

Public Relations Society of America

Board of Ethics and Professional Standards

Code of Ethics Case Study Series

Public Relations Ethics Case Study #3

Disclosure of Information

Assume that you are the president of PR Results, Inc., a Las Vegas-based public relations firm representing the National Cement and Asphalt Contractor's Association (NCACA). NCACA has been closely monitoring high-growth communities across the country, like Las Vegas, that are preparing to vote soon on regional transportation and road improvement plans. NCACA has hired your firm to organize and manage a citizen's group in Las Vegas called Las Vegas Citizens for Active Road Expansion (LVCARE). The group's sole purpose is to persuade voters to pass Las Vegas' aggressive road expansion plans (and bring more business to local and national cement and asphalt companies). A reporter from the *Las Vegas Tribune* learns about LVCARE and contacts you for information regarding the individuals or organization(s) funding/backing the group. Your client asks you to keep their involvement confidential. Your "gut" tells you to disclose the information; however, you are concerned about losing the business if you go against your client's wishes. What do you do?

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

Is it ethical to omit sponsor information, or to disseminate false information regarding the citizens group, LVCARE, which my firm has been asked to organize and manage?

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

Do local, state or federal laws require a particular decision?

What do my company values, policies or procedures require?

What action do I believe is in the public's best interest?

3. Identify key values.

Honesty – I am obligated to tell the truth when communicating with the public.

Fairness – I must deal fairly with my client, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public.

Independence – I will provide objective counsel to my client. I am accountable for my actions.

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

Las Vegas citizens, voters, government officials and media; public relations profession; colleagues/employees; self.

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

A core principle of the *PRSA Member Code of Ethics* regarding “Disclosure of Information” is: “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: “Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented; Be honest and accurate in all communications; and Avoid deceptive practices.” Another Code guideline under “Enhancing the Profession” that applies to this case advises 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 (Las Vegas citizen’s, voters, government officials and media; profession; colleagues/employees; self) 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 truthfully respond to the media by disclosing your client as the sponsor of the citizen’s group, LVCARE, and advising your client of the reasons for acting in the best interest of the public(s).

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 association, not to mention potential legal liabilities associated with local, state and federal disclosure requirements. This decision would preserve the integrity of processes of communication and also help the association (and the public relations professional/firm) maintain important relationships with Las Vegas citizens, voters, media and government officials.

This decision is supported by the *PRSA Member Code of Ethics*, which prohibits deceptive practices (e.g. Not disclosing sponsors for causes and interests represented).