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## The National Academy of Sugar



By Marty Kaplan



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The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is at it again.

You might think an outfit calling itself an academy would be, you know, academic. But as Jon Stewart put it, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics is as much an academy as the “Pasteurized Prepared Cheese Product” called Kraft Singles is cheese.

The last time the academy was in the news, it was for taking an undisclosed amount of money from Kraft in exchange for giving Kraft permission to put the academy’s “Kids Eat Right” logo on Kraft Singles. When nailed for this, the academy denied that this amounted to putting a stamp of approval on Singles. What it really was, they claimed, was an ad for the academy’s Kids Eat Right initiative. If this were true, it would be the first time in the history of the world that an advertiser *received* money for placing an ad, instead of paying for it.

The story of the academy’s smelly deal with Kraft, broken by Stephanie Strom in the *New York Times* and amplified by *The Daily Show*, the *Wall Street Journal* and other news outlets, raised such a public stink that its endorsement of Kraft Singles was yanked. It also drew an unflattering spotlight on the academy itself, which counts 75,000 dietitians and other food and nutrition professionals among its members.

It turns out that the academy has long functioned more like a trade group than a professional society. As detailed in 2013 by public health lawyer Michele Simon in “And Now a Word From Our Sponsors,” the academy’s major sponsors have included ConAgra, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, the National Dairy Council, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Kellogg’s. Andy Bellatti, strategic director of Dietitians for Professional Integrity, an organization of academy members who believe Americans deserve nutrition

information “not tainted by food industry interests,” traces the long trail of taint: In 1993, the academy “teamed up with McDonald’s to develop a line of Happy Meal Toys.” In 2010, it “joined forces with the Hershey Center for Health and Nutrition ‘to educate Americans on better, balanced eating.’” In 2014, it “received a grant from Elanco, maker of livestock pharmaceuticals, to ‘teach dietitians about farming.’” The academy isn’t a watchdog of the industry; it’s married to it.

And now, fresh from the Kraft Singles debacle, the academy is back in the news. This time it’s for an article about added-sugar labeling in an issue of its seemingly academic publication, the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. The article reports the findings of a survey carried out and paid for by the International Food Information Council Foundation. Whatta name! It’s like having, “*We’re not lobbyists, pimps, propagandists or obfuscators — we’re legit! No, really!*” tattooed on your forehead. This Foundation, you will not be shocked, shocked to learn, is funded by the food and beverage industry.

Added sugar has no nutritional value; that’s why its calories are called “empty.” It’s not the sugar that occurs naturally in some foods, like fruit. It’s the sugar added to a product during the manufacturing process, making it taste sweet. That sugar, along with added salt and fat, changes our brains. The more we eat, the more we crave. It’s not a moral failure — it’s chemistry. As former Food and Drug Administration commissioner David Kessler lays out in his book, *The End of Overeating*, we are literally addicted to sugar, and it’s killing us.

The F.D.A. recommends that added sugar contribute a maximum of 10 percent of our daily calories. That’s a ceiling of 50 grams of added sugar per day. Drink a big soda, eat a Cinnabon or a Milky Way, and you’ve hit the limit. If you think that’s draconian, it’s higher than the American Heart Association’s limits (38 grams for men, 25 grams for women), and it’s double what the World Health Organization recommends.

What prompted the nice folks at the International Food Information Council Foundation (I love saying the name) to pay for a survey was an F.D.A. proposal to require packaged food and beverage labels to state not only the grams of added sugar, but also what percent of your daily max of added sugar calories is in it. It’s sobering to read that the venti salted caramel mocha you’re about to hoist contains 71 grams of sugar; it could be horrifying to learn that it blows past 140 percent of the F.D.A.’s daily added sugar limit.

According to the International Food Information Council Foundation survey, consumers would be confused if food labels had to include an added sugar percentage. The label might be technically accurate, but people would believe that even more sugar had been added than actually was, and so they’d be less likely to buy the product. In other words, what’s wrong with the labeling is that it would work.

On the heels of this news, the *Times* also broke the story of Coca-Cola’s undisclosed parentage and funding of the Global Energy Balance Network. The purpose of the GEBN is to shift the blame for obesity away from bad diets — to create the appearance of scientific support for added sugar, as long as you burn the calories by becoming more active. It’s nice to know there’s evidence that exercise is good for us. It’s not so nice to know that Coca-Cola is paying for that research as a PR strategy to take nutritional guilt out of drinking Coke. Yep, that 20-ounce bottle is the perfect thirst-quencher while you’re shopping online for the perfect pair of sneakers for that Soul Cycle class you’ve been meaning to look into.

That PR strategy dovetails nicely with the industry’s targeting their TV marketing of sugary and salty food at the same people who should be cutting back on them. According to research not funded by the industry, African-American kids in the U.S. — who have higher rates of obesity and other diet-related diseases — are more than twice as likely to see TV ads for candy and soda than their white counterparts. Thirty-nine percent of Hispanic and Latino kids are overweight or obese, but “over two-thirds of the Spanish TV ads that are directed to [Latino children] are really pushing fast food, sugary drinks, candy and snacks.”

It’s hard enough to keep up with changing nutritional guidelines. But unless you’re an expert, it’s damn near impossible to tell the difference between independent research and research ginned up by trade groups and marketers. Not long ago, I was especially gladdened to learn that butter and eggs were back. Unfortunately, I now realize I have to go back and see whether my bliss was bought and paid for by the National Academy of Bovine Studies and the Global Galline Information Institute Foundation.

*This is a cross-post of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you’d like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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