

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

**Public Relations Ethics Case Study #4**

**Ethical Use of Interns**

As director of public relations for a major pharmaceutical company, you are under increasing pressure to show measurable results with a limited budget. The CEO asks you to develop an effective campaign to engage public support for the company's application to the Federal Drug Administration for approval of a new drug research shows to be highly effective at controlling asthma for children and to have no known side effects.

As one of your key tactics, you plan a series of community meetings for parents. Your CEO is pleased with the tactic. You have an unpaid intern, working for class credit and public relations experience who has completed course work and is looking for a job in a tight market. He wants public relations experience that will benefit his job search but you have not yet given him meaningful tasks that will help him build his skills. He has been answering the phone and filing while you have been out of the office in meetings for hours at a time. You don't have the budget to hire a mailing service or temp to get the invitations out, track RSVPs or check-in guests at the informational meetings. You want to assign the job to the intern.

Should you do this?

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 #4**

##### **[Professional Standards Advisory #17: Ethical Use of Interns](#)**

Unpaid internships remain widely available in the American workplace. This Professional Standards Advisory (PSA) addresses the ethical implications regarding internships in public relations firms, businesses, government agencies and anywhere public relations internships are possible.

Employers value work experience when hiring. Job candidates who wish to be competitive willingly accept unpaid positions to gain work experience. This raises questions for both the employer and vulnerable job seekers. The question for employers is: "Does the position being offered meet the legal standard set by federal law for an unpaid internship?" For the student, the question is, "Can the internship be a significant career builder as opposed to just a mindless activity that provides little or no immediate academic or work experience?" For both parties, there are ethical questions to consider.