



October 2016

# 2016 FOOD AND NUTRITION CONFERENCE & EXPO (FNCE) RECAP

# 2016 Food and Nutrition Conference & Expo Recap

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## *Industry-Sponsored Sessions*

As Dietitians for Professional Integrity's FNCE Guide Manager, I perused the list of educational sessions several weeks prior to the event to help identify possible conflicts of interest.

The first thing I noticed was that, for the first time in FNCE history, industry-sponsored sessions were separated from the conference's main program and labeled "Foundation Events."

While this was a sign of progress as far as industry-sponsored sessions being much more clearly delineated than in previous years, it nevertheless still begs the question:

*should industry be given a platform to offer Continuing Professional Education (CPE) units to dietitians?*

After all, these sessions present conflicts of interest and blur the lines between objective information and marketing.

These talks required a \$10 donation to the Academy Foundation from attendees, adding a sense of altruism that is reminiscent of "causewashing". Perhaps these sessions should be offered as 'bonus' sessions not attached to CPEs?

## *A Surprise at the Registration Desk*

At the conference's registration desk, I expected to receive the standard thick program binder and tote bag with sponsor logos. I was pleasantly surprised when that was not the case- another sign of progress! Since our inception, DFPI has recommended getting rid of these expensive items as a way to cut costs so

that putting an end to corporate sponsorship has less of a financial effect.

## *Academy President's Opening Remarks*

Academy President Lucille Beseler's opening talk was intended to set the tone of the conference, and one brief comment on corporate sponsorship caught my attention: "I am not so weak-minded that I would ever make a decision based on receiving a pen."

This seemingly defensive posture unfortunately underestimated the impact of advertising and marketing on subconscious decision-making. A growing body of academic research suggests the [influences of industry messaging to health professionals are subtle, but present](#). This is not about "weak-mindedness", it is about [larger systemic forces](#) that we are all susceptible to.

## *The Expo Floor*

The expo floor had improved somewhat from years past. McDonald's and Coca-Cola were not present, there were no soda machines in sight, and it was encouraging to see booths for councils that promoted healthful foods (i.e.: lentils, raspberries, blueberries, tree nuts).

Nevertheless, The Corn Refiners Association, National Confectioners Association (candy lobby), and the Sugar Association all had booths at the conference. This is problematic since these trade groups not only promote sugar and candy, but also extensively lobby against public health efforts.

Our concerns about problematic industry presence at the annual conference expo focus on industry-friendly messaging about unhealthy products. Sure, these companies and trade



groups at the expo are not official sponsors of – and do not have financial ties to – AND, but their presence is nevertheless inappropriate for a nutrition conference.

### *DFPI's Recommendations*

We recommend a vetting process to ensure that the companies and trade groups at the expo hall are appropriate for a nutrition conference. Some may argue that the presence of purveyors of highly processed foods is necessary so dietitians can be aware of products our clients may come across. However, we can easily remain aware of that by visiting company websites or simply perusing the aisles of local grocery stores. At least that way we are not learning about a new product via a company rep that has been given talking points to specifically market the product.

Besides, the last thing the sugar and candy industries (we are all well aware of their

existence) need is more promotion or “healthwashed” marketing (i.e.: “sprinkle sugar on vegetables to make them tastier for children!”).

### *It is encouraging to see incremental changes at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics annual conference.*

We have also identified the following areas for improvement:

1. Discontinue CPEs for industry-sponsored educational sessions;
2. Implement a vetting process for expo hall exhibitors that examines companies not just by the products they sell, but also by their political actions (i.e.: what do they lobby for/against?);
3. Acknowledge well-researched and thoroughly documented issues surrounding bias and influence so we can address them cohesively as a profession.



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