

Public Relations Ethics

CMN 413

When making decisions, public relations professionals need to consider:

- 1) The public interest
- 2) Their employer's interests
- 3) Their professional code of ethics
- 4) Their personal values

- Public relations professionals must be ethical while communicating with their clients, and also with the public.
- Contrary to wide spread belief, PR is not a business to lie on behalf of clients.

- Public relations as an industry still suffers from a bad reputation today of manipulating the public mind.
- There's a Yiddish proverb that states: 'A half-truth is a whole lie.'
- There is little doubt that the public's image of public relations is less than spotless

PR is a business of imagebuilding for employers and clients.

The manner in which this is done has an impact on the image of PR itself as a field.

- Roots of modern public relations trace back to early 20th century. A nephew of Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays was convinced that a ‘public relations counsellor’ (a term he coined) should use social science approaches to manipulate the masses into thinking the way they ought to think, and the way they ought to think is the way the social elite thinks.

In 1928, Edward Bernays wrote in his book *Propaganda*:

‘The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society... Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism... constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.’

Do you agree with Bernays' argument?

Is PR conscious and intelligent manipulation of the masses, which constitutes the true ruling power like an invisible government?

In the 1930s, public relations pioneer Carl Byoir is reputed to have invented the bogus grassroots campaign by setting up dummy organizations such as the National Consumers' Tax Organization to lobby against special taxes on chain stores, a tactic which was carried out at the behest of his client, grocery giant A & P

Another example to the manipulation of the public is Hill and Knowlton's campaign to stimulate American public support for the first war against Iraq, for which the Kuwait government reputedly paid them US\$10 million. A major part of their strategy involved the creation and distribution of a video news release featuring a young Kuwaiti woman's testimony before a congressional committee.

- A woman identified as Nayirah said that the Iraqi army dumped babies from incubators in Kuwait hospitals.
- Later, it was found out that Nayirah was actually the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador, coached for her performance by her public relations handler and without any first-hand knowledge that any such atrocities had ever taken place.

But, by the time this was discovered, the damage was already done: opinions had been formed based on her testimony and action had been taken.

As social trends of the past quarter-century have resulted in the need for more strategic communication between organizations and their publics, there has been an accompanying focus on the ethical behaviour of those organizations.

Public relations functions as the interface between the organization and its publics, and arguably the keeper of the organizational reputation. PR has an even more important role as the social conscience of the organization.

Ethical decision making involves making rational choices between what is good and bad, between what is morally justifiable action and what is not. Ethical decisions should be based on values, which are considered guiding principles in people's lives and enduring notions of goodness and badness that guide behavior in a variety of contexts.

Some PR practitioners: “not let their personal ethical beliefs” influence their work but instead rely on attorneys, while some others are ethically aware and view their role as a strategic adviser. These individuals believe professional communicators have obligations beyond profitability, meaning their responsibility to a client or employer must be balanced with their responsibility to the public.

The 'Truth' in Public Relations

- The public are sceptical of the truth of what is communicated to them. Codes of ethics of professional associations of public relations practitioners provide chapter and verse on the need for the truth.
- Telling the truth, although often deemed to be a casualty in the search for new and better ways to disseminate messages and persuade publics, is an important aspect of ethical public relations.
- Defining what the 'truth' *is* however, as always also in public relations, a challenge.

Given that one of the objectives of PR business is often to persuade publics to change their behaviour, one needs to be very careful of achieving what could be considered an ethical outcome through unethical means. Defining the truth is clearly the challenge.

One can mislead without lying. The issue of misleading is an especially important one in public relations.

If failing to disclose information, regardless of the motivation, leads the public to a wrong conclusion, then it is as ethically questionable as telling an outright lie.

The Pillars of PR Ethics

- Veracity (to tell the truth)
- Non-maleficence (to do no harm)
- Beneficence (to do good)
- Confidentiality (to respect privacy)
- Fairness (to be fair and socially responsible)

- PR professionals ought to avoid doing harm to others as far as is possible; certainly no intentional harm should be done and foreseeable harm should be avoided.
- Sometimes, the harm may be both unintended and unforeseen. In that case, PR professionals' actions cannot be deemed to be unethical – just unfortunate and perhaps regrettable.

Ethical PR seeks out opportunities to do good. For example, when developing a community relations programme, seeking to sponsor the charitable event that could actually do the most good for the public rather than the one that does little material good but improves one's image would be construed to be the most ethical approach.

- *Respecting the privacy of others* and keeping confidential information that is of a confidential nature is clearly germane to ethical decision-making in any public communication function.

Loyalty to whom?

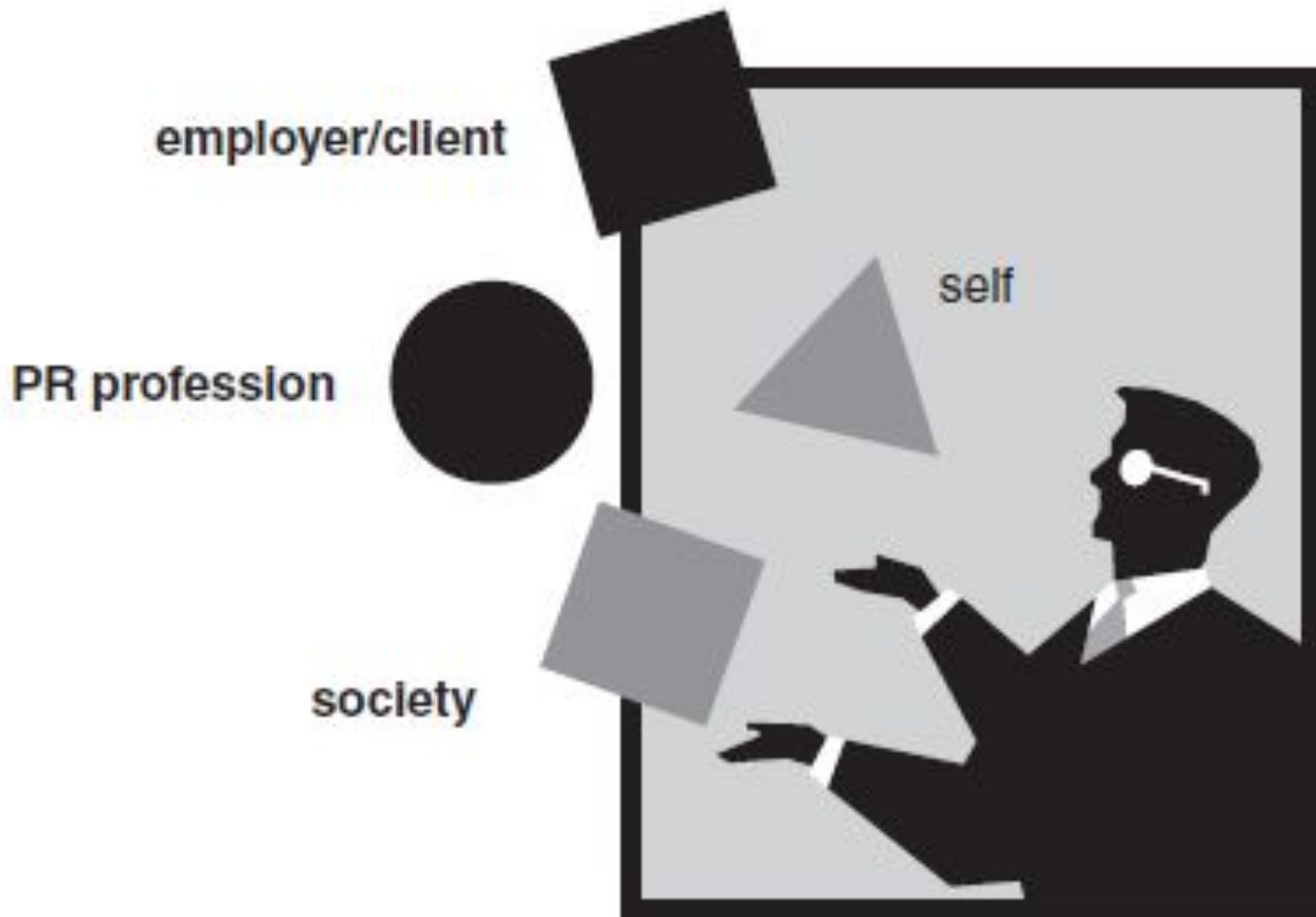
- Loyalty may be defined as ‘a constituent to whom the public relations practitioner owes a duty and who, in return, places a trust in the practitioner.’
- One of the first duties that may come to mind is duty to one’s employer or client. A PR professional takes on a particular position with a contract, either written or implied. S/he does a particular job and the employer or client provides her/him with monetary compensation.

- However, to what extent is it necessary for a PR professional to be loyal under these circumstances? If the employer says do something, does s/he do it? Blindly? Without consideration of consequences to others or oneself? What happens when the employer or client expects her/him to do something that s/he knows will erode the trust of others?

- Arguably even more important ethically than one's duty to one's employer or client is one's duty to society. This is the key to social responsibility.
- Another loyalty that one might consider is one's duty to one's profession. Public relations as a professional discipline has a public image that is not spotless in the area of ethics.

Finally, there is one's duty to oneself. Indeed, some people believe that one of the most common, if not the most common ethical dilemma that will face all PR practitioners at some point in their career is to have to make a choice between what the employer or client is asking of them and what they as individuals, and based on their own personal value systems, know to be right.

Juggling your loyalties



Codes of ethics in public relations

The current state of ethics in public relations practice depends heavily on codes of ethics held by the major professional associations. Membership in these groups is voluntary, meaning that one is not required to belong to such an association in order to practice public relations. Members agree to abide by a code of ethics that is written for the entire group. Some codes of ethics are written in terms that forbid a list of certain activities; other codes of ethics espouse a set of ethical principles which should be followed.

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)

- Wide range expertise: business, industry, counseling, the military, government agencies, education, health and NGOs.
- Based in New York, 30.000 members, 116 branches.
- Developmental training programs, seminars, conferences and courses.
- Publication: *Strategies & Tactics*

PRSA Code of Ethics

‘The PRSA is committed to ethical practices. The value of member reputation depends upon the ethical conduct of everyone affiliated with the Public Relations Society of America. Each of us sets an example for each other – as well as other professionals – by our pursuit of excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct.’ – extract from their website

PRSA's Code of Ethics

Six core values

- *ADVOCACY: serving public interest*
- *HONESTY: high standard of accuracy*
- *EXPERTISE: advanced professional development*
- *INDEPENDENCE: accountability as a result of individual actions*
- *LOYALTY: being faithful to employer while serving to public.*
- *FAIRNESS: respecting opinion and free expressions.*

PRSA Codes: Free Flow of Information

- Preserve the integrity of the process of communication.
- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the practitioner is responsible.
- Preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving or receiving gifts by ensuring that gifts are nominal, legal, and infrequent.

Examples of Improper Conduct :

- A member representing a ski manufacturer gives a pair of expensive racing skis to a sports magazine columnist, to influence the columnist to write favorable articles about the product.
- A member entertains a government official beyond legal limits and/or in violation of government reporting requirements.

Competition

- Follow ethical hiring practices designed to respect free and open competition without deliberately undermining a competitor.
- Preserve intellectual property rights in the marketplace.

Example of Improper Conduct :

- A member spreads malicious and unfounded rumors about a competitor in order to alienate the competitor's clients and employees in a ploy to recruit people and business.

Disclosure of Information

- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the member is responsible.
- Investigate the truthfulness and accuracy of information released on behalf of those represented.
- Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.
- Disclose financial interest (such as stock ownership) in a client's organization.
- Avoid deceptive practices.

Examples of Improper Conduct :

- Lying by omission: A practitioner for a corporation knowingly fails to release financial information, giving a misleading impression of the corporation's performance.
- A member discovers inaccurate information disseminated via a website or media kit and does not correct the information.
- A member deceives the public by employing people to pose as volunteers to speak at public hearings and participate in "grass roots" campaigns.

Safeguarding Confidences

- Safeguard the confidences and privacy rights of present, former, and prospective clients and employees.
- Protect privileged, confidential, or insider information gained from a client or organization.
- Immediately advise an appropriate authority if a member discovers that confidential information is being divulged by an employee of a client company or organization.

Examples of Improper Conduct :

- A member changes jobs, takes confidential information, and uses that information in the new position to the detriment of the former employer.
- A member intentionally leaks proprietary information to the detriment of some other party.

Conflicts of Interest

Do not serve two competing firms at the same time

- Act in the best interests of the client or employer, even subordinating the member's personal interests.
- Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.
- Disclose promptly any existing or potential conflict of interest to affected clients or organizations.
- Encourage clients and customers to determine if a conflict exists after notifying all affected parties.

Enhancing the Profession

- Acknowledge that there is an obligation to protect and enhance the profession.
- Keep informed and educated about practices in the profession to ensure ethical conduct.
- Actively pursue personal professional development.
- Decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code.
- Accurately define what public relations activities can accomplish.
- Counsel subordinates in proper ethical decision making.
- Require that subordinates adhere to the ethical requirements of the Code.
- Report practices that fail to comply with the Code, whether committed by PRSA members or not, to the appropriate authority.

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Code of Ethics

IPRA Code of Ethics is based on the following premises:

- Respect for the the Charter of the United Nations which determines “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, and in the dignity and worth of the human person”;

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Code of Ethics

- Respect for the 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and especially recalling Article 19;

“Everyone has the **right** to freedom of opinion and expression; this **right** includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

- Public relations, by fostering the free flow of information, contributes to the interests of all stakeholders;
- The conduct of public relations and public affairs provides essential democratic representation to public authorities;
- Public relations practitioners through their wide-reaching communication skills possess a means of influence that should be restrained by the observance of a code of professional and ethical conduct;

- Channels of communication such as the Internet and other digital media, are channels where erroneous or misleading information may be widely disseminated and remain unchallenged, and therefore demand special attention from public relations practitioners to maintain trust and credibility;

- The Internet and other digital media demand special care with respect to the personal privacy of individuals, clients, employers and colleagues.

IPRA Code of Ethics

In the conduct of public relations practitioners shall:

- 1. Observance

Observe the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

- 2. Integrity

Act with honesty and integrity at all times so as to secure and retain the confidence of those with whom the practitioner comes into contact;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 3. Dialogue

Seek to establish the moral, cultural and intellectual conditions for dialogue, and recognise the rights of all parties involved to state their case and express their views;

- 4. Transparency

Be open and transparent in declaring their name, organisation and the interest they represent;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 5. Conflict

Avoid any professional conflicts of interest and to disclose such conflicts to affected parties when they occur;

- 6. Confidentiality

Honour confidential information provided to them;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 7. Accuracy

Take all reasonable steps to ensure the truth and accuracy of all information provided;

- 8. Falsehood

Make every effort to not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information, exercise proper care to avoid doing so unintentionally and correct any such act promptly;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 9. Deception

Not obtain information by deceptive or dishonest means;

- 10. Disclosure

Not create or use any organisation to serve an announced cause but which actually serves an undisclosed interest;

- 11. Profit

Not sell for profit to third parties copies of documents obtained from public authorities;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 12. Remuneration

Whilst providing professional services, not accept any form of payment in connection with those services from anyone other than the principal;

- 13. Inducement

Neither directly nor indirectly offer nor give any financial or other inducement to public representatives or the media, or other stakeholders;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 14. Influence

Neither propose nor undertake any action which would constitute an improper influence on public representatives, the media, or other stakeholders;

- 15. Competitors

Not intentionally injure the professional reputation of another practitioner;

IPRA Code of Ethics

- 16. Poaching

Not seek to secure another practitioner's client by deceptive means;

- 17. Employment

When employing personnel from public authorities or competitors take care to follow the rules and confidentiality requirements of those organisations;

- 18. Colleagues

Observe this Code with respect to fellow IPRA members and public relations practitioners worldwide.