

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. These guidelines are for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice. Please consult an attorney to obtain legal advice regarding your specific situation. The PRSA Member Code of Ethics may be found online at 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 a blog that appears to be authored by 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 websites 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.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE:

At least four 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. A member shall:

- Preserve the integrity of the process of communication
- Be honest and accurate in all communications
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the practitioner is responsible

Disclosure of Information. Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society. A member shall:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications
- Act promptly to correct erroneous communications 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 interests (e.g., stock ownership) in a client's organization
- Avoid deceptive practices

Conflicts of Interest. Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the public. A member shall:

- Act in the best interests of the client or employer, even subordinating the member's personal interests
- Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests
- Disclose promptly any existing or potential conflict of interest to affected clients or organizations
- Encourage clients and customers to determine if a conflict exists after notifying all affected parties



Enhancing the Profession. Public relations professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession. A member shall:

- Acknowledge that there is an obligation to protect and enhance the profession
- Decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code

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 cellphone 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 online 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, email 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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