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PEPSI BLUE

by Gail Johnson

When you sit back to think of the color blue, some powerful images may come to mind: a prairie sky in winter, a Rocky Mountain lake, the warm waters of the Caribbean. Flip through a box of Crayolas and you'll find blue in all its glory: midnight blue, teal blue, turquoise blue, cornflower blue, periwinkle blue, navy blue, cerulean blue.

But Pepsi blue?

Among the megacorporation's myriad marketing strategies is Pepsi's plan to trademark the particular shade of blue that coats its products around the globe. "Pepsi's use of royal blue vending machines and coolers in the Middle East had a strong influence on the company's decision to 'own' a color," Pepsi Cola International's website states. "The success of Pepsi Max and its radical design confirmed that the color blue could have a dramatic impact in the soft drink arena."

Keith Hughes, Pepsi Cola spokesperson for the company's head office in Somers, New York, however, was tight-lipped about the move during an October interview with Adbusters. ("Adbusters?," he repeated hesitatingly when told of the publication's name. "Sounds like a scary concept.") "It's no secret that we, as an organization, are moving towards solid blue, but I couldn't tell you the precise nature of what it might come to," Hughes said.

"We're reviewing the possibilities. We've got some exciting plans, but I really couldn't address that question at this point. I think we already do own that color of blue, in the beverage market anyhow."

If Pepsi succeeds in its attempt to trademark a color, it will join the ranks of companies like MGM, which has a trademark on its lion's roar; NBC, which has a trademark on its three chimes; and Coca-Cola, which has a trademark on the shape of its bottle. Harley-Davidson, similarly, has filed a petition for exclusive rights to its Hog call, the sound of its "45-degree V-twin single crankpin motor."

In 1995, the United States Supreme Court ruled that a color can be registered as a trademark provided there's evidence that shows the color has become associated with a particular product. The U.S. federal trademark registration statute defines a trademark as "any word, name, symbol, or device, or any combination thereof used ... to identify and distinguish goods from those manufactured or sold by others." So, the court asked, "If a shape, a sound, a fragrance can act as symbols, why, one might ask, can a color not do the same?"

Protecting its royal blue under a trademark is just a sliver of Pepsi's global marketing assault called "Project Blue" -- representing the company's investment of more than \$500 million. It also teamed up with the Russian Mir space station to produce the world's first commercial filmed in space, which was aired during MTV's Music Awards in September.

"As a company we have a reputation for having a little bit of fun," Hughes told Adbusters. "We don't take ourselves too seriously."

Will Pepsi set a precedent by owning its shade of blue? Will all the colors of the rainbow be snapped up in a marketing craze --red for Coca-Cola, yellow for Sunlight, orange for Sunkist -- until we have commercial breaks in our color spectrum?

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