

## **Professional Standards Advisory PS-8 (October 2008)**

### **DECEPTIVE ONLINE PRACTICES AND MISREPRESENTATION OF ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS**

*All PRSA members pledge adherence to the Society's Member Code of Ethics. As issues arise relating to the practice of public relations, the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) is charged with providing guidance on such issues within the framework of the Code provisions. The PRSA Board of Directors then announces these guidelines through this series of professional standards advisories. The PRSA Member Code of Ethics may be found online at [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org).*

**ISSUE:** Misrepresentation by organizations and individuals using blogs, viral marketing, and anonymous Internet postings with undisclosed sponsorships and/or deceptive or misleading identities or descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants. (Note: The term "Flog" has been coined to describe a "fake blog," where an organization or its representative creates an online forum that appears to be from a private citizen expressing personal opinion or experiences, when, in fact, it is being maintained for hire with an undisclosed agenda.)

**BACKGROUND:** A number of Web sites and deceptive social networking postings have surfaced on behalf of issues, candidates running for public office and products blindly sponsored by individuals, industries and organizations. PRSA members are reminded that open communication is essential for informed decision-making in a democratic society. The provision states that a member shall:

**RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE:** At least three Code provisions and three professional values relate to this issue. They are:

#### **Code Provisions**

**Free Flow of Information.** Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

**Disclosure of Information.** This provisions states that a member shall be honest and accurate in all communication. Act promptly to correct erroneous communication 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 of the client organization, past client work or affiliation. Avoid deceptive practices. And disclose or help expose deceptive practices where possible

**Conflicts of Interest.** Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the publics.

**Enhancing the Profession.** Public relations professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession. Investigate the truthfulness and accuracy of information released on behalf of those represented.

#### **Professional Values**

**Honesty.** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

**Fairness.** We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public.

**Advocacy.** We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts and viewpoints to aid informed public debate

#### **EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES**

- The CEO of a company poses as a stock analyst and makes glowing remarks about her company's performance on a popular financial blog and recommends the stock.
- An agency creates a fake identity and uses the identity to post favorable comments about a client's social responsibility activities on a number of blogs and social networking sites.
- A member of a political candidate's staff disguises his identity and posts negative comments about the opposing candidate on a number of political blog sites.

- A public relations executive at a corporation wants to obtain the phone and text records for a public relations assistant who she suspects of leaking information to the media, so she pretends to be that person wanting to check her bill and requests a summary of her calls from her cell phone provider.
- An agency representative impersonates a client's online critic and posts favorable comments on a blog.
- A political campaign staffer sets up some Web pages on a popular social networking site that look like they were created by the opponent, and the pages misrepresent the opponent's position on a number of issues and make inflammatory statements about other candidates.
- A competitor's staff intentionally enters incorrect or misleading information about their own products or their competitor's product on a popular on-line encyclopedia.
- A public relations firm is hired to post favorable comments on Wikipedia about a number of clients. She poses as a neutral, third-party to post the comments.
- A public relations practitioner, to curry favor with a reporter, allows access to a client's private text conversations, e-mail and pre-release web/blog comments.

**RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE:** The use of deceptive identities or misleading descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants to further the objectives of any group constitutes improper conduct under the PRSA Member Code of Ethics and should be avoided. PRSA members should not engage in or encourage the practice of misrepresenting organizations and individuals through the use of blogs, viral marketing, social media and/or anonymous Internet postings.

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