

PRSA STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Background Paper

What Role Should PRSA Play in Establishing Practice Standards for the Public Relations Profession?

October 2008

Bob Frause, APR, Fellow PRSA

Jean S. Frankel, Partner, Tecker Consultants

CONFIDENTIALITY AND NONDISCLOSURE STATEMENT AND AGREEMENT

This report is the property of the Public Relations Society of America. This report contains proprietary information of PRSA and is solely for the use of PRSA volunteers and staff. This confidentiality and nondisclosure statement and agreement are for the purpose of protecting such confidential information from being made available and disclosed to unauthorized persons.

©2008 Public Relations Society of America

Process Overview

Jean S. Frankel, Partner, Tecker Consultants

Knowledge-Based Strategic Dialogue

PRSA will devote a significant portion of the 2008 PRSA National Assembly to engaging all participants in discussing the Society's long-term strategies for advancing the profession. The dialogue will use a proven methodology known as a "Mega Issue Dialogue" to help delegates, PRSA volunteer leaders and staff, address a variety of key strategic, professional and governance issues for PRSA going forward.

Strategic "mega" issues are broad topics of strategic importance. The process will lead us through key questions that PRSA's leaders believe will benefit from more dialogue. The goal of this process is to illuminate strategic choices the organization faces and identify paths toward smart decision-making.

Process

The process of **Knowledge-Based Dialogue** involves several steps:

- I. Defining **what is known** about an issue.
- II. Determining what **strategic choices** this knowledge suggests.
- III. Assessing the relative **opportunities and challenges** of the choices.
- IV. Coming to a **consensus** on a choice of strategies or actions.

What we Know Relative to the Question Proposed

This section was authored by Bob Frause, chair of the Board of Ethics & Professional Standards and chair of the Certification Task Force, and is based on his experience.

Source: Merriam-Webster online:

1. **ethic** – 1. *plural but sing or plural in constr* : the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation 2.a: a set of moral principles : a theory or system of moral values <the present-day materialistic *ethic*> b. *plural but sing or plural in constr* : the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group <professional *ethics*> c: a guiding philosophy d: a consciousness of moral importance <forge a conservation *ethic*>3. *plural* : a set of moral issues or aspects (as rightness)
2. **standard** – 3. something established by authority, custom, or general consent as a model or example : **CRITERION** <quite slow by today's *standards*>4. something set up and established by authority as a rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality

A. PRSA Code of Ethics

As part of an effort to enhance the professional standing of public relations, PRSA wrote its first Code of Ethics in 1950 and added enforcement provisions nine years later. Judicial panels, set up to hear complaints of code violations, would recommend appropriate action to the PRSA Board of Directors, while a nine-member Grievance Board would investigate violations. The Grievance Board (which transitioned into the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards in 1983) would evaluate the situation and present charges to the appropriate judicial panel for a ruling.

Code enforcement has long been an active area of debate among PRSA members. A 1973 member survey revealed concern about the Code's lack of enforcement and inability to relate to non-PRSA members. Yet, PRSA members appeared unwilling to charge fellow members with Code violations. Years of experience had taught BEPS that PRSA could not enforce a code of conduct without legal authority to subpoena evidence and sanction members.

In 2000, PRSA dropped the enforcement system, adopting a new Code focused on personal commitments to professional standards. According to PRSA documents during the 50 years of enforcement, only 10 of 232 cases investigated resulted in formal sanctions, along with about 20 letters of "admonishment" or "concern" from the PRSA Board of Directors. Additionally, six of the 10 formal sanctions were based on the findings of a court of law -- thus only four formal sanctions resulted from investigations conducted by the PRSA Board of Ethics during this period. Other problems with enforcement included resignations by members under investigation, refusal to provide evidence despite Code requirements, retention of legal counsel and threat of defamation lawsuits.

The new, voluntary Code is aspirational and educational, aiming to inspire and create understanding of ethical behavior. PRSA members pledge to uphold code principles every year when they renew, and cannot retain membership without pledging. This requirement raises the ethical bar for today's public relations professionals.

B. A Call for Professional Licensing

There are still some who call for PRSA to get tough on ethics violators. This prompted BEPS to take another look at how a judicial-based system might work for PRSA members and the profession in general. BEPS determined that any judicial-based system cannot work without legal authority. All other professions that have strong and working practice standards and ethics codes share one thing — practitioners must hold state certifications or licenses to practice. Violators can be expelled from the profession and even jailed if they are out of compliance with their certifications and/or licenses.

In 2006, BEPS called for consideration of Professional Licensing and Certification for the public relations profession, resulting in a discussion at the 2006 PRSA Assembly in Salt Lake City. Outcomes from the Salt Lake City discussions produced some interesting observations:

- Licensing Considerations
 - To establish public relations licensing there is a need for a uniform definition of the practice of public relations, a code of ethics, a grandfathering system, and a test for those that don't fall under the grandfather clause.
 - Costs to establish can range from \$150,000 – \$200,000 to set up the test and \$75,000 to maintain it.
 - Legal authority to administer the license would be granted by each state.
 - Licensing establishes a mandatory practice for everyone.
 - Licensing increases the status of the profession.
 - The public understands licensing.
 - Continuing education is a must to maintain a license.

- Arguments Against Public Relations Licensing
 - There is no common definition and scope of practice — 250 or more definitions of public relations.
 - What would we license? The term or tactics?
 - Who would be licensed?
 - Do we have a consensus on formal training and college curriculum?
 - Do we even have enough professors to meet the demand?
 - State-by-state ... Would a company need to be licensed in each state? What if messages or clients crossed state lines? What happens to professionals who relocate?
 - What would be the impact on public relations jobs and budgets?
 - Have we done all that we can do to promote APR?
 - What is the root cause of the problem? (Are we dealing with the symptom or the problem?)
 - Do we need this when we have professional regulations already in place ... (i.e., truth in advertising, Sarbanes-Oxley, etc.)?
 - Do we want government intervention in our industry?
 - Licensing may be a very difficult goal to achieve given the sanctity of speech in American society.

- Arguments for Public Relations Licensing
 - There is a persistent desire among some practitioners to have harder definitions, to even codify what is permissible and ethical in public relations practice.
 - When infractions or violations occur, some in the profession want disciplinary controls that trigger sanctions if what's done is unethical, or to actually "throw the violator" out of the profession.
 - One stage or strategy on the way to licensing could be through the professional certification of various levels of competency as determined by testing, observation, and professional achievement. Certifications could be modified, suspended, withheld or rescinded in the event that unethical or inappropriate behaviors are noticed and verified.

- **NEW DEVELOPMENT** — Licensing Public Relations Professionals in Puerto Rico
 - The Puerto Rico Public Relations Association is reporting that effective August 8, 2008, the practice of public relations is licensed in Puerto Rico. Over the next several months a government regulatory board will be created to develop the licensing procedures, etc. The law establishes: The Regulatory Board for Public Relations Practitioners, educational requirements, ethics and continued education procedures and requirements for the licensing of the Public Relations practice in Puerto Rico.

C. A Call for Professional Certification

Another possible avenue considered by BEPS to address improved standards of practice is the concept of professional certification.

- Certification vs. Licensing
 - Certification is used by many professions and trades. While it falls short of actual licensing, it helps assure that a practitioner is competent and capable of delivering relevant services through the credibility of the examination process.
 - Certification is usually a voluntary process conducted by a private organization for the purpose of conveying information on individuals who have successfully completed the certification process. Unlike licensing, the process has no legal status other than potential restriction of use of the certification title.
 - Lack of certification usually does not prevent an individual from engaging in professional activity. Uncertified practitioners, just like non-Accredited practitioners, do not have to meet any standard.

- Certification vs. Accreditation
 - Like Accreditation, certification is a front-end-loaded activity. That is, it is up to the practitioner and the certifying authority to maintain the relationship of certification through continuous updating and education, and periodic recertification through examination.
 - We already have certification via APR.
 - For public relations, it may be possible to devise certification regimens in various practice areas offering concrete client and competitive value. They can focus on specific areas of practice and therefore test and validate knowledge, competence, and experience independently to achieve highly focused, competency-based certifications on subject matter that might include crisis communications, financial relations, events management, etc.

- Promoting Certification Within PRSA
 - Certification may be a tough sell. Public relations and journalism, as professions, are unusual in that they actively question any kind of certification, or authentication of credentials, including the current process of Accreditation. Virtually every other profession and regulated trade, from law to plumbing to personal grooming, looks for, establishes, promotes and relies on different levels of certification or recognition of professional competence based on core areas of practice and knowledge.
 - A profession is judged by more than its code of conduct and body of knowledge. Its value is judged by how practitioners set, adhere to, and, to a great extent, rely on practice standards, which clients come to expect as measures of competence and value. A profession is also judged by the willingness of its members continuously to seek self-improvement, which further justifies public and client confidence.

- The concept of Accreditation serves to identify individual practitioners who, on their own initiative, have taken steps to validate a base level of professional knowledge. Certification reflects a higher level of personal professional initiative and accomplishment. The goal is to establish *bona fide* credentials validated by a competent outside certification process. The expectation is that certification will offer members a competitive marketplace advantage or simply the personal satisfaction of having their competencies validated.

A PRSA Certification Taskforce was established in August 2007 to explore the possibilities of developing such a program. Work is continuing, and recommendations to the PRSA Board of Directors are expected last quarter 2008 or first quarter 2009.

D. Is There Another Way to Address this Issue?

Again, given the above discussion and outcomes to date, there continues to be a call among some PRSA members, professionals and other interested parties, including the media, for PRSA leadership public commentary, member sanctions and even expulsion for those who are accused of practicing public relations in opposition to the current PRSA Code of Ethics.

Since 2004, BEPS has been issuing [Professional Standards Advisories](#) to address issues of professional standards as they arise. There are currently seven PSAs which provide guidance to PRSA members on issues ranging from deceptive practices by “front” groups to telling the truth, especially in wartime.

The establishment of practice standards may be another way of addressing this call to action. So the “mega” issue question at hand for the 2008 Assembly is:

What Should PRSA’s Role Be in Establishing Formal Practice Standards for the Public Relations Profession?

II. STRATEGIC CHOICES

Possible strategic responses to this issue:

Identify what PRSA could do with regard to this issue. What high-level strategic choices should PRSA consider?

Choice 1: Put sanctions back into the PRSA Code of Ethics.

Opportunities

- Sanctioning those who practice unethically.

Challenges

- Budgeting for anticipated legal costs.
- Establishing a process for sanctioning nonmembers.
- PRSA has no legal authority to enforce.

Choice 2: Take another look at licensure.

Opportunities

- Objective measure of competency.
- Applicable to members and nonmembers — benefit to the profession.
- Set regulated practice standards.
- Monitor Puerto Rico's approach.

Challenges

- Costs.
- No uniform definition of public relations.
- What to license — term or tactics?
- Who to license — practitioner or firm?
- State license — what if professional relocates?
- Government intervention in the industry/profession?

Choice 3: Continue to explore certification.

Opportunities

- Objective measure of competency.
- Flexible — certification in specialty areas.
- Recognize and promote levels of competency.

Challenges

- Confusion/competition with APR.
- Voluntary — no legal status.
- Costs.

Choice 4: Create a compendium of practice standards.

Opportunities

- Flexible — can address issues as they arise.
- Complements PRSA Code of Ethics.
- Positions PRSA as the leader for professional practice standards.

Challenge

- Difficult to enforce.

Choice 5: Maintain status quo.

Opportunities

- Focus limited staff resources in areas where there is greater ROI.
- Prepare an abbreviated rationale to respond to questions about the current system.

Challenges

- Concerns will continue to be raised about individuals who appear to violate the Code and are not disciplined.

