

LaCroix crazy: Chicago's tech employees addicted to fizzy beverage



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LaCroix sparkling water, with its palette of colorful cans, has a tendency to convert people by simply being available.

Evidence of this can be found at several Chicago tech companies, where the drink that has become a bit of a phenomenon among millennials is often readily stocked and frequently outstrips the availability of other free beverages, like pop or juice.

In these offices, cans and cans of LaCroix, in their signature colors — each of the roughly 20 flavors has a different aesthetic — are arranged on refrigerator shelves and sometimes artistically on desks, forming a kind of beverage rainbow.

The drink has gained an impassioned and creative following that seems to be rising as fast as carbonated bubbles.

Tommy Werner, operations manager at SwipeSense, says he orders about five cases of LaCroix, or 60 cans, a week for the roughly 25 people in the office.

“I think that if I were to order more, they would all be consumed,” said Werner, 29, adding he’s also a fan of the drink because of “it’s refreshing without being cloying.”

Werner orders LaCroix from Instacart and says it’s the only staple he orders every week and the only non-coffee drink the company stocks.

“I’ve heard of people coming into the office, not really hearing about LaCroix, and for some reason, coming back and getting addicted,” he said. “I think there are a lot of converts.”

At Sprout Social, the social media management platform, a pyramid of coral-colored pamplemousse cans (LaCroix's grapefruit flavor) about four feet high has taken a prominent place among a bevy of computer screens.

Last month at Grubhub, the marketing team put on a LaCroix Luau during its Liquidity Preference Function (the company's term for happy hour) featuring three different LaCroix-themed cocktails.

Open the fridge at the Yelp, and LaCroix cans far outnumber all other free drinks available to the roughly 700 people at its Merchandise Mart offices.

At Braintree, Ryan O' Donnell, a software developer, estimates there are about 10 different flavors of LaCroix available at work. He had never tried the carbonated drink until coming to the company two years ago.

"I never heard of LaCroix until I started at Braintree, honestly," said O'Donnell, 29. "I didn't like carbonated water until I started working here."

He started with the blue can of LaCroix — which is unflavored — "and turned around pretty quickly on it. I started experiencing the different flavors, and I've been a fan ever since."

Carbonated water makes up just a couple of percentage points of the overall beverage market, says Adam Fleck, director of consumer equity research at Morningstar. However, Fleck points out that while consumption of beverages like pop has been dropping every year for the past decade, sales volumes of flavored carbonated waters have risen about 10 percent a year.

"It's one of the rare growth stories in carbonated beverages," Fleck says. "Consumers have shown that health and wellness is a predominant decision factor when they're thinking about what to drink."

He adds millennials, in particular, have shown a willingness for "premiumization," or paying more for health, wellness and taste, when it comes to beverages.

"The millennial generation, what we've seen in general is they're more focused on clean labeling, natural ingredients and healthy lifestyles," Fleck says. "That is generally a trend we're seeing, and I think overall, why carbonated beverages have struggled more recently, while these naturally sweetened — like LaCroix products, the bottled waters, the noncarbonated offerings — these companies have been doing much better."

Sales of LaCroix, which is owned by National Beverage Corp., have doubled in the last two years to about \$225 million, according to the Wall Street Journal, citing figures from market researcher Euromonitor International Ltd. The stock price of National Beverage Corp. has more than doubled since last August.

LaCroix does much of its marketing through social media and word of mouth.

"It's not surprising to me," says Fleck, "that you would have sort of a Millennial-focused set of companies offering these brands."

Recently, the wife of one of O'Donnell's co-workers at Braintree tweeted that all LaCroix flavors tasted the same, which prompted a responding tweet from another co-worker that he would be able to tell the difference between each LaCroix flavor. Inspired, O'Donnell challenged her assertion by setting up a blind taste test at his kitchen apartment with about 180 cans of LaCroix.

His co-worker Lila Conlee, a software developer who calls herself a lifelong LaCroix fan, won by guessing about seven of 13 flavors. "It was an excuse to have a fun times with friends," says Conlee, 23, "and we got to prove our co-worker's wife wrong."

They didn't rub it in her face, she adds, because "I don't think that's the spirit of LaCroix."

Erin Chan Ding is a freelance reporter.

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