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SUCK IT UP

Marion Nestle talks about how Big Soda is under attack from communities and people who are tired of obesity, diabetes and bad science.

BY HILARY ACHAUER

SODA POLITICS

TAKING ON BIG SODA (AND WINNING)

MARION NESTLE

FOREWORD BY MARK BITTMAN
AFTERWORD BY NEAL BAER



The ingredients in soda are simple: carbonated water, high-fructose corn syrup and sucrose, caramel color, phosphoric and citric acids, caffeine, and natural flavors.

The ingredients may be simple, but their impact is profound.

Selling this flavored sugar water has turned The Coca-Cola Co., PepsiCo Inc. and Dr Pepper Snapple Group Inc. into multi-billion-dollar companies. As Marion Nestle points out in her exhaustively researched 500-page book “Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning),” the reach of these companies is global. They spend millions to influence health science, drive public policy and affect legislation. Nestle holds a doctorate in molecular biology and is a professor at New York University. She’s the author of numerous books about food safety, food politics and nutrition.

For decades, most of Big Soda’s dealings were unseen by the public. Then in August 2015, [The New York Times](#) revealed that Coca-Cola funded the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the idea that the obesity epidemic can be pinned on a lack of exercise, not poor nutrition.

The reaction to these revelations, especially from those involved in public health, was [swift and negative](#). In response, Coca-Cola CEO Muhtar Kent wrote an Aug. 19 Wall Street Journal [op-ed](#) in which he vowed to improve transparency in the company’s research funding and promised to publish a list of partnerships and funded research on Coca-Cola’s website.

At the beginning of November, the University of Colorado School of Medicine announced it would [return a US\\$1 million gift from Coca-Cola](#). The money was intended to fund GEBN science that downplayed the link between sugar-sweetened beverages and obesity. At the end of that same month, the Associated Press obtained [emails](#) sent between Rhona Applebaum (Coca-Cola’s chief health and science officer) and GEBN president James Hill, a professor at the University of Colorado. The emails show Coca-Cola influenced the group from the beginning.

A few days after the correspondence came to light, Applebaum resigned and the GEBN [ceased operations](#).

The GEBN incident was perhaps the most prominent example of Big Soda’s influence on health science, but it’s far from the only one. In “Soda Politics,” Nestle details how beverage companies spend millions to affect government regulation, influence science,

promote sales to children and low-income groups, and expand into developing countries. In this interview, we explore what Nestle uncovered in the three years she spent writing the book.

CrossFit Journal: What led you to tackle this huge topic?

Marion Nestle: I was asked to do it by my agent ... it sounded like enormous fun. I thought the idea of writing about sodas just made really a lot of sense because I’m interested in food advocacy and there’s a lot of food advocacy around drinking less soda ... and there’s plenty to write about. I mean, I knew about soda marketing, and I’d been writing about soda marketing for a very long time and sort of tracking what the soda industry is doing. As more and more research was coming up that linked sodas to poor health, it seemed like this would just be a terrific opportunity to kind of show the way a food industry operates: following the tobacco-industry playbook and how advocates are fighting back and winning. In many instances soda sales are down.

In public-health terms, sodas are low-hanging fruit. And they are really easy targets. And so they are really easy to write about.

CFJ: Soda uses water from municipal supplies, so it makes that ingredient cheaper for them. You have a chapter in the book about how Coca-Cola ranks water as the second most prominent risk to profitability after obesity. Can you talk about some of the problems access to water poses for soda companies going forward?

MN: Because they are an international company, they have bottling plants in pretty much every country in which they do business, and a lot of those countries have water shortages.

And in countries like India, where the water supplies are very limited, a Coca-Cola bottling plant will deplete the local water supply, lower the water table, make it impossible for farmers to grow their crops, and reduce the availability of drinking water for the local community because the volume of water that’s needed is so great.

CFJ: You write about the debate surrounding whether or not soda should be included in the United States Department of Agriculture’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). Can you tell me the argument for including sodas in SNAP purchases and why you think they should be removed?

MN: The original proposal when food stamps ... were first being considered was to keep sodas out. There was a big argument in Congress about it, and eventually the lobbyists won. The soda (industry) lobbies extensively—it always has, it still does. It puts an enormous amount of lobbying effort and dollars into protecting anything that's going to affect its sales, and that was fine up until the time that obesity became a problem.

Low-income people have a higher prevalence of obesity and obesity-related diseases than do people with higher incomes. So, again, soda is low-hanging fruit. There's sugars and water and nothing else (in soda). SNAP recipients don't buy candy, so why should they be allowed to buy soda?

So that's the public-health argument. But that comes against very, very strong counter arguments from the anti-hunger community, who are very concerned about stigmatizing the poor, and who if you talk to them ... they just think it's insulting to tell SNAP recipients what they can and cannot buy with their SNAP benefits. But if you talk to anti-hunger advocates quietly and not for public consumption, they'll say that they are just terrified if there's any change made to the program that Congress will use it as an excuse to cut it. And they are right. They are right about that.

(They want to) keep it off the radar. When I was on the president's commission on SNAP ... we just spent a day lobbying, and we went and talked to staff of a great many senators and congress-people and people at the White House, and they told us the same thing: That until the advocates for the poor can get together on this one, nothing will happen.

CFJ: What can we learn from the successful soda-tax legislation in Berkeley, California, and Mexico?

MN: For a place in America, Berkeley did everything right. They did advocacy by the book, and what I mean by that is that they thought very carefully about what kind of frame they were going to use for it, and their frame was Berkeley against Big Soda. It wasn't being promoted as something that was good for health, although that was certainly part of it. But it made it very clear that this was (an) anti-corporate initiative, and what that did was it made it impossible for the soda industry to do anything without showing off its muscle.

What I was told by people in Berkeley was that they were really offended by the soda industry plastering the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station with anti-tax posters. BART

stations never had advertising before, and people felt this was really inappropriate and pushy and Big Soda acting like Big Soda, and they were really offended by that. Every time the soda industry did anything, it was immediately revealed as Big Soda. So that was one thing. The other was they did very serious community organizing and went everywhere in the entire Berkeley community—rich and poor, hills and flats—and canvassed in every single community, discussing the issue with people. That was how they were able to get a 76 percent majority, which is pretty amazing.

That explains the Berkeley tax. The Mexico tax had other reasons for it. Mexico has the highest per capita consumption of sugary drinks, obesity rates are very high, its Type 2 diabetes (rates) are very high, sodas are deeply embedded in Mexican culture, so it's difficult to do anything about them, but the health issues in Mexico are extraordinary. They are really facing a health catastrophe if people don't reduce their obesity and their Type 2 diabetes and so forth.

So there was sympathy at the governmental level for passing a tax, particularly if the tax was tied to improving the water supply, which is a big problem in Mexico. And so the advocates wanted a 20 percent tax; they got a 10 percent tax, and there is evidence that that has reduced soda consumption by about 6 percent—about half of what they wanted, but still a step in the right direction. The soda industry was so upset by that that it came back and said, "We want the tax cut in half," and the advocates got busy again and that has not happened. But one of the things that Mexico is going for it is \$16 million in Bloomberg Foundation money.

CFJ: Why do you think the Bloomberg Foundation targeted Mexico? Because it felt it could have success there?

MN: The advocacy groups in Mexico are extremely well organized and extremely smart. There's a group coalition of about 30 groups, an alliance that has worked on this, and one of the groups in particular is just amazingly skilled at advocacy. They have a lot of connections in government. It looked like if they had some help with the television advertising and bringing in consultants and doing some of the other things that they would be able to rally a great deal of support, and that's what happened.

CFJ: It feels like we are at a turning point right now. Do you think public opinion and awareness are changing?



In 2014, Berkeley, California, became the first city in the United States to place an excise tax on sugary beverages. "Berkeley did everything right" in its fight against Big Soda, Nestle said.



“The New York Times piece this summer was a catastrophe for Coca-Cola. It was an enormous public-relations disaster for Coca-Cola.” —Marion Nestle



Bill Hayes

Marion Nestle

MN: Oh yeah. And I think all of the tax initiatives, the soda-cap initiative, and the advocacy is raising public awareness. That's why sales are down. Sales are down, and they've been going down for 10 years. More than 10 years: 15 years. And there's no sign of them leveling off, and the soda industry is very well aware of that. [The New York Times piece](#) this summer was a catastrophe for Coca-Cola. It was an enormous public-relations disaster for Coca-Cola. They were completely blindsided by it. They weren't expecting it. They hadn't thought about it in that way.

Their response to it was to go transparent, and that has had pretty amazing consequences where Coca-Cola has ... gotten divorced from the organizations that raised the most negative publicity. All three of the organizations (the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Academy of Family Physicians) where the partnership has been severed are organizations with a lot of internal dissent about the Coca-Cola partnership.

Now it's done and the medical school at the University of Colorado is giving back (the money from Coca-Cola) ... I think there will be more of that kind of thing going on. It's starting to look like what happened to Phillip Morris.

CFJ: Have any of the soda companies responded to your book?

MN: I was on [The Diane Rehm Show](#) in Washington, D.C., and she asked a representative of the American Beverage Association (ABA) to come on with me, and the ABA refused, but they issued a press release that's pretty funny. I posted it on [my website](#). It was hilarious. I mean, it talked about how it was going to engage with critics, but then it didn't engage. Then the International Food Information Council, which is an industry group, somebody did a [blog post](#) that was quite critical of the book, but it was pretty clear that whoever wrote it hadn't read the book because the kinds of things she was criticizing I hadn't said.

CFJ: Where do you think we are in getting a nationwide soda tax?

MN: In this administration? I don't think so. Regime change (has to happen). It's not going to happen because there is so much industry opposition and Congress is so in thrall to industry.

CFJ: What has been the impact of the Berkeley soda tax, and why is it important for the consumer to feel a price increase?

MN: Consumers are paying higher prices for sodas now (in Berkeley). And they are paying enough higher prices so that it's generating \$100,000 a month for child health programs.

(More expensive sodas are important) because higher prices discourage sales. (It's) economic price elasticity. And that's what you hope, is that it will make the public think twice about buying ... it makes the cost of the product more expensive, and it makes people think twice.

And yes, it's regressive ... but so is Type 2 diabetes.

Nestle writes about the latest in health and food politics at [foodpolitics.com](#). ■

About the Author

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