



It has been said that business ethics is one of the most antagonistic subjects facing a capitalistic society. On one side is the concept of doing the right thing by customers, on the other side is the goal of maximizing profits and increasing business opportunities. While doing the right thing to one person may simply mean being honest in marketing and sales to consumers, others may suggest business ethics must be broadly applied and extended to all human and environmental considerations. For this reason, this article will focus on business ethics from an exercise professional's perspective. This will encompass the professional "standards" that help support fair and acceptable practices, govern transparent internal controls, and promote honesty with customers.

The first step in this process of understanding ethics in marketing is differentiating "ethical marketing" from "marketing ethics". The prior describes an approach to marketing in which the individual or company sets ethical standards and follows them. The latter sets up a framework that promotes good practice in marketing, regardless of the product, service or target audience. In the fitness industry it is important to consider both concepts, as a business must decide first to establish an ethical agenda and second to create a method of marketing and sales that adheres to it. In doing so, it accounts for the individual, products and services collectively. Breaking them into separate business segments can help in this process as each has different ethical considerations.

Individual

Honesty in representation, knowledge and experience

Different reports suggest that between 30-50% of the information on many resumes has been embellished to make the individual look more competent or experienced to gain new employment or a raise. Representing oneself honestly is an important first step in marketing. An easy rule of thumb for resumes is the Human Resource (HR) test. Does your resume match the documentation that HR maintains on file? For instance, participation in an internship for six months as a fitness assistant should be recorded as such; in many cases people assume titles for their resume that do not match what HR has on file. In the same vein, does one's representation of their experiences reflect the knowledge and skill being advertised? Taking a weekend workshop may provide a certificate of participation, but is this the equivalent of expertise? A weekend "certification" course in kettlebells is clearly not the same as being a certified trainer from

an accredited organization. While it is appropriate to acknowledge participation in coursework that provides some new skills, using titles associated with professional roles such as certified trainer would be unethical based on a weekend course, as it may confuse the consumer.



Maintaining credentials in good standing

Whereas a degree in exercise science or related field may never expire, professional credentials in the fitness industry have expiration dates. Becoming a certified personal trainer (CPT) for instance, provides 2 years of competency assurance. During which time, a professional is expected to complete continued education and professional skill development aligned with the credential content domains. If the credential expires, similar to a driver's license, it is no longer valid. Continuing to promote oneself as a certified strength coach (CSC) or CPT would be unethical if the credential expired.



Obeying scope of practice boundaries

Each professional discipline that has a role defined by the Department of Labor has a scope of professional practice. Complying with the defined scope is ethical and sometimes a legal requirement. Exercise professionals should not provide advice in areas where a state has requirements to be licensed to practice the profession. Clearly, providing medical advice is illegal without a license, but exercise professionals also should be aware that diagnosing medical conditions and/or providing therapeutic treatment is also an ethical and legal conflict.



Participating in reported continued education

Ongoing professional development is the ethical responsibility of all exercise professionals. Identifying areas of weakness or interests that may expand service offerings are always good choices for continued learning. When reporting participation in ongoing education, it is an ethical responsibility to report activities that were actually engaged in or performed - and not simply paid

for. For example, registering for a conference in Las Vegas and checking in at the registration desk to “denote participation” before hitting the Strip is clearly not the same as sitting through the actual education seminars. Likewise, creating fake certificates of completion and falsely reporting contact hours are always unethical. This commonly happens among organizations that use audit systems over reporting systems.



Protecting confidential information

Exercise professionals have a legal and ethical responsibility to guard the privacy and confidentiality of clients. Any personal information gathered through screening and evaluation protocols is subject to confidentiality. One should not share any personally-identifiable information about any individual they have worked with or are currently working with; this includes both verbal and written information. Also, appropriate security procedures should be in place to protect client information from being accessed by others. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) may not apply to fitness professionals, but that does not suggest any level of difference in safeguarding client information between professionals.

Products

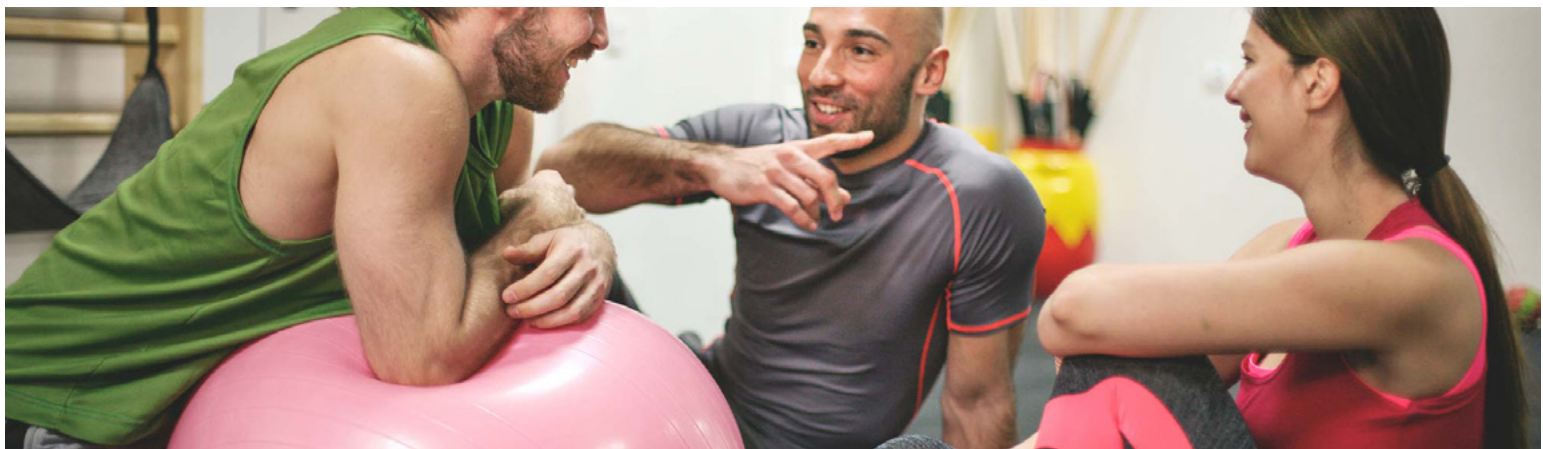


Representing the marketing of a given product honestly

Sometimes exercise professionals are asked to push the products or services of their club, or they have an opportunity to supplement income through product endorsements. While these acts unto themselves are not unethical, they can become gray areas when the exercise professionals do not know if the products or services are safe or even effective. It would be unethical to endorse or recommend a product for financial gain that is known not to work. It is also unethical if the endorser doesn't know what the product does or does not do but supports its sale for financial benefit.

Alerting customers when there is an ethical conflict of interest

Receiving money for referrals to a specific professional or practice requires that this information be disclosed to the client to be ethical. Declaring relationships, gifts, or monetary gain to your client at the time of the referral would make the referral more ethical as it identifies potential conflicts of interest and allows the client to make an informed decision. Likewise, telling clients that you are paid for endorsements would be ethical when marketing the products to them for purchase.



Service

Good business practices – proper evaluations, tracking and billing

Good business practices include complying with state and federal laws, industry standards and guidelines and communicating honestly with colleagues and clients. Maintaining appropriate insurance coverage, maintaining credentials in good-standing and engaging in practices of personal growth are all in compliance with expected ethical practices.



Tailoring programs to a client's needs

Knowing how to instruct and program safe and effective exercise is foundational to competency among exercise professionals. Properly evaluating clients while tailoring programs and instruction for each client is an

ethical expectation. Liability increases when a professional fails to appropriately assess the needs of their clients, uses cookie-cutter programs or does not match the fitness level of the client with activities and intensities selected. Additionally, viewing activities on Instagram or YouTube may be entertaining but not necessarily the best choices for your client's health and safety. Each activity in a program should align with the best decisions for those paying for services.



Offering services that are within your expertise

Assuming the capabilities of a licensed professional to provide service, advice, or information for a given client is inappropriate. The proper way to manage ethics from this regard is to refer clients and athletes to the appropriate professional. Maintaining some names from different professions allows for choices and voids ethical conflicts such as a financial incentive to refer.

Explaining factually the level and rate of results

Trying to sell personal training and related services comes with an ethical responsibility. While almost everyone can benefit from having a qualified personal trainer - the outcomes are specific to the actions. Telling people they will have miraculous results if they pay for your services is not always an accurate representation. This is where marketing ethics is most scrutinized. There is nothing wrong with showing examples of how one's service has benefitted others, but it is unethical to make-up unrealistic potentials to get a sale. Many of the infomercials sensationalize results in this manner, representing unethical advertising.

After reviewing these common samples of ethical versus unethical decisions or activities, it should be clear that ethics follow a system of common sense. Doing the right thing for ethical professional practice is the expectation of all exercise professionals. Certainly, financial gain is the desire of most professionals and is an appropriate goal. Using unethical activities to achieve greater opportunity or gain is where the problem lies. For more guidance on ethical behaviors and practice review the NCSF code of ethics and practice standards. ■



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