

Invited Commentary

Food industry front groups and conflicts of interest: the case of Americans Against Food Taxes

Industry-based front groups can serve as powerful tools when businesses attempt to avoid government regulation⁽¹⁾. In 1994, RJ Reynolds started a ‘coalition’ called Get Government Off Our Back (GGOOB). By creating an organization that was not explicitly sponsored by the tobacco industry, RJ Reynolds gained endorsements from non-industry groups to support the industry’s views against government regulation^(2,3). It later became evident that GGOOB was actually a front group created by the tobacco industry to fight regulation^(3,4). The tobacco industry received considerable negative press when the media disclosed that the group purporting to be comprised of concerned citizens was actually an industry-initiated effort.

The beverage industry has created its own group to prevent enactment of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes. These taxes have been proposed as a means of both improving public health through reduction of sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and generating revenue during the economic downturn^(5,6). The industry group, Americans Against Food Taxes (AAFT), describes itself as ‘a coalition of concerned citizens – responsible individuals, financially strapped families, small and large businesses in communities across the country – opposed to the government tax hikes on food and beverages’⁽⁷⁾. AAFT’s website, YouTube videos, commercials and Facebook page depict images of mothers shopping for food, a couple sitting by a campfire, grocery store clerks and young people, creating an image of grassroots opposition to the taxes⁽⁷⁾.

The beverage industry may be acting similarly to tobacco companies in creating a grassroots image for an industry-based organization and by generating conflicts of interest through funding community groups which then support industry positions. For the sake of transparency, we believe it is important to identify such financial ties so that the public and policy makers can judge whether conflicts of interest are an issue in interpreting the positions organizations take on policy issues.

We obtained a list of AAFT coalition members from the AAFT website to quantify the number and type of entities that support AAFT⁽⁷⁾. Coalition members were sorted into the following categories: (i) industry-affiliated companies, (ii) anti-tax groups and (iii) community organizations. Industry-affiliated organizations were defined as any company involved in the production, distribution or promotion of food or beverage products. Anti-tax groups were defined as organizations with a mission statement demonstrating their opposition to tax increases and

government regulation. Community organizations were defined as groups that provide a social service to a specific subset of the American population.

We then compiled a list of food and beverage sponsors of each community organization by visiting their websites, calling their offices or emailing their officers. These data were used to calculate the percentage of community organizations that have been sponsored by or associated with the food and beverage industry, through direct sponsorship, support of the organization’s events or affiliation with the organization’s leaders. Finally, information regarding the number of individual supporters of AAFT was gathered from its website.

Fifty-five per cent (*n* 275) of the coalition members sold food or beverage products, 18% (*n* 89) supplied products or services to the food and beverage industry, 7% (*n* 34) were community organizations and 2% (*n* 9) were anti-tax groups. Sponsorship data were obtained for 88% (*n* 30) of the thirty-four community organizations in the coalition; 93% (*n* 28) of these groups were sponsored by or associated with the food and beverage industry. Notably, 83% (*n* 25) of these community organizations were sponsored by Coca-Cola. Of the community organizations in the coalition, 94% (*n* 32) state on their website that they specifically aim to provide services for African American or Hispanic populations. Only one group supporting African Americans and one group supporting Hispanics stated they did not receive industry funding, and four Hispanic organizations could not be reached to confirm or deny industry support. Although sponsorship information could not be obtained for four AAFT coalition members, additional information would not likely alter the observed trend. Finally, AAFT’s website reports that 95 993 individuals have signed a petition supporting the group.

This close examination of AAFT’s coalition members indicates that most groups are in fact companies associated with the production, distribution or promotion of food and beverage products. Furthermore, many community organizations that stand against food taxes, some of which represent populations most vulnerable to obesity and diabetes, have received support from the food and/or beverage industry. Finally, major food and beverage corporations like Coca-Cola have invested directly in these community groups that serve vulnerable populations. The number of individual petition signatures supporting the group only equates to the population of a single city like Cambridge, Massachusetts⁽⁸⁾. This raises the question: is it really ‘Americans’ Against Food Taxes, or just the ‘Food Industry’

Against Food Taxes? Furthermore, only taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages have been proposed, not on food in general, so the mere name of the group (Americans Against 'Food' Taxes), not to mention its marketing campaigns, might be interpreted as an attempt to portray taxes as more broad than they really are.

The tobacco industry has a long history of influencing vulnerable groups, from minorities and youth to its own partners and suppliers^(9–12). It has used direct financial support to minority groups and marketing strategies like product placement, advertisements and even specially designed products to influence various vulnerable subpopulations^(13–15). Studies have shown that the food and beverage industry has used marketing tactics specifically designed to target certain minority groups^(16–18). This is not the first time that the food and beverage industry has influenced government regulation by support of other groups. In March 2011, the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania received a \$US 10 million pledge from a non-profit organization created by the American Beverage Association, the Foundation for a Healthy America^(19,20). Just months later, in June 2011, the Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's soda tax proposal was defeated for a second time⁽²¹⁾.

Policy makers and the public should be aware of the influence of industry sponsorship and support on the opinions and actions of various organizations when evaluating their positions on policies. Additionally, food and beverage companies should be transparent about the money and support provided to different groups. Finally, the public should remain cognizant of ways in which the food and beverage industry may attempt to hinder or circumvent government regulation.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Rudd Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. S.Y. originated the idea and design, helped with data acquisition, completed the analyses and led the writing. M.A.B. assisted with the design, helped with data acquisition, assisted in drafting the manuscript and reviewed drafts of the manuscript. S.Y. and M.A.B. had full access to all of the data and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. C.A.R. helped with data acquisition, interpretation of the results and reviewed drafts of the manuscript. K.D.B. helped interpret the results and provided critical feedback on drafts of the manuscript.

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