

## Editorial

# Oral health promotion by the oral health products industry: unrecognised and unappreciated?

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There is often ambivalence in the way dentists view the oral health care industry. On the one hand, there are the skeptics who view corporate activities as suspect, calling into question the validity of industry-sponsored research and considering all promotional activities as self-serving. On the other hand, there are those who will evaluate research, whether industry sponsored or not, on its merits and appreciate corporate philanthropy that aims to give something back to the profession, although at times the expectations of the amount of financial support available are markedly in excess of the actual amount based on dental product sales. (Yes - and don't let your young children see this! - the tooth fairy who goes around dispensing endless number of dollars or pounds or euros does not actually exist!) Recognizing that, of necessity, corporations exist to make a profit, I would submit that the relationship of responsible companies to the profession can often be looked at as a partnership in which both sides benefit. Ultimately, all have as a goal the improvement of the oral health of our patients (or consumers) which is facilitated by the availability of effective products. In addition to marketing products, the oral care industry plays a large, though oftentimes unnoticed, role in oral health promotion. For the most part, this involves targeted financial support or contributions of products that serve to enhance patients' understanding of oral diseases and the need for good oral care, and/or provide access to care for underserved groups. In the following sections, I will give some examples of industry-supported health promotion activities, most of which will be activities in the United States with which I am most familiar. These are examples only - the list is not intended to be exhaustive and a company's name will be included in only the few instances in which it is an integral part of the programme title.

In general, the majority of industry-sponsored oral health promotion activities direct to consumers can be categorized as follows:

### *Patient education brochures*

The distribution in such venues as dental offices and pharmacies of brochures dealing with specific oral health topics is a common method with which to supplement and reinforce oral hygiene instructions and to explain dental diseases and therapy. Companies often produce brochures dealing with diseases and conditions relating to their products that provide the patient with useful information. In addition, companies also provide funds to support more 'generic' brochures produced by professional associations, such as the American Dental Association. These are editorially under the auspices of the association and are not product specific. In this case, as well, companies generally fund brochures on topics relating to their products. However, the only connection to the company or product is generally in an acknowledgement, such as, 'this brochure was produced with an educational grant from Company X, maker of Y.'

### *Museums and related programmes*

There are not many museums dedicated to dentistry. However, the National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore, Maryland is one such museum and contributes to health promotion by educating the public about various aspects of oral disease. Exhibits deal with such topics as methods

for achieving good oral hygiene, the role of nutrition in oral health, adverse effects of tobacco, and the importance of saliva for oral health. Dental products manufacturers were a major source of funding that allowed for the establishment of this museum, and continue to provide support for the development of new exhibits.

### *Access programmes*

One of the most successful oral health promotion programmes sponsored by industry in the US is 'Give Kids a Smile<sup>®</sup>', a one-day programme that provides free preventive and restorative treatment for children who would otherwise have little or no access to dental care. In 2007, the program treated over 758,000 children at approximately 2,250 locations including dental schools, community clinics, and private offices. Corporate sponsors provide more than \$3M in products and services to support this event. In addition to providing some basic care for the children, the programme aims to increase awareness of the need for a public policy that adequately responds to children's health needs.

### *National patient education programmes*

Another aspect of industry oral health promotion involves partnerships between companies and professional organizations to provide consumers with information concerning some aspect of oral health. For example, Colgate has partnered with the British Dental Association for an annual 'Colgate Oral Health Month' to deliver key oral

health messages to patients. This year's theme, 'fighting together for better oral health', focuses on raising periodontal disease awareness. In addition to providing educational materials and product samples for patients, the programme includes a nationwide campaign with television advertisements, press releases, interactive TV and text competitions, and mobile units traveling to major United Kingdom cities to provide tips on oral health and demonstrate appropriate mechanical oral hygiene methods. In the US, GlaxoSmithKline and the American Dental Association have recently launched an ambitious joint initiative, 'OralLongevity™', that aims to promote oral health among older adults. Programmes such as these require a significant commitment of corporate funds and resources and do much to enhance the public's awareness of the importance of oral health.

### *Advertising to consumers*

Although we are constantly exposed to consumer advertising for oral care products, we often fail to recognise that in the course of marketing products these advertisements also convey information aimed at promoting oral health. It is interesting to note that even in the early part of the last century, advertisements for products included quite sophisticated information about the causes and prevention of caries and periodontal disease. In fact, for the major part of the last century, advertisements contained a considerable amount of text, something seldom seen today in an age of television, text messaging, and limited attention spans! For example, a 1916 newspaper advertisement for a dentifrice contained the headline, 'Film – a real danger', and spoke of then recent scientific findings on the role of film (the term *dental plaque* apparently hadn't yet been introduced) in causing dental caries and periodontal diseases. Much of the information is still valid today. A 1919 advertisement for a tooth powder highlighted the significance of gingival bleeding as a sign of 'pyorrhea' and described the features and course of the disease as well as the importance of prevention. Again, an advertisement in 1924 emphasised the need for radiographs in order to assess the condition of the periodontium, under the heading 'White teeth – but what would the x-ray show?' In subsequent years, similar advertisements relating primarily to periodontal diseases appeared in marketing efforts for products such as dentifrices, mouthrinses, and toothbrushes. Following the development and testing of a stannous fluoride-containing toothpaste, a 1957 advertisement described in some detail the role of fluoride in caries prevention and the clinical trial that had been conducted to demonstrate efficacy of the dentifrice. In more recent years, advertisements for anti-gingivitis products became more frequent, first, as a consequence of the awarding of the ADA Seal of

Acceptance to certain products in this group and secondly, because previously periodontitis *per se* had not been considered an indication for a consumer product. These advertisements conveyed the points that gingivitis is reversible with good oral hygiene and that there are chemotherapeutic adjuncts to mechanical methods for people who are not adept enough with the latter. Interestingly, consumer surveys indicated that while few individuals thought they had gingivitis, a larger percentage reported gingival bleeding but did not associate this with gingivitis. Thus, as did the 1919 advertisement referred to previously, a television promotion for a prescription mouthrinse in the 1980s emphasised the significance of gingival bleeding as a sign of periodontal disease and thereby made the connection that most consumers failed to make. Currently, there has been a trend in consumer advertisements to highlight associations between oral and systemic diseases. Thus, for example, one for a mouthrinse states 'Emerging science suggests that there may be a link between the health of your mouth and the health of your body' while advertisements for an antigingivitis dentifrice, a sonic toothbrush, and educational materials for a programme directed at older patients all speak of the 'mouth-body connection'. While considerable research remains to be done to sort out accurately the nature of this connection, these advertisements serve to provide information about the latest research with the intent of heightening consumers' awareness of the importance of oral health.

In positioning consumer advertising as playing a role in oral health promotion, it is important to recognise that the vast majority of advertisements are well supported by data and subject to review by regulatory agencies (at least in the US and UK) to confirm the appropriateness of the claims. When there are disputes, these more often involve product claims, especially claims comparing competitive products, rather than specific oral health information.

In summary, these examples indicate that the oral health industry has a significant role in oral health promotion through funding and/or participation in a wide variety of activities. Clearly, there is an association between informing consumers about oral diseases and the marketing of products. However, in this process both sides benefit, with the outcomes being the continued viability of the companies and the improved oral health of the population.

*Note:* The consumer advertisements for the years 1913-1960 mentioned in this article can be seen at the following website (accessed September 24, 2007): <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/dynaweb/mma/toothpaste/>.