

Diet Pepsi's New Skinny Can: A Brand Heavyweight?

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PepsiCo Inc. threw some weight behind its Diet Pepsi brand by introducing a new “skinny can” at New York Fashion Week in February, and picked up some controversy along the way. The Purchase, N.Y.-based soft drink giant’s campaign showcased the new, sleeker look for its Diet Pepsi cans at several events during Fashion Week, including a style studio designed by fashion commentator Simon Doonan and sponsorship of designer Betsey Johnson’s fashion week show. But Pepsi’s use of the word “attractive” in association with “skinny” in its marketing campaign angered the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), which issued a press release deriding Pepsi for introducing the skinny can at Fashion Week, “a venue admittedly rife with eating disorders,” it said, adding: “Pepsi should be ashamed for declaring that skinny is to be celebrated.” The new can, available nationwide in March, is a 12-ounce size and does not replace Diet Pepsi’s original packaging.



Diet Pepsi’s move to stand out in the cluttered soft drink marketplace was a clever one from a packaging innovation standpoint, says Stef Gans, CEO of Effective Brands, a New York-based global marketing consultancy. “The can size appeals to consumers because it’s a nice-looking can and it will definitely stand out on-shelf.”

“This package is different in a way that so suits the product proposition. It’s a sleek, thin, slender, stylish can. That imagery is so fitting for a diet soft drink,” says Jonathan Asher, senior vice president at Perception Research Services International, a packaging and shopper research firm based in Fort Lee, N.J.

As for NEDA’s comments, “It feels like a cheap shot to get publicity and it would be a shame if that’s what it was. I don’t think calling this can the skinny can and associating it with Fashion Week is going to do much to contribute to the very serious problem of eating disorders,” Asher says.

But Gans says that the campaign’s literal association with skinny as a reference to the fashion industry and models hits a sour note. “PepsiCo is spreading more cholesterol than any company I

know of, and they would do well to steer away from exploiting the [skinny] schism,” he says.

However, experts say the controversy shouldn't do much damage to the Diet Pepsi brand in the long run. “For a brand like Pepsi, with its incredibly widespread distribution, the average American consumer probably won't even notice. It's a storm in a teacup,” Gans says.

“Most people would see the efforts by Diet Pepsi and the intent to be pretty fair and targeted,” Asher says. “It's a well thought-out campaign that utilizes a lot of different efforts that make sense for the brand. [Fashion Week] fits with the rest of what they were doing.”

For more on how product packaging can attract attention and inspire purchases, check out the March 30 issue of Marketing News, available later this month at www.marketingpower.com/marketingnews.