



Even in today's online world, PRSA's ethics stay the same

By Mary Pekas

What I am about to say may alarm you: this year's college freshmen have never known a world without Internet.

This social observation comes from the Beloit College Mindset List, which has been cataloging cultural phenomena since 1998 to offer insight into the minds of those *increasingly* youthful undergrads. And this year's list reveals that in addition to playing with Tickle Me Elmos and observing Martin Luther King Day in Arizona, the Class of 2015 has been surfing the Net since they were in diapers.

Feeling old? Well, "don't touch that dial!" The aforementioned generation may have to Google that reference, but modern public relations practitioners should take note: While the game has changed, the "rules" are still the same.

This month the Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics will celebrate 11 years of service. Following the society's initial punitive code drafted in 1950, today's Code was adapted in 2000 to offer a more educational and inspirational guide to ethical conduct for professionals in the field.

To keep the Code timely, the PRSA Board of Directors employed a foresighted tactic in 2004: Professional Standards Advisories. Considered direct extensions of the Code, PSAs are published as needed to address societal changes, industry developments and technological advancements – including the Web, Web 2.0, and presumably, the Web of tomorrow.

So what's new in ethics in the evolving online world? Not a thing.

As the world of communication has been inundated with powerful online tools, budding players and progressively engaged audiences, the **core of the Code still applies**. In fact, the Code's PSA for "deceptive online practices" states that, at a minimum, the following provisions and values commonly apply:

Provisions

- Free Flow of Information
- Disclosure of Information
- Conflicts of Interest
- Enhancing the Profession

Values

- Honesty
- Fairness
- Advocacy

The following might be case studies that our up-and-coming colleagues could discuss in PR Ethics 101 this year, but they are also realistic examples of online dilemmas professionals face today:

- Your company's director of public relations asks you to create fake online identities to post favorable comments about your company, and disparaging ones against competitors, on news stories, blogs and social networking sites. Do you set up accounts and start posting?
- A vocal member of your client's online community persistently questions your client's claims and expresses seemingly honest, but unsavory opinions about your client's products and services. Do you delete his comments and banish him from the network?
- You have pitched a popular blogger to write about your client's product line by offering him a generous assortment of free goods. He has posted a rave review, but he failed to disclose the perks he received. Do you ignore the omission and claim a PR win?
- You have the task of ghostblogging for your CEO, and a current event prompts the opportunity for a swift blog post from the head of the company. She is out of the office and has not responded to your draft submission. Do you post the blog without approval? Should you even be drafting blogs with her byline?

These scenarios can result in a spectrum of actions; some dictated by personal values, others by law. However, the greatest strategy for weighing such predicaments is to familiarize yourself with the Code – because regardless of your generation and the changing landscape of the career, one thing remains constant: Ethics never go out of style.

To review the PRSA Code of Ethics and to take the pledge, visit www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/.

Join the Public Relations Society of America, Southern Arizona Chapter Ethics Luncheon this month!

"Role of Government Communications: Perspectives and Expectations at the Local, State and Federal Levels"

Guest speaker: Jan Leshar, Deputy County Administrator for Medical and Health Services, shares her experiences after serving former Arizona Governor and Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano.

When: Tuesday, Sept. 27; 11:45 a.m.-1 p.m.

Where: Arizona Inn, 2200 E. Elm St.

Cost: \$25 for members of Public Relations Society of America Southern Arizona Chapter, International Association of Business Communicators Tucson, American Advertising Federation Tucson, Tucson Chapter of the American Marketing Association; \$15 for students and \$35 for others.

Reservations: www.prsatucson.org

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