

# NPR DIGITAL SPONSORSHIP MESSAGING GUIDELINES

## **NPR is unique among media companies.**

We put substance *and* style in our reports. We talk *with* our audiences rather than *at* them. We think of our audiences as intelligent people who are curious about the world, and we treat them that way. We inform and delight our audiences with content that advances our fundamental educational purpose.

We are also a non-profit, tax-exempt organization committed to pursuing an educational purpose. The content we produce or distribute and the events we conduct are intended to advance NPR's educational mission.

NPR is also a membership corporation that exists to advance the collective interests of the educational institutions and organizations that are the foundation of the public radio system. Whether producing and distributing NPR's signature broadcast content, operating the Public Radio Satellite System, or producing and acquiring digital content and services, NPR exercises leadership on behalf of its Membership and the public radio system as a whole.

These unique features extend to the sponsors who support NPR. NPR sponsor messages are distinctly different from the cluttered and chaotic world of commercial advertising. And our research shows sponsorship on NPR works *because* of those distinctions, not in spite of them.

Here are some key points about NPR sponsorship that differentiate our practices from traditional commercial advertising:

- The best sponsorships are smart, compelling statements that respect our audience and inform them
- We proactively maintain our journalistic firewall and hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards
- Our messages do not shout at consumers or mislead them into action
- They are not loaded with claims that can't be proved
- They avoid distracting mentions of product or service pricing
- Our supporters will not find their messages adjacent to pitches for products or services subject to abuse (such as tobacco, marijuana and gambling). They will not find their messages next to, for example, promotions for quasi-medicines.

The platform-specific sponsor acknowledgment guidelines that follow are intended to further these objectives. The digital messages we bring to our audience from sponsors are fundamentally intended to inform and engage them. At the same time, sponsor messaging is always kept distinct from the NPR content itself. Given NPR's public radio leadership role, guidelines for sponsor messaging on all platforms encourage best practices for such messaging throughout public radio.

## Digital Sponsor Messaging Guidelines

The guidelines immediately below address sponsor messages that appear on NPR's digital platforms, including audio messages and banners on the website, in mobile apps, in podcasts and wherever NPR content travels in the digital realm. It isn't so much a rigid list of do's and don'ts as an explanation of our approach. They are designed to help sponsors craft messages that connect with people in "the NPR way."

1. ***We maintain an open access policy but we reserve the right to reject individual sponsors.*** NPR maintains an open access policy based on its independence and lack of bias. That does not mean NPR must accept support from any prospective sponsor. NPR reserves the right to reject support from any particular entity and will do so if accepting the support may call NPR's independence and objectivity into question.
2. ***We avoid messages with misleading language and products or services with questionable claims.*** NPR reserves the right to reject any banner or audio promotional message at its discretion, including on the grounds that it is false, misleading, inaccurate, or unsubstantiated; that it makes unfair competitive claims; or that it fails to comply with standards of decency and dignity.
  - NPR reserves the right to decline promotional messages regarding cigarettes (including electronic cigarettes or nicotine vapor devices), tobacco, marijuana, gambling and other products subject to abuse. Promotional messages for distilled spirits or other adult beverages are acceptable provided they are tasteful in nature and do not encourage abuse.
  - NPR does not accept promotional messages that express views on an issue of public importance or controversy.
  - NPR does not accept promotional messages that support or oppose any candidate for political office or a public referendum.
  - NPR does not accept promotional messages for prescription drug products or FDA regulated medical devices.
3. ***We do not blur the line between promotional and editorial content.*** Each banner or audio podcast promotional message should be readily identifiable as the promotional message of a sponsor and transparently distinguished from the adjacent editorial content. To maintain the separation between editorial content and promotional messaging content:
  - Audio promotional messages should open with language that makes clear that the message comes from the sponsor. Promotional messages in banners or other formats will be readily identified as coming from the sponsor.

- Audio promotional messages may not be read by NPR journalists. Hosts or other contributors to podcasts who are not NPR journalists may read podcast promotional messages, but those hosts/contributors may reject language that they are uncomfortable reading.
  - The context should make clear that the substance of the promotional message comes from the sponsor, not from NPR.
4. ***We avoid excessive promotion because our audience appreciates the lack of clutter.*** Promotional messages are designed to give sponsors more time or flexibility to describe the features of their products or services than they have in traditional broadcast underwriting. They are intended to be part of a sponsorship environment that is different from a traditional commercial advertising environment. Accordingly:
- NPR does not endorse sponsors or the products or services they offer. Personal endorsements or testimonials from show hosts, other NPR journalists, or other voices associated with NPR are not permitted, nor is such language permitted in banners. Promotional messages should not state or imply that NPR or an NPR employee has used and likes the sponsor’s products or services. The message should not include statements in the first-person voice or lines that reasonably could be confused by the audience as a statement reflecting the host’s (or other NPR announcer’s) opinions, beliefs, findings, or experiences regarding the sponsor or its products.
  - Language that describes a quality or feature of a product or service in qualitative terms is permitted, provided it is not overly promotional, is true and accurate, and is not likely to undermine NPR’s credibility as a news organization. If the description of a product or service in an audio promotional message could leave the impression that NPR or an NPR representative has first-hand experience with that product or service, the language should be re-phrased to avoid the perception of first-hand use. For example, a description of a product as “simple and easy to use” could be re-phrased as “the product is designed to be simple and easy to use.”
  - Language that denigrates a sponsor’s competitor (or any person or entity) or that expressly compares the sponsor (or its products or services) to a competitor (or its products or services) will not be accepted, but descriptive language that is implicitly comparative may be accepted. For instance, describing the sponsor as a “discount broker” is an implicit comparison to a “full service broker,” but such a description would be permitted so long as the comparison is not to a named competitor of the sponsor.
  - Promotional messages that make “best” or “better” claims or otherwise convey a claim of general superiority compared to competitors are generally not allowed.
  - While specific product or service pricing is not permitted, the availability of a discount or special offer (for example, a special offer for NPR listeners) may be conveyed and described, and product offerings

that include free delivery and/or returns may reference that fact. Referencing free trials or products that are free is permissible. In all cases, all material terms must be disclosed in combination with a free offer.

- A promotional message may direct the listener to the sponsor’s website or another source for more information, to redeem a discount or offer, or to purchase an item. The promotional message should not convey urgency or pressure to take immediate action.
  - Clinical test claims (for example, “clinically proven”) and similar claims (such as “scientifically proven” or “proven”) are not permitted.
  - Health or wellness claims are generally not permitted (for example, “one cup replaces a full meal” or “increases focus and concentration”).
5. ***We only allow promotional messages that are truthful and not misleading.*** The sponsor is responsible for (1) substantiating the substance of all factual claims made in the promotional message; (2) compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and guidelines; and (3) securing any third-party rights in the content of the message. Language that is reasonably susceptible of being interpreted as false and defamatory, profane or indecent, sacrilegious, a form of hate speech directed at an individual or a group, or otherwise scandal provoking will not be accepted.
6. ***We will avoid promotional messages that sound or look like intrusive forms of commercial advertising.*** All digital audio promotional messages will be voiced by NPR talent. In podcasts, some promotional messages formats allow for inclusion of informative audio from a sponsor, but this should not be overtly commercial content or content people associate with commercial advertising, and NPR reserves the right to refuse any content. The promotional messaging cannot sound like journalism for hire.
7. ***We may give users the choice to engage with additional content from our sponsors, but we are unambiguously clear that the engagement is optional and the content is not from NPR.*** Some banners or digital audio promotional formats may allow the user to click or tap to hear or view more information about a sponsor or its products and services within the creative. In these cases, the post-click/tap content comes from the sponsor, and the sponsor is solely responsible for such content. In these cases, it will be made clear to the user in visual and audio cues that they are experiencing or about to experience content from the sponsor. NPR reserves the right to reject any provided post click/tap content that is deemed inappropriate for NPR, or which may confuse users about the origin of the content.

*Within these guidelines, a number of individual questions of judgment or interpretation may arise, which will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. These guidelines are also expected to evolve over time, as NPR, our sponsors, and our audiences gain experience with promotional messaging.*