

Coca-Cola rolls out largest ad campaign ahead of Olympics
U.S. beverage giant pulls ahead of other sponsors in awareness and recall
By [Normandy Madden](#)



Coke's New Year party in Beijing
BEIJING—Coca-Cola was an early mover among the dozens of sponsors of the 2008 Olympic Games, launching an Olympic pin program in mid-2006 and pledging two years ago to use the games in Beijing on an "unprecedented scale."

The scales are now tipping in Coke's favor.

"As we get closer to the event we are accelerating our marketing in China," said Jean Francois DeKimpe, Coke's VP-marketing, China in Shanghai.

He stressed that the groundwork was already in place, "because we also want to make sure we are part of key milestones like the one-year countdown. But as we get closer [to the Aug. 8 Olympic start date], our marketing programs are becoming more intense and larger in scope, partly because consumers are also getting more interested in the Olympics."

With the games just seven months away, the U.S. soft drink marketer leads all other sponsors in terms of Olympic awareness, purchase intent and recall, according to the latest round of China's biggest Olympic research, by Beijing-based consulting firm R3 and TNS Group's CSM Media Research division in China. The companies conducted more than 8,000 in-person interviews in ten key Chinese cities.

Coke's return on investment is now the best of any of the official Olympic sponsors, said R3 principal Greg Paull. "Coke has made some big bets with Liu Xiang and Yao Ming, and supported it with consistent, integrated marketing. More than 38% of respondents spontaneously mentioned Coke as a sponsor, up from just 10% a year ago. The Coke approach to Olympic marketing is going to be a case study."

Those numbers will probably keep rising, given the scope of its latest ad campaign, which brings together many of Coke's Olympic-themed activities in

China—its Dream Team, the Torch Relay and association with Yao Ming, the Houston Rockets' star center.

Established last year in China, Coke's Dream Team includes Yao Ming, track-and-field champion Liu Xiang, diver Guo Jingjing, table tennis player Wang Liqin, basketball player Yi Jianlian and volleyball player Zhao Ruirui. Coke also sponsors Chinese Olympic teams, like the men's basketball team and the women's volleyball team.

Called "Open to Happiness", Coke's new campaign invites 1.3 billion Chinese to share the happiness for the forthcoming Olympics year. The U.S. beverage giant is following a familiar route, as other sponsors like McDonald's and Adidas have also been trying to connect with Chinese in ways that let consumers voice their own enthusiasm and pride in their country's teams and athletes. Advertising kicked off in late December, initially with outdoor ads that spilled over into TV, print, packaging and online media in mid-January, including a light-hearted spot celebrating Chinese New Year.

"The spot centers around Olympic athletes who can't go home for the holiday, which is traditional for kids in China. So their mothers decide that in this special year, they need to open up to new thinking too and travel to Beijing instead to be with their children," said Wasim Basir, Shanghai-based managing director of Red Lounge, a specialist agency melded from Coke's various agency partners in 2006 with a mission to handle Olympic campaigns.

Coca-Cola also set up online communities on iCoke.cn and other portals and bulletin board sites. Consumers can download information about Coke's Dream Team members and the Torch Relay, scroll through consumer blogs, and exchange messages with friends via the site celebrating the upcoming Chinese New Year holiday, a three-day festival that starts this year on Feb. 7, 2008. Coke set up street graffiti sites where Chinese can draw or express *shuang*, a Chinese word meaning refreshment—physical, emotional and spiritual—now frequently evoked by Coke in China.

For an extra blast of energy, Coke put on a giant New Year's Eve countdown party in Beijing on the last day of 2007, featuring Taiwanese pop star Wilber Pan. Coke also used the party to unveil a "curved bottle," 15 meters high and composed of 330,000 LEDs on a digital screen.

The world's largest LED bottle moves to Shanghai this month for Chinese New Year promotions. Afterwards, it will visit more than 100 cities with the Olympic Torch Relay, giving over 100 million consumers the chance to connect with the brand.

A simultaneous online community promotion let consumers send virtual Coke bottles to friends via 51.com, a Facebook-like Chinese site. At midnight on Dec. 31, 2007, the bottles burst open, giving the recipients gifts like virtual pins.

The party was broadcast on Beijing TV 2 and Dragon TV and online at Sohu.com and Coke's online platform iCoke.cn, said Mr. DeKimpe, "making it a great non-traditional way to get closer to youth." That's good news, since the mainland is Coke's fourth-largest market globally, and well on its way to being No. 1.