Advancing Health through Sustained Collaboration: How the History of Corporate Relations Extended the Academy's Reach

This article is reprinted from the January 2015 issue of the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics *(2015;115(1):131-142).*

Editor's Note: This is the fifth article in a series on the Academy's history from 1990 to the present. Other articles in the series are available at www.jandonline.org/content/amh.

WHEN THE CONCEPT OF corporate alliances*—pairing up profit-motivated corporations with cause-motivated associations—was introduced in the 1980s, it was at first considered an unlikely and uncomfortable union.† But as this arrangement became more widely accepted as the new reality for nonprofit and for-profit business models, there was some reticence among the associations dedicated to practice in health and wellness. Could concern for the well-being of others assumed in practitioners of science and the profit motivation assumed of corporations align toward a goal that benefits each entity as well as the public at large?

In the simplest of terms, the value of association–industry alliances lies in the assets each brings. Typically, the funding from industry allows associations the opportunity and capacity to produce more multifaceted projects and enjoy greater public outreach. Meanwhile, the associations, boasting established credibility, represent an opportunity for corporations to communicate messages to target audiences while demonstrating good corporate citizenship—a tactic that is expected more and more in today's corporate culture.[1,2]

Still, additional levels of concern have cropped up in all spheres of health care–related trade associations, including dietetics, as the wholesale trends in association–corporate relationships have shown that such relationships are anything but simple. For example, if one group is dedicated to understanding and recommending food choices that encourage a total diet approach, and another group is concerned about maximizing profits within its market segment, aren't their goals inherently at odds? The short answer is no. Given the reputation of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) as food and nutrition experts, and the status of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics‡ as the largest organization of these practitioners, it is no wonder that corporations have long sought out relationships with the Academy in order to share with its members science-based communications on matters of nutrition and health. And the history of the corporate relations at the Academy has adroitly demonstrated many times over the past several decades that an innovative, above-board corporate relations program can have far-reaching, positive outcomes on the profession's status and on the ability of the profession to optimize the nation's health through food and nutrition.

CORPORATE RELATIONS HITS THE BUSINESS SCENE

In the mid-1980s, what was, at the time, considered an unlikely relationship changed the landscape of possibilities in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors: American Express launched a campaign to donate a fixed amount to San Francisco–area arts organizations every time a card was used and a larger amount every time a new account

**Academy's Alliance Program consists of consortium, project, and social network relationships with organizations to advance the Academy's strategic plan. Sponsorship, on the other hand, represents when a company, that aligns with the vision and mission of the Academy, pays a fee to the Academy in return for specific rights and benefits that are equitable and clearly defined.*

†The Academy closely evaluates all potential sponsorships to ensure that they are consistent with the Academy's science-based positions and messages. The Academy does not endorse any companies, products or services. Sponsors do not influence the Academy's decision making process nor do they affect policy positions.

‡Until January 2012, the Academy was known as the American Dietetic Association; throughout this document, it will be called "the Academy."

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2017.08.020

Statement of Potential Conflict of Interest: The author has no potential conflict of interest to disclose.

This project was made possible through a generous donation by Alice Wimpfheimer, MS, RD, CDN.

was opened. The success of the program led the credit card company to debut this program at a national level, first earmarking some funds for a foundation overseeing restoration of US landmarks (ie, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island) and then partnering with a hunger-relief organization.[1] The American Red Cross, the YMCA, and the American Heart Association were among the first groups from the nonprofit sector to wade into the corporate alliance waters.[1]

In the years since, corporations have "increasingly see[n] the value of doing well by doing good" and have integrated social causes and other "work that used to be the exclusive domain of nonprofits" as part of their standard business practices.[2] But there is much pressure on associations regarding the paramount need for ethically balancing private interest with public good in these arrangements, so corporate partnerships, alliances, and sponsorship agreements have been subjected to heavy scrutiny by the public, media, and association members. Although an organization and its corporate allies may have shared goals, there must be a great deal of care to demonstrate that the association's interests are paramount over the corporation's profit. Associations have largely followed the expected, and accepted, pattern of protecting their own brand image and program content,[2] but there were growing pains early on.

As corporate relationships were in the early stages of gaining traction across the nonprofit sector, the delineations as to what members and the public would accept were not firmly established and were somewhat blurry. And thus cropped up some great lessons about the real costs—actual dollars and public trust—of doing it wrong. The Arthritis Foundation, the American Cancer Society, and the American Medical Association, to name a few, took some public hits for what was perceived as compromising their values in the interest of commercial dollars.

The Arthritis Foundation's 1994 decision to lend its name to a line of pain relievers manufactured by McNeil Consumer Products/Johnson & Johnson in exchange for research dollars was heavily criticized, as was the American Cancer Society's licensing agreement with SmithKlineBeecham's nicotine patches. In both these cases, despite the counterargument about the otherwise-unattainable consumer reach afforded by such arrangements, the contention was that unbiased health recommendations were impossible in the face of agreements where essentially use the organization's name was up for sale.[1]

Because of the millions of dollars at stake, fierce public backlash, and lawsuits, perhaps the most notorious illustration of the difficulty of striking the right balance in that era was the American Medical Association's 1998 partnership with Sunbeam. This controversial 5-year endorsement deal permitted Sunbeam to use the American Medical Association's name on a host of home medical products in exchange for cash and inclusion of the association's educational materials in product packaging.[3] As the end result included an internal push to open board meetings to its members,[4] this fiasco hammered home the point about the incredible need for transparency whenever an association and a corporation forge an agreement of any kind.

These salient early lessons served as a tremendous beacon for other associations trying to determine their own best practices[§] for joining this trend to the benefit of their members. It was around this era that the Academy's corporate relations programming was just beginning to take shape.

The Trajectory of Academy Corporate Relations

The early relationship between the Academy and corporate affiliations was rooted primarily in the form of donations, sponsored awards, and sponsored events at annual meetings. But, like so many other associations, when the mid-1980s business model began to slowly shift, the Academy began to explore its options. After appointing a corporate advisory council to guide the process of soliciting funds from the corporate sector in 1981,[5] the Academy's first major attempt at collaborating with industry to advance a cause was in its 1986 campaign to seek corporate dollars to help fund its National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics. But through the following years, as cause-related marketing alliances had taken hold and revenue streams from corporate sponsorships were becoming more and more common, the program picked up momentum and alliance-based initiatives that furthered the reputation of dietetics practitioners and the Academy itself were burgeoning.

The 1990s to Early 2000s: Segmented Support

The Academy has long known that "mastering the art and science of strategic partnerships is key to future achievements and growth of the dietetics profession" and that it would lead to positioning the Academy and its members as leaders and influencers in emerging nutrition-related areas and policy agendas.[6] In the early 1990s, conflation of dwindling corporate donations, slowly creeping private donations, and diminishing government contributions in the face of social service and welfare reform translated to a skyrocketing reliance on the struggling nonprofit sector.[1] Like so many associations facing a scarcity of resources at that time, the Academy had to be creative and seek out additional sources of revenue to reach its goals.[6]

At that time, the norm for many associations was to collaborate with industry that sponsored individual projects. The Academy followed that basic approach, joining forces with several corporate entities to launch projects meant to benefit dietetics and other health care practitioners, media, and consumers. In the late 1990s, for example, when the incidence of infant anemia in the United States was on the radar of both the Gerber Products Company and the Academy, these entities teamed up to publish science-based messages related to infant nutrition on more than 2.7 million boxes of Gerber cereals (see Figure 1 for an example of the Academy messaging on a Gerber cereal box in 1999). According to Barbara J. Ivens, MS, RD, FADA, who is a Foundation past chair (2011-2012) and was employed as a nutritionist at Gerber Products Company at that time, this effort achieved exactly what such programs aim to do, and underscored the basis for

§Although these stark examples of corporate relation controversies helped to inform the best practices of other associations, it should be noted that the Academy does not offer endorsements or licensing agreements in its sponsorship and alliance programming.