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The Next Battleground for Soda

by Mark Bittman

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Tolstoy wrote that time and patience are the two most powerful warriors. The advocates of measures restricting the marketing and sale of sugar-sweetened beverages have had to employ plenty of each, and the payoff may be coming.

It's difficult for community efforts to fight against big money, and that's something of which the beverage producers have plenty. But by repeating the same message — that sugar-sweetened beverages are deadly when consumed in quantity, and their marketers will not voluntarily restrain themselves from peddling their wares to children — it becomes evident that something must be done.

The current battlegrounds are Berkeley and San Francisco, where votes will be held on Nov. 4 on local soda taxes. (I'm using "soda" to mean "sugar-sweetened beverages," including some Gatorade and Snapple drinks — which are not really "sodas" but are also pretty much useless, nutritionally, contain loads of sugar and are certainly taxable sugar-sweetened beverages. "Diet" sodas, which *are* really sodas but contain no sugar, are not included but have problems of their own — [recent studies suggest](#) they may contribute to diabetes and obesity rather than mitigate them.)

These are important struggles, because a victory in either place would, I believe (and I'm not alone) begin a snowball effect, as cities with public health and cash crises recognize that by taxing soda they can alleviate both problems associated with each. Funds could be raised for public coffers — money to fight for better public health — and soda consumption could decrease. Also, less soda consumption means better public health as well. A nice cycle, and relatively painless.

The reasons for limiting soda consumption are so compelling I don't feel obligated to go into them here. (Well, just a couple of stats: sugar-sweetened beverages are [the single biggest calorie source in the American teenager's diet](#), and drinking one to two sodas a day increases your risk of diabetes by 26 percent.) The issue is how to limit that consumption.

Public health marketing campaigns could work, in theory, if they weren't countered by the billions spent on marketing by an industry valued at half a trillion dollars. Remember that cigarette taxes did lower smoking rates, but the anti-smoking campaign became way more successful when limits were put on how and where you could market cigarettes. (Can you imagine an end to soda vending machines? Maybe not. But when I saw cigarette vending machines last week in Naples, I was taken aback.)

I'll get to the details about Berkeley and San Francisco in a bit, but I do need to mention two signal events that are giving the anti-soda troops a boost. The first comes, surprisingly, from Mexico, where soda consumption and obesity rates [are sometimes even worse than our own](#). [As I wrote almost a year ago](#), Mexico has established a significant tax on soda and junk food, a tax that was seen by many on both sides of this battle as a test of whether such policies might work.

The soda industry feared that the taxes would reduce consumption, and fought hard against passage. They were right to worry. Soda consumption in Mexico fell by a couple of percentage points almost immediately: Sales for the country's biggest Coke bottler fell over 6 percent in just six months, and a poll conducted by the University of North Carolina and Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública estimated a 10 percent drop in consumption within the first quarter. (Interestingly, there was an almost as large increase in the sale of bottled water, which of course is not taxed.)

Perhaps seeing the writing on the wall, the soda industry blinked. A couple of weeks ago, the three largest soda companies — Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and the Dr Pepper Snapple Group — dramatically announced that they would aim to cut the number of sugary drink calories consumed by Americans by 20 percent over the next 10 years by reducing portion size and trying to sell more zero-calorie and low-calorie options. These, of course, are not necessarily healthier options, but at the moment more easily defended ones.

The announcement took place at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York, and the former president called it “huge.” (What's huge, as nutritionist and public health expert [Marion Nestle points out](#), is that “soda companies are at last admitting their role in obesity.”) Clinton might have noticed that a not-especially-aggressive tax like that in Mexico may have taken *half* of that 20 percent bite in just one year. The difference is that a well-thought-out soda tax reduces consumption and also industry profit, while contributing to a larger anti-junk-food campaign. And it doesn't rely on the word of the profiteers to succeed.

Which brings us back to the Bay Area. The San Francisco measure is a much more aggressive one, the kind I (and many public health advocates) would like to see: a two-cents-per-ounce tax (that's 24 cents per can, which experts believe to be significant; plus it *sounds* significant) with the resulting money (estimated to be a minimum of \$30 million) being channeled into health and wellness programs. That second feature, good as it sounds, means that the measure needs a two-thirds majority to pass. It's not an impossibility — and the [endorsement of The San Francisco Chronicle](#) helps — but it's not seen as likely.

The Berkeley measure is tamer: one cent per ounce (which is still almost 10 percent, about what it is in Mexico), with the taxes going into the city's general fund, and therefore requiring only a simple (50 percent) majority. This, plus the fact that Berkeley is, well, “The People's Republic of Berkeley,” makes it so that almost everyone I spoke to gives the Berkeley tax a far better chance of passing. Overall, this is a good thing; a real soda tax anywhere in the United

States will demonstrate that the action is effective, and will encourage other municipalities and even states to consider it.

The soda industry does not really want to fight obesity. (It wants to fight soda taxes, and [has spent more than \\$7 million doing that](#) in San Francisco, a massive amount for a local measure.) Of course if it could replace all of its sugar with air, or make its profits by selling water, that would be fine. But if it were really interested in changing the status quo, it could stop marketing soda to children who are too young to figure out that it's essentially poison ("a substance that is capable of causing the illness or death of a living organism when introduced or absorbed") and could stop [battling against taxes](#) and public health campaigns designed to decrease its consumption. The industry will do neither of those things unless we compel it to. With time and patience, we will.