

A Contested Contest Over Soda in the Schools

The marketing meeting for Vibe lime-flavored energy soda was well underway, headed by the Department's new Manager, Jessica Denton, and attended by other employees, Mike, Angela, and Jamal. The drink, which had only been on the market for two years, was finally starting to gain a bit of ground in its target market of young adults, especially males, in this highly competitive soda market. But if we couldn't increase sales significantly within the next year, the product was going to be pulled. In brainstorming ideas, Mike, the Assistant Manager, mentioned trying to go a bit younger and hit the middle schools. He suggested something like a contest in the schools, like for a new slogan. "We have an energy drink, and what creates more energy than a contest!"

"But we just invested a lot in branding our 'Get your Vibe on' slogan," Jamal protested. "And it's going well, so let's not abandon it." The others agreed.

"OK, so what about some other kind of contest, like for a TV commercial," Mike suggested with excitement.

Angela fed off this idea and said "Yes, it could be good for the middle school video, arts or advertising classes to get some real world marketing experience. Do they even have advertising classes in middle school?"

"I don't know. But it would look good on their resume to have a national commercial under their belts at the ripe old age of thirteen or whatever," Jamal chimed in. "And it certainly would get kids thinking and talking about Vibe, which is what we want."

"I think the idea of a commercial contest is intriguing," Jessica contended with some skepticism. "But I worry about the implications of targeting so young an age as middle school for an energy soda. Even high school is pushing it."

"Jessica, surely you want to create life-long customers for Vibe," Mike explained. "And it's not like middle school kids aren't drinking soda already. Heck, I think I had Pepsi in my baby bottle." The others laughed.

"I like soda just as much as the rest of us," Jessica countered. "But we are old enough to know about nutrition and not drink caffeinated and sugary products in excess. As a parent of a pre-teen, I don't think middle school kids are savvy enough to make good food choices yet."

"That's certainly a nice idea to care about kids, I do too. Certainly it would be easier on our consciences if we were marketing carrots or vitamins or something," Mike argued. "But the fact of the matter is that we have an energy soda. It's not poisonous, and there are lots on the market, and it's our job to help sell it. Isn't like we're trying to get them hooked on beer and cigarettes."

Jamal and Angela looked a little uncomfortable as the tension increased in the room between Jessica and Mike. Perhaps he was resentful that he didn't get the promotion to Department Manager. Mike certainly wasn't letting Jessica come in and push him around. Jessica tried to proceed firmly but tactfully to assert her new authority. "I appreciate the dilemma that we are in with trying to market a, shall we say, 'non-health food' to young adults. You are right that we are hired to sell it and need to compete. But that doesn't mean that we abandon our ethics or sense of social responsibility toward children in the

process, even if other companies are. We just have to be smarter than they are and work around the limitations. Why don't we consider putting this contest out for the general public?"

"That isn't really creating a buzz around youth when it comes to creating early loyal users and it doesn't allow us to get inside the minds of young people to know their lifestyles and preferences," Mike replied. "Kids can't compete with adults when it comes to making commercials. I think it either needs to be done at the middle school level or it isn't worth doing. When we start targeting adults, we compete with alcoholic drinks. With kids, all they really can choose is soda."

Jamal chimed in rather sheepishly to try to break the tension "It's not like they have to drink it anyway, they just get to be creative and work on a cool commercial. It's a creative and business endeavor more than a nutritional choice. It gets our name out there."

"Yes," Angela said. "And maybe we could donate their prize money to their school, so the whole thing ends up being charitable. That way it gives the school administration an incentive to encourage their students to participate as a class project."

"Yeah," Mike said with a smirk, "We can say the money has to be spent on a school vegetable garden, that way they get some vitamins with their caffeine after all. Everyone's happy."

The three of them waited for Jessica's response.

Imagine that you are Jessica. What would you do and why?

Use the following questions to guide your decision.

1. Will *any* option being considered cause harm to anyone?
2. Who, and what harm?
3. Would any option mitigate or eliminate that harm?
4. If your chosen option still causes harm, answer the following two questions:
 - How will harming someone promote the overall good of the community?
 - Who might be harmed if your proposed action is *not* taken?

Take no more than one, double-spaced page to answer.