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Gaining a Competitive Advantage Over the Daesh Start-up Model

Foreword

Daniel Holloman was born into a Presbyterian family in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1991. His family is primarily Republican and middle class. Daniel is registered as a Democrat, but agrees with some aspects of both parties. He tries to keep an open mind toward religion and politics, but admits slight biases due to his upbringing as a Christian and an American. The following essay is based primarily on research reinforced, in part, with Daniel's opinions. The nature of the following essay may seem quite controversial, but the work as a whole is intended to offer solutions on how to end the tyranny of violent militant groups. The author does not seek to legitimize militant groups by comparing them to business start-ups, rather, Daniel posits a business strategy which has potential to gain a competitive advantage over terrorists.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the Islamic State has been operating more and more like a business with a wildly successful social media marketing campaign. ISIS has been using technology and social media to reach a growing group of supporters around the world. According to Stanford University, the number of ISIS militants is estimated to be more than 30,000 (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2015). This wide support base is largely influenced by intimidation and indoctrination through social media platforms such as Twitter.

First we are going to take an in-depth look at ISIS as a business model. We will examine their marketing and recruitment strategies as well as analyze their customers and determine their 'corporate structure'. We will make comparisons between the 'ISIS start-up model' and the models of various other militant groups.

Then we will discuss how corporate strategy and management techniques can combat militant groups. We can turn these same techniques against ISIS and build and maintain a competitive advantage against them.

Nomenclature

They call themselves the Islamic State while wielding a falsified Qur'an like a weapon. They twist the meaning of the Qur'an to indoctrinate young soldiers to fight for them. Muslims who refuse to join them are murdered. In an attempt to turn the Western world against Muslims, they have used the title "Islamic State". Many experts and political figures refuse to use the term "Islamic State" because it gives legitimacy to the group and its caliphate. Instead, they now use the delegitimizing

name “D.A.E.S.H.” (pronounced *da’ish*) which, “is a transliteration of the Arabic acronym formed [from] the same words that make up I.S.I.S. in English: ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’” (Guthrie, 2015). This may seem like a small issue, but it is of vast importance. “Islamic State” is a brand name. It is intended to evoke deeply emotional feelings of religious significance among Muslims. “Islamic State” implies a religious sovereignty with defined borders. This brand name reinforces the existence of the caliphate (a form of Islamic state from the Dark Ages). It is important to destroy the ISIS brand name in order to defeat them. Therefore, from this point on I will only use the term “Daesh” to refer to the religious extremists formerly known as ISIS.

Religious and Cultural Implications of Establishing a Caliphate

Daesh has declared itself a caliphate, a type of Islamic state led by a caliph who has both religious and political power over the people. They believe the caliph is a direct successor of the prophet Muhammad (Chandler, 2014). Daesh demands that all Muslims recognize and join the caliphate. Those who refuse to align themselves with these quasi-crusaders are typically put to death.

The caliphate hearkens back to the ancient ways of 7th century Islamic extremism. This was a time when religion was imposed upon the masses at the edge of a blade. The neocaliphate is Daesh’s way to align their agenda with an ancient cultural occurrence with deep religious significance.

Lost in Translation

Many Muslims believe that the Qur’an cannot be fully understood when translated to English. They say you cannot know the true word of Muhammad unless you understand Arabic (Pickthall, 2001). *Qur’an* translates to “the recitation” in English. It is intended to be read aloud in Arabic each Ramadan. The Qur’an sounds like beautiful music when recited, giving an added meaning and emotional appeal to fluent Arabic speakers.

The western world’s general misunderstanding of Islam leads many Americans to fear what they do not understand. Daesh is a campaign of terror intended to frighten the world into submission. They are trying to turn our ignorance into prejudice against Muslims. It is imperative that Americans recognize the stark distinction between Islam and Daesh. Muslims are typically peaceful people. The only enemies here are religious extremists like Daesh and similar terrorist groups.

The United States Armed Forces have an alliance with Kurdish freedom fighters. Our Muslim allies oppose Daesh and their regime. They risk their lives to end terrorism in their homelands and abroad.

Corporatized Terror

Daesh has spent many years developing their Jihadist group into a corporate structure that resembles Fortune 500 companies. Experts say the Daesh

management model is, “more akin to that of General Motors than it is to a religious dynasty from the Dark Ages” (Simpson, 2014). In other words, they behave less like a caliphate and more like a start-up.

Just like a typical growing business, Daesh has a web of regional managers who each have power to operate with partial autonomy. These managers are responsible for carrying out a plethora of profitable activities in their province ranging from theft and racketeering to assassinations and bombings. Accountants maintain detailed records of cash inflows and outflows, as well as death toll statistics.

In early 2007, United States Marines were performing routine patrols in Anbar, Iraq. They uncovered a stash of Daesh documents: “financial records, payrolls, supply purchase records, administrative records, and other details of fund flows into and out of a single local cell in Anbar” (Simpson, 2014). Soon thereafter, Iraqi militiamen found a “hard drive holding ledgers with 1,200 files detailing the finances and operations of provincial-level managers overseeing the cell and others like it across Anbar province” (Simpson, 2014). Just like a thriving decentralized company, Daesh has a network of regional managers operating with some degree of autonomy.

There are myriad similarities between Daesh and a corporation. Daesh collects taxes from people living in regions under its control. They refer to stolen and pillaged goods as “spoils”. They publish annual report, which outlines their “operations and performance of its divisions” (Simpson, 2014). They have even participated in several mergers and acquisitions.

Chief Executive Officer

Typically, Daesh “chief executives” only last about 39 months (Simpson, 2014). At least two past CEOs have perished in airstrikes. The current Daesh leader, Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, also known by his nom de guerre, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi “al-Quarashi” is regarded by his soldiers as a direct successor to the prophet Muhammad. He was elected caliph, the religious and political leader of the Daesh caliphate in 2014. Such a position of power breeds corruption and cronyism.

Daesh has done everything in its power to frame al-Baghdadi as a demigod. The group invented a biography of al-Baghdadi, which was, “made to appear as if it were written on a yellowing, ancient scroll,” wherein, “the group claims its leader earned a doctorate in Islamic studies and served as a prominent cleric” (Simpson, 2014). Daesh rivals, however, contest that the scroll was a blatant fabrication. What cannot be disputed is al-Baghdadi’s “arrest on suspicion of supporting terrorism, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq” (Simpson, 2014).

Mergers and Acquisitions

Like many large companies today, Daesh was formed as the result of a merger between two large companies. Al-baghdadi was associated with a band of Al-Qaeda convicts before he ever had anything to do with Daesh, “after his release, a small

jihadi group al-Baghdadi led pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq, bringing him into its management ranks via a merger” (Simpson, 2014). It is shocking to imagine two of the world’s most notable modern terrorist groups merging together with a common goal, but that is exactly what has been happening.

Military-Management Model

Some people say that farmers were the original entrepreneurs, but the first entrepreneurs came long before agriculture. Military leaders were the original entrepreneurs. The standard management model pyramid was first invented by militaries.

According to William J. Baumol, early feudal societies spurred rapid innovations in management and military strategy. These early military leaders invented the basic management structures still used in corporations today, “military tactics and strategy... can be interpreted as contributions of military entrepreneurs undertaken at least partly in pursuit of private economic gains” (Baumol, 1990).

It may sound bizarre, but Daesh uses a multidivisional-hierarchy form of management and, “was set up along the lines of the best multinationals” (Simpson, 2014). They have a shockingly sophisticated handle on their decentralized operations. Even “[Daesh’s] own publicly issued reports and statements show it remains structured in the M-form, with 18 semiautonomous provincial divisions drawn across Iraq and Syria” (Simpson, 2014).

Financing and Accounting Daesh

Daesh primarily self-funds their operations. Most of their income comes from selling stolen goods such as construction supplies, power generators, and more. They make 100 percent margin on products they sell because they paid nothing for the items. If you factor in the cost of weapons, ammunition, salary, and medical expenses related to stealing those supplies, you still come up with a margin that approaches 100 percent. Daesh uses sophisticated accounting methods to record all financial inflows and outflows. Surplus money and supplies goes to the “national treasury” for storage and safekeeping. Divisional managers are not allowed to hold more than two weeks of operating capital at a time. This minimizes liability of assets being lost during air strikes and raids, “moneymen at all levels would hold no more than two weeks’ worth of operating cash at a time, making it harder for U.S. forces to disrupt the overall structure with individual raids” (Simpson, 2014). Daesh also levies taxes on the local community as a revenue driver, but a better word for this is “extortion” or “racketeering”.

Another source of Daesh funding comes from crowd-funding pages in secret locations on the dark web. These uncatalogued domains do not show up in search engines and are generally only accessible by highly skilled programmers, but with the recent release of TOR Browser for Mac and PC, accessing the dark web is becoming relatively effortless. This and the advent of anonymous currencies, such

as Bitcoin, have allowed for nearly untraceable donations to be made to Daesh from their foreign supporters around the globe.

Customers

By the end of 2015, Daesh, “was selling \$40 million a month worth of oil, which is sent in trucks across the battlefield of the Syrian civil war and sometimes further” (Sonawane, 2015). Over the life of their trade relationship, Bashar Assad, the Syrian president, has been buying Daesh oil to the tune of \$500 million. Adam Szubin, Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, explains the irony of this cooptation, “The two are trying to slaughter each other and they are still engaged in millions and millions of dollars of trade” (Sonawane, 2015).

Recruitment

Militant groups do not recruit new “employees” from a typical career fair. The Daesh leader, Al-Baghdadi, spent a whole year breaking prisoners out of jail to join his cause. He sought the world’s most experienced criminals for his regime. In many cases, the best place to find those soldiers was on death row. It makes sense, because some people refer to prisons as finishing schools for criminals.

The most experienced fighters are strategically used for combat situations, while the inexperienced and non Arabic-speaking recruits end up as cannon fodder. Daesh refers to them as suicide bombers, but I will call them front-line employees.

Suicide bombers are always inexperienced members. Often, they are foreign supporters of Daesh who may not even speak Arabic (anyone can drive a car). They keep the experienced soldiers among their ranks as fighters (Simpson, 2014).

Medical

Like a multi-national conglomerate offering healthcare benefits to its employees, Daesh has its own medical service. According to a report published by Daesh propagandists, Daesh funds “a specialized medical team” (Islamic State Report, 2014). The existence of employee benefits furthers my theory that Daesh is a start-up.

Courier

Daesh accountants frequently denote their courier unit as the “mail division” in financial statements. Similar to a corporate mailroom, this parcel delivery arm of Daesh transports hand-written strategy details and other correspondences between “managers” usually via bicycle. And since letters cannot be hacked, they must instead be intercepted. Perhaps a small group of covert forces, like Navy SEALs, could seize and decipher these mysterious missives. The valuable intelligence contained within could be a tip-off to Daesh’s next strategic move.

Communications

Members of Daesh used popular smart phone apps such as, “WhatsApp, Telegram, and other messengers” until being kicked off by concerned app developers

(Constine, 2016). This impediment to terrorist communications was short-lived. Daesh sympathizers now use an encrypted Android chat app called “Alrawi” to communicate with their worldwide support group. Alrawi “shields users from having their texts intercepted. And without a reputable company behind Alrawi, there’s no one to ban [Daesh] from using it” (Constine, 2016). The Android app cannot be downloaded from Android’s app store, Google Play. Alrawi can only be “installed from shady back alleys of the Internet” (Constine, 2016). At present, Android is not currently interested in barring 3rd party apps from being installed on their devices. After, all, open-sourced operating systems are what make Android devices so desirable to many of their customers.

Twitter Warfare: Combating the Daesh Start-Up Model

Various groups have attempted to stymie Daesh propaganda online. Twitter moderators have begun removing violent and threatening accounts. Social media activists tweet their opinions against Daesh. Big data analysts have been using marketing algorithms to track and monitor covert terrorist activity on Twitter. Even Anonymous hackers have begun performing distributed denial of service attacks on ISIS websites, doxxing (publicly outing) Daesh supporters, and sabotage of Bitcoin donation pages in the deep web (Singer and Brooking, 2015).

As technology and social media continue to merge, many smart phones connect seamlessly with social media platforms. Government agencies such as the CIA have asked Apple to unlock the iPhones of suspected terrorists, but Apple refused to cooperate. Meanwhile, Daesh propaganda is filling up Twitter, regulatory gray areas govern large portions of the web, and technology is becoming ubiquitous. How can we, as Americans, simultaneously protect ourselves from militant groups without infringing on our personal liberties?

Business and Military Strategy Can Stop Daesh

Now that we have taken the time to analyze and understand the Daesh start-up model, we can take the necessary steps to defeat them. The best way to handle this situation is use a two-prong approach, “applying financial pressure as well as military might” (Lavin and Newman, 2015). Corporate management structure was invented during times of war. If we intend to beat Daesh, we must follow the wisdom of military strategists. In “The Art of War” Sun Tzu wrote that in order to know victory you must first know yourself (Tzu, 2015). We must fight fire with fire. We must use corporate strategy and military tactics to gain a competitive advantage over Daesh. Let us also take advice from some of the world’s market leaders, such as Coca-Cola. After all, Coke has developed a long-term understanding of how to maintain a competitive advantage over start-ups and the threat of new entrants.

Target Their Bottom Line

In order to slow Daesh’s growth, we must cut off their funding. Once we manage to cut off their income, they will not have the capacity to grow and expand. Bloomberg writers Lavin and Newman explain this concept eloquently in their article, *Islamic*

State's Business Model Must Be Disrupted, “Countries should stop paying ransoms to Islamic State, for one thing, and encourage insurers to do the same. Intelligence agencies should better coordinate their investigations of the middlemen who facilitate its oil sales. Banks and auction houses must be more alert to cutting off trade in pilfered antiquities. Neighboring countries—notably Turkey—still need to do more to stop the flow of illicit money and goods through Iraq and Syria. And Iraq’s central bank must crack down on financial firms that funnel U.S. dollars to Islamic State and its associates” (Lavin and Newman, 2015).

Using Satire to Destroy the Daesh Brand Name and Trademark

As discussed earlier, “Daesh” is not an Arabic word. Rather, it is an Arabic acronym, which helps to delegitimize the militant group. Acronyms are seldom used in Arabic and, therefore, sound awkward and unpleasant to many Arabic-speakers’ ears. “Daesh” is only one letter away from “daes” which is a pre-Islamic term meaning “to trample”. This pre-Islamic connotation further negates the religious extremism of Daesh. More importantly, *da’ish* sounds very similar to the Arabic word “ja’hish” which means “ass”. It may seem like childish name-calling, but this humorous use of “satire is a crucial weapon in the fight against these maniacs” (Guthrie, 2015). Imposing a forced rebrand of this militant group’s name is, “not only defiance but [a Syrian] coping strategy... which has been quite under-reported” (Guthrie, 2015).

Daesh is not a truly recognized state. They are not an accurate representation of Islamic religion. They should never be referred to by their preferred name. As Syrian writer and political dissident, al-Haj Salih, once asked, “If an organization wants to call itself ‘the light’, but in fact they are ‘the darkness’, would you comply and call them ‘the light’?” (Guthrie, 2015). Let us continue to delegitimize this militant group by referring to them as “Daesh” in an effort to dissolve their preferred trade name.

Daesh flies a black flag with their preferred logo and brand name written in Arabic. The flag is their trademark. The plain black background has deep historical and religious significance to Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad traditionally flew a plain black flag, often called the Black Banner or Black Standard (Singer and Brooking, 2015). Abu Muslim, a general under the Abbasid Caliphate, used the Black Standard extensively in the mid 700s leading up to the Abbasid Revolution (Raeside, 2014). In order to further separate Daesh from Islam, I propose using a new flag to represent Daesh in the news media (see figure 1 and 2 below).



Figure 1: before rebranding, the Black Standard is emblazoned with the Daesh logo. This flag is eerily similar to the flags used in ancient caliphates.



Figure 2: after forced rebranding, 'Da'ish' becomes 'Ja'hish'—"The State of Donkeys in Iraq and Syria" (Guthrie, 2015).

According to the hadiths, black flags will come from the East (from Khorasan) (or Medinah, depending on the hadith) when imam Mahdi returns. The Islamic version of Jesus, known as Isa Ibn Maryam, will tell Mahdi to perform the sacred prayer (Mobin, 2015). Let us no longer give legitimacy to the Daesh black flag. Let us impose our new satirical donkey logo instead.

Strategic Partnerships

Daesh has become a global threat to civil rights. Therefore, stamping out Daesh needs to be an international collaboration. The United States must continue to partner with powerful allies such as the United Nations, France, Italy, and Saudi Arabia. We can supply weapons, training, and resources to Peshmerga (Kurdish) freedom fighters. Many sources recommend the United States Air Force continue supplementing Kurdish efforts with US airstrikes of strategic targets.

Cooperation with foreign allies will allow us to identify and dismantle Daesh revenue-drivers, "international efforts to investigate and cut off its cash—such as the Counter-ISIL Finance Group—are also making some progress" (Lavin and Newman, 2015). If we all band together, we can prevent the daesh start-up model from becoming a new trend.

Cut off Supply Lines

The ancient military tactic of siege (performed by surrounding a city and cutting off their supplies to encourage surrender) must be employed against Daesh. Groups such as the C.I.F.G. mentioned above are working diligently to analyze all forms of Daesh funding. Representatives from 26 countries and several multilateral organizations met to agree on an action plan to "further their understanding of [Daesh's] financial and economic activities, share relevant information, and develop and coordinate efforts to combat [Daesh's] financial activities" (Establishment,

2015). Hopefully, if we all work together, we can confiscate their resources such as oil. We can also make a global effort to deny their foreign funding.

Disrupt Customer Relations

One logical approach to ending a startup involves cutting off their connection with their customers. In this case, those customers are Assad and parts of Turkey, “[Daesh] financial supporters [who] have been hit with sanctions” (Lavin and Newman, 2015). Without access to their most valuable revenue sources, Daesh capital reserves will quickly dwindle, resulting in decreased control and power in the regions they currently control. As the Daesh grip loosens on the Middle East, peaceful nations will find the courage to stand up for themselves.

Hactivism and Cyber Warfare

Hacking is another way Daesh can be foiled. Daesh hosts vulnerable donation pages and propaganda websites hidden in the deep and dark webs. Hacking groups such as Ghost Security Group, “replace[d] an ISIS propaganda hub with an advertisement for Viagra and Prozac” (Singer and Brooking, 2015).

There may also be opportunity to hack into their communications apps, such as Alrawi. Organized groups of “hactivists” have joined together to flag and report over 100,000 Twitter accounts linked to terrorist activity. These hactivists use big data analytics to identify social media accounts belonging to terrorist groups, “hundreds of times in rapid succession” (Singer and Brooking, 2015).

Hactivists have also adopted a cyber bullying technique called “doxxing,” publishing private information about Daesh recruiters. In doxxing, hackers posing as recruits, slowly gather information about terrorist recruiters, “this information is then revealed to the world and passed to local authorities. One such tip, discovered by the hactivists of Ghost Security, helped avert a July terror attack in Tunisia” (Simpson and Brooking, 2015).

Daesh website servers can be overloaded through use of distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS). Using a fairly primitive system of thousands of linked computers called botnets, hactivists can overwhelm Daesh servers, bringing them offline temporarily.

Combat

The United States Air Force has been bombing strategic targets in Syria. Depending on the outcome of the next presidential election, we may have more boots on the ground in 2017. The United States military has also been, “bombing the group’s oil fields in eastern Syria and belatedly demolishing its smuggling trucks, which will hurt its bottom line” (Lavin and Newman, 2015).

But bombs can kill more than just their intended targets. Bombings and drone strikes just cause more death. Are we really playing the good guys if we are simply combating violence with more violence? If we want to end this conflict ethically, we

should consider the collateral damage caused by giving the Kurdish fighters air support. If the United States really want to position itself as a moral and cultural leader, we must resolved this terrorism problem with as little violence as possible. That means reducing the number of retaliatory drone strikes we perform on our enemies.

Lessons from The Coca-Cola Model

Instead of dropping bombs, perhaps we can take a lesson about handling competition from one of the world's most successful startups, Coca-Cola. Coke captured the soft drinks market as one of "the power brands of the 1880s" (Tedlow, 1996). Coke learned how to exploit the infrastructure of available technology, "[they] did not invent the railroad or the telegraph, but its executives understood how to use them" (Tedlow, 1996). Modern marketing for Coke makes use of modern infrastructure such as television ads, which are typically uploaded to Youtube as well, to allow for maximum exposure. The United States government should take advantage of Youtube and television advertisements to inform citizens of ways to suppress the Daesh start-up model.

Coca-Cola India found the Indian beverage market saturated by juice drinks distributed by their competitors' major brands, "PepsiCo's Tropicana and Dabur's Real" (Coca-Cola Set to Leave, 2011). Coke riposted by creating, "a separate division for juices to focus on its non-carbonated portfolio" (Coca-Cola Set to Leave, 2011). Coke used Maaza and Minute Maid brands to dominate the fruit juice market. Perhaps the United States can take a queue from Coke's use of separate divisions. Our armed forces can form a separate division or special unit such as the Navy SEALs team that captured Osama Bin Laden. Similarly, a small elite team of undercover operatives could capture Al-Baghdadi without harming civilians. The same cannot be said for drone strikes, which often harm innocent lives.

According to Constance Hays from the New York Times, Coca-cola uses aggressive negotiation tactics with distributors in order to dominate shelf space. Coke competitors such as Royal Crown, founded by "Bruce Hackett, who left a job with the local Coke bottler after nine years in 1994 to start Hackett Beverages in Monticello, Arkansas. By 1997, he said, he had been squeezed out of store after store" (Hays, 2000). This is because Coca-Cola had negotiated marketing deals with stores, giving Coke exclusive signage and marketing rights. Coke bullied RC out of the market, turning over their ice buckets and dumping them near the street. If the United States wants to suppress Daesh, we will have to be more aggressive in our negotiations with their distributors. Anyone that transacts in Daesh oil or stolen goods should be sanctioned. Financial supporters and customers of Daesh oil such as Assad and Turkey should be punished with sanctions for perpetuating terrorism.

One of my favorite sodas, 7Up, marketed itself as "the uncola" and even released a 7Up branded video game in 1993 called *Cool Spot* on the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. 7Up did everything in its power to separate its brand from Coca-Cola, but 7Up still, "routinely has trouble advertising... products through stores that have

signed marketing agreements that favor Coke” (Hays, 2000). Coke can teach many lessons about suppressing new entrants into the soft drinks market. Like 7Up, Daesh has positioned itself as an industry threat. The United States should take a queue from Coke’s battle with 7Up and push Daesh products right off the shelves.

Finally, Coca-Cola has one of the most recognizable brand names because of its vast marketing division and budget. Coke’s fierce negotiation tactics, sign-on bonuses, and defensive contractual terms and agreements, have positioned Coke as the world’s most popular soft drink. Similar to Coke, the United States is widely considered one of the greatest countries in the world. The United States brand name connotes freedom, justice, and prosperity. This image can be maintained through continued use of marketing. We should have more advertisement for our armed forces, continuing the effort to frame them as our nation’s heroes. We need to reinvigorate patriotism in our country one commercial at a time. And then we need to follow up the publicity with real works. We must end this crisis in the Middle East as peacefully and logically as possible. After all, good business is about sustainable ethical practices and doing the most good.

By listening to the advice of our strongest companies, and trusting our government to make the right strategy decisions, we can prevent dangerous militant start-up groups from forming around the world.

Conclusion

Daesh shocked the world with their religious extremism. They promoted a culture of fear and oppression by murdering anyone who disagrees with their viewpoints. They used business and military tactics to grow their organization into the most profitable terrorist group in the world. They corrupted Islamic symbolism into a brainwashing tool for the masses and built a brand name that is feared around the world. And, perhaps most surprising of all, their management and marketing techniques are so sophisticated, that journalists and scholars have begun comparing Daesh to an illegal business start-up profiteering from racketeering, blackmail, theft, and murder. But they are not unbreakable. We need not fear this predatory start-up. Scholars suggest that we can defeat Daesh by applying financial pressure, business tactics, and military might.

The United States should also look to its mature companies with iconic power brands for advice on beating the Daesh start-up model. Such organizations have industry-specific experience on how to prevent start-up formation in their market space. Coca-Cola has been knocking off incumbents for more than a century. If anyone knows how to prevent these types of organizations from popping up around the world, it would be a multinational powerhouse like Coke.

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