

Pepsi Prank Fizzles at School's Coke Day

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Friday was "Coke Day" at Greenbrier High School in Evans, Ga. Yesterday was Mike Cameron day nationwide.

Cameron is the 19-year-old senior who was suspended for one day -- yesterday -- for wearing a Pepsi shirt at a Coke Day rally at his school. Instead of attending classes, he spent much of his day talking to the national media and participating in call-in shows about his plight.

Coke Day was dreamed up by the student government as part of the school's entry in a national "Team Up With Coca-Cola" contest that earns \$10,000 for the winning school. In the program, Coca-Cola Co. invites high schools throughout the country, except those that have exclusive contracts with PepsiCo Inc., to come up with a plan for distributing Coke discount cards locally.

All four high schools in Columbia County competed, but "Greenbrier elected to go big time," said Tom Dorhmann, superintendent of the Columbia County Board of Education. That included the rally, in which the students, who were encouraged to dress in Coke's red and white, lined up to spell out the word "COKE" while more than a dozen of the company's executives looked on. Coke has its headquarters 100 miles away in Atlanta.

In recent years American businesses have started reaching out directly to public schools to affect the buying habits of young people for everything from potato chips to sneakers. In the highly competitive soft drink market, some schools have signed contracts agreeing to exclude a competitor's product in exchange for cash payments.

But having programs such as Coca-Cola's takes the commercialization to another level, Marianne Manilov of the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education said yesterday. "From where we sit this is out of hand," she said. "The school door has been thrown open to marketers."

According to Cameron, he had worn his Pepsi shirt all day but didn't get in trouble until it was time for the picture. "I was standing in the middle of the 'C' with my arm around my girlfriend," he said. The photographer was above the group on a cherry picker for an aerial shot.

According to the principal, however, Cameron was wearing another shirt until the picture-taking, then whipped it off to expose the Pepsi shirt underneath.

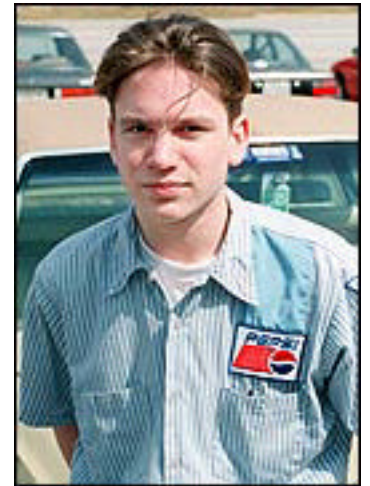
The principal, Gloria Hamilton, called Cameron's actions a disruptive prank and said she would hand down the same punishment if she had a chance to do it again.

"I don't apologize for expecting my students to behave at school," Hamilton said.

The punishment, she said, was not for wearing a Pepsi shirt; it was for "being disruptive and trying to destroy the school picture." That offense, she said, normally gets you a six-day suspension.

A second student also received a one-day suspension for wearing a Pepsi shirt, she said. She would not identify the student, who served the suspension in school, separated from classmates.

"I don't consider this a prank," Cameron said. "I like to be an individual. That's the way I am."



Michael Cameron was suspended after wearing a Pepsi shirt during a Coca-Cola promotion at his school. (AP)

Superintendent Dorhmann said he was "just flabbergasted" at the attention the suspension was getting. He accused Cameron of manipulating the news media.

"The kid is preying on the press. He's used you," said Dorhmann, who backed up Hamilton's version of events. He called the event "premeditated."

Pepsi seemed to be enjoying the whole episode yesterday. Company spokesman Brad Shaw called Cameron a "trend setter with impeccable taste in clothes, and we're going to make sure he has plenty of shirts in the future." Shaw said the company had sent Cameron a boxful of Pepsi shirts, enough "for his friends and family."

Coca-Cola had another view of Pepsi's move.

"It sounds like an easy way to unload all that leftover Pepsi stuff that nobody else wanted," company spokeswoman Diana Garza said.

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