Sharing Coke and Happiness Around the World: An Analysis of the “Share a Coke” Campaign Globally

Image Source: ShareACoke.com

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In the current social media revolution, technology users are finding new ways to share individual stories and allow for a greater amount of personalized self-expression, such as SnapChat photographic stories, or detailing Facebook Timelines. As this trend continues to emerge, Coca-Cola sought to be a part of the movement, and in 2011, the company launched the “Share a Coke” campaign in Australia (Moye, June 10, 2014). Within a few years, the campaign arrived in the United States during the summer of 2014, and also became a global phenomenon.

The idea for the campaign was simple: take some of the top names in a country, and place them on the labels of Coke/Diet Coke/Coke Zero bottles. The company encouraged Coke drinkers to find a bottle with their name, as well as the names of their family, friends, and co-workers, in order to create conversation between people, but also with the product.

The campaign also aimed to create a digital conversation among Coca-Cola consumers, and share their experiences via social media tools with the #ShareACoke hashtag. In the United States, Coca-Cola collected these photos online, and featured them on interactive billboards around the country, including New York City’s Times Square. The #ShareACoke campaign was a success globally for its ability to understand the current trends within their market, specifically the millennials, as well as their efforts to make adjustments to the campaign in each international environment. From the media coverage of the campaign, there were positives, but also negatives that could be improved, especially as #ShareACoke 2.0 begins to rollout this summer.

The media attention of the campaign was extensive and international, outlets in every country were reporting. When the campaign in Nigeria started, they used 600 names to capture the diversity of the many cultures and regions of the country. (Miller, January 13, 2015). Thailand was the first country in East Asia to host the campaign, not only putting names on the
bottles but also expressions. (Rungfapaisarn, September 25, 2013). As the campaign continued, the media also covered adjustment countries made to the campaign. In New Zealand, Coca-Cola decided to ask customers what names they wanted to see on bottles and allowed for a variety of names to be nominated for selection. (Stop Press, September 14, 2014). In Argentina, marketing companies introduced names written in Braille on cans and bottles to allow blind Coke drinkers to still enjoy the campaign, and #ShareACoke (Shinn, May 29, 2015).

There was also media attention for the campaign itself. Communications and international publications all discussed the strategy and success of the campaign, suggesting other brands could learn from the ideas of #ShareACoke. Much of the coverage focused on the “personalization” aspect of the campaign, and the digital participation of the customers (Grimes, July 24, 2013). The campaign was also discussed on Ragan’s PR Daily, in an article suggesting five take-aways from the campaign (Winchel, November 17, 2014). Specifically, the article commented on the campaigns success internationally by way of global reach, but with an emphasis on local roots. This commentary on the global success of the campaign offers some explanation as to what worked well for #ShareACoke.

Throughout the #ShareACoke campaign, there were many strategies that made it a success. First and foremost, it was a creative idea, but simple enough that it could be adapted in each country, and altered to fit various cultures around the world. When the campaign arrived in Ireland, it was quick and simple for Coke to switch from the top 250 U.S. names and use traditional Irish names including Aoife, Cathal, Gráinne, Áine, and Eimear (Ring, May 10, 2013). Wherever, Coca-Cola took the campaign, they has the benefit of making adjustments in every region of the world.
#ShareACoke was also a campaign that was appealing to millennials, and their activities on digital platforms (Moye, June 10, 2014). When a customer purchased a bottle with their name, all too often there were popular “selfies” spreading awareness about the campaign and the product itself. The campaign allowed for more self-expression among a younger demographic, a growing trend with personalized social media channels. As an independent Egyptian publication, *Daily News*, pointed out: “The campaign is one example of how many advertisers are appealing to the individualism in modern youth culture” (Morgan, August 5, 2014). As “egocentric” trends continue to appear in younger cultures, this campaign found a way to join the movement.

By launching the campaign during the summer season, they could market their product as the perfect drink for summer picnics, parties, and barbecues. As a result, there was more awareness for the campaign as friends, family, and community members came together enjoying these special occasions, as well as the connectedness of #ShareACoke.

Finally throughout the campaign, Coca-Cola was able to successfully communicate four key messages that the campaign aimed to stress in attracting potential buyers. The first key message of the campaign insisted on the *happiness* you could find by enjoying a delicious Coke/Diet Coke/CokeZero with your name on it or the name of someone else you know. The next key message was *connection*. The campaign not only brought together friends and families over the bottle, but connected people with the same names, and also brought together Coca-Cola drinkers from around the world.

The third key message of the campaign was *youth*. #ShareACoke was mainly designed to engage a younger demographic and the way they communicate: through social media tools, hashtags, and in a personalized, “selfie” manner. The campaign reached this demographic by
allowing millennials to interact with the product digitally, as opposed to traditional forms of interactions with products and companies. Finally, the last key message of the campaign was #ShareACoke’s aim to go global. As more countries continued to announce their participation, they also mentioned the presence of #ShareACoke around the world, pointing towards the campaign’s global reach. The campaign made extensive efforts to make their four key messages, happiness, connection, youth, and global participation, attractive and interesting to their stakeholders. As a result, #ShareACoke was able to successfully make the campaign understandable among a variety of international media platforms, traditional or digital.

However, while all of these strategies allowed for the campaign to grow and spread around the world, there are some aspects of the campaign that pose challenges and create negative press attention. With each situation though, there are strategic steps that could be taken as recommendations to improve the campaign.

Throughout Coca-Cola’s history, one of the largest complaints the company continually faces is their contribution to the obesity crisis, especially with children. As #ShareACoke arrived in Ireland, Professor Donal O’Shea pointed out that most of the names used in Ireland were the 100 most popular names of seven and eight-year-olds. “[O’shea] also criticized the company for what he said was a breach to its own promise not to target children under 12 with the drink…” (O’Regan, September 1, 2014). Moving forward with the #ShareACoke campaign, the company should attempt to address the issue and incorporate a nutritional element. One suggestion could be to actually encourage kids to share a coke with their “BFF,” which could result in children drinking less sugary calories. Regardless of the success of the campaign, there will be nutritional backlash that the company must attempt to resolve.
The campaign was also limited in the variety of names they selected. In the United States, only 250 names were selected as opposed to the 600 in Nigeria. In some countries a lack of specific names caused controversy. In Israel, the exclusion of the Arabic name “Mohammed,” one of the most popular names in the region and around the world was not used, causing citizens to criticize the campaign as being discriminatory. (Aubrey, May 29, 2013). The campaign failed to consider the presence of international and significant names in various domestic markets, and as a result received backlash. For this criticism, there are two solutions. The first is to simply create a larger list of names to place on the bottles for more inclusion among their consumers to participate in the personalized experience. In regards to the discrimination claims, the campaign needs to make a more extended effort to work with local experts on what names are necessary to accurately represent the region. As pointed out in Winchel’s article, #ShareACoke was a global campaign with local execution. However, there needs to be even further communication with local markets to ensure these controversial claims can be avoided. While the campaign can not commit to all names, popular names such as “Mohammed” must be recognized and incorporated. 

One final unfortunate situation the campaign faced was during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics (Stuart, January 26, 2014). Coca-Cola was already receiving criticism for sponsoring an event in a country where the attitude for LGBT citizens and their rights was negative. Meanwhile, when online users attempted to type “gay” into the virtual “Share A Coke” can on Coca-Cola’s website, they received the message: “Oops, let's pretend you didn't just try that” and were asked to type in a different term. This prompted outrage from LGBT activists pointing out Coca-Cola’s online intolerance for LGBT citizens. As the company was already facing critics for their involvement in the Olympics, this caused further controversy. Moving forward, Coca-Cola
must consider how all of their products, including the digital platform of the #ShareACoke campaign play a role in world events. Not only should they strive to avoid controversy, but also increase their involvement during world events and celebrate the connectedness of the campaign as the international community comes together. For example, they could alter the campaign from names of people to names of the athletes or countries participating in the Olympics. If Coca-Cola were to continue sponsoring these events, they have opportunities to play with the campaign, and create more global connections during world events such as the Olympics with #ShareACoke.

As the summer of 2015 approaches, Coca-Cola is getting ready to roll-out #ShareACoke 2.0. As the campaign kicks off, the company has already started to make some changes after listening to critics of #ShareACoke last summer . (Moye, April 14, 2015). For example, in the United States, they are making the increase from 250 to 1,000 names on Coca-Cola products, in order to get more of their consumers involved in the experience. For those whose names are still not on the bottles, they can be made and ordered on Coca-Cola’s website. While the campaign has been incredibly successful thus far, there are still many opportunities for #ShareACoke to grow, and address some of their former issues such as obesity and discrimination. For now, it looks as though #ShareACoke aims for continual improvement, and the global awareness of the campaign will continue to thrive.
References


