

Soda companies' PR campaigns are bad for health: experts

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Health advocates need to organize strong public health campaigns to educate the public and policymakers about the dangers of both sugary beverages and the misleading industry corporate social responsibility campaigns that distract from their products' health risks, according to US experts writing in this week's *PLoS Medicine*.

In a Policy Forum article, the authors (media and public health experts from the Berkeley and Boston, USA) examined prominent campaigns from industry leaders PepsiCo and Coca-Cola, that, according to the authors, have embraced [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR) with elaborate, expensive, and multinational campaigns.

The authors say that while soda companies may not face the level of social stigmatization or regulatory pressure that now confronts Big Tobacco, concern over soda and the [obesity epidemic](#) is growing. In response to health concerns about their products, the authors argue that soda companies have launched comprehensive CSR initiatives sooner than did [tobacco companies](#) but that these campaigns echo the tobacco industry's use of CSR as a means to focus responsibility on consumers rather than the corporation, bolster the companies' and products' popularity, and to prevent regulation.

However, unlike tobacco CSR campaigns, soda company CSR campaigns explicitly target young people and aim to increase sales.

The authors say: "It is clear that the soda CSR campaigns reinforce the

idea that obesity is caused by customers' "bad" behavior, diverting attention from soda's contribution to rising [obesity rates](#)."

They continue: "For example, CSR campaigns that include the construction and upgrading of parks for youth who are at risk for diet-related illnesses keep the focus on physical activity, rather than on unhealthful foods and drinks. Such tactics redirect the responsibility for health outcomes from corporations onto its consumers, and externalize the negative effects of increased obesity to the public."

The authors argue: "Emerging science on the addictiveness of sugar, especially when combined with the known addictive properties of caffeine found in many sugary beverages, should further heighten awareness of the product's public health threat similar to the understanding about the addictiveness of tobacco products."

They conclude: "Public health advocates must continue to monitor the CSR activities of soda companies, and remind the public and policymakers that, similar to Big Tobacco, soda industry CSR aims to position the companies, and their products, as socially acceptable rather than contributing to a social ill."

More information: Dorfman L, Cheyne A, Friedman LC, Wadud A, Gottlieb M (2012) Soda and Tobacco Industry Corporate Social Responsibility Campaigns: How Do They Compare? PLoS Med 9(6): e1001241. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001241](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001241)

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