



Dietetics is one of the lowest paying health professional fields. But, did you know that some dietitians are earning “four-digits” a day as a “media

spokesperson” promoting the same products and services that many of us name-drop with clients?

My foray into great-paying media spokesperson opportunities began with a phone call from a PR agency, “Is this Dr. Jo, author of *Dining Lean?*”—and ended with a very lucrative 30-city media tour (radio, TV and print) promoting the (then new) low-fat chicken sandwiches at KFC. Not only was I allowed to promote my book on the air, but also encouraged to do so. Since that time I’ve worked with many other companies and commodities including Yoplait, I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter, SlimFast, NutraGrain, and Canola Info in a number of different capacities.

## What Does a Media Spokesperson Do?

Dietitians perform a wide range of duties as media spokespeople. Many speakers, like me, have their speaking programs sponsored by a food company or commodity. As a Diabetes Care Specialist, Barbara Eichorst, MS, RD, CDE, is on a Speaker Bureau for many pharmaceutical companies. She says, “Pharmaceutical reps usually have an educational budget so I get honorariums for all of my presentations.”

Food booths at trade expos and other events are often staffed by registered dietitians—as are some product demos in grocery stores and malls. This past FNCE, while I was working the Canola Oil Info booth, I saw several other dietitians working. Carol Meerschaert, RD, was working with Coca Cola. Hillary Wright, RD, MEd, LDN, was with National Beer Wholesalers

Association, Carol Berg Sloan, RD, was at the Walnut Marketing Board exhibit, and Robin Flipse, MS, RD, was working with Masterfoods USA, a division of Mars Incorporated.

A lot of dietitians write print and web articles, author blogs, brochures and marketing materials. Nelda Mercer, MS, RD, FADA, writes a regular food column for a grocery store food ad. Wright’s contract with the National Beer Wholesalers Association involves finding and writing about up-to-date research on the effects of alcohol use on health, including anything specific to beer.

Many of us have done radio and TV interviews where we agree on a couple of

were looking for a dietitian who was also a mother of younger children (and they seemed to like that I had brown hair). For the first 30-second ad I talked about the importance of breakfast. The other 15-second spots were about sensible snacking and the organization, America on the Move. That day of shooting was extremely fun—and very exhausting.”

If a company wants to be mentioned in a magazine story, ideas are pitched to magazine editors six months in advance. Dietitians are often used for “desk side” interviews where one meets with the food or health editors one-on-one. Sometimes, companies plan something bigger. Musk was asked to participate in an

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messages to deliver—often including the company name, but not always. Maye Musk, MS, RD, told me, “I have done two different half-hour interviews where I wasn’t even allowed to mention the product. One show was for Dannon Yogurt where I spoke about calcium and children; the other on the importance of breakfast for Kellogg’s. The interviews consisted mainly of listeners calling in with questions. As I respected the program hosts’ wishes, they relaxed. They were so pleased with the sessions, that they thanked the sponsors when they said goodbye to me.”

Sandra Nissenberg, MS, RD, LD, did an infomercial with Freeda Foreman (George’s daughter). And Maria Pari-Keener, MS, RD, CDN, did three TV commercials for PepsiCo. She, too, was not allowed to mention the product’s name nor show the product labels. “I’ve never acted. I was chosen because they

editor’s breakfast at a NYC hotel, sponsored by Twinings Tea, where she presented a 15-minute program to the 20 editors in the room.

## What Credentials, Skills and Experience Do I Need?

There are at least six important considerations for becoming a paid media spokesperson: the proper credentials, being viewed as a subject expert, experience, knowing the right people, having the proper presence, and having the ability to translate nutrition into effective sound bytes.

Regarding credentials, most often being a registered dietitian is adequate, although I’ve been told by some companies that they were specifically looking for a dietitian with a PhD. Some specialty certifications can also help. Eichorst said she gets asked to speak on behalf of the

pharmaceutical companies because she is a Certified Diabetes Educator.

Nissenberg adds, “Don’t plan to be a spokesperson. It’s the work you do that will make you a spokesperson, whether it be writing a book or specializing in a particular area. You need to be an expert first.” While dietitians are “nutrition experts”—many companies are looking for expertise within a certain niche. Writing a book or articles, doing research, speaking at conferences, and having an effective website and articles online are useful ways to be viewed as an expert. Janet Helm, RD, with WeberShandwick, a PR firm, says it’s important to have a new and relevant book that we can pitch to the media. “Books help to open the door—certainly for national media.”

Don’t expect to become a spokesperson right out of school. Liz Ward says, “Experience matters.” In fact, most of the dietitians I spoke with had at least three years of experience before their first paid “gig”—and most had much more. “It’s beneficial to start small and locally before going on to the ‘big leagues,’ ” recommends Faye Mitchell, RD, LD. “Media training is very helpful.” But not everyone had past experience. Sylvia E. Melendez-Klinger, MS, RD, LD, NCSF, told me, “The American Heart Association, looking for a bilingual RD, asked me if I was interested in doing a series of morning shows about nutrition! I quickly told them yes, but that I didn’t have any experience (except for playing twice on a game show when I was 13). They said no problem, we will help you, and the rest is history.”

Most of us aren’t that lucky. Being “discovered” is usually the result of a lot of experience—and networking (not from listings on job boards). Eichorst told me, “I have fostered collaborative relationships with pharmaceutical representatives who ask me to speak at continuing education events. “Network with colleagues—even those who are in your own backyard,” suggests Mitchell. “Do not consider those colleagues as competition. My first gig

came from a colleague and friend in the DC area. She was too busy at the time to take on the project, so she asked me if I was interested.” And, don’t forget cold-calling to get your next gig. “Be ready for lots of rejection,” reminds Pat Baird. “After 18 years on my own I still do ‘cold-calling.’”

Baird also believes, “If media is your goal, be aware of how you look, speak, and carry yourself—these are all evaluated when companies look for a spokesperson.” Beverly Price agrees, “A lot is looking good on television, overall appearance and personality. You also need to deliver facts in an interesting, personable and conversational way.”

Lastly, you have to translate the message into effective sound bytes. Meerschaert counseled, “This isn’t a little girl job—you’re playing with the big boys. You have to know all the products, all the ingredients, and the science behind the product. Then you have to think on your feet and stay on message. It’s not as easy as it looks.” Musk adds, “With many interviews, you walk a fine line. If you talk too much about product, people get annoyed.”

### Any Downsides?

Ward says, “It’s not easy and it’s not for everyone.” Nissenberg advises, “Spokesperson work can be rewarding and it does pay well. But along with it comes lots of ups and downs and you need to be aware of that. You have to be on call, and it’s difficult traveling at the last minute since I have a family.”

Remember, TV and radio don’t stop when you go to bed. I’ve done shows as early as four o’clock in the morning and as late as midnight. And like other consulting work, there are no paid benefits and no vacation. While one day’s work sounds lucrative, it actually represents many hours of marketing yourself and years of experience.

### What’s a Media Portfolio and How Can I Build Mine?

Helm says before you will get paid as a media spokesperson, you need a media portfolio. This includes a one-page narrative bio (written not as a resume, but as how someone would introduce you) and a professionally produced demo tape with clips of TV interviews (no more than 5 minutes). If you want to get paid for your writing, you’ll need to have samples of other articles you’ve written—then post PDFs of them on your website. And add the list of your media placements. Helm adds, “We really like being able to view everything, including the demo, right from your website.”

How can you start building a media portfolio? Both Ward and Mercer volunteered for many years (13 and eight respectively) as both state media rep and an ADA spokesperson. Mercer suggests, “I highly recommend it to dietitians who live in major media markets.” Or get some experience by joining your local or state PR committee, or volunteer to do PR for your church, favorite organization, or the PTO. Media training is also important. Melendez-Klinger attends the ADA media workshop almost every year!

Volunteer to speak whenever possible. Start with local meetings. If you’re not ready to give a speech, start by volunteering to introduce the speaker. With experience you’ll be ready for regional, state, and then national meetings—and ready to ask for money! If you’re nervous about speaking, join a local Toastmasters group to gain the experience and confidence you need.

Many dietitians are good writers and should do more of it. Meerschaert recommends, “Write anything you can and get published—in magazines, newspapers

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# DBC Spotlight on Sharon Palmer, RD

Interview by Carol Berg Sloan, RD

**Working as a freelance food and nutrition writer sounds**

**fascinating. Please share some of your responsibilities**

I have been writing, primarily about food and nutrition, for the past six years and have over 450 published articles in newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. I have also contributed in books and am a monthly columnist. It took a while to break into writing, but over time I have developed relationships with editors who are interested in covering the most recent topics related to food and nutrition. To write articles on these topics, I perform research and interview experts and scientists to make the article as science-based, yet interesting to read, as possible. I often provide recipes to accompany nutrition articles. I always test and provide nutritional analysis on these recipes. I do whatever I can to include a dietitian expert in my interviews and articles. My goal is to let my readers know that dietitians are the nutrition experts. Part of being a successful writer is marketing yourself; you must constantly keep up with potential markets for your work in order to keep a steady stream of assignments coming in.

### What is your educational background?

I received my BS in Dietetics at Loma Linda University. I have taken local college courses on writing in order to help me in my chosen field.

### Share an unusual day you have had in your dietetics career.

I was interviewing a celebrity chef and she was driving her car down Santa Monica Boulevard while chatting with me (getting

lost, cursing on the phone, remembering something she forgot), as if I were her best friend. It's nice to know that people you see on TV can be down to earth.

### What advice or words of wisdom do you have for new dietitians that may want to enter the business/communications area of dietetics?

First of all, you need to learn the business and communications side of the career. The study of dietetics doesn't often highlight these necessary skills. For instance, I have been told by editors repeatedly that so few dietitians can really write. Even though they may be experts in their field and possess such great knowledge, they can't translate it well to an audience. Sometimes a dietitian's nutrition advice comes across as too conservative, stale and old-fashioned (another complaint I hear from editors). Dietitians need to stay in tune with all of the latest nutrition topics and buzzwords and be open to discuss things that are even non-traditional. Seeking educational supplementation to the career through business and writing classes is valuable.

### What are some of the significant issues facing DBC members in today's work environment?

There is a real thirst for nutrition knowledge in so many settings. Networking, stepping out of your comfort zone, and becoming a valuable asset in nutrition is an important route to becoming the source for this nutrition information. For example, there can't be a soul in our country that hasn't heard about the obesity epidemic, but does the public understand and appreciate that dietitians can present a solution for this problem? Things are starting to gradually change; I am seeing more and more work in mainstream publications written by dietitians or quoting dietitians as experts. I am so happy to see that one of the best selling books on diet right now is written by a dietitian.

### How has DBC membership helped your career professionally and personally?

It has helped me make connections. I have found many nutrition experts in various fields that have been excellent resources. I also find the newsletter very interesting, informational and inspiring.

### What changes do you predict in the field of dietetics in the future?

I see that an organic and sustainable food supply will be a huge issue to consumers and dietitians can get more involved in this area. I think the media will increasingly report on nutrition science, so that consumers will become frustrated with discrepant studies. Dietitians can be valuable assets on how to figure out the best, most practical solutions for eating in the face of all of this science. When it comes to clinical dietetics, reimbursement is a huge issue and will continue to weigh in on compensation and job future.

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and websites. Write a letter to the editor. Comment on blogs. Respond to reporters' requests for comments and information. All of this will get your name out as a credible source who knows how to offer media-friendly comments on hot topics." The more you do, the more you'll be asked to do. As Ward says, "one thing then leads to another."

#### Any Additional Words of Wisdom?

Keep in mind that PR companies and the food companies and commodities that they represent are in business to promote their products in the best light possible. And just because they ask you to represent their product doesn't mean you should take the job.

Ward says, "I have to totally believe in the product and want other people to use it as well." Bonnie Taub-Dix, MA, RD,

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