

Challenges and Upholding Integrity: The Research on the Imperative of Ethical Public Relations

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Abstract: Public relations is an important element of the media society, establishing the links of mutual communication between the organization and the various stakeholders [1]. These stakeholders usually include but are not limited to customers, suppliers, shareholders, media, government, and the company's employees. Public relations (PR) professionals are crucial to guiding the ethical standards of organizations. They can either encourage ethical or unethical conduct during campaigns. This paper discusses the ethical foundations in public relations, the ethical challenges in the profession, and ways that public relations professionals can act more ethically. The paper emphasizes the importance of making ethical decisions in PR to build trustworthy, mutually beneficial relationships for both the organization and the various stakeholders. By examining the ethical dilemmas inherent to the profession itself and analyzing real-world cases, this paper argues that engaging in ethical public relations is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic imperative. Ethical public relations can preserve professional integrity, build trustworthy relationships with stakeholders, and contribute to the long-term success of both the organization and the PR practitioners' careers.

Keywords: Public Relations, Ethical Responsibility, Social Media, Social Responsibility, Communications

1. Introduction

Public relations is the profession of integrating all modern communication strategies to serve individuals, organizations, and society at large [1]. The main function of public relations is to build credibility between the organization and the public. According to the Public Relations Society of America, ethics in PR includes values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and transparent communication. Ethics is a matter of all communications including press releases, media relations activities, social media, marketing communications, employee communications, emails, and blogs. Ethics is important in public relations because PR practitioners are deemed as trusted counsel between the organization and the public. They have the power to alter public opinions and therefore possess the ethical responsibility for the information disclosed. Without trust, PR professionals would fail to contribute to the positive impact of their organizations and put the public's rights at risk. However, public relations practitioners often find themselves navigating through ethical challenges during their careers, where the allure of unethical practices could be tempting. This temptation could emerge from the pressure to meet client and organization goals, the

competitive nature of the industry, financial considerations, and the digital landscape. Adhering to the PRSA Codes of Ethics, acquiring sufficient ethical training, accumulating professional experience, and timely consulting with the C-suite during ethical dilemmas are vital to assisting PR professionals' ethical conduct. Engaging in unethical practices could cheat the organization to achieve favorable outcomes, but the negative consequences would damage the brand's reputation and break the trust between the organization and the public. Although public relations practitioners frequently confront ethical dilemmas in their careers and engage in unethical practices might offer an immediate advantage, adhering to ethical principles is indispensable to support the organization's long-term development.

2. Literature Review

Public relations professionals encounter both ethical decision-making at an individual level and at the level of an organization [2]. At a personal ethical decision level, practitioners may be tempted to insider trading, accept bribes, disclose confidential information to a competitor, or selectively report research results [2]. When it comes to an organization level, the central ethical dilemma for PR practitioners is divided loyalty, because they need to be loyal to their employer but at the same time also have loyalties towards the public, the media, and themselves [2]. When facing conflicting loyalties, PR practitioners turn to their personal worldviews to make ethical decisions [2]. Public relations practitioners have the responsibility to best represent their organization while not harming the interests of the public. If practitioners fail to transparently communicate with the public and lie to protect the benefits of their organization, the organization would risk receiving severe backlash and the practitioners would risk damaging their career reputation as well.

Ethical PR practitioners build mutually beneficial relationships between their organization and their stakeholders, fostering trust and transparent communications. The ethical guidelines in public relations are provided by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The PRSA Code of Ethics serves as a guideline for PR practitioners to perform their duties ethically. The code is built upon six principles: advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness [3]. As mentioned in the code, PR practitioners need to provide all relevant facts and truthful information to people. They should acquire knowledge with critical thinking to maintain credibility and take responsibility for their actions. Practitioners should also be loyal to their consultants without putting the public interest at their expense. Last but not least, practitioners should respect all views fairly. PR Practitioners are expected to adhere to the PRSA Code of Ethics to maintain trustworthiness between their organizations and stakeholders.

In the complex nature of the real world, PR practitioners face various temptations that could lead them to engage in unethical practices. These temptations include but are not limited to pressure to please clients, maintaining reputations, securing media coverage, social media influences, competitive pressure, temptation to mislead during crisis, conflict of interest, and financial considerations [8]. First, PR practitioners often work with clients who exert pressure to achieve their goals at the expense of ethical standards [8]. The temptation to please clients by bending ethical standards can be significant for PR practitioners. Secondly, when an organization faces a reputational crisis, public relations professionals could be tempted to cover up the negative information or deceive the public on the severity of the situation, leading to unethical conduct [8]. Thirdly, public relations professionals often strive to secure media coverage for their organizations. They could be tempted to bribe journalists or manipulate relationships with media professionals to receive positive earned media coverage [8]. Fourthly, PR professionals could be tempted to create fake accounts, purchase followers, or generate fake engagements to boost the online presence of clients, manipulating public perceptions on social media [8]. Public relations professionals are often under intense pressure to outshine their competitors in the competitive PR industry, leading to the temptation of engaging in

unethical practices such as spreading false information about the competitors and sabotaging their campaigns [8]. During a crisis, public relations practitioners would undergo the most temptation to engage in unethical conduct. They may tend to mislead the public by spreading false information or downplaying the severity of the organization's situation in order to manipulate the public [8]. PR professionals often work with multiple clients simultaneously, so they may be tempted to prioritize the interests of one client over another [8]. They may also tend to prioritize the interest of their client over other stakeholders, causing unethical behaviors. Last but not least, the financial pressures within PR agencies or organizations can tempt PR practitioners to accept projects that may not align with ethical standards, leading to compromised ethical principles for financial gain [8].

Public relations practitioners are the "ethical conscience" in an organization, where they carry out critical roles to provide ethical counseling to senior organizational leaders [5]. They provide ethical guidance that demonstrates both the concerns of their client and the various stakeholders [5]. Most codes of ethics provide no enforcement besides the occasional removal of membership in PRSA, leaving these codes ineffectual in restricting practitioners' actions [9]. Therefore, acting ethically is primarily the responsibility of PR practitioners themselves. It is crucial for practitioners to acquire holistic ethical training to act morally. Research was conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation in 2007 studying public relations ethics. The research surveyed 1,827 IABC members along with other professional communicators worldwide [9]. The study revealed that 65% of public relations practitioners around the world have access to the decision-making executive level of their organizations, often called the "C-Suite" [9]. This shows that besides being involved in strategic management, planning processes, and marketing campaigns, public relations managers are also involved in ethical advising in an organization [9]. However, IABC's study also shows that the majority of public relations practitioners did not have a lot of academic training in ethics. 30% of the practitioners reported that they had no academic ethics study and 40% of the practitioners said they had only a few lectures or readings on public relations ethics [9].

Fortunately, the emphasis on public relations ethics increased over the decades and practitioners nowadays receive more ethical training compared to the past years. In 2022, the University of Georgia's Communications Department conducted an international survey in Canada and the USA, where the sample included 1,046 respondents working full-time in the spheres of public relations [5]. Among the 1,046 respondents, over 85% of the professionals indicated that they have participated in communication ethics training [5]. However, only 30% of the public relations practitioners indicated that they had ethical training in recent years [5]. Although nowadays public relations professionals exhibit more ethical training than they did in the past, the current training remains insufficient. Professional experience with ethics needs to be acquired over time and newer practitioners are at a disadvantage to ethically face a dilemma, even if they had good intentions. The lack of preparation for young practitioners to deal with ethical issues not only jeopardizes their careers but also harms the reputation of the public relations profession [5]. Both professional experiences and quality education in ethics are vital for a PR practitioner to perform ethically. Universities and organizations can put more emphasis on educating practitioners on ethical PR, making these learnings mandatory rather than voluntary. Training programs are also essential in educating the ethical expectations of PR professionals. Organizations should conduct yearly ethical training for PR practitioners to best assist their employees.

Top management is another key factor in helping to support ethical PR practices; it has been found to be crucial in encouraging employee's ethical behavior [10]. There are three actions that top management can ameliorate public relations professionals' ethical dilemmas: (1) serve as role models by promoting ethical practices, (2) promptly rebuke unethical practices, and (3) promote ethical codes for both their organization and the industry [10]. Although a firm's ethics code rarely influences the

practitioners' ethical behaviors in a determining way, the leaders' commitment to ethical behavior and rewards for ethical practice positively influence fellow public relations practitioners to perform ethical conduct [10]. During times of ethical dilemmas, public relations practitioners could seek their superiors for ethical guidance, aiming to make the ethical decision that generates mutual benefits for all stakeholders.

In the 21st century, public relations practitioners embraced digital media as the main communication tool in their work. Social media has revolutionized the landscape of public relations, allowing instant communications, direct engagement with audiences, data analytics, influencer partnerships, and crisis management [4]. However, the rise of social media also brought forth new ethical challenges for PR professionals. Nearly 60% of surveyed professionals reported facing ethical challenges in their daily work, with a wide range of ethical challenges in digital practices [5]. Technologies and emerging media impacted public relations and raised new ethical challenges for PR professionals, including native advertising, the blurring of paid strategies with earned media, consumer privacy, and digital ad fraud [6]. One of the primary ethical challenges involves privacy issues related to data collection. For example, the Internet and social media platforms collect large amounts of user information to form campaigns and communicate with various stakeholders [7]. The 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal is one of the most notable examples of an ethical dilemma in the realm of data privacy and public relations, where Cambridge Analytica gained access to approximately 87 million Facebook users' personal data without their explicit consent [7]. Both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica suffered severe damage to their reputations, indicating the consequence of unethical PR practices in data privacy. Therefore, PR professionals must navigate the fine line between utilizing user data and respecting user privacy. It is also important to maintain transparency in online interactions, where PR professionals are obligated to disclose sponsorships to content. The ethical challenges arising from social media marketing highlight the importance of transparency and integrity when PR professionals conduct online communications. Hence, the organization's credibility could be preserved.

Conducting public relations unethically can lead to severe consequences, affecting an organization's reputation, trustworthiness, legal standing, and long-term sustainability. Although acting unethically could provide shortcuts for achieving short-term profits, it jeopardizes an organization's long-term development. Manipulating public opinion by spreading misinformation is a classic example of unethical PR. One notable example is "Walmarting Across America" in 2006. Walmart launched a blog called "Walmarting Across America," documenting the journey of a couple's positive experiences at Walmart stores while traveling across America [12]. The blog appeared to be an organic account from the couple. However, it was later revealed that Walmart paid the couple, and the blog was managed by Edelman, the world's largest PR firm. Walmart's involvement in the blog was not transparent, intending to gain sales through deceptive advertising. When the true nature of the blog was exposed, public outrage and accusations were tremendous. Although Walmart and Edelman issued apologies, the incident severely damaged their reputation. Many employees were fired in Walmart, including their PR firm. Blogging and social media were still new back then, if this incident were to occur in today's blogosphere, Walmart would face much larger consequences. If Walmart had revealed that the couple's trip was being sponsored, people would still enjoy the blog and it could have been a creative PR strategy. When choosing to deceive the public, the organization may gain short-term benefits, but the brand reputation and long-term standings are being put at great risk. This incident emphasized the significance of transparency and ethical communications in public relations.

When public relations professionals conduct their work ethically, the organization can achieve long-term success and credibility by building trust, enhancing reputation, and contributing to social responsibilities. An example of ethical PR practice is Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" Campaign.

Patagonia is an American outdoor recreation clothing company, and it has been well-known for its commitment to environmental and social responsibility. In 2011, the company launched a campaign in The New York Times with an ad that featured a picture of one of their best-selling jackets, along with the “Don’t Buy This Jacket” headline. The campaign was not trying to discourage customers from making a purchase; it educated consumers about the environmental impact during the process of clothing production by providing information on the resources used. The campaign urges consumers to consider their needs before making a purchase. Patagonia’s campaign was incredibly transparent, committing to honesty and openness. The campaign was in line with the organization’s values, demonstrating their dedication towards environmental conservation. The growth of fast fashion brands such as Zara and H&M has exacerbated the negative impact of consumerism on the environment, while Patagonia is among the few brands that have stayed true to their mission. The campaign raised conversations about consumerism and sustainability, allowing the company to engage with the public on environmental issues. Patagonia received positive public perception and was widely praised for its ethical stance, promoting an increase in brand loyalty with environmentally conscious consumers. Interestingly, the company’s sales rose by 30% following this campaign [11]. In a world where companies are obsessed with profitability, Patagonia’s ethical PR tactics and environmental priorities once again prove that doing good is good for the business. Therefore, choosing to conduct ethical PR could build genuine relationships with the public, achieve long-term brand loyalty, and potentially receive more financial gains as well.

3. Conclusion

Public relations is one of those trades in which earning trust, respect, and loyalty are crucial to success. Public relations professionals play crucial ethical roles within a company, facing ethical decision-making at both a personal and an organizational level. They are the ethical conscience within an organization, encompassing the responsibility to contribute to the organization’s reputation, credibility, and mutually beneficial relationships with all stakeholders. PR professionals face a variety of ethical challenges in their careers, where they constantly need to balance the interests between various stakeholders and find solutions under the pressure of their clients and the media. Although it could be tempting to conduct unethical PR as a shortcut to achieve success, this process would harm the organization’s reputation and negatively contribute to its long-term development. Ethical public relations not only mitigate risks and build resilience but also foster a positive image of the organizations and the PR profession itself, ensuring long-term success and public loyalty. Through adherence to the PRSA Codes of Ethics, comprehensive ethical training, the accumulation of professional experiences, and timely consulting with top management managers, public relations professionals can enhance their ability to practice ethical conduct and foster valuable relationships. In the vast ocean of business, ethical PR practices act as the North Star, steering the ship safely toward the harbor of credibility and lasting reputation.

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