

# Industry Tactics From “Coke Leaks”

Based on Research by Kyle Pfister, *Ninjas for Health*<sup>1</sup>

Internal executive emails detailing Coca-Cola’s coordinated global strategies to defeat sugary drink policies and influence dietary guidelines were leaked to the public in fall 2016.<sup>2</sup> The emails confirm what public health advocates have said for years – the beverage industry is following the tobacco industry’s playbook to fight health regulations worldwide.

The emails reveal how the soda industry 1) funds studies that support its arguments, 2) pressures journalists, 3) lobbies against federal and international health policy, 4) deflects with self regulation, 5) lies about grocery taxes, and 6) organizes fake grassroots opposition.

**This brief pulls quotes from the leaked emails to illustrate the soda industry’s tactics to reference in your education efforts.**

## BIG SODA TACTIC

## SUPPORTING QUOTES

**1. Fund Studies that Support Their Arguments.** In Mexico, the soda industry funded studies that show soda consumption returning to pre-tax levels, and in Europe, economic analyses were calibrated to match Coca-Cola’s arguments.

“He reviewed multiple studies from well-respected institutions in Mexico (ITAM, ColMex, and UANL, supported by funding from industry) that make clear the tax was ineffective.”  
— *Kerry Tressler, Coca-Cola (4/27/16)*<sup>3</sup>

“We will locally investigate the government’s elasticity on the tax proposal and make calculations to support our arguments.”  
— *Melinda Androutsopoulou, Coca-Cola of Central and Eastern Europe (4/1/16)*<sup>4</sup>

**2. Pressure Journalists.** Coca-Cola builds relationships with reporters to promote false “balanced coverage” of industry-funded research and scientific research. Emails reveal Coke pressuring reporters at AP, WIRED, Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post and the New York Times. They provide industry-supported “background material” to counter studies by the Harvard School of Public Health and UNC Chapel Hill School of Public Health.

“We will be reaching out to this reporter to better understand her decision not to include our perspective, and to build her brain around our strategy.”  
— *Amanda Rosseter, Coca-Cola (5/25/16)*<sup>5</sup>

“In an effort to help shape the story and insert balance, there have been a number of conversations with Mike [Esterl at the Wall Street Journal] and the local anti-tax coalition, ABA, TCCC [The Coca-Cola Company].”  
— *Ben Sheidler, Coca-Cola (5/5/16)*<sup>6</sup>

“While Mike initially planned to reference [the CHOICES<sup>7</sup> study on Philadelphia], we worked through ABA to ensure Mike understood the source of the study and that it had not been published or peer reviewed yet.”  
— *Karyn Harrington, Coca-Cola (5/6/16)*<sup>8</sup>

**3. Lobby against Federal and International Health Policy.**

Coca-Cola lobbied to influence and defeat soda regulations in the US Congress, WHO, and internationally.

“Our results-driven team will continue to provide the strategies and engagement plans required to build trust and strengthen our system reputation at all levels of government... The entire Government Relations team is committed to effectively managing the national, state and local public policy issues and strengthening our social license to operate so that our business can grow.”  
— *Kate Rumbaugh, Vice President of Government Relations, Coca-Cola North America (12/18/15)*<sup>9</sup>

## BIG SODA TACTIC

## SUPPORTING QUOTES

### 3. Lobby against Federal and International Health Policy, continued.

“The DC team continues to execute a robust campaign with Congress and the agencies to ensure that policy recommendation on a soda tax is not included in the final [US Dietary] guidelines.”

— Ryan Guthrie, *Coca-Cola* (5/28/15)<sup>10</sup>

“We are also digging into some of the data to explore how we can leverage this report to push for a more holistic view on promoting health rather than a sole focus on sugar and soft drinks.”

— Wouter Vermeulen, *Coca-Cola Europe* (3/15/16)<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Deflect with Self-Regulation.

Coca-Cola successfully offered voluntary calorie commitments and product reformulations in order to fight legislation and sell the soda industry as part of the solution to the diabetes and obesity epidemics they cause.

“The GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries have some of the world’s highest levels of obesity and diabetes, and therefore concrete industry action is important to avoid regulation.”

— Michael Goltzman, *Coca-Cola* (3/2/16)<sup>12</sup>

“Industry can deliver change faster and more effectively through its innovation power than governments can through regulation.”

— Wouter Vermeulen, *Coca-Cola* (4/28/16)<sup>13</sup>

“Our calorie commitment in the Netherlands is now out and is getting massive media traction locally. It’s a key element in our strategy to fight discriminatory legislation and to improve category perception...”

— Salvatore Gabola, *Coca-Cola* (6/25/15)<sup>14</sup>

### 5. Lie About “Grocery” Taxes.

Internally, Coca-Cola admits soda taxes are not grocery taxes. They actually would prefer and privately promote grocery taxes to disperse the impact of taxation.

“Options to broaden the affected categories are being discussed if the tax cannot be defeated.”

— Michael Goltzman via the *Government Relations Dashboard*, *Coca-Cola* (4/4/16)<sup>15</sup>

“Any discussion about taxation on SSBs must be steered towards addressing ALL added sugars in all foodstuffs.”

— Hamish Banks, *Coca-Cola Eurasia & Africa* (4/18/16)<sup>16</sup>

“Sales taxes are not ‘beverage taxes.’ There’s a difference between sales taxes and excise taxes. Excise taxes target one specific item and are often a flat rate on top of what you buy. The Coca-Cola Company does not oppose sales taxes on our products because they are applied fairly across most other food and beverage items found in grocery stores and restaurants.”

— Ben Sheidler, *Coca-Cola* (6/9/16)<sup>17</sup>

### 6. Build Fake Grassroots Opposition.

The soda industry infiltrates cities where community members propose a soda tax to raise funds for health efforts that counteract soda

“Coalition-building work is underway in the California cities of San Francisco, Richmond, Oakland and Watsonville in preparation for potential beverage tax ballot measures in June or November 2016.”

— Jennifer Lemming, *Director of State & Local Government Relations for Coca-Cola* (2/15/16)<sup>18</sup>

## BIG SODA TACTIC

### 6. Build Fake Grassroots Opposition, continued.

industry behavior. They know wary community members are skeptical of the soda industry's intentions, so they build fake coalitions that pretend to be local equivalent of the community coalition. These fake coalitions spread rumors to businesses and deflect negative attention from the soda industry, often using people of color.

## SUPPORTING QUOTES

"Sources in [Philadelphia's] City Hall indicated that council members were wary of a beverage industry campaign against a tax."

— *Lauren Craig, Coca-Cola (6/11/15)*<sup>19</sup>

"An industry led, broad-based coalition met today to begin implementing a comprehensive campaign response to the tax proposal. The coalition, having faced beverage tax proposals advanced by the previous administration, is well coordinated and is moving quickly. Coalition efforts include council engagement, continued research and message development, stakeholder outreach, and plans for proactive and reactive media."

— *Lauren Craig, Coca-Cola Philadelphia (2/29/16)*<sup>20</sup>

"...include local voices opposing the tax rather than overly simplifying the situation with the premise that this tax is a fight between 'big soda' and the Mayor's Pre-K program."

— *Ben Sheidler, Director of the Coca-Cola Company [TCCC] (5/5/16)*<sup>21</sup>

"Beverage tax organizers in Watsonville, CA have withdrawn their petition efforts to place a two cent per ounce request on the November ballot. Early organizing and outreach to the business community were instrumental to this successful outcome."

— *Michael Goltzman via the Government Relations Dashboard, Coca-Cola (4/4/16)*<sup>22</sup>

## References

- 1 #CokeLeak: *Insider Emails Expose Soda's Strategy to Fight Health*, Kyle Pfister, published on Medium between 10/16/17-11/7/16, <https://medium.com/cokeleak>.
- 2 The leaked emails were chains exchanged between Coca-Cola VP Michael Goltzman and Capricia Marshall, a communications consultant simultaneously working for Coca-Cola and the Clinton campaigns. The emails became publicly available on DC Leaks in fall 2016. Copies were made. The DC Leaks site was pulled in spring 2017 for unknown reasons.
- 3 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/30/16
- 4 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/5/16
- 5 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 5/26/16
- 6 In email from Ben Sheidler to Karyn Harrington 5/5/16
- 7 CHOICES stands for the Childhood Obesity Intervention Cost Effectiveness Study. In April 2016, the Harvard Chan School of Public Health released a brief on Philadelphia's proposed sugary drink tax, examining its projected impact on cases of obesity and diabetes, and healthcare cost savings. For more information, see [choicesproject.org](http://choicesproject.org)
- 8 In email from Karyn Harrington to Matt Echols 5/6/16
- 9 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 12/19/15
- 10 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 5/28/15
- 11 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 3/15/16
- 12 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 3/2/16
- 13 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/29/16
- 14 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 6/24/15 (date difference due to time zones)
- 15 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/4/16
- 16 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/18/16
- 17 *Philadelphia Tax Background TCCC Position NA*, in email sent by Ben Sheidler 6/9/16
- 18 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 2/16/16
- 19 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 6/11/15
- 20 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 3/1/16
- 21 In email from Ben Sheidler to Karyn Harrington 5/5/16
- 22 In email sent by Michael Goltzman 4/4/16