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Promoting Brand Name Products

An RD works for a retail food and beverage company as a nutrition specialist. The company's current advertising campaign features the RD singing the praises of the company's high fibre cereals to help consumers meet their daily fibre recommendations as outlined in Canada's Food Guide. Are there any concerns with the RD promoting these products?

The College does not prohibit RDs from endorsing specific brand name products. However, RDs should be aware that there are many colleges that have prohibitions and restrictions regarding endorsements and recommendations of products. RDs who use their credentials or professional status to promote a product are facing a potential or perceived conflict of interest. This situation must be carefully managed through honest, transparent, and evidence-based practice.

RDs must keep in mind that, as regulated health professionals, their first obligation is to their clients. In this scenario, there are two clients: 1) the public, the target audience for the advertising; and 2) the company that employs the RD. Where there is more than one client, the hierarchy of clients must be considered. Patients or the public are always the first priority. Focusing on the public interest when considering endorsements, will help RDs manage conflicts of interest arising between the public interest they serve and the interests of the company employing them.

To make professional and ethical decisions about endorsements that favour the public interest, RDs must apply these three principles:

- 1. Be transparent and honest:** The RD must clearly identify him/herself as a representative of the food and beverage company. Full disclosure about being paid by the company to represent a product will help the public make an informed decision. People will be able to weigh the information they hear about the product against the fact that the RD is being paid to promote it.
- 2. Base product claims on evidence:** Any promotional claims made about the nutritional benefits of a product must be based on sound evidence. Using evidence-based information within the appropriate context will help foster public trust in the profession.
- 3. Choose or present the products you promote carefully:** Lending RD credibility to a product requires professional judgment. RDs need to ensure that their product recommendations present a comprehensive approach to healthy eating. In the interest of clients, and in the interest of maintaining professional integrity, RDs should consider the ethical implications of representing a product that is high in one nutrient (e.g., fibre) but excessive in another nutrient (e.g., sodium). All product recommendations should be based on evidence and represent a full picture of the product in relation to healthy eating.