

Have You Considered Advertising Your Services?

by APApractice.org

January 18, 2005 -- Whether you are in private practice, work in a counseling center or community-based agency, or have a consulting business, having a basic understanding of advertising can help you reach potential clients who could benefit from your services. This article will review key concepts, provide pointers for effectively advertising your professional services, and highlight ethical and legal considerations.

Over the years, many of the historical restrictions on psychologists' ability to advertise have been loosened via ethics code revisions and the Federal Trade Commission's work to eliminate barriers that prevented public access to useful consumer information. Despite these changes, some psychologists still view the advertisement of psychological services as inappropriate and distasteful.

Few would argue that psychologists should hawk their wares in the fashion of a used car salesman. But if done professionally, tastefully, and appropriately, advertising can be an effective way to educate the public about psychology, help potential clients make better choices about accessing needed services, and help drive business to your door. It also can be a cost-effective communications tool. Advertising can provide you with a way to reach a large number of people simultaneously, using mass media.

What is advertising?

Advertising is a nonpersonal communication using various media that is usually paid for by an identified sponsor, often in an effort to inform an audience about, or create a demand for, a particular product or service. The goals of advertising are specific to the sponsor and for psychologists, might include:

- Building a positive reputation in the community
- Increasing awareness of your practice, the services you offer, and how to access those services
- Changing people's attitudes about using psychological services
- Informing the public about a new service that you offer
- Generating new clients or referrals

How does advertising differ from marketing?

Marketing is the entire strategic process you use to meet both client and organizational needs through the provision of services. Marketing includes designing the services you offer and how you price, promote, and provide those services. Advertising is just one component of your promotion strategy, which in turn, is just one part of your larger marketing plan.

What steps are involved?

Typically, perhaps in consultation with a marketing consultant and/or design professional, you will create a document called an advertising plan. The goal is to match the most effective message to your audience. Your advertising plan will include information about your practice, the market you serve, who you are trying to reach, the core message you want to communicate, your advertising goals, and how you will deliver, evaluate, and fund your advertising efforts. For optimal results, be sure your advertising strategy is consistent with your larger business plan and marketing strategy.

For more detailed information about what to include in your advertising plan, read the companion piece to this article, "Elements of an Advertising Plan".

What makes an ad effective?

Successfully marketing your practice starts with high-quality services that people want and need. The best advertising in the world will not help you in the long run without a well-thought-out business plan, but poor quality advertising can damage a practice that is otherwise first-rate. An effective ad:

- Has clearly defined objectives
- Targets a specific audience
- Contains a message that addresses something important to your audience
- Presents clear, accurate, relevant information
- Appears in media that the audience is exposed to
- Gets your audience's attention. Look at the design elements (e.g., font type and size, colors, graphics, use of white space) typically used in the media where you will be placing the ad and do something different for contrast.
- Engages your audience and "pulls them through" until they get to the point of your message
- Is creative and memorable
- Is well executed and looks professional

Ethical and legal considerations

APA's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* offers guidance regarding advertising and other public statements made by or on behalf of psychologists (see ethical standards 5.01-5.06). In general, advertising is not prohibited, but psychologists may not make false, fraudulent, or deceptive statements about their practice, research, and other work activities.

Prohibitions vary by state and your state licensing board may have more stringent restrictions. Therefore, psychologists are advised to contact your state board and state, provincial, or territorial psychological association for specific guidance.

Play it safe when advertising:

- Review the APA code of ethics carefully to ensure that you are not violating any standards
- Be familiar with any state-specific restrictions or prohibitions from your licensing board
- Consult with your colleagues regarding the content and tone of your materials
- Err on the conservative side – if you think something might be questionable, take it out
- Review all final advertising materials before they go out, paying special attention to any materials that others create on your behalf
- Keep an archive of all of your advertisements and other marketing materials, that way you have documentation in the event a question is raised in the future

There are many different ways to advertise your practice, from creating a professional and informative practice brochure to placing a listing in a print or electronic directory. Stay tuned to future issues of the *PracticeUpdate* E-Newsletter on APApractice.org for more information and resources to help you market your practice, including an article on the effective use of yellow pages ads – coming soon!

NOTE: The information presented in this article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal or financial advice.

Reprinted with permission from APApractice.org, the official website of the APA Practice Organization. For more information about issues and topics affecting the practice of psychology, including important legislative and legal developments and information about managing a practice, visit [APApractice.org](https://www.apapractice.org).