

INFORMATION NOTE

Sponsorship of Health Professional and Scientific Meetings by Companies that Market Foods for Infants and Young Children

Context

The *WHO Guidance on Ending the Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children*¹ recommends that “companies that market foods for infants and young children should not... sponsor meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings and that health workers, health systems, and health professional associations should not allow [such sponsorship].” The Guidance notes that “health professionals and facilities are often targeted and influenced by the infant and young child food industry through promotion, relationships, and incentives and that these incentives create conflicts of interest and can result in the loss of independence, integrity and public credibility”. Sponsorship establishes a visible, reciprocal relationship between a company and the organisation it sponsors. This may be perceived as implying that the company, or its product, has earned some endorsement or approval from the organisation it sponsors. When a company sponsors a meeting or conference, it borrows (or purchases) some of the reputational trust that researchers and health professionals place in the host organisation. Establishing a sense of reciprocity between health professional colleges and associations may compromise patient care.

Sponsorship is common amongst health professional colleges and associations². An examination of association websites found that over half of national paediatric associations reported to receive funding from manufacturers of breast-milk substitutes (BMS)³ (Figure 1). WHO and UNICEF have received queries from various associations regarding what is or is not considered to be corporate sponsorship of health professional and scientific meetings. The purpose of this information note is to clarify what WHO and UNICEF consider to be sponsorship with respect to associations, organizations, companies and health care providers that organise meetings, conferences or other events including training for health care workers including health professionals. It is not, however, intended to be exhaustive.

National Paediatric Associations' relationships with BMS Source: Guinness et al., BMJ Open, 2019

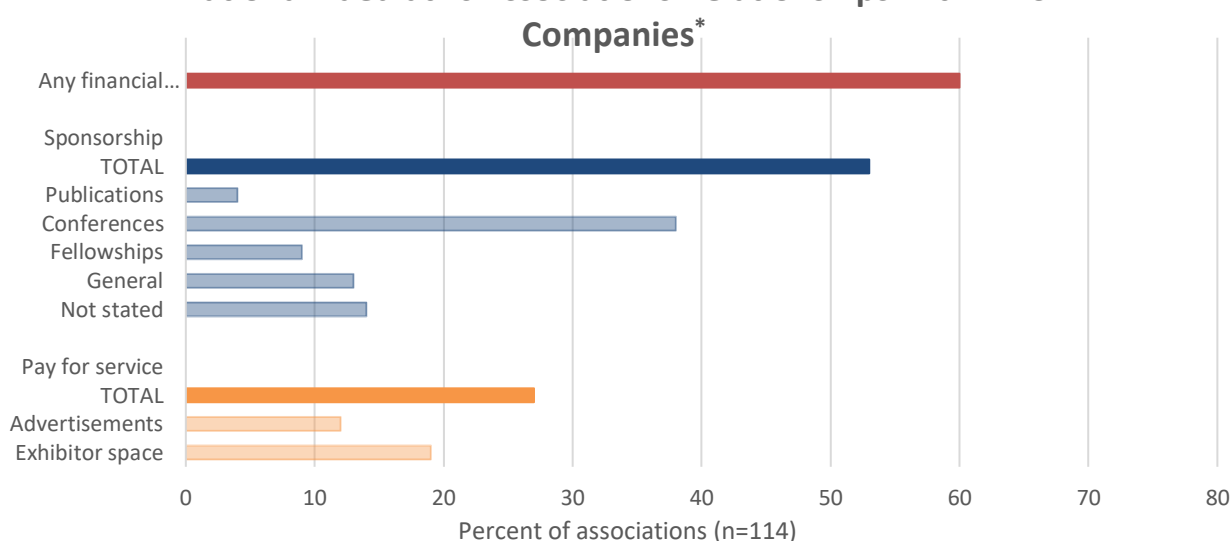


Figure 1: Prevalence and type of sponsorship from BMS companies amongst national paediatric association

Definition

Sponsorship is a commercial transaction in which a financial contribution made to a person, event, project, or activity is exchanged for commercial advantage⁴⁻⁷.

Business and Marketing literature emphasise the commercial benefits of sponsorship to the purchasers. These include opportunities to generate goodwill for a brand amongst a group of people who can influence purchasing behaviour in others⁸⁻¹⁰ and promote sales even in the absence of recognisable advertising.

Health professionals are in a position to influence the purchasing behaviour of caregivers and families responsible for young children because they are trusted to use their knowledge of medical and scientific evidence to recommend safe and effective nutritional and pharmaceutical products.

Sponsorship is defined in business management as:

*a business relationship between a provider of funds, resources or services and an individual, event or organization which offers in return some rights and associations that may be used for commercial advantage. Sponsorship allows a business to demonstrate its affiliation to the individual, event, or the organization that it has chosen to associate with.*¹¹

Sponsorship is a relationship that enables sponsoring companies, including those that promote breast-milk substitutes, to disguise promotional activities and marketing materials as educational activities or scientific content that is, explicitly or implicitly, endorsed by the host organisation¹²⁻¹⁴.

Several studies demonstrate that health professionals exposed to targeted commercial activity have more positive attitudes to the products being marketed, are more likely to recommend their patients use these products, more likely to recommend patients use products in the category, and less likely to be able to identify spurious claims made in marketing materials. Furthermore, these effects occur even when health professionals cannot recall sponsors' names and when they believe they are not influenced by exposure to this sort of

advertising¹⁵⁻¹⁹.

Sponsorship Activities

In addition to providing funds to support general operation of a conference, meeting, or educational event, the activities listed below also constitute sponsorship.

Provision of in-kind support for specific activities of the conference.

This includes, but is not limited to, providing a meal, refreshments or catering during or between sessions, offering child-care or other services to delegates or speakers, or establishing a gathering/relaxation area for use during a conference or meeting. It also includes providing gifts or merchandise for distribution to delegates, regardless of whether these gifts bear any mark known to be associated with a company or product.

Advertisements of any company, brand, or product.

This includes, but is not limited to, advertisements placed in any part of a program booklet, associated research publications including journal supplements or special issues, delegates' attendance packs (whether physical or digital), on seats, lecterns, floors, walls, ceilings, projection screens or other surfaces.

Sponsorship of sessions or side-sessions.

Support that is limited to specific sessions is also considered sponsorship. While meeting organisers cannot prevent companies from holding their own independent meetings, there should not be any type of cross promotion or announcements about any concurrent or adjacent event organised, funded, or hosted by a company that produces or markets foods for infants and young children.

Provision of financial support or aid for scholarships, awards, or grants.

This includes, but is not limited to, travel awards, registration support, accommodation subsidies, or grants provided by companies that promote breast-milk substitutes for distribution by the organisers to delegates or speakers for the purpose of attending

the meeting. Coordination with the organizers to provide funds directly to delegates or speakers is also considered sponsorship. Providing financial support directly to a delegate or speaker is a clear violation of WHO guidance¹ needing no further explication.

Sale of meeting delegates' contact details.

Selling registration lists to companies is a form of sponsorship that facilitates direct marketing to delegates in return for providing financial support for the conference.

Exhibition space

The act of selling or hiring exhibition space is not necessarily considered sponsorship. The International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (WHA 34.22)²¹ permits companies to provide health workers with information on their products provided it is restricted to scientific and factual matters and does not contain any content (in any medium) that is promotional in nature.

However, selling or hiring large (or multiple) exhibits

or selling space in premium locations is *de facto* a form of preferential opportunity and is therefore considered to be sponsorship.

When hiring exhibition spaces, the following conditions should apply.

1. The total area of exhibition space hired by any manufacturer of foods for infants and young children (and its subsidiaries) does not exceed two times the total area of the smallest available exhibition space.
2. The space hired is not preferentially located in a high traffic or high visibility area.
3. The price paid for exhibition space is commensurate with that paid by other commercial exhibitors.
4. No gifts, trinkets, sweets, samples, or any branded items are offered or distributed to delegates from exhibits or in any other place in which a meeting is taking place. Such items, however trivial, function as inducements to interact with marketing personnel, activities, or materials.

Summary

Sponsorship of Health Professional and Scientific Meetings by Companies that Market Foods for Infants and Young Children creates unacceptable conflicts of interest. Therefore, companies that market breast-milk substitutes and foods for infants and young children should not sponsor health professional or scientific meetings or events. Professional and scientific associations or organisations who organise or host these events (including their representatives) should neither solicit nor accept sponsorship from companies that market foods for infants and children up to the age of three years.

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