

Food companies teach US dietitians about nutrition

February 26 2014, by Candice Choi

(AP)—Snack and soda makers that often are blamed for fueling U.S. obesity rates play a surprising role in how Americans learn about healthy eating: they teach dietitians as part of their behind-the-scenes efforts to burnish the image of their snacks and drinks.

Companies such as Frito-Lay, Kellogg and Coca-Cola are essentially teaching the teachers. They're offering seminars, online classes and workshops that are usually free for nutritionists. The practice has raised ethical concerns among some who say it gives the food industry too much influence over dietitians, who can take the classes for education credits to maintain their licenses.

With two-thirds of Americans considered overweight or obese, the makers of processed foods have shouldered much of the blame for aggressively marketing sugary and salty products. Critics argue that companies use the classes, which are usually less expensive and more convenient than other courses dietitians can take, as a way to cast their products in a positive nutritional light. Not to mention that companies often collect the contact information of dietitians to mail them samples or coupons, in some cases to share with their patients.

"It's not education. It's PR," says Andy Bellatti, a Las Vegas-based dietitian who helped found Dietitians for Professional Integrity, a group of about a dozen dietitians who are calling for an end to the practice.

Food and beverage companies, meanwhile, say their classes are intended

to inject perspective into the public debate over nutrition.

At the annual Food and Nutrition Conference and Expo, the food and beverage industry holds several workshops and classes on nutrition for many of the thousands of dietitians who show up there each year.

Last year at the conference in Houston, Frito-Lay explained to dietitians how it removed trans fats from its Lay's potato chips and other snacks. The makers of high fructose corn syrup encouraged them to question a study that ties the prevalence of the sweetener derived from corn to higher rates of Type 2 diabetes. And the company famous for its Frosted Flakes cereal taught the benefits of fiber.

Bill Dietz, a former director of the division of nutrition and physical activity at the federal Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention, notes that an online class by Coke entitled "Understanding Dietary Sugars and Health" was taught by instructors who both had industry ties. One listed ties to the Sugar Association and companies including candy bar maker Mars. The other disclosed ties to the Corn Growers Association on the subject of high fructose corn syrup.

At one point during the online class, one instructor says he doesn't think there should be dietary guidelines regarding sugar intake; Dietz notes that viewpoint is in contrast to the positions held by many reputable groups, including the American Heart Association, which recommends women consume no more than 6 teaspoons daily and men consume no more than 9 teaspoons daily.

Of course, the matter of corporate influence isn't limited to dietitians. In 1997, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued guidance intended to address concerns regarding the role of drugmakers in continuing medical education for doctors. The guidance drew distinctions between ads and education, essentially stating that drug companies shouldn't

influence the latter.

Those barriers don't exist between food companies and dietitians, however. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, a professional group that's based in Chicago and has more than 75,000 members, governs the path to becoming a registered dietitian and oversees the accreditation for continuing education providers.

Glenna McCollum, president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, says that dietitians know how to question any findings that might that may not seem sound. "Some of the information provided may need to be challenged," she says. "That's part of the job."

For registered dietitians in the U.S., continuing education is a requirement, not an option. After earning a degree in nutrition, completing an internship program and taking an exam, they must earn 75 credits of continuing education every five years. An hour-long class typically translates to one credit.

Teaching dietitians isn't a new practice to food makers. Companies have been doing it for quite some time. For instance, General Mills, which makes Cheerios, Lucky Charms, Yoplait yogurt, Pillsbury dough and Progresso soup, has been an education provider through its Bell Institute of Health and Nutrition for at least 15 years.

But the practice came under scrutiny after a report by public health lawyer Michele Simon last year that detailed the industry's deep ties to the field. Shortly afterward, a small but vocal group formed Dietitians for Professional Integrity to call for changes.

A petition by the group on the subject got more than 25,000 supporters on Change.org; the academy provided an audit to the AP that says only 600 of those signatures were by its members.

Companies say their classes present simply nutritional information to dietitians.

Coca-Cola, which makes drinks including Dasani water and Minute Maid juice, offers about a dozen seminars each year through its Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness. On average, Coke says the live, hour-long classes get more than 5,000 participants. It plans to increase the number of webinars it offers each year.

Ben Sheidler, a spokesman for Coca-Cola, says the company's course materials are based on independent, third-party research. He says Coca-Cola is acting responsibly by working to provide professionals with the facts surrounding its products.

Coca-Cola, for one, says its surveys show the vast majority of participants in its classes find them helpful and "free of commercial bias."

But some say companies would never present information that doesn't serve their interests. Elizabeth Lee, a registered dietitian in Los Angeles and one of the founders of Dietitians for Professional Integrity, notes that the classes typically have a message that supports the company's products.

"It's getting harder and harder to really find something that isn't total baloney," says Debra Riedesel, another registered dietitian based in Des Moines, Iowa.

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Citation: Food companies teach US dietitians about nutrition (2014, February 26) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-food-companies-dietitians-nutrition.html>

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