



# Sponsorship of health professional associations by manufacturers and distributors of commercial milk formula

## Alternative funding resources for events

### Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended (1) that, in order to promote, protect and support breastfeeding, prevent obesity and noncommunicable diseases, promote healthy diets, and ensure that caregivers receive clear and accurate information on feeding, companies that market foods for infants and young children should not “sponsor meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings.” Likewise, health workers, health systems, health professional associations and nongovernmental organizations should not “allow such companies to sponsor meetings of health professionals and scientific meetings”.

In resolution 69.9 on Ending Inappropriate Promotion of Foods for Infants and Young Children (2), the World Health Assembly called upon Member States and health care professionals to implement these recommendations. WHO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have published an Information Note that explains what is meant by sponsorship of health professional and scientific meetings by companies that market foods for infants and young children (3). The document provides a non-exhaustive list of marketing activities that may create conflicts of interest (COI) in health care systems and among health care professionals.

### Purpose

This brief offers suggestions as to how a healthcare association can fund educational programmes, congresses, conferences, and other meetings without sponsorship by companies that market foods for infants and young children.

## Virtual meetings

Virtual meetings are generally far less costly than face-to-face meetings. They can also improve equitable access for participants who cannot afford to travel to face-to-face meetings. They offer the added benefit of reducing the carbon footprint of meetings.

Technological innovations are increasingly offering new opportunities for social participant engagement, with multiple ways to communicate among participants, use small breakout rooms, and share visual experiences.

Costs can vary tremendously across hosting platforms, so it is important to investigate different costs and opportunities. While hybrid meetings are an appealing option to provide greater access to face-to-face elements, the costs may actually be higher than in-person only meetings.

## Face-to-face meetings

Face-to-face meetings of healthcare professional associations typically occur at luxury hotels, large conference centres, or other facilities designed for such events. Facility fees, meeting expenses, and travel costs are usually high, leading to the need to seek funding beyond that available from registration fees. There are various alternatives to consider that might reduce these costs.

### Facility fees

- Lower-cost facilities can be considered, such as universities, hospitals, or cheaper hotels.
- Smaller, regional or local conferences held at smaller venues are typically cheaper.
- Often lower costs Hosting meeting during off-season times of year can help to negotiate better rates.
- Smaller cities and non-tourist areas typically have lower venue costs than popular, well-known locations.

## Meeting expenses

- Honoraria for speakers are often unnecessary or can be negotiated down.
- Simpler, lower-cost food and beverage selections are often an option.
- Disseminating conference materials online or in an app can cut down on printing costs.
- Creation of graphics and stage materials that can be used again in different venues will reduce long-term expenditures.
- Conference “swag,” such as tote bags, notebooks, lanyards, or water bottles are unnecessary and may not be valued by attendees.
- Volunteers from among the membership can help with meeting tasks and may increase engagement in the meeting.

## Travel costs

- Facilitators and speakers who are locally available can be selected to avoid or reduce airfares and perhaps lodging costs.
- Keynote or well-known speakers can be hosted on a virtual platform to reduce travel costs.
- Hosting meetings back-to-back with other related events could allow for cost-sharing of travel.

## Alternative revenue sources

- Basic registration fees can often be increased without significantly affecting attendance. To improve equity, discounts can be offered for participants from lower-income countries, students, or other categories. A scholarship fund subsidized by members from higher-income countries could make the meeting accessible to those unable to afford registration fees.
- Additional programme options, such as a facility tour, gala dinner, or social activities, could be offered for added fees.

- Sales of books or other materials could generate additional revenue.
- Sponsorship from foundations, charities, or government organizations that are free of conflicts of interest may be acceptable.
- Sponsorship from commercial entities other than companies that market foods for infants and young children could be

considered, although careful consideration must be given to the potential for other conflicts of interest that these might raise.

To organize an effective and financially viable meeting, careful planning is an important start. Meeting goals of advocacy, education, networking, and social engagement can often be met at lower costs than assumed.

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## References

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2. World Health Assembly, 69. Ending inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016 <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/252789>
3. World Health Organization. Clarification on sponsorship of health professional and scientific meetings by companies that market foods for infants and young children: information note. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240074422>