

# Nutrition *Action*

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 HEALTH LETTER®  
 CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

# Not So Happy

How Big Soda pushes sugar water

You'd think it might be hard to sell 12 oz. cans filled with carbonated water, 9 teaspoons of sugar, and flavoring. But that's only if you're trying to sell soda. Selling happiness (or family or kindness or love) is a different story.

Here's how soda companies keep us drinking sugar beverages, despite the evidence that they raise the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other health problems.



#openhappiness

happiness.  
coca-cola.

# Not So Happy

## How Big Soda pushes sugar water



**Marion Nestle** is the Paulette Goddard Professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University. She is the author of eight books, including *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda*

(and *Winning*) (Oxford, 2015) and *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley, 2007). You can read her blog at [foodpolitics.com](http://foodpolitics.com). Nestle spoke to Bonnie Liebman.

### Q: What do studies say about the harm caused by soda?

**A:** The science is clear. Kids and adults who drink sodas tend to be heavier and have a higher prevalence of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and tooth decay.

The evidence is overwhelming—study after study after study, meta-analysis after meta-analysis after meta-analysis—except for ones that are funded by Coca-Cola and the American Beverage Association. What a coincidence.

Roughly 85 percent of the studies that are funded by industry find soda to be harmless. And roughly 85 percent of independently funded studies find strong correlations between soda drinking and poor health. Those percentages are too remarkable to be coincidental.

### Q: Instead, the industry promotes exercise?

**A:** The soda industry is following the tobacco industry's playbook. First you discredit the science. Then you discredit the scientists. Then you deflect attention from your product and in-

voke other kinds of issues like physical activity, hydration, personal responsibility, and so forth.

The industry says, "We are not holding a gun up to your head and making you drink sodas. It's up to you to decide what you want to drink. It's your responsibility."

### Q: Isn't that true?

**A:** It completely omits the ways in which sodas are marketed. Much of *Soda Politics*, my new book, covers that behind-the-scenes marketing. It's just part of the normal landscape of urban life. But if you pay attention to it, it's astounding.

The book's big take-home lesson is how comprehensive the strategies are for protecting and marketing a product that is essentially sugar water.

### Q: What are the marketing strategies?

**A:** They start with the advertising that you see—the brilliant commercials on television that cost millions of dollars to run during the Super Bowl



**Share honesty?** Check out the latest soda videos from the Center for Science in the Public Interest at [bit.ly/ShareHonesty](http://bit.ly/ShareHonesty) and [bit.ly/ChangeTheTuneOnSoda](http://bit.ly/ChangeTheTuneOnSoda).

and appear in every language in every country in which they are marketed. That's the obvious part.

But they don't advertise the product itself. They advertise happiness or family or they invoke other deep emotional connections.

### Q: And that works?

**A:** Absolutely. People have to have this product. Coca-Cola makes millions of tchotchkes that people fight over on eBay. My office is filled with Coca-Cola memorabilia that I have been collecting for years. They're part of America, part of your childhood.

I have three cans of Coca-Cola in my office. One says Love, one says Superstar, and one says Marion. Those cans are brilliant marketing. Everybody loves a Coca-Cola can with their name on it.

### Q: What strategies are less obvious?

**A:** The hardball tactics, like fighting New York City former Mayor Bloomberg's cap on soda sizes, fighting soda taxes and public health measures. Then there's the funding of research to undermine the science, the deliberate marketing to low-income minorities, and the front groups.

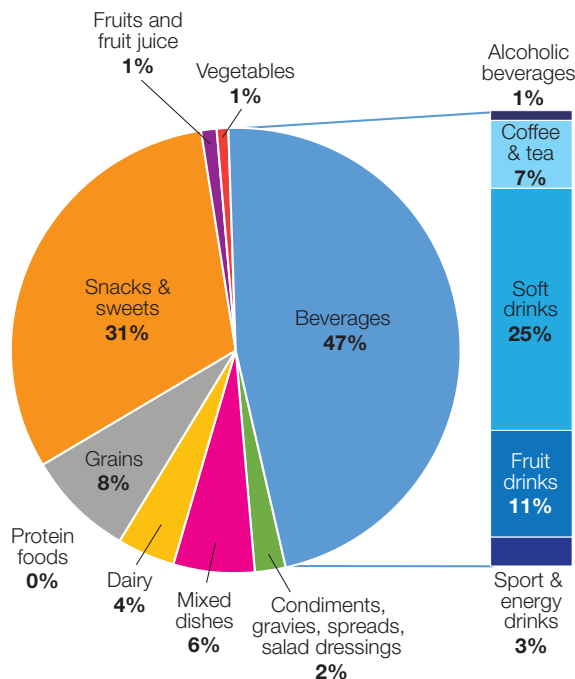
Soda companies also fund health organizations, community organizations, city organizations. When New York State was considering a soda tax, Coke offered to fund a park initiative. When Philadelphia was considering a soda tax, Coke offered to give the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia \$10 million. It's that kind of thing.

### Q: That sounds generous.

**A:** Yes. It's like their other corporate social responsibility efforts. Soda companies actually win prizes from the Environmental Protection Agency and environmental organizations for their



## Where Our Added Sugar Comes From



Source: What We Eat in America, NHANES 2009-2010.

attempts to protect the environment. A few months ago, the *New York Times* ran an article about all the fabulous things that Coca-Cola does to preserve water and reduce its water footprint. It read like a Coca-Cola press release.

### Q: The reality is different?

**A:** The reality is that Coca-Cola doesn't count in its water footprint the water it takes to grow the sugar. That makes a huge difference.

And behind the scenes, companies are fighting recycling laws and deposit laws for cans and bottles. What they fund is clean-ups. Because *you* do the work, and it doesn't raise the price of soda. Soda is a price-sensitive product. That's why companies are willing to go to any expense to defeat a soda tax or deposit law, even if it's only a few pennies.

### Q: What are the front groups?

**A:** They're industry-sponsored groups with names like Citizens Against Unfair Taxes. They sound like grassroots groups, but they're actually paid for by Coca-Cola or the American Beverage Association.

We saw them in New York City during the Bloomberg soda-cap fight. This was New Yorkers for Beverage Choices. The members handed out cards saying "Don't let bureaucrats tell you what size beverage to buy." The group's website was maintained by a PR firm recruited by the American Beverage Association to fight soda taxes.

My graduate assistant talked to people collecting signatures on petitions who said they were paid \$30 an hour. That's the best entry-level job in New York!

### Q: And they re-framed the soda cap as a ban?

**A:** Immediately. In fact, it wasn't a ban. You could buy as many 16 oz. sodas as you wanted.

### Q: But the soda companies won?

**A:** Yes. They took the city to court, which ruled that only the City Council, not the Health Department, had the authority to limit soda sizes. While companies talk about how they really care about public health, they're sinking fortunes into defeating public health initiatives.

I'd give anything to know how much money they spent defeating the New York soda cap. There were ads, posters, videos, banners on planes flying overhead, home mailings—I got one—the front groups, the legal fees.

### Q: Why do companies use celebrities and athletes to market soda?

**A:** The athletes link soda with health, and they're role models, especially for young people. They're often minorities, so they're part of soda companies' marketing to young people of color. And these groups have an especially high prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Beyoncé got \$50 million to promote Pepsi. Who'd turn that down?

### Q: Do they market to kids?

**A:** Companies aren't supposed to market to children under the age of 12. But

do kids under the age of 12 ever see programs meant for older kids? Of course they do. Do they see sports? Of course they do. And much of the marketing is electronic now.

### Q: Like Facebook ads?

**A:** Oh my goodness, yes. Coca-Cola's Facebook page has about 93 million likes. And this is about selling "liquid candy," as CSPI president Michael Jacobson brilliantly calls it. You would never let your kid eat candy all day long.

### Q: Yet companies claim to be fighting obesity.

**A:** Yes. They're in a difficult position. Soda sales in the United States are way down, especially in educated, better-off socioeconomic groups. Their most profitable product by far is flavored

sugar water. And the first thing you should do if you want to lose weight is to stop drinking sugary drinks.

For years, they've been scrambling to address the problem. In Securities and Exchange Commission filings for the last 10 years, obesity is listed as the first threat to Coca-Cola profits. So they've worried about obesity for a long time.

### Q: Doesn't Coca-Cola also sell water?

**A:** Yes. Companies can sell healthier drinks like vitamin waters, sports drinks, or just water. But they're not as profitable.

You'd think that bottled water would be the most profitable product in the world, but apparently it's not because it is so competitive. Bottled water is bottled water, so people buy the cheapest one. It's essentially a loss leader.

### Q: Are sodas profitable?

**A:** They're fabulously profitable, especially the fountain drinks, because companies don't have to pay for cans or bottles. A fountain drink basically costs 2 cents an ounce. So if you buy a 20-ounce soda in a movie theater—if they have anything that small—it costs

the theater 40 cents, and you've just paid \$4.50 for it. That's real money both for theaters and soda companies. That's why theaters have concession stands. I thought those calculations were staggering. I had no idea.

**Q: Are smaller cans profitable?**

**A:** Yes. These little 7.5 oz. cans with people's names on them are selling like hotcakes. Coca-Cola's profits last year were mostly from the little cans. Smaller cans are a step forward for health.

**Q: Is the water in soda cheap?**

**A:** Yes. It comes from taxpayer-supported municipal water systems. It's an absolutely brilliant strategy.

They also use municipal water in their bottled water. They run it through a filter, but it's no cleaner than tap water.



Part of the New York City Health Department's campaign to fight obesity.

**Q: Why do companies fight bottle deposit laws?**

**A:** Because they raise prices. In the old days, bottles were precious. Now they are disposable. And companies don't want to clean them.

**Q: What is the Global Energy Balance Network?**

**A:** That's a seemingly independent front group funded by Coca-Cola that basically says that exercise, not diet, is the main solution for obesity. Unfortunately, it involves scientists of considerable stature. But it was a huge public

relations disaster.

In August, a *New York Times* reporter discovered that these scientists had taken millions of dollars in research grants from Coca-Cola, and that the company had paid for the group's website. The scientists said that Coca Cola registered the website because the researchers didn't know how to do it. I had to laugh.

**Q: Were the scientists talking from Coca-Cola's playbook?**

**A:** Yes. One of the scientists, Steven Blair, said in an online video that everybody is always telling you eat less, eat less, eat less, don't eat junk food, don't drink sodas. You don't have to do any of that. All you have to do is be more active. If only.

**Q: If only it were that easy?**

**A:** Yes. As I'm fond of saying, it's 100 calories a mile. That's what it takes to work off this stuff. So if you drink a 300-calorie soda you've got to walk for three miles. Not many people are likely to do that.

**Q: What is the Beverage Institute for Health and Wellness?**

**A:** That's a kind of a front group of the American Beverage Association. The ABA includes makers of sugar-sweetened beverages, like Coke, Pepsi, and Dr Pepper Snapple. This group runs continuing education programs for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the professional association for dietitians.

**Q: They hold seminars at meetings?**

**A:** Yes, and some are hilarious. They'll have sessions on sugars and health, and you can bet they'll be saying there's no evidence that links sodas to poor health, and that everybody needs hydration and physical activity.

**Q: Do other food companies sponsor similar programs?**

**A:** Yes. And food companies also sponsor the American Society for Nutrition, the most important association of nutrition researchers. And it doesn't look like that's going to change. People are scrambling to figure out how these nu-

trition societies can take money from food companies and get away with it. I think that it introduces enormous conflicts of interest.

**Q: And when it comes to the science, all they have to do is instill doubt?**

**A:** Yes. And now industry-funded scientists argue that all researchers, not just those funded by industry, have a bias. The question is: What comes first: public health or industry profits?

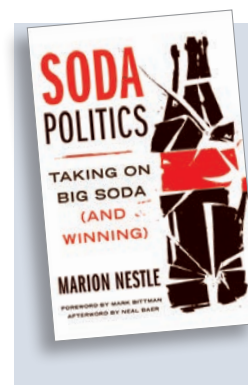
Every time I get five industry-funded studies that come out with results favorable to industry, I post them on my blog. I've been doing this since March, and so far I've posted 60 studies with results favorable to industry. I've asked people to tell me about industry-funded studies with results that are unfavorable to industry. So far I've found three.

**Q: But isn't Big Soda losing the battle?**

**A:** The soda companies think that soda sales are down because of obesity and that advocacy is just ruining sales. I'm not going to argue. Like the cigarette companies, the soda companies have moved their marketing overseas.

They're under siege. And not just because of the damage sodas do to our health. They're under siege by those who want to impose soda taxes. They're under siege for using up water from water supplies in India. They're under siege because their empty bottles and cans litter all over the place. It's one thing after another on many fronts.

That's why my book title ends with the words "and Winning." 🍷



Want to know more about the soda industry's shenanigans and how to fight them? Check out Marion Nestle's new book.