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An Unimaginable Journey: How Pepsi Beat the Odds in Romania

Aviad Meitar
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Coke and Pepsi is one of the classic business rivalries. These arch-competitors continuously battle for market share around the world. Given Coca-Cola's number one ranking, it is a sweet victory when Pepsi can rise to the top. That is exactly what happened in Romania, and *An Unimaginable Journey* is the story of that triumph.

Aviad Meitar was one of the principals involved in this unlikely success. Meitar's book offers an inside look at how he and his team overcame insufficient funding, outmoded factories, a crumbling local economy, staffing challenges and, of course, competition from Coke to launch Pepsi and other drink brands in Romania.

Meitar breaks the book into chapters named after the various stages of a sailing expedition. While this is a somewhat overused technique, dividing the book into "Rough Waters on the Maiden Voyage," "Filling the Sails," "Surviving Stormy Seas," and similarly named chapters helps to give the journey a compass.

The author describes the complexities of building a business in Romania and dealing with the worldwide Pepsi organization. One particular story symbolizes Meitar's overall experience. He and his partners were able to arrange for a large illuminated Pepsi-Cola sign to be prominently placed in Bucharest. The Pepsi logo was visible any time television cameras showed the city, offering the brand significant free advertising.

But Pepsi decided to change its logo just months into the Romanian company's operation, and that meant changing the logo everywhere it appeared. As for the sign in Bucharest, Meitar says, "Pepsi had produced it for us just a few months previously. In an instant, it became a relic of the past."

Nonetheless, Meitar's team rose above such corporate challenges, using aggressive marketing and product innovations to achieve substantial success. For example, Meitar convinced PepsiCo to sponsor Romania's national soccer team in 1994. A major marketing campaign was created around the sponsorship, which helped give the Romanian company a competitive advantage over Coke. Even though Coke was a sponsor of the Soccer World Cup, "Romanians saw their team connected to Pepsi."

During the 2000 Summer Olympics, Romanian swimmer Diana Mucanu won two gold medals. Meitar rushed to secure Mucanu as a spokesperson for Perla, a brand of mineral water marketed by the Romanian company. The move out-flanked Coke which was also interested in Mucanu.

The journey described by Aviad Meitar is nothing if not intriguing. This well-written and concise eyewitness account of building an American brand in an Eastern European country offers rare insight into how a business can succeed even in the face of the most daunting challenges.

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