

## **Professional Standards Advisory PS-10 (July 2009)**

### **PHANTOM EXPERIENCE: INFLATING RESUMES, CREDENTIALS AND CAPABILITIES**

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:** Inflated résumés credentials, documentation and capabilities are a growing problem in American industry and commerce these days. Within the public relations profession this is called "Phantom Experience."

**BACKGROUND:** Phantom Experience means providing information that overstates or distorts the actual experience being brought to the table by an organization, a company, a group, or an individual. The practice of falsely claiming experience, knowledge, and/or implying direct experience or knowledge is, per se, unethical and may very well be unlawful in certain employment circumstances, and in government contracts and contract applications. Phantom Experience has roots in psychology where, for example, when people imagine things they eventually believe what they imagine to be true (Gallager, P., Desmond, D., & MacLachlan, M., 2008). Within the public relations industry, for example, this behavior can be observed when the practice of overstating, embellishing or making false claims becomes truth or fact.

The problem for the practitioner is that once these phantom facts and examples are included in a résumé, capabilities brochure, contract applications or descriptive material left with clients, put on the Web, included in professional presentations, or published in other ways and places, this information taints even the most correct and authentic information and calls into question the character of the person making the claim, if discovered.

The insidious aspect of Phantom Experience is that, after a while, those who practice this come to believe that they actually have the bogus experience they claim. We see top executives lose their positions because they falsely claim a business school degree. We see high profile professionals with the same problem, claims of recognition from academic institutions, industry organizations, or life accomplishments that turn out to be Phantom Experiences.

**RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE:** At least four Code provisions and two professional values relate to this issue. (Lattimore, D., Baskin, O., Heiman, S., Toth, E., & Van Leuven, J.K., 2004)

#### **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.** Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society. *The intent is to build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision-making.*

**Enhancing the Profession.** Building respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations.

**Competition.** Promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals preserves an ethical climate while fostering a robust business environment.

#### **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.

**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**

- A member includes in his/her portfolio a project, which gives the impression that the individual had led or had a major role in the project. In reality, the member had only a minor role in the project. (Deception)
- A member discovers inaccurate information disseminated via the Web or through news releases but fails to intentionally correct or notify the proper authorities. (Omission)

- A member claims to have many years of work experience, special knowledge, or expertise, but has fabricated the specifics of the work experience. (Commission)
- A member knowingly disseminates or fails to correct misleading and false information or rumors about a competitor to influence the competitor's customers. (Negligence)

## **RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES:**

### **Obligation and Commitment to Truthful Disclosure**

PRSA members pledge to adhere to a rigorous code of conduct and the highest standards of professional integrity and responsibility. PRSA members should avoid Phantom Experience altogether. Members and the companies that they represent—including public relations agencies, independent public relations consultants, public relations departments, and anywhere in which the practice of public relations is taking place—must adhere to the strict principle of truthful disclosure of knowledge, skills, and experience. To claim knowledge, skill, or experience, even if closely related to a specific area of expertise, is unethical if that experience, knowledge, or skill only resembles what is required or what is being implied.

### **Specific Ethical Practices**

- Provide clear, simple, truthful information, including helpful facts or data, which the customer, prospect, employer, or client may not easily be able to find or think of. (Candor)
- Wherever information you've provided has been changed, edited, otherwise made to be inaccurate or false, aggressively correct that information in as many formats and forums as it can be found. Members have an affirmative obligation under the Code to correct and clarify information that is misleading, inaccurate, false, or questionable. (Correction and Clarification)
- Information that is provided, which may have more than one interpretation by different forces, sources, or users, should have enough detail so that the user can evaluate what they are looking at and getting, from their perspective and in the context of their potential use for the information. (Truthfulness)
- Where previous information has been inaccurate, incorrect, misleading, or false, the practitioner has an affirmative obligation to publish, pronounce, or notify those who might be adversely affected by the information as it was previously disclosed or made available. (Transparency)
- A practitioner has an affirmative obligation, when discovering fabricated, false, erroneous, or inaccurate information about other products, other professionals, and other circumstances, to apply the same practices to the bogus information that they would apply were their own ethical practices in question. (Professionalism)
- The client, prospective employer, and/or customer of a public relations agency has the right to know important information without having to ask for it or seek it out, including: (Disclosure)
  - If it is the first time you are doing something you are proposing
  - Those you plan to put on the project if different than those who came to sell the work to prospective client, customer, or company or agency
  - Your past experience with or understanding of the project you are undertaking based on credentials and information about the proposals you are presenting

### **Special Circumstances**

It is unethical for a member to claim total credit for work done by a group of individuals, subcontractors and vendors. It is ethical for a member to claim credit for the actual contributions made provided the work of individuals, subcontractors and vendors is acknowledged. Commonly used phrases and concepts that may mislead clients and, if used, need to be clarified include:

- "I have done that!"
- "We've done something very close to that."
- "Our Senior Vice President for XYZ has something very similar to that in his experience background from his work 12 years ago."

## **REFERENCES**

Gallager, P., Desmond, D., & MacLachlan, M. (2008). *Psychoprosthetics*. New York: Springer.  
 Lattimore, D., Baskin, O., Heiman, S., Toth, E., & Van Leuven, J.K. (2004). *Public relations: The profession and the practice*. (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) New York: McGraw-Hill.

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