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Response of the Food and Beverage Industry to the Obesity Threat

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TO AVOID PUBLIC CRITICISM AND FORESTALL GOVERNMENT intervention, the food and beverage industry hopes that self-regulation is sufficient¹ and also seeks to establish public-private partnerships. This reaction is common in industries under threat and can take helpful or harmful forms.

Industry self-regulation can sometimes work in the public interest, with forestry and fisheries serving as examples.^{1,2} Public-private partnerships can also promote health. For instance, donations by pharmaceutical companies of metizan for river blindness, mebendazole to eliminate intestinal parasites, and azithromycin to treat trachoma have supported health agencies and benefited millions of persons with debilitating diseases. The food industry has demonstrated its ability to contribute to the public's health through folate fortification of flour and bread products, a productive public-private collaboration aimed at reducing rates of neural tube defects. In other cases, such as tobacco, self-regulation and public-private partnerships have a long history of undermining public health.³

Food and beverage companies have reacted to criticism in ways forecast by the behavior of other industries.^{3,4} Some practices obstruct public health goals and may even hurt industry interests by creating public relations liabilities and provoking rather than preventing government intervention. This Commentary highlights some common food and beverage industry attitudes and practices.

Association With a Health Organization or Connotation

The food industry has sought credibility by teaming with respected partners (eg, a beverage company partnering with a medical professional association). This tarnishes the partner and is seen as a cynical way of buying influence and good will. Another practice is to expect that depicting physical activity in packaging or marketing (eg, children playing outside in ads for sugared cereals) offsets the promotion of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods.

Framing Issues

The food industry uses several practices to reframe issues, such as emphasizing “balance” and “calories out.” Companies are in the “calories in” business and focusing on physical activity is increasingly seen as diverting attention from food. A super-sized burger meal can contain more than 2300 calories. The exercise equivalent of running a marathon would be necessary to burn these calories. Physical activity is beneficial for many health outcomes, but even when practiced regularly, it cannot counteract excessive caloric intake and allow time for work, sleep, and other daily activities.

The industry argues that there are no bad foods and that only the totality of the diet counts. Health experts agree widely that population consumption of some foods (eg, sweetened beverages and fast foods) should decrease and consumption of others (eg, fruits/vegetables) increase. All calories are not equal; foods with similar caloric content can have markedly different nutrients; eg, 100 calories of broccoli vs 100 calories of french fries or sugared beverage. Another strategy of the industry is to claim that failures in personal responsibility are the cause of the nation's obesity problem. At issue are the external factors making it difficult for individuals to eat responsibly and how government and industry can act to create better defaults.

Moreover, the industry claims that market forces will correct the problem. There are negative externalities created by current business practices such that parties not involved in transactions between company and customer suffer financial damage. For example, half of obesity-related health care costs are paid for with public funds, and food and beverage companies do not pay the full costs of either production (eg, subsidies drive down costs of raw materials) or the effects of their products on the environment or public health.

The industry often claims that government actions create a “nanny state” that impinges on personal freedom. Government intervenes frequently to improve public

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health (child immunizations, tobacco taxes, speed limits, fluoridated water, etc) without food industry criticism, and the companies do not object to favorable government policies such as corn subsidies that support beef production and make it possible to sweeten foods at low cost with high fructose corn syrup.

Deceptive Science and Advocacy

The food and beverage industry has created or funded front groups reminiscent of the Tobacco Institute that give the appearance of grassroots support (eg, Americans Against Food Taxes, Center for Consumer Freedom). Another strategy involves development of self-regulatory pledges with standards that are contrary to science-based criteria for healthy foods. Examples include the numerous foods that met the now defunct Smart Choices criteria and still meet industry-derived “Better for You” criteria brokered by the Council of Better Business Bureaus. For example, Lucky Charms and Froot Loops cereals, marketed heavily to children, are according to industry Better for You foods.

Product Formulation

The food and beverage industry may add vitamins, minerals, or fiber to foods of poor nutritional quality and promote them as healthy options. Packaging for a sweetened breakfast cereal claiming the cereal “Now Helps Support Your Child’s Immunity” provides an example of scientifically dubious industry assertions. Moreover, the industry simply cannot expect that introducing healthy items into a company’s portfolio cancels out the effects of promoting products high in sugar, salt, and fat.

Defensive and Counterproductive Behavior

The food and beverage industry may, like tobacco companies, respond defensively to criticism, acquire the loyalty of scientists and professional organizations while creating conflicts of interest, oppose public health measures, classify those who challenge the industry perspective as biased advocates, and deny all harm. The industry also may use 2 standards: one for operating policies and behavior in the United States and another for other countries, especially those with low to middle income. In addition, one of the most counterproductive practices is to aggressively market less healthy foods directly to children, ignoring the science proving the harmful effects of these products.⁵

The Need for Change

Billions of dollars have been spent convincing individuals (children in particular) that highly sweetened beverages and cereals, salty snack foods, and a vast array of products high in fat, sugar, and salt are fun, athletic, sexy, popular, healthy, and even have beneficial properties. Flat or slumping sales of these products in the United

States are more than offset by markedly increasing sales in developing countries as powerful marketing techniques are deployed around the globe. In the fourth quarter of 2009, Coca-Cola posted its largest growth in China and India.⁶ Industry executives focused on short-term gains may bequeath to their successors souring public opinion, dire concerns about actions in developing countries, and a host of legal, legislative, and regulatory actions.

Industry can play a constructive role in addressing obesity but the mistrust resulting from the actions noted herein is increasing rapidly. If industry is to build public trust, retain self-regulatory authority, keep government at a respectful distance, and develop meaningful public-private partnerships, a new approach is needed. An excellent beginning would be to suppress automatic opposition to public health recommendations such as the series of reports on food and obesity produced over the last decade⁷⁻⁹ and embrace recommended changes.

Industry has endorsed the Let’s Move campaign launched by the White House. Other recent positive actions include the availability of smaller portion sizes and nutritional labeling. This is a good start, but real progress will be made when industry reformulates products, actively promotes moderate portion sizes, develops pricing that does not offer minimal marginal costs for more calories, acknowledges reputable science from peer-reviewed journals, avoids conflicts of interest with scientists and professional organizations, acts and markets ethically with consistency across borders, develops meaningful criteria for self-regulation, and creates a long-term strategy that addresses both business and health goals. In summary, the food and beverage industry needs to make and market healthier products and do so globally.

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