



College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Advertising

Revised version published July 2020 (Original version published April 2017)

This document is meant to serve as a guide to understanding and applying the requirements of the *Professional Practice Standard: Advertising*. It includes:

- a discussion of the CVBC's role in overseeing professional advertising,
- a focused explanation of the objection to the use of testimonials in advertising, and
- a question-and-answer section intended to clarify requirements through example.

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 registrants. The College also ensures that marketing by its registrants is consistent with the duties, integrity, and dignity of the profession.

Veterinarians provide services for which a fee is charged to the public and therefore must work in a competitive market. But, in exchange for the *limited* competition that exists within the terms of a regulated profession, veterinarians and other professionals are expected to uphold certain values and ethics – among them, professionalism. 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 professional standards of conduct and not bring the profession into disrepute.

In promoting their services, veterinarians 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.

Veterinarians must be aware that third party companies that provide marketing and advertising services to businesses, including website design, are not always familiar with the regulations and expectations pertaining to marketing by a licensed professional. It is the responsibility of the registrant to:

- ensure that any individual or company engaged to develop or maintain marketing on their behalf understands the CVBC's requirements, and

Revision approved by Council on July 17, 2020

G:\CVBC – Regulation\Standards, Guidelines & Policies\Advertising

- review any marketing materials (including website design) that are created to ensure they are professional and that they comply the CVBC's bylaws and standards.

Advertising Testimonials

While veterinarians are encouraged to advertise and market their services to the public, they must not make use of advertising testimonials in doing so.

Advertising Testimonial (as defined in the *Professional Practice Standard: Advertising*) means 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.

Advertising Testimonials have long been a restriction of regulators. 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, advertising testimonials are neither reliable nor verifiable. It is preferable for clients and the public to rely on their personal encounter and outcome with the veterinarian, or on those of trusted acquaintances, when forming an opinion, rather than on advertising testimonials made by unknown/anonymous individuals. It is difficult to verify the creator of an advertising testimonial and under what circumstances that testimonial was made. It is also not possible to determine its accuracy.

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 because 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.

With current marketing strategies in business including websites, Facebook, Twitter and other online media, the posting of comments and reviews by members of the public is quite common. So long as the posts are neither solicited nor screened by the veterinarian or practice, the College takes no objection.

For registrant-controlled social media (e.g. A practice facility's Facebook page or Instagram account), the College accepts that members of the public will post comments on the feed and/or leave reviews. These statements, so long as they are unsolicited by the veterinarian/practice, are acceptable because they are unfiltered. In freely allowing the public to post comments, the veterinarian accepts that both positive and negative reviews may be posted. This contrasts with the selective posting of favourable testimonials on a facility's website or in other advertising.

Third-Party Sites: 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. The College recognizes that unsolicited postings on third-party websites are beyond a veterinarian's control. The College has no regulatory authority over third party websites, and does not expect veterinarians to monitor and manage social media that is in the public domain. Our concern is the conduct and activities of our registrants.

Frequently Asked Questions

A. General

1. 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. The *Professional Practice Standard: Advertising* elaborates on the bylaws. Advertising by veterinarians should convey professionalism as it can affect the public perception of, and respect for, the entire profession of veterinary medicine.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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).

6. 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.

B. Testimonials in Advertising

1. What are some examples of solicitation of testimonials?

Direct Solicitation of advertising testimonials would include (with or without offering incentives):

- Inviting clients to post an endorsement or testimonial on the facility’s website or social media page,
- Inviting clients to post a review or rating on a third-party website,

Indirect Solicitation of advertising testimonials would include:

- Providing links on the facility’s website to third-party review sites

2. 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 earlier discussion on Advertising Testimonials for more information.

3. 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 equivalent to soliciting a testimonial. This is prohibited.

4. 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.

5. Can I display Thank-You Cards from Clients?

Veterinarians should refrain from posting pictures of thank you cards from clients on their clinic's website as this is a form of testimonial. However, displaying thank you cards within the veterinary facility is permissible as this is not advertising to the general public since, presumably, the audience are already clients.

6. 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.

7. 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. Either written or verbal consent from clients is appropriate. If a veterinarian chooses to get verbal consent, it should be documented that consent was obtained. However, posting pet photos or case stories on a clinic's website or social media should not be used as testimonials.

C. Pricing and Fees

1. Can veterinarians advertise prices?

Yes, prices can be advertised. As with all advertising, fees cannot be misleading. 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.

Prices must not, at any time, be advertised in comparison to prices charged by other facilities (specifically or generally).

2. Can veterinarians offer discounted pricing?

Yes, discounts can also be advertised. These could include:

- Limited time discounts, such as those offered when a facility is participating in dental health month. For example, dental cleanings could be advertised as being X% discounted.
- Other forms of discounts that are a part of the facility's permanent fee structure are also acceptable. For example, seniors, multiple pets, new client discounts, etc.

As with all price advertising, the advertised discounts must clearly identify what services/components of service are included within the offered discount.

Discounts must only refer to reductions in that facility's own pricing from its normal fee structure. They must not be presented in comparison to prices at other facilities – this is *comparative advertising*, which is prohibited.

3. Can veterinarians offer reward programs for services and products?

Yes, reward programs can be used.

Veterinary facilities can:

- can participate in third party rewards programs so that clients can use their points cards for example, and/or
- can offer their own reward programs for clients. Examples:
 - if a certain number of bags of food are purchased, they will get a free bag.
 - 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 solicit or promote new client referrals.

4. Can veterinarians advertise a \$1 exam?

Yes. The College does not make policy related to business models or fee structures. Veterinarians who own practices are free to determine the fees charged for their services.

However, advertised prices must not be deceptive or misleading. As with all fees, clients need to be informed about what the \$1 exam does and does not provide.

5. Can veterinarians use coupons in advertising?

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

6. Can veterinarians advertise in the “Welcome Wagon” or a Realtor’s 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.

D. Other

1. Can veterinarians be involved in providing a product/service testimonial or endorsement?

No. Endorsements and testimonials *by registrants* are specifically prohibited in the CVBC's bylaws (Part 4, section 233 and 234).

Veterinarians cannot give oral or written testimonials or otherwise endorse any commercial product, including specific veterinary products, brands of products, brand-name drugs or third-party service providers. For example, a veterinarian could not participate in a print ad campaign in which 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 for the purpose of letting clients know what products and services are available at that practice. This is not considered an endorsement, unless the descriptors used make it such. 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 an endorsement.

Acknowledgement

Adapted with permission from the College of Veterinarians of Ontario.