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## Sugar High

Film examines sugar-industry documents detailing PR campaign that mirrors the Big Tobacco playbook.



**Movie Review**

By Mike Warkentin

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All photos courtesy of "Sugar Coated"

*Documents from this defunct factory reveal how The Sugar Association sought to influence governments and the public.*

Someone probably forgot to shred them.

When the Great Western Sugar Co. shuttered a factory in Colorado in 1976, its records eventually found their way to Colorado State University. You can find a detailed index [here](#), and toward the bottom of the list you'll note a series of entries related to the trade group The Sugar Association Inc.

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1 of 3

Dentist Cristin Kearns did exactly that, and when she dug through the boxes she found the confidential sugar-industry documents that are at the center of Michèle Hozer's documentary "Sugar Coated."

### **Trailer: "Sugar Coated"**

Just over 90 minutes long, "Sugar Coated" uses the likes of journalist Gary Taubes ("Why We Get Fat") and Dr. Robert Lustig ("Fat Chance: Beating the Odds Against Sugar, Processed Foods, Obesity and Disease") to outline how increased sugar consumption is linked to obesity-related health issues.

In support, the doc features the de rigueur formerly obese teen, but Alexis Gomez's story really isn't needed. Gomez, who hit 217 lb. at 14 years old, is representative of a problem that's so widespread examples can be found just by walking down the street.

And that's perhaps the main criticism of a documentary in possession of a smoking gun: "Sugar Coated" has to set the table for those who use the film as an access point to the sugar-obesity issue, and it does so at the expense of those who might want truly ruthless investigative treatment of an industry's repeated and very successful attempts to influence governments and the public over several decades.

Overall, the film does a fine job of summarizing the whole issue for neophytes, but diet-conscious CrossFit athletes might find the scenes linking added sugar and obesity to be preaching to the choir.

That's a minor criticism, and the reminder might actually be needed. After all, the sugar industry has succeeded in yelling more loudly than science for about 30 years.

"I'm very surprised that all of a sudden people are realizing that sugar is bad for you because we did this research 30 years ago," says Judith Hallfrisch, a researcher who co-authored "Metabolic Effects of Dietary Fructose" with United States Department of Agriculture researcher Sheldon Reiser in 1987.

The strategy used to bury such research on the negative effects of sugar is remarkably similar to the plans of another industry that came under fire only when science finally overwhelmed marketing and lobbying.

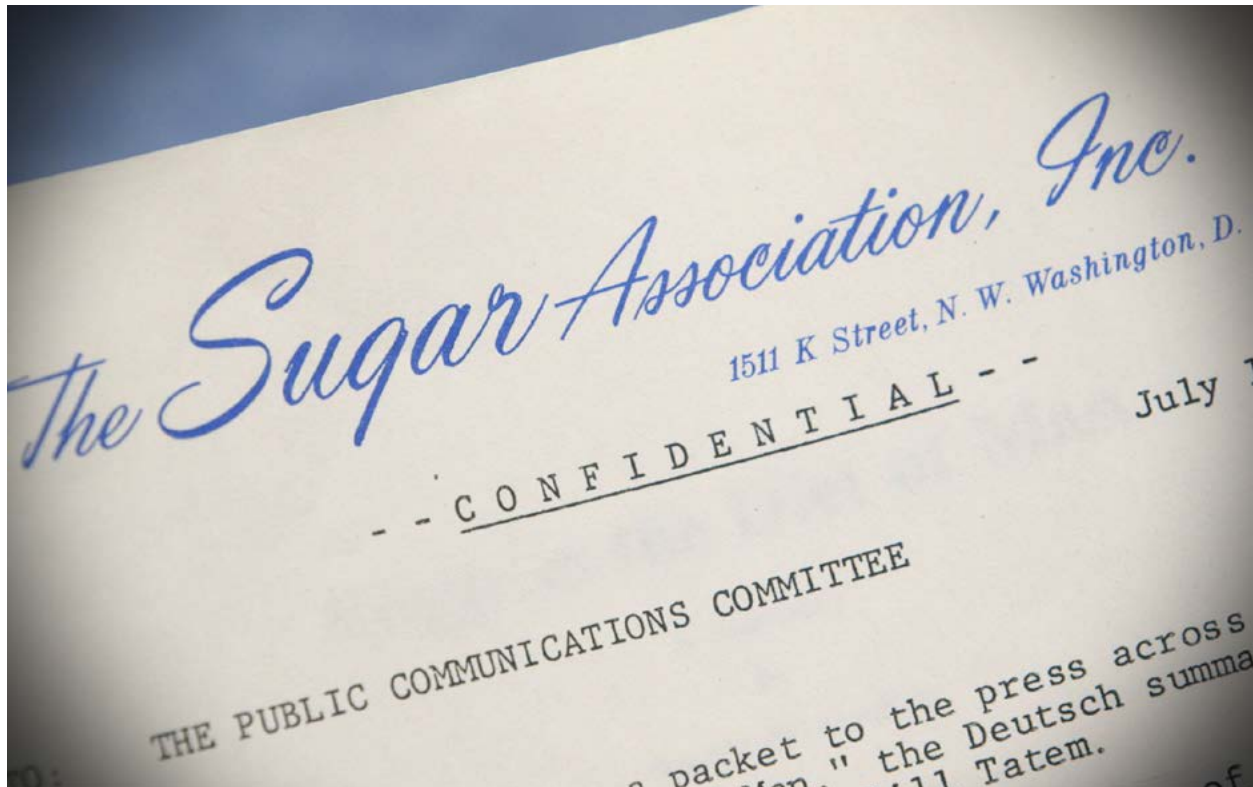


***Cristin Kearns, formerly a dentist, is now studying the marketing and lobbying tactics used by Big Sugar and Big Tobacco.***

"What the tobacco documents and the sugar documents that (Kearns) found show is that they're all using the same playbook," said Stan Glantz, a professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

Glantz, also director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, has been at war with the tobacco industry for years and was involved in the creation of the [Truth Tobacco Industry Documents \(formerly Legacy Tobacco Documents Library\)](#). Wrung from Big Tobacco through litigation in the '90s, the documents show how companies such as RJ Reynolds Tobacco Co. worked to break or obscure the link between secondhand smoke and cardiovascular disease, as detailed by Glantz and Dr. Elisa K. Tong in an article published in 2007 in the journal [Circulation](#).

When viewed through the lens of the tobacco campaign, the actions of the sugar industry come into perfect focus in "Sugar Coated":



**Now publicly available through Colorado State University, documents such as this one explain how research on the negative effects of sugar was obscured for 30 years.**

Roll out a PR campaign designed to promote “all-natural” sugar as part of a healthy lifestyle while pointing a finger at other factors—such as fat—as the cause of poor health. Fund research that supports the status quo and call into question any studies linking sugar to health concerns. Cloud the obesity issue by focusing on inactivity rather than nutrition. Lobby governments through trade associations. Change the names on packaging to hide the word “sugar.” Blur the lines and curry favor by **funding a host of health and fitness organizations**. Deny, divert, defuse, defend, distract and keep delivering the sugar.

The entire campaign is detailed as the doc gains momentum in its final act, with Hozer sadly denied the chance to wave a damning sheaf of papers at representatives from the sugar industry, who perhaps wisely declined to be interviewed. But let’s hope this is the first in a series of films that push the issue further, as Kearns has left dentistry and moved to California for a job as a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Francisco.

“Once I found those documents, I didn’t know where the path would lead ...,” Kearns says in the final moments of “Sugar Coated.” “The goal (now) is to be demonstrating the similarities between the tactics used by the sugar industry and the tactics used by the tobacco industry.”

It’s a worthy endeavor that will be needed to help stem the mighty flow of sugar-sweetened beverages, candy bars and doughnuts. Even if the tide is turning against the industry, it’s certain Big Sugar will fight to the bitter end.



#### **About the Author**

Mike Warkentin is the Managing Editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of [CrossFit 204](http://CrossFit204.com).