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Should Kids Use "Energy Drinks?" Should Anyone?

By **Todd Morman**, *Spectator Magazine*. Posted **March 13, 2002**.

As energy drinks like "Red Bull" and "Whoopass" gain in popularity, some health officials are sounding alarms about their potential dangers for young people.

It's Thursday night at a local gay club, and the comedy is underway. On a video monitor, a drag queen is holding a can of 180, a caffeinated "energy drink" from Anheuser-Busch.

"Liquid crack!" the drag queen announces. "It's what you need!"

The crowd laughs and cringes at the same time. Some of them hold cans of 180.

Selling Speed

During the past year, "energy drinks," also known in the business as "functional beverages," have become part of the scenery at bars and convenience stores nationwide. The names of these drinks are usually aggressive: Whoopass, Venom, Piranha, Amp. The most successful, Red Bull, has already passed into pop-cult status, regularly used in TV shows and magazines as shorthand for getting legally jacked.

The buzz these drinks provide comes mainly from caffeine and sugar -- in some cases, as many as five teaspoons of sugar in a thin little can -- with a variety of extras thrown in. Some drinks load up on herbs like ma huang, ginseng, green tea or guarana, and market themselves as "natural" alternatives, despite the fact that ma huang is just a form of ephedrine. Others dispense with the froufrou stuff and sell themselves to bodybuilders, like Speed Stack, Adrenaline Rush or Extreme Ripped Force. Still others, like Red Bull, toss in chemicals like the nonessential amino acid taurine and make claims of increased endurance. Many drinks create a stew of all those things, plus a few more.

The marketing hype is as aggressive as the product names. Ads promise to "give you wings," "make you fire on all cylinders" and "thunder through your workouts" with "radical energy in liquid form."

The spread of these edgy products across the United States has drawn a lot of attention since Red Bull introduced them in 1997. A similar wave spread across Europe after the drinks were imported from Asia in the late 1980s. While energy drinks now constitute only about 1 percent of the U.S. soft-drink market, they're one of the fastest-growing segments of the industry. Big players like Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Anheuser-Busch and Snapple have all introduced their own versions in thin 8.4-ounce cans. Dozens of smaller companies like Jones Soda and Hansen's Beverage are also in the game.

"The energy-drink market is a tiny, tiny dot in the overall soft-drink business," says John Sicher, editor of Beverage Digest, an industry trade magazine. "At this point in time, its staying power is unclear. Will it grow into a small category, or is

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it a fad? We don't know."

Not surprisingly, Red Bull North America spokeswoman Emmy Cortes is optimistic. Her good spirits may have something to do with the fact that the company she works for controls about 65 percent of U.S. energy-drink sales.

"The growth has been spectacular, but we've done it slowly to build a loyal audience," she says. "It took us five years to get in all 50 states. But we sold over one billion cans around the world last year alone. It's not a fad."

Catching the Eye of Jittery Kids

Specific data on the age breakdown of energy-drink consumers is difficult to obtain because companies consider it proprietary information. But one thing is clear: The industry's advertising aims squarely at young, active consumers. When Pepsi announced the creation of Amp, a drink based on Mountain Dew, Beverage Digest editor Sicher noted that "Mountain Dew as a platform for energy drinks makes perfect sense" because of the caffeinated soda's youthful consumer base. Companies also routinely create new extreme-sports events, such as Red Bull's kite-boarding and free-ride snowboarding competitions, to attract a youthful demographic.

Red Bull's Cortes acknowledges the attraction of young people to the drink but is quick to point out that truck drivers, businessmen, college students and those who are "youthful without age limits" are also customers.

"You have to remember that all active people aren't young," she says.

That's certainly true. But when Drug Store News wrote last summer that "the juiced-up fizzy drink segment... appeals mainly to the sneaker- and-jeans demographic," it probably wasn't referring to middle-aged businessmen who need a lift to get through the workday.

Still, one local convenience-store worker notes that at \$2 a can, energy drinks tend to be out of the price range of the average kid. That position is echoed by an industry analyst, who told Brandweek that energy drinks "move at prices which are mind-blowing," adding, "Obviously we're not talking about the price-sensitive consumer."

But a worker at another local convenience store doesn't hesitate when asked if high school-aged teens bought energy drinks.

"Oh, yes. They buy a lot of those," he says, "a whole lot. And they buy these, too." He points to a display of packets of tiny ephedrine pills.

Suitable for Minors?

Most manufacturers insist their drinks are safe and effective when used properly by adolescents. The Red Bull Web site answers the question, "Is Red Bull suitable for young people?" with a confident "Yes! For young people who drink coffee, Red Bull is harmless."

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