

## Coke: It's the Unreal Thing

COCA-COLA COMPANY PARTNERS WITH THE AAFP TO PROVIDE *HEALTH EDUCATION* TO CONSUMERS.

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The [recent deal negotiated](#) between the Coca-Cola Company and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) in a reportedly six-figure alliance is now complete. The "deal" will fund educational "consumer alliance partnerships." The absurdity of this financial arrangement is causing me (and should cause you) to see red, the same color as the traditional Coke can.

The AAFP recognizes that consumer-product companies can have significant influence on consumer health. That's why the AAFP created its Consumer Alliance Program, a strategy whereby the AAFP aims to partner with companies that demonstrate good corporate stewardship and a strategic focus on consumer health. The program will allow FamilyDoctor.org, the AAFP's award-winning consumer health and wellness resource - and the fundamental core of the AAFP Consumer Alliance - to expand educational content that helps consumers make informed decisions about nutrition, physical activity, emotional health and prevention of disease.

So, a highly prominent group of "health care providers," the AAFP, is suggesting that an alliance with a world-famous soft drink company is going to provide health and wellness information to the consumer? We are currently in an epidemic of obesity in the U.S., which is now spreading worldwide. The U.S. already ranks first among countries in terms of soft-drink consumption. There is such strong evidence supporting the correlation between soft-drink consumption and body weight that researchers are able to calculate that each additional soda consumed increases the risk of obesity in children by 60 percent. High-fructose corn syrup in drinks is associated with obesity, and soft drinks sweetened with saccharin and aspartame have demonstrated a carcinogenic effect in animals in research experiments.

There is also ample evidence that soft-drink consumption by children poses a significant risk factor for impaired calcification of growing bones. Soft drinks have long been a contributor to low calcium levels because of their high phosphate content.

Each year, additional insight into the deleterious effects of soft-drink consumption grows. I find it insulting that with the overwhelming evidence supporting the negative health effects of soft drinks, consumer information is touted as the sound reason the AAFP decided to effectively sell its credibility. Considering all of the above, it should be obvious that there is simply no positive or truly objective health information that a consumer could obtain from Coca-Cola's corporate alliance with AAFP.

Now let's deal with the sensitive side of this unholy pact - the part that relates to ethics and hypocrisy. For the CEO of the academy to suggest that the "deal" won't influence the group's public health messages is akin to suggesting that there was no wrongdoing by having physicians place their names on articles ghost-written by pharmaceutical companies, or researchers failing to disclose conflicts of interest when they clearly benefited financially and with stock futures from the success of a drug they were researching. The absolute lack of integrity by a believable, trustworthy group of health providers is apparently another example of "misplaced trust" and a lack of a moral

compass by health care professionals empowered and entrusted with the confidence of the people they should serve.

Is there anyone who really believes the public service message from the cigarette companies in their attempt to sponsor stop-smoking programs, or the casinos or state lotteries that offer gambling addiction classes"? It should be painfully obvious that these corporations have no sincere interest in helping those who smoke or gamble, but they attempt to placate the conscience of their stockholders and the demands of their public-relations departments by offering these rather transparent programs designed to combat the very addictions that generate them billions of dollars in profit.

One could even understand this rampant corporate hypocrisy of greed because these entities are usually for-profit corporations whose goal and objective is to sell their product and remain profitable. Do these corporations owe the public a duty to keep the world free from smoking or gambling? The answer is no, of course, but perhaps they may feel some small twinge of social guilt and thus these remedial programs help their image.

However, the trust, confidence, faith, belief and yes the "cultural authority" bestowed on our health care advisors is another matter altogether. There is an expectation that transcends profit and business when it comes to our healers. There truly is a higher standard of behavior that these doctors must meet.

When that trust is broken by flagrant acts of hypocrisy, such as a six-figure financial contract with a soft-drink company to provide "educational material," there are no words or amount of public-relations spin that can erase the transparency of an act so egregious as to insult the very basic sensibility of Americans.

I do not blame Coca-Cola one bit for doing what it does best, which is advancing its product in every arena that is available. Coke is doing the "right thing" to advance the goal of the company. No, my objection and criticism is singularly aimed at the AAFP for its lack of stewardship and for not doing basic due diligence in affiliating with what is clearly a conflict of interest. Regardless of the manner in which this affiliation is packaged or promoted, the underlying principles cannot be erased by clever legal maneuvers and separate philanthropic groups.

The AMA and its affiliate specialty groups are not alone in these seemingly unexplainable decisions and lack of judgment. There have been times when we have seen questionable decisions by various chiropractic groups who affiliate with less-than-stellar companies. Perhaps the lesson learned from this latest high-profile stupidity is that before affiliations are consummated, there should be an "ethics" advisory convened to review the decision and the potential fallout. Chiropractic is not immune to similar enticements and lures, particularly as economic challenges mount.

There is also a valuable lesson to be learned for chiropractic. Credibility and trust are very difficult to earn and so easily lost by decisions predicated on short-term needs that compromise basic values. Hopefully, this act by the AAFP will help to discredit other commentary and positions espoused by this group, because when trust is fractured, no amount of excuse will repair the damage.

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