

# 2026 Chicago Public Media Broadcast Underwriting Guidelines

## I. Legal Background

Section 317 of the Communications Act requires NCE broadcasters to identify persons or entities that provide financial support for specific programs. Section 399B of the Act prohibits noncommercial stations from airing advertisements, which are defined as:

Any message or other programming material which is broadcast or otherwise transmitted in exchange for any remuneration, and which is intended (1) to promote any service, facility, or product offered by any person who is engaged in such offering for profit; (2) to express the views of any person with respect to any matter of public importance or interest, or (3) to support or oppose any candidate for political office.

In implementing these statutory provisions, the Federal Communications Commission's ("FCC's") rules state:

No promotional announcements on behalf of for-profit entities shall be broadcast at any time in exchange for the receipt, in whole or in part, of consideration to the licensee, its principals, or employees. However, acknowledgements of contributions can be made. The scheduling of any announcements and acknowledgements may not interrupt regular programming. The FCC enforces its underwriting rules, but the precedent is replete with exceptions and nuances. The vast majority of concrete guidance is derived from case law (much of which is fairly old and involve obvious violations) and informal Commission guidance. As such, the line between permissible donor identification and impermissible advertising can be somewhat imprecise and arguably even subjective. If there is room for interpretation, the Commission will generally defer to the reasonable good faith judgment of the licensee as to whether underwriting spots identify, rather than promote, the underwriter.

## **II. Acknowledging Donors – Who to Include and How**

A station must broadcast underwriting announcements if consideration (such as money, in-kind contributions, programming material, goods or services used for programming) is paid to support the broadcast of specific programming. Licensees must identify every donor that has paid consideration to support the production or broadcast of a particular program. Announcements must include the name of the person or entity providing the consideration, for example if the “Jane & John Smith Family Foundation” provided the check, they must be referred to as the “Jane & John Smith Family Foundation,” not simply “Jane & John Smith.”

Underwriters for programs supported by numerous underwriters may be acknowledged in two ways:

1. Major underwriters must be acknowledged in the normal course.
2. Minor underwriters may be acknowledged in the normal course or the station may acknowledge them in a group (for example, “Friends of” the program) and maintain a list of these contributors in the station’s public file.

Guidelines around co-op buys are covered in a later section.

For sponsors who want to include a second entity not providing consideration in the copy:

1. If the second entity is not a co-sponsor, it cannot be included in the preamble
2. The second entity cannot be a for-profit company
3. The second entity can be a non-profit the entity providing the consideration supports or is working with

## **III. Permissible Content of Announcements**

Underwriting announcements may include the following information:

1. The name of the donor and/or its brand and trade name and product service listings;
2. Established slogans that are not overtly promotional in nature;
3. Value-neutral description of products or services;
4. Telephone number, location and website address; and
5. Non-promotional background information, such as how long the donor has been in business.

#### **IV. Impermissible Content - Applicable to All Underwriters**

Underwriting announcements may not:

1. Express any person's views with respect to any matter of public importance or interests, or
2. Support or oppose any candidate for political office.

#### **V. Impermissible Content – Applicable to Commercial Underwriters**

The announcements/acknowledgments of commercial underwriters may not include the following information:

1. Any comparative, qualitative, or overtly promotional descriptions of products or services. The truth of a statement is not a defense if the statement is promotional;
  - a. Examples of prohibited language include:
    - i. Accommodating
    - ii. Delightfully honest
    - iii. Dependable
    - iv. Efficient
    - v. Economical
    - vi. Five-star rating
    - vii. Board-certified, but see 5(D)(7) below
    - viii. Cheaper
    - ix. Leading provider of...
    - x. Reliable sale
    - xi. Faster
    - xii. Adjectives ending in “-er” or “-est,” such as “bigger” or “biggest”
    - xiii. References to “stars” or other ratings systems
    - xiv. Quotes that imply a “review” of a performance or product
2. Any calls to action or inducements to buy, sell, or lease;
  - a. Examples of prohibited language include:
    - i. Do yourself a favor and come visit!
    - ii. Stop in today
    - iii. While supplies last
    - iv. Get your tickets now
    - v. With every test drive you'll receive a pair of tickets.
    - vi. Any mention of return policies or warranties
    - vii. Free or complimentary offers

- viii. Suggestions to visit a website or follow on social media
  - ix. Call-out statements such as questions (e.g., “Want to know...?”)
    - 1. Note: Website addresses or telephone numbers that contain calls to action (like [www.goseeashow.com](http://www.goseeashow.com) or 1-800-GET-DEALS) are acceptable.
3. Any mention of price information, such as sales or savings, interest rates or discounts.
- a. Examples of prohibited language include:
    - i. No down payment – up to \$3000 in rebates
    - ii. First time buyer’s plan and preferred financing
    - iii. On sale for a limited time only
      - 1. Note: Coupon and discount websites (like Groupon or Living Social) may be accepted as underwriters as long as the spot does not contain any prohibited information about pricing, specific discounts, etc.

### Other Content Considerations

1. **Live Broadcasts.** Take care when broadcasting live from the underwriter’s business not to include information that would otherwise be considered to be prohibited language (i.e., no mentions of special offers, quality of products, inducements to visit, etc.).
2. **“Non-identifying Verbosity.”** Avoid repeating unnecessary and/or excessive repetition of otherwise permissible identifying information. Fifteen repetitions of “Nissan of Temecula,” for example, was found to constitute impermissible non-identifying verbosity.
3. **Excessively Detailed Menu Listings.** Avoid overly lengthy and detailed announcements that list a string of products (“we sell metal roofing, siding, hardware, trim, insulation, trusses, and gutters”); a list of 4 or fewer items is reasonable.
4. **No piggybacking.** Mentioning an entity who is not an underwriter in an underwriting announcement can be done only in limited circumstances. Mentioning products offered by the underwriter, citing a location where an underwriter’s product can be found, and mentioning a nonprofit that the underwriter supports are all acceptable, while simply promoting the goods/services of a third party is not. CPM’s own in-house promos must also abide by this restriction (i.e., no mention of third-party websites unless there is a sponsorship arrangement).

5. **Underwriters are companies, not things or events.** An underwriter may be identified by its brand or trade name, but not by its product (“Brought to you by Kelloggs” is acceptable, whereas “Brought to you by Fruit Loops” is not). For events, the name of the paying party (such as the production company) must be included in the announcement (“WBEZ is supported by Jam Productions, presenting Andrew Bird at the Chicago Theatre on July 1st.”).
6. **Gambling, Alcohol and Tobacco.** Companies that manufacture tobacco products may be considered as underwriters as long as tobacco products are not mentioned. Casinos may be considered as underwriters as long as gambling-related activities are not mentioned. Finally, manufacturers of hard alcohol, beer and wine may be considered as underwriters, and their products may be mentioned.
7. **Categories v. Descriptions.** Terms that appear to be qualitative or comparative in nature may be acceptable if they are commonly accepted and designate a category of goods or services.
  - a. For example, fine art, smart phone, certified preowned car and fast food are categories of goods or services and are permissible.
  - b. Expensive fine art, sleek smart phone, luxury certified preowned vehicle, fast fast food are descriptions and not permissible.

### **CPM Requirements Not Explicitly Required By FCC Rules/Precedent.**

The items in italics are stylistic preferences. These requirements are not mandated by FCC Rules or precedent but are important to our listeners and members. Departures from these recommendations will be evaluated on a case by case basis. As issues arise, Traffic and Underwriting will work together to adhere to these guidelines and find solutions that are agreeable to CPM and to our clients. In the rare instance that a resolution is not possible, Traffic and Underwriting will present the copy to Legal Counsel, VP of Programming, and the Editor-in-Chief for their approval or denial. Chicago Public Media maintains the right to make final determination on all copy.

1. ***Use of Preamble.*** All Underwriting messages should be preceded by the following preamble: “WBEZ is supported by...”. Traffic/Programming can approve adjustments to the preamble on a case by case.
2. ***Co-op Underwriting.*** CPM accepts underwriting by clients that share underwriting costs (i.e., “supported by GM and Anheuser Busch”), as long as both entities are paying for the Underwriting.

3. **Use of First or Second Pronouns.** CPM does not allow the use of “*I, me, you, our and your*” in underwriting announcements. While not prohibited by FCC rules or precedent, non-commercial stations commonly restrict use of these words.
4. **Underwriting by Advocacy Groups, Unions, Trade Associations, and Religious institutions.** CPM accepts underwriters who describe their mission and services without advocacy. The following would be permissible: “Support comes from Illini for Affordable RX, a coalition led by pharmacy benefits managers who are working to reduce prescription drug costs for Illini. Learn more at Affordable RX Illini dot com.”
5. **Recruitment Messaging.** CPM allows for recruitment underwriting as long as the spot adheres to other restrictions, i.e., no calls to action (“Fill out an application today!”) or comparative language (“You’ll be happier working for us!”).
6. **Location and Proximity.** CPM recommends that mileage, rather than travel times, be used and that location information remain neutral (avoid phrases such as “just blocks from...” or “right off of...”).
7. **Slogans and Taglines.** The more qualitative the slogan, the more established it has to be. Examples of established slogans include: demonstrating that it has been in use for 6 months, trademarking of the slogan, and using the slogans in previous marketing materials. CPM also provides that taglines/slogans be the last element read in copy.

## VI. Promoting Non-Profits.

CPM allows non-profits greater latitude in their Underwriting Messaging. These standards apply to these organizations: arts, education, healthcare, charitable organizations. This does not apply to trade associations who are covered by Section (4) above. The onus is on the Corporate Sponsorship Account Executive to provide evidence that the entity has non-profit status by securing the entity’s Employer Identification Number (EIN) or state registration. While providing latitude, the goal is to keep with the desired sound of a non-commercial station that our listeners have been accustomed to hearing.

1. CPM will allow limited pricing information to be used. This includes reference to refunds, discounts and use of the words affordable and complimentary. Reference to prices or use of the word “free” are not allowed.

2. CPM will allow non-profits limited promotion of their products and services.
  - a. Copy is required to be about what the underwriter does or the event they are promoting
  - b. If the copy contains qualitative adjectives/wording, this must be supported by the website referenced in the copy
  - c. The copy cannot make it sound as if CPM is promoting the product or service
3. Non-profits may refer to reviews, rankings or awards received as well as limited descriptions of shows, productions, concerts and events. Examples:
  - a. Medical or Education Accreditations: “Support comes from the Northwestern Memorial Hospital ranked number 1 in Chicago by US News & World Report.”
  - b. Arts: Words such as “Tony-winning,” “Oscar-winning,” “Golden Globe nominated”.
  - c. The reference cannot be from a paid post
  - d. If the reference is for a ranking or review, it must be within the last 5 years
    - i. Awards and nominations, such as Tonys, Oscar, etc. can be older than five years
4. CPM will allow limited calls to action for non-profits
  - a. Learn more
  - b. Learn how to help
  - c. Learn how to support
  - d. Ways to help/support
5. Impermissible for all underwriters
  - a. Expressing any person’s views with respect to any matter of public importance or interests
  - b. Supporting or opposing any candidate for political office.
  - c. Use of first or second person pronouns

## **VII. Timing, Frequency, and Duration of Underwriting Announcements**

Stations may not alter, interrupt or suspend regular programming to broadcast underwriting announcements or donor acknowledgments. Announcements may be made at the beginning, end or between identifiable segments of the program or station breaks. As a general rule, the longer an announcement takes to identify an underwriter, the more likely it is to be promotional. CPM guidelines allow 15-second

spots, 15-second traffic sponsorships, and 30-second non-profit spotlights of 80 words or less. No announcements can exceed 30 seconds.

### **VIII. Escalation Process**

In the event a compromise regarding language in a script cannot be found, Traffic will begin the internal escalation process. If Traffic and the Account Executive are unable to edit the copy in a way the client agrees with, Traffic will alert the VP of Corporate Sponsorship, Legal Counsel, VP of Programming, and Editor-in-Chief. Traffic will complete this [Google Form](#) and attach the full email chain as context for review. Legal Counsel, the VP of Programming, and Editor-in-Chief will review the copy and accept or deny it. The VP of Programming will email the aforementioned group with reasoning for acceptance or denial. Traffic will document reasoning and steps taken for future reference.

### **IX. FCC Enforcement of the Underwriting Rules/Penalties for Noncompliance**

The FCC does not monitor the airwaves seeking violations of its underwriting rules; its enforcement process is driven by complaints filed by station listeners, disgruntled former employees, and/or competitors in the market. More often than not, complainants have been listeners concerned about what they perceive as “commercialization” of their local NCE station.

An FCC enforcement proceeding can include a variety of outcomes, including dismissal of the complaint, a fine issued against the licensee, or a voluntary consent decree in which the FCC and the licensee enter into an agreement, called a consent decree, that may include a payment to the U.S. Treasury and steps to ensure future compliance. Most proceedings are settled through consent decrees, with settlement amounts historically ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000. Of those cases that have resulted in the issuance of a forfeiture, penalties have ranged from \$2,000 to \$20,000. The case in which the Commission imposed the highest penalty amount involved the broadcast of ten improper underwriting announcements that were repeated approximately 3,149 times over the course of one year. The Commission subsequently reduced the \$20,000 proposed forfeiture to \$9,000 based on the licensee’s “good overall compliance record.”

*Revised January 2026*