

NEWS BREAK

Article: **Gen Z hates diet sodas but loves them with 'zero sugar' branding**

Section: **BUSINESS, C5**

Sunday's News Break selects an article from **Sunday, February 1, 2026**, of The Seattle Times print replica for an in-depth reading of the news. Read the selected article and answer the attached study questions.

Feel free to adapt this lesson for your students. For instance, some educators may assign this as a homework task, while others might facilitate the reading and discussion of questions within small groups or larger class discussions.

****Please take a moment to review all NIE content before classroom use to ensure it is suitable for your students.****

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1

- Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2

- Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

Learning Objectives:

After reading the article, students will be able to analyze how branding and product reformulation are being used to capture the Gen Z market, specifically through the transition from "Diet" to "Zero Sugar" sodas. The article also highlights a significant shift in the beverage industry's strategy to stay relevant as consumer values evolve.

Pre-Reading Discussion:



- What do you think the article will be about, using this picture?
- Are there any clues? What can you infer?

Vocabulary Building:

Read this sentence, what do you think the highlighted words mean using *context clues*? A **context clue** is a word or words that are hints and refers to the sources of information outside of words that readers may use to predict the meaning of the word.

“The word ‘diet’ is from a different era. For a lot of younger consumers, it’s **radioactive**,” said Kevin Ryan, chief executive officer of Malachite Strategy and Research.

Radioactive Guess:

Radioactive Definition:

Comprehension Questions:

1. PepsiCo is running a 30-second spot, which can run more than \$ _____ million, to hype the no-calorie drink. “We’ve gone all in” on Pepsi Zero Sugar in the last two years, said Ram Krishnan, the chief executive officer of PepsiCo North America.
2. Many brands such as Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Canada Dry and Dr Pepper are leaning into _____ sodas.
3. Across the soda aisle, _____ is out and Zero Sugar is in.
4. Keurig Dr Pepper, for one, didn’t have a single Zero Sugar offering in 2020. Now it has more than _____.
5. Both Diet and Zero Sugar are calorie free, artificially sweetened imitations of their sugary brethren. Yet, the latter’s branding resonates more with whom?

6. Last year a viral TikTok likened Diet Coke to what?
7. It's a sharp turn for soda's fortunes in the U.S., where sales by volume have fallen ____% over the last two decades.
8. More consumers are opting for what two beverages?
9. What is key to Keurig Dr Pepper's strategy?
10. While there was some internal anxiety that the changes would alienate customers, they didn't, Dabrowski said. "It was a risk worth taking that has paid off." Keurig Dr Pepper's U.S. sales of beverages like soft drinks rose 14.4% in the third quarter to \$____ billion, helping offset weakness in its coffee division.
11. The company's research has found that ____% of them try a new beverage every month, compared to just 16% of Boomers.

Class Discussion Questions:

- What surprised (or stood out to) you in the article?
- At first, I thought _____, but now I think _____?

Deeper-Dive “Connect & Explain” comprehension questions for small groups, entire classes or journal entries and/ or essay prompts for extended enrichment:

1. The article notes that while the ingredients are largely the same, "Diet" is viewed as "radioactive" while "Zero Sugar" has a "health halo." How does this change in terminology influence a consumer's self-perception? Why does "Zero Sugar" feel like an empowered choice while "Diet" feels like a restrictive one?
2. A viral TikTok compared Diet Coke to a "fridge cigarette." Break down this metaphor. What does it imply about the generational shift in how we view "vice" and "wellness"?
3. Madilyn Hovey (age 25) says Zero Sugar feels like drinking "the real thing." Why is "authenticity" in flavor so vital for a generation that is increasingly skeptical of processed foods?
4. PepsiCo spent over \$8 million for a 30-second Super Bowl spot for Pepsi Zero Sugar. Based on the article's data about falling soda volumes (down 27% in 20 years), justify this massive expenditure. Is it an offensive move to gain market share or a defensive move to save a dying industry?
5. Using the article as a springboard, define the difference between "wellness" and "dieting." How has the shift from weight loss (Diet) to ingredient avoidance (Zero Sugar) changed the way corporations' market to young people?
6. The article states that 72% of Gen Z try a new beverage every month compared to 16% of Boomers. What does this tell us about the "loyalty" of the modern consumer? How does this force companies to innovate differently?

7. Why did Pepsi revive the "Pepsi Challenge" for Zero Sugar products specifically? In an era of social media influencers, does a blind taste test still hold the same cultural authority it did 50 years ago?
8. While "Zero Sugar" removes the calories, it remains an "artificially sweetened imitation." Predict the next "radioactive" word in the beverage industry. If Gen Z eventually rejects artificial sweeteners (like aspartame or sucralose), where do these companies go next?

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