

Can Obesity Research and Soft Drink Companies Share the Same Goals?

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The Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN) is a relatively new, not-for-profit organization that uses the science of energy balance to identify innovative solutions that work to prevent and reduce diseases associated with inactivity, obesity, and poor nutrition. They rely on engaging experts of many fields to achieve a standard of healthier living while creating a virtual hub of awareness and providing a platform for voices in science. Energy balance is a concept that GEBN views as a practical solution to balancing food intake with physical activity to stabilize body weight and achieve optimal health. Although seemingly reasonable, the organization has been questioned over their over-simplification of nutrition that downplays the risks of junk food and sugar-filled drinks for exercise when it comes to the fight against obesity. Leading nutrition experts believe this is a skewed view that connects to their logistic and financial support received from soft drink super-giant, Coca-Cola, making people ask the question – is it ethical?

"Most of the focus in the popular media and the scientific press is 'Oh they're eating too much, eating too much, eating too much – blaming fast food, blaming sugary drinks and so on," said Global Balance Energy Network's vice president Steven N. Blair, "and there is no compelling evidence that that, in fact, is the cause," (O'Connor, 2015). Barbara Hansen, who served on the obesity guidelines panel, adds that "two cans of coke a day is only a small amount out of a 2,000 calorie diet – it's not the coke, it's the total calories counted in a day that's the critical point," (Walters, 2015). Both respected nutrition experts believe that when it comes to obesity and nutrition, exercise is often overlooked as a more important factor than people are led to believe.

GEBN, which boasts said claim over their social media and website pages, claims to operate entirely independent of its various funders. "They're not running the show. We're running the show," says President James O. Hill (Huehnergath, 2015). But the idea of Coca-Cola funding obesity research becomes extremely complicated. Last year, Coke contributed over USD\$1.5 million towards the creation of the Global Energy Balance Network, registered the website domain, and also lists it under their site's administrator. Since 2008, Coke has also provided nearly four million in funding for various research projects carried out by GEBN's founding members. But the more serious problem here is that funding from the food industry is not uncommon practice when it comes to scientific research. Studies have shown that this funding tends to lead to bias results. For example, studies linking sugary drinks and weight gain were five times more likely to find no connection between the two when funded by organizations such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi, or the National Beverage Association (O'Connor, 2015). The Global Energy Balance Network claims transparency, but as of early August, the organization's Facebook and Twitter pages, which promote physical activity as a solution to chronic diseases and obesity, had no mention of the funding. In fact, the mention of funding was also missing from their website until GEBN was questioned about it. "As soon as we discovered that...we put it on there," says Dr. Blair, "does that make us corrupt in everything we do?" (Walters, 2015). The roots of this partnership run deep, and even with the new non-profit claiming transparency, you cannot hide the fact that subconscious efforts may still affect results.

Kelly D. Brownell, Duke University's Dean of Stanford School of Public Policy, said that Coke "focused on pushing a lot of calories in," while "their philanthropy is focused on the calories out part; the exercise" (Scott, 2015). In themselves, the goals of each organization here contradict each other. "You cannot exercise your way out of overeating," says the Center for Human Nutrition Director at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Scott Grundy, "it's food intake over exercise that dominates the cause of obesity" (O'Connor, 2015).

Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition at New York University and is responsible for the book Soda Politics, makes her opinion on the matter blunt: "The Global Energy Balance Network is nothing but a front group for Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola's agenda here is very clear: Get these researchers to confuse the science and deflect attention from dietary intake" (Ferdman, 2015). This opinion is one that Barry Popkin, a professor of global nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill agrees with. Popkin even goes a step further, comparing Coke's strategic move to that of the tobacco industry years ago, which worked effectively in the fight for the deregulation of cigarettes (Walters, 2015). This clash of the science behind obesity, of course, comes at a time when there are efforts to remove sugary drinks from schools, and highly tax them, all the while consumption of such sodas by the average American is dropping.

Over the years, Coke has adopted a well thought out strategic corporate social responsibility plan, but the public remains cynical of their motives. For example, Coke has donated money to build fitness centers in more than 100 schools across the country, it sponsors the program "Exercise is Medicine" which encourages doctors to prescribe physical activity to patients, and when Chicago proposed a soda tax in 2012, Coke donated USD\$3 million to establish fitness programs in more than 60 community centers across the city (O'Connor, 2015). People claim that Coke has deployed these strategies under consequentialist terms, by focusing on outcomes, only opting in for the 'optional side' of corporate social responsibility, using these promotions to distract attention from their self-centered behavior, an opinion that can neither be proved nor dismissed.

What can be proven though are the recent email leaks from the corporate headquarters of Coca-Cola to the desks of Global Energy Balance Network's board. Emails such as one from Coke's chief health and science officer, Rhona Applebaum, that compares their strategy to that of a political campaign, stating they will "develop, deploy and evolve a powerful and multi-faceted strategy to counter radical organizations and their proponents" (Choi, 2015). GEBN President James Hill writes back that he wants "to help [Coke] avoid the image of being a problem in peoples' lives" (Choi, 2015). The network once again was under media scrutiny for the second time in months.

The overwhelming conclusion here becomes that objectivity is everything when it comes to scientific research. And conflicts of interest, such as the sponsorship of the Global Energy Balance Network by Coca-Cola, undermine objectivity. Even if the company did mean well, just naming conflicts of interest for the sake of transparency does not suffice when dealing with matters vital to public health. Health-conscious consumers should be entitled to reliable data that meets these functions to make their decisions on a base of solid information. Given Coke's commitment to honesty and integrity through its set code of ethics, which states to treat all customers "fairly, and with dignity" (The Coca-Cola Company) it should uphold an obligation not to fund research that fails to meet the demands of objectivity. And with the discontinuation of operations at Global Energy Balance Network due to a "limitation of resources" as of November 30th, 2015 (Global Energy Balance Network, 2015), one can see the results of what happens when a stated scientific community seemingly lacks this neutrality.

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