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May 21, 2012

Rick Snyder
Governor, State of Michigan
P.O. Box 30013
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Dear Governor Snyder,

Commercial Alert is a project of Public Citizen, a consumer protection organization based in Washington, D.C., with more than 300,000 members and supporters. We aim to keep commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

We understand that the “Pure Michigan FIT program,” aimed at fighting childhood obesity, is partnering with Nestlé’s Gerber brand, which will provide its “nutritional expertise” to the program. We are writing to urge you to reverse the decision to partner with Nestlé. By partnering with Nestlé, the city is undermining its own efforts to reduce childhood obesity, and instead providing a venue for Nestlé to market products that have been shown to lead to increased obesity. Childhood obesity is a serious matter that warrants considerable attention from public entities. We commend your commitment to addressing this issue. However, public officials must ensure that programs intended to combat childhood obesity are not co-opted by corporations seeking to profit from this health crisis.

Nestlé is the world largest producer of infant formula, a product that it markets with disregard for the WHO Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, both in the United States and in the developing world.¹ By aggressively marketing infant formula to families, Nestlé undermines breastfeeding. In her recent “Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding,” the Surgeon General emphasized that marketing of infant formula has a negative influence on breastfeeding.²

Nestlé’s involvement in the development of a program to teach families about improving the diets of young children, including infants, toddlers and preschoolers is worrisome because its advice will likely reflect its interest in selling its products. Among the key components of the Pure Michigan FIT program is the goal of longer duration of breastfeeding, which you have rightly identified as an important practice for reducing obesity. However, Nestlé’s infant formula sales depend on women choosing not to breastfeed their babies. The company’s ability to effectively highlight the importance of breastfeeding is highly questionable.

Not breastfeeding has serious consequences for the health of both mothers and babies. Among the many risks for infants of formula feeding, rather than breastfeeding, is an increased risk of childhood obesity. One study found that breastfed children are 22 percent less likely than those who are not to be obese.³ In addition, children that are not breastfed have an increased risk of acute otitis media, non-specific gastroenteritis, severe lower respiratory tract infections, atopic dermatitis, asthma, type 1 and 2 diabetes, childhood leukemia, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), and necrotizing enterocolitis. For mothers, not breastfeeding leads to increased morbidity and mortality over those who do, including reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, obesity, ovarian cancer, post-partum depression, and bladder infections.⁴

In a state that has been particularly affected by the recession, the economic effects of not breastfeeding are an important consideration. Formula feeding costs between \$800 and \$2800 per year.⁵ Breastfeeding saves families the cost of formula, as well as potential healthcare costs for infants that do not reap the health benefits of breast milk. Not breastfeeding also comes at a high cost to the U.S. economy as a whole: one study found that if 90 percent of families in the United States breastfed babies exclusively for six months, savings could amount to \$13 billion.⁶

Nestlé of course also manufactures a variety of unhealthful products, including Wonka candy and Butterfinger, Crunch and Baby Ruth chocolate bars. While Nestlé has scaled back its marketing directly to children following intense pressure from public health groups, there is a considerable risk that it will use its role as a “nutrition expert” in the Michigan program to unduly influence families to purchase its products and to offset criticism over any troubling aspects of its candy and other junk food.

The childhood obesity epidemic in Michigan requires a serious public response. We encourage you to continue your important work on this issue. However, we strongly urge you to reconsider allowing Nestlé to commercialize anti-obesity programs in Michigan, potentially undermining efforts to promote breastfeeding and healthy eating. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Robert Weissman
President
Public Citizen

Elizabeth Ben-Ishai
Campaign Coordinator
Public Citizen’s Commercial Alert

¹ World Health Organization. "International Code of Marketing of Breast-Milk Substitutes." Retrieved 10 October, 2011, from http://www.who.int/nutrition/publications/code_english.pdf.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. Retrieved 14 February, 2012, from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/breastfeeding/calltoactiontosupportbreastfeeding.pdf>.

³ Ip, S., M. Chung, G. Raman, P. Chew, N. Magula, D. DeVine, T. Trikalinos, and J. Lau. "Breastfeeding and Maternal and Infant Health Outcomes in Developed Countries." Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Publication, U.S. Department of Healthcare and Human Services. Retrieved 2 November, 2011, from <http://www.ahrq.gov/downloads/pub/evidence/pdf/brfout/brfout.pdf>; Arenz, S., R. Ruckerl, B. Koletzko, and R. Von Kries. "Breast-Feeding and Childhood Obesity—a Systematic Review." *International Journal of Obesity* 28, no. 10 (2004): 1247-56.

⁴ Ip et al., "Breastfeeding and Maternal and Infant Health Outcomes in Developed Countries."; Labbok, Miriam H. "Effects of Breastfeeding on the Mother." *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 48, no. 1 (2001): 143-58.

⁵ Calculations based on prices of store brand and name brand formulas at Walgreens.com in November 2011 and average consumption of 30 oz. of formula per day.

⁶ Bartick and Reinhold, "The Burden of Suboptimal Breastfeeding in the United States: A Pediatric Cost Analysis."