

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

**Public Relations Ethics Case Study #1**

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

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?

1. Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.
2. Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision.
3. Choose key values that apply.
4. Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional's obligation to each one.
5. Select ethical principles to guide your decision-making.

6. Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.

## **Guidance for Case Study #1**

### **Professional Standards Advisory PS-1:**

#### **Disclosure of Employment Status of Client-Based PR-Agency Staff**

Disclosure of employment status of public relations agency staff or independent public relations consultants who work on-site at a client's offices.

Today there are a variety of practices for engaging public relations counsel in the client-agency/consultant relationship. A practice that is apparently being used more frequently is one in which employees of an agency or independent consultants work on-site at the client organization, in either a full- or part-time capacity. Sometimes they are identified with company titles. Having agency staff or consultants on-site can benefit the client company by providing face-to-face access to their counsel and support. Plus, the additional personnel are available to handle routine or specific PR responsibilities. However, at a time when openness and transparency in communications is recognized as a "best practice" for companies and organizations, public relations professionals must consider the issue of disclosure.

### **Professional Standards Advisory PS-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. (Note: The term "Flog" has been coined to describe a "fake blog," where an organization or its representative creates an online forum that appears to be from a private citizen expressing personal opinion or experiences, when, in fact, it is being maintained for hire with an undisclosed agenda.)

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.