

One Woman's Showdown With the Food Industry

Marian Burros
The New York Times
5/15/02

IN "Food Politics," Marion Nestle's telling book on the food industry's influence on nutrition and health, she asserts that one of the ways the industry intimidates its critics is by suing them.

As if on cue, the Sugar Association has threatened to sue Dr. Nestle, professor and chairwoman of the department of nutrition and food studies at New York University.

Dr. Nestle is in very good company: a group of Texas cattlemen sued Oprah Winfrey for making disparaging statements about hamburgers. They lost.

This threat is central to the theme of "Food Politics" (University of California Press, 2002). "Many of the nutritional problems of Americans, not the least of them obesity, can be traced to the food industry's imperative to encourage people to eat more in order to generate sales and increase income," Dr. Nestle says.

Something is certainly making Americans fatter. From the late 1970's to the early 1990's the prevalence of obesity nearly doubled, according to a study in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine in 1995. That study showed that 14 percent of children were overweight, as were 12 percent of adolescents and 35 percent of adults. Levels continue to rise.

Though not in the muckraking genre of Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation," Dr. Nestle examines what she sees as the industry's manipulation of America's eating habits while enumerating many conflicts of interest among nutritional authorities. Combining the scientific background of a researcher and the skills of a teacher, she has made a complex subject easy to understand.

And she has succeeded in making a number of people who believe the food industry is only giving people what they want quite angry. (And while intimidating as threats of legal action may be, the Sugar Association -- which is upset about being lumped together with corn sweeteners -- has not yet gone further than a lawyer's letter.)

It's hard to argue with Dr. Nestle's point that food is above all political and that with all its money the food industry can influence what we eat and how much information we are given about it. It spends \$33 billion a year for advertising and promotion and countless millions more on lobbying.

"Food Politics" provides a road map of food and politics since just after World War II, when scientists discovered that chronic diseases caused by overeating and lack of exercise were becoming a bigger problem than undernutrition.

It comes as no surprise that the food industry lobbies Congress and regulatory agencies. But Dr. Nestle has substantial evidence to show how wide its influence is, and how the people the public turns to for unbiased information are no longer in a position to provide it. The food industry, she says, has bought a lot of scientists, nutritionists, dietitians and universities, as well as having co-opted the government. People may argue about whether they have been bought, but the amount of money that has changed hands is well documented.

The companies, Dr. Nestle says, "routinely provide information and funds to academic departments, research institutes and professional societies, and they support meetings, conferences, journals and other such activities. Most nutrition professionals depend on such support, and some actively seek it."

Among the companies that sponsor nutrition journals are Coca-Cola, Monsanto, Procter & Gamble and Slim-Fast. Dr. Nestle points out that fact sheets produced by the American Dietetic Association are also sponsored by the companies: one financed by Monsanto discusses the importance of biotechnology, one financed by NutraSweet discusses the value of aspartame and one financed by Campbell's Soup says the link between sodium and high blood pressure is unclear.

Dr. Nestle also makes these points:

- * Corporate funding underwrites entire departments at universities.
- * Papers presented at conferences sponsored by food companies are sometimes published as supplements to journals, with the companies underwriting the cost.
- * Nutrition societies routinely seek corporate sponsorship of meetings. At one meeting of the American Society for Nutritional Sciences, Dr. Nestle recounts, heads of university nutrition departments were invited to a Kellogg breakfast that featured samples of psyllium fiber-supplemented foods, which the company was test-marketing.
- * No matter how careful the research, corporate sponsorship casts doubt on the results. "This impression is reinforced when sponsors use the results to advertise or publicize their products," she says.

Dr. Nestle concludes that while most people can understand advertising, "it is far more difficult to know about the industry's behind-the-scenes efforts in Congress, federal agencies, courts, universities and professional organizations to make diets seem a matter of personal choice rather than of deliberate manipulation."

Her advice sounds like common sense: ignore the food industry's messages to eat more; instead, eat less.