

The question of ethics



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In the wake of recent business and political scandals such as Martha Stewart, Enron, and the Canadian government's advertising scandal, to name a few, the idea of ethical communications practice bears even more importance. As communicators, it is necessary that we advocate principled, honest and sincere conduct in political, business and personal relationships. In fact, many schools offering courses in public relations tell their students that public relations practitioners are considered 'the conscience' of the organizations for which they work.

This being said, what is the actual definition of ethics? Simply stated, ethics deals with issues of right and wrong. In considering ethics, we ask ourselves if a course of action is moral or immoral, fair or unfair, honest or dishonest.

But how do we relate ethical conduct to public relations? Public relations practitioners have the obligation to be truthful and consider the public good when they are addressing audiences.

In order to make sound ethical decisions in public relations, we need to weigh a potential course of action against a set of standards and guidelines. For many, this will be a personal decision based on the values and morals that have been ingrained through life experience. As such, one person's ethical decision-making process may differ slightly from that of another person. It is obvious that, when it comes to ethical issues, there are some grey areas.

So how do we deal with these shades of grey? The answers are really quite simple:

When establishing the goals and objectives of your communications efforts, make sure that they are ethically sound. To do this, it is necessary to clearly define the outcomes you want to achieve (i.e. pay tribute, educate, or report information).

Fully analyze your audience. This will allow you to tailor your communications, organize your key messages, and communicate them in a clear and concise manner.

Knowledge of all that there is to know about your topic is also important at this stage of the game. It is a good idea to research all sides of the issue and ensure the accuracy of the information being presented. The audience will view you as a credible source of information and could be making business or personal decisions based on your presentation. From a legal standpoint, one could say that we owe a duty of care and due diligence to our audiences when we write and present our material.

Honesty is the best policy. Your audiences assume that the communications you are sending can be trusted. Once the bond of trust is broken, it cannot be regained. It is important to note that dishonesty does not always involve outright lies. There are more subtle forms such as juggling statistics, quoting out of context, misrepresenting sources, and stating preliminary findings as fact.

It is not enough just to be aware of these points on ethics. We must put them into practice and not just offer them lip service. As public relations practitioners, our credibility with clients is based on the relationship of mutual understanding and trust. I firmly believe that ethics should be considered as important to constructing communications methods and messages as the strategic objectives are.

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