

case 7-806-041
April 1, 2022

Andrew Hoffman

LaCroix and PFAS: Redefining the Role of Science and Regulation

Josephine Hudson,ⁱ the president of customer satisfaction at National Beverage, leaned back in her chair and mentally prepared for the day ahead. It was a late September day in 2020, and Hudson was contemplating how to continue National Beverage's impressive growth. Having served two decades as the customer satisfaction president, she had much to be proud of. Just two weeks ago, the company had posted its most successful quarterly net sales figure to date, \$293 million, which proved its products' growing popularity.¹ Yet, her focus was on the future. The company's success had been driven by its sparkling water brand, LaCroix, and she had great plans for continued innovation in the category. Her obsession with delighting customers had helped create a cult-like following around LaCroix products. In a recent meeting concerning the product launch of a competitor, she stated her high confidence once more: "Why don't you go ahead and offer our hip customers this or any other drink alternative? None of them would trade the LaCroix taste and the coolness of the can design." A focus on trendy designs and fun flavors had made LaCroix a force to contend with, not only as a mass-market alternative to premium European brands, but also as a healthier alternative to other carbonated beverages.

However, her excitement was about to be tempered as a *Consumer Reports* article, questioning the healthiness of the beverage, landed in her inbox. The report claimed that high levels of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) had been discovered in a variety of sparkling waters, including LaCroix.² Hudson was surprised by the size of the study, as she had believed PFAS compounds were not provocative enough to be covered by the media. However, this was not the first challenge to LaCroix's health claims.

A quick search revealed that there were no national food regulations regarding levels of PFAS, so LaCroix was not breaking any laws. However, the release of this report got her thinking. There was growing consensus in the scientific community that PFAS had negative health effects. Sparkling water was thought of as a healthy alternative to many other beverages, and therefore health-conscious individuals were LaCroix's

ⁱ Josephine Hudson is a fictional character.

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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