

ETHICAL ISSUES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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In South Africa formal codes have been adopted or proposed by various communication-oriented professions, including that of public relations. For some people, formal codes are the hallmark of a true profession. For others, codes are worthless exercises in vagueness, irrelevance and slick opinion management (Johannesen 1990: 169).

Public relations or communication management practitioners are in the business of persuasion. They come to the marketplace with a bias, and there is nothing wrong with that. Although we expect public relations personnel to adhere to the threshold requirements of truth - that they not knowingly disseminate inaccurate information - they have no ethical mandate to provide balance in their public proclamations.

Persuasion is a legitimate function of mass communication and in such circumstances the audience expects that the dissemination of information will be selective. However the moral imperative to fully disclose the relevant information is more acute when the health or safety of the public is at risk (Day 1991: 75).

Every organisation is unique and its communication will depend on who the audience is, what the message is, as well as the manner and the medium of communication.

The internal communication within a company is the process through which information is shared, commitment is built and change is managed. Internal communication can include oral communication, group or one-on-one interaction, or communication by means of visual and electronic media. In serving the interest of not only the

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internal members, but also the external public, practitioners dedicate themselves to the goals of better communication, understanding and co-operation among individuals, groups and institutions of society (Skinner, Von Essen & Mersham 2001: 14).

Today public relations encompass not only the transmission of information to the public but also the advocacy of corporate positions on public issues (Johannesen 1990: 164). Once a company behaves irresponsibly, it takes more than words to regain trust. Respect for the truth and the public's right to information are the fundamental principles that inform the way in which public relations practitioners conduct their business.

Most public relations dilemmas involve moral duties to three publics:

- the company;
- the media; and
- society at large.

Public relations practitioners owe their first allegiance to their client or the organisations for which they work. They are both an advocate and a source of information. The public relations practitioner becomes the initial gatekeeper who decides how much of the truth should be released and under what circumstances. From an ethical standpoint there is nothing inherently wrong with being an advocate. Outright lying would be wrong, but no one expects an advocate to release information that would be detrimental to a client's interest. Public relations practitioners are expected to foster a positive image for their clients or companies. They should provide insights into building, sustaining and defending this unique and inimitable asset – the company's good name. The question is how to accomplish this goal while continuing to serve the public interest. One means of serving the interest of society is through release of information to the media (Day 1991: 89).

With the rise of consumer-orientated information in the local media, there has been a noticeable increase in public relations-supplied material. The practice of running advertisements masquerading as news raises complex ethical issues. At first glance it would appear that there is no real ethical problem with the actions of public relations practitioners. After all, they are committed to doing their best for their clients, and there is nothing inherently unethical in supplying the media with material about one of their client's products (Day 1991: 89). One should however examine the methods employed by the

agency. Is it deceptive to supply advertising material that they know might be confused by the readers with a factual news report? On the other hand it could be argued that the public relations agency's role as advocate on behalf of the client allows it to use any reasonable and legal approach to get its message across. From the standpoint of the media organisations that use public relations-supplied stories, one might hold them ethically responsible for the use of such material. After all, they are the ones that ultimately decide to disseminate "canned" information to the public. American TV news has already evolved from a hard-news format to one devoted increasingly to soft news and features and the ethical guidelines governing the use of public relations material information has become blurred (Day 1991: 90).

Public relations practitioners are expected to serve the best interest of their companies and not to release information detrimental to the corporate welfare. They are expected to be loyal and trustworthy. This situation sometimes creates an atmosphere of distrust between journalists, who are seeking to inform the public, and public relations personnel, who feel obliged to maintain the confidentiality of corporate proprietary information. It should be pointed out that trustworthiness in the marketplace is not always based on genuine affection but is more often a reflection of a feeling of obligation. Thus such trustworthiness is transitory and may lose its moral force when the circumstances under which it was formed is altered. Trustworthiness, like patience, does have its limits, but the use of confidential information from a now-terminated relationship poses some interesting moral dilemmas (Day 1991: 131).

As far as the ethical dilemma of trustworthiness goes, public relations practitioners are in a particularly vulnerable position, because they are the organisation's communications link to the media and the public. Practitioners should conduct their professional life in accordance with the public interest, but determining what constitutes the public interest is sometimes a difficult exercise. For the purposes of resolving such ethical dilemmas one should weigh the competing trustworthiness and truthfulness before rendering judgement (Day 1991: 150).

Truthfulness and honesty mean refraining from lying, cheating, stealing, or deception. Although most people agree with the importance of truthfulness and honesty in relationships, practising being truthful and honest is a practical challenge. Public relations practitioners sometimes experience an inner conflict involving the

application of general societal values. As in the recent case of Pick 'n Pay and the "poisoned" food, a public relations executive may have to decide between the value of revealing the truth to the public about his company's environmental blunder and the value of trustworthiness to the company. At times there is a conflict between general societal values and professional or occupational values (cf. Day 1991: 14).

There are at least three reasons why civilised society should embrace the commitment to truth as a fundamental principle:

- a lack of integrity in human communication undermines the autonomy of the individual. As rational beings we depend on truthful and accurate information to make informed judgements about a whole host of activities;
- it demonstrates a respect for persons as an end rather than as a tool to be manipulated. Deception usually places self-interest over the interests of others; and
- the belief in the truthfulness of communication is what builds trust between individuals and between individuals and society's institutions. Deception constitutes a breach of faith and makes it less likely that relationships based on trust and credibility will succeed in the future (Day 1991: 70 - 72).

In working one's way through the ethical thicket involving truthful communication, one should return to moral reasoning. Deontologists, represented by the views of philosophers such as Kant, hold that something other than consequences should determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Kant maintains that the test of a moral principle is whether it should be universalised to apply to every situation. Therefore, the principle of truth is an absolute that should be applied under all circumstances, regardless of the consequences (Day 1991: 75). This approach would clearly rule out all deception by public relations practitioners.

Teleologists (represented by the utilitarians), provide a different perspective on the question of truth and deception. Teleologists are sometimes referred to as consequentialists, because they gauge the consequences of an act as means of making an ethical judgement. Because utilitarians believe in promoting the greater good for the greatest number, a public relations practitioner following this approach would weigh the relative harm or good done to various individuals or groups as a result of his deceptive behaviour (Day 1991: 76).

It is the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who reminds us that credibility (*ethos*) is derived from a person's expertness, trustworthiness, and goodwill.

- *Expertness* is conveyed when the practitioner's material and the treatment thereof shows that he knows the subject well and can treat it accurately and appropriately;
- *Trustworthiness* is attributed to a practitioner when people think the person knows what he is talking about and shares and respect the same values; and
- *Goodwill* is a quality attributed to a person. One can say that goodwill is conveyed when there is a feeling of friendship between the practitioner and the client (cf. De Wet 1991: 26ff).

Aristotle's "golden mean" (the desirable middle ground between any two extremes) is an example of virtue ethics and is sometimes valuable in applying when a public relations practitioner discovers a conflict of interest in servicing two clients with opposing agendas, because it provides a reasonable accommodation between unrealistic moral purity and the callous disregard of the public's right to know about the existence of the conflict. Aristotle's golden mean is also a valuable approach in providing a sense of balance and proportion in cases involving the extent of truth to reveal in any given situation, or the kind and scope of material to be used in a press release. There are occasions when public relations executives will apply this approach in an attempt to maintain that delicate balance between social responsibility and corporate self-interest (cf. Day 1991: 77, 79, 163).

Nothing is more important to successful corporate ethical policy, written or unwritten, than emphatic and open endorsement by top-level management. The "tone" of any company's response to its challenges - journalistic, business and ethical - is set at the top and transmitted down. The first element of corporate ethical policy must be guidance by management (Fink 1988: 91).

Public relations is a critical communication function for most modern organisations. A single person or a number of employees within the organisation, or an external public relations consultant, may perform this important function (Johannesen 1990: 162). A public relations practitioner needs a diverse range of skills and experience, including not only organisational, administrative and communication skills, but also an enquiring mind, tenacity and adaptability. To further ensure

professionalism, the qualities of moral courage and integrity are also vital.

Personal integrity and ethics is part of professionalism. Practitioners are judged by the way that they act: they give expert advice; they do not bribe or corrupt (Skinner, Von Essen & Mersham 2001: 13); they publish articles that strive for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts - on merit and not because they entertain journalists.

Ethics in public relations apply particularly to the way practitioners behave, but it should also convey the company's mission statement and values. Thus a public relations practitioner has a social responsibility along with the applied ethics of the company. The least that public relations can do in case of a crisis is to be a channel for clear communication. In some cases personal ethics and business ethics do not mesh and for this reason various communication-oriented professional associations, such as *The Institute for Public Relations & Communication Management* (PRISA), have adopted formal codes of ethics. Members are bound by a professional code of ethics.

PRISA bases its professional principles on the fundamental value and dignity of the individual, holding that the free exercise of human rights, freedom of speech and assembly of the media is essential to the practice of good public relations (Skinner, Von Essen & Mersham 2001: 13).

Registered individuals of PRISA pledge:

- To conduct themselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness and responsibility to the public and towards colleagues;
- To improve their individual competence and advance their knowledge and proficiency of the profession through continuing education and research; and
- To adhere to the articles of the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations.

The Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations includes guidelines on professional conduct towards clients and employers; colleagues; the business environment; channels of communication; the State and towards PRISA (Skinner, Von Essen & Mersham 2001: 13 - 15).

The fact remains that basic values that often need interpretation, can sometimes come into conflict, and therefore ethical public relations

practices require conscientious decision-making in all contexts. An ethical public relations practitioner should accept a positive duty to observe the highest standards in business and public relations practice by promoting the benefits of good public relations practice in all dealings, and by improving the general understanding of what it means to be a professional public relations practitioner.

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