Dental advertising on the Internet

Website advertising must comply with the American Dental Association’s Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct

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Many dentists feel that advertising their practices on the Internet is essential to competing in today’s evolving market. Before 1979, dentists were generally prohibited by law from advertising their dental services in order to avoid misleading the public.

Now, dental advertisements are common, but strict restrictions are in place to ensure that the public is not misled by dentists’ false claims.

All states have laws prohibiting false, deceptive or unsupported statements in dental advertisements. Violating these prohibitions could result in a fine, injunction and censure or in suspension, revocation or limitation of a dental license. Dentists should make a point to understand the applicable laws.

Dental websites are a very common form of advertisement, but dentists must ensure that they are complying with the American Dental Association’s Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct. Dentists must remember that the same guidelines that apply to advertising in newspapers, magazines, telephone books, brochures, radio and TV also apply to advertising on the Internet.

The rules apply to any statement, oral or written, that offers to perform dental services either directly or indirectly.

The rules apply to advertising of any kind, regardless of whether it is paid advertising or free advertising. Ultimately, the dentist will be the party held responsible for the dental practices’ online websites and advertisements.

This means that whether or not a web consultant designs the dental practice’s webpage, the owner of the dental practice must be involved in the content of the materials posted on the Internet.

Every dentist has a duty to advertise truthfully. Section five of the American Dental Association’s Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct lays out the ethical standards by stating that no dentist shall advertise or solicit patients in any form of communication in a manner that is false or misleading in any “material” respect.

This includes misrepresentations of fact, making partial disclosures of facts, making self-praising statements, comparing the quality of one dental practice’s services to another dental practice’s services, and making any other statement that would cause a reasonable person to be deceived.

These guidelines have been instated as a method of protecting the public from misleading advertisements inducing the patient to seek dental services at a particular office. For example, a dentist who advertises an unearned degree or who falsely advertises that the dental practice specializes in a certain area of practice would be guilty of misleading patients in a “material” respect.

In addition, the American Dental Association’s Code describes claims of superiority as misleading when the claims are not subject to reasonable substantiation.

The licensed dentist’s name and the address of the dental practice should always be identified in an advertisement. If a dentist is advertising fees, a disclaimer should be included stating the description of the service, the specified period during which the fee is in effect and that the fee is a minimum fee only.

In addition, if a dentist advertises specialty services such as orthodontic, oral surgery or endodontic procedures, the dentist should also state whether the services will be performed by a general dentist or a specialist.

When advertising on the Internet, there are many phrases that should not be used. First, phrases of superiority such as “the best” should be avoided. Dentists should never claim that services are “painless” or that specific results are “guaranteed.”

In addition, some states prohibit testimonials on dental websites. A