

Editorial

Misrepresentation in dental advertising

A seedy trend toward misrepresentation in dental advertising is emerging. If this trend is not nipped in the bud, it will destroy the fabric of trust and honesty that still exemplifies "dentistry" to our colleagues and to the general public. Must we tolerate the few unscrupulous colleagues who balance precariously on the edge of ethical acceptability, or will dentists refrain from supporting such activities?

Continuing education programs are crucial for the growth and development of the profession. The profession deserves better from continuing education, however, than undisclosed conflicts of interest, and even dishonesty, in advertisements for courses. While a certain amount of chicanery and crass commercialism is expected in the world of used car sales, the dental profession should be above participating in such shenanigans. Health care, and the use of dental products for that care, deals with human lives and well being from a responsible and trusted position.

One of the major ways a certain dental products company sells its wares is through a host of so-called continuing education programs. If it is clearly presented to potential attendees that a program is a product information seminar rather than a generic educational program, and if all the lecturers and participants are clearly and honestly identified as to their primary means of employment with all potential conflicts of interest disclosed, then everyone who pays to attend such a manufacturer-sponsored program is fully aware of what to expect. However, if deceit and undisclosed conflicts of interest are lurking behind the scenes, then the ethical boundary has been penetrated, and the dentist who attends based on the advertised credentials of the speaker(s) is cheated.

A blatant and shocking example of deceit concerns a series of advertisements for lectures sponsored by a dental products manufacturer. In the advertisement, speakers are identified by name, picture, and affiliation. Obviously, in the small space available under a speaker's photograph, one cannot list all the individual's credits and affiliation(s). However, one would normally expect that each individual would be listed with his or her

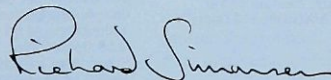
primary affiliation first, followed by any meaningful secondary affiliation where space allows. Thus, when a speaker is exclusively, or primarily, identified as being from one or more universities, the reader naturally assumes that this person is an educator, a university administrator, or a researcher — an unbiased source of information.

It turns out that one speaker promoted in the advertisement in question, and identified by university affiliation only, has but a superficial connection to the universities listed. In actuality, he is the owner of the company sponsoring the seminars, and he has a private practice, not a professorial position, as an alternative form of employment. Why is his ownership of the sponsoring company couched in academic robes and not disclosed to potential attendees?

Furthermore, some lecturers, who as true academics would lend great credibility to the seminars, are listed despite the fact that they do not participate in any of the lectures.

If a dental products company is going to be dishonest in its dealings with the profession, what message does this send to the employees of the company, and to the profession, about the ethical standards of the company and its owner(s)?

If misrepresentation works, and the manufacturer pays no price for dishonesty, the whole profession will suffer as other manufacturers may be tempted to test their own ethical limits. It is time for the Dental Manufacturer's Association to take a stand on unethical advertising practices and to formulate a code of ethics for its members. Dentists should voice their collective concern regarding misrepresentation or dishonesty in advertising by taking their business elsewhere.



Richard J. Simonsen
Editor-in-Chief