

Response

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Abstract Fast food companies like Siam Burger that participate in health awareness campaigns create a conflict of interest between the social responsibility of promoting health and the business interest of increasing sales through marketing strategies like advertising. Alternative options of raising health awareness without mitigating the involvement of fast food companies either by denying advertisements or having a third party foundation should be explored.

Keywords Conflict of interest · Social responsibility

Conflict of interest is the most obvious consideration to be settled in deciding whether Mrs. Vipa should accept the offer of Siam Burger. The conflict arises because fast food companies are thought to promote consumption of products that have led to greater obesity, by pushing food items high in calorie content.

Here, we provide reasons for advising Mrs. Vipa not to accept the offer unless certain conditions are met. The discussion must assume that Siam Burger, as a fast food company, has an inherent interest in promoting and advertising its products. Although it could simultaneously accept a social responsibility to pro-

mote the interests of its consumers and offer them assistance in meeting their health care needs, it must be presumed that the food company's business interests will remain paramount in guiding their activities, as these interests constitute its very reason for being. Even in its exercise of social responsibility, it can be presumed that business success and profit are the company's ultimate motivations.

Hence, the act of funding and supporting a health promotion campaign should be viewed at the same time as an ideal and effective venue for promoting Siam Burger's products. Mrs. Vipa's campaign is likely to be the means by which the food company will reach out to more possible customers, with food items that many presume to be compromised from the perspective of obesity prevention. Should the sponsorship be accepted, people who are closely involved in the health consultations and activities will be wearing the fast food company's logo, thereby endorsing Siam Burger. The endorsement of healthy food eating habits will serve as a smokescreen for the contribution of their products to the incidence of obesity. The sponsorship sends a confusing message: "Siam Burger cares about your health. So go ahead, patronize our burgers". Even if Siam Burger will not be promoted verbally, the marketing message will come across forcefully to the participants in the campaign. Wearing logos on shirts and other items and printing the logo on the weekly school newspaper are no less powerful than verbal promotion.

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If we imagine the situation taking place in the Philippines, we also have to view the proposal in relation to a culture of exchange dominated by a strong sense of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude)—a feeling that one ought to repay a benefactor for something given freely. The responsibility is seen as something that should be fulfilled with even greater passion than something given with formal expectation of payment. Even if there is no articulated pressure from the sponsor for the beneficiaries of the program to actively support Siam Burger, Mrs. Vipa's high school is likely to feel compelled to patronize the company's product out of *utang na loob*.

An alternative option that could be recommended is to accept the offer of sponsorship on condition that the products will not be advertised in any way. No advertising banners or posters would be displayed in connection with the campaign and the general public

would be blinded to the fact that the burger company is supporting the campaign. The sponsorship would be known only to Mrs. Vipa and those in her confidence who participate in the program. Thus, the negative impact could be negligible. (We understand, nevertheless, that one of the measures usually recommended to deal with conflicts of interest is transparency, including a declaration that one of the parties in a transaction faces a conflict, to enable the public to judge properly whether that party's actions have been compromised. Thus we may be perceived as equivocating in respect of this principle.)

Another alternative that could be recommended is the possibility of a contribution made through a third party (a foundation, for example) that is not directly identified with the burger company. This "cleansing" of the donation could avoid the advertising impact of the donation.