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## Mum's the Word: We Found a Greener Gas

By [CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH](#)

PSYCHOLOGISTS and Wall Street traders have long known it: people and markets act on perception, whether it clashes with reality or not.

Which means that sellers of cold foods may soon have a public relations problem on their hands.

Hydrofluorocarbons, better known as HFCs, have been the refrigerants of choice since their predecessor, chlorofluorocarbons, were proved to hurt the ozone layer. But refrigeration equipment can leak, and HFCs are a powerful greenhouse gas. So [Coca-Cola](#), [McDonald's](#) and other companies are switching to another gas to keep their vending machines, trucks and in-store freezers and soda machines cold.

That gas is carbon dioxide. Thus the perception problem.

Thanks to the language of [climate change](#) — “carbon offsets,” “carbon neutral,” “carbon intensive,” “carbon tax” and the like — most people think carbon dioxide is far and away the worst, if not the only, greenhouse gas around. But pound for pound, HFCs, among other gases, are far more potent when it comes to trapping the earth's heat. So using carbon dioxide in place of HFCs in refrigeration equipment poses less environmental risk.

CO2 as a good thing? Even [Martha Stewart](#) might have trouble explaining that.

“Really understanding this issue requires a level of scientific knowledge and sophistication that is beyond most people,” said Kert Davies, research director of [Greenpeace](#), which spearheaded Refrigerants Naturally, an industry coalition that has been exploring alternatives to HFCs for several years.

The result, marketing experts warn, could be reputation chaos. “The man in the street just assumes that carbon dioxide is the killer,” said Michael Watras, president of Straightline International, a brand consulting firm. “Those companies better be ready for a huge image issue.”

The issue hasn't arisen yet, for various reasons. [Unilever](#), which owns Ben & Jerry's, switched to another less-risky gas, propane, for refrigeration, thus dodging the carbon dioxide bullet. McDonald's is so far testing carbon dioxide as a refrigerant only in Europe, “where consumers are far more attuned to the scientific issues,” said Bob Langert, McDonald's vice president for corporate social responsibility.

And companies that normally promote their greenness are keeping an uncharacteristically low profile on their use of CO2. In September, for example, Greenpeace and Coca-Cola mailed a press release

publicizing the HFC-free coolers Coke will use at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The identity of the replacement refrigerant was not revealed until halfway down, in passing.

“We hadn’t even asked ourselves if there will be a stigma attached to this, because we are so sure it is a strong solution to a climate problem,” said Jeff Seabright, vice president for environment and water resources at Coca-Cola. “But CO2 has developed such a bad reputation as the cause of climate change that we have to really explain how harnessing its attributes is part of the solution, not the cause.”

But can Coke and its confreres prevent the inevitable — if unfair — bad buzz?

Marketing experts say yes. But they offer highly divergent and often mutually exclusive ideas about how.

Eric Hirshberg, chief creative officer of Deutsch/LA, a unit of [Interpublic Group](#), suggests using placards in stores, stickers on refrigerated trucks and other visual methods to stress the end results while playing down the means.

“They have to stay on message, which is that they are voluntarily lowering the climate impact of their refrigerants at their own expense,” he said. “They don’t have to mention carbon dioxide at all.”

And if they do, they certainly should not try to justify its use, added Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, a professor of marketing at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the [University of North Carolina](#).

“It’s a losing proposition to try to explain that you are exchanging something very bad for something mildly bad,” he said. “The companies should just calculate their carbon footprint, and specify that this change is reducing it by X percent.”

Conversely, Dan Becker, a former [Sierra Club](#) official and a consultant to environmental groups, says he thinks carbon dioxide should be front and center — but that the companies should defuse the issue by letting Greenpeace do the talking. “If an environmental leader says that ‘irony of ironies, carbon dioxide is the safest refrigerant,’ it has a lot more credibility than if companies say it,” he said.

Others suggest that companies simply position the switch as a way of saying they are reusing carbon dioxide, thus keeping it out of the atmosphere. “The idea of recycling carbon will be a much easier sell than the idea that other gases are worse than CO2,” said Stephen Ansolabehere, a professor of political science at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#).

Mr. Watras, the brand consultant, disagrees with all the tactics. He thinks the companies should mount a straightforward advertising campaign, preferably on prime time television, explaining in simple terms why carbon dioxide is not the gaseous equivalent of the devil incarnate. But he thinks they should speak with one voice — that of Refrigerants Naturally — rather than as individuals.

“A company advertising alone looks like it is pushing an agenda, but a consortium of companies looks like it is tackling an issue,” he said.

And as any brand specialist knows, perception trumps reality every time.