

## PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS IN PRACTICE

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### INTRODUCTION (WORK PLACE SCENARIOS)

#### **Situation 1**

Your firm is one of several under consideration by a manufacturer planning to introduce a new service. The company anticipates severe opposition from certain groups and politicians. You are given confidential information as to the service and the company's plans so you can develop a proposal. The company awards the contract to a competing firm. Can you disclose the information to the manufacturer's opposition?

#### **Answer**

You are obligated by the PRSA code Article 13 to safeguard the confidences and privacy rights of present, former, and prospective clients or employers.

#### **Situation 2**

Your firm publishes a newsletter directed to brokerage houses. A corporate executive – one of your clients – asks you to help make the company better known among stockbrokers. You publish a highly optimistic forecast of the company's business prospects, leaving out some information about problems. You also fail to indicate your firm's relationship with the company. Were you under any obligation to disclose this relationship? Should you print a correction that includes all the information you have about the company?

#### **Answer**

According to Article 5 of the code, you must immediately print a correction in your newsletter, giving all the facts and clarifying your relationship with the company. Not only is your incomplete and optimistic report in violation of federal security regulations but you are also in



violation of several articles of the code: Articles 1,3,4,5,7, and 8. Your publication clearly was not in the public interest, did not deal fairly with the public, and did not adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth. The code forbids disseminating false or misleading information and representing an undisclosed interest while professing to be independent or unbiased. The code also requires that you be prepared to identify clients or employers on whose behalf communication is made.

### **Situation 3**

Your employer directs you to set up a supposedly independent citizens' organization to demonstrate support for a new real estate development that requires planning commission approval. The new organization will be financed secretly by your company and a group of contractors who will participate in building the homes. Is there anything wrong with establishing this organization?

#### **Answer**

You may not set up an organization that purports to serve an independent cause but actually carries out a private or unannounced interest of a PRSA member, client, or employer (Article 8).

### **Situation 4**

A pharmaceutical company hires your firm to set up a press conference for an independent British scientist who has tested one of your client's new products and written a favorable research article. You are also to arrange speaking engagements for the visiting scientist. After your successful press conference, which gains wide media coverage, you learn that the scientist is actually an employee of the pharmaceutical company's research subsidiary. What actions should you take?

#### **Answer**

You must sever relations with this client as soon as possible (Article 17) and cancel all speaking engagements you arranged for the scientist (Article 5). To continue the relationship and programme would violate Articles I, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8: to act in the public interest, exemplify high standards of honesty and integrity, deal fairly with the public, adhere to the highest standards



of accuracy and truth, not corrupt the integrity of communication channels, and not use an individual purported to be independent to serve an undisclosed interest.

### Situation 5

Your employer asks you to give a series of talks in communities served by your company. You are to discuss the new plant being built and its operations. You visit the plant before giving the speech prepared by your immediate supervisor. During the tour you learn that several claims in the speech are not true. Can you give the speech as originally written?

#### Answer

Knowingly presenting false or misleading information to the public is a clear violation of Articles I, 2, and 5. If your employer insists that you give the speech as written, then your only choice is to resign (Article 17).

### Situation 6

A client asks you to help arrange a public offering of stock. You decline because you have no experience in corporate finance or financial relations. Instead, you refer the client to your friend, a fellow PRSA member, who specializes in financial relations. The practitioner sends you a check for \$500 in appreciation of the referral. Can you accept the money?

#### Answer

You may keep the payment from your appreciative friend only if your client knows about the payment and approves (Articles II and 12).

(Adapted from article written by the late Donald B. McCammond APR while he served as chairman of PRSA's Board of Ethics and Professional Standards on "Ethics: **The Right Choice**". *Public Relations Journal* 43, No. 2 (February 1987): 8-10. Used with permission of *Public Relations Journal*.)

### Communication professional skill areas strategic communication planning

- The development of a strategic communications plan which contributes to achieving company objectives;
- The influencing and management of perceptions using professional communication approaches and tools;



- Assessing communications context: including societal trends and competitor activities;
- Setting specific communication objectives;
- Analysing target audiences, developing key messages and determining effective message delivery “channels”; and
- Planning message and channel coordination.

### **Public Affairs**

- The use of communication with external decision makers to increase their understanding and contribute to decision-making on public issues of direct relevance to the business;
- Identifying and contributing to relevant government policy. Proactively managing industry relations developments;
- Proactively managing NGO relations;
- Contributing to regulatory policy making and legislation;
- Partnership with local communities;
- Drafting and decision-making; and
- Partnering with the academics.

### **Management of Media Relations**

Included under media relations management are the following:

- Proactive communication and relationship building with media to increase their understanding inform their thinking and persuade them to “support” the organization, operating company and individual brand objectives in stories of current or potential media interest;
- Determining which media and journalists are good;
- Packaging and pitching story angles relevant to achieving objectives;
- Effectively handling media inquiries;
- Designing story angles of interest to them;
- Analysing media coverage.



## **Issues Management**

- Identifying and managing issues of broad public interest that have the potential to harm or enhance the reputation of the organization, an operating company or an individual brand;
- Using communication to position our business to best advantage within the context of emerging public debates;
- Identifying and recognizing relevant issues which are global or potentially global;
- Analysing and prioritizing local issues;
- Working with identified issue owners to conduct scenario planning and develop positions and support materials;
- Building allies to support positions an ongoing management of issues.

## **Crisis Communication Preparedness and Management**

Under this, we have the following activities:

- The preparation required to prevent issues or incidents from escalating into crises;
- The management of communication during crises to minimize negative impacts on the business and protect the organization, operating company or individual brand reputation;
- Management of a communication risk audit and vulnerability;
- Establishment of dedicated communication channels and assessment;
- Maintenance of contact information;
- Setting up of policies and procedures for communication;
- Testing of crisis communication preparedness; and
- Management of communications during a crisis.

## **Internal Communication**

This involves:

- The use of communication within operating companies and across the organization to increase understanding of company values;
- The improvement of performance through increased employee understanding and



- commitment;
- The development of communication plans specific to employees;
- The use of communication techniques that ensure feedback; and
- The delivery of effective cross-cultural communications.

### **Strategic Integration of Communications**

- Giving increased recognition to and continuing development of communications as a competitive business tool and the incorporation of communications in the setting and the delivery of business strategy and objectives;
- Forecasting communications resources and expertise required to support the business;
- Attracting, developing and maintaining required resources and expertise;
- Integrating communication disciplines to enhance effectiveness and maximizing business impact;
- Identifying and managing required resources – both internal resources and consultants;
- Evaluating costs and benefits, defining milestones and executing strategies to achieve them;
- Measuring results and revising the plan as necessary;
- Capturing and sharing, learning on communications;
- Ensuring that internal communication is a shared management responsibility;
- Managing new communications technologies;
- Providing input into business strategy;
- Networking; and
- Assessing the corporate communication consequences of brand management.

