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Editorial: Advertising

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EDITORIAL

Advertising

No question is more generally the topic of discussion among accountants than the propriety or impropriety of advertising. During the past year there seems to have been a recrudescence of the advertising idea among certain members of the profession, and this magazine has received many inquiries from persons who deplore the prevalence of advertisement, but seem to dread the effects of it upon their own individual practice.

In the American Institute of Accountants matters of this kind are under the supervision of the committee on professional ethics, and in view of the wide-spread interest which is manifested in the question of advertising, the chairman of that committee was asked to express his opinions for publication.

We are glad to be able to publish the views of the chairman of the committee on professional ethics, and in doing so commend them to the earnest consideration of all accountants who are not sure that advertising is undesirable.

The opinion follows:

The question of the proper kind of publicity for a professional accountant has before now been discussed by this Journal. It is a question which is much in the mind of every accountant and cannot be too frequently discussed.

That the great preponderance of opinion among reputable accountants, leaders in their profession, is opposed to commercial advertising of all kinds is beyond question. That some able and competent practitioners—yes, even members of the institute—as well as many professional quacks and immature and ill-informed
members of the profession, deem it essential to advertise their
wares in some form or another is unfortunately also true.

The specious arguments which are made in favor of advertising
and publicity campaigns are sometimes presented in such
alluring form as to silence, if not convince, those who know in
their hearts that no calling or vocation can consistently aspire to a
professional status and dignity while it countenances unprofes-
sional and undignified practices. Oil and water will not mix—
you cannot wed science to charlatanry without producing a sterile
hybrid, and you cannot lay claim to membership in a profession
while engaging in unprofessional practices. The things are
incompatible—they cannot be reconciled, no matter how ingenious
and eloquent the argument.

The following letter was recently received from a member
of the institute:

SIR:—I am moved to write this letter because of the action of many
accountants, some C P A's and members of the institute and others who are
not.

There has been much recent discussion, oral and written, as to ethics in
our profession, embracing among other things the question of advertising,
circularizing and other forms of publicity.

In my twenty-five years of practice I know I have been as conservative
as any member of the profession, and have watched the various forms of
publicity and advertising by fellow accountants and witnessed the receipt by
my own clients of all manner of circulars and pamphlets soliciting business,
and have consistently stood firm in my attitude.

I am, however, at present, going through a period of deep thinking caused
by methods and practices of other accountants, and am wondering whether
I have been and am still too conservative in my ideas and methods, and
whether I should adopt different methods by advertising, circularizing, etc.,
with a view to increasing my business—not that I am in need of more
business, but merely for the purpose of having a larger business with a larger
number of assistants and a larger suite of offices, all of which, of course,
would mean more income.

My present state of mind is also caused by the fact that my son, now in
practice with me after having been graduated from college and been in the
service for more than two years, is very observing, ambitious and likes the
profession, and tells me frequently I am, in his judgment, too conservative,
when he observes the publicity of other accountants. We all must admit
that many of them do secure considerable new business, and he is fired with
the ambition to enlarge the field and build up a larger practice than we now
have.

By this letter you will recognize that I am still conservative, by seeking
the opinion of those whose opinions are worth while, instead of being carried
away with the new ideas and undertaking a campaign of publicity.

I should appreciate a letter from you on the subject, or if you think it
better to have it referred to the proper committee you may do so, and if
it would make good material for an article for discussion in The Journal
of Accountancy it might be of some service not only to myself but to many
other members of the profession, because it must be a fact that many others
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are doing some hard thinking along the same lines, and it seems to me this is as good a time as any other to have the matter discussed and handled in the dignified and commendable manner in which every subject is handled by the institute.

Also witness the numerous men leaving the service of the internal revenue bureau and advertising by letter and other means that they are now available to the business world, setting forth in glowing terms the wonderful and valuable work they are qualified to do.

The foregoing letter was followed by another several weeks later containing a dozen or more samples of newspaper clippings ranging from a one-inch card to a full-page display advertisement:

It reads:

Just a few samples of the kind of advertisements, which are the cause of my recent letter to you.

Professional ethics—does not seem to be any such animal—and my long continued conservatism and dignified observance of ethics in the profession are weakening and waver more every day.

The foregoing correspondence parallels the line of argument so frequently made by those practitioners whose innate good taste and professional instincts would naturally lead them to refrain from such lurid methods, but who say to themselves: "The advertiser is depriving me of opportunities for my services and I must, in self-defence, climb the hill of printers' ink and shout my wares." How often have we heard this argument. And how seductive it is.

The discriminating public long ago learned properly to classify the advertising doctor, dentist, architect, engineer or lawyer—and yet there are alleged members of each profession who contribute to filling the advertising pages of our daily newspapers. Who among the readers of this editorial is ever allured into patronizing an advertising dentist? If there be one, we think he lost his way when he became a reader of this JOURNAL. It is not the type of man who reads this magazine to whom such publicity appeal is made. It may be that the business public has not yet quite reached the stage of discrimination it is in concerning the question of advertising practitioners of the older professions. The time is bound to come when it will be. Do you want to be among the leaders or among the laggards?

While it is true that many accountants, including members of the institute, do more or less advertising, the best opinion does not look with favor upon this practice. You are not likely to patronize an advertising doctor or lawyer, and the same reasons which would dissuade any member of these older professions
from commercializing his profession by promiscuous advertising should dissuade a member of our profession from resorting to such undignified procedure.

Consider for a moment what the result would be if every practitioner were to advertise to the same extent. What possible profit could ever flow to anyone except as the result of more skillful and conscientious work? The artistic and skillful advertiser may reap a momentary financial advantage at the expense of practitioners who do not advertise. We are sure that if he does it is quite likely to be at the expense of his professional reputation, and we take it that every accountant has quite as much regard for his professional reputation as for his financial success.

The accountant who advertises obtains business by this means solely because his advertisement does not come into competition with advertisements of his more dignified fellows. If all advertised, his advertisement would not attract the attention which it now does attract. If we admit this to be so, we place the advertising accountant in the position of taking advantage of his fellows.

This kind of thing may be good commercial practice, but does it add anything to the dignity and the fellowship of a profession? From this point of view, does not the advertising and soliciting accountant come pretty close to being a bandit or, in the vernacular of another profession, the "ambulance chaser" of the accounting profession?

However, the outstanding point about this whole matter is that either accountancy is a profession or it is not a profession. Its practitioners will, therefore, have to choose which it shall be. If it is to be a profession, it must adopt professional practices. If it is to be a trade, advertise and shout your wares from the house tops, but do not delude yourself into the belief that you are a member of a dignified and learned profession.

"Time at last sets all things even," and the writer has an abiding faith that in the long run the accountant who steers his own northwest course and keeps to the charted channels will have quite as successful a voyage as though he departed from the approved and tested routes and sought a short-cut to professional success.