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Preface

Dietitians for Professional Integrity is a registered dietitian-created group that advocates for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics to revise its sponsorship policies and sever ties with the likes of PepsiCo, General Mills, Elanco and other companies whose missions conflict with the Academy’s.

We believe these partnerships compromise the integrity of the Academy and the dietetics profession, water down the Academy’s health messages, create problematic conflicts of interest and confuse a public that is already apprehensive about who to trust for objective information on health and nutrition. We want to elevate registered dietitians’ reputations among other health professionals and the general public.

Many of our supporters have told us they want to advocate on this issue at the local level (i.e. a city or state dietetic associations, academic dietetics programs, professional settings) but aren’t quite sure where to begin.

This toolkit was created to help guide advocacy efforts toward ending the Academy’s problematic industry ties.

In order to stay current, this toolkit is revised and updated yearly. To suggest a topic for future updates, please send us an email at integritydietitians@gmail.com.

Thank you for your support.

In the name of progress and transparency,

Dietitians for Professional Integrity Team

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Why Sponsorship Matters

The mission of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is to empower members (registered dietitians) to be the nation's food and nutrition leaders. The registered dietitian (RD) credential is one of the only professional nutrition credentials in existence and dietitians are considered the foremost experts in nutrition. But, in a world with billion-dollar advertising budgets for fast-food chains and highly processed snack foods, the general public is understandably confused about what constitutes a healthy diet. We believe that taking money from companies that spend millions of dollars advertising unhealthy products and lobbying against public health damages our reputation and reduces public trust.

The Issue is Power and Influence

Food and beverage corporations are some of the largest in the world, with financial systems bigger than that of many countries. Their goal is profit and expansion in the name of share-holder enrichment. Processed food is extremely profitable and, in an era where more calories are produced than needed, promoting overconsumption is standard. In addition, today's big business involves lobbying the government for subsidies and tax breaks, fighting public health policies that could limit profits, and producing research that obfuscates the real issues.

Our Professional Reputation is at Stake

We strongly believe that ‘sitting at the table’ and working with multi-national corporations that sell predominantly junk food is contradictory to our mission as dietitians. Collaboration makes sense when all parties involved have similar missions. A company that mainly profits from selling soda cannot be expected to prioritize health and make business more difficult for itself by alerting the public to the negative health effects of its own products.

In 2015, Kraft Foods entered into a partnership with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics’ Kids Eat Right Foundation, which approved the use of the ‘Kids Eat Right’ logo on packages of Kraft singles. This was perceived by many as an endorsement of processed cheese, and the partnership evoked strong criticism from dietitians, other health professionals, and the general public.

The Academy ultimately rescinded the agreement with Kraft but the debacle forced the dietitian community to ponder whether we should have relationships with food companies that sell products few dietitians consider health-promoting.

DFPI believes the answer to that question is “no”. The following pages explain why.
Industry-Funded Science

Due to a dearth of federal funding for nutrition science, the food industry has identified another way to market its products: industry-funded nutrition research. This isn’t to say that sponsored research is invalid or that dietitians and researchers aren’t intelligent enough to make objective research interpretations.

However, this increase in corporate funded studies is a boon for the food industry. A few studies that go against a generally accepted idea can be enough to cast doubt. That, combined with hefty advertising budgets, allows industry to influence public perception of a nutrition issues.

The food and beverage industries have a variety of institutes and trade associations to protect interests. Examples include:

- Coca-Cola Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness
- General Mills Bell Institute
- Gatorade Sports Science Institute
- Kellogg Nutrition and Health Institute
- American Frozen Food Institute
- Corn Refiners Association
- National Cattlemen’s Beef Association
- The Sugar Association

These groups generally present their respective offerings (e.g.: soda, sweeteners, breakfast cereals) as wholesome, unfairly targeted by nutrition professionals, and/or perfectly healthful when eaten in moderation – a term the food industry is fond of since there is no static definition. What does drinking soda “in moderation” mean? Once a day? Once a week? Once a month?

The Manufacturing of Doubt

In Merchants of Doubt, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway detail how the tobacco industry manufactured doubt. This excerpt is especially important, as many parallels can be drawn to how the food and beverage industries currently create doubt:

"From 1979 to 1985, physicist Fred Seitz directed a program for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company that distributed $45 million to scientists around the country for biomedical research that could generate evidence and cultivate experts to be used in court to defend the "product." In the mid-1990s, another physicist, Fred Singer co-authored a major report attacking the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over the health risks of secondhand smoke.

Several years earlier, the U.S. surgeon general had declared that secondhand smoke was hazardous not only to smokers’ health, but to anyone exposed to it. Singer attacked this finding, claiming the work was rigged, and that the EPA review of the science -- done by leading experts from around the country -- was distorted by a political agenda to expand government control over all aspects of our lives. Singer’s anti-EPA report was funded by a grant from The Tobacco Institute, channeled through a think tank, the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution.

Call it "The Tobacco Strategy." Its target was science, and so it relied heavily on scientists -- with guidance from industry lawyers and public relations experts -- willing to hold the rifle and pull the trigger."
Examples of Industry Influence

Our concerns around the food and beverage industries aren't about nutritional purity. Rather, they have to do with these industries' political power and influence to manipulate science, policy, and public perception. We believe it is odd, not to mention extremely problematic, for health organizations to partner up and accept funding from companies that spend significant resources fighting public health.

Below are just some of many examples of how food and beverage industries -- many of which are still linked to health organizations like the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics -- have used their political power and deep pockets against the interests of health, good nutrition, and transparency.

It is our belief that industries and companies that actively work against better health for Americans should not be granted the privilege of partnering with health organizations or speaking directly to their members at health conferences.

**The Sugar Industry**

- The sugar industry has a [long history](#) of spinning science to help create health policy that clears it of any responsibility and wrongdoing.
- [Government research on cavities](#) was sabotaged by [sugar industry interference](#).
- The sugar industry has [obscured science and undermined policy](#) by threatening to suspend funding to the World Health Organization and misrepresenting science to secure weak school lunch nutrition standards.

**The Pizza Industry**

The pizza lobby is one of the most powerful food lobbies. In the last two election cycles (2008 and 2012), it has given over $1 million to Republican federal candidates. That investment has paid off.

- How the pizza lobby [put a stop](#) to proposed improved school lunch nutrition guidelines.

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*I just finished chairing a meeting with 32 people from across the globe in Bellagio, Italy. What we felt was the number one, I repeat, top issue, facing most of the countries in Latin America (e.g.: Mexico, Chile, Brazil) and Asia (e.g.: Thailand) was the aggressive pushback of Big Food and Big Soda against any effort to regulate unhealthy foods and to promote healthier food consumption. Each time action is taken, the amount of resources Big Food and Big Beverage have placed on fighting this topic are overwhelming.*

**Barry Popkin, PhD**

*W.R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of Nutrition; Carla Smith Chamblee Distinguished Professor of Global Nutrition, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*
**Meat, Dairy, and Egg Industries**

Although DFPI is not a plant-based organization, we recognize the benefits of the general public eating more whole, plant-based foods. The United States Department of Agriculture – which, problematically, both creates nutrition policy and promotes agricultural industries – acknowledges this, but policies and subsidies do not line up. Why? Industry influence. These same industries that work closely with the government – and benefit tremendously for doing so – have used their political prowess to avoid public scrutiny.

- Idaho dairy industry wrote and lobbied for state’s “ag-gag” laws.
- The meat industry’s decades-long influence on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Agricultural commodity groups tried to exempt themselves from Freedom of Information Act requests.
- The American Egg Board tried to sabotage an egg-free mayonnaise competitor.
- Government dairy “check-off” programs have helped the likes of Domino’s and Taco Bell market junk foods.

**The Soda Industry**

Nutrition policy is not the only way the food and beverage industries exert their influence. Recent examples have demonstrated how Coca-Cola has attempted to shape public perception of its products and soda taxes by infiltrating media.

- Coca-Cola passed off advertisements as “editorial content” in hundreds of newspapers.
- Soda industry influenced news coverage of Richmond, CA and El Monte, CA soda tax proposals.
# Front Groups

## What is a Front Group?

The [Center for Media and Democracy](http://sourcewatch.org) defines a front group as “an organization that purports to represent one agenda while in reality it serves some other party or interest whose sponsorship is hidden or rarely mentioned.” Food industry front groups usually claim to hold the public’s interests in mind, but they are a way to communicate food industry talking points through a seemingly “neutral” messenger.

## What are Common Front Group Tactics?

Front groups aim to control public discourse. Food industry front groups are specifically created to respond to legitimate concerns from the public health and nutrition sectors. Specific tactics include:

1. **“Astroturfing” (Fake Grassroots):** “Seemingly grassroots-based citizen groups or coalitions that are primarily conceived, created and/or funded by corporations, industry trade associations, political interests or public relations firms.” ([sourcewatch.org](http://sourcewatch.org))

2. **Shooting the Messenger:** Discrediting critics, often times paired up with “attack dog journalism”.

3. **Spinning/Co-opting Science:** Funding research that paints specific foods/ingredients in a positive light or otherwise makes them appear innocuous.

4. **Fear Mongering:** Usually seen in response to proposed policies that call for more regulation or higher costs (i.e. your grocery bill will go up”; “we’ll be forced to cut our workforce by one third”, etc.)

## Food Industry Front Groups AND Sponsors Belong To

- American Council on Science and Health*
- Animal Agriculture Alliance*
- Back to Balance Coalition
- Calorie Control Council*
- Center for Consumer Freedom*
- International Food Information Council*

*To learn more about these front groups, look them up at [www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org).

## Media Coverage of Front Groups

*Coca-Cola Funds Scientists Who Shift Blame for Obesity Away From Bad Diets*, New York Times, August 2015

*Critic of Artificial Sweeteners Pilloried by Industry-Backed Scientists*, The Center for Public Integrity, August 2014

*Leaked Documents Reveal the Secret Finances of a Pro-Industry Science Group*, Mother Jones, October 2013

*Nonprofit Advocate Carves Out a For-Profit Niche*, New York Times, June 2010
The Food Industry and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: An Overview

The companies mentioned below have been, or are currently, involved with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) in some capacity. This involvement may include corporate sponsorship, Academy Foundation-related events, exhibitors at the annual conference expo hall, and/or providers of AND-approved continuing education for registered dietitians and dietetic technicians. Note that this list is a sampling and not all-inclusive.

**AND Corporate Partners & Sponsors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Sponsorship Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott Nutrition</td>
<td>McNeil Nutritionals, LLC</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Dairy Council®</td>
<td>CoroWise™brand</td>
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<tr>
<td>PepsiCo</td>
<td>Aramark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hershey Center for Health &amp; Nutrition</td>
<td>Unilever</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Coca-Cola Company Beverage Institute for Health &amp; Wellness</td>
<td>Truvia</td>
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**Academy Foundation and Related Event or Initiative Sponsors**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Sponsorship Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nestlé Nutrition Institute</td>
<td>Kellogg’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott Nutrition Health Institute</td>
<td>ConAgra Foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Cattlemen’s Beef Association</td>
<td>PepsiCo</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Mills</td>
<td>Unilever</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shamrock Farms</td>
<td>Elanco</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Coca-Cola Beverage Institute for Health &amp; Wellness</td>
<td>Mars</td>
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**FNCE Expo Sessions, Exhibitors or Event Sponsors**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Sponsorship Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corn Refiners Association</td>
<td>Chick-fil-A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweet Surprise: The Truth about High Fructose Corn Syrup</td>
<td>Safeway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Mills</td>
<td>Dr. Pepper/Snapple Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PepsiCo</td>
<td>Campbell Soup Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kellogg Company</td>
<td>The National Pork Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kraft Foods</td>
<td>ConAgra Foods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbott Nutrition</td>
<td>National Dairy Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Cattlemen’s Beef Association</td>
<td>Sweetleaf Stevia Sweetener</td>
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**Accredited Continuing Education Providers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Accreditation Type</th>
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<tr>
<td>General Mills Bell Institute for Health and Wellness</td>
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<tr>
<td>ConAgra Foods Science Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coca-Cola Company Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institute of Food Technologists</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Food Information Council Foundation</td>
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**References**

4. [http://s19.a2zinc.net/clients/Academy/FNCE2015/Public/eventmap.aspx](http://s19.a2zinc.net/clients/Academy/FNCE2015/Public/eventmap.aspx)
Media Literacy

The Center for Media Literacy defines media literacy as “a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”

More importantly, the Center for Media Literacy specifies that the point media literacy “not to memorize facts or statistics about the media, but rather to learn to raise the right questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to.”

We believe media literacy is a crucial skill, especially given the food industry’s propensity to create front groups, spin science, and co-opt health professionals to deliver messaging that is industry-friendly and aims to distract from other issues.

The Center for Media Literacy has created a list of five questions to ask and five core concepts that are crucial:

**5 Questions to Ask:**
1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

**5 Core Concepts:**
1. All media messages are ‘constructed’.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

These questions and concepts are important to keep in mind when analyzing nutrition communications. For example, industry front groups often prefer to focus their messaging on obesity and calories, as this deflects attention from the nutritional quality of foods and unhealthy ingredients.

After all, two hundred calories of almonds have a much different effect on our health than two hundred calories of soda, fried chicken, or cookies.
Answers to Common Questions about Food Industry Sponsorship

Q: Doesn’t criticizing our professional organization make us look untrustworthy to the public?

The better question is: how does sponsorship from companies who make unhealthy foods help our trustworthiness? Change can only come from voicing our concerns. Most positive change begins with a group of people expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo in hopes of mobilizing others. Remaining silent under the guise of loyalty does not address issues, help foster dialogue, or provide room for problem-solving. Loyalty is a virtue; blind loyalty is a detriment.

Q: Won’t membership dues and conference costs increase significantly without food industry sponsorship?

In 2015, sponsorships brought in $598,113. If this funding source were eliminated, it could be made up by having each of the roughly 75,000 Academy members pay an additional $8 a year. If guidelines on more ethical and responsible sponsorship were implemented and half of that money can be raised from more appropriate sponsors, annual dues for each of the Academy’s 75,000 members would go up only $4 a year. There is also the possibility, of course, that 100 percent of current sponsorship funds can be obtained from more ethical sponsors.

NOTE: This amount is significant lower than it has been in the past. In 2013, for example, sponsorships brought in $2.3 million.

Q: Is DFPI against dietitians who work with industry?

No. We advocate for our organization to sever ties with industries and companies that go against the interests of health professionals. We do not disparage individuals, but instead educate dietitians on issues that arise with food industry partnerships.

Q: Are you saying that the Academy and dietitians should never work with any food company?

No. We advocate for sponsorship reform so the quality of sponsors can improve.

Q: The Academy recently convened a sponsorship task force and created a new sponsorship committee. Does this mean DFPI “won” and reforms have been made?

We recognize the work the Academy has done over the last two years regarding sponsorship in response to so many dietitians advocating for change, but we continue to await further details.
Despite newly-implemented sponsorship guidelines, PepsiCo continues to be a premier sponsor. Further advocacy on this issue is still needed.

**Q: Can’t dietitians work with industry to bring meaningful change that can help the general public?**

Where is the research that shows dietitians have had a positive influence on multinational companies? McDonald’s, for example, cooked its egg McMuffins in partially hydrogenated oils for years while having a director of nutrition (a registered dietitian) on staff. History has shown that, until legally required to do so, industry tends to fight proposed public health policies (i.e.: menu labeling, nutrition labeling). If the goal is to have a positive impact on public health and corporate behavior, policy is a more direct avenue.

**Q: When companies like Coca-Cola and The Corn Refiners provide continuing education, isn’t an RD or another health professional always involved to ensure objectivity?**

Industry dietitians tapped to participate in these sessions and panels often work or consult for these companies. They usually have public relations experts who help them deliver information in a very specific and calculated fashion, a luxury reserved for the companies who have the money to pay these experts. False objectivity could be simply not covering or adequately exploring research that contradicts studies that benefit industry or, even worse, falsely representing other perspectives in order to downplay their potential significance.

At the Academy’s annual conference, sessions that are in any way critical of industry are always set up as a point-counterpoint, where industry is always given the right to respond. However, sessions that are flattering to the likes of McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and the National Dairy Council are rarely, if ever, presented in point-counterpoint format.

We believe it is crucial that all sessions that feature industry speakers allow equal speaking time to concerns and legitimate, science-based criticism about industry’s practices and effects on public health.

**Q: PepsiCo has a range of healthier products, Quaker Oats, bottled water, whole grain chips, low sodium chips, and diet sodas. If we recommend these items in moderation, what is wrong with taking their money?**

The presence of some healthier items does not absolve companies that largely profit from the marketing and sale of unhealthy products. Being associated with companies largely known for chips and soda does not increase our trust with the public nor does it build credibility for our credential.

Public perception of our field is crucial. If dietitians are to be considered experts in the eyes of the public, it is in our interest to not be associated with companies that manufacture junk food. Having soda companies on our conference tote bags, fast food companies hosting conference
lunches and sugar producers creating educational content is very damaging to the perception of dietitians as the leading experts in nutrition.

**Q: Dietitians are smart and know how to analyze information. So what if the Sugar Association has a booth at FNCE?**

Dietitians are smart and we don’t doubt their ability to interpret science and research. But, the question is: why should we give companies yet another platform to spin science, obfuscate the issues and advertise products that do not promote health? Let’s devote the expo hall floor to companies that truly support the Academy’s mission.

**Q: Many people struggle with good nutrition. Some people can only afford a dinner of boxed mac and cheese. Why make them feel bad?**

We agree that our current eating environment poses many challenges. Access to healthful food is a real issue for millions of people and we acknowledge that fast food and convenience stores may be the only options for a significant number of people, especially in lower-income communities.

However, we believe many of these challenges are due to the influence of companies that profit from unhealthy foods. We want to reduce their influence and work to build an environment where healthy food is available for all. One way to do that is for our professional organizations to sever ties with these companies and begin to hold them accountable.

**Q: Our profession is not political. Why are you bringing up political ideologies?**

The food industry is highly political. It lobbies relentlessly to defeat public health measures and contributes to political campaigns to stave off regulation. As American historian Howard Zinn said, “you can’t be neutral on a moving train”.

**Q: What can I do to help?**

We are glad you asked! See pages 16 and 17 in this toolkit for tips on advocating to the Academy and at the local level. Continue to educate yourself on the topic and share this toolkit with your colleagues. Please get in touch with us via email if you have more questions: integritydietitians@gmail.com.
Academic Literature on Conflicts of Interest

Critically evaluating the influence of industry on health professionals and the public isn’t a matter of preference or opinion, but science-based analysis with historical precedence. Here is a small sampling of social science and public health research on conflicts of interest (COI). See our website for more studies, articles and perspectives.

**American Association of University Professors, *A Not-So-Slippery Slope***
Dr. Allan M. Brandt of Harvard University examines how industry has influenced academic expertise (specifically tobacco funding in the university setting) and how that can erode universities’ “integrity, values, and public trust.”

**American Association of University Professors, *Big Food, Big Agra, and the Research University***
An interview between the American Association of University Professors and Marion Nestle on the topic of COI between “food companies and academics, the difference between food products and food, and the problem with pomegranates.”

**American Psychological Association, *Corporate Funding and Conflicts of Interest: A Primer for Psychologists***
Based on the Executive Summary of the APA Task Force on External Funding Final Report, this article shares the task force’s findings and recommendations “in the areas of association income, annual convention, research and journals, continuing education, education, practice, and conflicts of interest and ethics.”

**Annals of Family Medicine, *Professional Medical Organizations and Commercial Conflicts of Interest: Ethical Issues***
Howard Brody, MD, PhD on conflicts of interest between health organizations and the food and beverage industry's most notorious companies.

**The British Medical Journal, *BMJ Journal Editors Will No Longer Consider Research Funded by the Tobacco Industry***
The British Medical Journal explains its 2013 decision to no longer consider for publication any study partly or wholly funded by the tobacco industry.

**CUNY Law Review, *PepsiCo And Public Health: Is the Nation's Largest Food Company a Model of Corporate Responsibility or Master of Public Relations?***
This article by public health lawyer Michele Simon describes the public relations tactics used by PepsiCo to convince the public to continue buying its products via lobbying as well as deliberate use of vague language in annual reports and other company documents.
Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine, *Conflict of Interest: Can We Minimize Its Influence in the Biomedical Literature?*

This article reviews how primary interests in science medical practice are often affected by the influence of commercial funding. It also highlights the journal’s policy on “disclosure and transparency related to competing interests and conflict of interest.”

Journal of American Medical Association Internal Medicine, *Corporate Funding of Food and Nutrition Research Science or Marketing?*

This op-ed by Dr. Marion Nestle details the challenge in differentiating industry influences from objective professional opinions in research publications.

Obesity Reviews, *Bellagio Declaration 2013*

The International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) and the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) held a meeting in 2013 to discuss obesity prevention efforts in low and middle income countries. At this meeting, the 2013 Bellagio Declaration was drafted, which specifically highlights strategies to counter Big Food’s undermining of healthy food policies.

Pan American Journal of Public Health, *Food and Beverage Industries’ Participation in Health Scientific Events: Considerations on Conflicts of Interest*

This article, published in the flagship scientific and technical periodical publication of the Pan American Health Organization, delves into conflict of interest issues that arise when the food industry participates in health organizations' scientific events.

Pew Charitable Trusts, *Conflicts-of-Interest Policies for Academic Medical Centers*

This report suggests best practices for conflict of interest policies. These are concrete, specific guidelines that truly attempt to tackle the problem. In our opinion, the “golden standard.”

PLOS Medicine, *“Big Food,” the Consumer Food Environment, Health, and the Policy Response in South Africa*

This article examines the influence Big Food has on South Africa’s food supply, mainly by employing strategies aimed to change “the availability, affordability, and acceptability” of its products. It also provides suggestions to the South African government to help regulate Big Food’s promotional activities.

PLOS Medicine, *Financial Conflicts of Interest and Reporting Bias Regarding the Association between Sugar-Sweetened Beverages and Weight Gain: A Systematic Review of Systematic Reviews*

This systematic review examines how funding sources affect whether a study’s conclusions are favorable to the sponsor.
“It is not just Big Tobacco anymore. Public health must also contend with Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Alcohol. All of these industries fear regulation, and protect themselves by using the same tactics. Research has documented these tactics well. They include front group, lobbies, promises of self-regulation, lawsuits, and industry-funded research that confuses the evidence and keeps the public in doubt. Not one single country has managed to turn around its obesity epidemic in all age groups. This is not a failure of individual will-power. This is a failure of political will to take on big business.”

Margaret Chan, MD
Director General, World Health Organization

Public Health Nutrition, Food Industry Front Groups and Conflicts of Interest: The Case of Americans Against Food Taxes

In this 2012 invited commentary, researchers from Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity discuss how "industry-based front groups can serve as powerful tools when businesses attempt to avoid government regulation." More specifically, the article delves into how industry carefully crafts front groups that are often misrepresented as grassroots advocacy efforts.

World Health Organization, WHO Director-General addresses health promotion conference

Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, spoke at the 2013 Global Health Conference on Health Promotion. In that speech, she called out the food industry for battling public health and spoke on the importance of political willpower to take on the food industry.
Advocating at the Local Level

In 2014, following a presentation by two Los Angeles-based members of Dietitians For Professional Integrity on sponsorship reform and an overwhelming majority of its members expressing interest in revising sponsorship guidelines, the Los Angeles District (LAD) Executive Board voted to put all sponsorship on hold for the 2014-2015 year.

In lieu of accepting money from food companies, LAD raised its dues by $5. Membership increased, as many LAD dietitians felt proud to be members of a progressive organization willing to take a stand on an important issue.

LAD spent the next year developing sponsorship guidelines along with a standardized vetting and voting process, which it now uses to determine whether to accept sponsorship from any company, group, or organization.

**Tips for successful sponsorship advocacy at the local level:**

1. Assess group opinion on current sponsorship criteria/guidelines and interest in developing more stringent ones (Survey Monkey is a great tool). This can also help identify knowledge gaps and questions members may have.
2. Present on the issue, making the case for more ethical and responsible sponsorship. Address knowledge gaps or questions relevant to your group. This toolkit and DFPI’s website offer resources, examples of organizations that have tackled sponsorship successfully, and academic literature on problematic issues that arise when the food industry sponsors health organizations.
3. Form a sponsorship committee to draft guidelines.
4. Actively market your organization as a group that has progressive views on corporate sponsorship and offer your experience to other dietitian groups looking to make similar changes.
5. Reach out to companies that would be a good fit for your group’s revised guidelines and explain why partnering with credentialed nutrition and dietetic professionals can be a privilege for food companies.

If you are involved with your local dietetics chapter and would like further guidance and advice on sponsorship reform at the local level, please contact DFPI core member David Wiss (davidawiss@nutritioninrecovery.com), who worked closely with LAD leadership on this issue.
Advocating Directly to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

Communication with AND leadership is important for all sponsorship reform advocates. It is equally important to engage in impactful communication. General guidelines to keep in mind when drafting written communications:

1. **Be concise.** We recommend a maximum of 500 words. Identify no more than three key messages you want to get across and briefly expand on each. Think of this letter as the text to a 1 or 2 minute speech you have been asked to give to AND leadership regarding your concerns about the current sponsorship model.

2. **Be specific.** Details are powerful. When thinking of your concerns, illustrate exactly what bothers you. Was there particularly egregious literature at a company’s FNCE booth that you found troubling? Did you recently come across a statistic about how much money an AND sponsor spent lobbying against a public health measure?

3. **Be passionate, but not hostile.** Hyperbole (i.e.: “Doritos are poison”) and conspiracy theories (“Big Food purposefully wants to make us sick!”) detract from the seriousness of advocacy. It is important to communicate concerns while sticking to facts and reason (i.e.: “Doritos are a minimally nutritious, highly processed snack”, “The food industry’s main goal is to protect profits, not public health.”)

4. **Identify your ideal scenario.** Successful advocacy identifies problems and suggests how these problems can be fixed. Communications to AND should provide one or two solutions you would like to see leadership pursue (i.e.: seek more ethical and responsible sources of funding -- provide examples).

“I don’t know a single individual who thinks that taking money from food companies influences personal opinion or practice, but research on the effects of drug—and food—company sponsorship demonstrates otherwise. At the very least, sponsorship gives the appearance of conflict of interest. Individuals and organizations who accept sponsorship from soda companies, for example, can hardly be expected to advise the public to drink less soda.”

Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH
Paulette Goddard Professor, New York University
Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health
Below is a sample letter we have drafted. Feel free to use it "as is" or as inspiration.

"Dear Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Leaders,

I strongly believe dietitians’ reputation is eroding in the eyes of the public and other health professionals as a result of our corporate partnerships. Our organization’s dependence on controversial corporate partnerships is compromising our ability to promote nutrition and is a betrayal to our hard earned credential.

If we are to be regarded as nutrition experts, we need to raise the bar and remain independent from food industry influence. It is time for the Academy to honestly and deliberately address the concerns of dietitians, through real and tangible action, including severing ties with PepsiCo, a company that derives a significant portion of its assets from the production and sale of soft drinks and highly processed snacks.

In addition, PepsiCo’s lobbying history shows how it has repeatedly battled public health policy; recent examples include fighting the FDA’s proposal to include added sugar on the Nutrition Facts panel as well as voluntary guidelines for marketing to children proposed by the Interagency Working Group.

It is time for the Academy leadership to push for a new paradigm of fundraising that does not compromise our professional image nor ask professionals to uncomfortably defend the Academy.

Sincerely,

(Name, Credentials)"

We recommend sending written communications to the following individuals

- President
- President-Elect
- Board of Directors Headquarters Partner
- Chair of Ethics Committee
- Ethics Committee Headquarters Partner
- Ethics Committee Headquarters Partner
- Member Value Committee Chair

A leadership directory with email addresses is available here.