

Professional Standards Advisory PS-7 (2004; Revised October 2008)

ENGAGING IN THE USE OF DECEPTIVE PRACTICES WHILE REPRESENTING FRONT GROUPS

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: Representation of front groups with undisclosed sponsorships and/or deceptive or misleading descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants. (Note: The term "Astroturfing" is often associated with unethical front group activities. Because Astroturf is a registered trademark, it is recommended that the term "Front Group" be used.)

BACKGROUND: A variety of organizations - known as "front" groups – as well as individuals have surfaced on behalf of issues and products blindly sponsored by industries and organizations. PRSA members are reminded that open communication is essential for informed decision-making in a democratic society.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE: At least four Code provisions and three professional values relate to this issue. They are:

Code Provisions

Free Flow of Information. Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

Disclosure. A member pledges to be honest and accurate in all communication. Act promptly to correct erroneous communication for which the member is responsible. Investigate the truthfulness and accuracy of information released on behalf of those represented. Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented. Disclose financial interest such as stock ownership of the client organization, past client work or affiliation. Avoid deceptive practices. And disclose or help expose deceptive practices where possible

Conflicts of Interest. Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the publics.

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

Professional Values

Honesty. We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

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

Advocacy. We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES

- Citizens for Tougher Tobacco Laws* (committed to passing legislation in every state that pre-empts all local smoking legislation resulting in lighter state standards)
- Citizens for Justice in the Workplace* (advocacy group committed to a raise in the minimum wage)
- National Association for Good, Honest, Liberal Politicians* (committed to the defeat of conservative elected officials)
- Coalition for Better Food* (sponsored by farm interests dedicated to softening legislation on feed lot pollution)
- National Association for School Safety*(gun control advocacy group)
- Automotive Safety Advocates* (coalition of auto parts manufacturers lobbying to lessen regulation on auto repairs at the state level nationwide)

- Sustainable Earth* (coalition of business organizations and interests committed to fighting tougher environmental legislation)
- Coalition for Feminine Rights * (advocacy group to defeat the pro-life agenda.)
- PEACE People Everywhere Against Coercive Education* (religious organizations committed to getting prayer into schools)
- National Association for Good, Honest, Conservative Politicians* (committed to the defeat of liberal elected officials)
- Coalition for Better Food* (sponsored by farm interests dedicated to softening legislation on feed lot pollution)
- Automotive Safety Advocates* (coalition of auto parts manufacturers lobbying to lessen regulation on auto repairs at the state level nationwide)
- Sustainable Earth* (coalition of business organizations and interests committed to fighting tougher environmental legislation)
- PEACE People Everywhere Against Coercive Education* (religious organizations committed to getting prayer into schools)

*Hypothetical organizations

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE: PRSA members should recognize that assisting front groups and individuals that represent undisclosed sponsorships and/or deceptive or misleading descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants, even if such activities are lawful such as 527 organizations, constitutes improper conduct and malpractice under the PRSA Member Code of Ethics and should be avoided.

PRINCIPAL BEPS AUTHOR: Jim Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA