



## **WHA Member Advisory**

### **RECOMMENDED PRINCIPLES FOR ADVERTISING BY HOSPITALS AND HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Advertising is commonly used by hospitals and other health care organizations to communicate with patients, communities and other constituent groups. A unique relationship exists between mission-focused health care organizations and the people and communities they serve. The Wisconsin Hospital Association Board of Directors approved these principles to provide suggested guidance as organizations develop and implement their advertising.

#### **Purposes of Health Care Advertising**

Advertising, like all methods of communication, should be used to advance the health care provider's goals and objectives and should support the mission of the health care organization. Commonly cited purposes of health care advertising include: public education about available services; public education about health promotion and illness prevention; public accountability about the organization's outcomes; maintenance or expansion of market share for specific services and programs; generating public support to enhance fundraising activities; employee recruitment and recognition; and recognizing and supporting medical staff capabilities and services.

#### **Code of Ethics for Public Relations and Marketing Practitioners**

The Wisconsin Healthcare Public Relations and Marketing Society has an approved code of ethics that describes expectations and standards for professionals practicing public relations and marketing. That code is included as an addendum to this advisory and can be viewed as a useful tool for individuals involved directly in developing advertising and marketing programs. The WHPRMS ethics are available here: [http://www.whprms.org/who\\_we\\_are/code\\_of\\_ethics.html](http://www.whprms.org/who_we_are/code_of_ethics.html)

The Society of Healthcare Strategy and Market Development issued an advisory *Trust and Transparency: A Guide to Ethical Marketing Communications*, which was developed to help health care marketing communications professionals develop strategies and messages that support their organizations' missions, advance their goals while expanding relationships with patients and communities that are built on trust and transparency. The SHSMD guide is posted here: (LINK)

## **Content of Health Care Advertising**

The content of health care advertising should be measured primarily by its **truthfulness, fairness, accuracy, completeness** and **sensitivity** to the health care needs of the public. False or misleading statements, or statements that might lead the uninformed to draw false conclusions about the health care facility, its competitors, or other health care providers are unacceptable and unethical.

Advertising by health care facilities should not raise unrealistic expectations. Communication of success rates, outcomes and other statistical evidences of quality should be done with great care and in the spirit of honesty, accuracy and full disclosure. Words such as “safest,” “most effective,” and “best” should be used with great caution, as they can be misleading unless objectively substantiated and measured and reported over time.

Direct comparisons between one health care facility and another should not be made unless those comparisons can be objectively measured and fully substantiated.

## **Next Steps**

In approving these principles, the WHA Board of Directors recommends the publication, dissemination and annual discussion of issues addressed within this document at the highest levels of management and governance within our member organizations so that advertising and marketing efforts align with principles discussed in this advisory.

The Board also supports renewed focus and attention on issues addressed in this advisory, as well as the cited Code of Ethics, by members of the Wisconsin Healthcare Public Relations and Marketing Society and other practitioners directly involved in public relations and marketing.

Finally, the nature of health care is such that advertising must be undertaken with a greater degree of discretion than that which is practiced elsewhere. Additionally, the missions of our community-focused organizations similarly require that special attention be paid to the guidelines and principles contained within this advisory.