

people had put away their two-ways and were paying attention to the DJ set or to a couple of girls-gone-wild types who kept charging back and forth to the bar. Apart from a logo projected on one wall, all the marketing material had been shoved aside. It was all feeling very rickety, and very real.

chapter **nine**

the murkiest common denominator

*THE UNKNOWN PUBLICITY STUNT . . . EXPLAINING RED BULL . . .
THE MURKIEST COMMON DENOMINATOR . . . ROOTS OF MURKETING:
THE 1890S . . . THE INTERESTING EFFECTS OF ENERGY DRINKS . . .
ALL ABOUT MARKETING*

the unknown publicity stunt

The day was so perfect, it looked just like a commercial. The sky was blue, the sand was white, and although it was December, the temperature was in the low seventies. Among a handful of people milling around on a broad stretch of Miami Beach shorefront, three guys were fussing with kiteboards—contraptions that consist of large, crescent-shaped parachutes rigged atop miniature surfboards. Two more people wielded videocameras, and several others clutched little silver cans of the peppy refreshment that was paying for all this activity: Red Bull, the “energy drink” that was already on its way to becoming a global phenomenon.

Created by a privately held Austrian company, Red Bull was introduced to the United States in 1997. At the time, there were no “en-

ergy drinks" in the American beverage market, but within a few years of its arrival, it had attracted a swarm of shameless knockoff competitors and spawned an entirely new answer to the question of what you might drink if you happen to be thirsty. Anheuser-Busch put out a drink called 180. Coca-Cola tried one called KMX, then another called Full Throttle, and one called Tab Energy. Pepsi introduced SoBe's Adrenaline Rush, a Mountain Dew spin-off called Amp, and another Mountain Dew spin-off called MDX (the gamer-targeted drink hyped at E3 the same year that Tylenol was being promoted at the trade show). There were also plenty of smaller start-up rivals, like Crunk Juice. Despite heavyweight competition, Red Bull has remained dominant, with annual global sales reported at more than \$1.5 billion.

Red Bull comes in small cans (8.3 ounces), usually costing \$2 or more and featuring a silver-and-blue pattern and two red bulls about to head-butt each other. "Improves performance, especially during times of increased stress or strain," it says on the can. It also says, in bold red letters: "With Taurine."

As it made its way into the American market, the company did not do anything so banal as sponsor an established skateboarding star. Instead, it devised and underwrote its own stunts and competitions in obscure disciplines. Red Bull ran an event for "competitive freeskiers," for instance. It created a "street luge" contest that involved shooting down San Francisco hills strapped to a wheeled board. It sponsored a guy who set a world record by kayaking over a ninety-eight-foot waterfall.

And on Miami Beach that December day back in 2001, the Red Bull forces were preparing something particularly audacious: A small flotilla would ride wind-powered kiteboards eighty-eight miles from Key West to Varadero, Cuba, a distance that would set a new world record for the emerging sport. Kiteboarding involves standing on a four-to-six-foot board, secured by foot straps or boots, and being propelled by a billowing kite that is controlled by manipulating a hand bar that guides one-hundred-foot-long tethers. When the wind

is right, those who know what they're doing can pull off astonishing forty-foot-high jumps. Not surprisingly, the number of people who can do this is pretty small.

As I joined the beach crew, Kent Marinkovic, one of the kiteboarders, was talking to the cameras. Marinkovic, thirty-three, was national sales manager for a Miami extreme-sports equipment retailer. He was preppy-looking, very tan, and very, very motivated. "I'm *super*motivated," he said. "I don't get nervous." He held a can of Red Bull. Nearby was another kiteboarder, Neil Hutchinson, who co-owned a Fort Lauderdale-based water sports company, scorned vegetables of any kind, and smoked Marlboro Reds. He was British, thirty-one, and with a tan deeper still than Marinkovic's, he looked like a leather-hided Peter O'Toole. When he took his turn explaining his equipment and tactics to the lens, he was immediately heckled by Oliver "Mowgli" Butsch, the third kiteboarder. "Neil has *tactics*!" Butsch bellowed in mock disgust. "Buddy, I'm going *over*. I'm *arriving*. Fuck tactics!" Butsch was Austrian, so it was hard not to think of Arnold Schwarzenegger when he spoke, which was often. A thirty-eight-year-old model with long hair, he wore shades and had the most stupendous tan of all.

I took a seat under a beach umbrella and opened a can of Red Bull. You drink this stuff not for the flavor—it's been described, accurately, as tasting like liquid SweeTarts—but for the effect. It's supposed to give you a boost. As the can puts it, Red Bull "Vitalizes body and mind." Marinkovic joined me, and I asked about Red Bull's appeal. He stared at the can in his hand. But he didn't say anything about the various promises printed on the back ("Increases endurance," "Stimulates the metabolism," and so on). He said: "It makes a good mixer with vodka. And it's kind of a hangover cure."

The beach scene struck me as odd. It wasn't the fact that the puny cans cost three or four times more than a twelve-ounce Mountain Dew, or the curious rumors about "taurine," or even the bizarre particulars of this particular promotional stunt. The weird thing about this promotional stunt was that *no one knew about it*. There was no

advance press release. There were no carefully recruited coolhunters to tell their influential friends. There was no Red Bull tent set up to attract local news crews or hand out free samples to curious onlookers. For that matter, there were no curious onlookers. (One white guy with dreadlocks wandered up to ask if we were giving lessons; that was it.) This was one of the most outrageous marketing events I'd ever heard of—kiteboarding to a nation that's under a strict U.S. trade embargo!—and it seemed to be happening in a vacuum.

How could this possibly work? I've followed Red Bull ever since that curious day on Miami Beach, and although I didn't know it back then, what I was watching was the beginning of the modern era of marketing. Red Bull was not a brand with a history, like PBR, or a reputation for functional quality like Timberland or Apple. Unlike the Scion, it was not seen by its owners as a product for a rarefied consumer niche. Unlike Tylenol, its brand name was not established in the traditional mass-media era. Yet Red Bull became perhaps the quintessential example of how brands become established in the early twenty-first century. Its story is a direct rebuke to the supposed impossibility of going mass in the postclick era, to the insistence on authenticity, and to the idea that the end of top-down marketing and the supposed capitulation of commercial persuaders to consumer "collaboration" adds up to a triumph of rationality. It's the brand whose story makes you wonder: If consumers are in control, is this really the best we can do?

explaining red bull

Red Bull is headquartered in Fuschl, Austria, a lakeside village outside Salzburg. The official corporate creation saga says it was invented by a Fuschl resident and entrepreneur named Dietrich Mateschitz. Traveling in Asia in the 1980s, he supposedly came across a syrupy tonic favored by rickshaw drivers in Thailand, called Krating Daeng. The key ingredient (the story goes) was an amino acid called taurine, which occurs naturally in human and animal bile. He adapted it to

something more palatable and launched Red Bull in his home country in 1987.

Red Bull grew into a widely known brand in Europe, but when it came to the United States, it did not roll out a big, flashy ad campaign or orchestrate massive, coast-to-coast distribution. There was no announcement or even explanation as to what this new stuff was and who was supposed to drink it and why; there was no big bang. Mateschitz, meanwhile, remained a largely unknown figure. "He doesn't like the media," offered Emmy Cortes, Red Bull's spokeswoman, who was assigned to answer my questions at the time. She said he was "a very charismatic gentleman," age sixty or so, single, and "kind of a playboy." This coyness, she explained, was of a piece with "the mystique of the brand."

As Red Bull gained momentum, marketing experts jumped on the bandwagon and tried to explain its strategy with a shower of adulatory slogans. "We live in an emotional society," purred Marc Gobé, president and CEO of the New York-based branding firm Desgrippes Gobé Group and author of a book called *Emotional Branding*. He identified a key to Red Bull's success in its association with exotic and risky physical feats. "Extreme sports deliver on that need to, to . . . vibrate, in a way. Red Bull is one of the first products I've seen that delivers on that energy." According to Nancy Koehn, a Harvard Business School professor, the key was that "cosmopolitan" young people view Red Bull as a product of the "global village."

Later, gurus Al and Laura Ries argued that the key was positioning Red Bull as not simply a drink, but a whole new category with a clever name. "*Energy drink* works as a category name even though there is little relationship between the ingredients in a can of Red Bull and the ingredients in energy bars like PowerBar" and others. "Red Bull became a powerful brand because it is perceived as a drink that improves performance especially during times of increased stress or strain, which some people take to mean sexual performance. (*Energy* is just a way of expressing that idea in a socially respectable way.)" Others held up Red Bull as an example of a brilliant "stealth" brand,

built by “brand evangelists” who stoked a “grassroots” marketing wave—“building an image for next to nothing,” enthused the business magazine *Fast Company*. The experts all agreed: A didactic, top-down, fuddy-duddy, *traditional* mass-market product like Coke could learn a few things from Red Bull.

It was certainly true that Red Bull was not following what had been the dominant strategy of the dot-com era that was still in full flower when the drink made its U.S. debut: a big explosion onto the scene, epitomized by something like a Super Bowl ad. But really, all those marketing experts were not describing the mystique of the brand, they were helping create it. Because Red Bull’s street vibe didn’t just happen, and it certainly wasn’t created on the cheap. Bankrolling those extreme sports is a pricey proposition. The Cuba crossing, after all, involved a crew of at least twenty people, including a meteorologist, several boats, a lot of equipment, and a video team.

Red Bull also invested in an array of other projects that had nothing to do with extreme sports. For a while, it ran Red Bull Lords of the Floor break-dancing competitions. Remember that computer game tournament I attended in Manhattan? Red Bull was distributed freely to the top gaming teams. Another interesting example: Red Bull Music Labs. The company picks a dozen or so cool young people in several cities and enrolls them in a free multiday workshop where they learn how to create original music using the latest electronic technology. I once visited a Music Labs session in New York; it took place in an expansive downtown loft rented for the occasion, with sleek and elaborate computer terminals for everyone and recording studios at the ready. The main instructor was a famous San Francisco DJ and producer called Bassnectar. At the end of a three-day binge of learning and music making (punctuated by visits to the refrigerator full of Red Bull), everybody attended a party at a fashionable nightclub, where the participants’ tracks were played before Pete Rock did a set. In addition to a CD of their new creation, all the Music Labs attendees got to keep a copy of Reason, a \$600 piece of software.

Meanwhile, as Red Bull spread from city to city, it deployed “mobile energy teams” that traveled about in supermodified Suzuki Vitaras, all done up with the company logo and a big silver can mounted on the back. Cortes told me these teams show up at any place where people might “need a boost,” like gyms, office buildings, and construction sites.

And as I’ve mentioned, the first time I came across Red Bull, it was in a bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans, where I lived at the time. Red Bull turned out to be fairly easy to find in the Quarter, in the company of such good-time classics as the Hurricane and the Hand Grenade, which didn’t seem to make much sense for a drink that postures as an aid to sporting achievement, given that the Quarter is arguably the most unathletic neighborhood in the world. Those “mobile energy teams” Cortes was talking about would also show up at, say, certain bars and hand out samples. If all went well, the bar owner would notice that the kids loved this stuff and start to sell it. From there, it moved to convenience stores and other retail venues. I was told that bar visits happened only occasionally—at the time, the drink was getting bad publicity because there had been deaths allegedly associated with its use as an alcohol mixer at raves and other party settings—but Red Bull also spent money installing displays in nightclubs. And in New Orleans, at least, the first place to sell Red Bull was in fact a bar on Bourbon Street.

In other words, Super Bowl ads or no, Red Bull was spending real money. Within a few years of its first appearance in the United States—and right around the time Red Bull was first coming to the attention of marketing watchers who would praise its supposedly low-cost image-building strategy—*Brandweek* reported that the company was spending \$100 million a year for its American “stealth” efforts. Company spokeswoman Cortes disputed the figure but admitted that “the perception that these events don’t cost much to produce is good for us.” She explained, “We don’t want to be seen as having lots of money to spend.”

The key thing in the creation of the so-called mystique of Red Bull wasn't so much about what the company did—it was about what it *didn't* do. There was something oddly unfocused and inconsistent about the Red Bull message. Most notably, nobody ever really explained what the Big Idea was. Red Bull's various sales strategies never involved clearing up the rumors about the drink or defining taurine once and for all. The company really never offered any rational explanation of what the stuff was all about and who was supposed to drink it. It never sent a clear message to the masses.

When I spoke to college-age people about Red Bull, they did not associate the stuff with extreme sports at all. They thought of it as a bar drink. One typical Red Bull drinker was Kaytie Pickett, a Tulane dormitory resident assistant who heard about Red Bull from sorority girls. She didn't say anything to me about cosmopolitan youth or Red Bull's global origins. "It's really a kind of fashionable drink," she said. "You see the fashionable sorority girls buying their can of Red Bull with their Marlboro Lights. It's like 'Look, I can afford to pay three dollars for this ridiculous drink.'" This from a person who bought Red Bull on a regular basis.

And like many others, she'd heard a few of the rumors. These tend to focus on the drink's ingredients, especially taurine—it's bull testosterone, it's bull semen, it's bull urine, it's an aphrodisiac, and so on. The company simply laughs off the more outlandish of these.

Pickett had also heard the less amusing rumors. Pretty much from the beginning, health officials in other countries have had questions about Red Bull; in some European countries, its sale was limited to pharmacies. The controversy stemmed from a handful of deaths in which an overload of Red Bull (sometimes in concert with alcohol) allegedly played a role. Some pointed to the drink's caffeine content, and one theory was that Red Bull with liquor acts like a poor man's speedball. The company didn't laugh these off but did assure the press that the reported problems had more to do with using the product unwisely than with Red Bull itself. As for the caffeine, Cortes said it is about 80 milligrams per can, equal to that in a cup

of coffee. (It's also about twice what's in a twelve-ounce Coke, along with roughly two teaspoons of sugar per can.)

Kaytie Pickett was no fool. Her rationale for drinking the stuff was a Zen statement on young adult ambivalence. "Maybe I think it works just because they say it works," she said. "I'm a slave to peer pressure." Then she laughed, just a little.

the murkiest common denominator

The easiest way to think about popular culture, or fashion, is to think in sweeping strokes: Everybody wakes up one morning, throws away their Ecko hoodies, and starts buying Lacoste again, revising their vision American style, and their very aspirations, in lockstep.

The real world is nothing like that. An "urban" brand might lose strength in the inner cities but explode in the suburbs. Meanwhile, "street" vernacular reaches for establishment symbols, while the children of the established middle class aspire to connect with authentic street, which in turn aspires to upper-crust validation. You can buy baggy jeans at Abercrombie & Fitch and an argyle sweater from Phat Farm. Somewhere in this Möbius strip of branding metaphors is the consumer.

Indeed, hardly anyone seems to believe—in our click-fragmented age—in the idea of a single America. Political pundits suggest there must be at least two Americas (red and blue, as they say). In the 1970s, sociologist Herbert J. Gans argued that there are five Americas, or at least five American "taste cultures," defined partly in terms of class and income. At around that same time, researchers at a firm called SRI International created the Values and Lifestyles Program, which suggested there are nine Americas. Paul Fussell's 1983 book, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, finding the usual lower-middle-upper-class distinctions inadequate, also settled on nine Americas, defined in no small part by their consumption habits. And of course there are those who think that in a post-mass-market, one-to-one marketing world, there are three hundred million Americas.

In a mass-market culture, it's important for anyone trying to send a message—whether it's a politician or a brand creator—to be consistent about it. One way that such message senders have dealt with this problem is a phrase you've heard before: the lowest common denominator. That is, what is the most basic thing that can be said or offered that everyone will agree on? In the new, niche-y, post-mass marketplace, that's less important. In fact, some suspect that it may even be counterproductive. Once a brand is established as being *for* a certain slice of the population (hip-hop fans, for example), this could be taken by others (NASCAR enthusiasts, let's say) to mean that it is *not for* them.

Perhaps that's the kind of thing Timberland, for instance, was worried about back in the 1990s. In 1999—when Timberland racked up its fourth straight year of record revenue—the company launched a new subbrand called Timberland Pro, for “the professional tradesperson.” This was created, as the company's chief operating officer, Ken Pucker, explained to me, to serve a consumer Timberland had lost touch with: the blue-collar worker. Joe Butler—the crusty factory foreman who inspired the original Timberland work boot—remained at the center of the company's official self-identity, but the reality was, the Joe Butlers of the 1990s didn't buy Timberland anymore. Pucker had a hypothesis that although the company could make products that blue-collar workers would buy, it was probably best to do it under a new brand name, since Timberland was “no longer as relevant to them, because of how the brand had expanded in terms of products and distribution.”

The company conducted three hundred one-on-one interviews with “blue-collar guys” in about half a dozen markets. These confirmed part of Pucker's hypothesis. The latter-day Joe Butlers didn't buy Timberland because it was not sold at the places where they bought boots and because they needed steel toes, nonmarking soles, or boots approved by the American National Standards Institute for electrical hazard protection. “Those are all things we didn't do anymore,” Pucker observed. “Our boots hadn't evolved that way.”

But what's interesting is the part of Pucker's hypothesis that proved wrong: The interviewees had no problem with the Timberland brand. “They actually loved the brand,” he said, and would be more than willing to buy it if the functional attributes were there. So Timberland Pro became a distinct line, with a slightly different logo that incorporated the famous Timberland tree but had an orange-and-black color scheme. New boots that resembled Timberland classics but were functionally loaded were placed in a distinct distribution pattern—not so much Nordstrom as Sears. Timberland Pro worked out sponsorships and partnerships with the Future Farmers of America and NASCAR. It has enjoyed double-digit growth in each year of its existence. More to the point, it created no particular confusion in the marketplace. The Timberland name and iconic logo can be on a NASCAR racer and an OutKast album cover, and neither has any particular effect on the other.

In a way, Timberland inadvertently found something more powerful than unified, top-down, centrally defined meaning. Just as the key to the success of the Livestrong bracelet or the iPod was not *one thing* about those objects, Timberland discovered success in the diverse, even contradictory, ways that consumers found personal narrative relevance.

And this is essentially what Red Bull figured out, too: Murky, it turns out, is not only okay, it's the whole point. Murky is why rumors are not a corporate headache—they help. Murky is why being embraced by extreme athletes and clubgoers and gym rats and middle-class office workers and computer gamers and break-dance fans is just fine—at worst, each group simply thinks Red Bull is something for them, partly because they have never been told otherwise. **That silver can is able to stand for whatever you want it to stand for. If meaning can flow from consumer to product, not the other way around—then let it. Let the same “projectability” that allows Hello Kitty's fans to read a mood into her expressionless image take over. Let the rationale thinkers spot the pattern that works for them and fill in all the blanks.**

roots of marketing: the 1890s

Much like Red Bull founder Dietrich Mateschitz, Angelo Mariani invented a drink with a mysterious foreign ingredient. Famous actors and singers in Paris soon took it up, feeling that it enhanced their performances. Soon Mariani, a Corsican with a family background in pharmaceuticals and medicine, was selling his Vin Mariani all over Europe and in the United States and Canada and even as far away as Egypt and Vietnam. He, too, attracted a swarm of imitators and was called a promotional “genius” more than once. He made the most of celebrity endorsements, not just from entertainers, but from politicians, royalty, and even religious leaders; some of these notables were introduced to the stuff (or as they say today, “seeded”) with a free case. He published books filled with tales of Vin Mariani heroics and commissioned scores of leading artists to produce original posters and postcards. He was, in short, a brilliant user of marketing tactics, from the debut of Vin Mariani in 1871 until his death in 1914.

Vin Mariani consisted of Bordeaux wine mixed with coca leaves; so in this case, the mysterious foreign ingredient was cocaine. Eventually this, along with Prohibition, would cause serious problems for the once global brand, which withered away after it was reformulated. But among its imitators, there was one man worthy of some notice: John Pemberton of Atlanta, Georgia. Pemberton borrowed not just the key ingredient of the coca leaf for his French Wine Coca, but also the notion of targeting the educated, the upper class, the “intellectual,” as the primary consumers (and brand evangelists) for “this great invigorator of the brain.” His innovation was two more exotic ingredients: something called damiania, and the kola nut, from Africa. Both were touted as having energy-enhancing effects, and the drink was, according to an 1885 advertisement, the perfect thing for “all who are afflicted with any nerve trouble, dyspepsia, mental and physical exhaustion,” among other things. It was hinted that the drink might be an aphrodisiac as well.

Pemberton later changed the name of his murkily powerful tonic

and adjusted his formula to remove the traces of cocaine in 1903. Of course, his invention, now known as Coca-Cola, is no longer marketed using hokey means like playing up the “invigorant” powers of some mysteriously potent ingredient discovered in a faraway land. But it remains famous for its “secret formula” a century later and has surpassed the worldwide success of Vin Mariani many times over.

Today, the phrase “snake oil peddler” means anyone selling something useless, probably to a bunch of gullible rubes. But what the snake oil salesman actually sold was snake oil, and that was exactly what he wanted his potential customers to know: Snake oil was considered a virtuous ingredient; it was used in remedies to treat joint pain in China and, later, the United States, particularly in the frontier West. Increasingly spectacular “medicine shows” were a fixture of American life by the end of the nineteenth century. These were extravaganzas and in some cases promoted brands that were thoroughly national. Hamlin’s Wizard Oil sent its rigidly controlled “concert troupes” to perform “open-air advertising” concerts, using horse-drawn mobile stages with a built-in organ, all over the country. The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, seller of salves, oils, cough cures, and “Sagwa,” was perhaps the biggest of the medicine show companies, with one hundred units or more, typically consisting of half a dozen tepees, a twenty-foot-wide stage, and ten or more performers, traveling as far as the West Indies.

The patent medicine companies also advertised heavily. Their often outlandish claims appeared not just in newspapers—many of which basically depended on the business—but in all manner of outdoor advertising, from billboards and posters to the sides of trolley cars.

Charitably, one can imagine a physically ailing consumer, in a time when a visit to a reputable doctor was not necessarily a routine event, becoming diverted by an entertaining extravaganza long enough to let down his or her guard and—in a rickety bridge moment—decide that it was worth trying a bottle of Wizard Oil. Less

charitably, one can simply think about how easily people used to be suckered, hoodwinked, and fooled. When an exhibition of “quack” advertising from the nineteenth century appeared at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2005, wall tags explained that the wild claims for the benefits of these dubious products and treatments were “widely believed in an era when double-blind studies for effectiveness were nonexistent.”

But as that same “quack” art exhibit made clear, vociferous public criticism of patent medicines and other fishy-sounding products of medicine show culture were a constant presence. The critiques climaxed with the rise of muckraking journalism near the turn of the century, which eventually inspired government regulations like the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, cracking down on the fantastic—and, crucially, *specific*—claims of the patent medicines. (The medicine show was bound to die out anyway, with or without government rules: “The end came, in large part, because of competition from other forms of free entertainment,” Brooks McNamara wrote in his study of the form, *Step Right Up*. “The premise of the medicine show was that a free performance would sell a product. The premise was a sound one and radio and television merely borrowed it and developed it on a scale far beyond anything dreamed of by the traveling medicine showman.” And kept on developing it—right up through today.)

The vast majority of patent medicines were not so much dangerous as useless, and in many cases the pitchman simply responded to regulation by being a little murkier—“cough cure” became “cough syrup”; instead of patent medicine offering “cures,” tonics offered “pep.” They let the consumer fill in the blanks. This was what Vin Mariani did. And Coca-Cola did, too, with its “secret formula.” **At the very least, some of these consumers were tricking themselves. They were, you might say, collaborating with the pitchman in the creation of a product’s meaning.**

Jackson Lears, in his books *Fables of Abundance* and *Something for Nothing*, has explored a history of America that is not simply a tri-

umphant march of progress, but an ongoing competition between two visions of life: one guided by doctrines of science and technology and rationality, the other by beliefs that transcend the measurable and controllable and tilt over into the realms of fate, providence, and even magic. “The recurring motif in the cultural history of American advertising,” he has written, “could be characterized as the attempt to conjure up the magic of self transformation through purchase while at the same time containing the subversive implications of a successful trick.” Sometimes this could be pulled off simply through lying. But sometimes, perhaps, some of those buyers were engaging in “magical thinking,” an element of what Lears terms the **Other Protestant Ethic: not the plodding approach of the Puritans, but rather the “fascination with the ecstatic experience of conversion, the moment when the soul transcended its human limits.” This tendency plays well into the “carnavalesque” tradition that has waxed and waned throughout the history of commercial persuasion.**

Still, most of us surely assume that to the extent that this tradition exists, it has little effect on us.

After all, we live in the age of the double-blind study.

the interesting effects of energy drinks

This brings us to an interesting question: What, exactly, is “taurine”? Taurine is important, a Red Bull spokesperson told me, because “in times of stress and strain, your taurine levels are depleted, and Red Bull replaces them.” The key to the “kick,” I was informed, comes from the combination of caffeine, taurine, and glucuronolactone, a “carbohydrate that rids your body of toxic substances.” When I ran this by Gregory Stewart, co-medical director of the Institute of Sports Medicine at Tulane, he dismissed the idea that boosting taurine level has a meaningful impact on physical or mental performance—just like most medical professionals who have been asked. A study in the journal *Nutritional Neuroscience* reported that the only ingredient in energy drinks found to have a measurable impact on mood and per-

ironic
marketing

formance was caffeine (energy drinks generally have extremely high caffeine content). As for taurine, another nutrition expert, at Rutgers, has summarized: "We haven't got a clue to what it does." A Canadian study examining the effect of taurine on cycling performance found that it had "no effect . . . on anything," one of the researchers involved told me.

A Coca-Cola executive explained to *The New York Times* that the beverage giant's entry into the lucrative energy drink category included taurine and various other exotic-sounding ingredients because, basically, the consumer is boss, and that's what the consumer wants—whether it has any real effects or not. "We make no claims about any of them," she continued. "We believe in marketing our brand by focusing on the brand's personality rather than the ingredients."

Here, perhaps, is the true lesson of the energy drink boom: The real secret of Red Bull is there is no secret.

But there's another study to consider. It was organized by Dan Ariely, a management science professor at MIT, along with collaborators Baba Shiv and Ziv Carmon. They were interested in how the effectiveness of something like an energy drink might be affected by its price and by third-party claims. Rationally, of course, such things can have no direct effect on whether or not Red Bull or any other energy drink "gives you a boost." Just because a Vin Mariani poster promised that the tonic "fortifies and refreshes body & brain," just because a satisfied consumer of Kickapoo Indian Oil claims that the stuff cured his "nervous headache"—none of it has any *real* meaning. Everyone knows that.

The 204 participants in Ariely's experiment were split into four groups. In each group, everyone drank a can of SoBe Adrenaline Rush, waited ten minutes, and then were asked to solve a series of puzzles; a set of written instructions explained that the subject had thirty minutes to solve 15 puzzles. An earlier pilot study—that is, one not involving energy drinks—had established that the average number of puzzles solved was 9.1.

For half the subjects, the written instructions also included this statement: "The website of SoBe includes references to over 50 scientific studies suggesting that consuming drinks like SoBe can significantly improve mental functioning." The other half got the same note, except that in their version the claim was downgraded: Energy drinks were said to "slightly" improve mental function. There was a second variable. Each of the two groups were divided again: Half were told the drink cost \$1.89, the normal retail price, and the rest that it would cost half the regular price, thanks to an institutional discount (that is, nothing to do with the quality of the drink).

Members of the group that drank full-price SoBe and had been told the drink "can significantly improve mental functioning" were by far the puzzle-solving stars of the experiment; they completed an average of 10.1 each—better than the energy drink-free norm of 9.1.

The other groups, curiously, all performed well *below* normal. The worst was the group told that SoBe might "slightly" boost mental functioning and that they were drinking 89-cent cans; those subjects managed only 4.2 puzzles on average.

This seems bizarre. It's one thing for the power of suggestion to lead a person to believe that a certain beverage tastes better than another—or even that it is better than the same thing in a different package. But here the change occurred not in the subjective realm of taste, but in the measurable realm of a kind of mental performance. The experiments, the researchers argued, suggested that "marketing actions" and price changes can affect "not only *perceived* quality, but also *actual* quality" of a product.

Perhaps what Lears calls "magical thinking"—that belief in the transformative power of certain, right stuff—is not just an artifact of a vanished, prerational age. Perhaps it is, instead, one of the most powerful forces of the world of marketing. Perhaps it is powerful because it comes from us. And because we believe it's real. Maybe if we believe that it's real, then somehow it is.

all about marketing

Since that day I first encountered Red Bull's marketing efforts, its profile has continued to rise—as has its spending on its oddly flexible image. At this point, practically everybody knows what Red Bull is; it's in every supermarket and is the stuff of late-night talk-show punch lines. There's even a diet version now. Red Bull, in other words, is totally mass. Somewhere along the line, Dietrich Mateschitz even started to give interviews and was quoted saying things like "Everything we do is about marketing."

Much of the brand's approach has continued to be, while not cheap, decidedly unconventional. Rather than simply sponsor sports teams, Red Bull preferred to buy them: It owns two Formula One racing teams and one soccer club in Europe, and in the United States, it announced plans to start a NASCAR team, bought the New York MetroStars, a major league soccer team, and promptly renamed them the New York Red Bulls. The company also carried on with its more obscure sports endeavors—involving some eight hundred official Red Bull athletes—such as the Red Bull Air Race (small planes slaloming through air-filled pylons over the river Thames) or a Red Bull-created sport called "Crashed Ice" (a cross between hockey and snowboarding). It continued the club-culture-focused projects, like Red Bull Music Labs, and began dabbling in video games through a partnership with a game developer. In 2006, it cut a deal with the Independent Film Channel to produce five-minute alt-sports documentaries about its various stunts and extreme-sports activities, never shilling directly for the drink but not exactly turning the camera away if it happened to come to rest on a Red Bull logo worn by a participant. (This fit into IFC's efforts to create "TiVo-proof" revenue sources, *Brandweek* noted.)

In time Red Bull did run television commercials, as it gradually increased its distribution to truly mass scale. And as it happens, they demonstrated that murkiness is not just about the medium, it is also about the message: Its TV spots were vague and pointless things fea-

turing a bull animated in a sort of *Schoolhouse Rock* style. The slogan "Red Bull gives you wings" could mean anything and almost sounded like a kind of secret code. The ads did nothing to specify the Red Bull claim or clarify the Red Bull idea. It was still up to the consumer to decide what this stuff was for and what it supposedly did, how it was relevant to him or her.

And in this way, at least, not much had really changed since my initial encounter with the brand back in 2001. The morning after my rendezvous with Red Bull on Miami Beach back then, I sat in the little breakfast room of the Key West Comfort Inn. It had been made over into Command Central, with a laminated map taped to the wall. The organizer of the "Cuba Crossing," Gilles d'Andrieux, a dashing thirty-two-year-old Frenchman, arrived and led everyone through the basics. The eighty-eight-mile trip was expected to last eight hours, touching down on the coast one hundred miles east of Havana. Winds on launch morning would likely gust to twenty knots or better. Everyone going on the trip got forms to sign that said things like "I agree that upon my transport to any medical facility or hospital, Red Bull shall not have any further responsibility for me."

A few days later, d'Andrieux debriefed me on how it turned out. Neil, Kent, and another rider made it all the way to Cuba. Oliver, the model, got his kite tangled and barely got off the starting line. A fifth rider, Paul Menta, who insisted on going even though he was battling the flu, passed out about halfway through the trip, falling off his board facedown in the water, arms akimbo. D'Andrieux fished him out, apparently saving his life. (I spoke to Menta later, and he said he flew back to Florida the next morning because he had blood in his urine.) All in all it was a rough ride, d'Andrieux concluded, but a clear triumph: The party arrived at 6:38 p.m., after eight hours and thirty-eight minutes on the water. The sun had set by then, and it was too dicey to kiteboard all the way to shore, so they stopped five hundred feet short of Cuban sands and took the boats the rest of the way. All five kiteboarders told me the same story.

So I was surprised when I later got a press release from Red Bull,

which presented a somewhat different version of events. It had the three kiteboarders “arriving in Cuba at 5:55 p.m., one minute before sunset.” A tape of the “video news release” put together by the company responsible for documenting the event included a few minutes of highlights and some comments from a couple of the kiteboarders. This footage was what went out over the wires and was picked up for use by more than forty local news broadcasts around the country. In the video, oddly, the three kiteboarders surf all the way onto the shore and celebrate with high fives in light that is obviously presunset. The release didn’t say so, but the scenes of the boarders’ “arrival”—unbeknownst to the folks who used the footage in their evening news broadcasts—had been shot the following day.

Questioned about this, my Red Bull contact called the video release “a huge mistake not in line with our brand values.” But it doesn’t really matter. This is the final lesson of modern marketing theory, one that would be familiar to those who have built businesses off quenching our various thirsts for more than a century: When the truth doesn’t quite work, substitute something better.

And whatever the facts may be, the *truth* is that any Red Bull drinkers, or potential drinkers, who might be impressed by the Cuba crossing are going to get exactly the message Red Bull wants them to get. People who are receptive to the idea that Red Bull’s involvement makes the drink cool will decide that without additional prompting. Other Red Bull fans will never hear about it or just shrug when they do and dream up some other, murky reason to buy the next can.

They won’t even need to see a commercial.

chapter ten

the commercialization of chitchat

UNHIDDEN PERSUADERS . . . WHAT MOTIVATES THE AGENTS? . . .

MAGIC PEOPLE . . . NON-MAGIC PEOPLE . . . THE “MERE OWNERSHIP”

EFFECT . . . HONEST OPINIONS . . . STRONGER THAN PERSUASION

unhidden persuaders

Many of the guests arriving at cookouts on a particular July 4 weekend not so long ago—at a family gathering in Kingsley, Michigan, at a small barbecue in Sag Harbor, New York, at a sixty-guest picnic in Philadelphia—had something in common: They brought, for the grill, packages of Al Fresco brand chicken sausage. We can know that this happened, and even how various party guests reacted to their first exposure to Al Fresco, because the Great Sausage Fanout did not occur by chance. The sausage bearers were not official representatives of Al Fresco sausage, showing up in uniforms to hand out samples. They were invited guests, friends or relatives of whoever organized the get-togethers, but they were also—unknown to almost all the other attendees—“agents,” and they filed reports. “People could not believe they weren’t pork!” one agent related. “I told every-