

Group funded by Coke to fight obesity disbanding

December 1 2015, byCandice Choi



In this April 25, 2011 file photo shows a bottle cap on a bottle of Coca-Cola in Philadelphia. A nonprofit funded by the Coca-Cola Co. to combat obesity is disbanding following revelations about the beverage maker's involvement with

the group. The Global Energy Balance Network said on its website Monday, Nov. 30, 2015 that it is "discontinuing operations due to resource limitations." The decision was effective immediately.(AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

A nonprofit funded by the Coca-Cola Co. to combat obesity is disbanding following revelations about the beverage maker's involvement with the group.

The Global Energy Balance Network said on its website Monday night that it is "discontinuing operations due to resource limitations." The decision was effective immediately.

The group had previously said that it received an "unrestricted gift" from Coke and that the Atlanta-based soft drink giant had "no input" into its activities.

But last week, The Associated Press reported on emails showing that Coke helped with the selection of the group's leaders, edited its mission statement and suggested content for its website. When contacted about the exchanges, Coke CEO Muhtar Kent said in a statement there wasn't enough transparency regarding the company's involvement.

Coke also told the AP that it accepted the retirement of Rhona Applebaum, its chief health and science officer who initially managed the relationship with the group. The company said it was no longer working with the Global Energy Balance Network.

The emails obtained by the AP through a records request showed Coke executives and the group's leaders held meetings and conference calls to develop the group's mission. A proposal circulated via email at Coke 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 run a political-style campaign to counter the "shrill rhetoric" of "public health extremists."

Early on, Applebaum also informed the group's president 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 is known for its red logo, while Pepsi is associated with blue.

The Global Energy Balance Network, led by a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, initially came under fire in August after The New York Times reported on the group's funding by Coke. On Nov. 6, the University of Colorado said it was returning a \$1 million donation from the company because of the distraction it was creating. The announcement came after the school released hundreds of emails to the AP.

The University of South Carolina has said it is keeping a \$500,000 donation it received for the group and that there was no misuse of funds. One of the school's professors is also a group leader.

Coca-Cola said Monday night it had no comment and deferred questions about the status of its donation to the University of South Carolina. A representative for the [university](#) did not respond to a request for comment Monday.

Critics say Coke touts the idea of "[energy balance](#)," or the need to offset calorie intake with physical activity, to deflect negative attention over its sugary drinks by stressing the need for exercise.

James Hill, the group's president and a professor at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, did not respond to a request for comment. Steven Blair, the [group](#)'s vice president and a professor at the University of South Carolina, also did not respond.

Both had financial ties to Coca-Cola prior to the formation of the Global Energy Balance Network. For instance, Coke paid Hill \$5,000 for at least one speaking engagement overseas. His travel expenses were also covered by the company.

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