

New Study Details Coca-Cola's Big Influence on Public Health Organizations, Conferences and Events

An investigation reveals the beverage giant gives big bucks to influence research and policy through events and conferences.

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Coca-Cola is directly influencing public health conferences and events via sponsorships — sometimes undisclosed — that could give the multinational company say in speaker selections and conference agendas, according to a new study.

The study, published in the [Public Health Nutrition Journal](#), uncovered previously unknown collaborations between Coca-Cola and major health institutions including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the Institute for Excellence in Pediatrics, the Obesity Society and the American Academy of Family Physicians. It builds upon a 2020 study that showed the company [helped shape](#) the International Congress on Physical Activity and Public Health, an international effort to promote physical activity.

The findings, based on documents uncovered by 22 Freedom of Information requests by the U.S. Right to Know organization, suggest that Coca-Cola's influence could suppress research and viewpoints unfavorable to the company and its suite of unhealthy products, advance messaging that physical inactivity is the key cause of obesity and bolster its image as science-friendly.

"The effect of this industry involvement is to expose professionals to the brands and marketing of certain products, including ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, while also allowing the brands to build their image by affiliating with scientific and research communities," the authors wrote.

Conflicts of interest

The study found Coca-Cola gave three types of support: funding conference organizers, non-profit organizations or conference speakers. These contributions gave the company perks such as proposing topics, suggesting speakers, marketing opportunities or lunchtime seating with conference VIPs.

The documents even show a Coca-Cola vice president stating that, "As you know AAP [American Academy of Pediatrics] is a great partner of ours..."
[@AmerAcadPeds https://t.co/8kaUpqqk7U](https://t.co/8kaUpqqk7U) pic.twitter.com/Q6c62Aaz5w

— Gary Ruskin (@garyruskin) [December 1, 2022](#)

The study points out that some of the funding came through third-party organizations so researchers may not know they're sponsored by Coca-Cola.

Researchers and events that fail to declare conflicts of interest and clearly state their funding sources, "obscures corporate influence over what is said and to whom it is stated" in these events and conferences, the authors said.

Direct and indirect funding

The study looked at 239 public and private events. Coca-Cola provided some funding, directly or indirectly, to 158 — including 98 conferences, 21 symposia, 10 lectures, 14 private meetings, one workshop, three webinars, three seminars, three forums and three panels.

Of the 158 events partially funded by the company, Coca-Cola gave money directly to 28 of them. Meanwhile, 70 were funded via third parties that received Coca-Cola money and the company funded speakers for the remaining 60.

Payments for organizers ranged from \$2,500 to \$100,000 per event.

The emails showed Coca-Cola would occasionally encourage researchers favorable to its interests to also talk to the media, as well as promoting researchers, programs and events that stressed a lack of physical activity, instead of sugary beverages, as a major cause of obesity.

"We are concerned about several connection of funding to media coverage," the authors of the study wrote. "By pushing speakers towards the media, a company's influence over science communication may be significant, and therefore should be fully disclosed."

The study recommends "robust financial and conflict-of-interest disclosures for public health conferences, not only for the conference organizers, but also for speakers."

See the full study at the [Public Health Nutrition](#) journal.

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