



College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

Professionalism in Advertising Guidelines & FAQ

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Guided by core values outlined in Part 4 of the Bylaws, veterinarians hold themselves and their colleagues to a high standard of ethical conduct. These core values include compassion, transparency, respect, trustworthiness, professionalism and competence. Maintaining professionalism in all aspects of a member's practice is an expectation of the public and this includes promoting one's business and services.

Why is the College involved in advertising by veterinarians?

In serving the public interest, the College, like other regulated professions, ensures that the public is protected from false, misleading or deceptive information in marketing by its members. The College also ensures that marketing by its members is consistent with the duties, integrity, and dignity of the profession.

Let's take a step back and consider why veterinarians are regulated. Regulation of a profession occurs when the people, through their government, determine that certain types of services are sufficiently complex as to create a level of risk to the public that the service must be limited to those with specific qualifications.

Those granted the privilege of practicing that profession are given an oligopoly: a state of limited competition in which a market is shared by a small number of service-providers. In exchange for that limited competition, veterinarians and other professionals are expected to uphold certain values and ethics – among them, professionalism.

Veterinarians provide professional services for which a fee is charged to the public; therefore, they must balance professionalism with working in a competitive market. However, the public expects veterinarians to adhere to standards of professionalism which are fundamentally different than those of retailers. Marketing to the public must be consistent with these standards and not bring the profession into disrepute.

Veterinarians, in promoting their services, should choose marketing strategies that ensure the dignity and integrity of the profession are upheld. The information in their advertising must be factual and verifiable.

Demonstrating professional and ethical conduct in the advertising they produce contributes to veterinarians earning and maintaining public trust.

Third party companies that provide marketing and advertising services to businesses, including website design, are not always familiar with these expectations or the professional regulations pertaining to marketing. It is up to the member to inform third party companies and review any website design or advertisement that is created to ensure they comply and are professional.

By complying with the regulations on advertising, veterinarians maintain their professionalism and continue to earn the public trust.

Advertising Testimonials

While veterinarians are of course encouraged to advertise and market their services, they may not make use of testimonials in doing so.

A testimonial, in the context of advertising, is “a statement from a client, former client, or other person that is solicited (directly or indirectly) by a veterinarian and used in an advertisement for the purpose of demonstrating esteem, admiration, gratitude, or praise for services provided by or experiences with the practice.”

By their very nature testimonials are subjective and, as such, are rarely unbiased. For animal owners making decisions on the health care of their animals, testimonials are neither reliable nor verifiable. It is preferable for clients and the public to base their individual confidence on their encounter and outcome with the veterinarian, rather than on testimonials that are based on personal feelings or opinion. It is difficult to verify the creator of a testimonial and under what circumstances the testimonial was made. It is also not possible to determine its accuracy.

Testimonials have long been a restriction of regulators. Part 4, Division 4.4, section 233 of the Bylaws clearly states that testimonials are prohibited in veterinarian-controlled advertising. This applies to all forms of advertising including websites, social media, print, etc.

Third party vendors hired by veterinarians to help with advertising and marketing initiatives may recommend the use of testimonials as they do with other business clients as they are not always aware of the profession-based responsibilities. Veterinarians are responsible for ensuring that testimonials do not appear in the advertising they develop and control, including clinic websites. Providing links to review sites on a clinic’s website is indirectly soliciting testimonials. Veterinarians should refrain from posting pictures of thank you cards from clients on their clinic’s website as this is a form of testimonial. Displaying thank you cards within the veterinary facility is permissible as this is not advertising to the general public since the audience is the existing client base. Asking clients to post reviews or ratings on third party internet websites, with or without incentives, is generally considered soliciting testimonials and is prohibited.

The College understands there are times when comments are posted by members of the public on third party websites and social media without a veterinarian’s encouragement and/or approval. These postings are beyond a veterinarian’s control. In fact, with current marketing strategies including websites, Facebook, Twitter and other online media, the posting of comments and reviews by members of the public is quite common. The College has no regulatory authority over

third party websites; veterinarians also do not control this dialogue. The College does not expect veterinarians to monitor and manage social media that is in the public domain.

In summary, veterinarians should let the work they do in the delivery of safe, quality veterinary medicine speak for itself.

Can a client “like” a veterinary practice’s Facebook page?

Yes. This is not considered a testimonial as long as the veterinarian has not solicited the client to do so. When a veterinary practice advertises promotions on its Facebook page, but only provides the promotion to people who like the page, the veterinarians are using an incentive to gain a positive review, which is like a testimonial. This is prohibited.

Can veterinarians advertise?

Yes, veterinarians can advertise the professional and ancillary services they provide. Division 4.4 of Part 4 of the Bylaws allows for veterinarians to market their services to members of the public in order to improve the viability of their practices. Advertising by veterinarians should convey professionalism as it can affect the public perception of, and respect for, the entire profession of veterinary medicine. See the document on [Professionalism in Advertising](#) for more information.

Can veterinarians use testimonials in their advertising?

No. Veterinarians may not make use of client testimonials in the advertising they produce or have produced. Clinic websites should not have links to third party review websites. It is prohibited to use reviews or thank you cards/letters from clients or a story from a patient’s perspective in advertising on a clinic’s public website or other public medium. These are examples of a testimonial. Testimonials have long been a restriction of regulators. See the document on Testimonials for more information.

Can veterinarians use incentive programs to try to increase their client base?

No. Clients should not be offered compensation, rewards, or incentives to refer others to a veterinarian’s practice.

Can veterinarians use coupons in advertising?

Yes. Coupons can be used in advertising. This is one method of advertising prices.

Can veterinarians thank a client if they find out the client referred a new client to the clinic?

Yes. If clients, of their own accord, speak highly of the clinic to family and friends and this results in a new client, a veterinarian can thank them. A thank you can be verbal, or a card/letter can be sent. If you wish to show your appreciation for the referral by giving a gift card, or a discount on services or products, that is fine too. This scenario differs from incentive programs in that the client made the referral because the client wanted to; not due to pressure or the prospect of a reward for doing so.

Can veterinarians post photos of clients' pets or share case stories of a client's patients on the veterinary clinic website or social media platforms?

Before posting pictures or case stories of patients, a veterinarian needs to get the client's consent. If a veterinarian is obtaining client consent to share an animal's case story, be sure the client understands and agrees to what information will be shared. Written or verbal consent from clients is appropriate. If a veterinarian chooses to get verbal consent, it should be documented that consent was obtained. Posting pet photos or case stories on a clinic's website or social media should not be used as testimonials.

Can veterinarians offer reward programs for services and products?

Reward programs can be used. Clinics can participate in third party rewards programs so that clients can use their points cards for example.

Veterinary facilities can also offer their own reward programs for clients. For example, if a certain number of bags of food are purchased, they will get a free bag. Or perhaps if clients spend a certain amount of money, they will reach a free service or a discount on a future invoice. Reward programs cannot be used to promote new client referrals.

Can veterinarians be involved in an endorsement?

No. Veterinarians cannot endorse specific products, brands of products, brand-name drugs or third-party service providers. For example, a veterinarian could not participate in a print ad campaign the veterinarian gives a testimonial about a product or service such as "I use product X on my own horses because it is the best on the market."

Veterinarians can advertise the products they stock at their clinic on the clinic website. This is not considered an endorsement, unless the descriptors used make it such. This lets clients know what products and services are provided by the veterinary facility. For example, advertising that "our clinic stocks item A" is fine. Advertising that "our clinic stocks item A because it is the best" is not appropriate as this would be seen as an endorsement.

Can veterinarians ask clients to rate them on a review or third party website?

No. Veterinarians cannot ask individuals to rate them or provide a review on a third party website as this is soliciting testimonials. If clients, of their own choice, write reviews on a third party website about a veterinary clinic and their experiences there, they are free to do so. The College has no regulatory authority over third party websites. Clinic websites should not have links to third party review websites. See the document on Testimonials for more information.

Can veterinarians advertise that they specialize in a specific service, like dentistry?

In order to use the terms “specialize” or “specialist,” the veterinary facility must have a veterinarian on staff who has been registered in the class of specialty private practice or who holds a diplomate status that has been recognized by the registration committee. It is acceptable to advertise that a veterinarian has "an interest" in dentistry.

Can veterinarians advertise prices?

Yes, prices can be advertised. When advertising prices, be clear as to what is included in the price cited. Also indicate if any taxes will be additional or if they are included. As with all advertising, fees cannot be misleading.

Discounts can also be advertised. For example, if a veterinary clinic is promoting dental health month, dental cleanings can be advertised as being X% discounted. Seniors, military, multiple pet, new client discounts can all be advertised as well if that is part of the veterinary facility’s fee structure.

Can veterinarians advertise in the “Welcome Wagon” or Realtor welcome package?

Before advertising in the “Welcome Wagon” or similar community welcome package, a veterinarian should ensure the opportunity to advertise was offered to multiple businesses and the advertising is not exclusive to that veterinary practice, since this can be seen as an endorsement or promotion of that practice.

Can veterinarians advertise a \$1 exam?

Yes. The College does not make policy related to business models or fee structures. Veterinarians who own practices determine the fees and charges for their services. Advertised prices should not be deceptive or misleading. As with all fees, clients need to be informed about what the \$1 exam does and does not provide.

Can veterinarians advertise their services are better than another's?

When advertising their practice, veterinarians cannot use comparisons to, or statements of superiority over, another practice/veterinarian, for example, “the best in town” or as “delivering the most compassionate care.” Such comparators are not usually verifiable.

What can veterinarians say in an advertisement?

Regulatory requirements outline the guidelines to follow when developing any form of advertising. The information provided in an advertisement should:

- be factual and verifiable
- not be false, misleading or deceptive
- contain no testimonials
- contain no comparisons to, or claims of superiority over, another veterinarian or veterinary practice
- contain no endorsement or promotion of specific products, brands of products, brand-name drugs or third-party service providers
- not guarantee a cure
- not be misrepresentative
- not make claims about the utility of any type of treatment beyond what can reasonably be supported as professional opinion

Advertising should not demean the integrity or dignity of the profession or bring the profession into disrepute.

Where can veterinarians advertise?

Veterinarians can advertise in any public medium. This includes print, radio, television, internet social media, and on signs and bulletin boards. Veterinary clinics can also participate in tradeshow, such as “pet expos” by having a booth.

The clinic was voted “Best Veterinary Clinic” through the local newspaper. Can the clinic advertise this?

Yes, this can be used in the clinic’s advertising as long as the ad clearly states that the clinic was “voted Best Veterinary Clinic” and the source of the award (i.e., the name of the newspaper).

Acknowledgement

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