



Meals: a very effective gift

Social sciences explain why small gifts are an effective marketing tool (1-4). In the US, a number of high-profile university hospitals are teaching these concepts to their students and have banned industry-sponsored meals on their premises (1).

Influenced is not the same as "bought". Social sciences confirm what common sense tells us: people only feel they have been "bought" when they receive what they consider to be a large gift. A small gift is effective precisely because it does not raise suspicion and because its influence is subconscious. This explains why the practice is commonly used in so many different industries (1-4).

First, small gifts and free meals are the price pharmaceutical companies must pay to make contact with healthcare professionals and develop cordial or even friendly relationships with them (2,3). Next, acceptance of a small gift or meal by the recipient creates a link with the donor based on politeness, gratitude and the need to reciprocate in some way. This effect is well documented and explained by several psychological mechanisms (2,3,4).

The need to reciprocate after receiving a gift is independent of its value and exists even when the recipient does not particularly like the giver. Unsolicited gifts also create this feeling of obligation. And the gift provided in return is often something of greater value than the original gift (1,2). It has also been shown that once someone has accepted a first gift, the desire to remain "consistent" makes it difficult to change their attitude towards accepting other gifts (4).

Meals: a very influential gift. For social scientists, accepting food is no trivial matter. A meal makes the recipient feel particularly positively inclined towards the person or company that provided it (2). Experiments have shown that written or verbal messages have a greater impact and seem more convincing to people who have been given a free meal (1,2,3). Psychologists have summarised this as *"food is the most commonly used technique to derail the judgment aspect of decision making"* (1,2).

In summary. All over the world, healthcare professionals maintain in all sincerity that pharmaceutical companies cannot buy them *"with a pen or a slice of pizza"*.

However *"the natural tendency for people to accept gifts and kind gestures reduces their ability to choose to whom they wish to be indebted"* (2). This is reason enough to refuse industry gifts. And because even small gifts influence the recipient's behaviour, *Prescrire* demands that pharmaceutical companies be required to disclose every euro they spend on gifts.

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1- Margolis RH "What social science research teaches about financial incentives from industry" University of Minnesota 2008: 5 pages.

2- Katz D et al. "All gifts large and small: toward an understanding of the ethics of pharmaceutical industry gift giving" University of Pennsylvania - Center for Bioethics Papers, 2003: 21 pages.

3- Wright R "Face, dissonance and drug lunches - Communicative and cognitive mechanisms for drug company marketing" University of Arizona, 1998: 8 pages.

4- Prescrire Rédaction "Petits cadeaux: des influences souvent inconscientes, mais prouvées" *Rev Prescrire* 2011; 31 (335): 694-696.



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