

The new, improved water cycle

By Heather-jane Robertson

In 1993, the iconic corporation known as Coke assured its stockholders that prosperity and consumer captivity were closely related. “All of us in the Coca-Cola family wake up each morning knowing that every single one of the world’s 5.6 billion people will get thirsty that day. If we make it impossible for these 5.6 billion people to escape Coca-Cola, then we assure our future success for many years to come.”[1]

If the people in Coke’s marketing department had a sense of humor, they would have named the next Coke product “Ubiquity.” The “real thing” has become so commonplace that it is almost invisible until its presence becomes particularly offensive, i.e., when its image serves as a backdrop to a tableau of child malnutrition in Africa, or when a crying baby is photographed sucking a bottle filled with dark brown stuff.

Of course, this image/message/commodity could just as likely be associated with PepsiCo, Inc. Several years ago, I was invited to appear on a television talk show to discuss the commercialization of schools. A puzzled young man called in with an unforgettable question. “Well, Miss,” he began, “I went to a Coke high school, but now I’m at a Pepsi university. So what’s the problem?”

According to my caller, as long as students could buy what they wanted and corporations shared in (or at least took turns at) profiting from them, then the conditions necessary to determine the “level playing field” of the marketplace/school had been met. What point was I trying to make? Indeed, unless the purposes of public education and private commerce are distinctly and intentionally different, my point is moot.

It is difficult to measure the less tangible aspects of privatization, but logos littering the hallways and secret deals conferring exclusive “pouring rights” are usefully concrete indicators of the changing culture of schools. A recent research project undertaken by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF), and the Fédération des syndicats de l’enseignement (FSE) set out to measure the extent to which elementary and secondary schools across Canada had delivered their students — reluctantly or enthusiastically — over to corporations.[2]

Marketing to kids is good business — great business if it has the blessing of schools. In Canada, children between the ages of 9 and 14 control approximately \$2.9 billion of their own spending money, and they “kidfluence” at least \$20 billion of their parents’ spending. Advertising is expensive. Ensuring that students are routinely and inescapably exposed to a product or at least its logo is smart, cost-effective marketing. If it delivers community good will at the same time, so much

the better.

The CCPA/CTF/FSE survey relied on voluntary responses, and so its results are indicative rather than definitive. Still, nearly a quarter of all schools responded to a common questionnaire. Of this group, 28% of elementary and 55% of secondary schools reported that advertising appeared in their hallways and cafeterias, on team uniforms, on scoreboards, and on school websites.[3] Twenty-seven percent of responding schools had signed exclusive contracts with Coke or Pepsi, and those doing so were more common at the secondary level (60%) than at the elementary level (19%). Deals were more likely to be consummated in the Prairie provinces, at 40%, than in Quebec, where a mere 5% of schools had signed agreements.

Yet sales of soft drinks through school vending machines constitute a very small slice of the global revenue of Coke and Pepsi. Years of brand loyalty, not quick profits, motivate corporations that see themselves as “iconic.” Starting earlier means profiting longer. By 18 months of age, toddlers can recognize logos and are forming primitive “relationships” with products and images.[4] Properly nurtured, these relationships can endure for eight or nine decades.

Contemporary marketing is all about making and deepening the relationship between customers and their brands. Coca-Cola is just one of several corporate clients of the BrightLight Neurostrategies Group (BNG), a company that promises to meld science and marketing in the service of “Improving Public Life.”[5] At BNG, scientists have “repurposed” magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Corporations now receive strategic advice on communicating at this deep, nonconscious level. Neuromarketing is touted as the new frontier.

Ironically, public health care in Canada is enduring a lot of stress and criticism, in part because those expensive MRIs are in short supply. Private MRI clinics are appearing in several provinces where demand for imaging has created long waiting lists. Often, those who wait aren’t as concerned with public provision as they are with getting what they need quickly.

Precisely the same process takes place in schools. Starve schools of sufficient funds for sports teams, the school library, band instruments, or textbooks, and some folks become less doctrinaire about the evils of commercialization. Most provincial politicians can delegate the tough decisions and the political fallout to junior levels of government or school councils. There, well-meaning people struggle with the tradeoffs. Giving up on an exclusive soft drink contract could mean higher user fees for students, fewer class trips, or yet more fund raising for exhausted parents.

Whether private fund raising takes the form of bake sales or vending machine sales, it undermines a fundamental principle of public education. The quality of children’s education should not depend on the amount of money that parents,

teachers, communities, or corporations can bring to the table. All those who believe that public education is funded more fairly by hawking chocolate bars to coworkers than by fair taxation, please speak up.

As it turns out, the problem that finally provoked some political action had more to do with calories than with corporations. Ministers of education have found it increasingly difficult to overlook the sales of sugary and fat-laden snacks to students. When rates of childhood obesity are soaring and its medical and psychosocial effects have become more urgent, high-calorie snack foods (and drinks) have become “the new tobacco.” Soft drink consumption in North America has increased by 300% in the past 20 years, while serving sizes increased from 6.5 ounces in 1950 to 20 ounces by the late 1990s.[6] Depending on age and sex, between 56% and 85% of school-age children consume at least one soft drink daily. Twenty percent of adolescent males consume four or more soft drinks every day.[7]

Not that there’s any proven relationship between what children eat and how much they weigh, of course — according to the snack food industry.[8] The industry is working to frame the international obesity problem as an inactivity problem. Corporations such as McDonald’s have become vocal advocates of more physical education in schools, and they have purchased the services of Canadian Olympic heroes to ensure that the focus stays on fitness, not fats. Personally, I take my fries with a dash of skepticism. My calculator reports that I would have to run quickly for two hours and 11 minutes to work off a cheeseburger, medium fries, and a medium milkshake purchased from the Golden Arches.

While the industry’s reframing strategy has been moderately successful, it appears that, in schools, the junk-food jig is up. The trade association of major manufacturers of soft drinks and other beverages known as Refreshments Canada has “evolved voluntary school guidelines to ensure that Canadian students have greater access to lower calorie and nutritious choices.”[9] Henceforth, only 100% juices, no-fat or low-fat milk, and bottled water will be sold in elementary schools. High school vending machines will add no-cal and low-cal beverages, juice drinks, and “sports drinks” to the juice, milk, and water selections.

Despite Refreshments Canada’s attempt to personify enlightened corporate Canada, it should be noted that its members’ bottom lines are hardly in danger. Both Coke and Pepsi manufacture a sufficient variety of products to keep the vending machines humming, and the switch means that they will sell more of one of their most profitable items: water. Bottled water is sold at retail prices that are between 240 and 10,000 times more expensive than tap water.[10]

Globally, more than \$100 billion annually is spent on bottled water. Millions of people who have ready access to clean and safe drinking water, at very little

cost, will pay for bottled water at a price that exceeds the cost of gasoline. Presumably, consumers believe that what's inside the bottle is pristine. See the glaciers, mountain springs, and hidden aquifers that grace those labels? Yet Coke's Dasani and Pepsi's Aquafina bottled water brands contain water drawn directly from municipal taps.[11]

Experts repeatedly confirm that tap water and bottled water are equally safe, although tap water is inspected much more frequently than bottled water. Tap water—the same stuff that comes from the school's water fountains, assuming that they're in working order. And plastic bottles have become the fastest growing form of municipal solid waste, releasing toxic chemicals and contaminants into the air and water, both when they are manufactured and when they are destroyed. Yet tap water in some places is in short supply, because governments have allowed corporations to take water for bottling more quickly than it can be replaced by nature. Then the same corporations turn around and sell the water to the people whose taps have run dry.

Landfills and gutters around the world will soon be sporting new evidence of exactly how creative water merchants can be. Plans have been announced to target niche bottled-water markets by packaging in the familiar shapes of Disney characters, in bottles that claim to help you work out your karma issues (Aquamantra), and in bottles spiked with nicotine (Nic Lite.) Increasing total sales of bottled water also means convincing consumers that sophisticated good health is dependent on consuming more of it, that the truly health-hip drink water especially when they aren't thirsty. Promoting the conspicuous over consumption of water in the face of the spreading global resource crisis is shameful as well as wasteful.

Coke, Pepsi, and other corporations want to forge "relationships" with students. I'm all for it. Given a chance, students who explore what's inside the bottle from the perspective of water quality, privatization, political influence, marketing, public health, human rights, and environmental consequences can decide for themselves if that relationship is abusive.[12] They may decide that "the real thing" isn't the right thing, after all.

[1] Richard Girard, "Inside the Real Thing: A Profile of the Soft Drink Giant Coca-Cola Company," Polaris Institute, Ottawa, Ont., October 2005, available at www.polarisinstitute.org.

[2] Bernie Froese-Germain et al., *Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who's Calling the Shots?* (Ottawa, Ont.: CCPA, CTF, and FSE, 2006). Available at each organization's website and also available in French.

[3] Ibid, pp. 8, 9.

[4] Robert Lee Hotz, "Searching for the Why of Buy," Los Angeles Times, 27 February 2005, link to article available at <http://spinwatch.org>

[5] BrightHouse Neurostrategies Group, "Bright- House Neurostrategies Group Designed to Improve Public Life," press release, 22 January 2004, available at www.prweb.com, search on date.

[6] American Association of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, "Soft Drinks in Schools," policy statement, Pediatrics, January 2004, pp. 152-54, available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org>.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Heather-jane Robertson, "Doing It Daily," Phi Delta Kappan, January 2005, pp. 411-12.

[9] Refreshments Canada, "Canadian Beverage Industry Evolves Guidelines to Support Healthy Schools," press release, 3 May 2006.

[10] Tony Clarke, "Ten Concerns About Bottled Water," available at www.kairoscanada.org.

[11] Tony Clarke, "Inside the Bottle: An Exposé of the Bottled Water Industry," Polaris Institute, Ottawa, Ont., January 2005, available at www.polarisinstitute.org.

[12] For further information and curriculum ideas, see www.insidethebottle.org and the Water Campaign section at www.polarisinstitute.org.