

SHOULD WE BE SCEPTICAL ABOUT SUPERFOODS?

By Holly Friend

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Author and professor of nutrition Marion Nestle sheds light on the manipulative marketing techniques that food brands are borrowing from the tobacco industry.



Can you explain the concept behind your book *Unsavoury Truth* and how it explores the conflicts of interest in food science?

Unsavoury Truth is about the effects of food company sponsorship on nutrition research and practice. These effects are well established in industries such as tobacco, chemicals and pharmaceutical drugs. I wrote this book to bring food into the picture. The main finding is that industry-sponsored research almost invariably favours the sponsor's interests. Another finding is about how this happens. The bias mainly shows up in the design of the research questions. There is a big difference between asking a study to demonstrate a food's benefit, and finding out the effects of a food on health. Industry-funded studies tend to focus on benefits that can be used for marketing purposes. A third key finding is that industry influence is likely to happen unconsciously – recipients of industry funding tend not to recognise that they are being influenced.

Bias in food and drink research has been happening for years. How has it changed?

Decades ago, food companies funded basic research on vitamins or other nutrients in food, whereas now they fund studies aimed at showing that a particular food or product is a superfood that will do miracles for your health. Whenever I see a study title claiming that a single food reduces disease risk, I look to see who paid for it. Bingo. It makes no sense to think that adding one food to diets of enormous complexity could make much difference to overall health. These studies are about marketing, not science.

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Your book explores how the food industry has borrowed techniques from tobacco manufacturers. Can you expand on this?

Food companies are not social service or public health agencies – their job is to sell products and provide profits to shareholders. **Tobacco companies** learned long ago that the best way to keep people smoking was to cast doubt on the science linking cigarettes with lung cancer. Casting doubt on the science is rule number one in the tobacco industry playbook. Food companies have adopted that rule, and other playbook precepts: fund favourable studies, co-opt critics, work with experts who support your objectives, fund front groups and lobby, of course.



Perspective by Suzanne Saroff



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Do you think food brands will be forced to undergo similar regulation to tobacco companies?

Food is much more complicated than cigarettes. Cigarettes are unnecessary for life and are linked with one simple public health message: don't smoke. Food is essential for life, includes tens of thousands of products and requires much more complicated messages: eat this instead of that or eat less in general. This makes it much harder to regulate. Regulation has started with soda taxes, not least because they are an easy target; they contain sugars and water but nothing else of redeeming nutritional value. Pretty much everything else we eat is much more complicated.

How should consumers navigate these confusing health claims?

I advise scepticism whenever you hear statements to the effect that a single food is a breakthrough, a miracle, cures multiple diseases and, my favourite, 'everything you thought you knew about nutrition is wrong'. That's not how science works and certainly not how diets work.

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overall health. These studies are about marketing, not science. '

Do you think we'll see the end of so-called superfoods as consumers wise up?

I doubt it. We're human and we seem to be hard-wired to respond to superfood messages. We aren't supposed to think about whether 'superfood' means anything; we are supposed to react to it emotionally, which is what we do. When advertising is done well, you don't notice it and you aren't aware of how it affects you. Advertisers know this and aim messages below the radar of critical thinking.

How do you expect nutrition to evolve in the next five years?

I hope that my book will get researchers and food companies to rethink their relationships and set up better safeguards, and will get reporters and everyone who eats to pay more attention to how food marketing affects food choices. I want everyone to be at least a little sceptical of studies funded by food companies and to use common sense. Not all industry-funded studies are biased, but too many are to ignore this as a problem.

Lab Notes

: In a similar vein to wellness, an industry tarnished by misleading claims and muddled definitions, nutrition is in danger of losing its efficacy, as consumers grow aware of pseudo food science

: Many consumers are fighting back against fad diets and using food to upstream their health. However, Nestle argues that the link between food and the body is more complex than we think, and eating habits should instead be driven by common sense