

Digital Marketing Ethics

in the Addiction Space

Though a relatively new field, digital marketing has become the cornerstone of advertising and business growth across all industries.

But recent controversy within the addiction field has highlighted the importance of digital marketing best practices to protect the largely vulnerable population we serve. [Recovery Brands](#) offers these comments in hope of supporting conversations that will follow the NAATP 2015 Conference. We applaud NAATP leadership in advancing the discussion in the field toward a solution of how best to harness the power of the Internet while serving our clientele with integrity. Our comments are not intended as legal analysis or advice, and we gladly welcome any feedback or comments about the ideas presented in these white papers.

While many in the addiction industry have embraced the inclusion of digital marketing practices into their business models, others have approached the digital realm with trepidation. This hesitation is often fueled by misconceptions, fear of the unknown, and the ethical challenges digital marketing may pose. Additionally, there is a history of opportunistic operators who have exploited the advantages of the digital space. Bait-and-switch, selling placements and branding fraud have contributed to some addiction professionals' wariness of online marketing.

Addiction treatment providers are held to very high ethical standards. Both NAATP and NAADAC have issued comprehensive codes of ethics for their members. Some of these standards may apply to the digital marketing practices those members use. These key points comprise a set of 6 essential principles for ethical web marketing.



Principle 1: Beneficence

The addiction treatment industry is uniquely poised to promote wellness and health to a large and vulnerable population. This principle is readily apparent in traditional arenas within the addiction space. Clinical, counseling, and support staff alike have a single mission: to help those struggling with addiction. Digital marketing practices must support that mission by promoting beneficence - or the act of helping and doing good. Digital marketing fulfills this principle by making it possible for treatment providers to connect to a vast new audience of potential clients who might benefit from their services.

Principle 2: Nonmaleficence

Addiction treatment professionals also have a responsibility not to intentionally harm a client. This is often done by providing treatments that do not inflict psychological distress. When overwhelmed, confused or distraught clients turn to the Internet for guidance, addiction treatment providers should avoid using digital marketing practices that would exploit consumers' vulnerability. Likewise, treatment providers have an ethical obligation to avoid bait and switch, stealing calls intended for another, branding fraud or other tactics that may harm the business model or reputation of a competitor.

Examples of unethical digital marketing practices:

- A company bids on a treatment provider's name as a Google search term, using that provider's name in its ad text. This is not only a violation of guidelines and trademark rules, but it also confuses consumers.
- A lowquality directory site lists thousands of facilities but only uses one phone number to funnel calls to its own call center referral service or a treatment center owned by the same person running the directory site.
- This is baitandswitch. It purposely confuses consumers into believing they are reaching one facility when they actually are contacting another.
- Facility X builds a large advertising campaign, and subsequently constructs "contracts" with other facilities to refer inadmissible clients for a fee. Such kickbacks and patient brokering may be illegal and are always unethical, and drive up health care costs.

Principle 3: Support of Autonomy

Addiction treatment is not a onesizefitsall solution. Individuals seeking treatment have unique beliefs, needs, and preferences. Digital marketing efforts must recognize this and offer a panoply of options and information that will allow potential clients and their loved ones to freely make care decisions.



How your call center can support autonomy:

- An individual calls Facility X while looking for Facility Y. Facility X's call center should try its best to connect the caller with his intended party.
- A caller mentions that she is choosing between two treatment centers. The call center representative should not misrepresent another program to manipulate the caller's decision.

Principle 4: Honesty and Candor

The digital space can often seem daunting because there are no set standards about how and what kind of information can be shared. It is the ethical responsibility of the treatment provider, however, to disseminate information truthfully and in a transparent manner. This means conveying information without making anything up, over inflating the positive qualities or hiding the negatives.

Examples of deceitful marketing practices:

- Facility X stacks its Google, Yelp, or Rehabs.com reviews with false entries made by employees or an offshore team. Most large, reputable thirdparty websites have strict rules against this practice.
- Facility Y's website claims that its offers ultra luxury beachfront amenities when the facility is actually located 30 miles from the beach.
- Facility Z sets up myriad false business names/locations in an attempt to drive nationwide local calls into their single call center.

Principle 5: Fidelity

Addiction treatment providers must accept the ethical responsibility to verify the accuracy of information that is posted on digital platforms. Webbased marketing materials, and associated facility call center and admissions staff, must accurately portray the services, amenities, and credentials of the addiction treatment facilities they represent.

What can you do to make sure your facility's digital presence is accurate?

Tip 1: Make sure your website is up-to-date.

Did you recently add a new insurance provider to your network? If so, update your accepted insurance section right away with all of the necessary information regarding terms of service. Did your PTSD specialist retire, and have you yet to fill that vacancy? Remove "specializes in cooccurring substance use and PTSD" from your website.



Tip 2: Check all third party websites.

It is good practice to monitor and manage information about your facility on thirdparty websites. Does Yelp have the right phone number for your call center listed? Does Rehabs.com have the correct address for your facility? Does the Google review link to the right website? Monitor these, and other sites, regularly to make sure consumers who search for your facility have correct information.

Tip 3: Review your advertising campaigns.

Do you advertise that you have a 100% success rate in curing addiction? This is a misleading statement, as most addiction professionals agree that 100% success rate for “curing” addiction is improbable, at best. Your advertising campaigns should be an accurate reflection of what you have to offer. For those that advertise effectiveness rates or guarantees, the underlying bases for those claims should be made clear.

Principle 6: Gratitude

In the digital realm, gratitude means treatment professionals have an ethical obligation to share their knowledge and resources with others, and reach as many people as possible to “share the good.” The digital space is the perfect platform for professionals to do this beyond their personal or professional networks. Showing gratitude can be as simple as sharing stories of success across your digital platforms and campaigns. These stories can help to relieve the stigma of addiction and illustrate the achievability of recovery, thereby encouraging and empowering those struggling to seek treatment themselves. So long as such stories and testimonials can be shared in a way that is HIPAA compliant and respectful of the recovering individual’s best interests, they can provide significant help to others while simultaneously aiding a marketing campaign.

Principle 7: Stewardship

In the addiction industry, resources are often expended inefficiently. For example, personnel hours and money are allocated towards marketing campaigns that do not allow for tracking analytics proving return on investment. Using those resources in a conscientious manner or stewardship can be especially vital. Through the digital space, with its endless opportunities to engage with targeted consumers, treatment providers have the most control over their marketing campaigns, and can allocate resources based on evidence of efficacy. Being mindful of which campaigns are working, and which may need to be tweaked .or paused, can reduce costs and free up resources for positive programming and beneficial client offerings.

The above principles are intended to serve as the foundation for ethical digital marketing, and Recovery Brands will continue to utilize and apply these principles to our practices and our series of white papers on this topic. As the conversation on ethical web practices continues to move forward, we invite all those interested in collaborating and engaging in meaningful discussion to join us in furthering the movement for industry-wide ethical behaviors.

Questions or comments can be sent to education@rehabs.com

For more information on digital marketing practices and educational resources, visit recoverybrands.com/resources

