

Cola giants reconsider marketing tactics on school campuses

by Martha Groves
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Coca-Cola Co. on Wednesday will announce changes in the way it markets products in public schools - an attempt to address complaints from parents and others about fatty, sugary snacks and excessive commercialism on campus.

Among other shifts, the company said it will urge its bottlers not to seek exclusive contracts with districts and will promote a wider array of beverages, including more with calcium and vitamins. It will also make available vending machines featuring a school mascot or commercial-free glass fronts, rather than the Coca-Cola logo.

In recent years, cash-strapped districts nationwide have negotiated lucrative, exclusive contracts with soda and snack vendors.

Big high schools have reaped as much as \$100,000 a year in extra revenues to buy band uniforms, fund field trips and support team sports. Under the exclusive contracts, the more cans of soda or bottles of juice drinks sold, the more money for schools.

But the arrangement has increasingly come under fire from parents, school leaders and legislators, who note the hypocrisy of preaching good nutrition in the classrooms while peddling empty calories in the halls.

They point to research linking soft

drinks to childhood obesity and a sharp increase in the incidence of adult-onset diabetes.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture in January issued a stern report to Congress recommending that all snacks sold in schools meet the federal government's nutritional standards.

"One of the biggest challenges school meal program managers face is the competition with foods that are marketed to children through multimillion-dollar, glitzy and sophisticated advertising campaigns."

-U.S. Dept. of Agriculture report

school meal program managers face is the competition with foods that are marketed to children through multimillion-dollar, glitzy and sophisticated advertising campaigns," the report stated.

A Coca-Cola official said the company is attempting to address the concerns of parents and educators.

"Companies that have considered schools as a marketing opportunity need to reconsider," said Jeffrey Dunn, president of Coca-Cola North America, a division of Coca-Cola Co., based in Atlanta. "The pendulum has swung too far."

Dunn added that bottlers are "on

board" with the policy shift. They are independent companies, however, and Bill Marks, a Coca-Cola spokesman, acknowledged that "if this movement doesn't take off, you might (continue to) see exclusives."

A Pepsi spokesman, Larry Jabbonsky, said his company has taken or is considering some of the same steps. He took exception to critics who maintain that the push for exclusivity has come from the cola giants.

"It has been a school, a district or consortiums of districts getting together and dangling exclusivity to generate the most money from a given supplier," Jabbonsky said.

For cola companies, the school contracts represent less a chance for short-term revenue gains than an opportunity to build brand loyalty. School sales accounted for only about 1 percent of Coca-Cola's sales of 5.1 billion cases of beverages in the most recent fiscal year.

The debate poses a conundrum for schools.

"It's a case of helping out the schools with money that students would already otherwise be spending off campus," said Dick Van Der Laan, a spokesman for Long Beach Unified School District in California. "The schools themselves can offer the healthier alternatives, but the reality is the students do buy junk food and empty calories."

Nevada population swells to nearly 2 million

by Tom Gorman
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LAS VEGAS - Led by a tripling of its Latino residents, the population of Nevada - the nation's fastest-growing state - has ballooned to nearly 2 million people, a 66.3 percent increase since 1990, according to U.S. Census figures released Tuesday.

Most of that growth occurred in Clark County, allowing the Las Vegas region to further manhandle the balance of the state on political and financial issues.

Clark County, with 1,375,765 residents, now accounts for nearly 69 percent of the state's total population. The population of the county has eclipsed the rest of the state since 1980, but the trend has continued with the surge of new Las Vegas Strip casinos in the past decade and, in its wake, the resident work force that followed.

For all its open spaces, Nevada's population is heavily concentrated in its urban counties, and that concentration grew in the past decade. About 86 percent of the state's residents live in either Clark County or Washoe County, around Reno, compared to about 83 percent in 1990.

The state's population has also become more ethnically diverse, a change that has not been lost on Las Vegas' casino owners, at least one of whom is now marketing specifically to the local Asian population.

Among the various ethnic groups, the number of Asians, Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Nevada has about tripled, from 35,897 in 1990 to between 96,362 and 122,457 in 2000, about 6 percent of the population. Figures on race and ethnicity from the 2000 census are reported as ranges because, for the first time, people were allowed to report themselves as belonging to more than one group.

The state's Latino population is also up sharply. In 1990, Latinos - with a population of 124,419 - made up 10.4 percent of the state's residents. By 2000, the number of

Latinos had roughly tripled, to between 355,452 and 393,970, or 17.8 percent to 19.7 percent of the population.

The dramatic increase in the Latino population should put politicians on notice that those voters will need to be reckoned with, elected officials say.

Now it is time for them to become politically involved, said Dario Herrera, chairman of the Clark County Board of Commissioners - and one of only three Latino elected officials in southern Nevada. The other two are a school board member and a state legislator.

Jeff Hardcastle, the state demographer, said the burgeoning Latino population in southern Nevada is stoked by the availability of jobs in new home construction and service jobs in the hotels and casinos.

"That's the story of Nevada's growth: job creation," he said. The question that will be resolved when additional census data are released, he said, is whether the Latinos have moved to Nevada from California or directly from other countries.

The census showed that the state's black population was between 131,509 and 150,508 - between 6.6 percent and 7.5 percent of the population. Whites numbered between 1,303,001 and 1,366,981 - between 65.2 percent and 68.4 percent of the population.

Politically, the continued population shift to Clark County will force state legislators to add more seats to represent southern Nevada, giving the county an even stronger voice in politics at the expense of the rest of the state. Nevada also is in store for a third congressional seat, and a piece of that district will probably be in Clark County, which already makes up parts of the other two seats.

Las Vegas' population increased 85 percent to 478,434, from 258,295 just 10 years ago.

Reno, the state's second-largest city, grew by nearly 35 percent to 180,480 residents, and Carson City, the state capital, grew about 30 percent to 52,457.

Solar power shines amid energy crisis

by Hugo Martin
Los Angeles Times
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Solar power, believed by many to have gone out of style with tie-dyed shirts and love-ins, is back in fashion, thanks largely to California's energy crisis.

Throughout the state, dealers and manufacturers of solar panel systems are reporting an increase in sales. State and local grant programs for residents and business owners who install such systems have been inundated with applications.

"We can't get them in fast enough," said Steve Radenbaugh, owner of Los Angeles-based Bilt-Well Roofing and Solar, who recently hired extra workers to handle a doubling of orders for solar electricity systems in the past month.

The biggest drawback to rooftop solar energy systems has always been the high cost, with typical residential setups costing \$15,000 to \$80,000. At such prices, it can take 15 years or more to pay off the investment in energy savings.

But with new rebate programs and the threat of higher energy rates, such an investment has become more attractive.

The renewed interest in solar is reflected in a 500 percent increase in grant applications to the state's \$56-million solar rebate program, which received 250 applications in January, according to officials at the California Energy Commission. The increased interest has forced Gov. Gray Davis to pledge another \$50 million to keep the program from running out of funds.

Only 100 Los Angeles residents have received rebates from the Department of Water and Power's \$80 million solar rebate program, which was launched last year. But in recent months, the number of people who have requested applications has doubled to nearly 1,000 per month.

"All this brouhaha about the energy crisis has made people aware of what their alternatives are," she added.

Solar energy generates a fraction of the 262,000 gigawatt-hours of electricity that Californians use each year. Still, the power supplied by solar energy has increased gradually, from 810 gigawatt-hours in 1997 to 954 in 1999, according to state figures.

A typical 2,000-watt solar energy system can supply a 1,500-square-foot home with up to 60 percent of its power, according to experts. The amount of electricity generated by a solar system depends on the amount of sunshine.

Still, a 2,000-watt system can cost \$15,000. A typical state rebate can cut that cost to \$9,000.

But even then, it can take 15 years or more of utility bill savings for a solar system owner to break even on the investment, according to solar panel dealers.

The payback period could be

slashed dramatically if electricity rates rise - a possibility that is on the minds of many recent solar converts.

That was the case with Mark Irwin, a contractor from Agoura Hills, Calif., who described his family of four as "energy hogs." They had regularly racked up electricity bills of \$160 per month, he said.

Like others who have recently purchased solar systems, Irwin had long considered making such an investment, but he hesitated until the energy crisis struck.

"I firmly believe our rates are going to go up," he said. In January, Irwin bought a \$36,000 solar system that can generate a peak output of 4.4 kilowatts - enough, he said, to

slash the energy bills at his 2,400-square-foot home by more than half. With the state rebate, he paid \$24,000 for the system.



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO BY BORIS YARO

Mark Irwin of Agoura Hills, Calif., near Los Angeles, got solar panels for his family of "energy hogs." Fellow contractor George Nikolas checks the work.

But Irwin said the purchase was intended to help save the environment as well as to save money.

Solar panels, also known as solar photovoltaic systems, use silicon cells installed in rooftop panels to convert sunlight into electricity. For that reason, experts recommend that solar systems be mounted on homes with at least 300 square feet of unobstructed roof area facing south or west.

Most solar electric systems are wired into a home's meter. If the panels generate more

electricity than is being used, such as when no one is home during the day, the solar energy is diverted into the local power grid. When that happens, the home's electric meter runs backward, creating free energy credits that the homeowner can use later.

However, if a home solar system generates more energy than that household uses over the course of a year, local utility companies are not obligated by law to buy that excess power from the homeowner. So, it doesn't make sense for most homes to have systems with more capacity than 5 kilowatts.

For an extra \$2,000 or so, solar system dealers offer a set of solar-powered batteries to keep the electricity flowing in case of blackouts or a disaster-related outage.

Oklahoma-based Bergey Windpower Co., which makes residential wind turbines, sold 40 home units in California in January, compared with just six in California in all of 2000 and 12 in 1999.

"Sales are exploding," said company President Michael Bergey. "We see this as perhaps the launch of a new age of affordable personal power generation."

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