

Public Relations Society of America

Board of Ethics and Professional Standards

Code of Ethics Case Study Series

Public Relations Ethics Case Study #6

Enhancing the Profession

You are the public relations professional for a housing developer. Your company's next project is multi-family housing for middle-income families. In gathering information related to the project, you find that the land for the complex was the site of a landfill. An EPA report shows very low levels of contaminants that are not life-threatening hazards. You discuss this information with your supervising boss, who is not a public relations professional, and recommend ways to explain the landfill history in promotional materials. Your boss tells you that the landfill information is not to be included in the materials. He does not want this issue proactively discussed. What do you do?

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

Do you follow your employer's instructions?
Should potential renters have this information?

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

Internal (builder) – Is the developer legally bound to proactively reveal the history of land? What steps is the developer taking to ensure that levels of contaminants remain low? What monitoring of the land is required to ensure that contaminants are not life threatening?

External (residents) – Conditions of land can change over time. If renters plant small gardens, could food be affected by land contaminants? What other potential issues could change the contaminant levels of the land? Even though contaminants are not life threatening, are there any other potential impacts such as allergies or sensitivities that might affect children, the elderly or people with immune deficiencies?

3. Identify key values.

The PRSA Code of Ethics presents core values that set the industry standards for the professional practice of public relations. These values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole.

In this situation, several professional values in the Code of Ethics apply.

Honesty – we adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in communicating with the public.

Independence – we provide objective counsel to those we represent and are accountable for our actions.

Loyalty – we are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

Fairness – PRSA members deal fairly with the general public.

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4. Identify the parties who will be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional's obligation to each.

The developer – public relations professional has a duty to convince his/her boss that revealing this information and the efforts of the developer to ensure the safety of residents is in the best interest of the company.

Potential residents – public relations professional has a duty to inform the public about safety issues.

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

Core principles of the PRSA Code effecting this decision are:

- Enhancing the Profession -- To build respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations. This principle requires that a member decline representation of clients or organizations that urge or require actions contrary to this Code. Additionally, unethical behavior would be to declare the product (in this case, land) safe without disclosing the EPA report.
- Disclosure of Information – To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making. This principle requires that a member be honest and accurate in all communications.

6. Make a decision and justify.

There is a potential for conflict between loyalty to the employer and the public's right to know. However, the value of independence helps resolve this conflict.

You must convince your boss that it is in the company's best interest to acknowledge the history of the land. It is an opportunity to explain all efforts to ensure the safety of the land being developed and future monitoring. The reputation of the company will be enhanced by proactive communications.

If the EPA report becomes public under Freedom of Information Act, the failure to voluntarily disclose this information could backfire against the developer and result in serious economic losses.

Your reputation as a public relations practitioner depends on your skills to persuade your employer to act in the best interest of the public.