

**THE PROFESSIONAL ETHICS COMMITTEE
FOR THE STATE BAR OF TEXAS
Opinion No. 661**

July 2016

QUESTION PRESENTED

Does a lawyer violate the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct by using the name of a competing lawyer or law firm as a keyword in the implementation of an advertising service offered by a major search-engine company?

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Recognizing that many potential clients search for a lawyer by using internet search engines, Lawyer A uses various search-engine optimization techniques to try to ensure that his name appears on the first page of the search results obtained when a potential client uses a search engine to seek a lawyer. One way Lawyer A seeks to achieve this goal is by participating in internet search-based advertising programs offered by search engines that are in widespread use by many types of businesses.

These search-based advertising programs allow a business to select specific words or phrases (“keywords”) that will cause the business’s advertisement to pop up in the search results of someone using that keyword in a search. The advertiser does not purchase exclusive rights to specific keywords; the same keywords can be used by a number of advertisers.

Lawyer B is a competing lawyer in Lawyer A’s town. Lawyer B’s area of practice is similar to Lawyer A’s. Lawyer A and Lawyer B have never been law partners or engaged in joint representation in any case.

One of the keywords selected by Lawyer A is the name of Lawyer B. Lawyer A’s keyword selection causes Lawyer A’s name and a link to his website to be displayed on the search engine’s search results page any time an internet user searches for Lawyer B using the search engine. Lawyer A’s advertisement will appear to the side of or above the search results in an area designated for “ads” or “sponsored links.” In addition to displaying Lawyer A’s name and a link to Lawyer A’s website, the ad or sponsored link may contain additional text concerning Lawyer A and his practice. Usually Lawyer B’s name would also be listed in the search results. Moreover, if Lawyer B had also purchased similar advertising services from the search engine and had used his own name as a keyword, Lawyer B’s name would also be listed in the ad or sponsored link section as well as in the regular search results when Lawyer B’s name was used by a potential client as a search term.

Lawyer A's keyword advertisement or sponsored link does not indicate whether or not Lawyer A and Lawyer B are affiliated. Lawyer B did not authorize Lawyer A to use Lawyer B's name in connection with Lawyer A's keyword advertisement.

DISCUSSION

Advertising, including internet advertising, is addressed in Part VII of the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct. The Texas Disciplinary Rules do not specifically address the question of whether it is permissible for a lawyer to use a competitor's name to enhance the lawyer's internet advertising. However, several provisions of the Texas Disciplinary Rules must be considered with respect to this question.

Rule 7.01(d) states that "[a] lawyer shall not hold himself or herself out as being a partner, shareholder, or associate with one or more other lawyers unless they are in fact partners, shareholders, or associates."

Rule 7.02(a) prohibits a lawyer from making or sponsoring "a false or misleading communication about the qualifications or the services of any lawyer or firm." A communication is false or misleading if it "contains a material misrepresentation of fact or law, or omits a fact necessary to make the statement considered as a whole not materially misleading[.]" Rule 7.02(a)(1). Comment 3 to Rule 7.02 explains the standard set forth in Rule 7.02(a)(1) as follows:

"Sub-paragraph (a)(1) recognizes that statements can be misleading both by what they contain and what they leave out. Statements that are false or misleading for either reason are prohibited. A truthful statement is misleading if it omits a fact necessary to make the lawyer's communication considered as a whole not materially misleading. A truthful statement is also misleading if there is a substantial likelihood that it will lead a reasonable person to formulate a specific conclusion about the lawyer or the lawyer's services for which there is no reasonable factual foundation."

Under these Rules, if Lawyer A's use of Lawyer B's name as a keyword in search-engine advertising results in an advertisement that holds out Lawyer A to be a shareholder, partner, or associate of Lawyer B, then Lawyer A's use of Lawyer B's name would violate Rule 7.01(d). Furthermore, if such use of Lawyer B's name would lead a reasonable person to believe that Lawyer A and Lawyer B are associated in some way, then the use of Lawyer B's name as a keyword would be a misleading communication in violation of Rule 7.02(a).

In the opinion of this Committee, the use of a competitor's name as a keyword in the factual circumstances here considered would not in normal circumstances violate either Rule 7.01(d) or Rule 7.02(a). The advertisement that results from the use of Lawyer B's name does not state that Lawyer A and Lawyer B are partners, shareholders, or associates of each other. Moreover, since a person familiar enough with the internet to use a search engine to seek a lawyer should be aware that there are advertisements presented on web pages showing search results, it appears highly unlikely that a reasonable person using an internet search engine would be misled into thinking

that every search result indicates that a lawyer shown in the list of search results has some type of relationship with the lawyer whose name was used in the search. Compare *Habush v. Cannon*, 828 N.W.2d 876 (Wis. Ct. App. 2013) (finding no violation of Wisconsin right-of-privacy statute when one law firm used the name of a competing law firm as a keyword in search-engine advertising).

In addition to Rules 7.01(d) and 7.02(a), Rule 8.04(a)(3) must also be considered. Rule 8.04(a)(3) prohibits a lawyer from engaging in conduct “involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation.” In the opinion of the Committee, given the general use by all sorts of businesses of names of competing businesses as keywords in search-engine advertising, such use by Texas lawyers in their advertising is neither dishonest nor fraudulent nor deceitful and does not involve misrepresentation. Thus such use of a competitor’s name in internet search-engine advertising is not a violation of Rule 8.04(a)(3). In reaching this conclusion, this Committee has considered but does not concur with 2010 Formal Ethics Opinion 14 of the Ethics Committee of the North Carolina State Bar (April 27, 2012) (ruling that a lawyer’s use of a competitor’s name as a keyword in a search-engine advertising program violates the equivalent of Texas Disciplinary Rule 8.04(a)(3) because such use constitutes “conduct involving dishonesty” in that the conduct shows “a lack of fairness or straightforwardness”).

It should be noted that this opinion addresses only whether the use of a competitor’s name in internet search-engine advertising programs violates the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct. Although such use of a competitor’s name as a keyword in advertising programs does not in the opinion of the Committee involve a violation of the Texas Disciplinary Rules, a Texas lawyer’s participation in such an advertising program must comply with the other provisions of the Texas Disciplinary Rules applicable to advertising, in particular Disciplinary Rule 7.04 on advertisements in the public media. Moreover, depending on the circumstances, a Texas lawyer advertising through keywords on internet search engines may be subject to other requirements or prohibitions imposed by federal or state law or by professional ethics rules of other jurisdictions.

CONCLUSION

A lawyer does not violate the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct by simply using the name of a competing lawyer or law firm as a keyword in the implementation of an advertising service offered by a major search-engine company. The lawyer’s statements included in this advertising program must not contain false or misleading communications and must comply in all respects with applicable rules on lawyer advertising.