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Message in a Bottle

BY RUSSELL BERGER

Clinton Foundation sends mixed signals by partnering with
Coca-Cola while claiming to work for health and wellness.





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The Clinton Foundation has partnered with Coca-Cola on 32 different projects and received between \$5 million and \$10 million in donations from the beverage company.

The Clinton Foundation is currently giving a nod to Coca-Cola by hosting a public art exhibit at the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, until Feb. 15, 2016.

The exhibit marks the “Coca-Cola Bottle’s 100-year anniversary” and features iconic images from the last century of Coca-Cola marketing, complete with the classic small-town Americana of Norman Rockwell and Fred Mizen’s Coke-slinging Santa. While many will see [Coca-Cola: An American Original](#) as nothing more than a nostalgic tribute to a classic U.S. brand, the exhibit actually highlights the uncomfortably close relationship between Big Soda and big philanthropy.

Historically, the Clinton Foundation has taken a strong stance against childhood obesity, which Bill Clinton recently called “one of the most important issues facing our country today.” The foundation’s [website](#) also notes that “people are eating more but exercising less; working harder but sleeping less; and drinking more high calorie beverages but less water.” The former president himself, in [an article](#) co-authored with Nancy Brown of the American Heart Association, noted as positive the fact children are “drinking less sugar-sweetened beverages.”

The Clinton Foundation presents itself as an advocate for health and wellness through disease prevention—and yet a growing body of research suggests sugar is a [primary culprit](#) behind obesity, diabetes and heart disease. So why would the Clinton Foundation honor a company that sells products known to cause these diseases? And why would it showcase the work of a company that admits to [targeting children](#) with its advertisements?

I believe the answer is simple: As of September 2015, Coca-Cola is reported to have donated between [US\\$5,000,001 and \\$10,000,000](#) to the Clinton Foundation. Similarly, the [Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette](#) linked Coca-Cola and the Clinton Foundation to no less than 32 joint initiatives.

This is not out of the ordinary for the soda company, which was recently exposed for [quietly funding health professionals](#) in order to influence public opinion.

History shows that the Clinton Presidential Center’s artistic glorification of Coca-Cola is only part of a longstanding symbiotic relationship between the Clinton Foundation and Big Soda.

In this relationship, the Clinton Foundation plays the role of public-health champion by promoting policies that appear to be tough on soda. These policies, however, are little more than publicity stunts that actually have no meaningful effect on soda sales. The Big Soda companies then benefit by appearing responsible and proactive but dodge any negative economic or political pressure. And of course they continue to fund the Clinton Foundation.

Exhibit A: In 2006, the Clinton Foundation—along with the American Beverage Association (ABA), Big Soda’s lobbying arm—was involved in brokering a deal that aimed to reduce the amount of sugar-sweetened beverages in school cafeterias. The New York Times ran a story on the deal with the headline “**Bottlers Agree to a School Ban on Sweet Drinks.**” In reality, the agreement was not a ban but a voluntary policy statement schools were encouraged to follow. In essence, the ABA was encouraging school districts to sell less sugared soda and more sports drinks, diet soda and bottled water. This sleight of hand allowed Big Soda to appease critics while maintaining sales, and the PR posturing likely had **little or no impact** on students’ soda consumption.

Exhibit B: In 2014, Coca-Cola, Dr Pepper Snapple Group and PepsiCo announced **a plan** to reduce beverage calories consumed per person nationally by 20 percent in the next decade. The announcement was made at the Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting and represented a partnership between the ABA and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, an organization founded by the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association.

As with Exhibit A, there are significant issues with Big Soda’s commitment in Exhibit B. First, soda sales have been in decline for 10 straight years. In other words, a 20 percent decrease in beverage calories consumed per person nationally is expected regardless of any action or inaction on the part of the industry. Second, Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the **Center for Science in the Public Interest**, noted that the soda industry “could accelerate progress by dropping its opposition to taxes and warning labels on sugar drinks. Those taxes could further reduce calories in America’s beverage mix even more quickly, and would raise needed revenue for the prevention and treatment of soda-related diseases.”

While the Clinton Foundation publicly pats itself on the back for brokering this empty pledge to improve public health, the beverage industry is posturing to take credit for the declining popularity of soda. All the while, Big Soda simultaneously **battles against soda taxation** and pays health professionals



The Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock, Arkansas, hosts Coca-Cola: An American Original until Feb. 15, 2016.

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A 250-ml bottle of Coca-Cola contains about 27 g of sugar. Sugar is a leading cause of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

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to obfuscate the truth about the relationship between sugar consumption and metabolic derangement. Both groups win, and the losers are the millions of misinformed people who will suffer and die from sugar-induced diseases.

All that aside, the Clinton Foundation finds itself just another organization that claims to work for health and wellness yet accepts money from the very entities at the root of obesity- and sugar-related health problems. **This is not an exclusive club**—but it should be. Big Soda has no place in health and wellness.

Furthermore, Hillary and Bill Clinton should know better. Bill Clinton's diet has been a topic of popular discussion for years due to heart trouble beginning in 2004. Clinton has long struggled with his weight, and **Dr. Mark Hyman**, who served as the Clintons' dietitian for years, prescribed a sugar-free diet that helped the former president shed 30 lb., according to [Examiner.com](#).

“Sugar in all its forms is the root cause of our obesity epidemic and most of the chronic disease sucking the life out of our citizens and our economy,” Hyman wrote on [Drhyman.com](#) in 2015.

And yet you can't escape the fact that the Clinton Presidential Center is somehow celebrating a substance the former president likely avoids in order to preserve his health.

On Nov. 6, Bill Clinton and Coca-Cola CEO Muhtar Kent were featured guests at an invite-only **private preview** of the exhibition. The Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette report on the opening detailed several of Clinton's “Coke stories,” including how he worked filling a grocery-store vending machine with soda at 13. Perhaps missing the irony altogether, reporter Brian Fannehy had Clinton explaining how Coke is reducing the amount of calories it ships to schools just before a paragraph in which Kent bragged about selling 1.9 billion servings a day worldwide.

You can call Big Soda advertising art, but there's no artistry here. If you happen to catch a glimpse of the Clinton Foundation's glorification of America's most popular sugar drink, consider it a perfect display of the corruption and hypocrisy that comes with Big Soda dollars. ■

About the Author

Raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Russell Berger spent four years in 1st Ranger Battalion. After leaving the military in 2008, he opened CrossFit Huntsville, where he spent three years as head trainer. He now works full time for CrossFit Inc.