

## **Professional Standards Advisory PS-9 (October 2009)**

### **PAY-FOR-PLAY**

*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:** Pay for Play (PFP) occurs when there is intent to hide an exchange of value between a PR professional and a journalist. It occurs when PR professionals make undisclosed payments to journalists or media to publish or broadcast a client's story. Or, when PR professionals compensate journalists or media to allow placement of stories that appear to be editorial material, again, failing to disclose that the information was provided by outside sources and for which compensation (including advertising) was provided in some form in exchange for publication or broadcast. The payment can be in various forms, including gifts and future favors.

A variety of Pay for Play practices occur in many industries and countries. Business behaviors and customs vary widely. The purpose of this discussion is to provide guidance for PR practitioners on how to address these practices while remaining faithful to the PRSA Code.

As publics demand greater transparency from institutions, internationally and inter-culturally, it is important that public relations practitioners do their part in addressing any undisclosed practice that could significantly affect the credibility of communications channels. Media professionals are responsible for their own ethical issues. The ethical practitioner encourages disclosure of any exchange of value that influences how those they represent are covered.

**BACKGROUND:** "Pay for Play" (PFP), the undisclosed compensation of reporters or media for the placement of editorial material, is improper under the PRSA code of ethics. Readers, listeners, and viewers have the right to expect advance disclosure about anything that might compromise the integrity of the information they are getting. There are gray areas, in that definitions of ethical impropriety may vary widely between industries, countries and individuals and PFP is condoned and expected in many cultures.

**RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE:** At least four Code provisions and three 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.

**Disclosure of Information.** Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society. Intent is to build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision-making.

**Conflicts of Interest.** Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the publics.

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

#### **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.

**Independence.** We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.

#### **EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES**

- A public relations professional KNOWINGLY FAILS TO REQUEST DISCLOSURE of confidential compensation to a communication medium for placement of specific editorial content, which could come from editorial staff of the communication medium, the PR professional or an advertising agency.

## **RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES**

- Disclosure must be requested in any pay for play situation. Journalists should be notified that any, gift, or in-kind service in exchange for placement should be clearly disclosed to the reader, viewer, and listeners so they can make up their own minds about value, bias, accuracy and usefulness.
- Where it is a common practice to offer journalists free or special travel and lodging rates or product demonstration items, we should encourage those journalists to disclose, to protect their independence and integrity.
- Some trade publications sponsor trade shows and special editions that require fees to participate (then articles featuring only paid participants' a participation fee is required to—products are run in special show editions) get the coverage. Public relations professionals should ask for disclosure of these fees by participants and publications.
- The ethical practitioner always has the intention to encourage the clear and obvious disclosure of crucial information that communication consumers should have, or reasonably expect to have

**PRINCIPAL BEPS AUTHORS:** Emmanuel Tchividjian CCEP; Jim Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA; Tom Eppes, APR, Fellow PRSA