Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Coca-Cola

As of January 6, 2026

Condition: Healthy

Paying to stay remembered

Coca-Cola describes its brands as having high levels of consumer recognition, yet it spends more on advertising now than it did a few years ago. As of January 6, 2026, the patient looks healthy: the company says it is gaining share and putting more money into marketing. This check-up looks at why the spending keeps working, what New Coke taught the company and where the strain shows.

Key takeaways

- Coca-Cola reported $5 billion of advertising costs in both 2023 and 2024, up from $4 billion in 2022, for brands it already calls highly recognized.
- In our view, the spending protects mental availability: the chance that buyers think of the brand at the moment they are thirsty. Fame alone does not guarantee it.
- New Coke in 1985 showed that taste tests do not measure attachment. Share a Coke showed the brand can feel personal without touching the formula.
- Growth now leans on price. In the third quarter of 2025, price and mix rose 6% while unit case volume rose 1%.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Awareness	Very high. One of the best-known brands in the world.
Mental availability	Maintained with about $5 billion a year in advertising.
Market share	Gaining value share, the company says.
Volume	Steady. Unit case volume up 1% in Q3 2025.
Pricing	Leaning on price and mix, up 6% in Q3 2025.
Creative	Mixed. AI-generated holiday ads drew criticism.

Timeline

When	What happened
Apr 23, 1985	Coca-Cola announces a new formula after taste tests with nearly 200,000 consumers.
Jul 11, 1985	After 79 days, the original formula returns as Coca-Cola Classic.
2011	Share a Coke begins in Australia, putting first names on bottles and cans.
2022 to 2024	Advertising costs rise from $4 billion to $5 billion a year.
Mar 2025	Coca-Cola brings back Share a Coke for Gen Z in more than 120 countries.
Oct 21, 2025	Q3 results: unit case volume up 1%, Coca-Cola Zero Sugar volume up 14%.
Nov 3, 2025	The “Holidays Are Coming” ads return, two of them AI-generated.
Dec 10, 2025	Henrique Braun is named CEO, effective March 31, 2026.

What happened: a famous brand that keeps advertising

Coca-Cola’s annual report puts advertising costs at $5 billion in 2024, $5 billion in 2023 and $4 billion in 2022. The same filing describes its brands as having high levels of consumer recognition and loyalty. Almost everyone already knows the name. So why keep paying?

The diagnosis: fame fades without upkeep

The answer is memory. Researchers at the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute describe mental availability as how easily buyers think of a brand when buying and how quickly they recognize it. Being known is not the same as coming to mind at the cooler. Memories fade, and rivals compete for the same moments.

This is brand building in its plainest form: broad reach, repeated year after year. Each ad renews a memory so the brand comes to mind the next time someone is thirsty. On one year's income statement it looks like a cost. It works like maintenance on an asset.

Two lessons from its own history

On April 23, 1985, the company announced a new formula that nearly 200,000 consumers had preferred in taste tests. The tests did not measure the bond people felt with the original. By June the consumer hotline was taking 1,500 calls a day, up from 400. After 79 days, the original returned as Coca-Cola Classic. The research asked which drink people preferred. It did not ask what they would lose. Anyone weighing a rebrand or a product change should test attachment as well as preference.

Share a Coke began in Australia in 2011, swapping the logo on bottles and cans for popular first names. In March 2025 the company brought it back for Gen Z, with a rolling launch planned for more than 120 countries. New Coke changed the product and ignored the attachment. Share a Coke left the product alone and gave people a personal reason to pick it up.

The result: still gaining share

In the third quarter of 2025, Coca-Cola said it gained value share in nonalcoholic ready-to-drink beverages while putting more money into marketing. Unit case volume rose 1%, and Coca-Cola Zero Sugar volume grew 14%. A brand that most people have known all their lives is still winning buyers, and the company is still paying to keep it that way.

Where the strain shows

- **Growth leans on price.** In the third quarter, price and mix rose 6% while unit case volume rose 1%, and Trademark Coca-Cola volume also grew 1%. Price-led growth lasts only as long as buyers accept it, a core question in any pricing strategy.
- **Familiar campaigns draw fire when they change.** The 2025 "Holidays Are Coming" ads came out on November 3, and two of them were AI-generated, after the company's first AI holiday ads in 2024 were largely poorly received. The company said the earlier film had performed well with customers.
- **Leadership is changing.** On December 10, 2025, the company named Henrique Braun, its chief operating officer, as CEO effective March 31, 2026. James Quincey will become executive chairman.

Lessons for your marketing

1. Keep advertising while you are healthy. Memory fades, even for famous brands.
2. Keep a steady share of spending on reach, even in good years.
3. Test what customers would lose before you change something they love.
4. Refresh the experience, such as a pack or a campaign, before you touch the core product.
5. Watch volume next to price. Growth that comes only from price lasts only as long as buyers accept it.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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