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What's in a name?

The Center for Consumer Freedom made a big splash last week with ads in major magazines and newspapers, including USA TODAY, that called the nation's obesity problem "Hype."

Every group is entitled to its opinion, but it would have been nice if readers knew straight off that the center is heavily funded by restaurants and food companies — industries with a huge stake in battling concerns that Americans are eating themselves to death.

Maybe the group should change its Web site from ConsumerFreedom.com to FatforProfit.com.

Fat chance of that, given that names are powerful symbols and the goal is to persuade. Just as numbers can mislead, names are often used to convince or confuse. Politicians, special interest groups and think tanks have honed the game of the convenient name to a fine art.

Thus Congress' bankruptcy overhaul last month — the darling of the credit card industry and bane of consumer groups — was called the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act. A bill last year that bestowed billions in corporate tax breaks was titled the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004.

NOT CLEAR

The names of interest groups can often be ambiguous:

Republicans for Clean Air (Supporters of George W. Bush who ran ads attacking Sen. John McCain during the 2000 GOP primaries.)

Americans Coming Together (Liberal, labor-backed group that worked to get Democrats to the polls last fall.)

Citizens for Better Medicare (Group funded by drugmakers that ran ads against price controls on medicines.)

During political campaigns and policy debates, when dubiously dubbed groups travel in packs like wolves, voters can't tell the players even with a program.

In last fall's presidential race, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, which included many Bush supporters, savaged John Kerry's war record. Along came Texans for Truth, founded by Democrats, to air ads attacking President Bush's National Guard service. Together and individually, those groups' tactics gave truth a bad name.

Got a controversial cause or image? Try a comforting name, preferably one invoking "consumers" or "workers." The Alliance for Consumer Rights in New York, for example, operated out of the trial lawyers' headquarters. In the fight over individual Social Security investment accounts, the Alliance for Worker Retirement Security is

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carrying the message for business groups.

The Supreme Court, ruling in a historic 2003 campaign-finance case, decried groups that seek to influence campaigns while "hiding behind dubious and misleading names." The court cited Americans Working for Real Change, funded by business groups opposed to organized labor, and Citizens for Better Medicare, funded by drug companies.

Trying to influence policy and politics is Washington's favorite game. Groups that play should be upfront about who they are. Groups that aren't straightforward ought to be regarded with suspicion.

A rose by any other name may smell as sweet. A special interest group with a deceptive name? That just stinks.

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