



2.3

Ethics in the PR industry

As a PR professional, you have a responsibility to act in an ethical manner. Historically PR has been associated with unethical behaviour such as lying and spin doctoring, and in fact some critics suggest that there can be no ethics in PR, because the job consists of exaggerating or hiding the truth. The industry is trying hard to counteract that assertion, and now it is generally the PR professional who is placed to advise companies on ethical behaviour.

1 Ethical dilemmas faced in the PR industry

Key terms

Ethics – the principles of moral behaviour – ethics define what a business will and will not do.

Morality – principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour.

Ethics and **morality** define how PR professionals act. In a business that deals with reputations and public opinion, it is important that PR is conducted ethically and morally.

Professional ethics in PR

Ethics are fundamentally linked to PR. The work of professionals in this industry is regularly in the public eye. For PR campaigns to be effective, the public must trust PR practitioners. Therefore it is important for the industry that you develop a good reputation and act with social responsibility.

As an aspect of PR is to be a reputation manager of the organisation/brand they work for, the PR professional's job is to promote positive coverage of their clients and manage any negative views.

Every PR organisation has an ethical code by which its employees are expected to abide, but the main themes that face PR professionals can be summed up as follows.

Telling the truth

It is the PR professional's job to communicate with the media, public and stakeholders in such a way that the organisation is not promising to do more than they can or making unrealistic claims about their products. PR is about building relationships, which depends on trust. You cannot be a trusted source if you have been found to be lying.

Telling the truth can extend into the uncomfortable area of 'whistleblowing'. This is where in the course of work an employee discovers that their employer is participating in unethical or illegal activities. At this point you have to use your personal ethical code and that of the industry, and expose the company by telling the truth about their activities. Telling a lie, even for the good of the company, is not acceptable when weighed against the good of society. You can apply telling the truth also when looking at other work for inspiration. While it is acceptable to be inspired by the work of others, it is not acceptable to try to pass this work off as your own. Not only is it unethical to do so, but you will find yourself breaking intellectual property laws as outlined in Topic guide 2.1, page 9.

Legal responsibilities

You have a responsibility to act within the law when working in PR. This means:

- making legal and reasonable claims – the Advertising Standards Agency regulates promotional activity and has the power to issue fines and force agencies to issue corrections if a claim is found to be misleading
- being aware of libel and slander – be careful about what you say in a campaign about a competitor, as libel or slander could land you in the courts.

Transparency

This is currently a big issue, especially in the age of the internet and the 24-hour news cycle. Organisations must be open, honest and above reproach. There is

Key term

Two-way communication – a conversation. An organisation makes information available and welcomes feedback to it. The organisation listens to feedback and may adapt practices in response.

currently a trend towards social news rooms where an organisation posts all of its communication in one place, making it easy for stakeholders and the public to find. This not only opens your organisation to scrutiny but also allows stakeholders to interact with you on any issues with which they are not happy. The organisation can in turn act upon these concerns and so a valuable **two-way communication** has been opened up and relationships can be built from a base of transparency.

Transparency can additionally be applied to your communication with clients. It is possible that in the course of your work you may encounter a conflict of interest between clients you are working for and it is essential that you recognise this and deal with it in a professional manner. It is also important to be transparent in your use and choice of suppliers so that you can prove they were chosen for the quality of their work and that no preferential treatment has been given to them due to the use of payments or excessive hospitality. Not only would this be illegal under bribery laws outlined in Topic guide 2.1, page 11, but it would also bring you into conflict with the CIPR code of conduct.

This is also important when dealing with journalists. As a PR professional you should use your skills of communication to bring stories alive in the media; at no time should you be tempted to pay a journalist to run a story.

Who you work for

Being ethical does not rule out working for the tobacco, fast food, pornography or defence industries. These industries have the same right as others to communicate in a fair and ethical way. It is vital, however, not to do anything unethical on behalf of your client – you should not lie or suppress information.

You should make yourself aware of the value systems of the organisation for which you work and of its management. Not only is this professionally correct, but it also acts as an identification process for issues management. Failing to identify an ethical issue before it becomes a problem can result in loss of business and/or reputation for an organisation, whereas early identification of an ethical issue allows you to be proactive in defining and managing the issue. Additionally a PR professional is well placed within an organisation to make senior managers aware of external ethical standards.

Who you work with

When thinking about who you work for, you may also wish to consider who you work with. Do any of your personal relationships have a conflict of interest with the organisation for which you work? Or are you able to respect your clients' confidentiality among your circle of friends and acquaintances? Client confidentiality is key and as you build a network of communications with professionals in many different fields, you have to ensure you can keep these relationships on a professional level. Do not 'gossip' about clients or your organisation's behaviour, decisions and actions, no matter how innocent discussing these issues may seem.

Do you have any personal conflicts with any other employee of the organisation, or any of your organisation's key media or stakeholders? If so, you would need to consider if you can act in a professional manner or if these personal issues will

have an effect on your performance at work. Would you be able to carry out your duty honestly for your client or organisation without addressing these issues?

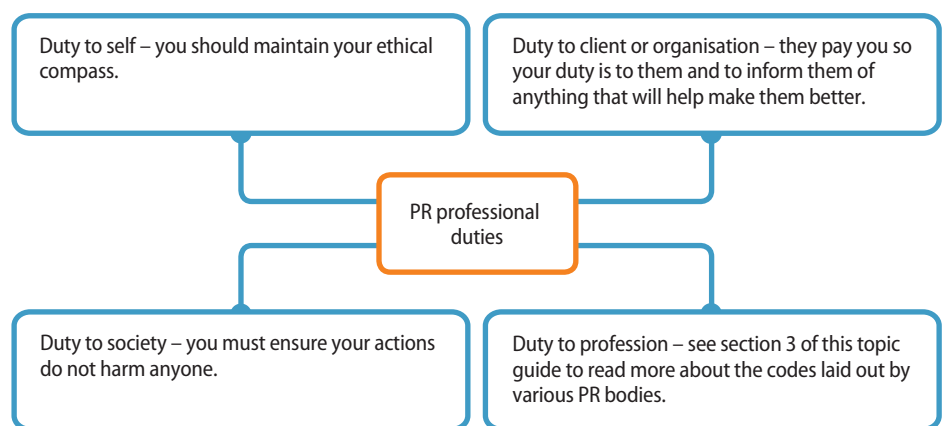
Personal values and principles

Your own personal values and principles should guide you through your PR career. Think about how you want to act and be perceived. Are you honest? Accurate? Responsive? Respectful?

As a professional you should keep yourself fully up to date using all of the information available, not just that from one source. Your own value system is important and you should work with colleagues and clients where you feel free to express it – however, it is important to do so in a professional manner. You should therefore undertake research on the best practices regarding the issues that you face. By following a moral code, you bring about trust; this enhances the building and maintenance of relationships, which is the essence of PR.

By reading the codes of conduct linked to in the 'Take it further' (page 6) and thinking about the legal aspects outlined in Topic Guide 2.1, section 5, you should be able to define your own professional ethical guide.

Figure 2.3.1: Key duties for your professional ethics



Activity

- 1 Reflect on your own code of ethics. What do you immediately feel is right or wrong?
- 2 Now list companies that you would be proud to work for, and those that you would not – reflect again on why that might be. What is it about those companies that makes you feel that way?

2 The importance of ethical behaviour

Strategic PR will open up a dialogue with the key stakeholders of an organisation and use this as a two-way communication between the organisation and the stakeholders. By making decisions based on give and take with the organisation's stakeholders, the long-term objectives of an organisation are more likely to be met. It is the undertaking of this two-way communication that may assist in the implementation of a corporate social responsibility programme, or an organisation's code of ethics.

It is important that an organisation is ethically responsible and shows a willingness to resolve any problematical issues with morally good intentions. This assures stakeholders that they are dealing with a trustworthy company. The organisation will then gain public approval and build a positive reputation.

The importance of a good reputation to an organisation cannot be overestimated. A good company reputation will help build custom and also assist with attracting and hiring good employees, as both customers and employees would like to be associated with the positive aspects of the company. A good example of this is the Virgin Group, a company which most people associate with a good reputation – be it for creativity, customer service or the ethos of its founder, Richard Branson. This has enabled the company to diversify into many different business areas and the careers page on their website states that the words 'jobs' and 'vacancies' are the most searched terms on www.virgin.com.

Ethical dilemmas and constraints

Ethics is not easily defined. You will need to use your moral instincts and sound judgement to address some of the issues you are likely to encounter in PR. For example:

- If you have a personal relationship with one of your suppliers, is it ethical to use them for a project on which you are working? Could you prove that their work was the best available and that you were not just acting out of personal favour?
- You know an angle for a news release that will guarantee coverage in the media, but to take this angle will mean distorting facts and exploiting the media. Is this something that you should do for the short-term exposure? Or should you think about your long-term relationship with the media?
- Your client has started working with a high-profile politician on a personal matter. It would make for great media coverage, but would not be in the public interest and would be a breach of the politician's right to confidentiality. What would you do?

3 An ethical code for PR

Professional or industry codes of conduct provide basic standards for PR professionals and every PR organisation has a code of ethics by which its members are expected to abide. The main objective of these codes is to form guidelines for professional behaviour. You should remember, however, that membership of these industry bodies is voluntary and you do not need to belong to an industry body in order to practise PR. This raises the issue of self-governance where those that do not need governance may seek it out while those that do may not.

In the PR industry, ethical codes vary widely. The PRSA offers practical guidance to agency practitioners and the CIPR's Code of Conduct is designed to make practitioners 'accountable to the public' (www.cipr.co.uk). This code is built on three principles – integrity, competence and confidentiality. Codes such as those of the IPRA (International Public Relations Association) focus on 18 tightly written principles including observance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, integrity, transparency, accuracy and not asserting undue influence.

As the PR industry grows and changes, the codes must change with it. In 2012 the PRCA made an addition to their codes about PR professionals working on the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia where editing it on behalf of clients showed a breach of interest from a duty to society and a duty to client. There have also been recent cases on the way promotional activity is undertaken by bloggers and on social networking sites.

Take it further

Visit the following websites to see the relevant codes of conduct/ethics:

- CIPR: www.cipr.co.uk/content/about-us/about-cipr/code-conduct
- PRCA: www.prca.org.uk/assets/files/AboutUs/Files/PRCA_Codes_of_conduct_and_Professional_charter.pdf
- PRSA: www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish
- IPRA: www.ipra.org/detail.asp?articleid=31.

Portfolio activity

3.1–3.3

In order to complete the assessment for this unit, you will need to demonstrate that you understand the purpose of PR, the nature of the current industry and the importance of ethics in the industry. To prepare for the final part of the assessment, address the questions below.

- 1 Analyse the ethical dilemmas PR professionals may face in the industry.
- 2 Assess the importance of ethical behaviour within PR.
- 3 Assess the purpose of having an ethical business code for PR.

Credits

Produced by Pearson on behalf of the Skills Funding Agency.

The publisher would like to thank the following for their kind permission to reproduce material.

Photographs: Picsfive/Shutterstock.com, Goodluz/Shutterstock.com.

Further reading

PRWeek and the PRCA's PR Census 2011

The Holmes Report, Consultancy Rate Card, 2012 EMEA

Books

Fitzpatrick, K. R. and Bronstein, C. (2006) *Ethics In Public Relations – Responsible Advocacy*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Parsons, P. J. (2008) *Ethics In Public Relations – A Guide to Best Practice*, London: Kogan Page.

About the author of Topic guides 2.1 to 2.3

Hannah Wright has worked in both public relations and teaching and training roles for the past 15 years. Her public relations experience spans in-house, freelance and consultancy roles working with brands as diverse as small local businesses to large multinationals. She has also been lucky enough to work in the exciting area of experiential marketing and large event management which she has a strong interest in.

She is a passionate believer in vocational education and her teaching roles encompass the teaching of business and marketing vocational courses at tertiary level.