Coca-Cola, Transparency and Science Outreach

By Hank Campbell — September 28, 2015

If you get money from a corporation, are you for sale?

Thousands of bloggers who have jobs and then write at night would be surprised to know their online thoughts are controlled by the people who give money to their employers. It's obviously silly, yet much of the public tends to think that if a scientist gets funding from the government or a corporation, they have a mandate to produce a specific result, even though those same people would not agree that their own "funding source" -- an employer -- controls their thoughts.

Coca-Cola has been in the news because of the revelation that they were funding the Global Energy Balance Network, which stated that exercise and diet moderation were more important than just cutting out a food type when it comes to obesity control.

Funding or not, that makes perfect sense. The American Council on Science and Health has shown the same thing numerous times, with entire books and peer-reviewed studies to document it. And in the past Coca-Cola has made unrestricted grants to fund our peer-reviewed work or science outreach. All funding is appreciated, of course, but can any rational person think a small grant makes us "industry shills?" It is like saying a stranger on the street gives you $5 and suddenly you adopt all their beliefs.

Coke does not think that doling out 1/1,000,000th of their annual revenue is causing any group to go from hating soda to promoting it. Yet simplistic conspiracy theorists often insist it must be so.

A few weeks ago, we got a call from a very nice person at Coca-Cola telling us that under their new transparency initiative, they were going to disclose that we were included in a list of the $118.6 million in health research and partnerships they had funded since 2010. And they did.
My first thought when I heard about the conversation was that it was really nice of them to call. We are obviously quite literally a drop in their science bucket, and their last grant was years ago, yet they were apparently calling each group individually as a courtesy. That is class.

My next thought was, "so what?" Unlike Natural Resources Defense Council, or the foundation that laundered money for Mother Jones magazine, we have always proudly listed industry relationships because we know that science is science. Sixty percent of basic research is industry-funded and almost 100 percent of applied research. To contend that funding source determines the output would mean that Democrats have to deny all the research funded during the George W. Bush administration. Madness.

And we are not alone, most scientists cannot be controlled. Running Science 2.0, it became obvious that trying to herd scientists is like trying to herd butterflies -- except scientists are butterflies that transform into sharp-fanged cultural gargoyles when mobilized due to outrage.

Yet I still had to wonder. Did it make a difference in our discussions of soda?

Yoni Freedhoff, who consults on nutrition from the University of Ottawa, says it might have: "Consciously or unconsciously, (the organizations) might pause before saying anything that would in turn be negative for their funders."

Really? So if the University of Ottawa or the Canadian government were poisoning people with toxic chemicals, Freedhoff would also "pause" and not speak out, because he is reliant on them as funding sources, right? He would object to that characterization, I hope, so it seems odd he would casually infer it about other scientists. If he were able to look at the issue objectively, he would caution against making such caricatures out of real people.

But I wanted to know for sure, so I had a researcher here audit our work from 2010 on. Coke gave us no grants in 2011, 2014 or so far in 2015, so using the entire six-year period made sense; spikes would be obvious. The results were heartwarming. Though we did talk about soda more at times, that was because the mayor of New York City was trying to ban Big Gulps, and then food activists are generally cycling through the same stuff and getting media attention so we have to debunk it.
In 2010, we mentioned soda 15 times, just over once a month. That means one article out of about 100. No articles about Coke that year, though we got a grant from them.

In 2011, soda was discussed 11 times with Coke the subject twice. This was more like what I expected, since obviously they are the most successful soda company in the world -- but they gave us no grants.

In 2012, soda articles dropped to eight, which would not have happened if donations mattered, since we got a small grant from Coke. That year there were again no articles about Coke at all.

In 2013 soda was big in the news once more and Coke was the subject three times over the course of a year while soda was in 10 articles out of around 1,200.

In 2014, and so far in 2015, we had six soda articles, none about Coke (though this article is, so that will be one).

So much for being shills for Big Soda.

But that was never true anyway, no matter how often anti-science groups and the media platforms sympathetic to them try to claim it must be so about anyone not embracing the latest health scares. Instead of us being shills, companies occasionally give us grants because we make a difference in promoting science issues that are important to them, just like individuals fund us because we share their values. We aren’t out there jumping from scare tactic to scare tactic; instead, we are trusted guides for the public on complex issues.

Promoting fear and doubt about science -- not standing up for it -- is how groups get rich, Counting on "corporate funding" for science is a horrible business model, as any look at our revenue and opponents of science can easily show. NRDC made more just in interest on its bank account while you’re reading this, than we receive in donations in an entire month.

Yet many journalists don’t get that, and instead they go with the easy narrative (NRDC has more money, so they must be right) and that does influence public perception. We are in mainstream media once a week or so, and one press mention recently said we were "pro business." When was the last time the New York Times called NRDC or EWG "anti-business?" Never -- and they won't as long as NRDC keeps buying full-page ads in their newspaper.

Fortunately for you, we don't much care what the New York Times or anyone else thinks. We only care about science and health.

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