
**E-80-19 Law firm sponsorship of legal seminars
for the public**

Question

May a law firm present seminars on specific legal topics for the benefit of the public without the sponsorship of a bank or similar institution?

Conclusion

The committee's answer depends upon a determination as to whether or not the presentation of such seminars constitutes permissible public education or impermissible solicitation.

SCR 20.06 and Ethical Considerations (1) to (5) inclusive are pertinent and your attention is directed to them. Under these Ethical Considerations, the members of the public must be assisted in recognizing the legal aspects of their problems and the importance of seeking assistance.

Acting under proper auspices, lawyers may participate in educational and public relations programs, such as seminars concerning our legal system with particular reference to legal problems that frequently arise. In so doing, lawyers should be motivated by a desire to benefit the public rather than get publicity or employment for particular lawyers. Lawyers who participate in seminars should shun personal publicity. A lawyer taking part in a seminar is under most conditions participating in an educational program with particular reference to legal programs that frequently arise. While a lawyer participant in the seminar is not to volunteer advice to a particular person on a specific question, if he is to do more than give a philosophical discussion, he must deal with various factual situations. In so doing he is volunteering advice. Such action is proper only if motivated by a desire to educate his listeners to recognize that they may have legal rights or obligations of which they have been ignorant.

The motivation of the lawyer is subjective. It is not possible to reach into his mind to discover the reasons which cause him to offer the advice. The lawyer must recognize that his conduct will be judged objectively. If the lawyer meets the terms set forth above, there appears to be no prohibition against his holding

such a seminar. If he does not meet those terms, he violates the Code of Professional Responsibility and is engaged in solicitation.

As a practical matter, it will not be possible to pass judgment on the conduct of the lawyer or law firm sponsoring the seminar until it has concluded. Then, a review of the facts will be a basis upon which a judgment can be made as to whether the Ethical Considerations referred to above have been violated or not. The advertising used in publicizing the seminar, the manner in which the seminar is conducted and what the participants at the seminar say will, among other things, be the basis on which a decision can be made. A lawyer or law firm conducting a seminar, with or without a sponsor, is responsible for conducting it in such manner that the seminar does not become a vehicle for prohibited solicitation.