

Professional Standards Advisory PS-6 (April 2005)

DISCLOSURE BY EXPERT COMMENTATORS AND PROFESSIONAL SPOKESPERSONS OF PAYMENTS OR FINANCIAL INTERESTS

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.

ISSUE: The failure of commentators and professional spokespersons to disclose that they have been paid to promote a cause or point of view, or that they have a financial interest in the products or organizations on which they purport to provide expert opinion, commentary or information.

BACKGROUND: In recent months, attention has been focused on commentators, some even posing as news reporters and expert analysts whose views were presumed to be independent, but who had been paid to endorse a cause or product and had not disclosed that relationship. In one controversy, syndicated columnists supported initiatives of the Administration but was later shown to have been paid fees by the government channeled through a public relations firm. Similarly, supposedly independent consumer product experts appeared on news programs and endorsed specific products, but were later found to have been paid for those endorsements or to have had prior financial relationships with the manufacturers.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE: At least four Code provisions and four professional values relate to this issue.

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. And 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 interest (such as stock ownership) in a client's organization. And avoid deceptive practices.

Conflicts of Interest. Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the publics. 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. And, 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. And, decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code.

Professional Values

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.

Independence. We provide objective counsel.

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. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES:

- To be proper, commercial relationships must be disclosed in advance or simultaneously in the same public forum to ensure that those affected or influenced can make informed and knowledgeable decisions.
- Every participant in the chain of the financial relationship has an affirmative duty to disclose the relationship. Failure to disclose is improper conduct under the Code. PRSA members have important responsibilities in such cases.
- The Code requires honesty and accuracy in all communications, and requires members to reveal the sponsors for causes and interests they represent and any financial interest they or their clients may have in the outcome of events or individual decisions.

Opinion Underlying Recommended Standards

One of the foundations of a system of free expression is the presumed fairness and independence of reportage, analysis and commentary in the news media. In this system, a diversity of viewpoints and opinions needs to be heard, but must compete on the merits of argument and fact. When a point of view, organization or product is given an unfair advantage as a result of financial payments, it undermines the integrity of the system itself.

Spokespeople, commentators, product experts or others who offer opinions or points of view within the news media have a responsibility to disclose any financial relationships they may have with a person, organization, product or other entity on which they offer comment or perspective. This responsibility extends to public relations professionals who may enlist such spokespersons on behalf of a client. Moreover, the responsibility is an affirmative one: it cannot be left to reporters or others involved in the process.

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