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## “Help Yourself”: Coca-Cola’s ICY-O and The Rise Of Self-Service In The 1920s By John Eblen



This 1920s Coca-Cola advertisement for the **ICY-O dispenser**, with its bold promise of a reconditioned unit “Good As New” for **\$90.00**, is more than a simple sales pitch. It is a window into America on the brink of transformation, a nation defined by Prohibition, technological leaps, and a cultural obsession with speed and convenience. This ad not only marketed a product but also reflected the sweeping societal changes of the Jazz Age.

The eye-catching headline “Special While They Last”, flanked by repeated “SPECIAL” markers, speaks volumes about the urgency Coca-Cola instilled in their marketing. But beyond these bold claims lies a deeper narrative about how Coca-Cola, the bottled drink that began in soda fountains, expanded its empire by making refreshment instantly available, everywhere.

## A Barrel of Cool Refreshment

In the early 1920s, the ICY-O dispenser symbolized modernity. Shaped like a metallic barrel and designed to keep bottled Coca-Cola icy cold, it was utilitarian and unpretentious. On the surface, it invited customers to engage with it directly: “Help Yourself – Pay Clerk Please.” For store owners, it meant tapping into a cultural shift toward immediacy and autonomy.

**Special** WHILE THEY LAST  
**\$90.00**

Thoroughly Reconditioned  
« « « Good As New **ICY-O**  
for only  
**\$12.00**  
with **5** CASES  
OF  
**Coca-Cola**  
**FREE**  
PLUS DEPOSIT  
(Refundable) on COCA-COLA  
No. 3 - Capacity 3 Cases  
No. 5 - 5 "

Your order will be taken only on condition that you accept whichever size is available.

Pay no money until dispenser is delivered.  
Cash Price of Dispenser - - \$12.00  
Deposit on  
5 Cases of Free Coca-Cola 9.50 \$14.50

Retail Price of 5 Cases  
Free Coca-Cola at 5c per Bottle \$6.00  
Refund of Deposit  
on 5 Cases, Empty Bottles - 9.50 8.50  
Net Cost to You of Dispenser - \$6.00

Orders taken subject to PRIOR SALE

Phone *The Coca-Cola Bottling Company.* Now!

SPECIAL • SPECIAL • SPECIAL • SPECIAL • SPECIAL

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The dispenser’s appeal was clear. With its internal ice compartment and capacity to hold three to five cases of Coca-Cola, it brought the soda fountain experience to any retail setting, from corner groceries to train stations. Its promise of refreshment was simple, efficient, and above all, self-serve.

At \$90.00, a substantial sum at the time., the dispenser came with five free cases of Coca-Cola, turning the purchase into a long-term investment for merchants eager to meet growing demand.

## **The 1920s and Coca-Cola’s Golden Opportunity**

The 1920s was an era defined by contradictions: while the U.S. government banned alcohol through Prohibition (1920-1933), Americans developed an insatiable appetite for other forms of refreshment. Soft drinks like Coca-Cola surged in popularity as they filled the void left by shuttered saloons.

### **The Prohibition Effect**

During Prohibition, soda fountains and bottlers seized their chance. Bars converted into “soda shops,” and Coca-Cola’s bottling plants increased exponentially. By 1929, the company boasted more than 1,000 bottling plants, reflecting their aggressive push to make Coke available anywhere.

The ICY-O catered perfectly to this landscape. It offered storekeepers a means to capitalize on the beverage’s popularity without installing a full soda fountain, which required counter space and staff.

### **Urbanization and Changing Lifestyles**

As millions flocked to cities, the demand for convenient, affordable refreshments grew. The rise of the automobile also made roadside commerce viable, and cold bottled Coca-Cola became the drink of choice for travelers needing a quick stop.

### **A Shift Toward Self-Service**

The ICY-O reflects a broader cultural pivot toward self-service retailing. While today it feels second nature to grab a bottle from a cooler, in the 1920s, this was a novel concept. Coca-Cola was teaching America to trust itself in this new consumer landscape.

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## **The ICY-O Company of Charlotte, North Carolina: A Crucial Partner**

While Coca-Cola was busy expanding its bottling empire, the dispensers themselves were produced by The ICY-O Company of Charlotte, North Carolina. Founded in the early 20th century, ICY-O specialized in innovative refrigeration solutions designed to hold ice and keep bottled beverages cold for hours.

ICY-O became a natural collaborator for the soft drink giant. Their dispensers were rugged and functional, using insulated metal barrels that merchants could refill with ice daily. These devices became a fixture in general stores, train depots, and filling stations across the South and eventually nationwide.

The partnership illustrates Coca-Cola’s genius for collaboration with local manufacturers. Instead of designing and producing dispensers in-house, Coca-Cola worked with ICY-O to distribute thousands of these machines, effectively embedding Coca-Cola branding into ICY-O’s very product design. The result was a mutually beneficial relationship: ICY-O enjoyed steady business supplying dispensers, while Coca-Cola expanded its reach with minimal overhead.

The ICY-O Company itself contributed to the early refrigeration revolution in America, helping to transition businesses from block ice chests to insulated, self-contained units.

## **Functional Elegance with Urgent Messaging**

The ad’s design is straightforward but effective. Oversized fonts scream “\$90.00”, “\$12.00”, and “FREE”, while Coca-Cola’s red script logo provides instant brand recognition. The repeated “SPECIAL” down both margins functions almost like a neon sign, an attention-grabbing tactic for busy shopkeepers flipping through trade journals.

Unlike later mid-century Coca-Cola ads that leaned into lifestyle imagery, this ad is strictly business. It’s a utilitarian pitch aimed squarely at merchants, highlighting practical details like the refundable deposit and machine capacity.

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### **Why This Ad? Why This Moment?**

Coca-Cola’s approach with the ICY-O company demonstrates their keen understanding of the era’s retail challenges. Instead of relying solely on soda fountains, then the primary venue for soft drink sales, they equipped merchants to meet consumers where they were. This strategy expanded their footprint and reduced dependence on counter service.

It also points to Coca-Cola’s early mastery of vertical integration. By controlling the bottling, distribution, and retail equipment (with help from companies like ICY-O), Coca-Cola ensured that a cold Coke was never out of reach.

The ICY-O wasn’t just a dispenser; it was part of Coca-Cola’s broader effort to modernize refreshment and drive bottling sales. It combined the allure of chilled soda with the practicality of self-service, offering store owners a chance to engage a customer base that increasingly prized speed and convenience.

This ad reflects a pivotal moment when Coca-Cola transitioned from a pharmacy fountain drink to a bottled icon of mass consumption.



### **“HELP YOURSELF” WHEN COCA-COLA TAUGHT AMERICA SELF-SERVICE (1920s)**

Did you know this humble barrel-shaped cooler helped change how we shop? 🥤

In the 1920s, Coca-Cola partnered with the **ICY-O COMPANY OF CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA** to roll out these self serve dispensers across America. For just \$90, store owners got an ice-filled unit AND five free cases of Coke. Customers? They were invited to “Help Yourself” for the first time ever.

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### **ICY-O’s Legacy**

The ICY-O Company faded from prominence as refrigeration technology evolved, but its influence remains. These early dispensers taught Americans the ritual of reaching into a cooler for a cold drink, a behavior that Coca-Cola leveraged into dominance throughout the 20th century. By democratizing access to cold soda, ICY-O dispensers transformed corner stores and roadside stands into vital nodes in Coca-Cola’s distribution web. This collaboration helped solidify Coca-Cola’s reputation as the drink of choice for a nation on the move.

### **Legacy Takeaway**

Nearly a century later, the ICY-O seems quaint, yet it symbolizes Coca-Cola’s foresight and ICY-O’s role in refrigeration history. This ad wasn’t just selling a machine, it was selling a future where refreshment was instant and ubiquitous.

For Coca-Cola, the strategy worked. By 1929, despite the looming Great Depression, the brand’s reach was unrivaled. The ICY-O had done its part, proving that with the right tools and a little ice, even the smallest shop could become a Coca-Cola outlet. The ad’s simple message, “Help Yourself” was prophetic. It anticipated an America that would come to embrace convenience and autonomy as hallmarks of modern consumer culture.

### **Icy-O History**

#### **Cooler Models**

- Both tub dispenser models and a countertop model were produced by Icy-O.
- No. 3 Tub Dispenser: Produced between 1924-1928, held three cases (72, 6-1/2oz. bottles). Diameter 28” x 51” high.



#### **No. 3 DISPENSER**

Capacity, 72 6½-oz. bottles.  
Ice required, 30 lbs. crushed.  
Diameter, maximum, 28 in.  
Height, 51 in.  
Weight, uncrated, 110 lbs.;  
crated, 150 lbs.  
Variety of Drinks, unlimited.  
Finish, White Enamel, Black  
Trim.  
Display, as specified by pur-  
chaser.

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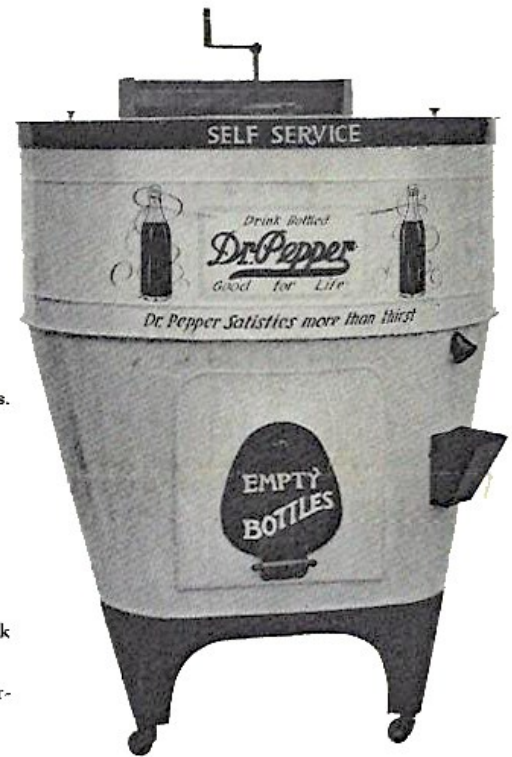
- No. 5 Tub Dispenser: Produced between 1924-1928, held five cases (120, 6-1/2oz. bottles). Diameter 34" x 51" high.

### *Announcing The New Cabinet Icy-o Dispenser*



#### **No. 5 DISPENSER**

Capacity, 120 6-1/2-oz. bottles.  
Ice required, 50 lbs. crushed.  
Diameter, maximum, 34 in.  
Height, 51 in.  
Weight, uncrated, 150 lbs.;  
crated, 200 lbs.  
Variety of Drinks, unlimited.  
Finish, White Enamel, Black  
Trim.  
Display, as specified by purchaser.



Countertop Dispenser: Produced around 1928 and is the rarer of Icy-O coolers. Held 2 cases (48, 6-1/2oz. bottles) inside and one case in the reserve space above the service door. Dimensions 24" 26"x 24".

### **Appearance and Construction**

- Tub cooler dispensers were metal usually finished in White Enamel with Black trim.
- Coca-Cola tabletop cooler dispensers were metal, finished in a red grained Mahogany Lacquer (designed to look like wood). Signage is in Gold with red outlines
- Ice was used inside to keep drinks cold.

All Icy-O dispensers are considered very rare and desirable by collectors.

### **Emblems and markings (1924-1928)**

- Early Coca-Cola coolers came with the word "Drink". Can also be found with "Bottled Coca Cola Delicious-Refreshing".

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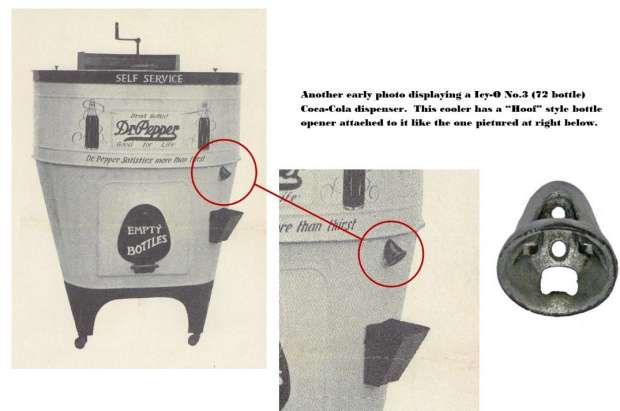
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- Dr. Pepper coolers were produced with the words “Drink “and “Good for Life”. Also had “Dr. Pepper Satisfies more than Thirst”.

“Drink Howdy” is another branded name found on early Icy-O coolers.

## Icy-O Bottle Openers

These are a few of the types of stationary bottle openers that would of been found on their early coolers during the 1924-1928 period:



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## **Glascock Bros. Mfg. Company**



### **Glascock Cooler**

Glascock beverage coolers became famous in 1929 after the announcement came that they had officially been licensed to be the sole producer of coolers for the Coca Cola company. This announcement ended the cooler wars being waged at that time by Icy-O's and others to win that Coca Cola contract.

### **Company History**

- Became the first company to produce officially approved and licensed beverage coolers for Coca-Cola, starting in 1929 and ending in 1934.
- The Glascock Brothers Manufacturing Company of Muncie, Indiana, unveiled the "Standard" model in January 1929, at the annual Bottlers Convention in Indianapolis, marking the advent of the first mass-produced Coca-Cola coolers.
- These early Glascock coolers, starting with the rectangular ice-chest model called "Standard" in 1929, were sold to retailers. They held ice above the bottles and had a rack for empties below.

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The "Standard" cooler initially sold for \$12.50.

Glascock also produced a smaller "Junior" model.

**1933 GLASCOCK STANDARD**



Vends: 72 bottles  
Size: 31½" wide  
23½" deep  
40" high

**1933  
GLASCOCK JUNIOR**



Vends: 36 bottles  
Size: 17½" wide  
17½" deep  
30" high

- In the 1930s, Glascock also produced coolers for other beverage brands.

Glascock also developed coin-operated vending machines for Coca-Cola, although their adoption was initially slow due to early coin-op technology limitations.

**Features of Glascock coolers**

- Materials: Early models used heavy-duty materials with cadmium-plated casters for mobility. Some coolers also featured embossed Coca-Cola signs on four sides.
- Coolers for Coca-Cola were traditionally characterized by green frames and red signs.

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- Design: Early Glascock coolers were ice chests with a rectangular shape and a lid. The "Standard" model held 72 six-ounce bottles and stored three cases of Coca-Cola, plus a case of empties.
- Capacity: The "Junior" model held 36 bottles in ice water and had storage space for an additional 24 bottles.

Vending Machines: Glascock also manufactured chest-type vending machines, like the GBV50 Slider, which had a coin entry and required the user to open the lid and slide the bottle to a release mechanism.

### **Interesting facts**

- Early coolers, predating widespread refrigeration, relied on ice to keep drinks cold.
- Over 32,000 Glascock coolers were sold in the first year of production, with a price of \$12.50 each.
- Glascock also created a coin-operated vending machine in 1931, their direct production of standard coolers for Coca-Cola ceased around 1934.

In 1988, Coca-Cola released full-size replicas of the Glascock coolers, available to collectors. These are much less valuable than the originals.

### **Key points**

- "Grandfather" of Coca-Cola Coolers: Glascock holds a significant place in the history of Coca-Cola as the first company officially approved to manufacture their beverage coolers.
- Beyond Coca-Cola: While their primary focus seemed to be on the popular soft drink, they also created soda coolers for other brands during the era.

Early Coolers & Beyond: Glascock Brothers initially manufactured washing machines and even produced some early stamped-metal production bodies for Midwestern manufacturers.

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### **Evolving Design & Functionality**

- By 1934, Glascock's early cooler design was being replaced by newer, more aesthetically appealing designs, like the Art Deco-inspired cooler designed by Everett Worthington for Westinghouse. Westinghouse also improved upon the existing vending machine concept by designing a model known as the Vendo-Top, which both cooled and vended sodas. Westinghouse continued producing coolers for Coca-Cola for several years.
- Around 1935 the introduction of electric cooling systems and improved coin-operated vending technology likely influenced Coca-Cola to seek manufacturers like Westinghouse who could incorporate these features into their new cooler designs.

While Glascock stopped manufacturing the primary Coca-Cola coolers in 1934, they continued to produce other types of Coca-Cola dispensing machines. For instance, the Glasco GBV50 Slider, a chest-type cooler and vending machine, was introduced in 1957 and produced until 1962.

## **Glasco Cooler Bottle Openers**

These are a couple of the Brown Mfg. Company stationary openers that would have been found and used on their early coolers:



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### **References/Credits/Resources Used:**

“Help Yourself “ Coca Cola’s Icy-O and the Rise of Self Service in the 1920s, used by permission [www.metriclabs.com/help-yourself-coca-colas-icy-o-and-the-rise-of-self-service-in-the-1920s/](http://www.metriclabs.com/help-yourself-coca-colas-icy-o-and-the-rise-of-self-service-in-the-1920s/)

“Vintage Coca-Cola Machines” by Steve Ebner & Jeff Wright

“Google” AI search

