

Good Deeds and Cheap Marketing: The Food Industry in the Time of COVID-19

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The consumption of ultraprocessed foods is one of the main drivers of the global obesity and noncommunicable disease (NCD) epidemic (1). It is well known that obesity is associated with a low-intensity chronic inflammatory state that creates a suboptimal immune response (2), which negatively affects the prognosis of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (3). The epidemic of obesity and COVID-19 can be viewed as a syndemic, as they negatively interact with one another to exacerbate the course of disease, leading to greater complications and severe illness. Together, they create a simultaneous and significant burden on the health system (4). Thus, an in-depth analysis on the food industry's role in this pandemic and in our society is necessary.

Since this pandemic began, the food industry has been proactive in supporting relief efforts. Many companies and fast food restaurants have donated money in addition to providing medical supplies and free food. One of the most well-known initiatives is PepsiCo's global campaign, Give Meals, Give Hope, which has provided \$45 million in donations and 50 million meals to more than 40 countries (5). PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, and other companies also gathered donations for the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund (6). According to its website, Coca-Cola has provided more than \$120 million in aid. Likewise, Nestlé pledged around \$10 million. Companies such as McDonald's, Hershey's, and Kellogg's also donated \$2 million to \$7 million. In Kingston, Jamaica, the Ministry of Education partnered with the franchise operators of Little Caesars pizza, Burger King, Popeye's, and KFC to provide school meals to children (7).

These companies have been applauded for their actions and have garnered massive public support. However, several studies point out that they aggressively market ultraprocessed foods and beverages, whose regular consumption is associated with weight gain and NCD (8).

Do these good deeds, or any social responsibility initiative, do away with the harmful actions that these companies engage in? Not only do many of their products promote obesity (7), but many companies also obstruct public health nutrition policies by using a variety of documented strategies, such as lobbying, funding professional health organizations, discrediting scientific evidence, and interfering in governmental decision-making processes, among others (9). A recent example involves attempts by the food industry to block the approval of a new front-of-pack warning label system in Mexico to promote healthier food choices by organizing through the Mexican Chamber of Industry (CONCAMIN). The representative in the front-of-pack discussion groups was an executive from Nestlé. Through this entity, industry

filed a legal challenge, launched media campaigns, and petitioned the government to delay the implementation of the new law because of COVID-19 (10). Furthermore, the CEO of Nestlé sent a letter to its suppliers, asking them to "intervene in this process" (11), while Coca-Cola interfered by having lobbyists from the sugar-sweetened beverage industry visit congressmen to try and influence their vote (12). Showing social responsibility publicly does not ensure a company's ethical behavior privately. In fact, one study of 49 Fortune 500 firms found that corporate social responsibility was associated with subsequent corporate social irresponsibility because it enabled company leaders to later behave less ethically toward stakeholders (13). If food companies wish to be socially responsible, they should provide healthy food choices and refrain from deploying strategies that interfere with government attempts to build healthier food environments.

In addition, COVID-19 is being used as a new marketing strategy, considering recent shifts to at-home activities. Publicity references staying at home, social distancing, minimal contact, or boredom in quarantine. Some companies recognize health workers and/or offer them free food. They also include messages such as "we're in this together." In Mexico, Coca-Cola released an image with spaces between the letters of its name to imply social distancing. Some companies offer ideas for coping with boredom, such as Jumex, a Mexican juice company, that created a "bowling alley" out of its used cans on Facebook. Others promote their products with activities for children. Hostess Brands posted an advertisement on Twitter showing a woman running toward a bag of donuts with hashtags such as "#AtHomeWorkout" and "#TreatYourself." In addition to the negative effects of consuming these products, this aggressive marketing promotes overeating and could worsen anxiety, especially because overconsumption of "comfort foods" has been tied to subsequent feelings of guilt (13). Other common hashtags have been modified during the pandemic. For example, Mexican Burger King modified "#HaveItYourWay" to "#HaveItYourWayAtHome." Others make appeals to emotion, including "#DriveThruHeroes" in the United States or "#WeAreWithYou" in Mexico. Almost every food company or fast food restaurant is promoting itself on delivery platforms while offering special deals and "contactless" options to encourage consumption (see online Supporting Information for examples).

Although these actions can be interpreted as the food industry taking advantage of a crisis to promote its products, others might say it is fair game to stay afloat or competitive. However, it is clear that many of these strategies are problematic for several reasons. First, marketing of unhealthy foods contributes to obesogenic environments, which

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increase the burden of obesity and NCD. Second, it exploits potentially harmful emotional relationships with these foods (14). Third, research has shown that ultraprocessed food and beverage marketing can influence food choices and overall eating behaviors, especially for children and adolescents (15). And finally, most people will be exposed to more marketing than usual during quarantine. Given what is already known about food marketing in general, it is not unreasonable to question whether these negative effects will be exacerbated.

A lesson from this pandemic is that the food industry should not interfere in public health policies, particularly through nontransparent actions, such as heavy lobbying and revolving-door tactics. Although industry has a right to participate in public consultations, they should not participate in private committees or governmental bodies whose sole purpose is to make decisions regarding health policy. In these contexts, an inevitable conflict of interest exists, which can have an undue influence on policy outcomes and population health. Their strong opposition to the health sector's attempts to provide better information to consumers and promote healthy eating as well as their aggressive marketing strategies is a major barrier to creating healthier food environments. If large-scale preventive measures to reduce obesity and chronic diseases had been taken earlier, COVID-19 complications would not be as severe among people with these conditions, and health disparities would not continue to be widened. Guidelines for ethical engagement with the food industry, such as those proposed by the World Health Organization to prevent and manage conflicts of interest (9), should be reviewed and continuously updated. Industry interference is dynamic and occurs in real time; systematic monitoring is needed to document new and evolving strategies so that public health officials and researchers can quickly intervene.

Much like the examples identified in this paper from Mexico and the United States, the industry's actions have raised concerns around the world, especially regarding companies that sell unhealthy food products. As a result, the NCD Alliance and SPECTRUM research consortium launched a global survey to document the industry's responses to this pandemic, including corporate social responsibility and marketing campaigns as well as participation in policy discussions (16).

If we wish to treat obesity seriously by promoting healthier environments and societies that can better respond to health challenges, such

as the current COVID-19 pandemic, then there is no doubt that the food industry's strategies are working against this goal and should be effectively regulated. **O**

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