Introduction

If 'Coca-Cola' were the name of a person, how would you describe that person? How does that person make you feel? Consumers often prefer products that have a strong, positive image. An important ingredient of this image will be the associations that are evoked in the mind of the consumer. The 'brand personality' is what people think and feel, consciously and subconsciously, about a company identity or product and is described in the same way as you would a person.

It is necessary to create the right image i.e. one that closely matches consumers' feelings and expectations of what the product should be. Marketing managers try to build on associations between products and other aspects of life. Sponsorship is one way of building these brand associations. Sponsorship involves providing financial support, creative input, media support, and experience to an important event or activity organised by another party. In return, the company receives a public opportunity to be seen to support and be associated with an event, activity, or person. Sponsorship is a crucial part of a public relations strategy because it is possible to reach a target audience with a specific message.

'Coca-Cola' Sports Sponsorship

'Coca-Cola' is one of the top global sponsors of sport. The rationale for sponsoring international and local sporting events is that it is "a natural fit". By matching the brand with world standard events, 'Coca-Cola' benefits from the exposure and the associations made between it and the event being sponsored. Equally by ensuring that local events are sponsored, the brand is exposed exclusively to a local market and will thus be seen as a local brand. By devising innovative and tailored marketing programmes based on local consumer insights, sales can be increased in the ready-to-drink nonalcoholic beverage market. Local offices around the world ensure that the company participates and supports local communities. 'Coca-Cola' is aware of what is relevant in the lives of its target market such as sport, music and fashion. Life experiences are created around these interests. By getting involved in these daily experiences 'Coca-Cola' meets its sponsorship objectives:

- To connect with teens in an interesting and fun way.
- To create unforgettable teen moments linked to 'Coca-Cola'.
- To ensure 'Coca-Cola' is viewed as making everyday life more interesting and fun.
- To communicate the dynamic and leading attributes of the brand.
- To be seen as a national sponsor at a local level and global sponsor on an international level.

Brand Positioning

'Coca-Cola’s' brand personality reflects the positioning of its brand. The process of positioning a brand or product is a complex managerial task and must be done over time using all the elements of the marketing mix. Positioning is in the mind of the consumer and can be described as how the product is considered by that consumer. When researching the positioning of a product, consumers are often asked how they would describe that product if they were a person. The purpose of this is to develop a character statement. This can ensure that consumers have a clear view of the brand values that make up the brand personality just like the values and beliefs that make up a person. Many people see 'Coca-Cola' as a part of their daily life. This affinity between the brand and the consumer leads to a high degree of loyalty and makes the purchasing decision easier. Brand positioning guides what will be communicated in the company's advertising, while the character statement guides how a message should be delivered or put across.

Sponsorship and the Marketing Mix

The Marketing Mix is the name placed on the "4Ps" of marketing: Product, Place, Price, and Promotion. It is this fourth element, Promotion, which is focused on in this case study. This involves communicating the benefits of a product to increase sales and ultimately profits. There are four main methods of promoting the benefits of a brand:

- Advertising
- Personal Selling
- Public Relations & Sponsorship (PR)
- Sales Promotion

The combination of these four methods constitutes the Promotion Mix. Public Relations is about communicating with the media to create good publicity for a firm or its products. The media then communicate these activities to the public.

Public Relations

One of the marketing department's functions is to manage public relations and maintain a positive and beneficial image of the firm's policies and products. The aims of the Public Relations Manager liaising with the marketing function are to:

- Make the public aware of the existence of the firm and maintain the good name and image of 'Coca-Cola' by issuing press releases, organizing news conferences and informing the public about the firm's activities.
- Maintain goodwill amongst the public for the company. Goodwill is the likelihood that the old customer will return and can be equated with brand loyalty. Brand loyalty occurs when customers repeat-purchase a particular branded product on a regular basis. 'Coca-Cola' has a high level of brand loyalty. When you want a drink do you automatically pick up a bottle of 'Coca-Cola'?

International Sponsorship

'Coca-Cola’s' powerful brand personality has become a vehicle for promotion in its own right, sponsoring many events both on a global and local level. The company has long been associated with global events such as the Olympic Games, The FIFA World Cup, Rugby World Cup and Special Olympics. Coke has also been linked to world's fairs and national exhibitions since 1905. With the Olympics blossoming in popularity and complexity, increased attention has been turned to serving the growing crowds and to supplying the needs of the athletes and organizing committees. In many countries where Olympic associations lack full government sponsorship local bottlers of 'Coca-Cola' donate funds to aid potential Olympians as the partnership of 'Coca-Cola' and the Olympics continues to grow.

'Coca-Cola' was the official sponsor of the Olympics 2000 Games held in Sydney maintaining an unbroken presence at the games since 1928. The company has already contracted to sponsor both the Summer and Winter Games through to 2008.
'Coca-Cola' will be the official global sponsor of the Special Olympics to be held in Ireland in 2003 (this is the first time the games will be hosted outside the US). As the Olympic Movement’s longest-standing corporate partner, ‘Coca-Cola’ has aided the evolution of games together with more than 190 National Olympic Committees assisting thousands of athletes in their training.

**National Sports Sponsorship**

In addition to sponsoring sporting events, their involvement extends to many community and education programs in Ireland. ‘Coca-Cola’ is a local business as much as a global one. It takes its responsibilities as a supporter of local community events seriously.

**Football**

‘Coca-Cola’ also sets out to support football at every level of the sport. On a global basis, ‘Coca-Cola’ has been a sponsor of the World Cup since the 1978 tournament in Argentina through to France in 1998 and into the new millennium. In Europe, ‘Coca-Cola’ is involved with the European Championship and plays a prominent part in making the event a success. The global popularity of football makes it an ideal sport for ‘Coca-Cola’ to build on the life experiences of their target group. At these events ‘Coca-Cola’ has exclusive product availability in the non-alcoholic beverage category. To support ‘Coca-Cola’s association with football, ‘Coca-Cola’ created the very successful 5-a-side football, sleep football, drink ‘Coca-Cola’ campaign and the World Cup for fans campaign. These campaigns highlight the natural link between having a ‘Coca-Cola’ and enjoying the experience of watching a football game.

**Rugby**

‘Coca-Cola’ has also become the long-term sport sponsor of the Rugby World Cup. The Company has been a sponsor since 1999. This is the first time for a sponsor to commit to more than one Rugby World Cup. The Company wants to communicate that ‘Coca-Cola’ is the refreshment that stimulates and revitalises rugby fans, and enhances the group experience and enjoyment of watching the game.

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As football is about fun, excitement, passion, pride and shared enjoyment ‘Coca-Cola’ tries to match this feeling within its brand. The company supports local football because it matches its customers’ interests. This market driven approach involves listening to what people say and giving them what they need and want.

‘Coca-Cola’ is also the official soft drink sponsor of GAA providing strong support for the International Rules football series. The Association President Joe McDonagh stressed the importance of this sponsorship as it ensures a successful series. Locally, ‘Coca-Cola’ supports and is present at all the national hurling and football games. The brand is also present at GAA schools level matches i.e. Leinster Secondary Schools Hurling and Football Championships, Feile na nGáidhlig, Feile Peile and under 14 hurling and football.

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**Form and Fusion Design Awards**

Life experiences are created for customers around interests. By getting involved in the daily experiences and by being aware of what is relevant in the lives of local target markets such as music and fashion, ‘Coca-Cola’ can build on these brand associations. The ‘Coca-Cola’s Form and Fusion Design Awards is a cutting edge, visually exciting and highly educational competition developed for students in transition or senior year in secondary schools in Ireland.

Students are encouraged to work in groups, using their own skills and imagination, to design and create futuristic costumes created solely from recycled materials. On completion the students organise a fashion show where six outstanding designs make their debut. The ‘Coca-Cola’s Form and Fusion design awards is a unique opportunity that allows ‘Coca-Cola’ to enhance and provide teens with an opportunity to express and learn about their own artistic skills. The competition provides a platform for learning through fun and enhancing interpersonal skills. The potential for the competition to grow and sub-divide into a variety of educational disciplines is enormous.

The competition began at a local level in 1998 when Aidine O’Reilly a schoolteacher in Ballincollig Community School in Co Cork, wanted to set up an exciting challenge for her transition year students. In 1999, Aidine, with the support of the ‘Art Teachers’ Association of Ireland’ brought the competition to Munster where 9 schools made 38 costumes and the competition received both national and regional media coverage.

In 2000, ‘Coca-Cola’ Ireland came on board as ‘sole’ sponsors of the event having identified a unique opportunity to connect with Irish teenagers in a way that creates fun and excitement in schools and on the ground. ‘Coca-Cola’s involvement, the competition took off and 1,700 students participated from 88 different schools across the country. Three preliminary heats were hosted in Dublin, Cork and Balina with the final event in Ballincollig Community School in Cork on Friday March 31 2000. Each of the 33 shortlisted costumes was showcased in a two-minute performance in front of a 700 strong audience. Then Minister for Education, Micheál Martin opened the event.

In 2001 the competition more than doubled in size with 192 schools participating. This number represented 2,400 students making a total of 365 designs. The final event was hosted in Midstreet in Cork, which was the venue for the 1993 European Contest (Munster’s largest venue) to an audience of 2,500 people. ‘Coca-Cola’ Ireland is delighted to be involved with this unique competition for the second year running.

"The originality of the concepts, the enthusiasm of the students and the way in which the event has captured the imagination of the entire country have all combined to create something truly memorable in addition to the long-term educational value. We are privileged to be associated with this competition which is endorsed by several curriculum support services within the Department of Education and Science’.

Brian Keating, Senior Brand Manager, ‘Coca-Cola’ Ireland.

This event was visually spectacular ‘Coca-Cola’ achieving huge press and television coverage all over the Republic of Ireland. Coverage included exposure on the Late Late Show, Nationwide and TV3 News.

**Conclusion**

It is necessary to create the right brand image that closely matches consumers’ life experiences and feelings. Sponsorship is one way of building these associations. Through events such as ‘Coca-Cola’s Form and Fusion Design Awards and sporting events a brand manager can ensure that its product image is made relevant to the target audience.

**Tasks and Activities**

1. Define Brand Personality, Brand Associations, Sponsorship and Public Relations.
2. Explain the following terms Promotion Mix, Positioning and Brand Loyalty.
3. The ‘Coca-Cola’ Company sponsors events and activities on a global and local level. Discuss.
4. How would you describe ‘Coca-Cola’ if it were a person? Compare your description with other soft drink brands.
5. In the following diagram where would you place the ‘Coca-Cola’ brand? Compare the positioning with the other drinks discussed in question 4. What conclusions can you draw?