Coke Weighs World Cup Sponsorship Tone on Brazilian Unrest

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Masked demonstrators set fire to a jersey with the colors of Brazilian national soccer team during protest against the World Cup 2014, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Thursday, March 27, 2014. Demonstrators call for better schools, health care, questioning the billions spent to host this year's World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. **(AP Photo/Leo Correa)**

LONDON (AP) — Coca-Cola plans to adapt its World Cup sponsorship and soften its celebratory tone in Brazil if unrest returns to the streets.

As the company launches its biggest World Cup marketing campaign, Coke executive vice president Joe Tripodi told The Associated Press it would react rapidly to any outbreak of protests in an attempt to reflect the mood of the nation.

Demonstrations flashed across the South American country last year as the Confederations Cup started, with Brazilians angry at the high level of spending on the World Cup compared with public services. The protests outside some matches, including the Brazil-Spain final, turned violent, with tear gas floating into stadiums.

"That (World Cup) spotlight can act as an opportunity to tell a story of happiness, but it can also be a spotlight to tell a story of grievances and concerns that they (the public) have about the direction of the country," Tripodi, Coca-Cola's chief marketing and commercial officer, said in a phone interview.

A litmus test of Brazilians' current attitude toward the World Cup could come when the trophy tour, organized by Coke, reaches its 90th country this month and begins a six-week tour across Brazil.

"We hope there is no unrest," Tripodi said from Atlanta. "But we recognize these

things happen. You always have to be smart to have all kind of Plan Bs, Plan Cs and Ds to prepare for any contingency. And if certain things happen, you might have to change the tonality of your marketing or communications ... to make sure our messaging better reflected the mood in a particular country."

The same social media channels Coke uses to promote its products can quickly be used to create a backlash.

"The worst thing is you can be complicit by silence," Tripodi said.

"The world we live in now is full of massive disruption, frequent chaos and change all the time," he added. "So as a company and as a brand if you are not prepared to respond ... then you aren't going to survive."

Coke's advertising has appeared in World Cup stadiums since the tournament was last staged in Brazil in 1950, and it has been an official FIFA sponsor since 1978.

The latest marketing campaign features fans across the world, from a Japanese region hit by the 2011 earthquake-tsunami to the West Bank, collecting tickets.

Rival PepsiCo is relying on the allure of soccer stars, with Argentina's Lionel Messi and the Netherlands' Robin van Persie performing tricks on the streets of Rio de Janeiro in a campaign released Wednesday.

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