

Social Media and Endorsements: What is the Best Practice for Dietitians in BC?

Researched and written by third year Dietetic students, Nisha Parker and Cindy Huang (August 2019). Updated June 2020.

With the rise of Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook “influencers”, it is increasingly common to see unregulated “wellness experts” using social media to endorse various products for financial and personal gain, without taking scientific or ethical considerations into account. While there is a lot of potential for profit using social media platforms, dietitians must be aware of legislation regarding endorsements of products and colleagues.

Abiding by the [Code of Ethics](#) and the Marketing section (74) of the College of Dietitians of British Columbia (CDBC) [Bylaws](#), dietitians in BC must stay within their scope of practice, use clear disclosure, identify and manage conflicts of interest when using social media to make endorsements, and maintain a professional boundary in online contexts. This is not only important for the safety and trust of the public, but also for maintaining dietitians’ integrity and credibility.

What can a dietitian advertise on social media?

A dietitian’s advertisement may only include products and services that are within the scope of practice of dietetics and the dietitian’s individual competence. In BC, a registered dietitian may not “endorse any property, investment, or service for sale” to the public unless they “relate directly to dietetics.”

Specifically, non-dietetics related products or services should not appear in publications where the registrant may be identified as a dietitian by the public. For example, makeup and skincare products, wellness products, clothing, or home furnishings are not within the dietetic scope of practice and should not be part of a dietitian’s business model. In addition, dietitians may not be associated with multi-level marketing/pyramid scheme sales.

What are conflicts of interest regarding endorsements?

Endorsements of products and services can mislead the public and compromise client trust, which may undermine the credibility of registered dietitians. A conflict of interest occurs any time a dietitian is recommending a product or service from which they receive a financial or personal benefit.

The [dietitian-client relationship](#) contains an innate power imbalance, since the client relies on the dietitian for evidence-based recommendations and care. Using the title “Dietitian” to endorse a specific brand without presenting other available options lends a false sense of superior credibility to that brand, creating a potential conflict of interest. This puts clients in a vulnerable situation where they might assume that this brand is the superior option, or the only option available. An effective strategy to mitigate a conflict of interest is to clearly disclose a partnership or sponsorship with the product or service being endorsed.

When and how should a dietitian disclose a partnership?

Promotion and endorsement of dietetic products, services, and colleagues should ensure full disclosure and transparency in the public's best interest. As material connections between brands and influencers may change the public's perception of the promoted content, disclosing such connections is mandatory.

To ensure clear disclosure, [Ad Standards Canada](#) recommends the following:

- Disclosures should be upfront, conspicuous and unambiguous. For example, include the disclosure at the beginning of a video, and in the first few lines of a post.
- Avoid blanket disclosures such as “many of the products...were provided to me for free by their manufacturers” in a profile or bio section.
- Be specific about the brand, product, what was given for promotion, and the nature of the material connection.
- Use widely accepted hashtags such as #ad and #sponsored. Avoid hashtags such as #ambassador and #partner that don't clarify if monetary connections are present. Simply tagging the brand is insufficient.
- Disclosure should be in the same language as the endorsement, in English and/or French.

How can a dietitian maintain a professional boundary online?

The mandate of the CDBC is to protect the public by regulating the dietetic profession. As such, a professional boundary must be maintained between dietitians and the public, even in online or social media contexts. Professional and personal accounts must be kept separate on social media. On a personal account, a dietitian may not accept clients as “friends”. On a professional account, all content must be within the scope of practice of dietetics, follow [Professional Practice Standards](#) and [Conflict of Interest/Marketing guidelines](#). On that note, dietitians should also consider how they interact with other professionals online. From the public's perspective, commenting on or “liking” posts from another professional or colleague could be interpreted as an endorsement of that individual's business or services.

Maintaining a professional image online is critical, as it is virtually impossible to delete what has been posted on the internet. Unprofessional online conduct can negatively affect a dietitian's reputation and undermine the profession and public trust. The same holds true for comments posted by others about the dietitian's practice. Dietitians are encouraged to be aware of comments posted about their practice and contact the respective website or social media administrator for correction or deletion of fraudulent or defamatory information.

When using an online platform to offer nutrition counselling services, such as in virtual dietetic practice, dietitians registered in BC may need to be registered with the regulatory bodies in other provinces. Ensure that the virtual practice is in compliance with the [CDBC Virtual Practice policy and guidelines](#).

Take home messages

- When considering promotion of products, services, and endorsement of colleagues, ensure that such promotions relate directly to dietetics.

- A dietitian must ensure that actions are contributing to the public's trust in objective and evidence-informed dietetic practice.
- State that the product or service being endorsed is just one example of many ways to support a healthy diet to mitigate conflict of interest.
- Follow the latest Ad Standards Canada guidelines for clear disclosure on social media.
- Keep personal and professional accounts separate to maintain a professional boundary.

Content adapted with thanks to College of Dietitians of Ontario ([CDO Conflicts of Interest](#) and [CDO Social Media and Dietetic Practice](#))