



Teaching Public Relations

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Ethics Questionnaire Facilitates Discussion

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Ethics: Mine...Yours...Ours...Theirs. One of the tasks facing anyone who endeavors to help students learn about ethics in public relations is to get across the idea that achieving consensus on a universal standard of behavior is not a simple task. Why? Because each of us has different perceptions about what we would do when confronted with an ethical code.

Indeed, learning to appreciate that others approach ethical situations differently from the way we do is crucial to the discussion of ethics in the public relations classroom.

The selected bibliography at the end of this article includes several items of interest to the teacher planning a unit on ethics. In particular, Hunt (1982), Kopenhaver (1984), Martinson (1991), Masel Walters (1984), McElreath (1984), Pratt and McLaughlin (1988), Ryan and Martinson (1985), and Schwarzlose (1978) address the issue of challenging students to consider how their interpretations of ethics may differ from those of others, especially professionals with experience in the field of public relations.

In preparation for a session on ethics attended by fifty public relations professionals and two hundred students at Rutgers University as part of the annual "PR-EXPO" career day sponsored by the campus chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America, a questionnaire with seven ethics situations modeled on real news stories was mailed to fifty professionals and administered to two-hundred students in their public relations courses. At the session attended by those same respondents, the seven ethics situations were debated in a "town meeting" format. To provide a database for the discussion, the two-hundred fifty participants were provided with a summary report that indicated the responses of the students and the professionals. Both documents are reproduced at the end of this article.

The same questionnaire has been used subsequently for an ethics workshop at a regional PRSSA conference hosted by the Rutgers chapter, as well as in the Principles of Public Relations classroom to introduce the module on ethics. In some situations, the survey is taken by mail a few weeks in advance of the event, and the results are tabulated for distribution to the audience. In the classroom, the information may be gathered one class session in advance, or at the beginning of the ethics module.

The questionnaire serves the following purposes:

- a database of information is absorbed by participants in advance;
- participants commit themselves to expressions of their views about how ethics are viewed by themselves and by others prior to the discussion;
- the variety and complexity of ethical situations are suggested;

- participants are invested in the discussion from the moment it begins, and
- ethics can be more readily viewed in shades of grey rather than black and white.

Instructions and printouts of results for the questionnaire should state that the survey represents the opinions of those attending the ethics discussion, not a scientific sample of any population. Similarly, the instructor or the discussion moderator may wish to point out that the seven cases are representative of typical public relations situations, but do not necessarily represent the entire spectrum of ethical dilemmas. Most of the situations involved ethical choices involving publics external to an organization. An entirely different set of situations could be developed for situations involving employees and other internal or specialized publics.

The materials in this article are not copyrighted, and the author encourages readers to modify the concepts and content to fit the needs of the classroom or professional workshops. It is important not to demand or expect that the results will be the same with each class or group. The purpose of the questionnaire is to spur discussion. Given the many levels and nuances of ethical approaches, that discussion can and should lead in any of several directions.

Teaching Ethics: A Selected Bibliography

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INSTRUCTIONS:

This is not a "scientific survey." It is a poll of students and public relations professionals to determine their perceptions of how PR people should and will act in certain situations.

Read the paragraph that describes each situation. Then read the choices of action that follow. Make two marks, as follows:

X Put an "X" to mark the choice that best reflects your personal feelings.

P Put a "P" to mark the choice that best reflects the action or opinion you would expect from most PR practitioners.

Note: You may put "X" and "P" on the same line.

You may add a different response under "Other."

1. Your PR agency prepares a "legislative kit" that includes model legislation for a law that

would make galvanized steel garbage cans mandatory in municipalities. You prepare this packet of materials for your client, a large steel company. Should the kit mention that the sponsor of the information is a steel company?

- There is no need to identify the client-sponsor.
 - The client-sponsor should be identified in the most obscure way possible.
 - The client-sponsor should be identified prominently.
 - Other:
-

2. Johnson & Johnson chairman James Burke criticized television stations that re-showed footage of a funeral in Chicago after the first Tylenol incident as part of the coverage of the second Tylenol incident. Should Burke have "taken on the media" at this critical point?

- He would have done better to wait until it was over.
 - He did correctly, and the criticism was useful.
 - He should have been even more aggressive to show that J & J was very upset about the "scare tactics."
 - Other:
-

3. You are the PR director for a food-processing company. The firm is about to roll out a new butter-substitute product. Your PR agency suggests that the food press be invited to a luncheon at the Four Seasons in New York that will feature the new product as used by the restaurant's chefs. The full-course meal will be accompanied by cocktails and wines. Is this an appropriate promotion?

- It constitutes "corrupting the channels of communication" because of the value of the free meal given to the journalists.
 - There is nothing wrong with the promotion, because it is a legitimate demonstration of the product that has new value for the journalists.
 - Other:
-

4. You are the PR director for a large defense contractor. The Congressman for the district where your main plant is located will tour the facility with your CEO in a few weeks. The CEO directs you to set up "a first-class dinner" at the country club where the CEO is a member so that the Congressman can be entertained after the tour. The husbands and wives of important subcontractors and large stockholders are to be invited, as is the Congressman's wife. It is proper for the company to put on such an affair?

- No
 - Yes
 - Other:
-

5. You are the publicist for a touring professional sports team that will play in a pre-season exhibition game with an area team. The owner of the team suggests that you send 20 complimentary tickets to each of the daily newspapers in the state, for distribution to their staff members. Would you comply with the request?

- o Yes
 - o No
 - o Other:
-

6. You are about to enter the conference room of a local business where you hope to land the account as the PR agency handling external relations. As you enter, who should exit but another PR agency's head, whom you know to be a big gambler who lost a previous account because he spent most of his time at the casinos and didn't finish work on time. Once inside, you are asked by the managers of the firm: "This guy we just finished talking to says he has a reputation as the most dependable agency in the state...can you make the same claim?" Do you take the opportunity to let the prospective client know that your competitor has a rather seedy reputation in PR?

- o You have to steer clear of the opportunity to let them know the truth about the other guy and just try to put yourself in the best light.
 - o You would be justified in saying: "Since you asked, I think I should tell you that he is a gambler who doesn't treat his clients well."
 - o You would be justified in saying: "I don't like to say bad things about my competition, but let me suggest that you talk to his earlier clients, because I understand they're not so satisfied."
 - o Other:
-

7. Your agency has just about convinced an automobile dealer to use your PR services. Then the owner says: "I know that incentives make my sales people work harder. If you get me on the front page of the New York Times auto section, I'll agree to give you a new car at cost, which could save you a couple of thousand dollars!" Is it a deal?

- o Yes
 - o No
 - o Other:
-

RESULTS:

SITUATION: A PR firm prepares a "legislative kit" with model legislation for making steel garbage cans mandatory. Should the fact that their client is a steel company be mentioned?

A slight majority of professionals said they would identify the sponsor prominently, and they thought other professionals would do the same. But a quarter of the professionals suggested that the client identification could be relatively obscure.

Over two-thirds of the students (69%) said they would identify the sponsor prominently, but they thought that only 41% of the professionals would do the same.

(NOTE: One out of eight professionals offered "grey area" responses, pointing out mitigating circumstances. Only two percent of the students chose "other" as a response. Across the survey (except for one item noted below), almost all of the students selected one of the answers suggested on the survey, while usually about 10 percent of the professionals opted to explain their position under "other.")

SITUATION: J & J Chairman, James Burke, criticized television stations for showing file footage of funerals that followed the first Tylenol episode when the second episode occurred.

Overwhelmingly, professionals and students thought that his criticism was warranted, and that others would agree.

SITUATION: A food company introduces a new product at a luncheon for the food press at the Four Seasons, with a full-course meal, cocktails and wines.

Three-quarters of the professionals found the promotion to be appropriate. Sixty percent of the students agreed, but they correctly predicted that more like 70% of the professionals would find the situation ethical. This was the one situation where nearly 20 percent of students marked "other" and raised questions about whether the full meal with drinks was really appropriate.

SITUATION: A defense contractor puts on a fancy dinner for the Congressman and his wife and subcontractors and their wives.

Only a slight majority of students thought this proper.

While 61% of the pros agreed, they predicted that 76% of the other pros would find the action acceptable.

SITUATION: The sports publicist is asked by the team owner to give an abundance of free tickets to the local media.

Students predicted correctly that nearly 80% of the pros would okay this, and 69% of the students agreed that it was okay. (Note: Some journalism ethics codes decry the practice of giving free tickets to other than working sports reporters.)

SITUATION: The principal of a PR firm is given an opportunity to criticize the competition during his own new-business pitch.

Here's the big one! Sixty percent of the professionals said "you have to steer clear of the opportunity to knock the opposition and just put yourself in the best light," as opposed to only a quarter of the students. Almost 70% of the students liked the idea of hinting that "you might check with the other guy's unsatisfied clients," whereas only a third of the pros thought that was the best option. Absolutely no pro said it was okay to level charges about the opposition, but 10% of the students thought the pros would do just that.

SITUATION: An auto dealer suggests an "incentive" scheme based on the PR firm's ability to get news on the front page.

Total agreement: 71% of students and pros said "no" and assumed other pros would agree.

This "unscientific survey" was taken in mid-March, 1986. Approximately 50 professionals and 200

Rutgers students were sampled. Most of the professionals are members of the New Jersey chapter of Public Relations Society of America. All students were enrolled in public relations courses, with about half intending to pursue careers in public relations.

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