

# Message in a bottle: Teaching business skills in developing countries

July 13 2011

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Two Baylor University professors use a bottle of Coca-Cola to teach basic business principles to minimally educated entrepreneurs in developing countries.

"Sold in more than 200 countries and territories, it is a readily available resource for teaching business lessons in developing countries," said Blaine McCormick, Ph.D., professor of management at Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. "Our goal is to teach [small business owners](#) how to increase demand for what they sell and the many ways that Coke does that."

Writing in a recent issue of the [Journal of Management Education](#), the article "Message in a Bottle: Basic Business Lessons for Entrepreneurs Using Only a Soft Drink" includes 12 lessons that were developed after a trip to Honduras, one of the [poorest countries](#) in the Western Hemisphere. The paper is available at <http://jme.sagepub.com/content/35/2/282.abstract> . The topics include listening to the consumer, product placement and promotion, marketing, inventory, finance and sustainability.

In 2009, while McCormick was in Honduras, he was asked to teach some basic business practices to a fish farmer, taxi driver and grocery store owner. He put together notes, bought lunch and a bottle of Coke. When marketing came up McCormick pulled out his bottle of Coke. They then discussed all the ways in which Coke promotes and places its product in Honduras and why and possibly how Coke came to be sold in

this remote village.

"Its availability is simply staggering. We experienced no difficulty whatsoever purchasing a bottle of ice cold Coke for every participant, and we were in some very remote locations accessible only by foot, horse or four-wheel drive vehicle," said Van Gray, Ph.D., professor of management and entrepreneurship at Baylor.

McCormick quickly tailored his teaching around Coke and concluded that, with additional study and preparation, a wide variety of fundamental business lessons could be taught using only a Coke bottle.

"We are involved in business education, serving people who do not have an opportunity to attend business school in their country. The Coke bottle is astoundingly effective at bringing us together with some common ground. It continues to amaze me," he said.

After returning to Baylor, McCormick and Gray developed their series of lessons. In 2010, they returned to Honduras to teach the lessons and gather data. While in Kenya and Rwanda in June 2011, they used the lessons to teach small business owners, students at a school for beauticians and hairdressers and young men at a home for street children.

"Business is a learnable skill. An instructor should be able to buy a bottle of Coke within a reasonable distance of just about any village or household in the world—an astonishing feat for The Coca-Cola Company—and have the audience fully recognize the teaching prop. Furthermore, the lessons might be recalled and reinforced with participants each time they see a Coca-Cola advertisement, drink a Coke, or share a Coke with someone else," Gray said.

McCormick and Gray said one of the risks of using a bottle of Coke as a

teaching aid is that many people they taught assumed they worked for the company.

Despite some of these suspicions, the key insight about the utility of a bottle of Coke as a teaching tool continues to exceed expectations, they said. Participants proved to have surprisingly deep pools of knowledge about Coke and its associated products. They heard rich and memorable responses when querying participants about their "Coke moments," uses for an empty Coke bottle, or the varieties of coke. A second benefit of Coke is its ability to attract an audience. Whatever concerns they might have about the product, participants gladly received a complimentary bottle of Coke, the authors said.

McCormick and Gray have received some positive follow-up from one of the Honduran entrepreneurs.

"He clearly implemented two of the Coke lessons. He started basic customer research to discover new products that fellow villagers might want to purchase in his grocery store, such as hot dogs," said McCormick. "He also changed his pricing structure and now prices some high volume items lower and some lower volume specialty items higher. If it is any sign of his [business](#) success, his modest home now boasts an indoor bathroom—rare for his village."

Provided by Baylor University

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