

Some Things Do *Not* Go Better with Coke: A Comment on Gieryn's "Science and Coca-Cola"

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Some things do *not* go better with Coke. Science is one of them. The central thesis of Gieryn's paper (1987, p. 12) seems to be that science (as well as Coke) "is a commodity, a commercial product bought and sold in a competitive market, and dependent for sales upon advertising." Gieryn implies that because science is sometimes advertised, it is a commercial good rather than a public good. In economics, a public good is defined as a good whose use by one person does not limit its use by other persons. Coke is thus a commercial good because my consumption of a Coke prevents Gieryn from consuming the same Coke. A lighthouse, on the other hand, is a public good because my use of the lighthouse at midnight to keep my boat from the rocks does not prevent Gieryn from using the same lighthouse at the same time to keep *his* boat from the rocks. Scientific knowledge has usually been thought to be a public good because, like the lighthouse and unlike the Coke, I can use the first law of thermodynamics without in any way limiting Gieryn's use of the law.

The reason why public goods are public is that their provision by the commercial market would result in supply which is low in relation to demand because of the high costs of locating and charging those who benefit from their provision. The main problem in establishing science as a commercial good is that property rights in ideas are extremely difficult to establish and enforce. This issue has been fruitfully discussed by Johnson (1972; see especially pp. 16-17, "Science as a Productive and as a Consumption Good"), who compares the scientific researcher with the person who stocks a pond with small fish, little knowing which fish will grow to maturity and even less knowing who will catch and eat them. Note that the use of advertising does *not* distinguish commercial goods from public

goods. The providers of public goods advertise all the time: charities advertise, political parties advertise, and government agencies advertise.

The bottom line of Gieryn's comparison of science to Coke is stated on p. 21:

The spectacular financial success of the Coca-Cola Corporation cannot be explained by the immanent qualities of Coke (it really is a sweet fizzy liquid, but so is Pepsi) nor by the innate thirstiness of humans (let them drink water). So: the spectacular financial success of scientists cannot be explained by immanent qualities of the procedures or products of scientific research nor by an innate human "need to know." Both Coke and science thrive because of their successful marketing.

These spectacular claims have in no way been established by the author in the paper. The Coke case is particularly unfortunate for the claims. Where was Gieryn when the Coca-Cola Corporation, with a major marketing blitz, introduced a new formula for Coke? Where was Gieryn when the new Coke fizzled (figuratively as well as literally) in spite of the major marketing blitz? And where was Gieryn when the Coca-Cola Corporation brought back Classic Coke because consumers like the way it tastes?

Gieryn (1987, p. 31, note 9) dismisses the vast literature by economists on advertising with a footnote remark that the literature is "dull and rarely pertinent." Dull it may be, but unfortunately much that is sound can be found in dryly written articles, while much that is unsound can be found in breezily written articles. Whatever the stylistic merits of the economics literature on advertising, for Gieryn to say that the literature is "rarely pertinent" to his arguments is a sign that Gieryn either has not read widely in the literature or else has not thought deeply about what he has read.

Much of the debate in this literature concerns whether the main function of advertising is to persuade or to inform. The issue is not settled, but surely the proponents of the information account have significant enough arguments and evidence to be taken seriously. Gieryn ignores the literature and proceeds as though it is obvious that the function of advertising is solely to persuade.

Advertising may inform in various ways: It may tell of the existence of a product, it may tell of the uses of a product, it may tell of the quality of a product, and it may tell of the price of a product. Even simply informing consumers of the existence of a new product may be a significant benefit to the consumer. In this way, advertising permits easier entry by new firms that must overcome the much greater name recognition of established firms.

Information on the uses of a product can be illustrated with one of the examples that Gieryn reprints for us. "The Bridge Player" emphasizes that drinking Coke will help you stay awake. Surely there are times when we

are tired and would like to be more alert. That would be true whether Coca-Cola existed or not and it would be true whether Coca-Cola *ads* existed or not. We have an objective. The ads tell us (accurately) that Coca-Cola is one means to the achievement of that objective.

Advertising may also inform of the quality of products. University of Chicago economist Lester Telser, for example, has argued that variation in product quality will be less for frequently advertised products than for other products, because consumers will be more apt to recall and retell bad experiences with a frequently advertised product (Telser 1974, p. 32). If one is looking for analogies between advertising and science, one might similarly argue that variation in article quality will generally be less for an often-cited scientist than for others, because scientists are more likely to recall and retell having read a bad article by an often-cited scientist. The often-cited scientist thus acts in a more risk-averse manner than the less-cited scientist because the often-cited scientist has more to lose from a mistake and less to gain from a success.

Information on prices, provided in many ads, is another way that advertising can benefit the consumer. Benham, in a classic study (1972), showed that, when quality is held constant, the price of eyeglasses is lower in states that permit eyeglass advertising than in states that ban eyeglass advertising.

All of Gieryn's Coke ads provide information in one or more of the ways just discussed. But even if Gieryn were right about advertising and Coke, nothing would follow about science. Kuhn and others have shown that the public's image of science is inaccurate in many respects. But the public is at least correct in believing that the "products of scientific research" are frequently useful in achieving important practical objectives. Where was Gieryn when man landed on the moon? What about the advance of medical science? Or of computation capabilities? Or communication? Perhaps Gieryn believes that these achievements do not depend on science. If so, he needs to make his reasons explicit. Or perhaps he believes that they are not really "achievements" but only objectives that we pursue because we have been cleverly duped by advertising. I do not believe it; but if Gieryn does, he needs to make his reasons explicit.

References

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