

Emails reveal Coke's role in anti-obesity group

November 24 2015, by Candice Choi



In this March 17, 2011, file photo, Cans of Coca-Cola and Diet Coke sit in a cooler in Anne's Deli in Portland, Ore. A nonprofit founded to combat obesity says the \$1.5 million it received from Coke has no influence on its work. But emails obtained by The Associated Press show the world's largest beverage maker was instrumental in shaping the Global Energy Balance Network, which is led by a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Coke helped pick the group's leaders, edited its mission statement and suggested articles and videos for its website. (AP Photo/File)

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But emails obtained by The Associated Press show the world's largest beverage maker was instrumental in shaping the Global Energy Balance Network, which is led by a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Coke helped pick the [group](#)'s leaders, edited its mission statement and suggested articles and videos for its website.

In an email last November, the group's president tells a top Coke executive: "I want to help your [company](#) avoid the image of being a problem in peoples' lives and back to being a company that brings important and fun things to them."

Coke executives had similarly high hopes. A proposal circulated via email at the company laid out a vision for a group that would "quickly establish itself as the place the media goes to for comment on any obesity issue." It said the group would use social media and run a political-style campaign to counter the "shrill rhetoric" of "public health extremists" who want to tax or limit foods they deem unhealthy.

When contacted by the AP about the emails, Coca-Cola Co. CEO Muhtar Kent said in a statement that "it has become clear to us that there was not a sufficient level of transparency with regard to the company's involvement with the Global Energy Balance Network."

"Clearly, we have more work to do to reflect the values of this great company in all that we do," Kent said.

The Atlanta-based company told the AP it has accepted the retirement of its chief health and science officer, Rhona Applebaum, who initially managed the relationship with the group. It said it will not fill the position as it overhauls how it goes about its health efforts. It also said it has stopped working the Global Energy Balance Network.

It's just the latest example of Coke working with outside experts to

promote messages that benefit the company.

Coke has long maintained that the academics and other experts it works with espouse their own views. But the collaborations can be fraught and blur the lines between advertisements and genuine advice. In February, several health and fitness experts paid by the company wrote online posts with tips on healthy habits. Each suggested a mini-soda as a snack idea.

One dietitian wrote five such posts in less than a year.

The Global Energy Balance Network came under fire in August after The New York Times reported it was funded by Coke. On Nov. 6, the University of Colorado School of Medicine said it was returning \$1 million from the company because of the distraction it was creating. The University of South Carolina said it plans to keep \$500,000 it received from Coke because one of its professors is also among the group's leaders. The school said there was no misuse of funds.

On its website, the Global Energy Balance Network says it received an "unrestricted gift" from Coke, but that the company has "no input" into its activities.

Behind the scenes, however, Coke executives and the group's leaders held meetings and conference calls to hash out the group's mission and activities, according to emails obtained through a public records request. Early on, Applebaum informed the group's president, James Hill, that those involved would need to be open about collaboration with private industry.

"That is non-negotiable," she wrote.

Relatively minor matters, such as the group's logo, were also covered.

"Color will not be an issue—except for blue. Hope you can understand why," Applebaum.

Coke's cans are red, while Pepsi's are blue.

"It seems like another one of these classic cases of money coming from industry with no strings attached—that's the official message. But it's a very different kind of story taking place," said Leigh Turner, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics, who studies academic integrity and conflicts of interest.

The exchanges weren't strictly limited to discussions about the group, and included Applebaum expressing approval or disapproval of health articles, and talk of other work with Coke. In an email to another Coke executive, Hill proposes research on "energy balance" that would be "very specific to [coke](#) interests."

Coke has long stressed the idea of "[energy balance](#)," or the need to offset calorie intake with physical activity. It's a basic concept few would disagree with, but critics say the company uses it to downplay the effects of sugary drinks by shifting more attention to the need for exercise.

In an introductory video, one of the Global Energy Balance Network's leaders said the media focuses on "eating too much, eating too much, eating too much—blaming fast food, blaming sugary drinks and so on." The video has since been taken down, and the group said the idea that it only focuses on [physical activity](#) is inaccurate.

Hill declined a request for a phone interview, but said in an email that the group's strategy benefits "all who are concerned about obesity." He said Coke provided input into the group's "organizational structure," but that it was understood the company would be "hands off."

The group wants to continue its work, he said.

Since 2010, Coke said it gave \$550,000 to Hill that was unrelated to the group. A big part of that was research he and others were involved with, but the figure also covers travel expenses and fees for speaking engagements and other work. It does not include money from Coke's overseas divisions or industry groups such as the American Beverage Association.

Excerpts from emails between Coke, anti-obesity group

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Below are excerpts of emails between the group's leaders and Coke executives starting in late 2012, when the network was still just an idea.

Rhona Applebaum is Coke's chief health and science officer; the company says it has accepted her retirement. James Hill is the group's president and a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Oct. 16, 2012

In an email whose subject line is "Ready for a stimulus pkg?" Applebaum tells Hill she has "sold the concept" of what would become the Global Energy Balance Network. She later informs him those

involved will need to be open about collaboration with private industry.

"That is non-negotiable," she says.

Nov. 8, 2012

Applebaum emails Hill and Peters about media questions over a Coke-funded study they are working on. Attached is an internal company document with talking points to address such matters.

"Also—if you would like media training let me know. All our folks receive it," she writes.

June 4, 2014

Hill emails a Coke executive saying the focus of the company's research should be energy balance: "We have given you ideas here. We have also given you ideas for research projects that might be very specific to coke interests."

Coke says the proposals were not related to the Global Energy Balance Network.

July 9, 2014

Applebaum emails the group with a "tweaked" proposal for the establishment of the network.

The proposal says the group will "inject sanity and reason" into the debate about obesity and become the go-to resource for media.

"Akin to a political campaign, we will develop, deploy and evolve a powerful and multi-faceted strategy to counter radical organizations and

their proponents," it says.

Aug. 30, 2014

Hill emails a Coke executive about a research proposal. "Here is my concept. I think it could provide a strong rationale for why a company selling sugar water SHOULD focus on promoting physical activity. This would be a very large and expensive study but could be a game changer. We need this study to be done."

The executive says she will call him the following week to discuss.

Oct. 14, 2014

In emails about GEBN potentially partnering with others on a project, Applebaum writes: "There you go! Than (sic) the # of experts and reputable orgs is too large for any naysayers to cull the pack and attack."

Oct. 18, 2014

Coke CEO Muhtar Kent emailed Applebaum and other executives for reasons he could give talk show host Charlie Rose to invite Hill on his show. Applebaum replies with Hill's credentials, which do not mention his work with Coke.

Hill has not appeared on the show.

Nov. 9, 2014

Hill emails a Coke executive: "It is not fair that Coca-Cola is signaled out as the #1 villain in the obesity world, but that is the situation and makes this your issue whether you like it or not. I want to help your company avoid the image of being a problem in peoples' lives and back

to being a company that brings important and fun things to them."

April 8, 2015

A Coke employee emails Hill and Peters asking them to sign a non-disclosure agreement before the company shares "some of the learnings we have received from some of our consumer testing to help inform" the group's work.

Once signed, she says the company will "begin the flow of information" in preparation for an upcoming meeting.

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Citation: Emails reveal Coke's role in anti-obesity group (2015, November 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-emails-reveal-coke-role-anti-obesity.html>

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