use of green draws on nature and the environment. The bottle is also promoted as environmentally friendly through appropriation of the commonly recognized recycling symbol, with the modifications of the leaf and color to further communicate the “green” nature of the plantbottle.

The “Come On In” online advertisement utilizes metaphor and color to connect the product with the environment (Figure 3). The entire ad is composed of a mosaic of small tiles from photos of online fans participating in a social media campaign. It uses the same image of the plastic Dasani plantbottle in the leaves, but only the top two-thirds of the bottle is visible on the far left of the frame. As in the previous two ads, showing the Dasani bottle as sprouting from the green leaves metaphorically constructs the bottle as a part of nature and uses the same green lid to signify the environment. This ad further builds on this symbolic structuring by pairing it with the metaphorical text: “Come On In, The Water’s Fantastic.” The phrasing “come on in” (emphasis added) creates an ontological container metaphor

by projecting humans' in-out conceptualization of the world "onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 29). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) note that "we impose this orientation on our natural environment as well. A clearing in the woods is seen as having a bounding surface, and we can view ourselves as being in the clearing or out of the clearing, in the woods or out of the woods" (p. 29). The ad's wording achieves this container metaphor by drawing on the common phrase, "come on in, the water's fine," exclaimed when inviting someone into a pool or body of water. One cannot literally go inside the Dasani bottle, even though it is a bounded body of water, but it draws on this implicit cultural-package of a lake or ocean. Evoking this natural environment suggests that Dasani's water is clean enough to swim in, and is indeed more than "fine," it's "fantastic." The container metaphor also conveys a complex message in a simplified form through using our experience of physical objects and substances as a further basis for understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25). By connecting the ad to associations with large bodies of water such as lakes, this natural environment is tied to the sourcing of the water in the Dasani bottle and through only six words the product is thus understood as a bottling of the fresh, clean water found in nature.

Along with connecting the consumer to nature, the advertisement also caters to social desirability in making the consumer feel like part of a group by purchasing the bottle. The numerous tiles forming the ad create the impression of a group of plantbottle patrons who are implicitly supporting the product by literally composing the advertisement. The tendency for people to want to join groups and fit in with others creates a strong appeal in this ad because it is as if by purchasing the Dasani bottle they are becoming part of this group of consumers. There is also a social aspect embedded in the text: the invitation to "come on in" implies that while the consumer is being invited, there is someone doing the inviting, strengthening the social desirability appeal of the product.

The fourth advertisement, "Plantbottle," relies largely on color and lighting to convey its environmentally friendly image (Figure 4). This ad is elongated horizontally into a rectangle and divided in half. The right half of the ad features two plastic plantbottles, a Coca-Cola bottle on the left and a Dasani water bottle on the right, with a silvery background and white light shining through the middle. The left portion of the ad has the plantbottle recycle symbol (described above) featured in the top half. Immediately below it is the text "plantbottle" with the word "plant" in a green matching the recycling symbol, and "bottle" in a light grey. The text below says "up to 30% plant based 100% recyclable bottle" in grey letters with the percentages in green, and below in a slightly slimmer font it says "redesigned plastic, recyclable as ever." The use of green text on the left side of the ad combined with the green lid on the Dasani bottle on the right promotes the environmental associations previously discussed. The use of few colors, mainly white grey and green,

“allows the colour to dominate the meaning... [and] gives much symbolic power to the single colour used” (Machin, 2007, p. 78), permitting pristine associations of white and grey and natural connotations of green to permeate the ad. The background on the right side of the ad also has elements of luminosity, characterized as an “unworldly glow of magic and supernatural beings or objects” (p. 78-79). Since the Coca-Cola and Dasani bottles are placed in the foreground and appear to have an internal glow, the desirability of the product is enhanced by this attractive appearance. The use of unmodulated colors makes the world “seem clean and certain, which is important for consumerism” (p. 77). This “clean and certain” aspect is central to promoting the plantbottle as a simple, uncomplicated way to easily change consumption habits to help the environment. The low-impact colors and spotless, bright composition connote the meanings Coca-Cola desires consumers to associate with the plantbottles: they are a low-impact product and promote a clean way to consume.

To Buy

Drawing from Micheletti (2003), Boström and Klintman (2008) recognize that “it is no longer merely votes that matter... citizens express political concerns through more active consumer choices, through ‘political consumption,’ either by boycotting products or ‘buycotting’—by consciously choosing environmentally and/or socially friendly products” (p. 2). This environmental activism through consumerism presents shoppers with an easy way to feel like they are engaging in the political arena by choosing a product advertised as more “green” than its alternatives. Dasani plantbottles encourage this type of “political consumption” by differentiating their water bottles from those of competitors and allowing customers to feel good about their purchase. However, by encouraging consumers to participate in political consumption, they are implicitly discouraging them from engaging in other types of environmental activism. This use of labels to separate plantbottles from other bottles is an instance of what Boström and Klintman (2008) call “symbolic differentiation,” where “the labeled product is unable in itself, by its sheer visual appearance, to show whatever it is that someone wants shown” (p. 29). Without the plantbottle label, consumers would not be aware of the unseen qualities of the bottle and how it is different from other products, and so it is set apart by these symbols.

As growing public concern for the environment causes people to desire to be perceived as environmentalists, consumption increasingly provides an easily attained manifestation of this internal concern by consuming products marked as ecologically friendly and thereby labeling oneself as environmentally conscious. In terms of social desirability, consumers do not want to be looked down on by others

for buying products that are environmentally harmful, and when people perhaps do not know how to be active in the public sphere, conspicuous environmental consumption presents a simple way to mark oneself as an environmentalist. Identification with environmentalism proves a strong motivation for this purchasing: “three out of ten consumers buy products because of green advertisements, green labeling, or other environmental endorsements” (Corbett, 2006, p. 155). Birgelen et al. (2009) observe that “social desirability bias may force consumers to agree to some price premium for eco-friendly packaging” (p. 140). Consumers fashion a display of these symbols because “one of the chief ways the self is defined to oneself and to others is through the adoption and display of symbol-offering (and in intent, meaning-invoking) goods” (Fowles, 1996, p. 238). This identification through the purchase of products is what Stuart Ewen (1976) termed “the commodity self” (Fowles, 1996, p. 47), or an outward projection of mainstream values and beliefs, such as preserving the environment. While this could be a positive occurrence, instead “the environment becomes a commodity whose value is primarily economic” (Corbett, 2006, p. 148), and the increased consumption it encourages in order to label oneself as an environmentalist is a discouragingly ironic result.

Dasani plantbottles provide a clearly differentiated product which appears to help the environment, making it easy for consumers to buy the bottles and feel virtuous about drinking from them. Corbett (2006) explains, “nature is a backdrop for selling, a useful symbol for communicating what are ostensibly shared cultural values, thus promoting a certain viewpoint as widely held and appropriate” (p. 148). By using nature as the backdrop plantbottles are promoted as “widely held and appropriate.” In and of itself, the christening of Dasani’s water bottles as “plantbottles” gives them a life of their own, because as noted by Fowles (1996), “through the act of naming, a product, something lifeless, [is] transformed into something lifelike, with possible meanings attached” (p. 35). Because “bottled water is a form of cultural consumption” (Wilk, 2006, p. 307), this naming transforms the plantbottle into a piece of nature itself, and allows the consumer to indirectly participate in the culturally valued “great outdoors.”

Not to Buy

Despite the green leaf logo and environmental signifiers that have been identified through semiotic analysis, the “plantbottle” is still just a typical PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic bottle and is not biodegradable or compostable on land or at sea” (Boyle, 2011). Even though this plant material supposedly “reduces the bottle’s carbon emissions by 25 percent,” it is important to place this improvement in the appropriate context and “consider that the bottled water industry produces more than 2.5 million tons of CO₂ a year, and that it takes three liters of

water to produce every single liter of Dasani” (Grayson, 2010). These facts severely undercut Coca-Cola’s campaign to insist that they are environmentally friendly, but in the face of contradictions such as these, the company touts the fact that these bottles are 100% recyclable and can be made into new bottles and other products (The Coca-Cola Company, 2012). However, this greenwashing does not take into account that “only about 20 percent of the 34.6 billion single-serving plastic water bottles bought in the US every year actually make it to the recycling plant” (Grayson, 2010).

Coca-Cola also does not collect and recycle the plantbottles, relying instead on curbside recycling, and when the bottles are recycled, it is “mostly into lower grade material that is not used in bottles again” (Boyle, 2011). Green advertising that promotes recycling does not present a strong environmental message: “It requires no political or social reform, and even the responsibility for the behavior is shifted from the producer, who should be responsible, to the consumer. From the consumption standpoint, the message is to consume with a minimum of ecological impact” (Kilbourne, 1995, p. 15). So really, of the relatively small amount of plantbottles that are recycled, few ever become bottles again, and even with the minor mitigating impact of recycling, the constant message to consume makes the process far from sustainable. This information, however, is not readily available to the consumer, and the Coca-Cola ads work hard to assuage any uncertainties so that the consumer does not delve deeper into their environmental practices. While cutting down on the emissions produced during production is undeniably a step in the right direction, it is obscuring the other wasteful aspects of the industry.

Coca-Cola’s motivation for greenwashing its image with plantbottles is provided by the primary goal of corporations: profit. Coca-Cola strives to project an “earth conscious image” because of the market advantage, as illuminated by surveys which reveal “consumers who either reward or intend to reward firms that address environmental concerns in their business and marketing practices and who punish firms that appear to ignore the environmental imperatives” (Vos, 2009, p. 680). However, companies have found that they do not need “to actually create social good in order to reap the benefits of a green reputation” (p. 681), but can instead rely on the release of vague environmental policy statements and the assistance of PR companies to build this image. Greenwash, after all, is environmental PR, and “today most of the top PR firms include environmental PR as one of their specialties” (Beder, 2002, p. 108).

The significance of the prominent use of green in these four advertisements is illuminated by Interbrand’s 2011 evaluation of the best global green brands. They found that by simply using the color green in ads, companies give consumers the perception that they are “focusing more on environmental sustainability than reality” (2011). According to their findings, “Coca-Cola’s -19.61 gap in perception and

performance suggests that it too has a great deal to live up to in terms of performance, as its branding of its sustainability efforts is clearly positioning the brand well” (2011). These findings verify that Coca-Cola’s greenwashing is effective in that public perceptions of environmental friendliness are much higher than actual practice. The reason for the promotion of this disinformation is fairly clear: if everyone did what was best for the environment and used reusable bottles, the water bottle industry would cease to exist and Coca-Cola would not make any money through its Dasani branch. Wilk (2006) rightly recognizes this idea. He states that by selling water in advanced countries like the US where clean water is readily and cheaply available, companies like Coca-Cola have achieved the improbable: “today marketers recognize that goods have magical powers that have nothing to do with ‘needs,’ and they have become magicians who transform mundane and abundant things into exotic valuables” (p. 303).

The commercial logic of marketing water, which is neither a green practice nor a “need” requiring fulfillment, stems from the economic framing in which environmental issues are often placed. When considering the environment, ecological consequences are weighed with economics in a cost-benefit analysis in which commercial interests almost always prevail (Beder, 2002). This frame can perhaps elucidate Coca-Cola’s My Coke Rewards (where credits can be earned through entering codes on products) announcement in 2009: “In honor of Mother Nature, you can earn Double Points with DASANI. April 20th through the 30th, enjoy any 12-pack of DASANI*—then enter your codes to boost your balance with Double Points—it’s a great way to enjoy Earth Day” (Smith, 2009). This encouragement to consume a product harmful to the planet in order to gain points, which are basically money, is a prime example of how the environment is sacrificed to financial considerations. While Coca-Cola’s release of the Dasani plantbottle for Earth Day in 2011 was at least an upgrade from this rewards system for littering the earth, the plastic bottle industry is still a far cry from becoming ecologically responsible.

Conclusion

Analysis of Coca-Cola plantbottle advertisements illuminates a consistent and persuasive semiotic message of cleanliness and naturalness designed to highlight their environmentalism, but the significance of the company’s progress in becoming greener is exaggerated through greenwashing. Dasani’s marketing emphasis on the plantbottle initiative is motivated by economic considerations because Dasani would not exist in a world free of plastic water bottle pollution. The ads are exceptionally appealing in their display of the product as part of nature, implying that they themselves are composed of natural materials, but in reality they are still PET plastic bottles. After all, “from a purely ecological position, a truly Green ad

is indeed an oxymoron: ‘the only Green product is the one that is not produced’” (Corbett, 2006, p. 157). As Wilk (2006) poignantly states: “here we have a world with acknowledged ecological problems... where a significant amount of energy and materials are being expended to transport water to places that already have plenty of it, freely available,” (p. 319). This type of tangible consequence of green-washing calls for a critical and visually literate society aware of these marketing techniques and able to discern deceitful claims in order to make environmentally friendly choices without being misled by profit-driven corporations. By increasing awareness of the methods ads use to persuade consumers, the public will be able to more accurately discern the realistic impacts of products and become more ecologically conscious consumers.

APPENDIX



Figure 1. Coca-Cola bottle. Print ad for Coca-Cola's Dasani plantbottles.



Figure 2. Dasani bottle. Print ad for Coca-Cola's Dasani plantbottles.

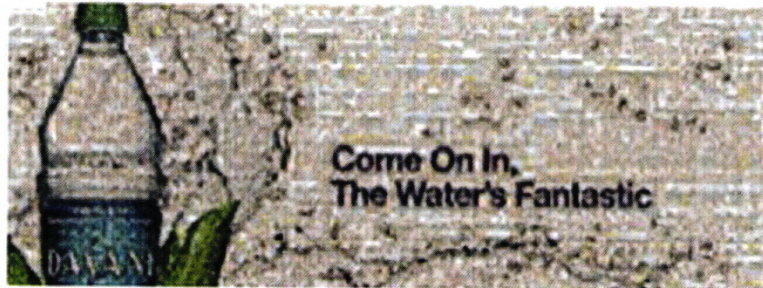


Figure 3. Come On In. Online ad for Coca-Cola's Dasani plantbottles.



Figure 4. Plantbottle. Print ad for Coca-Cola's Dasani plantbottles.

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