

# And Now a Word From Our Sponsors



## Are America's Nutrition Professionals in the Pocket of Big Food?

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## Executive Summary

By any measure, the nation is currently suffering from an epidemic of diet-related health problems. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,<sup>1</sup> chronic diseases – such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes – “are among the most common, costly, and preventable of all health problems.”

Against this backdrop, we must ask: what is the role of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND)—the nation’s largest association of nutrition professionals—in preventing or at least stemming the tide of diet-related health problems? What responsibility does this influential group of registered dietitians bear to be a leading advocate for policy changes to make eating healthfully more accessible? Does forming partnerships with the food industry compromise such a group’s credibility? And what does the food industry gain from such partnerships?

Why does it matter? As this report will show, the food industry’s deep infiltration of the nation’s top nutrition organization raises serious questions not only about that profession’s credibility, but also about its policy positions. The nation is currently embroiled in a series of policy debates about how to fix our broken food system. A 74,000-member health organization has great potential to shape that national discourse – for better and for worse.

### **Findings:**

- Beginning in 2001, AND listed 10 food industry sponsors; the 2011 annual report lists 38, a more than three-fold increase.
- The most loyal AND sponsor is the National Cattleman’s Beef Association, for 12 years running (2001-2012).
- Processed food giants ConAgra and General Mills have been AND sponsors for 10 of the last 12 years.
- Kellogg and the National Dairy Council have been AND sponsors for 9 of the last 12 years.
- Companies on AND’s list of approved continuing education providers include Coca-Cola, Kraft Foods, Nestlé, and PepsiCo.
- Among the messages taught in Coca-Cola-sponsored continuing education courses are: sugar is not harmful to children; aspartame is completely safe, including for children over one year; and the Institute of Medicine is too restrictive in its school nutrition standards.
- At AND’s 2012 annual meeting, 18 organizations – less than five percent of all exhibitors – captured 25 percent of the total exhibitor space. Only two out of the 18 represented whole, non-processed foods.
- Based on square footage, only about 12 percent of the expo floor was taken up by fruit and vegetable vendors, using AND’s own generous classification.
- The AND Foundation sells “nutrition symposia” sponsorships for \$50,000 at the annual meeting. In 2012, Nestlé presented a session on “Optimal Hydration.”

- The Corn Refiners Association (lobbyists for high fructose corn syrup) sponsored three “expo impact” sessions at the AND 2012 annual meeting.
- Roughly 23 percent of annual meeting speakers had industry ties, although most of these conflicts were not disclosed in the program session description.
- In an independent survey, 80 percent of registered dietitians said sponsorship implies Academy endorsement of that company and its products.
- Almost all RDs surveyed (97 percent) thought the Academy should verify that a sponsor’s corporate mission is consistent with that of the Academy prior to accepting them.
- A majority of RDs surveyed found three current AND sponsors “unacceptable.” (Coca-Cola, Mars, and PepsiCo.)
- The AND lobbying agenda reveals mostly safe issues benefiting registered dietitians. To date, AND has not supported controversial nutrition policies that might upset corporate sponsors, such as limits on soft drink sizes, soda taxes, or GMO labels.
- AND’s sponsors and their activities appear to violate AND’s own sponsorship guidelines.
- In 2011, AND generated \$1.85 million in sponsorship revenue, which represents about 5% the total revenue. This is down from 9% in both 2010 and 2009.
- For the AND Foundation, corporate contributions were the single largest source of revenue in 2011: \$1.3 million out of a total of \$3.4 million or 38 percent.
- In 2011, the AND Foundation reported more than \$17 million in net assets, more than six times its expenses for that year.

## Recommendations

**1) Greater Transparency:** AND should make more details available to the public (or at least to members) regarding corporate sponsorship—far beyond what it currently provides in its annual reports.

**2) Request Input from Membership:** Trade group policies should reflect the desires of its members. Many RDs object to corporate sponsorship but don’t know how to make their voices heard.

**3) Meaningful Sponsorship Guidelines:** AND should implement much stronger and more meaningful sponsorship guidelines, possibly looking to the Hunger and Environmental Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group’s stricter guidelines as a model.

**4) Reject Corporate-Sponsored Education:** AND should reject outright corporate-sponsored continuing education, as well as corporate-sponsored education sessions at its annual meeting. AND should also consider placing more distance between its credentialing arm and the main organization.

**5) Increased Leadership on Nutrition Policy:** In recent years, AND’s leadership has taken important steps to improve its policy agenda and create a positive presence in Washington. However, while the staff in the D.C. office is lobbying on behalf of AND’s membership, “education sessions” are being taught to RDs by Coke and Hershey’s. This disconnect will continue to undermine AND’s credibility on critical policy issues until the conflicts are resolved.