

Is the food industry really concerned with obesity? Their bottom lines are more important, study finds

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Efforts to combat obesity can be a threat to businesses that produce and sell food: If people eat less, profits will decline. But the food industry can't appear to be nonresponsive to what some have called a public health crisis, and it employs several tactics to maintain legitimacy and position itself as "part of the solution" while also protecting profits, shows a new study by a George Washington University professor.

Food companies frame obesity as an issue of the choices people are making rather than the choices they are being offered, said Ivy Ken, associate professor of sociology. The companies say the solution is for the public to buy their other [products](#), which they have voluntarily agreed to provide in addition to their full-sugar, full-fat options.

To make her conclusions, Dr. Ken studied [food companies](#) affiliated with two nonprofit organizations: the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and the Partnership for a Healthier America. She examined the commitments, speeches, websites, annual meetings and other public materials the companies and their partners distribute.

"I found that these organizations might more appropriately be called the 'Partnership for a Healthier Bottom Line,' Dr. Ken said.

Companies' commitments included creating new marketing campaigns for lower-calorie products, making healthier options more prominent on

menus and opening new stores, Dr. Ken said.

"These are the activities behind the grand pronouncements made by the Alliance and the Partnership that they are 'working together' with the public, 'partnering,' and 'collaborating' to solve the problem of obesity 'together.' This message is often delivered by prominent public figures such as former President Bill Clinton, First Lady Michelle Obama, and U.S. Senator Cory Booker, and it is carefully crafted to deflect attention away from how these token gestures are meant to keep junk food peddlers in the public's good graces."

The strategy has been very successful, Dr. Ken said. Some of the corporate partners' own analyses reveal that acknowledging obesity as a social problem and offering lower-calorie products as the solution has been very profitable. From 2006 to 2011, a set of companies that account for one-quarter of food sales in the U.S. increased their sales by \$1.25 billion from lower-calorie products alone. It's important to note, Dr. Ken said, that sales of their higher-calorie products did not decline as a result. Rather, these sales also grew by \$278 million in this period.

While better products might be an important step, most of the companies making minor modifications to their products—PepsiCo, J&J Snack Foods, Nestlé, and dozens more—are the same companies making the harmful products that contribute to obesity and other health and environmental problems in the first place, Dr. Ken said.

"They have received a great deal of attention and praise for their efforts, which helps them avoid regulation and public disapproval," Dr. Ken said. "But great problems have been created by companies' efforts to increase their profits at the expense of the public's health. Those who are interested in fighting these problems and combating [obesity](#) should not be lulled into 'working with' these companies, but rather, against and around them."

More information: The report is available online:
scu.sagepub.com/content/1/2/130.full.pdf+html

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