Medical Xpress

Coke to defend safety of aspartame in new ad

August 13 2013, by Candice Choi

Coca-Cola plans to run its first ad defending the safety of artificial sweeteners on Wednesday, a move that comes as the company looks to stem declining sales of diet soda.

The print ad is set to run in USA Today in the Atlanta area, followed by the Atlanta Journal Constitution on Thursday and the Chicago Tribune next week. It says that diet drinks can help people manage their weight and stresses the scientific evidence showing the safety of aspartame, which is more commonly known under the NutraSweet brand name.

The ad represents the next phase of a campaign Coca-Cola Co. launched in January to push back at critics who blame its sugary drinks for fueling obesity rates. The first wave of ads outlined the company's commitment to fighting obesity and pointed to the many diet options it offers. Now Coca-Cola is trying to reassure people that those lower-calorie drinks aren't harmful.

"Coke is trying to get out front and proactively defend these diet sweeteners," said John Sicher, editor of Beverage Digest, which tracks the industry.

The fading popularity of soft drinks in the U.S. has been a long-running trend, given worries that the sugary fizz makes people fat. But more recently, people have been pulling back on diet soda as well, signaling that concerns about soda go beyond just weight gain.

In fact, sales of diet sodas are falling at a faster rate than regular sodas in

the U.S., according to Beverage Digest. Last year, for example, sales volume for Coke fell 1 percent, while Diet Coke fell 3 percent. Pepsi fell 3.4 percent, while Diet Pepsi fell 6.2 percent.

The declines come even though the Food and Drug Administration says aspartame may be safely used in foods as a sweetener, and the ingredient can be found in a wide array of other type of drinks and foods. The American Cancer Society also notes that most studies using people have found that aspartame is not linked to an increased risk of cancer, including the largest study on the topic.

In a nod to the various concerns over artificial sweeteners, Coca-Cola and rival PepsiCo Inc. are also working to come up with a drink that uses natural, low-calorie sweeteners.

This summer, Coca-Cola rolled out a version of its namesake soda sweetened with stevia in Argentina, a smaller market where it can better gauge how the drink performs. Stevia comes from a plant of the same name.

Notably, Coca-Cola's ad softpedals the fact that it is about artificial sweeteners, a sign that the company wants to be cautious about a sensitive topic. The ad features a picture of two women under the heading "Quality products you can always feel good about," with several paragraphs of text underneath. "Time and again, these low- and no-calorie sweeteners have shown to be safe, high-quality alternatives to sugar," it states.

Caren Pasquale Seckler, vice president of social commitment at Coca-Cola, said the goal is to clear up the confusion around diet sweeteners. She said the company will gauge the response in Atlanta and Chicago before expanding the push.

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Citation: Coke to defend safety of aspartame in new ad (2013, August 13) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-08-coke-defend-safety-aspartame-ad.html

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