

BEST PUBLIC RELATIONS THAT MONEY CAN BUY



A GUIDE TO FOOD INDUSTRY FRONT GROUPS



CENTER FOR
FOOD SAFETY

MAY 2013

ABOUT US

THE CENTER FOR FOOD SAFETY (CFS) is a non-profit public interest and environmental advocacy membership organization established in 1997 for the purpose of challenging harmful food production technologies and promoting sustainable alternatives. CFS combines multiple tools and strategies in pursuing its goals, including litigation and legal petitions for rulemaking, legal support for various sustainable agriculture and food safety constituencies, policy initiatives, as well as public education, grassroots organizing and media outreach.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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One increasingly common way industry attempts to shape the public discourse is by forming a group that appears to benefit the public. Often these groups claim to represent farmers or consumers or some other sympathetic constituency when in fact they are funded by powerful industry players.

WHAT ARE FRONT GROUPS?

IN RESPONSE TO HEIGHTENED CRITICISM over the past few years, the food industry has stepped up its public relations efforts to reassure the media, the public, and policymakers that our food system is healthy and safe. One increasingly common way industry attempts to shape the public discourse is by forming a group that appears to benefit the public. Often these groups claim to represent farmers or consumers or some other sympathetic constituency when in fact they are funded by powerful industry players. Some long-standing front groups have a broad agenda, such as pushing industry-friendly science. Others form just to lobby or conduct public relations on a specific policy for a limited time and then disappear.

It is critical to understand who these groups are and how they operate. Their tactics are designed to hide their true agenda and funders. For example, representatives of front groups often write op-eds or appear as experts without disclosing the conflict of interest.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRADE GROUPS AND FRONT GROUPS?

Food companies hire lobbyists to push for legislation in their favor and oppose laws that hurt their interests. Trade groups are formal lobbying organizations through which food companies pool their resources to be more powerful. An example of a food industry trade group is the National Cattleman's Beef Association, which represents the beef industry. Each major animal product (pork, chicken, eggs, dairy) is represented by its own trade group. Likewise, the soft drink industry is represented by the American Beverage Association, while the Grocery Manufacturers Association represents both food and beverage makers such as General Mills, Coca-Cola, and Kraft Foods.

While trade groups are generally up front about who they represent, front groups are not. Front groups often have deceptive-sounding names and attempt to create a positive public impression that hides their funders' economic motives. Also, most front groups engage mainly in public relations campaigns as opposed to lobbying.

WHY DOES INDUSTRY FORM FRONT GROUPS?

Several motivators explain the rise of front groups in recent years. Most branded food companies (such as McDonald's or Coca-Cola) have millions of dollars invested in their public image and so would rather not engage in the under-handed and mean-spirited tactics that some front groups utilize. It's much safer to give money to front groups to let them do the dirty work while the corporate brand image remains clean.

Also, the largest players in the food industry know that "Big Ag" and "Big Food" have become synonymous with bad, so they are no longer credible messengers. It's better to create a front group that claims to represent farmers or consumers, two groups that are more sympathetic to the public. Similarly, industry knows that it has little credibility when it comes to complicated matters such as science. Years ago, the Tobacco Institute became notorious as the public relations arm of the tobacco industry—its aim to distort the science around smoking and health. This tactic effectively delayed public policy on tobacco for decades. The food industry's current effort to distort science is similar, but somewhat more subtle, operating through less obvious front groups.

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WHAT ARE COMMON FRONT GROUP TACTICS?

The main goal of any front group is to control the public discourse. Front groups are created in direct response to criticism being leveled at a sector of the food industry. Instead of fixing the myriad problems they've created, the food industry's response is to change the way these problems are talked about, to downplay them, to discredit critics, and otherwise make the problems disappear from the public's eye.

How do front groups accomplish this goal? The most valuable currency for any front group is propaganda and disinformation. Specific tactics include:

ASTROTURFING (FAKE GRASSROOTS): pretending your group represents the little guy, usually farmers, small business owners, or consumers. The idea is to make the public feel like the group is on their side and their interests are under attack by government and the elite.

SHOOTING THE MESSENGER: discrediting critics often by mocking them, calling them names like "food police" and "extremists" and otherwise marginalizing them.

BUYING SCIENCE: paying for research, hiring scientific experts as spokespeople, placing science stories in media, all without disclosing the conflict of interest.

SCAREMONGERING: Preying on people's fears, especially related to the economy; for example, saying a policy will result in higher food prices or job losses.

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Another common tactic employed by front groups is to “debunk” common “myths” about agricultural practices or nutrition advice. Front groups will portray advocacy groups, experts, and government officials as fear-mongers who don’t understand science or know the “facts.” The idea is to make the front group position appear sane and reasoned, while making opponents sound irrational and even conspiratorial.

A similar theme in front group discourse is to portray opponents as anti-democratic and anti-consumer. Often front groups will use hyperbolic language to describe policy ideas as threats to core American rights such as freedom. Such tactics exploit many American consumers’ fears and detract from the actual issue under discussion.

Each of these tactics is then deployed in a massive media campaign, through paid advertisements, media coverage, published research, op-ed articles, TV appearances, social media, etc. The idea is to distract attention from the substance of the issue (because industry often has no defense) and focus instead on anything else.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW THESE TACTICS WORK?

U.S. FARMERS AND RANCHERS ALLIANCE

A powerful example of a front group attempting to control the public dialogue on agriculture is the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance. Here is how the *New York Times* described the group upon its debut in 2011:

To assure Americans that food is safe, abundant and affordable, farmers can use their voices and faces to fight the label “Big Ag,” the organization’s leaders say. But the group’s members include the largest agriculture marketing groups in the country, with billions of dollars to spend. They include the American Egg Board (“The Incredible Edible Egg”) and the National Pork Board (“The Other White Meat”). Its \$11 million annual budget will come partly from mandatory marketing fees that the Department of Agriculture helps collect from farmers, and from corporations like Monsanto, the producer of genetically engineered seed, and DuPont, a major producer of chemical pesticides. Each company has committed to an annual contribution of \$500,000.¹

The group calls itself “farmers and ranchers” because that sounds better than Monsanto and Pork Board. The narrative that USFRA pushes can be summed up as: those critical of agriculture practices such as confining animals, the overuse of antibiotics, and genetically-engineered crops are

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simply ignorant city dwellers and if only actual farmers and ranchers could tell their own story, the public would be far better informed.

One of USFRA’s educational vehicles is what it calls “Food Dialogues,” in which the group hosts a series of panels to discuss various food production issues.² While the word “dialogue” gives the impression of a balanced debate, the panels are highly orchestrated and tightly controlled by USFRA and thus are skewed in industry’s favor. The events have each been hosted by leading media personalities, further illustrating the group’s agenda to influence how the media perceives them.

USFRA also maintains an intensive social media presence, with an impressive 200,000 likes on Facebook. (Although there appears to be a mix of people critical of conventional agriculture along with those defending it.) Many agriculture groups and farmers are also on Twitter, attempting to influence the discussion there. Of course, farmers and ranchers should be part of the national discourse on agriculture, but USFRA has an economic agenda that favors the largest players and downplays the plight of small farmers, not to mention the public.

NO ON PROPOSITION 37 IN CALIFORNIA

An excellent example of front group tactics is the No on 37 campaign in California during the 2012 election. Proposition 37 would have required the labeling of genetically-engineered foods. Despite early polling showing that most Californians favored the idea, the measure lost due to various underhanded tactics by the No campaign. While the No

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side claimed to be a “coalition of family farmers, grocers, food companies, small businesses and others,” they were in fact funded by leading biotech, pesticide, and junk food companies. But “farmers and small business” sounds better than “multinational corporations” or naming names like Monsanto and PepsiCo.

The opposition’s most effective tactic was scaremongering about higher food costs, despite the lack of data to support such a claim other than one paid-for, non-peer reviewed report. Another scare tactic was wild predictions about lawsuits and red tape. The No on 37 campaign also deployed shooting the messenger (plus scaremongering) by claiming Prop 37 was “written by a trial lawyer for trial lawyers,” which was untrue.

No on 37 also hired several medical and scientific experts as spokespeople, which is an effective way for industry to hide its economic interests. Voters are more likely to follow the advice of an MD dressed in a white coat than the CEO of Monsanto. Finally, they had a much bigger budget than the Yes side to spend on relentless ads.

HOW CAN WE FIGHT FRONT GROUPS?

The first step to fighting back is being able to identify these groups and who funds them. Often it just takes a little bit of internet research to uncover a group’s true identity. Sometimes the name alone can tip you off. Words like “alliance” and “council” are commonly found in front group names.

It’s important to call out when these groups are cited in the media, especially when their true agenda is not disclosed. For example, if you see an op-ed, write a letter to the editor, or contact the media outlet to tell them about the conflict of interest.

Some of these groups need to be held accountable for potential violations of their non-profit status. For example, Rick Berman and his Center for Consumer Freedom (along with his other numerous entities) have been accused of potential tax violations.³

It’s a testament to the food movement’s success that industry is responding with such sophisticated and well-funded public relations efforts. But we can’t allow these disingenuous and deceptive tactics to undermine our good work. You can help educate the public, the media, and policymakers about the true agendas behind these groups.

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To oppose New York City's policy to limit the size of sugary drinks, the soda industry created a front group called New Yorkers for Beverage Choices. The idea was to push emotional buttons designed to distract attention away from a serious public health threat.

ISSUE-SPECIFIC FRONT GROUPS

In addition to the front groups listed below, keep an eye out for temporary front groups that come and go based on the issues or policies being fought at the time. Examples include:

Sensible Food Policy Coalition—on marketing to children.

Community Coalition Against Beverage Taxes—successfully fought off Richmond, California soda tax ballot measure in 2012 election.

New Yorkers for Beverage Choices—opposing New York City sugary beverage cup size limits.

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EXAMPLES OF FOOD INDUSTRY FRONT GROUPS

LONG-STANDING FRONT GROUPS



ALLIANCE FOR FOOD AND FARMING www.foodandfarming.info

MISSION? “To provide a voice for farmers to communicate their commitment to food safety and care for the land.”

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Unclear but website says: “membership of approximately 50 farmers or farm groups who represent producers of U.S. fruit, vegetable and other specialty crops.”⁴

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? To counter negative information on problems such as pesticides, foodborne illness, and contaminants.

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH www.acsh.org

MISSION? “To add reason and balance to debates about public health issues and to bring common sense views to the public.”

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Unclear: “40% of ACSH funding coming from private foundations, about 40% from corporations, and the rest of the sale of ACSH publications.”⁵ According to SourceWatch, funders include Coca-Cola, Kellogg, General Mills, PepsiCo, and the American Beverage Association.⁶

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? ACSH attempts to control the scientific debate on issues such as the connection between food and health by promoting its scientific experts in the media. For example, in an article written by ACSH president published in the Daily Caller, among the “biggest unfounded health scares of 2010” listed was soda, high-fructose corn syrup, and genetically-modified crops.⁷

ANIMAL AGRICULTURE ALLIANCE www.animalagriculture.org

MISSION? “To communicate the important role of modern animal agriculture to our nation’s economy, productivity, vitality, security, and that animal well-being is central to producing safe, high-quality, affordable food and other products essential to our daily lives.”

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Unclear, but according to the website: “Funding for the Alliance includes support from livestock and poultry producers, individuals who make their living in animal agriculture, retailers, producer associations, feed and other input supplier companies, animal health companies, and consumers who want the truth based on sound science and the freedom of choice about their food.”⁸

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? To counter negative information about animal agriculture: “Everyone involved in the food chain can best combat the misleading, and sometimes outrageous, claims of animal rights extremists through proactive efforts to tell how we work to ensure the well-being of the animals in our care.”

—President’s 2009 statement.⁹

CENTER FOR CONSUMER FREEDOM www.consumerfreedom.com

MISSION? “Promoting personal responsibility and protecting consumer choices... A growing cabal of activists has meddled in Americans’ lives in recent years... they’re eroding our basic freedoms—the freedom to buy what we want, eat what we want, drink what we want, and raise our children as we see fit. When they push ordinary Americans around, we’re here to push back.”¹⁰

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Started with funding from Phillip Morris and its past funders include major food industry companies; its current funders are unclear, as CCF claims its supporters prefer not to be disclosed out of fear of violent activists.¹¹ “The Center for Consumer Freedom is supported by restaurants, food companies and thousands of individual consumers...Many of the companies and individuals who support the Center financially have indicated that they want anonymity as contributors. They are reasonably apprehensive about privacy and safety in light of the violence and other forms of aggression some activists have adopted as a “game plan” to impose their views, so we respect their wishes.”¹²

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? CCF is the attack dog of the food industry. They engage in numerous dirty tactics that its funders would never conduct on their own. For example, they took out full-page ads in major newspapers mocking New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (showing him dressed as a woman and calling him a nanny) for proposing to limit the size of sugary soft drinks.¹³ CCF’s director Rick Berman is currently under scrutiny by the IRS for his union-busting activities and has been criticized in the past for violating IRS rules.^{14,15} Visit Berman-Exposed.org for a detailed critique of Berman’s activities. You can also watch this 2007 *60 Minutes* segment, “Meet Rick Berman, AKA Dr. Evil.”¹⁶

Additional Center for Consumer Freedom websites:

- ActivistCash.com (“exposes” funding of advocates)
- HumaneWatch.org (to discredit Humane Society of the United States)
- PetaKillsAnimals.com (to discredit PETA)
- ObesityMyths.com

INTERNATIONAL FOOD INFORMATION COUNCIL FOUNDATION www.foodinsight.org

MISSION? “Effectively communicating science-based information on health, nutrition and food safety for the public good. We envision a global environment where credible science drives food policy and consumer choice, and we exist to help facilitate that environment.”

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Supporters include leading food, pesticide, and biotech companies including Kraft, McDonald’s, Nestle, PepsiCo, Monsanto, Cargill, Bayer CropScience, and Dupont. Their website also confusingly lists many “partners” including professional health organizations and federal government agencies such as the USDA, FDA, and EPA.¹⁷

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? IFIC is extremely aggressive with the media; they position themselves as a credible scientific resource for journalists on many issues such as arsenic in food, biotech, sweeteners, pesticides, and food safety and nutrition issues more broadly.¹⁸ IFIC also regularly conducts consumer surveys and promotes the results as objective science.¹⁹

Most of the “information” IFIC promotes parrots industry talking points. For example, from its biotechnology page: “Food biotechnology helps to produce fresher, better-tasting foods. For example, food biotechnology enables the production of fruits and vegetables that ripen on the vine for a better, fresher taste.”²⁰

IFIC also infiltrates professional conferences such as the annual meeting of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the nation’s trade association for registered dietitians. In 2011, IFIC moderated a panel at this conference called, “How Risky is Our Food? Clarifying the Controversies of Chemical Risks” in which the take-away message was not to worry about pesticides and anybody who tells you otherwise is scaremongering and non-scientifically valid.²¹ At the 2012 conference, IFIC was back again, with representatives on four separate panels, including dispelling any concerns about food additives.²²

RECENTLY-FORMED FRONT GROUPS



ALLIANCE TO FEED THE FUTURE www.alliantofeedthefuture.org

MISSION? "Raise awareness and improve understanding of the benefits & necessity of modern food production and technology in order to meet global demand."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? The "partners" page lists a who's who of agribusiness trade groups and other front groups, including the American Meat Institute, CropLife America, Grocery Manufacturers Association, and the United Egg Producers; a good example of how various trade groups can come together under the common cause of propaganda promotion.²³

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Various forms of controlling the public discourse, including promoting educational curricula for elementary and middle schools and hosting panels on "Food Security through Modern Agriculture."^{24, 25}

AMERICA'S FARMERS www.americasfarmers.com

MISSION? "Advocacy program celebrating U.S. farmers through communications, awards and special programs that highlight the importance of modern American agriculture."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? At top of site, see: "brought to you by Monsanto."²⁶

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Through various forms of public relations, including awarding small grants to farmers,²⁷ schools,²⁸ and "moms,"²⁹ promotional videos,³⁰ and ad campaigns.³¹

CENTER FOR FOOD INTEGRITY www.foodintegrity.org

MISSION? CFI "was established in 2007 to build consumer trust and confidence in today's food system."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? Board members hail from Monsanto, United Soybean Board, the National Restaurant Association, Tyson Foods, and the Dolphin Group, a public relations firm.³² CFI members represent a wide array of agribusiness and food industry interests.³³

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Through various forms of information control and public relations, including conducting consumer surveys,³⁴ promoting the results,³⁵ and hosting events.³⁶

Center for Food Integrity is also behind:

- Farmers Feed US (with numerous state affiliates)
- BestFoodFacts.org (consumer-oriented information)
- Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply (a response to criticism of battery cages)
- Foundation for Food Integrity (501c3 fundraising arm of CFI)
- Strategic Intelligence & Trend Evaluation (monitors news and social media)

GLOBAL HARVEST www.globalharvestinitiative.org

MISSION? "Private-sector voice for productivity growth throughout the agricultural value chain to sustainably meet the demands of a growing world."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? Leading biotechnology companies including Monsanto and DuPont, and "partners" include the Congressional Hunger Center and the World Wildlife Foundation.³⁷

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Through various forms of information control and public relations³⁸ including its “Global Agriculture Productivity Report”³⁹ (they have trademarked both this phrase as well as the shorter GAP Report), “Global Agricultural Productivity Index”⁴⁰ (or GAP Index—both phrases also trademarked). Trademarking is a way to make sure no other group even gets to use these phrases, the height of information control.

PROTECT THE HARVEST www.protecttheharvest.com

MISSION? Its sole purpose to attack Humane Society of United States, as stated on its home page: “to fight back and defend American families, farmers, hunters and animal owners from the growing threat posed by the radical animal rights movement.”⁴¹

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Appears to be a project of the billionaire Forrest Lucas of Lucas Oil and Lucas Cattle Company.⁴²

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Other than an unimpressive website, its activities are unclear.⁴³

U.S. ALLIANCE FOR FARMERS AND RANCHERS www.fooddialogues.com

MISSION? Not clear from website, but under About: “U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) is a newly formed alliance consisting of a wide range of prominent farmer- and rancher-led organizations and agricultural partners. This marks the first time agricultural groups at the national, regional and state levels have collaborated to lead the dialogue and answer Americans’ questions about how we raise our food – while being stewards of the environment, responsibly caring for our animals and maintaining strong businesses and communities.”⁴⁴

WHO’S FUNDING IT? Listed under “Affiliates, Board Participants, and Industry Partners” is a who’s who of leading agribusiness corporations and trade groups at both the national and state levels, including American Farm Bureau Federation, DuPont, Monsanto, and Cargill.⁴⁵

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Main project is called Food Dialogues, see above.

SCIENTIFIC “INSTITUTES” OF FOOD MANUFACTURERS



Junk food companies have a serious public relations problem on their hands because the nation is waking up to the connection between eating too much processed food and chronic health problems like heart disease, diabetes and cancer. One effective strategy to counter this inconvenience is to hire scientists and health professionals and form an institute. Then you can control the flow of scientific information to be sure anything negative gets a positive spin. Here are a few examples.

BELL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND NUTRITION (General Mills) www.bellinstitute.com

MISSION? “The mission of the Bell Institute and its staff of doctorate-and master-level scientists and registered dietitians is to influence the development of quality products that nourish lives and contribute to healthy living.”

WHO’S FUNDING IT? General Mills, leading maker of sugary kids’ cereals.

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? General Mills has hired at least 11 registered dietitians, either as “nutrition scientists” or “nutrition communicators.”⁴⁶ They also “work with leading scientists from universities around the globe to further research in nutrition and health.” We won’t see any science or helpful fact sheets related to how its sugary

cereals contribute to children's poor health or how the company has been criticized for targeting children with incessant marketing.⁴⁷ Rather, General Mills puts out positively-spun resources about how "cereal is one of the healthiest breakfast choices you can make."⁴⁸ The cereal giant also uses its institute for press releases in which the company boasts health improvements to its products as measured by of course, its own institute.⁴⁹

BEVERAGE INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS (Coca-Cola) www.beverageinstitute.org

MISSION? "Global in scope, The Beverage Institute for Health & Wellness is part of The Coca-Cola Company's ongoing commitment to advance scientific knowledge, awareness and understanding of beverages, and the importance of an active, healthy and balanced lifestyle."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? Coca-Cola, the world's largest beverage corporation.

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Coca-Cola is a master at public relations, so it's no surprise that its institute operates on numerous levels. One is to dispel any notions that its products might be harmful, for example, by distracting the public with words like "hydration"⁵⁰ and "energy balance."⁵¹

Another is to offer continuing professional education to registered dietitians, nurses, and other health professionals.⁵² Topics include "energy balance"⁵³ (to deflect attention away from eating and onto exercise instead); aspartame⁵⁴ (to assuage any concerns about this artificial sweetener); biotechnology⁵⁵ (to "address common misconceptions about the safety of genetically-modified foods") and similar seminars distracting away from Coke products. By offering continuing educational units, Coca-Cola gets its biased messages in front of health professionals while positioning itself as a legitimate source of those messages.

CONAGRA FOODS SCIENCE INSTITUTE www.conagrafoodsscienceinstitute.com

MISSION? "Providing nutrition and health information on food and lifestyle choices."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? ConAgra Foods, maker of many processed foods.

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? By offering webinars, for example, to registered dietitians and fact sheets on nutrition; also publishes "American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine."

GATORADE SPORTS SCIENCE INSTITUTE www.gssiweb.com

MISSION? "... a research and educational facility established in 1985 to share current information and expand knowledge on sports nutrition and exercise science that enhance the performance and well-being of athletes. The materials and services of the Institute are designed as educational tools for sports health professionals."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? Gatorade, maker of sugary beverages disguised as "sports drinks" (Gatorade is owned by PepsiCo, the largest food company in the United States.)

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? With this sophisticated operation, Gatorade is seeking to legitimize its products as a necessary component to sports and for athletes, whether pro or amateur. It's probably one of the most successful examples of marketing-driven science, given how prevalent Gatorade products are in sports. At the same time, sugary beverages all of kinds have come under fire for contributing to chronic disease. While many school districts have eliminated sugary carbonated beverages, somehow "sports drinks" continue to get a pass, most likely due to the brainwashing promulgated by Gatorade "science."

NESTLÉ NUTRITION INSTITUTE www.nestlenutrition-institute.org

MISSION? "The Nestlé Nutrition Institute shares leading science based information and education with health professionals, scientists and nutrition communities in an interactive way."

WHO'S FUNDING IT? Nestlé is the world's largest food corporation.

HOW DO THEY OPERATE? Nestlé has been on the receiving end of global criticism for its marketing of infant formula in developing nations, thereby undermining breast feeding.⁵⁶ For this and other reasons, the company engages in numerous public relations strategies to improve its image, including positioning itself as a legitimate

source of scientific research and information. (The company now says it supports breastfeeding “exclusively for six months and beyond.”)⁵⁷

Nestle also attaches itself to professional health organizations to gain legitimacy and control the debate. For example, in October 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced a new “Institute for Healthy Childhood Weight,” with “founding sponsorship from Nestle” that “will translate emerging science into practical tools to help prevent and treat childhood obesity.⁵⁸ Unlikely to be found on that scientific agenda is research showing how breastfeeding helps prevent childhood obesity⁵⁹ or anything related to how Nestlé markets junk food to children.⁶⁰

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Food MythBusters www.foodmyths.org & **SourceWatch** www.sourcewatch.org