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Battle of the little bottles: Mars attacks!

By Julian Mellentin

Mars' latest step in its health strategy – probably the most developed health strategy in the global confectionery business – has been unveiled with the launch of Positively Healthy Cocoa drink, a skimmed milk and cocoa powder beverage sold in an 85 ml bottle – a similar size to the classic 65ml “little bottles” of probiotic fermented milk drinks marketed by Yakult and the 100g bottles of Danone Actimel. Each bottle is described on neck labels as containing 150mg of cocoa flavonoids: “the equivalent of 500g blueberries, 450g red grapes or 400g green apples”.

The launch is being made through a company set up specially for the purpose of marketing healthy snack foods, called The Positive Food Company. Like Mars' organic foods division, Seeds of Change, there are no references to its parent on the company's website or literature or on the product.

The tone and style of the company's website is clearly inspired by the fun, “youth” marketing approach taken by many smoothie companies (two web addresses definitely worth visiting for an insight into the image Mars is trying to create are www.healthycocoa.com and www.positivefood.co.uk) and anyone encountering the Positive Food Company website would have no hint that it is an arm of one of the world's biggest multinationals.

Given the Mars' brand's association with indulgent confectionery and not health and nutrition this might be an astute move. However, Positively Healthy Cocoa's package design clearly owes its parentage to the Mars brand image and colours.

Positively Healthy Cocoa Drink carries the tag line “Top up your body's defences” and is described as gluten-free. Each bottle has 0.6g of fat and 69 calories. A detailed ingredients list is shown in the table on page 4. Mars claims a patented process and scientific proofs for the antioxidant effect of its beverage, adding that the

cocoa used is processed using proprietary processes that retain the naturally occurring flavonoids that might otherwise be destroyed.

Mars told *New Nutrition Business* in a written reply to our questions – the company is famously media-shy and rarely grants interviews – that the antioxidant capacity of one 85ml bottle of the drink has been shown in independent *in vitro* tests carried out at the UK's Institute of Food Research in Norwich to be equivalent to half a kilo of blueberries, 450g of red grapes, 400g of apples or 400g of onions and that, “This is being submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.”



“They are defending their snacking position as snacking moves increasingly from dry to wet – from food to beverage,” says brand strategy consultant Peter Wennström, adding, “It's a very good move to enable them to keep control of the snacking occasion with a healthier proposition.”

Dorothy Mackenzie, director of Dragon Brand Consulting, concurs: “This is more credible than saying, ‘eat more of our normal chocolate’.

“Cocoa doesn't have the pure indulgence aspects of chocolate but it does have a flavour hit,” she adds, “and cocoa drinks are about comfort and satisfaction. Cocoa is a nurturing childhood drink so this is quite consistent with the little bottle message. A lot of the values of cocoa are relevant to the concept of looking of comfort, nurturing and looking after yourself better.”

On the other hand, says Mackenzie, “It's a bit disingenuous to pretend they [Positive Food Company] are a nice little company: but everyone's doing it – Unilever, Nestlé. Consumers are saying they want to buy things from little companies with those kinds of small-company values – which is a problem if you are a multinational.”

A SMALL SIGN OF AN ADVANCED HEALTH STRATEGY

No other major chocolate companies appear to have taken their strategy as far down the health route as Mars and no major chocolate company has generated and used nutrition research findings in quite the same way as Mars. Having funded much of the research in the area of chocolate and health it began to deploy the positive findings in its nutrition marketing strategy from January 2000 with its “Cocoapro” logo and website.

Cocoapro is “the Mars promise that [its] chocolate products are made from cocoa beans that are carefully handled to retain their natural goodness”. For ‘natural goodness’ read flavonoids, as Mars itself clarifies: “In Mars chocolate products, much of the natural levels of flavonoids found in the raw cocoa are retained through proprietary processes that help prevent the destruction of the cocoa flavonoids during processing. Products made with these processes carry the trademark Cocoapro.”

In Europe this logo can be found on packages of M&M's, Galaxy, Twix, Bounty

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