

## Unethical marketing: define the line before you cross it

by LuAnne Speeter

Have you ever been tempted to use a questionable marketing tactic?

Sometimes what appears at first glance to be a brilliant campaign becomes a disastrous public embarrassment or – worse yet – a lawsuit.

Take, for example, the custom media company that offered a free car to the client who gave them the best endorsement. Initially, I'm sure it seemed like a win-win. The company would receive great testimonials and clients would fall all over themselves to win a new set of wheels. All good, until somebody realized this was out-and-out bribery.

A few years back, stealth marketing gained momentum with some companies who wanted to capitalize on the viral power of word of mouth and social networks. With stealth marketing, people are paid to endorse a product in public without disclosing that they're being paid to do so. The practice has been denounced by both the [Federal Trade Commission](#) and the [Word of Mouth Marketing Association \(WOMMA\)](#). So now, if a company pays you to push its product, you're obligated to disclose your relationship with the company.

Then there's sugging – selling under the guise of research – and even frugging – fundraising that's presented as research.

There are plenty of laws guarding against overtly unethical practices, requiring for example that [rate disclosures on credit card literature](#) must be printed in at least 18-point type. But then there are those methods that are legal, yet lack transparency and integrity. Social media has brought us face to face with the social conscience, causing marketers to toe the line for fear they may get caught at misleading the public – [Albert the CyberChimp](#) is a great example – and receive negative online publicity.

So what criteria do you use? A good place to start is the [American Marketing Association's Statement of Ethics](#). In particular, it defines in practical terms six values to uphold in a marketing context: honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency and citizenship. Instead of a list of legal constraints, the Statement challenges marketers to consider the consumer relationship and to act with integrity at all times.

Better still, it sets the stage for ethical marketing that's not based on whether we meet compliance and avoid impropriety. We should instead be driven by a more positive call to improve the world we live in.

And that's good. Because if a marketer has to consider, "Gee, I wonder if I can get by with this?" the campaign has morally failed.

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