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# Who Pays the Piper?

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*Through the years, the informational mills of the food industry have been grinding steadily. An array of materials, in volume perhaps startling to many people, has flowed from trade associations and other industry groups.*

—James P. McFarland, General Foods, 1971

*I can think of few things which would be more inevitable than a rightful public outcry against an intrusion by business into areas such as education in which it has neither competence nor a publicly legitimized role.*

—Peter Allport, Association of National Advertisers, 1978

In May 1960, the *New York Times* reported that when Canadian children came home singing brand-name jingles, parents and (belatedly) school officials discovered that there had made its way into the Ontario schools a glossy thirty-two page multicolored workbook entitled "The Educational ABC's of Industry" in which each letter of the alphabet (for sale at \$7,800 a page) was represented by an advertiser: "C is for Orange Crush, G is for General Motors, M is for Milko, and O is for Oxo." Commenting on this phenomenon in his 1963 book *Culture against Man*, Jules Henry remarked that it was not really surprising. In the "pecuniary philosophy" of business, to educate "meant to teach to buy products"; therefore, the person responsible would have seen "nothing wrong . . . in helping the process along by putting advertising materials in the hands of children. . . . What should businessmen do," Henry asks ironically, "sit in their offices and dream while millions of product-ignorant children go uninstructed?"<sup>1</sup>

To a contemporary New York-based company named "the educational abc of industry," the answer to Henry's question is still no. Among the company's "educational" activities is a yearly contest involving over 2.5 million junior high school students (35 percent of all those in the United States, by the company's own account) and 95,000 educators. "Sponsors" such as General Foods or Hoffman-La

Roche, Inc. (vitamin makers), provide students with materials on processing, additives, or vitamins so that participating students can compose an essay, write a report, design a poster, or otherwise "tell the company's story" in an attempt to win the National Student Contest. "Obviously an indelible impression is created on the participating teen and their [sic] parents."<sup>2</sup>

If business persons are bound to try to teach even children to buy their products, can they be trusted as educators? Should food companies do nutrition education? As interest in health and nutrition issues has increased over the last decade, these concerns have begun to take on urgency in both developed and developing countries. Questions arose first in relation to advertising: To what extent, critics asked, had food manufacturers become nutrition educators simply by virtue of the products they advertised, the audiences to whom they advertised them, and the intensity of these selling campaigns? More recently doubts have arisen about many of the educational materials and activities of food companies. Can the food industry do *objective* nutrition education? Should the food industry be engaged in nutrition education at all?

In the present review, these issues will be considered largely from a U.S. perspective. This decision reflects the reality that the problem of industry "education"—if problem it is—exists most extravagantly in the United States. For it is in the United States that advertising—much of it food advertising—has had its most lavish inflorescence. Here less than 5½ percent of the world's people manage to consume more than half of all the world's advertising.<sup>3</sup> And it is here that widespread concern has lately been generated over the appropriateness and objectivity of food industry-produced educational materials, especially as they are used in the nation's schools.<sup>4</sup>

For despite the fact that the United States is a very rich country, with a long-standing system of universal public education, the government's direct involvement in nutrition education over the past quarter century has been trivial compared to the efforts, both educational and promotional, of the commercial sector. Thus, by default, the nutrition "story" that has been told, both in the schoolrooms of the nation and in the mass media, has tended to be a story agreeable to the food industry.<sup>5</sup>

Given the competing demands for government funds in countries that are both less affluent and less comfortably overfed, the questions raised by food industry activities in the United States may also be instructive for nations in which such questions have not until

recently needed addressing. Can financially hard-pressed educational systems afford to refuse attractive food industry-produced nutrition-education materials or mass media campaigns? Can they afford not to? How can such offers and efforts be evaluated?

Any review of commercial nutrition education must begin with an assessment of advertising, since it is the best financed and best known educational activity of the food industry. Although advertisers themselves (and often educators too) tend to deny advertising's educational role, it is evident that: (1) education is whatever leads people to learn; and (2) most people learn *something* from almost everything they are exposed to over time.

The confusion here is between education and schooling, between what Dewey long ago characterized as "incidental" education acquired in the normal course of living and the "intentional" education of the schoolroom. As has been pointed out by Cremin, however, a good deal of education outside the classroom is also intentional. Much like the school, various social institutions, from the family to Boy Scout troops to radio and television stations, also have curricula, which they teach "quite deliberately and systematically over time." The curricula of the latter include not only

programs labeled educational, but also . . . news broadcasts and documentaries . . . commercials (which teach people to want) and . . . soap operas (which reinforce common myths and values).<sup>6</sup>

The *intention* of food advertising is to create a desire for certain kinds of food products; its behavioral goal (to use a recently fashionable educational phrase) is to lead the customer out into the marketplace to purchase particular edible substances. In working toward that end, any food advertiser seeks to make his product seem highly desirable and in some way essential to the social, psychological, and/or physical well-being of the advertisee. Since knowledge of (or belief about) relationships between food and well-being is part of the content of nutrition education, it is clear that food advertisers are, broadly speaking, nutrition educators.

Over the last ten years there has been a growing awareness of this educational role of food advertising—especially where young children are concerned. In this country, the most serious efforts to address both the actual and potential educational roles of food advertising have been those of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the regulatory agency assigned to protect the public from deceptive and unfair trade practices. During the 1970s, in two separate actions, the

commission proposed: (1) to require more, and more informative, nutrition information in food advertisements;<sup>7</sup> and (2) to regulate advertising directed to children, especially advertising of highly sugared food products.<sup>8</sup> Hearings on the latter proposal were held in early 1979; hearings on the Food Advertising Rule, part of which were held in 1976, were originally scheduled to recommence in the spring of 1979. Since then intense lobbying pressure from the food industry has induced Congress to move to curb FTC's rule-making authority. Whatever the outcome of that struggle, it is relevant here simply to recognize that a major regulatory agency has dealt with food advertising as if it were an educational enterprise—and has attempted to regulate so as to improve the quality of the instruction provided.

In nations less affluent than the United States, there is much less advertising of all kinds. (Compare, for example, the \$157 each U.S. citizen paid for advertising in 1976 with the 3¢ invested per Ethiopian.)<sup>9</sup> Yet in poor countries as in rich ones, the money spent on advertising food and drink may greatly exceed the funds available for health promotion activities. Such advertising is widely seen, by both its critics and its advocates, as educating the poorest of the poor in the consumer values of Western capitalism. Critics suggest that this education is harmful—that since its recipients cannot afford refrigerators, trips to Bermuda, or floors on which to use floor wax, they are lured into compromising their health by wasting their limited resources on the symbols of the modern world they *can* afford, soft drinks and snack foods.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years, an even more serious charge has been leveled; some infant formula manufacturers have been accused of contributing, through their promotional efforts, to the malnutrition and death of infants. Just as breakfast cereals with such unlikely names as Pink Panther Flakes have become symbols of U.S. problems with children and food advertising, so the promotion of infant formula in countries with poor yet large and fecund populations has come to symbolize—despite the prior ubiquity of Coca Cola—the adverse educational effects of advertising in the developing world.

The accusers in the "infant formula scandal" charge that infant formula manufacturers, by promoting their products to destitute mothers, have contributed to a dramatic and dangerous decline in breast-feeding. The claim is that an advertising-induced switch from breast to bottle among mothers who live in conditions that make safe bottle-feeding impossible has produced an increased incidence of illness and death among infants.<sup>11</sup> For their part, the formula

companies deny promoting their products to those women who cannot read package instructions, who lack access to safe water or refrigeration, or who cannot afford *enough* formula to feed their infants adequately.<sup>12</sup>

Just as it is impossible to prove that a U.S. child gets cavities from watching a Sugar Frosted Flakes commercial, so it has proved impossible, in a world of rapid social change, for critics to prove that the promotional activity of any given formula company has been directly responsible for any baby's death from its mother's inappropriate adoption of the bottle. However, through the persistence of such groups as the Swiss Third World Action Group and the U.S. Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, extensive testimonial evidence has been accumulated indicating that advertising and other promotional activities involving clinic and hospital personnel have helped convince many poor mothers to bottle-feed, with often disastrous effects on their infants' health. In the fall of 1979, the contending sides met at a UNESCO-sponsored conference on infant feeding; during the conference the formula companies agreed to stop all mass media advertising.<sup>13</sup>

It seems clear, then, that advertising educates, both in the United States and abroad; indeed, it is only since critics have begun to accuse food advertising of "miseducation" or have—as in the case of FTC—attempted to regulate it so as to improve its educational usefulness that advertising's supporters have begun to insist that it does not and cannot be expected to educate. A decade ago, when the food industry was under considerably less pressure, it was possible for a conservative and respected food industry veteran to admit proudly that in the United States "techniques and expertise for influencing and educating the public" were "in daily application" in the food industry. Such industry efforts were necessary, he suggested, because only industry, of the many educating groups, could afford to use the mass media.<sup>14</sup>

In the present adversary climate, the food companies most willing to admit that their advertising is educational are those for whom education is most in harmony with product sales. For example, a large U.S. food company recently surveyed in regard to its nutrition education activities offered its total advertising budget for its polyunsaturated margarine and its cholesterol-free egg substitute as nutrition education expenditure. Presumably the company was educating the public on the hypocholesterolemic effect of diets high in polyunsaturates and low in cholesterol.<sup>15</sup>

On the whole, however, the present public position of the food industry is that its lavish advertising budgets around the world are not (and should not be) regarded as having either educational potential or educational consequences. The industry's overt educational intentions are expressed through materials and activities most often produced by departments of consumer relations. And although budgets for things educational have been minute in comparison with expenditures for direct product promotion, the industry is viewing the educational aspects of its activities with increasing seriousness as attacks from anti-industry critics mount and as the United States and other governments move toward developing nutrition policies that may threaten various producer groups. In a speech to the 1978 annual meeting of the Society for Nutrition Education, one industry executive commented: "If the food industry is to halt or abate the current erosion of consumer confidence, incorporation of effective nutrition information and education components into consumer service programs on a coordinated, cooperative, industry-wide basis is becoming a *corporate necessity*."<sup>16</sup> Food industry spokesmen who testified about a nutrition information bill introduced into the U.S. Congress in 1978 were virtually unanimous in supporting nutrition education from infancy onward.<sup>17</sup>

#### INDUSTRY AS EDUCATOR

There is no central board in the United States that reviews industry-produced educational materials; and since many are promoted and sent out directly to health professionals, the public, or teachers, there is no way of reviewing all food company materials and activities. Several years ago, Jerry Moore wrote to twenty-five major food companies and received "a huge stack of printed materials," which he believed were but the tip of the iceberg. His listing gives an idea of their range:

Kellogg's "stick up for breakfast" school education program; McDonald's Nutrition Labeling and Diabetic Exchange Listing activities, as well as classroom education units; General Food's print-ad campaign on nutrition and food additive usage; Best Food's print-ad education materials; General Mills's "Contemporary Nutrition" newsletter with special editions for legislators and media professionals and health professionals; Foremost McKesson's "The Professional Nutritionist" magazine; Swift's "Food for Life" exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry; National Dairy Council's Nutrition Education Materials . . . ; a symposium on nutrition education at . . . the Institute of Food Technol-

ogists' convention; Florida Citrus Commission's sponsorship of regional nutrition education conferences; nutrition ad campaigns by the Potato Board and other commodity marketing associations; Kraft's long-standing support to Home Economics Education Programs . . . the list could go on and on.<sup>18</sup>

In beginning to evaluate this volume and variety of materials (and activities) covering such a range of topics and addressed to such an array of audiences, it may be best to begin with two diametrically opposed overviews of the whole. In late 1977, a subcommittee of the U.S. Congress chaired by Congressman Frederick Richmond asked the fifty-three largest U.S.-based food companies and ten trade organizations (1) for copies of their educational materials; (2) for their definitions of nutrition education; and (3) for information on their nutrition education policies. Based on the answers received and the materials submitted, Richmond was moved to comment that most of what he had seen was "product promotion under the guise of public service."

"The Industry's concept of nutrition education," Richmond observed,

is frequently nothing more than an excuse for such self-serving concepts as "breakfast nutrition," "snack nutrition," "dairy nutrition," or even "weiner nutrition." . . . Food company messages say "eat something of everything." . . . Aware that government has not taken an active role in providing nutrition education in our school systems, food companies and trade organizations are filling the void. Under the guise of nutrition education, they are promoting their products to captive audiences of children.<sup>19</sup>

Another view was recently expressed by Dr. E. Neige Todhunter, a distinguished nutrition educator. In meeting "the nutrition education challenges of a complex society," she suggested, the food industry had the resources "to create and distribute imaginative, reliable publications and visual materials for educational programs at all levels, especially schools." For fifty years, she concluded, the food industries have been presenting "scientifically based nutrition information in such a way that its authenticity is recognized and acted on . . . they can be counted on to continue to do so."<sup>20</sup>

The materials that inspired these disparate reactions can perhaps best be appraised by considering them in terms of their intended audiences: health professionals, the public, and school children.



## EDUCATING THE PROFESSIONALS

In food industry communications with professionals, the distinction between product promotion and education is often slight. Indeed, it is actually difficult to determine which activities the companies themselves would legitimately describe as promotional, and which educational. Where infant formula companies provide fellowships to nutrition students, sponsor all-expense-paid workshops on infant feeding for health professionals, provide ring binders and other materials (clearly marked with the company name) to nutritionists in a position to recommend to new mothers one or another product or feeding method, should these efforts be judged as educational or straightforwardly promotional in intent? Now that formula companies are abandoning "advertising" in developing countries, one may rightfully ask whether their donations of nursery equipment, their free samples for clinic and hospital patients, their gifts of formula to physicians' wives, will be retained as educational or suspended as promotional. Do we not ask too much of professionals to expect them to retain their objectivity in the face of such self-serving generosity?

Surely professionals should be the group most able to discern bias in industry-produced materials. They should, for example, be sensitive to the tendency of a dairy industry-supported educational review to emphasize somewhat disproportionately such topics as dental and bone health, the role of milk in the diet, the composition of dairy foods, or the usefulness of ruminant animals in combating world hunger. Similarly, a professional should anticipate that cereal industry-produced pamphlets such as "Increasing Importance of Grain Foods" and "Breakfast and Today's Lifestyles" may paint a markedly indiscriminating picture of the virtues of *all* processed breakfast cereals—including questionably valuable pink and blue ones. Yet as Todhunter's encomium about food industry efforts suggests, a historic habit of viewing the entire food industry as a selfless ally may prove difficult to overcome.

## ENLIGHTENING THE PUBLIC

Though the public logically ought to be more vulnerable to deception than professionals, there is some evidence that this may not be so. In the present high-pressure commercial climate, even young children are said to become aware of the selling intent of com-

mercials, and polls reveal that the public is growing increasingly suspicious of everything. Or perhaps nothing has really changed since 1938 when in discussions about organizing an industry-supported educational foundation, the then president of General Foods questioned whether "the public would ever believe that profit-minded industries would be unselfish enough to spend time and money on anything that detracted from profits."<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the public will so believe, even the most cursory examination of the kinds of "objective" information sent to consumers when they ask food companies for nutrition materials suggests that generalized wariness may be highly appropriate.

To begin with, factual information is often astonishingly brand-specific. For example, the sources for vitamin C listed in one large company's nutrition information booklet are (in order): "Awake frozen concentrate for imitation orange juice, Orange Plus frozen concentrate for orange breakfast beverage, strawberries, Tang and Start Instant Breakfast Drinks," and so on.

A National Livestock and Meat Board Chart, "Functions of Food and Nutrition," lists meat first among sources of protein, iron, vitamin A, thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin—but not fat. And out of twenty-four foods whose protein, calorie, and fat content is listed in another table, meat products—listed so as to emphasize their protein content—accounts for 37 percent.

A booklet on nutrition from an international company that makes (among other products) corn oil and corn oil margarine reads as if the sole purpose of ingestion were to prevent coronary artery disease. Another company has a handsome pamphlet entitled *Smart Eating* that promises to tell the reader the things "you'd like to know about nutrition, RDA's, labeling, additives and the like." Inside the back cover is the explanation "sent to you courtesy of Breakfast Squares. Smart Eating in this Busy World." The whole perfectly exemplifies what sociologist Jules Henry would call "Glory by Association."<sup>22</sup> The product, a highly sweetened, fabricated cake product, is clearly intended-to benefit from its implied association with good nutrition.

#### NUTRITION EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

While consumers who write to companies for "nutrition information" may be prepared to get their lessons with a sales pitch, school children receive nutrition education messages and materials from teachers in the classroom with all the associated authority that school

confers. Ideally the materials will be objective and educational, but in practice this is frequently not the case. Consider, for example, a single, well-publicized educational campaign undertaken by a major breakfast cereal company.

The Kellogg "Stick up for Breakfast" campaign actually began around 1973 with a contest for children printed on the backs of cereal packages. The contest was then "supported" with television commercials, print ads in comic books and other children's magazines, newspaper ads aimed at encouraging parents to have their children enter the contest, and in-store materials for food retailers. Finally, in 1975, the company induced the Washington, D.C., school system to conduct a full-week "Stick up for Breakfast" program, with the announced goal of increasing student participation in free school breakfast. According to a company report, "the whole school system was involved—about 3500 classes. Each class wrote a song on the value of a good breakfast, and three winning age groups won a free trip to Disney World."<sup>23</sup> If more children eat breakfast, it is probably to the children's benefit, as well as Kellogg's. However, the company and the program's critics ultimately disagreed about whether or not the program had actually increased school breakfast participation. Moreover, there seemed to be little question that, in the end, the school district invested more in the program than Kellogg, since the time of many school personnel was involved. Since "each child who participated [got] a certificate . . . signed by Kellogg's and decorated with a number of Kellogg's cereal box trade-marks, plus decals representing symbols of Kellogg's cereals," it could be argued that, at a minimum, the activity was more promotional than educational.<sup>24</sup>

As much was suggested in a report on the program given by a Kellogg vice president at an *Advertising Age* Promotion Workshop in August 1976. Acknowledging criticism of the "Stick up for Breakfast" program by "consumer activists," he insisted that such criticisms "were far outweighed by the positive value. . . . We're not in it just for the informational value, of course. [Such programs] can sell our products. By educating children on the importance of eating a good breakfast, we are making an investment in the consumer."<sup>25</sup>

"Kellogg's contribution to nutrition education," as one critical consumer activist has pointed out, is merely a symbol of the "larger problem of the food industry's influence over nutrition education programs."<sup>26</sup> Much of the industry effort goes to producing materials aimed at the schoolroom, materials that have been the subject of a thorough investigation by Sheila Harty, an educational media

specialist working with one of Ralph Nader's public interest groups. School-directed materials were also surveyed by the Richmond subcommittee. Both analyses are now in print.<sup>27</sup>

Harty's analysis begins with the observation that tight budgets have been a constraint on schools wishing to provide up-to-date materials on such newly popular subjects as nutrition. Seizing this opportunity, industry has begun to produce "sophisticated educational materials, some graded K-12, teacher guides included. These materials are available to teachers upon request, advertised in educational publications or through publicity catalogs distributed to school systems."

"The question is," Harty asks, "whether instructional materials in a product area prepared by those with vested interests could be free from bias or promotional advantage." She concludes that whether or not they *could* be free from bias, they *are* not. "All industry educational materials provide the opportunity for brand name identification and image-building with their inherent long-range profit return [and] some . . . of these materials show definite product promotion and bias."<sup>28</sup>

Consider, as a single example of what Harty is referring to, the nutritional value chart that teachers can get from a maker of canned and frozen fruits and vegetables. The chart recommends that for "assured nutritional value you should choose canned or frozen products as all food value is quickly sealed within." Another colorful chart from the same company shows how "variety in canned fruits" gives nutritional balance. The varieties include "cling half," "cling slice," "freestone half," "freestone sliced peaches." The "fruit drinks and juices" include "ping," "pong," "pi-li," and "citrusip," along with the more botanically familiar orange, grapefruit, pineapple, and tomato. An order sheet for additional educational supplies is enclosed.

Under such circumstances, Harty notes, it is difficult for teachers to present a balanced picture. Teachers often order films and other materials from publications like *Educators' Guide to Free Health, Physical Education and Recreation Materials*. The 1977 edition of this directory, Harty points out, had 266 listings under "Food and Nutrition," of which 56 percent were from companies or trade associations (up 12 percent from 1976), 19.5 percent from government or military agencies, and 15.4 percent from media centers. Less than 8 percent of the materials were from professional associations, foreign governments, and consumer groups; 0.4 percent were from educa-

tional organizations. The imbalance is notable on the face of it; in fact it may be even worse than it looks. For when "industry does not prepare its educational materials in-house, the instructional media centers to whom they contract are listed by the *Educators' Guides* as the source for the film. Teachers have no way of knowing beforehand that a film is sponsored by a particular industry."<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no oversight group for such materials at the federal, state, or local level—and industry helps prepare the only guide for separating the gold from the dross. Furthermore, though a teacher may recognize the potential or actual bias of industry-produced materials, obtaining resources with which to offer a different point of view is not only more difficult but is almost always more expensive. Thus free or inexpensive industry-produced materials tend to drive more costly unsubsidized educational materials from the classroom.

The Richmond Committee staff was also particularly concerned to find in the classroom nutrition-educational materials characterized by a "high degree of promotion." As Congressman Richmond himself commented: "Young children do not have the experience or education to distinguish between product promotion and nutrition education, especially when it is presented to them by a teacher in the classroom. Since there is no formal review of materials for accuracy and freedom from commercialism, there is a danger that classrooms will become the new frontier of advertising."<sup>30</sup>

As to the industry's own perception of its role in the schools, the Richmond Committee staff noted an interesting ambiguity. In responding to the staff's questionnaire about food company responsibility for nutrition education, the majority of companies responding said that the government should *not* educate the consumer, leaving that to the food industry; they thought government *should*, however, have primary responsibility in the school system. Yet, as the staff noted, "the provision of materials for nutrition education in our school systems has been, and increasingly is, a major activity of the food industry."<sup>31</sup>

This admittedly cursory overview of the educational activities of the food industry in schools and elsewhere inevitably raises a number of important questions. The most important of all is whether food industry efforts such as those reviewed here do any harm. To answer that question one must define what one means by "harm." What can be said is that some industry activities are deliberately misleading; for example, a sugar industry pamphlet that assures children that

"scientists have found that generous amounts of sugar are a valuable part of well-balanced diets for growing children." Or such activities may be blatantly promotional; for example the Distributive Education Clubs of America teaches children about the free enterprise system by having them sell Pepsi Cola and other products to their classmates.<sup>32</sup> And, finally, certain promotions may be competitive with more educational activities, for example, the Post Cereal and Campbell's Soup box-top and label collecting campaigns through which children induce parents and neighbors to purchase many thousands of dollars worth of food products so the children can earn "free" athletic equipment for their schools.<sup>33</sup>

Whether one considers such outcomes harmful in a rich country like the United States would depend on one's view of the product being promoted, and on one's view of how children—and schools—ought to be treated. At the least, bad activities and materials may, as noted, drive out good ones; and product promotion may provide an unbalanced view of what constitutes a good diet. Where expenditures for food account for a larger proportion of families' incomes than they do in the United States, the potential for harm would appear to be far greater. Mistakes in purchasing products under circumstances where the economic margin for error is nonexistent may have serious health repercussions. Thus it would be especially important for countries where advertising and promotion are ostensibly targeted at an affluent minority to be sure that promotional materials are kept out of both formal and informal systems of education aimed at the poor.

It is relatively easy to separate items that are overtly promotional from those that are, at least on the face of it, educational. The distinction has been most effectively made by a nutritionist, Margaret Phillips, who had extensive contact with industry-produced materials as a staff member of the Society for Nutrition Education. In testimony before FTC, Phillips suggested that "promotional materials can be objectively defined as those whose origin or source is apparent within the message even when the credit line is excluded."<sup>34</sup> That is, educational materials are those that do not unduly emphasize, or push, a single product or class of products.

Obviously there is a range of activities and materials on the spectrum between nutrition education and product promotion. Even clearly promotional materials may be differentially "harmful." If they are inaccurate, they are surely potentially harmful—and clearly uninstructional. But there is a second level of concern. Beef, for

example, is a good source of iron. Is a piece of promotional literature that conveys that fact—along with the equally accurate information that beef provides high-quality protein—useful educationally?

How professionals feel about such materials often tends to depend on the characteristics of the food promoted. Promoting beef is obviously nutritionally preferable to promoting soft drinks. Promoting broccoli or spinach may be even *more* desirable in a country that consumes too much animal fat and too few fresh vegetables. Hence an informational campaign promoting the notion that potatoes are a nutritious low-calorie food can win good will from professionals—since increased consumption of unprocessed potatoes in a society abandoning them for fat-marbled steak may be viewed as a nutritional good. There has been much less support, however, for a very similar promotional effort by the potato *chip* industry—even though the campaign promised to be based on equally accurate information about the nutrient content of the food involved. Commenting on the “Make Room for Potato Chips” campaign, one newspaper observed that cleaning up the image of the potato chip was like “trying to portray Attila the Hun as a Pioneer in urban renewal.”<sup>35</sup>

In the end, all materials promoting single foods turn out to be of questionable educational value since they tend, inevitably, to product overkill. A story for preschoolers that infers that an orange is a good daily snack seems, at first, less objectionable than a story suggesting a candy bar for the same purpose. Yet the nutritionally acceptable idea of an everyday orange turns out to be a conceptually limited and unnecessarily expensive solution to the problems of inadequate vitamin C intake and inappropriate snacking.

The intrinsic problem is that a food company or a food industry group cannot afford to urge potential customers to eat less of its products—whatever they are. And this problem afflicts not only clearly promotional materials but even those that are, by the Phillips definition “educational.” Thus materials from the meat industry promoting dietary “balance” emphasize the essentiality of abundant meat, materials from the dairy industry tend to neglect low-fat dairy products, and materials from the breakfast cereal manufacturers make no serious distinction between the nutritional merits of whole grains and of those multicolored, artificially flavored, super-fortified confections promoted to children as breakfast cereals. It is surely not incidental that, as Richmond observed, food company educational packages urge eating something of everything.

The difficulty is that while such materials may not be technically

promotional, neither are they really educational; sometimes, by failing to help their users make critical distinctions between actual products, they are merely ineffective in the context of a complex marketplace. More often they are truly deceptive—not by commission, but by omission. For example, consumer confusion appears to be high in the United States in regard to the fat levels and nutritional values of the hundreds of different dairy products on the grocery shelves. Yet one searches in vain through the Dairy Council's newly developed nutrition curriculum for any trace of such useful information. There is no suggestion at any grade level that overfat coronary-prone Americans might be well advised to eat low-fat dairy products, or that non-Caucasians might sometimes have trouble digesting milk at all. Such problems do not exist in the food world of the Dairy Council. The reality of the U.S. marketplace with its bewildering array of more than ten thousand different items is missing entirely from this carefully designed package. So is acknowledgement of consumer concerns over diet and health, food safety, the power of advertising, and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Which brings us to the crux of the problem. Any company or any industry's ultimate goal is to sell products. In the end no company can afford to do anything educational to threaten this bottom-line outcome. The nutrition educator's ultimate goal is to promote good nutrition—to teach people how to get the best possible diet at the lowest possible cost within the constraints of that person's life-style. These goals—that of the producer and that of the educator—are very often incompatible, since much of what the educator *ought* probably to be teaching in affluent countries is restraint, and nonconsumption of the very overprocessed food products from which many food producers make their greatest profit. No doubt the economics could be manipulated so that it would *pay* food companies not to fool with food—by the imposition of a high tax on the value added by processing, for example<sup>37</sup>—but at the moment the economics often work the other way. Which more often than not puts the food companies at odds with the nutrition educator.

Theoretically, of course, the situation is different in developing countries. There nutrition educators are seldom urging people to eat *less*, but are instead trying to teach them how to overcome nutrient deficiencies by supplementing their own or their children's diets. Yet even in developing countries, the foods that should be added to the diets of those most in need of nutrition education are not the comparatively expensive processed products from which the food industry



profits most. They are usually simple, locally available foods—green vegetables, grains and legumes, or the cheapest of animal proteins. It is hard to see how food processors could “afford” to support these educational efforts.

Finding a way to deal with the problems presented by industry educational efforts will not be an easy task. As has been illustrated, the quality of the materials, the obviousness of their selling message, and their potential for good or harm in various settings all vary markedly depending on who is producing the materials and on the sophistication of those using them. Even the most blatantly promotional materials can be put to good use by a well-informed teacher, who can use them to teach lessons on propaganda—if not on nutrition. Perhaps a guide to teachers on how to assess such materials would be one useful tool.

Attempting to restrict production of certain kinds of materials raises constitutional free speech issues; establishing some sort of monitoring board presents other kinds of difficulties. The Dairy Council curriculum was judged factually accurate and appropriate for its intended age levels by a review panel of the Society for Nutrition Education. Yet neither of those criteria deals with the previously discussed serious limitations in its *usefulness*.

Countries with food industries less powerful than that in the United States might well be able to enact legislation taxing the food industry on a percentage of its sales, with the funds to be used by an impartial board for the production of nutrition education materials.

In the United States one answer clearly lies in making public funds available so that educators can prepare nutrition education materials and activities capable of competing effectively with materials and activities offered by industry. Had there been any real alternatives in 1975, one wonders whether the Washington, D.C., school system would have been so receptive to Kellogg. Even the modest 50 cents per school child appropriated for such efforts under the 1977 Nutrition Education and Training program has already generated a level of effective local activity in some states and cities well beyond that provided for by the actual funds available. Certainly educators are considerably more comfortable with the idea that the good will drive out the merely venal than they are with the notion that certain materials should be wholly barred from schools.

Meanwhile, it is critically important for educators to learn a single, simple lesson. Few activities will be undertaken by any industry without some thought about their contribution to the industry's

profitability; the food industry can afford to support potentially effective nutrition education efforts only so long as consumers' improved nutrition does not imply a significant drop in product sales. No company or industry group can really afford to teach "eat less of what we make," even if it makes nutritional sense to do so. That is how business works of course; and where drain cleaners are concerned, subtle (or unsubtle) inducements to buy ever more of the company's product may be harmless. Where food is concerned, depending on the balance of the products so promoted, such urgings may cause serious dietary imbalance. Therefore, when anyone concerned with the public health is offered an "educational package" by a food company, it is essential to consider whether the public's health is really being served. While such consideration is proceeding, the caveat to hold in mind is an old one: "He who pays the piper calls the tune."

### Footnotes

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