

## **PRSA & Ethics: A History of Our Commitment to Integrity and Education**

Submitted by BJ Whitman, APR, Fellow PRSA  
Past PRSA Board of Directors Member  
and  
Janelle Guthrie, APR, Fellow PRSA

### **The Early Days**

From PRSA's earliest days, members expressed concern about conflicts of interest, misrepresentation of facts, invasion of privacy, unfair competition, gifts to media and failure to safeguard confidential information—just to name a few. The list has not changed much in the 75 or so years that public relations has grown into a thriving profession—and neither has PRSA's commitment to ethical behavior.

PRSA was formed in 1948 and, by 1950, the first PRSA code of professional standards was developed to address “responsibility for the good character and reputation of the public relations professional.” PRSA revised the code several times and added and enforcement provisions in those early years to strengthen the code and improve industry practices.

By 1959, PRSA adopted new provisions requiring members to participate with fellow members in enforcing and upholding the code—those provisions would remain in place for the next 40 years.

PRSA bylaws established a system of due process and created a national judicial council. The judicial council included judicial panels of six judges each serving each of PRSA's districts. PRSA's Board of Directors had ultimate authority in deciding cases.

### **Grievance Board Established**

In 1962, PRSA established a nine-member Grievance Board, which evolved into the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards in 1983. The Grievance Board investigated complaints from nonmembers and situations in which violations may have occurred. The Grievance Board's basic charge was to be the “watch dog” for the Society. The PRSA bylaws provided that no publicity be given to the actions of the Grievance Board.

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In 1963, PRSA addressed the growing concerns about conflict of interests, front groups, third party organizations and the undisclosed special interests of clients or employees. It also added an interpretation of “full disclosure” for financial public relations counselors, requiring financial counselors to act ethically within Securities and Exchange Commission and other rules, regulations and laws related to financial communications.

By 1966, PRSA had established official interpretations of the code to explain prohibited behaviors and provide advisory opinions on professional ethics, including guidelines governing political public relations activity and guidance against providing false or misleading information to intentionally injure the public reputation of an opposing interest.

The PRSA Board of Directors expanded the Grievance Board authority in 1970 to handle minor cases and authorized the board, through legal counsel, to write members about alleged infractions and ask for explanations. Depending on the response, this correspondence could result in an investigation or documentation in the member’s confidential file at PRSA.

That same year, the Federal Trade Commission advised PRSA it was investigating the voluntary codes of trade and professional associations and considers contingency fees to be a form of price fixing. As a result, PRSA added a new provision addressing contingency fees and stating members cannot guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member’s direct control.

In 1989, the PRSA Assembly replaced the Code of Ethics that was in force since 1950 and revised in 1954, 1959, 1963, 1977, and 1983. The new code placed more emphasis on the responsibility to avoid personal conflicts of interest and the duty to safeguard the democratic process, public interest, and truthful communications.

In 1990, the PRSA Counselors Academy developed code guidelines for public relations firms, encouraging practitioners to put the public interest as well as in the interests of their clients ahead of their own.

## **Punish or Inspire? Investigate or Educate? Times Are Changing**

By the late 90s, the Society was poised for change and began researching plans to abandon 40 years of strict enforcement in favor of a more voluntary and educational code.

Just prior to the Board's meeting in April 1999, PRSA retained the Ethics Resource Center of Washington, D.C. to provide principal consulting services to the Society, and, especially to BEPS, as it pursued the process of amending or revising the Code.

They employed six forms of research in their efforts to assess the PRSA Code of Professional Standards:

- Interview, Focus Group and Opinion Survey report of April 1999
- Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) survey of the PRSA Board of Directors, Chapter Presidents, Assembly Delegates and Section /District Chairs on August 12, 1999.
- PRSA Assembly poll during the October 23, 1999 meeting in Anaheim, California.
- Focus group report prepared by the Ethics Resource Center on November 15, 1999.
- PRSA member survey report by the Ethics Resource Center on February 25, 2000.
- Literature review of codes of ethics and professional standards.

### ***Summary of Findings***

#### **Interview, Focus Group and Opinion Survey Report of April 1999**

(Phone interviews of key public relations professionals, three focus groups and 300 responses to an eight-item telephone survey.)

- Current enforcement provisions are ineffective.
- Enforcement is difficult because PR is not a licensed profession.
- Enforcement provisions serve to enhance the image of PR and should remain.

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- There should be positive enforcement provisions and disincentives to adhere to standards.
- The Code is viewed as: out of date, offering an incomplete lack of positive incentives, is too detailed, lacks aspiration and is limited in explanatory text.
- Code revision is needed along with supporting training, communication and leadership.
- Major issues regarding “spin,” “business practices,” and “professionalism.”

**Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (Beps) Survey of the PRSA Board of Directors, Chapter Presidents Assembly Delegates and Section/District Chairmen on August 12, 1999**

(20 responses to a 28-question mailed survey.)

- Having a code is important for the profession and the future of PRSA.
- A revision is needed.
- The code should be enforceable.
- Various degrees of punishment could be used.
- PRSA has the responsibility to educate, guide and lead its members and non-members regarding ethical practices.
- PRSA members should be held responsible for actions of non-PRSA employees they supervise.
- Members should identify employers, clients and front groups.
- PRSA Board members should be held to a higher level of enforcement.

**PRSA Assembly Poll During the October 23, 1999 Meeting in Anaheim, California**

*Three questions were posed to the Assembly Delegates. A specific count of responses was not made.*

- A. “Should PRSA’s Code of Professional Standard be coupled with the provision for strong enforcement or voluntary compliance?”

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**Vote:** Evenly Divided

B. “Do you believe we should invest in an ethics education program for our members, our external audiences, our clients and our employers? For example, do you believe we should invest in an ethics education program for members and external audiences?”

**Vote:** Yes

C. “Ethical practices are our most powerful brand difference as a Society. Do you see ethics as a brand differentiator for PRSA?”

**Vote:** Evenly Divided

### **Focus Group Report Prepared by the Ethics Resource Center on November 15, 1999**

*Approximately 240 participants were involved in 18 focus groups.*

- Widespread support for professional ethical practices with many supporting the use of PRSA resources to revise the Code and increase the focus.
- Some question of Board authenticity / support of ethical issues.
- Professional standards, licensing and certification in the field of public related to Code provisions, enforcement and more broadly to the vision and identity of the Society.
- The most critical or central ethics-related issues in the PR industry were categorized as “Truthfulness in Business Activities,” “Communication Channels,” and “Competitive Practices.”
- The current Code is inadequate and in need of revision.
- Enforcement is desirable but may not be practical.
- Enforcement on ethical practices is supported but views differ on the desired extent of PRSA resource commitment.

## PRSA Member Survey Report by the Ethics Resource Center on February 25, 2000

*2,099 responses (10.4%) to a 79-item survey mailed to 20,266 PRSA members.*

- 92% see ethics as key part of PRSA mission, 86% believe ethical standards add value to membership, 90% think a commitment to a code can help brand PRSA as an industry leader.
- 15% “Strongly Agree” that the PRSA Board is committed to upholding the highest ethical standards.
- 50% believe the professional and ethical standards of PRSA are higher than the standards of the industry as a whole.
- Strong support for enforcement to include: denial of membership without commitment to uphold the Code (88%), revoking membership for failing to meet the standards of the Code (76%).
- 85% support offering education and training on ethics and the Code.
- Financial resources should be used to establish the Code (71%) and apply the standards (66%).
- Pressure to compromise ethical standards is higher with PRSA members (50%) than national average (13%).
- Observed misconduct closely matches the national average of 30%.
- Of the misconduct that has been observed, seven of the top eleven relate to management.
- 53% of observed misconduct is reported.

### Using Data for Reform

When BEPS revised the PRSA code in 2000, they intentionally removed enforcement, sanctioning and violations and shifted emphasis to identifying and promoting ethical conduct. Up until the week before the 2000 Code of Ethics was submitted to the PRSA Board and Assembly, the culture of punishment over inspiration remained in place.

The debate about punishment was robust and lasted throughout the three-year revision process, revolving around a single question: “Does PRSA want to be

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known for the number of people it kicks out each year, or its reputation as a source for educating, motivating and inspiring the highest level of professional practice in public relations?”

In the end, motivation, inspiration and education carried the day.

Research revealed the majority of early code complaints were about business practices rather than ethical issues. According to available data, during the first 50 years of PRSA code enforcement:

- \* 232 cases were considered:
- \* More than 65 percent were investigated, and
- \* 11 resulted in formal sanctions against members for unethical behavior.

Notably, six of those 11 sanctions occurred prior to 1973 and resulted from finding of a court of law rather than findings of PRSA judicial panels. This means that five formal sanctions were posed against member as a result of PRSA investigations from 1974 to 2000 - five in 26 years!

Most of the allegations were groundless. The PRSA enforcement system was clearly ineffective in seeking and adjudicating ethical conduct. Not only was the PRSA enforcement system “clearly unworkable,” PRSA members generally had little understanding of what unethical conduct was in the first place.

### **A New Code In 2000**

The members of the 2000 Board of Ethics and Professional Standard designed the new code to be aspirational and educational. And while enforcement was eliminated, the PRSA Board of Directors retains the right to bar from membership or expel from the Society any individual who has been or is sanctioned by a government agency or convicted in a court of law of an action that is in violation of the Code.

The mission of the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards has now been substantially altered to focus primarily on education and training, collaborating with other major professional societies, and serving in an advisory role to the Board when considering ethical matters of major importance.

## A New Era Emphasizes Education Over Penalties

As the public relations profession evolves so does the need to revise and refresh ethical standards. The PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) upholds and amends, when necessary, the PRSA Code of Ethics.

Ethical Standard Advisories (ESA), considered direct extensions of the PRSA Code, help the board explain and educate members on the most compelling issues of the day.

- [“Disclosure”](#) (April 2018)
- [“Ethics and Social Media”](#) (September 2015)
- [“Disclosure and Transparency in Native Advertising and Sponsored Content”](#)(September 2014)
- [“Deceptive Online Practices and Misrepresentation of Organizations and Visuals”](#) (Rev. June 2012)
- [“Illegal Recordings”](#) (March 2011)
- [“Ethical Use of Interns”](#) (February 2011)
- [“Plagiarism”](#) (September 2010)
- [“Looking the Other Way”](#) (August 2010)
- [“Expropriation of the Intellectual Property of Others”](#) (February 2010)
- [“Use of Video News Releases as a Public Relations Tool”](#) (October 2009)
- [“Questionable Environmental Claims and Endorsements \(Greenwashing\)”](#) (October 2009)
- [“Pay for Play”](#) (October 2009)
- [“Engaging in the Use of Deceptive Practices While Representing Front Groups”](#) (Rev. October 2008)
- [“Overstating Charges, Fees and/or Compensation”](#) (rev. August 2007)
- [“Disclosure by Expert Commentators and Professional Spokespersons of Payments or Financial Interests”](#) (April 2005)
- [“Telling the Truth, Especially in War Time”](#) (January 2005)
- [“Reporting Unethical Behavior or Unprofessional Performance”](#) (Nov. 2004)
- [“Disclosure of Employment Status of Client-Based PR Agency Staff”](#) (May 2004)

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BEPS members develop content for the annual ethics month, for the International Conference and for a variety of chapter and district speaking engagements.

The team writes articles and blogs posts all year long and also conducts valuable academic research.

Members of the Board of Ethics come from the public and private sectors, from corporations and education, and represent a range of experience in their careers.

To request a member of BEPS to speak or visit your chapter:

[https://www.prsa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/05/2018-BEPS-DirectoryV1R3\\_524\\_FINALMAY2018.pdf](https://www.prsa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/05/2018-BEPS-DirectoryV1R3_524_FINALMAY2018.pdf)

### **Eight questions you should ask yourself before acting?**

1. Am I going to violate any laws?
2. Am I going to violate any core ethical values such as honesty, fairness and civility?
3. Do I have all the facts I need?
4. Could I live in a world where everybody did what I am about to do?
5. How would I feel if what I am about to do was featured on the first page of tomorrow's paper?
6. How would I feel if someone did to me what I am about to do to others?
7. What would my mother say or think?
8. Am I already thinking about a justification or an excuse for what I am about to do?

### **Six statements that should warn you of a potential ethical violation.**

1. "Do what it takes."
2. "Everybody does it."
3. "Nobody will ever know."
4. "It is OK because it's legal."
5. "There is no other way, you have no other choice."
6. "Just follow orders."

### **Six indications that your company has an ethical culture.**

1. The message comes from the top
2. Management leads by example and "walk the talk."
3. Policies are enforced
4. All employees are treated fairly, irrespective of their status within the organization.
5. Employees truly feel free to speak-up without fear of retaliation
6. It is easy to do the right thing and difficult to do the wrong thing.

## **Eight Ethics Quotes:**

“On matters of style, swim with the current, on matters of principle, stand like a rock.”

Thomas Jefferson

“Integrity is doing the right thing when nobody is watching”

Anonymous

“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Luke

“Character is like a tree, reputation its shadow.”

Abraham Lincoln

“All it takes from evil to triumph is a few good men to do nothing.”

Edmund Burke

“A person without ethics is a wild beast on the loose in the world.”

Albert Camus

“Live so that when your children think of fairness, caring, and integrity, they think of you.”

H. Jackson Brown Jr.

“One of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.”

Chinua Achebe



Application to the Board of Ethics and Practice Standards (BEPS)

Prerequisites to BEPS Board Service

- APR Credential
- 10 years' experience in the practice of public relations
- Desire to promote, enhance and engage members of PRSA in the PRSA Code of Ethics

SECTION 1 – PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

APR \_\_\_\_\_(date) Fellow, PRSA \_\_\_\_\_(date) (Please Check)

Region \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ (Please Check)

SECTION 2 - AREAS OF EXPERTISES

List top three areas of Industry expertise (i.e. Food and Agriculture, Economic Development, Oil & Gas, Non-Profit, Government, Education, Legal, Politics, Financial Services, Health Care, Tourism, Transportation, etc.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List three areas of public relations expertise (i.e. Brand/Reputation Management, Strategic Communications Planning, Issues Management, Internal/External Communications, Employee Communications, Crisis Communications, Media Relations, Consumer Product, Social Media, Corporate Communications, etc.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please provide an Executive Profile (no more than 500 words)

### SECTION 3 - PRSA Experience

List volunteer positions in PRSA beginning with the most recent

Title	Time Held	Duties	Accomplishments
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### SECTION 4 – Accomplishments (please list your top 3 PR accomplishments)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

In one paragraph, please explain why you would be qualified to join the BEPS board

In one paragraph, please explain what you think is the most pressing ethical issue today in the practice of public relations

Please provide 2 letters of recommendations with this application. (Letters of recommendations must be from minimum APR and one Fellow PRSA)

Attach work resumes to the application and mail to: (current chair email)

# 6 Practical Recommendations for Building Employer Branding



### **Board of Ethics and Professional Standards**

There shall be a Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) consisting of eleven Accredited members, including its chair, each of whom shall serve for a term of three years. Three of the members shall be appointed each year by the chair, with the approval of the Board of Directors.

The chair, with the approval of the Board of Directors, shall appoint the chair of the BEPS each year. The chair may serve a maximum of three consecutive one-year terms.

It shall be the primary responsibility of the BEPS to develop and continuously make recommendations to the Board of Directors to refine the Society's standards for the ethical practice of public relations and to foster the highest level of professional standards within the profession and Society at large.

The BEPS shall also counsel the Board of Directors regarding the Code of Ethics and direct the development and implementation of educational programs regarding the Society's Code of Ethics for members and the public at large.

The BEPS may also, at the discretion and direction of the Board of Directors, act as counsel to the Board of Directors regarding actions to bar from membership or expel from the Society those who have been or are sanctioned by a government agency or convicted in a court of law of an action that is in violation of the Code of Ethics.

Members of the Society shall respond to information requests of the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards or the Board of Directors within 30 days.

Any BEPS member who misses three or more consecutive monthly BEPS meetings without requesting to be excused for a stated reason will automatically forfeit his/her seat on BEPS and will be replaced.

### **PRSA Chapter Ethics Officer Job Description**

The Chapter ethics officer shall promote and inspire the highest levels of ethical behavior and performance among Chapter members. Duties include:

- Seek education, training and guidance from PRSA's Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS), the College of Fellows and PRSA National.
- Provide ethics education and consultation to local board and Chapter members throughout the year.
- Stimulate and encourage PRSA Chapter members to seek guidance and clarification when they have questions about ethical principles, practices and standards of conduct in their day-to-day practice.
- Consult with a designated member of the PRSA College of Fellows or BEPS, in this order, before providing ethics consultation to Chapter members or making statements to the media.
- Notify the BEPS chair of any member's failure to comply with the PRSA Code of Ethics at the Chapter level.
- Develop, coordinate and promote at least one professional development program each year, preferably during "Ethics Awareness Month."
- Assist the local Accreditation chair by providing the ethics curriculum for the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations.
- Serve a minimum one-year term. (A two-year term is preferred). Note: The ethics officer position is NOT an officer position on the Chapter board of directors. A PRSA Chapter nominating or executive committee will appoint a person to this position.

### **Ethics Officer Support**

The Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) and PRSA National will provide the ethics officer with a position description, case studies, programming ideas, articles and other ethics materials for use in ongoing Chapter education and training.

BEPS will assist and educate the ethics officer via quarterly conference calls, ethics training at the PRSA International Conference and Leadership Rally, and articles in *PRSA Strategies & Tactics*. In addition, a member of the PRSA College of Fellows and a BEPS liaison will be on hand to provide ethics consultation and support to the ethics officer as needed.



## How to Integrate Ethics Into Your Chapter/Section/District Every Day

1. Open each membership/board meeting with an "Ethics Moment" from the PRSA code—or include them in the chapter newsletter, on Facebook or Twitter (#PRethics)
2. Explain one Ethics resource from the PRSA website at each meeting.
3. Call to action: Ask membership to present ethics case study/dilemmas (without using real names). Pick the 5 best and develop panel for Ethics Month in September
4. Have your Ethics Officer keynote a luncheon or write a newsletter article on "What it takes to be the PRSA Ethics Officer and why I volunteered for this job."
5. Consider inviting senior membership to form an Ethics Committee to support the Chapter Ethics Officer. Ethics committee could:
  - Develop a speaker's bureau on ethics issues from membership and the business community
  - Assist in answering ethics questions sent to website from members
  - Assist in developing ethics programming for ethics month in September and throughout the year
6. Ask members to submit examples of "Ethics Every Day" and put on Chapter/District/Section website, Facebook or Twitter for discussion at monthly meetings.
7. Ask a professor from a local college/university to speak on the importance of ethics.
8. Learn and live the code of ethics every day. Keep the PRSA Code of Ethics card in your wallet.
9. Set ethic goals as part of your strategic plan and be accountable.
  - Set up ethical committee to assist Ethics Officer
  - Plan objectives and programming every year
10. "Walk the Talk" and lead by setting the example:

- When a person or boss puts you in an ethically uncomfortable position stand-up for the truth
- When you are tempted to stretch the truth, be factual.
- Be trust worthy
- Keep an open mind for new ideas
- Anticipate ethical conflict

11. Invite PRSSA Chapters to attend your September Ethics Month program or volunteer to come speak at one of their meetings.

## BEPS 6 Work Groups

Each BEPS members will be assigned 2 work group activities each year on the board.

The 6 BEPS Work Groups are:

Description	Deadlines
1. <b>Ethics Month (September)</b> – Develop “Ethics Month” educational programs for the month of September to include, but not limited to:	<b>June</b>
• Introduction article in Tactics	<b>May</b>
• 6 Blogs	<b>May</b>
• 3 Twitter Chats	
• 2 Webinars	<b>May</b>
• Consider program option for Sections and Districts	
• Coordinate/Assist PRSSA with their Ethics Month offerings	
• Blog- Intro to Ethic Month	
• Coordinate promotion of Ethics month with PRSA representative	
• Ethics Moments Twitter Chats	
• Graphics	
• Report monthly to BEPS	
• Prepare summary end of the year report with analytics	
<b>November</b>	
II. <b>Ethics Standard Advisories (ESAs)</b>	
<b>July/December</b>	
• Be familiar with all past ESAs and the PRSA Code of Ethics	
• Consider updates to current ESAs	
• Develop a minimum of 2 ESAs per year as warranted.	
• Develop/Standardize format of all ESAs	
• Identify issues to discuss with BEPS monthly	
• Report monthly to BEPS	
III. <b>Chapter Ethics Officers Outreach Program (Monthly conference calls)</b>	
<b>Monthly</b>	

- Develop monthly educational programs for ethics officers at the chapter level
- Review previous year offerings for upgrades on the subjects
- Invite both BEPS and other segments of PRSA, Education Academy, College of Fellows to participate.
- Report monthly to BEPS
- Prepare end of year report

**IV. [beeps@prsa.org](mailto:beeps@prsa.org) – monitor the ethics inquiry line.**

**Year Round**

- Coordinate the process of answering the individual questions presented through the hotline.
- Answer all inquiries within 48 hours
- Seek help from fellow BEPS members to answer questions with industry and areas of expertise in the public relations.
- Present each inquiry/answer to BEPS members at monthly meetings. All answers should be approved by Chair.
- Coordinate the annual BEPS research projects with designated BEPS member
- Report monthly to BEPS
- Prepare an end of the year report on activity

**V. BEPS Communications Coordinator**

**Year Round**

- Coordinate communications with PRSA regarding BEPS programs/products (ESAs, Ethics Month, Ethic Moments, and other products/programs) created by BEPS to the Society
- Update BEPS directory
- Update Rapid Response Form
- Report monthly to BEPS
- Prepare end of year report

**VI. ICON/Leadership Rally**

**September**

- Develop “Society at Large” presentation and/or Ethics Symposium for ICON

- Identify materials for presentation at Leadership Rally and, if possible, present at the rally.
- Develop “Society at Large” and/or Ethics
- Report monthly to BEPS
- Prepare end of year report

**VII. BEPS Operational Manager (not necessarily a BEPS member) to act as the Year Round administrator for the board**

- Set the calendar and make it work
- Produce monthly, quarterly and end of the year report
- Keep members on track of deadlines

**VIII. Develop a Work Group of Previous BEPS Board Members to further the goals 2019**

of PRSA through the adherence to the Code of Ethics by partnering with other professional organizations. Introduce our members and report back to board of industry trends.

- Conference Board
- The Business Round Table
- The Chamber of Commerce
- Chief Ethics Officer Association

**WORK GROUP GROUPINGS**

**GROUP #1 Ethics Month, ICON/Leadership Rally**

**Group #2 [beps@prsa.org](mailto:beps@prsa.org), BEPS Communications**

**Group # 3 Chapter Ethics Officer Outreach Program**

**Group # 4 ESAs**