Panel Presentation Report

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Politics of Food
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05-15-2010

Food Researched: Coca Cola
Focus of Research: Production, Coke at Carleton
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May 18, 2010

The Coca Cola Company

The Coca Cola Company is one of the largest and most influential companies in the world. In 2009 the company had revenue of over $31 billion United States dollars, while employing more than 92,000 people. The Coca Cola Company currently has a portfolio of more than 3,300 beverages. These beverages include soft drinks, fruit drinks, water, sports and energy drinks, teas and coffee, and milk and soy products. The Company is represented by over 400 brands in 200 different countries (Coca-Cola.com). Coca Cola is truly a global company.

Objective(s)

Our research project on the Coca Cola Company addressed such areas of the company as production processes, campus human rights issues, history, marketing, and the every changing image of the company. I concentrated on the production processes and attempted to answer the question: How are Coca Cola items manufactured into the products we find when shopping today? I will also be discussing the history of Coca Cola here at Carleton. I will be discussing the ban and reinstatement of the product on our campus as a result of the human rights violations taking place at a bottling plant in Columbia. I will also report on the response of students to the initial termination of the Coca Cola contracts and the eventual negotiations and reinstatement of the Coca Cola contracts. Finally, I will discuss the aftermath and students opinions on the actions taken by CSA with regards to the Coca Cola Company.
Summary of Findings

Production:

Syrup Concentrate:

Most people would be surprised to discover that the Coca Cola Company does not entirely manufacture the Coca Cola products we see in vending machines, gas stations, and grocery stores every day. The only thing the Coca Cola Company actually manufactures is a syrup concentrate mixture that they then sell to bottling companies who own a Coca Cola franchise. The syrup concentrate is made up of carbonated water, sugar, caffeine, phosphoric acid, caramel, and finally natural flavors hidden within the “secret formula” (Coca-Cola.com). The bottling companies create the final products and then ship the products all over the world. The Coca Cola company can also bypass the bottling companies by selling the syrup concentrate directly to authorized fountain drink retailers.

Bottling:

The Coca Cola Company has more than 300 bottling partners throughout the world. The syrup concentrate manufactured by the Coca Cola Company is shipped to these bottlers who use the syrup to manufacture the products we are most used to seeing. The bottling process begins by creating a “simple syrup”, this is done by combining carefully purified water and sugar. The syrup concentrate from the Coca Cola Company is then combined with the previously made “simple syrup” to create the “final syrup”. This “final syrup” is finally combined with carbonated water to create the liquid beverage we have become accustomed to. Throughout the process there are many qualities checks performed on the beverages to check for proper taste, carbonation level, and syrup concentration. After the beverage has been approved for bottling the bottles are completely sanitized and re-checked for cleanliness before they are filled (academicdirect.org). The bottling company will then ship the finished product to stores and vending machines throughout the world.
Carleton and Coca Cola:

Taking notice:

Human rights issues surrounding the Coca Cola Company were first brought to the attention of the Carleton Student Association in the spring of 2004. Students responded to the alleged atrocities taking place at a Coca Cola bottling plant in Columbia. More specifically, the murder of Isidro Gil was brought to the attention of the CSA. Isidro Gil had been worker and a member of the union executive board representing workers in the beverage plant. In July of 2001, Gil was gun downed at his work place by paramilitary troops that had been called in by plant management. Also, another member of the union board was kidnapped, and the building housing union records, dates, and offices was burned. These events prompted the questioning of policy by members of CSA.

CSA takes action:

CSA began discussing their options in January of 2004 for the upcoming contract negotiations with Coca Cola and Pepsi. The human rights violations that had occurred in Columbia were first discussed by CSA member Mike Schorsch. Schorsch urged the Carleton community to take action in several articles he published in the Carletonian. Schorsch’s stances was “We have the ability to let Coca-Cola know that while we appreciate their business, we can not support what can only be called blatant disregard for workers’ lives.” (Carletonian February 6th 2004, A7) CSA was in a unique position because unlike other universities and colleges CSA has direct control over this budget issue and is responsible for making the final decision. When these happenings were brought to the attention of members of CSA they responded quickly by setting up a meeting to specifically discuss this issue. CSA asked for a one month extension of their current contract with Coca Cola which gave them time to put together a committee made up of CSA senate members and students to research this issue. A CSA meeting on March 23rd of that year brought more light to the issue. Luis Adolfo, an ex-worker in Columbia, gave a firsthand look into the treatment of the workers in these plants. Although the evidence was stacking up against the Coca Cola Company, CSA felt it only fair to allow the company to respond to these allegations. CSA decided to invite references from both sides of the issue to the meeting to help present the best picture of the alleged events. These references were two associates representing the Coca Cola Company and Ray Rogers, director of killercoke.org. Rogers was thought to have had a positive influence on the prospect of termination at the meeting. On March 8th, 2004, after over three hours of people voicing their opinions it was finally put to a vote. CSA voted twelve to eight in
favor of terminating the contracts with the Coca Cola Company. (Carletonian archives) When students returned from break that spring they were welcomed by 7-Up and Pepsi machines which had replaced the existing Coca Cola vending machines.

Aftermath:

During spring break of that school year the Coca Cola machines were removed and replaced by 7-Up and Pepsi vending machines. Several students had different opinions on the final decision to terminate the contracts between Carleton and the Coca Cola Company. Students felt disappointed in Carleton student’s actions after the termination of the contracts. A few columnists of the Carletonian referred to student activists as “empty” supporters. They felt the supporter’s initial concern had merit but their follow through and deeper values were skewed. Some felt students were content with the removing of Coca Cola products from campus even though the issue didn’t stop there. They said students lost interest in the Coca Cola Company and what was being done to bring awareness to these inhumane acts. Also, students did not seem concerned with what company would be brought in to replace the Coca Cola Company or what the record these companies might have with respects to human rights (Carletonian archives). This was exemplified when Carleton renewed its contracts with the Coca Cola Company for the beginning of the 2008 school year. It was rumored Carleton negotiated with the Coca Cola Company to get the company to purchase expensive “one-card readers” for the new vending machines. This was thought to bring large profits to Carleton by allowing students to purchase soda from machines using their campus one-card.

Conclusion:

The Coca Cola Company is one of the largest and most recognizable companies in the world. It has become so established in American as well as world culture that it is virtually ubiquitous in developed nations. As I stated earlier, Carleton students were initially actively opposed to the presence of Coca-Cola products on campus due to human rights violations and corporate practices of the Coca Cola Company. However, once the students had achieved their initial goal of banning Coca Cola products from campus, there was a general attitude of apathy toward the corporation’s policy toward maintaining workers rights in foreign bottling plants. When Coca Cola products were brought back to Carleton for the 2008 academic year, there was a complete lack of student response. In general, this shows how the Coca Cola Company has been able to market itself as an institution of American culture and avoid repercussions and bad publicity for some controversial actions and policies. Unless change arrives with stronger activism I do not see the Coca Cola Company changing any of its policies anytime soon.
Sources

- coca-colabottling.co.id
- www.killercoke.org
- Coca-cola.com
- Carletonian archives