

**Public Relations Society of America**  
*Board of Ethics and Professional Standards*  
**Code of Ethics Case Study Series**

**DISCUSSION KEY FOR CASE STUDY #1**

**Disclosure of Information & Deceptive Online Practices & Misrepresentation**

**Case Summary:**

One of the biggest success stories in the technology sector has hired the large international public relations agency you work for to represent its interests in a fierce battle to retain market dominance. Your agency was hired because of its demonstrated success with not only marketing communication but also issues management for other technology companies.

You were not involved in signing the business but are excited to be on the account team. You learn that the issue is a larger, better established and even more successful technology company that is developing products to compete head-to-head with your new client.

With your expertise in multiplatform media, your task is to secure news reports and blogs about how poorly the competitor's products perform and the possible problems that they create because of incompatibility with the most common operating systems.

The only basis you have to support allegations that the competitor's products don't work is a few negative online reviews and print media reports. You are also told that a condition of the contract for services is that your agency cannot disclose the name of the client.

Though you have fewer than five years of public relations experience, you're uncomfortable with this condition and believe it's wrong but don't know how to present your concerns to your boss from the point of view of the agency's business. You're afraid you'll be fired if you question the ethics of your agency or the client and you know jobs at your level are very hard to find. What do you do?

**General Guidance**

For information about disclosure of employment status of public relations agency staff or independent public relations consultants who work on-site at a client's offices see [Professional Standards Advisory 1 — Disclosure of Employment Status of Client-Based PR-Agency Staff](#).

See also: [Professional Standards Advisory 8 - Deceptive Online Practices and Misrepresentation of Organizations and Visuals](#). 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.

**1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict.**

Is it ethical to omit client information when contacting bloggers or traditional media, and is it ethical to disseminate negative information regarding the client's competition with limited proof of accuracy, which my firm has been asked to do?

## 2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision.

- Do local, state or federal laws require a particular decision?
- What do my company and professional values, policies or procedures require?
- What action do I believe is in the public's best interest?
- What actions are in the best interests of my firm and my client?

## 3. Identify key values.

- **Honesty.** Uphold the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those you represent and in communicating with the public.
- **Independence.** Give objective counsel to those you represent and **be accountable** for your actions.
- **Fairness.** Deal fairly with clients, employers, employees, competitors, peers, vendors, media and the public, and respect others' opinions.

## 4. Identify the publics who may be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional's obligation to each.

- The bloggers & other media who report on the (potentially inaccurate) information provided
- Consumers who may or may not purchase the new technology based on the information provided
- Employees of your PR firm and the client's firm if negative publicity from passing on questionable information ultimately hurts future business
- Others: the public relations profession; self, employees of the client's competitor

## 5. Select ethical principles to guide the decision making process.

Several core Provisions of the PRSA Code of Ethics help guide the appropriate action:

- **Free Flow of Information.** Protect and advance unobstructed, accurate and truthful information.
- **Competition.** Promote fair and healthy rivalry, honor intellectual property rights and employ ethical practices.
- **Disclosure of Information.** This provision is based on the premise that, "Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society." The stated intent of this provision is: "To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making." The Code guidelines that address this situation require that members: supply truthful and accurate open communication to support informed decision making, promptly correct errors that you are responsible for and reveal sponsors for causes and interests you represent.

- **Enhancing the Profession.** This provision is intended to enhance and strengthen public trust in our profession. It requires members to: “Decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions that are contrary to this Code.”

## 6. Make a decision and justify.

The public relations professional’s greatest loyalty is to his/her client/employer; however, the professional is obligated to provide counsel and actions that serve in the best interest of the public. Responsible advocacy requires that the interests of those affected by this decision be considered.

Although the potential for conflict between loyalty to client and revealing your client’s involvement exists in this situation, the value of honesty helps resolve this conflict. Appropriate counsel would require the public relations professional to advise the client that it would not be in anyone’s best interests to pass on unsubstantiated rumors about the competitor’s new product and that any contact with online or traditional media on the client’s behalf would require that your firm truthfully disclose that the contract is on behalf of the client.

This decision also would serve your client’s best interest since deceiving the media and the public(s) could contribute to declining public(s) trust in the firm, not to mention potential legal liabilities if the information being passed along is false and defamatory to the competitor. This decision would preserve the integrity of processes of communication and also help the client (and the public relations professional/firm) maintain important relationships with its customers and the media who cover this industry.

Being relatively new and not in a position of power does not excuse you from acting in an ethical manner. Your first action should be to make the above arguments to your boss and ask him or her to counsel the client accordingly so that all actions on their behalf are open and honest. If your boss or the client refuses to change direction, your options would be to seek higher authority to press the issue (at your firm and with the client), and absent any change in direction, to then ask to be removed from this account.