

The Cockta brand: From socialist copycat to authentic national icon

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Cockta is a refreshing carbonated drink, born under the socialist regime in former Yugoslavia and still successful on several markets in Adriatic region. Our historical review of Cockta was inspired by a special exhibition on the development of Slovenian brands in the National ethnographic museum in the summer of 2010. The event brought high public awareness and a new understanding that brands are a key component of the nation's economic history and cultural heritage (Rogelj Škafar, 2010). The Cockta brand was chosen as a prime example of a Slovenian brand that links national heritage to modern times and symbolizes the struggles of time-honored local brands in the era of globalization (Damjan, 2010). Our research aims to explore how a brand like Cockta managed to thrive (despite its manifold tribulations) in the socialist times and in the recent times of radical market transition.

Cockta was born in the transitional period of early 1950s. Following the 1948 fallout with the Soviets, Yugoslavia became the first communist-ruled state to deviate from the Soviet political and economic models. In the early 1950s Yugoslavia gradually began to experiment with market mechanisms, replacing the Soviet command economy with "self-management", a combination of market and socialist principles (Rusinov 1978). Faced with the (Soviet-orchestrated) Eastern bloc economic blockade, Yugoslavia has, in its bid for swift economic development, gradually turned to the West for economic aid, credit and trade, but also for ideas and technologies useful in constructing its "market socialism". At the time of Cockta's birth (1952), Yugoslavia has just ended its 5-Year Plan well below expectations, which added a further (economic) impetus to more radically break with the Soviet model of command economy and leave micro-economic planning (e.g., production plans) to individual companies.

The company Slovenijavino had started to create a recipe for the first cola-like drink in 1952, most likely upon order from Communist party officials. According to still living witnesses and other informants, its chief author Emerik Zelinka, fruit and herbs distillation specialist, analyzed Coca-Cola but then developed an original drink, which contained hip extract (at the time, hip based non-carbonated drinks were domestically produced in some areas of the country). The new drink had been at first named "Jugocola", but later rebranded as "Cockta" (after word "cocktail") and packaged in a redesigned small beer bottle. Its initial promotion took place at the 1953 ski-jumping competition in Planica, the main national winter sport event, where girls in red overalls (Cockta's signature color) were selling the new drink from specially crafted wooden trays (Ramovš, 2010). In, at the time almost advertising-free, Yugoslavia a strong print, radio and TV advertising campaign for Cockta had an enormous effect and the "smiling girl, drinking Cockta with a straw" quickly conquered the whole of Yugoslavia (see Figure 1 for visuals).

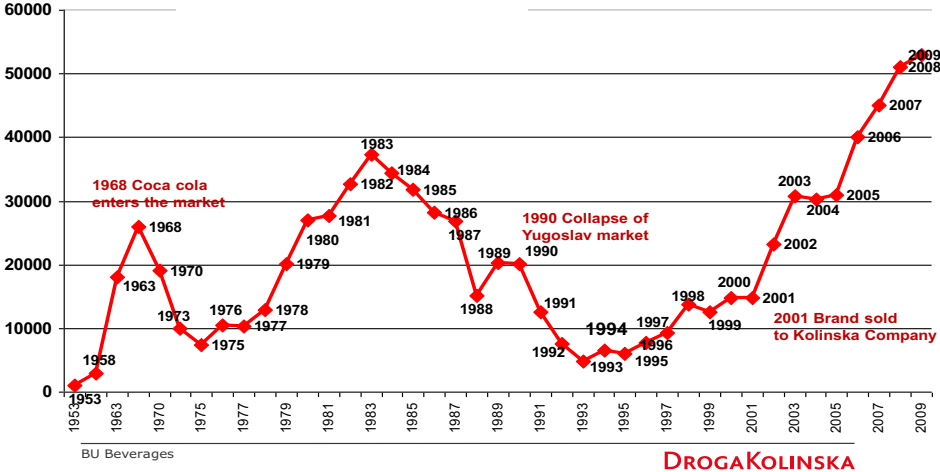
In the 1960s Yugoslavia continued the liberal economic reforms set in motion in the early 1950s. Its own ambitions (e.g., joining GATT) and its Western creditors, pressured Yugoslavia to reduce restrictions on imports. High inflation, a looming trade deficit and additional structural problems ensured that by 1961 the economic boom has turned into recession. This led to considerable political turmoil and the "economists' debate" (Rusinov, 1978, 120), which exemplified the clash between the pro-centralist and the liberal tier within the communist party. As in the 1950s the liberal views prevailed, with the crisis being attributed to slow and uncommitted implementation of liberal reforms. More radical liberal political and economic reforms were to follow in the mid 1960s, as the country sought to move towards free international competition. It was thus not a surprise that in 1960s Cockta encountered foreign competition. Coca Cola was launched in the Yugoslav market in 1968, taking the lead away from Cockta in just a few years (Droga Kolinska, 2010).

Figure 1.
Selection of
Cockta packaging
and promotion
materials



In Figure 2 we can follow the rises and falls that have accompanied Cockta to this day, each associated with various social, economic and political changes in the region. To fully understand Cockta’s history we need to study the innovations and reforms of the socialist economy of Yugoslavia, the political and economic relations among Yugoslav states, and finally the breakdown of the country (Damjan, 2005). The story of Cockta reflects political and economical development of the country, but had also played a special role in the development of marketing in Slovenia and Yugoslavia from its very beginnings in the early 1950s. The promotion of Cockta exposed generations of Slovenes and Yugoslavs to the Western style of living and new forms of advertising, thus shaping their understanding of consumer culture during the first rise of consumerism in the 1960’s and 1970’s (McBride, Damjan, 2002).

Figure 2.
Total sales of
Cockta



In the first years following Coca Cola’s entry into the Yugoslav market, Cockta experienced an era of brand inferiority. However, its managers successfully repositioned Cockta in mid 1970s with the slogan “The drink of our and your youth” and “The drink already consumed by three generations”, giving it a special boost of tradition and nostalgia. After its peak popularity in 1983, Cockta experienced ten years of decline, reaching the very verge of extinction in the mid 1990s. This evoked patriotic feeling towards Cockta among Slovene consumers, who have recently become the citizens of an independent state (Slovenia gained independence in 1991). In 2001, after the original owner’s bankruptcy, the Cockta brand was bought by Kolinska company, which redesigned the packaging to start a strong retro-style marketing campaign (also connecting the brand with the epic success of the national football team and ski jumping). As a result, Cockta gradually attained the position of an “authentic national icon”.

Consumer research shows that Cockta invokes various associations with various generations of consumers. For older consumers (50+) the prevailing association about Cockta is “The drink of your and our youth” slogan, while the main advantages of Cockta are found in its domestic origin and nostalgic meanings. Several older respondents mentioned that Cockta was “a special drink”, which they used to drink only at special occasions (e.g., Sunday family lunch in a restaurant). For younger consumers (17-26 years) the main advantages of Cockta are good taste and natural ingredients (Beno, 2010).

Previous research lead us to believe that the initial success of Cockta could be explained with the concept of “pioneer brand advantage”, while its recent success has been attributed to retro trends, powered by the effect of consumer ethnocentrism (Damjan, 2010). However, a more comprehensive historical overview raises several questions as to how exactly Cockta evolved from a copycat into an authentic product and how Cockta became an integral part of national identity. According to DrogaKolinska’s marketing documents, Cocktas key advantage is its special taste, based on a refreshing hip extract. Technically speaking, Cockta had never been a copycat as it is not really a typical cola drink. This fact carried lesser importance in 1950’s and 1960’s, when Cockta primarily aimed to emulate the Western life-style, but served as a vital source of competitive advantage in the 1980s and its latest re-launch.

Our brief analysis of Cockta’s 1950’s and 1960’s promotional activities also revealed various original elements, such as connecting the brand with a sport event of national importance and employing the leading local cartoonist for designing Cockta’s TV commercials and print ads. These findings suggest that Cockta was a copycat only as a concept, while its marketers had never employed the tools of Coca cola in a “cut and paste” manner. Because of that, the Cockta brand could and should be further and more comprehensively examined from various historic standpoints, that is, as an evolving managerial phenomenon (e.g., marketing strategy and practices), a socio-cultural phenomenon (e.g., ideological dimensions and relevance for national identity) or a consumer behavior phenomenon (e.g., customer perceptions, evaluations and practices over time).

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