

Living inside a PR world-between ethics and “spinning”

By Grigore Larisa-Alexandra

Abstract:

While PR critics state that “public relation ethics is an oxymoron”, the purpose of this paper is to provide a comparison between good/bad, ethical/unethical public relation practice especially in managing conflict of interest, and to underline the importance of responsibility and reputation in managing crisis.

Many PR people argue the concept of “spinning”, so the paper emphasizes its devastating effects both on public relation practitioner and company’s ethics, credibility, image and reputation.

The only conclusion to draw from the contradiction between altruism and self-interest and between the interest of the public and the one of the company is recognizing the ethical judgment that helps make a balanced decision in ethical dilemmas.

Key words: Responsibility, public confidence, reputation, integrity, propaganda, manipulation

JEL classification: M14

1. Responsibility and PR

“Responsibility is the price of greatness” (Winston Churchill)

When talking about PR you cannot only resume to the definition given by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984, the one saying that PR is nothing more than “the practice

of managing communication between an organization and its publics”. There is one single word missing, the one that underlines the meaning of public relations better than any other: RESPONSIBILITY!...Professional, social, media, moral, corporate, individual (and so on) responsibility means nothing more than ethics.

In a 2005 poll, sponsored by Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), one of the questions in the survey was: “Do PR practitioners sometimes take advantage of the media to present misleading information that is favorable to their clients?” Eighty five percent of the respondents agreed. Whether there is no truth, some truth or a lot of truth to the ethical indictments of public relations, PR practitioners must carefully consider their relationships to ethical principles.

2. Ethics and PR

“Relativity applies to physics, not ethics.” (Albert Einstein)

Ethics is more doing what you should do than doing what you must do. Some people say that practicing ethics needs courage. I would say that not practicing it needs a lot of courage because of the risk involved and the price paid. As John Luther said: “Good character is more to be praised than outstanding talent. Most talents are, to some extent, a gift. Good character, by contrast, is not given to us. We have to build it piece by piece-by thought choice, courage and determination.”

Questions of ethics in public relations inevitably arise as practitioners are expected to endure a delicate balance of simultaneously servicing both client and the collective good. PR professionals must constantly and responsibly manage conflicting interest between the needs of the client and the needs of the public. Loss of public confidence and a damaged reputation are the most likely results of a poor managed conflict of interest. Because public confidence is important to all companies’ success, good market communications are all about making the company relevant to the target groups of people, having a message people believe in, keeping promises and creating dialogue and trust. For although the cost may be well hidden, losing public confidence is an expensive business.

3. Spinning and PR

“No matter I’m dizzy, the world keep spinning in circles.” (Anonymous)

But what happens when spinning rises, leaving PR behind? “Spinning” is nothing else than a form of propaganda, achieved through providing an interpretation of an event or campaign to persuade public opinion in favor or against a certain organization or public figure. While traditional PR may also rely on creative presentation of the facts, “spin” often, though not always, implies disingenuous, deceptive and/or highly manipulative tactics.²

Orson Wells broadcasted a radio rendition of the “War of the worlds” story on October 30, 1938- Halloween Night. A lot of people claimed that of the estimated six to twelve million people who heard the broadcast, nearly one million people panicked. The idea that the broadcast caused even hundreds of thousands of people to call the police, hide in cellars, or otherwise prepare for a “Martian invasion” is more of a “put-on” than the broadcast itself.

Public relation firms provide much more than press agency. Harold Burson, chairman of Burson-Marsteller states: “In the beginning, top management used to say to us, ‘Here’s the message, deliver it’. Then it became, ‘What should we say?’, Now, in smart organizations, it’s ‘What should we do?’” This is a good approach especially when we talk about crisis. As Steven Fink said, crisis are forewarning situations that run the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with normal operations, jeopardizing organizational image, and damaging a company’s bottom line. For example in a recent survey sixty-five percent of the respondents thought declining to comment almost always means the company is guilty of wrong doing. Responses to crises affect perceptions of the organization’s credibility, character and competence.

4. Ethical dilemmas and PR

“Other than the helplessness to choose between life options, dilemmas are often a situation when no option to choose is left before” (Anonymous)

Rephrasing the title of David Callahan’s book “The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead” I would raise the next question: Why more PR professionals are spinning to get ahead? The same David Callahan gives us the answer: “When you put people under pressure and give them a choice of preserving either their integrity or their financial security, many will go for the money”.

Ethical dilemmas often result from dealing with variables. The ability to consistently make decisions rooted in difficult ethical dilemmas is a characteristic that is an everyday reality of the PR practitioner.

Rather than limiting discussion to negative, lump statements PR practitioners can now better understand the variables that affect their moral and ethics. In an ideal case everyone should follow Fitzpatrick and Gauthier’s professional responsibility model that frees public relations representatives from assuming social and communitarian responsibilities in their activities.

In the end, isn’t all about what Milton Friedman said “The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”, it is about competence, professionalism, specialist’ individual responsibility and conduct in managing PR, all these are activities that define and outline public relation activities in an ethical manner.

References

1. Grunig, James and Hunt, Todd: Managing Public Relations (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Javanowich, 1984), 6e. “Public relations is what you do with what you know and what other think about what you say”.
2. Safire, William “The Spinner Spun”, New York Times, December 22, 1996

3. Cutlip Scott M., Certer Allen H and Broom Glen M.- Effective Public Relations, Eighth Edition
4. Norwegian Business Daily Dagens Næringsliv, August 21st, 2006
5. Callahan, David: The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead, Harcourt, 2004
6. Fitzpatrick, K. & Gauthier, C. (2001). Toward a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 16(2&3): 193-212.