

Professional Standards Advisory PS-4 (November 2004)

REPORTING UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR OR UNPROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

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: Proper reporting of unethical behavior or unprofessional performance.

BACKGROUND: One of the most vexing areas in practice is determining what is unethical. This is sometimes even more challenging than determining what is ethical or the right thing to do. The greatest confusion seems to be among those issues that are contract related, business problems, legal questions, or matters that are considered "common practice" or "usual and customary."

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

Code Provisions

Disclosure of Information. Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society.

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

Professional Values

Expertise. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research and education.

Fairness. We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES:

Business, Legal, and Professional Issues

- Your prospect takes part of your presentation and uses it without compensating you. (Business issue)
- You work with a group of people who constantly take credit for your ideas and your proposals. (Business issue)
- You know some people in your company who are selling crack cocaine in an obscure location in your building and management seems to be ignoring it. (Legal issue)
- You work for a client who is having you wordsmith some very serious issues that minimize their importance, their seriousness and their potential impact. (Business and professional experience issue)
- You have a client who lies no matter how you advise or warn them. (Personal professional decision)
- You have an employee who is a dynamo, billing his brains out everyday. But, you do suspect he may be rounding up his timesheets and overstating his actual hours. (Business issue)

Ethical Issues

- You find out through a trusted client that a colleague is badmouthing you in the business community. (Unethical per Competition Principle)
- A client asks you to use a title from their management roster when you identify yourself rather than your actual role as an outside consultant. (Unethical. Same situation as PS-1)
- You hire an employee from a local company who offers to give you the "inside scoop" on their communications and business strategy. (Unethical per Safeguarding Confidences Principle)

RECOMMEND BEST PRACTICE: Ethical practitioners have an affirmative obligation to report questionable professional behavior so these situations can be analyzed and helpful explanations developed and guidance provided promptly to all Society members.

How to Report Questionable Ethical Performance

In order to provide ethics case study material to the PRSA Board of Ethics & Professional Standards (BEPS) based on bad ethical behaviors you witness, download this [How to Report Questionable Ethical Performance](#) form. While neither the Society's Member Code of Ethics nor PRSA BEPS is responsible for enforcement or practices not in compliance with the Code, your examples of ethical lapses are extremely valuable for practitioner training. This information will also be developed into educational and teaching tools for use by PRSA Chapter Ethics Officers.

Special Note: Please provide all information generically. Use a pseudonym or no name for the organizations or individuals whose conduct you are describing. Any scenarios received that directly identify real organizations or individuals will be returned to the sender.

Part 1. Please describe the nature of the questionable behavior. Be as specific as you can, but also brief (up to 200 words).

Part 2. Please list the specific questions raised by the behaviors described above.

Part 3. If you can specify which section(s) of the Code appear to be involved, please list them.

Part 4. If you could make the decisions, how would you like to see this situation resolved (up to 200 words)?

Submit questionable ethical performance information including your name, phone and email address to the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards c/o Judy Voss 212-995-0757 (Fax) judy.voss@prsa.org