

Red Bull or Slow Cow: Social Mood Influences Our Thirst for Energy Drinks

By Michael Fairbanks

Editor's note: Michael Fairbanks' essay on energy drinks won the 2018 Socionomics Foundation prize for most outstanding student paper. His research, which aligns with earlier socionomic observations, found society's taste for energy drinks has been greater in positive mood periods, whereas "anti-energy drinks" have made a splash when mood was more negative. In this excerpt, he considers the energy drink market circa 2008.

At the trough of the social mood trend, relaxation drinks began to explode onto the market. These drinks are marketed to reduce stress and anxiety while improving focus and sleep.

Slow Cow was introduced in the United States in 2008 and is marketed as producing a "feeling of relaxation and well-being." The can is similar in shape and size to Red Bull. The logo shows two cows relaxing, whereas Red Bull shows two bulls butting heads.

In 2010, Just Chill was introduced to the market. It is marketed as helping "you stay cool and calm in any situation." A few months later, Mary Jane's Relaxing Soda was introduced. "Mary Jane" is known as an alternative name for marijuana, but the drink has no chemical relationship with the drug.

With energy drinks appearing to enter the market near peaks in the social mood trend,

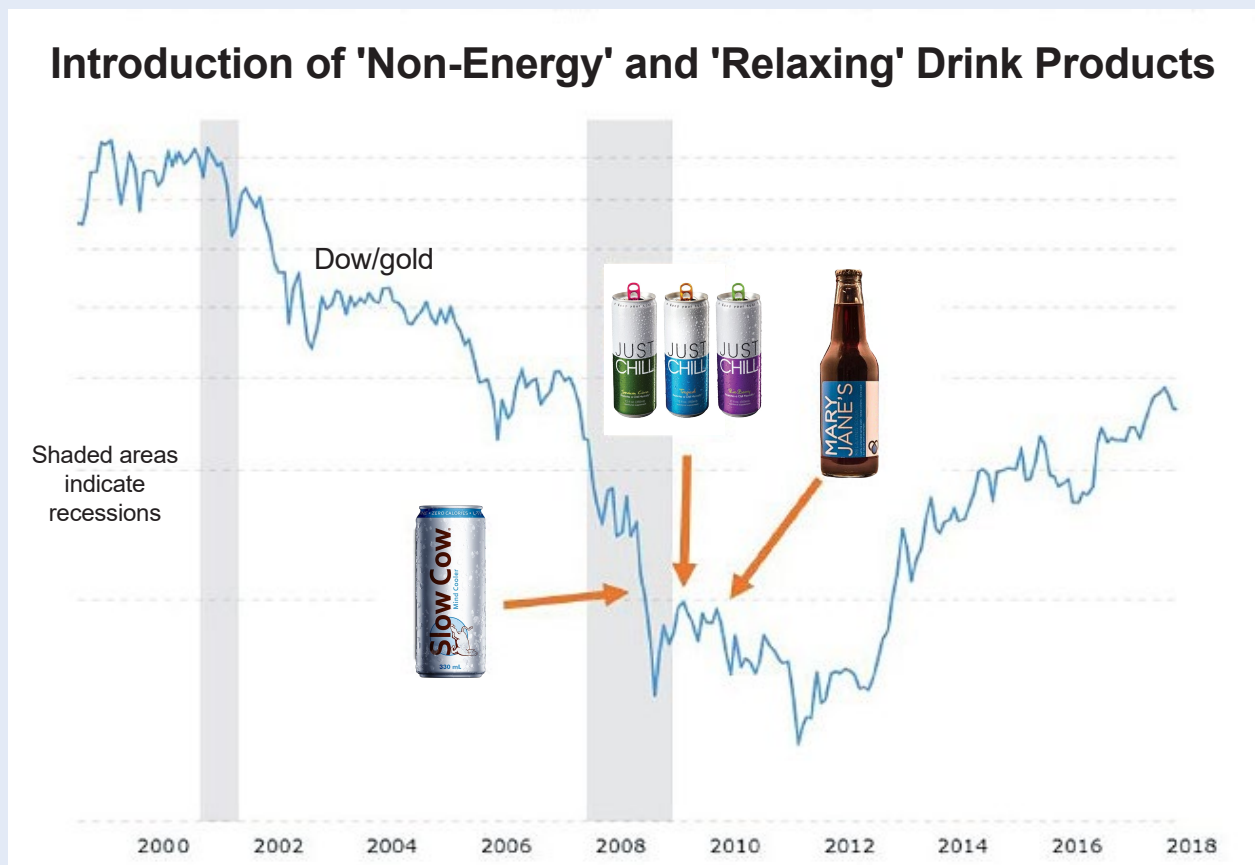


Figure 1

the rise of relaxing drinks occurred during the negative mood of the financial crisis. These drinks are marketed to induce the opposite symptoms of energy drinks, which could explain why they were introduced in an opposite social mood.

I personally had the opportunity to ask questions to an individual involved in bringing a popular German energy drink, 28 Black, into the U.S. market during the financial crisis of 2008. When asked about the drink's target audience, he said:

The drink was branded to be a premium upscale energy drink primarily served at nightclubs. It was served in a smaller and sleeker-looking aluminum can than other energy drinks brands and was marketed to have a better taste. The drink was being sold at prices much higher than Red Bull, which dominated the night-club space.

The previous findings of how social mood contributes to the energy drink market can help

explain the ultimate failure of 28 Black in the U.S. market. The most successful energy drink brands all entered the markets in times of elevated social mood. 2008 was not the right time for energy drinks to enter the market. Also, the premium brand strategy used by the company is another explanation for why this drink failed to gain traction. The strategy could work at times of high confidence when people are willing to spend more for less, but during the financial crisis people in the U.S. weren't buying it.

The similarities found between social mood and energy drinks are striking. Obviously there are many ways to measure social mood, but the market of energy drinks seems to capture social mood unusually well. Given society's history of embracing energy drinks near positive mood extremes, we may have serious reason to be worried in the future when new, exciting and popular energy drink products are introduced into the market.

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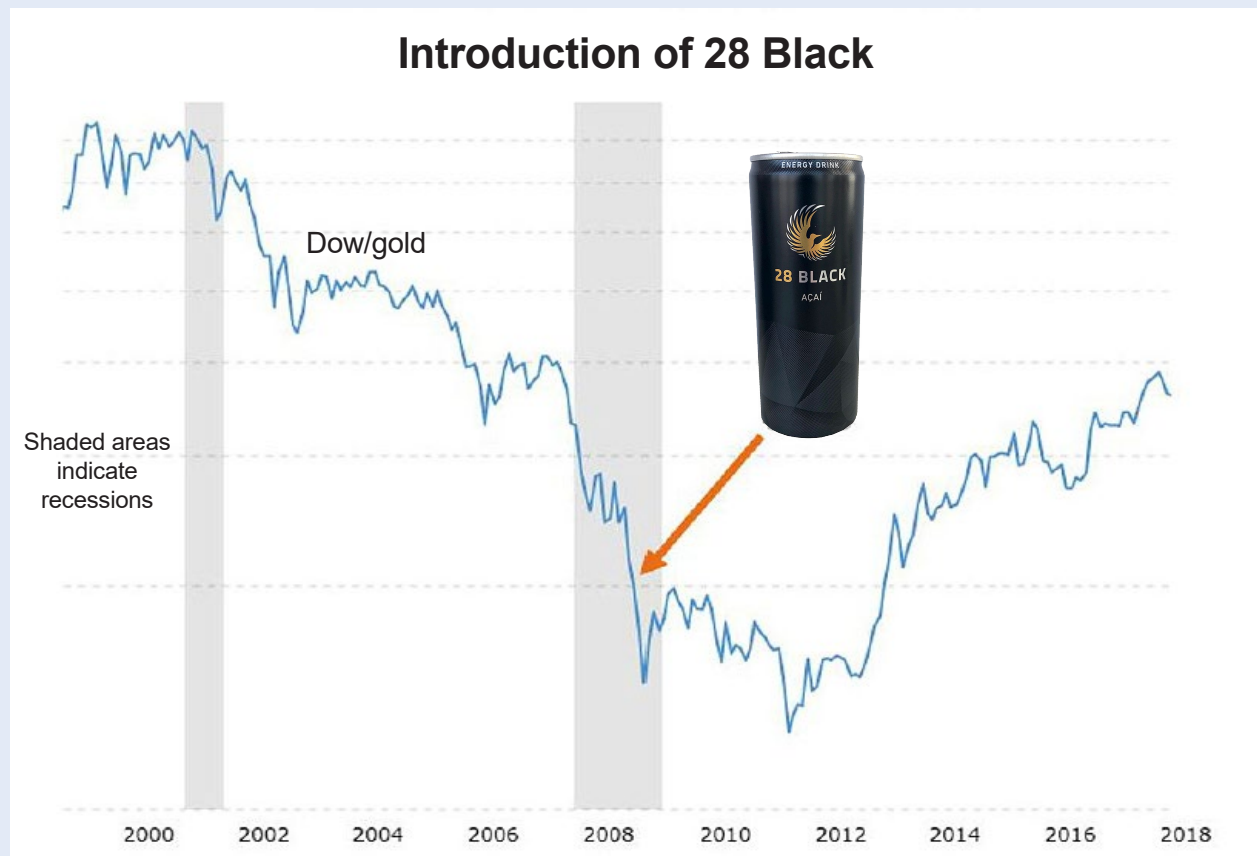


Figure 2