

I Live in a Coke v Pepsi Town

I live in a Coke v Pepsi town - you may too. I am talking about health systems and not soft drinks. Well, maybe I'm really talking about advertising and the power of health care brands. About the constant stream of messages that convince me that I am not as healthy as I could or should be – that I just need to get it checked out, to take this pill or to get this procedure.

Why am I writing this article? Well, maybe I'm just a little frustrated that I haven't been able to *teach the world to sing in perfect harmony*. Maybe, I should be talking about *the real thing*. Now that the Affordable Care Act is firmly established in our marketplace and in our court system, I should just accept the fact that *Coke is it*. I should *just have one and a smile*. But, is that really [true](#)?

Or do I need to follow Mean Joe Greene to Pittsburgh, the home of UPMC, to get that smile? I know, I know. What about *the Pepsi Challenge*? Maybe that big brand in our town really isn't as good as number 2. Maybe I am just a little too "old school," and I need to let *the Pepsi Generation* take-over. Maybe I do need to *ask for more*. Maybe I should *change the game*. But how could that be? *Coke adds life!*

Both soft drinks and their advertising are oh so sweet. Yes, [oh so sweet](#). Yes, I need some more. More is better. Never enough. Then again, maybe it is so sweet that it has tricked by body and my mind into thinking that I need more. Could this be the case? Years ago, I heard the CEO of Coca-Cola (at an Ernst & Young Partners meeting) say that Coke is not competing for a larger share of the soft drink market – it is competing for a larger share of the belly. Oh, so sweet. I must have some more.

In the early days of third party payment systems, when health care was way less than 10% of our economic belly, health care was about treating illnesses and injuries. Then someone had the thought: "Maybe we should go upstream and try to keep people healthier. Better to avoid a heart attack or stroke than to deal with the aftermath."

Great idea - sort of like regular maintenance of your car engine to avoid a total breakdown. However, sometimes great ideas have unintended consequences. "Keeping people healthy" has now evolved into treating the various realities of life, and aging, as "risk factors," "pre-diseases" and other "medical conditions." I am not talking about the equivalent of \$30 oil changes. I am talking about unnecessary "check-ups" (see [Choosing Wisely](#)), lab and imaging work "just to be sure," and low cost medications to treat "chronic conditions." Oh, should I also mention the new (and so expensive) specialty drugs that will make it easier to manage these "risk factors" and "chronic conditions"?

Did Coke or Pepsi tell you that there really is no correlation between when an individual meets with a physician and how long they live? Did they tell you that unnecessary testing and treatment too often generate false positives and harmful invasive procedures? Did they tell you that water is really better for you than their sweet, sugary drink (and a lot less expensive if you don't buy it out of a plastic bottle)?

Some people are starting to figure this out on their own, but it is tough to resist that slick advertising, that powerful brand, that sweet, sweet taste. Yeah, I guess my back does bother me a little more than it used to on the back nine. I guess spicy food does get to me more than it used to – especially when I eat it shortly before going to bed.

Now the typical adult over fifty is taking four medications and those over 70 are taking twelve. Oh, but did they tell you that that medication might lead to higher rates of obesity, diabetes, chronic pain or higher rates of bleeding?

They tell me their recommended surgery isn't bad either. I think it is probably a lot easier than doing physical therapy. Oh, they didn't tell me that the physical therapy would be harder *after* surgery than as *an alternative to* surgery. They also didn't tell me that the outcome would be the same without the surgery. Or, believe it or not, that a daily dose of baby aspirin would impact my survival odds as much as the recommended bypass surgery or stent.

Is it possible that these same medical providers and prescription drug manufacturers with the big marketing and advertising budgets aren't the only options in the market? That their messages might drown out the alternatives, but that alternatives are still there? That the best brand might not be the best product, the best service, and certainly not the best value? If only someone would have just offered me a cool cup of water. Why isn't there a big brand management machine for tap water? Oh, I get it, not much money in that. Oh well, I guess I'll just go out and take a walk and think about this a little more.

Enjoy! Life tastes good!

Rick Chelko