

Soft Drink Giant to Air Commercials Addressing Obesity

Coca-Cola Co will air a two-minute commercial on U.S. cable television on Monday that highlights its efforts in fighting obesity, as the soft drink industry faces increasing pressure from local governments and critics.

The commercial mentions how Coca-Cola sells about 180 low- and no-calorie drinks, works to produce better-tasting low-calorie sweeteners and has introduced smaller can sizes.

It also reminds viewers that “all calories count no matter where they come from” and that “if you eat and drink more calories than you burn off, you’ll gain weight.”

This is not the first time Coca-Cola has used advertising to address this issue, but it is a first for television. The move comes as New York City prepares for an upcoming ban on the sale of sugary drinks larger than 16 ounces (0.5 liter) in places like restaurants, movie theaters and stadiums. In November, voters in two California cities rejected ballot measures for soda taxes.

The commercial will air on Monday on CNN’s “The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer,” FOX News’ “The O’Reilly Factor,” and MSNBC’s “The Rachel Maddow Show.” It will air on Tuesday during other shows as well.

“The audience for this new ad ... is knowledgeable about the problem but doesn’t necessarily know about what the Coca-Cola Co. is doing to address it,” said Coke spokeswoman Diana Garza Ciarlante. “We are telling them our story.”

Another commercial, which talks about Coke’s front-of-package

calorie labels, will debut on Wednesday during the popular "American Idol" television show on Fox, which has partnered with Coke, the world's largest soft drink maker, for some time.

Ciarlante said the commercials were not in response to any increased pressure but Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest and an outspoken critic of the industry, said the move seems like "a full-blown exercise in damage control."

"They're trying to pretend they're part of the solution instead of part of the problem," Jacobson said. If Coke was serious about wanting to be part of the solution, Jacobson said, it could stop advertising full-calorie drinks altogether, set up a pricing scheme where full-calorie drinks were more expensive, or stop opposing proposed soda taxes.

In response Coca-Cola's Stuart Kronauge, general manager of sparkling beverages for North America, said the obesity problem can only be solved with "honest and collective action."

"This includes action by business, government, teachers, scientists, health professionals, parents, and of course companies like the Coca-Cola Co," Kronauge said in a statement. 'We have an important role in this fight which can only be won if everyone works together.'

Coca-Cola, which is also a big sponsor of the Olympics and other sporting events, spent about \$610 million on advertising in 2011, according to Brad Adgate at Horizon Media Inc, citing figures from Advertising Age.

American Idol is one of the costliest TV shows for advertisers, according to the latest annual survey by Advertising Age. The survey, released in October, found that the average cost of a 30-second spot on Wednesday's edition of the show was \$340,825.