

# Public Relations and Persuasion

**T**he practice of public relations shapes much of what we know of contemporary business, industry, government, sports, and entertainment—even religion. The act of helping an organization and its public adapt to each other or to “win the cooperation of groups of people”<sup>1</sup> calls on practitioners to “establish and maintain mutual lines of communications”; to manage problems or issues; to help management respond to public opinion and to use change in a positive way; to “serve as an early warning system”; and to help management understand how best to “serve the public interest.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, practitioners are asked to serve a variety of roles within the organization, including those of spokesperson, listener, planner, surveyor, and counselor. These communication and relationship roles become increasingly important in the digital world where rumors or misinformation can fly around the globe with the stroke of a computer key and where interconnectedness makes information about business and government in Greece as pertinent in Athens, Georgia, USA, as it is in Athens, Greece.

Such a daunting task list has prompted calls for increased emphasis on ethical practice.<sup>3</sup> The two largest professional organizations have adopted formal codes of ethical practice. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) have gone beyond the mere adoption of codes; they also teach, talk about, and try to enforce ethical practices. Practitioners from different industries, from health care to education, have adopted similar codes seeking to define and characterize the ethical principles that underlie best practices in their fields. (See <http://www.case.org> and <http://www.hcpra.org> for examples.)

Despite these efforts, the public image of public relations practitioners remains clouded. Terms such as *spin doctor* and *flack* and *special interests* are all too familiar; phrases such as “It’s just a PR stunt” and “It’s all image control” come to mind too readily for the field to become complacent about its image or its role. The criticism may just reflect the general cynicism with which most institutions such as the press, big business, and government are regarded. But at other times, the criticism stems from the discordant relationships between practitioners and other communicators. Organizational downsizing and resizing have meant that marketers, advertisers, and practitioners often operate within the same department—indeed, sometimes with duties divided among two or three employees. This may foster the assumption that practitioners use the same one-way flow of persuasive information that advertisers or marketers traditionally rely on in sales campaigns rather than a belief that practitioners desire to build and maintain reciprocal communication flow. The

interdependence between journalists and practitioners also has been an uneasy relationship, with questions arising about how much interaction can occur between the media and other organizations before ethical standards are breached. As new media emerge, these relationships become increasingly uncertain and undefined.

Criticism sometimes arises from a “kill the messenger” syndrome when practitioners, like reporters, are held personally responsible for the actions about which they communicate. The boundary communication role between the organization and the public played by the practitioner can become a convenient point of complaint for those discontent with the actions of politicians, corporations, or activist groups. Sometimes the criticisms are well deserved, such as when practitioners choose to divert public attention from the truth or distort it, or when they deliberately clutter the communication channels with confusing rhetoric or events.<sup>4</sup> Ethical suspicions also result from what appears to be the ever-increasing spread of the application of public relations into fields such as health care, litigation, and government.

The four chapters in this section do not claim to be encyclopedic, but they seek to raise the types of questions encountered by today’s practitioners and audiences. Are there fields of interest so vital to the public good that public relations should not play a persuasive role in them? Is the polishing and shaping of a public image inherently deceptive? How does one loyally serve the interests of a client or an employer and still serve the public interest? How much social responsibility should a corporation or business be required to demonstrate, and how does one best balance social responsibility with fiscal responsibility? Some of the cases that follow are drawn from actual situations; others are hypothetical cases based on a realistic understanding of these pressures. Each seeks to focus attention on the needs, pressures, contradictions, and promises of this influential profession.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing Part 3, you should be able to meet these objectives:

- Identify key ethical issues faced by public relations practitioners
- Recognize the interdependency of public relations practitioners and journalists, and explore the challenges present in this relationship
- Evaluate the nature of other conflicting relationships and possible conflicts of interest that arise in the practice of public relation
- Explore the nuances of truthfulness by exploring how loyalties and values may influence the amount of truthful information disseminated and publicized
- Appreciate the social responsibility of businesses and organizations operating within a democracy
- Understand how a public relations campaign can be conducted in a socially responsible manner

# Public Communication

**I**nformation provider. Advocate. Activist: Public relations practitioners frequently play multiple roles as they work with or against other stakeholders with particular viewpoints, needs, or causes. By definition, the practitioner is partisan—representing a certain group, organization, or public—with biases and loyalties apparent as he or she seeks to build or enhance critical relationships. In many settings, this partisanship raises few or no ethical questions. However, in the complex sphere of public communication in an open society, where successful or unsuccessful public relations may impact political campaigns, international diplomacy, judicial proceedings, and voter confidence, the motivations, tactics, strategies, goals, and objectives of practitioners may be more questioned.

The work of this important profession is clearly informational and decidedly persuasive. And why not insist on both at the same time? Truth is never neutral, so why should the telling of truth be any less than the professional mandate of someone paid to communicate a particular perspective? In one important sense, this is a more honest mode of media work because one's biases as a communicator in a public relations setting are usually transparent. Shedding pretenses is normally the first lesson in public relations training.

Regardless of how it is categorized, the need for advocacy and information extends from PTA councils to councils of war. Dwight Eisenhower recalled in his memoirs of the D-Day invasion that soon after his arrival in London in the summer of 1942, he recognized that the Allied plan to break into Germany through France would impose immense hardship on British families and farms as American sailors and soldiers gathered in preparation. His solution was to establish early “an effective Public Relations Section of the headquarters.”<sup>5</sup> The general went on to describe battle plans, so readers were left to wonder what role public relations played in the success of the Allied cause and in the continuation of pluralist democracy in the West. This part of the untold story is likely complicated and considerable.

Contemporary politicians and strategists rely on the information and persuasion of public relations to raise funds for campaigns, to influence decision making about legislation and policies, and to attempt to motivate what has become an inactive electorate to care about public affairs. A politician's choice of a press secretary or a campaign manager may be as avidly watched and debated as is the selection of a running mate or major policy initiative. Trade and professional organizations, labor unions, and industry groups routinely employ

full-time lobbyists and send representatives to meet with policymakers and politicians in local, state, and federal offices in hopes of influencing decisions. Indeed, the U.S. government employs thousands of public affairs specialists, writers, photographers, and editors, even though certain provisions of federal law seemingly prohibit such appropriation of funding.<sup>6</sup> At times, it seems that the channels of public debate have become so overloaded with voices representing special-interest groups that there is little room left for anyone who cares to articulate the need for the general public interest.

Who should control or influence the voices in the political and public affairs marketplace of ideas? Is the practice of journalism inherently more ethical than that of public relations because it strives more for objectivity and information? Or is public relations more honest because its practitioners admit their allegiances openly? Is there such a need to enhance the communication capability of some voices in the public forum that public relations must be employed? How far can the practice of public relations expand before it interferes with the democratic process?

The four cases in this chapter explore these questions. “What Happened to Mr. Ethics?” examines how journalists and public relations practitioners influence public communication. “Publicity and Justice” probes the expanding field of litigation public relations. Is the cause of rendering justice advanced when high-profile defendants or prosecutors use public relations tactics to communicate their views before trial? The third case, “The Many Friends of the Candidate,” explores how the use of social and digital media is changing political communication. The last case, “Bundling Campaign Support,” explores the factors involved in raising large donations for political campaigns.

## 43 WHAT HAPPENED TO MR. ETHICS?

“I can’t believe you’re even considering it, Richard.”

“Richard, you’ve always been the model reporter—Mr. Reporting Ethics. Surely there’s another option. You’re going to become a flack!”

Richard had worked for twelve years as a newswriter for a metro daily, moving from general assignment reporting to the business desk. He had enjoyed the demands and had a gift for interviewing and a fluent writing style. Editors seldom heard complaints about the accuracy of his work or the objectivity of his stances. Richard prided himself on thorough research before he interviewed or wrote.

That commitment to quality was known outside the newsroom, too. A year earlier, Richard had written a five-part series on the impact of the industrial and commercial downturn in West York. As part of the research, he had interviewed fifty local business managers and directors, read mountains of government and chamber of commerce reports, researched mortgage foreclosures, and even spent a week reporting inside the factory of the largest local manufacturer as it was retooled into a state-of-the-art green energy complex. Even though the news Richard presented was grim, the quality of the series earned him and his paper some awards.

But things were tough at the daily, too. Two months ago, half the reporting staff and some of the editors were let go. The remaining staffers were producing a smaller print daily and an online edition, and both editions featured much less local reporting. Richard could see that ad revenues were not growing at a rate the owners of the paper wanted.

So when he got a news release from the factory he had covered announcing the retirement of its public relations officer, Richard thought he had an opportunity. He believed his careful work on the series had impressed the plant manager. The company’s willingness to embrace new technology and its prospects for growth were intriguing. While he loved his job at the paper and his

work as a reporter, he had always prided himself on his realistic outlook and believed it might be time for him to look for other ways to use his training and skills. He phoned the plant manager and was granted a job interview. Within two weeks, he was offered a job as the public relations and government affairs liaison for the factory. Along with traditional communication duties for the plant, he would also guide their lobbying efforts in the state capital and in D.C.

When he told his colleagues, he was shocked at the passion of their cynicism. "I just can't believe you are doing this, Richard," the city hall reporter said. "The whole field of PR is about obfuscation and image control—it has nothing to do with those things you have always preached at SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists) meetings. I know there a few practitioners you can trust, but most are on the payroll to make their companies look good, and they'll do whatever it takes to make that happen. And you—not only a flack, but a lobbyist, too?"

Another reporter shook his head. "In my twenty-eight years as a reporter, I've never had a minute to waste with a PR person. When I was coming up, we were told they were paid liars, and that's how I've always treated them. Flacks are good for free lunches and photo ops and not much else, in my opinion."

"Free lunches?" Richard said. "Listen, there is one thing I've learned by covering business. If it weren't for public relations practitioners, there wouldn't be a business section published in any paper in this country. Plenty of responsible practitioners work hard to get their stories out. Heaven knows, many of them have helped me. Without these 'flacks' as you call them, none of you could get all the stories you do."

The first reporter broke in: "Think about it, Richard. You've spent a career learning to get around the PR types to get to the truth while they put up barriers for reporters and smoke and mirrors for their bosses. Lobbyists are there to see how cheaply they can buy politicians. Now that things have gotten tough in the newsroom, you're ready to jump in with them. So long, truth. Hello, job security."

Richard walked away feeling more depressed than he had in months. He had thought those old stereotypes about public relations ethics had died out, but apparently he was wrong. Were his colleagues right? Would he have to abandon journalistic ethics to successfully practice corporate public relations? ♦

For a seasoned journalist, Richard displays a surprising level of naiveté in assuming that his friends would not have stereotypical opinions of public relations practitioners. Surveys and anecdotes suggest that most journalists continue to consider themselves more ethical than public relations practitioners. Many practitioners, in turn, believe this negative attitude carries over into press coverage of public relations activities.<sup>7</sup> Richard's decision to leave his newspaper job and move into a lucrative corporate public affairs position is a natural target for the barbs of his colleagues.

Are their barbs on target? Will Richard's new position require him to adopt new standards for ethical behavior because journalistic ethics and practitioners' ethics are incompatible? Yes and no. Obviously, his communication situation will change and become in many ways more elaborate and less independent. Richard may be able to accept this lack of independence, however, if he understands how his position within the communication cycle has changed. The journalist's position as "objective outsider" is gone; the practitioner is called on to be a subjective insider. The voice of the practitioner is the official voice of the organization, not the personal expression of the individual. The lack of a byline on most public relations writing epitomizes this change in position. Such a lack of independence is not necessarily a lack of ethics, however, as long as other values such as accuracy, fairness, and public service are still operative.

Are those values recognized in the corporate office as they were in the newsroom? The written codes of ethics adopted by the two leading public relations professional organizations assert

the centrality of at least some of the values. One of the Core Principles of the Code of Ethics of the Public Relations Society of America says that “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.”<sup>8</sup> According to this standard, Richard will retain and use his commitment to accuracy, fairness, and public service.

Richard had always understood accuracy to mean that his writing was true and verifiable. In some ways, the corporate approval process may better ensure truthfulness than the copy-flow pattern of the print and digital newsroom because there will be more opportunity for errors to be caught. However, Richard may find some ethical tension between the truthfulness and verifiability of what is disclosed and that which is intentionally undisclosed for defensive reasons. It is in protecting this information from disclosure that Richard may face some of the issues his colleagues decried.

Fairness also may present a challenge to Richard’s journalistic intuitions. Richard had always understood fairness to mean that all sides of an issue would be given an opportunity to speak. For instance, in the series on the economy that had led to this job offer, he had interviewed both those in charge of modernizing the plant and the union official worried about job losses. Richard doubted whether he would be as compelled to include the negative information if he were to write a similar piece for a company publication, or if he did, he would certainly focus more on company programs for retraining workers or offering out-placement help to balance it.

Similarly, he may also find tensions between advancing the narrowly focused interest of his employer and the broader public interests as he advocates with legislators and regulators. Although he could attempt to emphasize fairness, he anticipates times when he might instead have to rely solely on accuracy in offering the company’s position or views. Of course, some of his business and general-assignment reporting had lacked complete fairness, too. It wasn’t always possible for a reporter to find a responsible representative for all sides of an issue or to find the time under deadline pressure to pursue all sides.

Richard was determined to continue his commitment to public service, however. In many ways, he felt the new job offered him greater opportunity to work with clearly defined constituent groups and come to understand their needs and interests. The satisfaction of communicating important news to his readers in the paper would be replaced with similar satisfaction from communicating important company news to employees, shareholders, and trade organizations and in helping protect the interests of this key local business. In some ways, being able to adopt a partisan tone when discussing the economic needs of workers, for example, or community needs that the plant and its workers could help meet would increase that satisfaction.

He also looked forward to more opportunity for personal community service. His paper’s code of ethics had prevented him from joining community organizations because of a feared conflict of interest. Now he looked forward to joining groups that were actively involved in making the city a better place for its residents and to participating in programs like the Partner in Education agreement the plant had with the local vocational high school.

He even looked forward to working with the local media. The plant was a major player in the economics of the region. So, in his own way, he wanted to better communicate how its plans for the future would help reboot the local economy. He might even buy his colleagues a free lunch now and then, he thought, but only because it would give him an opportunity to present his company’s views in a sympathetic setting. As a reporter, he had never felt compromised when a practitioner shared the company’s views with him because he trusted his reportorial training to help him maintain a sense of objectivity. He trusted that other reporters could keep their objectivity intact also. All in all, after thinking it through, Richard felt good about his decision to take the new job. His duties might change a bit, but his basic ethical standards did not seem to be threatened. And who knows? Maybe his behavior as a practitioner would help to change at least some of his colleagues’ stereotypes about public relations.

## 44 PUBLICITY AND JUSTICE

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested in December 2008 on charges of fraud and conspiracy. The Democrat was indicted in April 2009 by a federal grand jury on sixteen felony charges including racketeering, conspiracy, wire fraud, and making false statements to investigators.<sup>9</sup> Allegations included accusations that he sought favors or payment in return for naming the replacement for the U.S. Senate seat vacated when Barack Obama became president. Allegations in court documents made public in April 2010 also asserted that public funds in unneeded fees and commissions were given to Blagojevich's wife and that state contracts and some state positions were targeted for campaign donors.<sup>10</sup> Others, including Blagojevich's brother, some aides, and advisors, were also indicted.

After the arrest, the Illinois House and Senate began preparation for impeachment proceedings. On January 9, 2009, the House voted 114 to 1 in favor of impeachment. On January 26, 2009, the Senate impeachment trial began. While his attorneys were preparing his defense, Blagojevich hired The Publicity Agency, a Florida public relations firm, to represent him "in his dealings with the news media."<sup>11</sup> Those dealings were plentiful. Instead of attending the trial in the Illinois Senate, the governor appeared on ABC's *Good Morning America* and *The View* and NBC's *Today*. During the appearances, the governor argued the rules for the impeachment proceedings were unfair and compared himself to a character in a Frank Capra film or a cowboy hung for horse stealing before a trial.<sup>12</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* reported that *The View* hostess Whoopi Goldberg told the governor, "This is turning into a bit of a media circus, and I wonder if you're not hurting yourself more than helping yourself by doing all this because it feels a little bit like people aren't taking you seriously."<sup>13</sup>

Blagojevich's lead attorney, Ed Genson, resigned from the criminal case, telling reporters the governor was not listening to his advice.<sup>14</sup> On January 29, Blagojevich did appear to testify at the proceedings, but the Senate voted 59 to 0 to impeach him.<sup>15</sup>

But the media blitz continued. In March 2009, Glen Selig, Blagojevich's public relations counselor from The Publicity Agency, announced that a book deal had been signed with Phoenix Books for a reported six-figure fee.<sup>16</sup> In the book that was published, *The Governor*, Blagojevich proclaimed his innocence and compared himself to others like Martha Stewart and *It's a Wonderful Life* character George Bailey whom he said had been unfairly treated.<sup>17</sup>

In April, Blagojevich sought the court's permission to travel to Costa Rica to participate on the NBC reality program *I Am a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here*, but when his request was denied, his wife Patti appeared as a contestant.<sup>18</sup> During the program, she was briefly shown discussing the case. During an interview on CNN's *Larry King Live*, Blagojevich said the reality appearance was necessary for the couple to "earn a living and—and be able to afford our mortgage and keep our kids in the same school that they're going in. And it was a very generous offer by NBC."<sup>19</sup>

But the ex-governor's turn in a reality series would come. He appeared as a contestant on Donald Trump's *Celebrity Apprentice 3* in March 2010<sup>20</sup> where during the show he, according to federal prosecutors, "repeatedly proclaimed his innocence"<sup>21</sup> (and got fired as an apprentice) all before his June 2010 trial date.

The ex-governor described his public relations counsel to the *New York Observer* in March 2010, saying, "Just as I was marching into the abyss, Glen came into my life and helped me navigate."<sup>22</sup> Sharon Cohen, an Associated Press writer, said Selig had "transformed Blagojevich into a cottage industry."<sup>23</sup> ♦

The trial concluded in August with a conviction on only one charge; the jury was deadlocked on twenty-three other counts. Federal prosecutors said they would retry Blagojevich on those charges.<sup>24</sup>

Should a politician or a celebrity embroiled in a legal scandal court positive public opinion as a “cottage industry” before trial? The notoriety of cases involving politicians, actors, athletes, musicians, and other celebrities means that accusations against them will get high-profile coverage across news and entertainment media in ways that likely will not be true for private citizens involved in litigation. The O. J. Simpson trials established a precedent for widespread media coverage that far exceeded what had been traditional, and the Clinton impeachment proceedings pushed the limits on what topics would be included in such coverage. Certainly, there are celebrities who assert that they are not role models for others and that what occurs in their lives off the playing field, stage, or film should be kept from the public, but such an argument seems impossible for an elected official such as a governor to make plausibly.

So how should the famous who face serious legal issues approach their public communication or activities? Celebrities and politicians have access to media that is far greater than that afforded most private citizens. Unavoidable consequences may occur when potential jurors and presiding judges are bombarded with carefully chosen and contextualized messages or when plaintiffs or their families are confronted repeatedly with painful disclosures or countercharges. In such a circumstance, is the highest duty to one’s self to launch the best defense possible? What about the duty to one’s family? The numerous media appearances by Blagojevich and his wife may be ethically defensible as a utilitarian way of attesting to his innocence—or they may have been an exploitive way of generating empathy from potential jurors or opinion leaders or of profiting financially from the attention garnered by the impeachment.

Aristotelian analysis may offer the most useful insights here. Certainly, it would be virtually impossible for an indicted governor to avoid media coverage, and it would be virtually impossible for any such celebrity to totally control media coverage. But a balance that magnifies dignity and justice should be sought. What were the ex-governor’s options? He might have avoided the spotlight as much as possible, relying on his defense team or public relations spokespersons to offer his declaration of innocence to the public. Or, he might have pursued news interviews or news conferences as an appropriate setting in which to posit his defense. The pursuit of entertainment venues such as reality programs where payment was acknowledged as being an important motivator for participation and where protestations of innocence are not questioned may be seen as a strategic way to bypass traditional judicial proceedings in order to sustain a disarming public image “full of political bluster, not criminal intent,” as AP writer Sharon Cohen described.<sup>25</sup> In these settings, the interests of the others who were indicted with him are not addressed, and the impact of continuing to publicize the political scandal in Illinois is not considered. Among these choices, consideration of others’ interests, as well as those of Blagojevich, must be weighed heavily as decisions are made regarding public communications.

The role of assertive public relations efforts—such as news conferences, talk show appearances, and special events—during litigation is becoming almost routine, even for noncelebrities, and both defendants and prosecutors use public relations as a tool. Many leading public relations firms have experts available to serve as counselors for attorneys and their clients in this arena. A moral judgment by the practitioners regarding participation in crafting and executing these communication strategies should not be made without considering the legal and ethical underpinnings. Contemporary media coverage of crime and the justice system can be volatile and sometimes prejudicial, as the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled.<sup>26</sup> Yet public discussion and media coverage of a crime, arrest, and trial can only be abridged in certain narrow circumstances. Generally, then, arresting police officers and prosecuting and defense teams enjoy great media access. Unless barred by specific court order, from the time of the crime until completion of a case, they can address the public and media in press conferences, interviews, and speeches, thereby potentially affecting public perception of a suspect and the incident.

The ethical dilemma lies in deciding when information delivery co-opts justice to become trial by entertainment. News conferences, interviews, news releases, books, special events, reality programs: All may be employed by those hoping to alter the tone of the public debate before the

trial begins and a jury is selected. Yet, by attempting to affect or alter public opinion in these ways, litigants may be undermining the judicial process. If indeed all the communication deals with only the abstract issues, the tactics may be defensible. Typically, however such media contacts are more likely to be interpreted as attempts to influence potential jurors or to soften a potential judge into a sympathetic review of pretrial defense motions than as objective truth-telling. Few would argue that justice is served when judgment is rendered in televised talk show deliberations or edited reality programs rather than in a courtroom jury box.

## 45 THE MANY FRIENDS OF THE CANDIDATE

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, highlighted by its "Yes, We Can" promise of change, and his White House staff have succeeded in changing the ways in which candidates and the U.S. president communicate with the public. During the election campaign and the first years in office, the Obama team sought to provide and control access to information in innovative ways, using traditional media advertising, social media outlets, the Internet, and text messages to offer first-hand messages directly to their stakeholders.<sup>27</sup>

During the 2008 primary and general campaigns, more than 2 million individuals registered on the mybarackobama.com website,<sup>28</sup> and the campaign collected more than 13 million e-mail addresses from supporters.<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford law professor who advised the campaign on Internet policy, told MIT's *Technology Review*, "The key networking advance in the Obama field operation was really deploying community-building tools in a smart way from the very beginning."<sup>30</sup> Messages were sent directly to supporters by text, posts, and e-mail. Social communities such as MySpace and Facebook and viral video sites like YouTube were used, as Smith and French reported, "for developing an interactive, viral marketing-driven relationship with the Obama brand."<sup>31</sup> Shirky described the direct announcing of Joseph Biden as the candidate's running mate through text to "friends" as a way of preventing traditional news outlets from immediately analyzing the selection. This direct communication allowed text receivers to become the opinion leaders who would share the announcements with their friends and followers, enhancing the selectivity of the manner in which the news was spread.<sup>32</sup>

After the election, the administration used the Web to deliver controlled messages during the transition and the first year in office. The website <http://www.change.gov> was created to maintain information flow during the postelection transition period, and the website, <http://www.whitehouse.gov>, was redesigned and launched virtually simultaneously with the inaugural oath. It provides far more than just photos and standard information about the President and First Lady. It features a blog written by different members of the administration and updates on important legislation and initiatives. The website also provides interactive features ranging from an opportunity to sign up for e-mail alerts to options to post information from the site on various user-content sites such as Digg and Flickr. The site supports an online forum where Obama answers questions submitted online.

The website also features "West Wing Week," a video blog, or "vlog," that offers short segments of Obama statements, appearances, and interviews in what Paul Farhi of *The Washington Post* described as "the White House's video vision of itself and its chief occupant, as it would like to be seen, unfiltered by journalists."<sup>33</sup> The vlog is also available on YouTube.

*The New York Times* magazine described the care taken by the administration in crafting Obama's video image.<sup>34</sup> Heffernan reports:

Obama has been criticized by some, including Rush Limbaugh, for relying on teleprompters and electronic cue cards when speaking in public. . . . Obama's team, in producing and distributing more video (by far) than any past administration, has not so much won over political journalists as led the pack to become the new media on the White House beat.<sup>35</sup>

The new administration attempted to use the power of the social media relationships it had established to inform and to mobilize support of early administration initiatives. After the election in November, the Democratic National Committee formed a group called Organizing for America (OFA) and drew on that network of support.<sup>36</sup> That contact network was activated in March, when the administration and the Democratic National Committee asked volunteers to circulate petitions in support of the first Obama budget and economic plan. Obama issued the call to action in a video, and OFA e-mailed all 13 million followers a message asking individuals to contact Congress and their friends to encourage passage of the budget. The group gathered 214,000 signatures on petitions to deliver to Congress, 100,000 of which were gathered during local canvassing efforts on March 21, 2009.<sup>37</sup> However, *The Washington Post* concluded the petitions had little effect on swaying Congressional votes.<sup>38</sup> ♦

Traditional media coverage of campaign 2008 was substantive, beginning long before the first caucuses and primaries and continuing through November. Clearly some voters, however, wanted more immediate information and involvement, and the campaigns of almost all national candidates provided digital information, online donation sites, and social-media communities. The Obama campaign and administration's reliance on direct media communications provides an opportunity to explore the ethical implications of reliance on these communication channels in public affairs practice.

Direct-to-voter communication has been practiced since the first days of democracy. Public oratory, fiery rhetoric, and political debate have inspired support, opposition, and action. Ethicists have decried overwrought emotional appeals, negative advertising, and campaign sabotage efforts while bemoaning the growing lack of voter participation amid a rise in cynicism and apathy. Even in the midst of direct-to-voter communication efforts, members of the public have relied on nonaffiliated gatekeepers such as journalists and political commentators for help in sorting through claims of political parties and candidates whose words, appearances and strategies have been crafted by public relations advisors: Where are the issues among the images? What is true and important? Why should I care? Is there a place in political activity for me?

Digital social networks and Internet sites now provide instantaneous and alternative answers to such questions—and have energized a variety of political constituents to political advocacy and concern. Want to attend a political rally or hear a speech? Interested in knowing more of a candidate's stance on an issue, or want to weigh his or her opinions against those of opponents? Excited about adding your voice to the debate or in putting your money where your interest is? Click a browser. Join a network. Share your thoughts. The digital environment provides the contemporary agora, and democracy is revitalized.

Yet, as noted in the commentary on Case 1, the digital environment may limit at the same time it unites. The press has long played a check-and-balance role deemed important enough in a democracy to be granted specific First Amendment protection. Professional reportorial ethics seeks to prevent partisanship from shaping all political information; it does not restrain its partisanship, but it may contextualize or hold it accountable. Similarly, such traditional news outlets make information available to anyone who is interested on an equal basis. In the world of social networks and digital streaming, however, sharing information to "followers" exclusively or first may inherently leave others out. In a nation where a digital divide still exists, traditional media outlets provide information inexpensively and broadly.

The digital divide poses few ethical issues during a campaign, but the issue broadens when the campaign is over and a president is governing. New questions about access to public information arise: Is Internet access a requirement for active citizenship? Who determines if donors are

given information that nondonors do not have? Are the best interests of democracy served when the image of the president is controlled in-house with fewer opportunities for outside press scrutiny?

It may be uncomfortable for the occupants of the White House or other public offices to have journalists' notebooks, cameras, and microphones documenting their activities and statements. However, such media also provide open access for public servants to explain, expound, or complain when they deem it important. Similarly, journalists may be uncomfortable as they recognize the rise of citizen journalists active in the digital sphere and the accessibility public relations practitioners have in communicating directly to their interest groups without gatekeeping mediation. Aristotelian principles would posit finding a golden mean between potential extremes. In the agora of contemporary politics, yes, we can find room for in-house public relations practitioners who shape political images, the professional journalists who act as watchdogs, and the enlivened communities who form through digital tools.

## 46 BUNDLING CAMPAIGN SUPPORT

Imagine overhearing this conversation:

"Brian, I'd like to invite you to attend a luncheon where the president will speak."

"The president? I'd like to, but I don't have \$100,000 to donate to anyone, Bob."

"I know, Brian, but for a \$2,000 donation, I can guarantee that you'll receive an invitation, a good lunch, a place at the table with me and some other of the firm's employees, and a chance to establish a network with the leader of the free world."

"That sounds great. I appreciate your asking me, sir. I would be honored to attend. Will you or the firm get some kind of recognition for filling a table?"

"Well, now that you mention it, if you'll put this little four-digit code on your check and give it to me to turn in, I'll get credit for soliciting your attendance—and your money. Would you mind?"

"Not at all, Bob. I'm just excited to think about getting to hear the president. I just hope we'll get a chance to bend his ear about our views on those new trade agreements in Asia."

Even though this is a fictional conversation, it illustrates the reality of a campaign fund-raising strategy used by the 2004 George W. Bush presidential campaign, a refinement of a technique used successfully in 2000 by Bush and by countless other candidates and political action committees (PACs) for many years. Through a process known as bundling, key donors are encouraged to recruit multiple individuals to give \$2,000 for the campaign, and the multiple donations are then presented together at once to the candidate's campaign. (A provision within the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, popularly known as the McCain–Feingold Act, raised the amount an individual may legally donate to a candidate from \$1,000 to \$2,000.)<sup>39</sup> By using a tracking code on the donated checks, the key donors are granted credit for their fund-raising prowess.

In the Bush campaign, those who solicited at least \$100,000—personally collected the checks, coded them, and turned them in to the campaign—were hailed as "Pioneers." Those who solicited at least \$200,000 were named "Rangers." Pioneers and Rangers were eligible to attend special events with the president, to receive reports from top campaign officials, and to participate in special events at the 2004 Republican National Convention.<sup>40</sup> For example, in August 2003, 350 donors who had helped collect \$50,000 each by June 30 were invited to a private barbecue with the president and his top political advisers on a ranch close to the Crawford, Texas, ranch owned by President Bush.<sup>41</sup>

According to *The Washington Post*, many of those who registered to become Pioneers or Rangers were CEOs of major corporations, lobbyists, doctors, attorneys, or investment bankers. The *Post* said in a July 14, 2003 article, “The single factor virtually all such donors have in common is that they, their clients, their corporations, their suppliers and their subcontractors are major beneficiaries of the Bush administration’s tax-cutting and deregulatory policies.”<sup>42</sup>

By mid-July 2003, at least sixty-eight donors had become Pioneers or Rangers, soliciting about one-fourth of the \$34.4 million raised by the Bush campaign in its first forty-five days.<sup>43</sup> The official Bush campaign website provided a full list of the Pioneers and Rangers. However, the Bush campaign reported that 80 percent of those who contributed during that period gave less than \$200 each.<sup>44</sup>

More than 500 donors qualified as Pioneers during the Bush 2000 campaign, according to documents released in May 2003. The Associated Press reported that at least one dozen Pioneers bundled at least \$300,000 for the 2000 campaign. At least nineteen of those identified as Pioneers were later appointed as ambassadors.<sup>45</sup>

The successful fund-raising strategy was apparent in the 2008 campaign as well. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton set tiered goals for donors seeking to be recognized as “HillRaisers,” those who collected \$100,000 or more in bundled donations gaining such recognition. By April 2007, *Newsday* reported that eighty-two HillRaisers had contributed about a third of the \$25.8 million garnered by the campaign during the first quarter of 2007.<sup>46</sup> However, without such recognition levels, her primary opponent and later party nominee Barack Obama raised more than \$750 million, three times the amount raised by President Bush in 2004, an election in which Bush accepted public financing. Obama did not opt for the public-financing option during the election, but instead continued to accept public donations until the November election.<sup>47</sup> ♦

Certainly, there is nothing inherently unethical about politicians seeking contributions for political campaigns. In fact, representative, participative democracy will not work if politicians do not interact with constituents and supporters or raise funding to use in election campaigns. With less than half of potential voters in the United States participating in elections, perhaps any mechanism that increases their input or raises their interest—such as the personal solicitation strategies noted in the case—should be celebrated. And perhaps the process of bundling the donations from individual donors helps to maximize the political playing field. The pooled resources of many can compete with the influence of individuals or businesses who can speak with a powerful single voice. The costs of running successful—and unsuccessful—campaigns on the state or national level are increasingly high; without active contributions, candidates without vast personal wealth would be unable to fund media purchases or personal appearances.

Recognizing those who solicit individual contributions for bundling may raise other questions, however. Consider Rawls’s principle of fairness (discussed in “Ethical Foundations and Perspectives”). Is the identification of donation with access or partisan position so strong that few politicians can negotiate behind the veil of ignorance position demanded by Rawls? If access to the political decision makers is decided primarily by donations, then those who do not or cannot pay will be locked out of the political arena, and the financial stakes for those who seek influence may continue to rise. Will organizations or causes that fail to organize and contribute be ignored, or will the amount of access be linked to the size of the contribution made? If those with larger coffers can obtain greater access or influence, they may overwhelm the political voices of the smaller, less organized, and less financed groups or individuals. Those who criticize the influence of contributions must ponder alternatives for funding campaigns. Would it be more ethical to have each campaign paid for through public monies, for example, or does that raise other issues of fairness, such as incumbency, taxation, and implied endorsements?

These concerns have become even more important since the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.<sup>48</sup> That ruling overturned two precedents that had limited the amount corporations and unions could spend on political advertisements prior to an election. While direct contributions to candidates' campaigns are still not permitted, corporate monies can be used to create and fund advertisements that promote or oppose particular candidates or policies—ads that can run right up to election days. Disclosure of the sponsorship of the ads is still required.<sup>49</sup>

Does the practice of bundling—or the newly approved right to allow greater corporate spending on political speech—give undue influence to those with greater wealth, influence, and opportunity for influencing or gaining credit for the donation choices of others? Companies or organizations are not required to be functioning democracies, nor are political candidates or campaigns compelled to seek all viewpoints on issues—indeed, such would make the need for political parties disappear. Nevertheless, perhaps the “Wild West” of political opinions would function more democratically without the louder voices of those making significant campaign donations or direct expenditures.

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# Telling the Truth in Organizational Settings

**T**he pursuit of truth is common to all who seek to practice ethical communication. Yet public relations practitioners may be caught in one of the hardest arenas for truthfulness because of the special challenges arising from their liaison role. Practitioners enjoy multiple opportunities to shape information communicated to internal and external audiences. Controlling the dissemination of information—from carefully staging the news conference to artfully nuanced statements—offers practitioners a chance to stage manage the truth.

Consider the typical corporate website. Graphics, copy, audio, and video are carefully selected and placed. Some sites are animated to draw viewer attention; some open only after other items have been highlighted or selected. Tabs link to pages filled with targeted information about management, performance, history, values, employment, and news. Archival data may be present. All the information presents the corporation's point of view. It may be completely accurate and yet still be incomplete or one-sided. Just as those who receive information from news releases or press conferences have always found true, visitors to websites must remember that the information gleaned there has certainly passed through a public relations "gate" before moving out to various audiences. Similarly, consider an organizational blog post or a brand's Facebook page. All the information provided may be completely accurate, but its truthfulness may be diminished or lost completely because of what is omitted or recontextualized, or because of the lack of full disclosure about its sponsorship or partisanship.

Is the polishing and shaping of an image in such a manner deceptive? Does it violate the truth? Perhaps not in most cases or at least no more than any gatekeeping action does. But how far can one go in polishing before one becomes guilty of overt deception? The issue is complicated by many factors. Sophisticated technologies make it increasingly simple and quick to change or shape the reality of what audiences see, hear, or experience. The rapidity of the transmission makes it difficult for time-consuming verification or investigative processes to take place adequately. Audience impatience at involved presentations prompts practitioners to push for the pseudodramatic rather than relying on the "boring" truth. Intra-organizational pressures to please or appease managers or other key constituents are rising in this era of downsizing and reengineering. As partisan group members, practitioners may find their own enthusiasm a trap. It may be much easier to tell positive news than it is to tell negative news. Enthusiasm about something may lead one to overstatement and hyperbole.

The truth is almost always more than one person's story or one person's perspective. In an organizational setting, truth is often negotiated and contains components of several opinions. Practitioners operating within the multiple layers of organizations are often charged with communicating a message composed so that its original elements of truth are well hidden. The litigious era also has prompted many attorneys to advise organizational spokespeople to hide behind a "no comment"—a statement that is certainly true in and of itself but may not be truthful in its level of disclosure. The luxury of the unlimited news hole of the Internet means that multiple sides of a story may be heard, some without any attempts at objectivity or even accuracy.

The cases in this chapter will explore the demands of truth-telling within various organizational settings, both formal and informal. The first case, "Private Issues and Public Apologies," focuses on the controlled news conference held by Tiger Woods after a personal scandal. The second case, "Wal-Marting Across the Internet," and the third case, "Who's the Boss?," examine the impact that information included in or omitted from corporate and personal blogs may have on credibility and believability. The fourth case, "This News Story Is Brought to You By . . ." examines truthfulness and video news releases. The final case, "Posting #Truth @Twitter," questions the importance of authorship disclosure in the digital information flow across social networks such as Twitter.

## 47 PRIVATE ISSUES AND PUBLIC APOLOGIES

He is perhaps the best-known golfer in the world, and on many lists would appear as the best golfer in the world. His name was itself a brand, and his image promoted products from automobiles to watches to sports drinks, earning him an amount estimated at near \$100 million each year. An Omnicom Group unit that uses polling data to assess celebrity appeals to consumers had ranked him as number 11, the type of ranking given Bill Cosby.<sup>1</sup>

But things changed for Tiger Woods on November 27, when a car accident near his Florida home—that included a report of his wife breaking the rear window of his car with a golf club—sparked revelations of extramarital affairs that were covered internationally in an explosion of news reports. While the news reports raged, Woods did not appear in public.

The time line for the incident as explained by AAP Sports News is simple.<sup>2</sup> The day following the accident, the Florida Highway Patrol reported it had not spoken with Woods or his wife; on December 1, it issued Woods a traffic citation with a \$164 fine. On November 29, Woods posted a statement on his website (<http://www.tigerwoods.com>) that read: "I'm human and not perfect. Many false and malicious rumors circulating about my family and me are irresponsible." Then, the first news about an extramarital affair broke, and great media attention followed. Woods decided he would not play in the Chevron World Challenge tournament, a tournament he was to have hosted.

On December 2, Woods posted another statement on this website,<sup>3</sup> in which he offered another apology to his family and supporters.

He then criticized the media coverage the story had received, arguing that he and his family should be left to deal with the issues.

Although I am a well-known person and have made my career as a professional athlete, I have been dismayed to realize the full extent of what tabloid scrutiny really means. . . . But no matter how intense curiosity about public figures can be, there is an important and deep principle at stake which is the right to some simple, human measure of privacy. I realize there are some who don't share my view on that. . . . Personal sins should

not require press releases and problems within a family shouldn't have to mean public confessions.

Within a few days, thousands of comments were posted on the site in response—some supportive, some critical.<sup>4</sup>

In the next week, reports of liaisons with other women emerged, and media coverage was intense. On December 11, Woods reported he would take an indefinite break from the pro tour. Two days later, Accenture announced it was dropping Woods as a spokesperson, and on December 31, AT&T also ended its deal with Woods. Other corporations had stopped airing or printing commercials or ads featuring the golfer.

In January, it was reported that Woods had entered treatment or undertaken therapy, but he made no public statements until he called a press conference on February 19, held in the TPC Sawgrass clubhouse in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.<sup>5</sup> His mother was a part of the audience, but his wife was not. Fewer than forty family members, friends, PGA Tour executives and business associates were present.<sup>6</sup> One television camera was allowed. Only three reporters representing the Associated Press and Bloomberg and Reuters wire services were allowed in the conference, but they were not allowed to ask questions.<sup>7</sup> Three members of the Golf Writers Association of America had been invited to attend, but the association voted to boycott the conference. President Vartan Kupelian told CNN, "As long as we're not going to have the ability to ask questions, as long as we're just going to be standing there like props, there's no point of us being in the room."<sup>8</sup> About a mile away, the Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union* reported that more than 100 reporters from Florida newspapers, the four major golf magazines, television and websites gathered at a hotel to watch the apology, which was being broadcast live on television and streamed on the Internet. The conference was held while the WBC–Accenture Match Play Championship was being played in Arizona.<sup>9</sup>

During the conference, Woods apologized for what he called "irresponsible and selfish behavior I engaged in. . . . I have let you down."<sup>10</sup> He acknowledged the many groups adversely affected by his actions, including his family, friends, fans, employees, foundation associates, and business partners. He talked of the good work done through his foundation and pledged it would continue. He defended his wife whom he said had been unfairly criticized, and he said he had been participating in inpatient therapy since late December. Woods criticized some media coverage, saying the media should not have followed his daughter to school or staked out his wife or mother. "Some have written things about my family," he said, "Despite the damage I have done, I still believe it is right to shield my family from the public spotlight. They did not do these things. I did. I have always tried to maintain a private space for my wife and children."

Woods said he planned to return to golf competition, which he did by entering the Masters tournament in April. Just as he was preparing to play in tournament, Nike began broadcasting a black-and-white commercial that showed Woods somberly looking into the camera while the recorded voice of his late father, Earl Woods, asked him what he had learned.<sup>11</sup> An important question for ethical theorists to consider as well. ♦

This case demands two levels of analysis: a microanalysis of the ethical options available to Tiger Woods once his sexual history became public and endangered not only his status as a husband but as a commercial spokesperson and sports hero; and a macroanalysis that questions why this story commanded such public attention and media coverage.

The life of Tiger Woods had been played on a public course. His meteoric rise to superstardom as a golfer was matched by his success as a brand spokesperson; television viewing soared

when he played in tournaments and suffered when he did not. He benefited greatly from this attention, earning millions not only from his numerous tournament wins but also from his work in commercials and endorsements. The relationships with his family, from his mentoring father to his beautiful wife and children, were part of his carefully constructed public persona—a persona he seemed to lose control of as he lost control of his automobile the evening of November 27.

What was Woods then to do? What are the ethical options available to a sports hero whose embarrassing private life has become so public? Aristotelian thought can inform the decision making here. What is the golden mean in this situation? Can truth-telling become excessive? Some of the news coverage appeared so, as graphic details of sexual encounters were published and some of the “other women” became celebrities. Woods could have chosen to reveal all—on his website, in a tabloid, or on a *60 Minutes* appearance—or to publicize what was happening within his family as they dealt with the affairs, or to seek publicity as he sought therapy or treatment.

Conversely, what happens when truth is too limited? The initial statement on the Woods website seemed designed to turn away inquiry and suspicion rather than to admit truth. The second statement seemed to move toward a more candid and sincere admission of truth. Yet both of these statements appeared on his own website, one controlled by him and not open to public questions or personal elaboration. Hosting comments from responders, both critical and positive, was one admirable way of allowing a type of socially mediated discourse, but it fell short of the direct exchange and explanation possible through a media interview.

What about the press conference with its televised apology? Does this become the golden mean of truthfulness in this situation? Perhaps, but the carefully guarded nature of the setting, with restricted access and no questions, appeared too controlled and as if there was still much left undisclosed. A press conference is typically free-flowing, with reporters able to ask questions as they choose and the source choosing to respond or not. When initiating such a setting, Woods should have known the expectations and been willing to meet them. A press conference was not required from a public relations or an ethical standpoint. Had he chosen instead to issue a public statement or even a news release, it would have afforded him an audience eager to hear his side of this story and would have garnered great publicity. Truthfulness is not just expression; it is also shaped by context. Allowing more reporters to attend and being willing to respond to open questions from them would have created a more even flow of information and likely helped foster a more positive image for Woods, which seemed to be the intention of the communication event. But, in its staged context, Woods’s conference was just not up to par.

However, we should also acknowledge the rapacious nature of the media and audiences in seeking information about this story, which might have affected Woods’s choice of a venue for a lengthy public apology. The combination of the salacious sexual details, the physical beauty of those involved, and the influence and power of Woods himself made what could—or should—have been a private family issue all too public. Seeking every detail of every encounter was excess, a voyeuristic exploration of a hero’s life. However, at least some of this interest arose from the disappointment and lack of understanding of such a failed exemplar. Woods had been seen as a model of skill and talent and dignity; his public service and his public demeanor had won him accolades from many outside professional sports. When a hero falls, even those not normally drawn to tabloid storytelling, may find themselves searching for explanations and context.

Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute suggests this incident offered an opportunity for a type of ethical reporting he calls “collateral journalism” that would help address some of the larger issues.<sup>12</sup> Such writing, he says, “attempts to take a current story and frame it to view its higher social, political or cultural significance.” In the Woods case, he suggests stories that would explore the gender differences present in coverage and reactions to the coverage, or the power and status issues involved in the legal aspects of the accident and its aftermath. Such reportage would move readers and reporters beyond titillation to explore the larger meanings of this and other such events.

## 48 WAL-MARTING ACROSS THE INTERNET

Laura and Jim, traveling in an RV, wanted to park for free overnight in Wal-Mart stores parking lots as they traveled from their home to visit their three children who had moved across the country from them. In 2008, the brand name was changed to Walmart. When the couple contacted Wal-Mart, it apparently seemed like a great opportunity for Wal-Mart to feature its stores in a family-friendly manner. In response to the request, the couple was flown to Las Vegas, where they were provided with a new RV with a “Working Families for Wal-Mart” logo on the side and sent on their way to Georgia for the “Wal-Marting Across America” tour. With their gas paid for, the couple completed the 2,843-mile trip, with Laura filing a blog entry at each stop, for which she also was paid. The blog posted positive stories about the Wal-Mart employees the couple encountered.<sup>13</sup>

It was not until well into the trip, however, that the payments and arrangements were disclosed, after questions arose within the blogosphere about whether the bloggers actually were on such a trip and if it had been sponsored. The answers revealed that while the couple was actually traveling, a public relations agency, Edelman, had been involved in setting up the arrangement. This prompted questions about why the sponsorship information had not been disclosed earlier. In response, in one of the last blogs posted on the WalMartingAcrossAmerica website, Laura explained that she had contacted her brother who worked at Edelman, the firm that represented Working Families for Wal-Mart, to discuss what permissions would be required for the trip. She wrote: “They didn’t just give us permission. They said they would even sponsor the trip!”<sup>14</sup> So, Laura explained, she could make the trip, write about it and help publicize “all the good things Wal-Mart does for people” at the same time.

The explanation did not offset criticism from some who saw this as a deceptive public relations stunt. Edelman CEO Richard Edelman apologized for the lack of disclosure in his personal blog on the agency’s website.<sup>15</sup>

Not only was Laura’s brother a public relations practitioner at the agency, but Jim actually was Jim Thresher, a staff photographer at *The Washington Post*. According to *Business Week*, once this was disclosed, the *Post* asked Thresher to return the funds he received for the trip and to delete his photos from the blog.<sup>16</sup> The blog was just one of the efforts Wal-Mart undertook under Edelman’s guidance to foster a more positive public image. The Working Families for Wal-Mart group was apparently also formed to counter criticism of Wal-Mart’s labor and economic policies, although its links to Wal-Mart were not disclosed.<sup>17</sup>

The Web offered a lively setting for posting positive and negative messages about the retailing giant from partisan groups on all sides. The website for Working Families for Wal-Mart provided news about Wal-Mart’s positive contributions, likely hoping to counter the negative messages about Wal-Mart posted on sites such as WakeUpWalMart.com, launched in 2005 with funding from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, and Wal-Mart Watch, with funding from the Service Employees International Union.<sup>18</sup> The Web messaging grew more intense in 2006, when the Working Families for Wal-Mart group established another website, paidcritics.com, on which it countered posts on the Wake-Up Wal-Mart site. In turn, the Wake-Up Wal-Mart site launched a site called ABunchOfGreedyRightWingLiarsWhoWorkForWalmart.com.

Edelman, according to *The New York Times*, also targeted conservative bloggers with information about Wal-Mart.<sup>19</sup> Mona Williams, a Wal-Mart spokesperson, told *The New York Times* that the corporation began working with bloggers in 2005. She explained its motivation, “As more and more Americans go to the Internet to get information from varied, credible, trusted sources, Wal-Mart is committed to participating in that online conversation.”

The Web-based campaign was taken in a context of public scrutiny, but the retailer did not just rely on the Internet to stimulate a more positive image. The corporation provided generous cash and merchandise donations and work transfers for employees after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>20</sup> Wal-Mart also announced plans to build fifty new stores in economically challenged neighborhoods, where it would focus on helping local small businesses compete against its stores, feature local businesses in print and radio ads, and donate funds to local chambers of commerce.<sup>21</sup> Reaching out to other publics, Wal-Mart began underwriting National Public Radio newscasts<sup>22</sup> and began promoting a new environmental campaign, led by a former nun, Harriet Hentges, senior director of stakeholder engagement.<sup>23</sup> ♦

Corporate imaging is not unethical, and speaking out on public issues is certainly legal and ethical. The Internet provides great opportunity for widespread dissemination of information, but it also provides an easy tool for intense scrutiny and investigation of information. Failing to disclose sponsorship of corporate imaging raises questions about motivation and truth-telling that may distract from the original intention, and agencies or practitioners engaged in these efforts may be drawn into the questioning. A cross-country tour of Wal-Mart stores with blogged entries featuring employees' stories likely would have been effective even *with disclosure* that the tour was sponsored by the retailer. And the communication of the positive stories would have been more ethically justifiable. A lack of openness raises suspicions about the need for secrecy.

Similarly, sponsoring a group of satisfied customers who advocate for a corporation would be justifiable; General Motors found great success with its support of the Saturn customers network and its sponsorship of "homecoming" events. Ethical behavior can be profitable behavior. But, again, failing to disclose sponsorship diverts attention from the message. What is communicated may indeed be truthful, but doubts about what is not being said may undermine credibility.

Aristotelian analysis may lend guidance here. Commercial promotion is not a vice and does not have to be hidden. A complete lack of promotion or countering critics may not be virtuous if it leads to business failure with its ensuing social impacts. The mean then may be found in truthful practice—promote even aggressively but openly. Label advertisements as advertisements, sponsorships as sponsorships, and placements as placements. Responses to critics may be equally aggressive, but they also must be truthful. Those providing public relations counsel in such cases should remember to seek balance between their commitment to their clients and their commitment to public truth-telling.

## 49 WHO'S THE BOSS?

"Rahodeb" was positive about Whole Foods Market in the posts on the Yahoo message board and pessimistic about the prospects of Wild Oats Market. There is nothing too unusual about this—except for the real identity of the poster, John Mackey, who was CEO of Whole Foods Market, Inc., a corporation planning to merge with Wild Oats Market.<sup>24</sup> "The views articulated by Rahodeb sometimes represent what I actually believed, and sometimes they didn't," Mackey said, in a quote drawn from the Whole Foods website by Reuters. "Sometimes I simply played 'devil's advocate' for the sheer fun of arguing."<sup>25</sup>

In February 2007, Whole Foods announced plans to buy Wild Oats for \$565 million. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced plans to investigate the merger in March and in June sued to stop the merger. The Rahodeb comments were cited by the FTC as part of the reason for the suit.

Responding to the FTC investigation of the proposed merger of the two food companies, Mackey again turned to the Internet, posting a long, assertive message in his blog on the corporate website on June 19 in order to "provide explanations of how I think the FTC, to date, has

neglected to do its homework appropriately, especially given the statements made regarding prices, quality, and service levels in its complaint. I also provide a glimpse into the bullying tactics used against Whole Foods Market by this taxpayer-funded agency."<sup>26</sup>

Then, in July 2007, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) announced an informal inquiry into the postings. Whole Foods announced that it would "fully cooperate with the SEC and [did] not anticipate commenting further while the inquiry is pending." Its board of directors formed a committee to conduct an internal investigation.<sup>27</sup> The same day, Mackey released the following statement: "I sincerely apologize to all Whole Foods Market stakeholders for my error in judgment in anonymously participating on online financial message boards. I am very sorry, and I ask our stakeholders to please forgive me."<sup>28</sup>

The natural and organic food retailer was founded in 1980 in Austin, Texas, and quickly grew to 197 stores in North America and the United Kingdom. Its website says that it is mission-driven: "We're highly selective about what we sell, dedicated to stringent Quality Standards, and committed to sustainable agriculture. We believe in a virtuous circle entwining the food chain, human beings and Mother Earth: each is reliant upon the others through a beautiful and delicate symbiosis." As of 2010, it has been listed among *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" rankings for thirteen years.<sup>29</sup> ♦

The use of blogs as a medium of communication between chief executives and key stakeholders such as shareholders and customers is increasingly common. *PRWeek* reported in 2006 that at least twenty-nine Fortune 500 CEOs were blogging.<sup>30</sup> Dell has a blog that features posts from a variety of employees writing to customers (<http://en.community.dell.com/dell-blogs/b/direct2dell/default.aspx>). A 2007 survey conducted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Dow Jones of 482 PRSA and Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) members found that practitioners and students believe that blogging and other digital channels provide great opportunities for practitioners. Yet the members also indicated that the unregulated nature of blogs and social networks presents a potential for harm as well.<sup>31</sup>

Commercial speech is more regulated than almost any other sector of public communication, as executives of publicly traded corporations are aware. The SEC's interest in the content of anonymous postings about one's own corporation and a chief competitor—especially at a time when merger discussions may be underway—is not surprising. The blogosphere provides almost unlimited opportunity for individual expression, questions, and networking. Certainly executives must balance their desire to express personal opinions, even when it is fun to do so, with their responsibility to act as stewards of corporate resources and requirements. The ease of anonymity and pseudonymity raises ethical questions, however, that transcend regulation of commercial speech. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative may provide guidance here: Kant would assert that communications should be truthful, without compromise. Thus, using a pseudonym as a cloak for what might be seen as persuasive, self-beneficial messaging would be regarded as lacking truthfulness. Would one want this to be a universal practice by all digital communicators, particularly those in management positions who have a financial obligation to shareholders?

Mackey's bylined postings on the corporate website, while argumentative in nature, may not have been the most strategic means of seeking approval from the federal agency, but they were issued with public acknowledgment of their source. Do members of the online community who may have read and interacted with Rahodeb not deserve the same? The faceless nature of the Internet itself makes it difficult to really ever know who is behind information that is posted. There may be an equal burden, therefore, on Internet users and online community members to remain skeptical about information they receive through the medium, being careful to seek authentication before repeating or relying on it for decision making.

## 50 “THIS NEWS STORY IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY . . .”

Have you seen any of the following public relations messages broadcast? If so, were you told who funded their creation, wrote the scripts, and edited the video images?

- A news story questioning the reality of global warming
- A segment about the No Child Left Behind Act
- A news report about a child-passenger safety seat
- A news story that warned of the dangers of personal information being lost if a laptop were stolen

According to the Center for Media and Democracy, which tracked use of video news releases by television stations, it is highly likely that if you did see a video news release (VNR), you were not informed about the sponsor. In all these cases, the “news” actually was broadcast, often verbatim, from a VNR paid for by a corporation or perhaps even by a federal agency. The center issued two reports, “Fake TV News,” and “Still Not the News” that tracked specific VNRs to see if and how they were used by broadcast stations (see <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews2/findings/vnrs>). Writing in *O’Dwyer’s PR Report*, Diane Farsette, senior researcher and coauthor of the two reports, said: “Our two reports documented 140 VNR broadcasts. In only two instances did TV stations clearly and fully disclose the source of the VNR footage to news audiences.”<sup>32</sup> According to the *PR Watch* “Still Not the News” executive summary, “In twelve instances, television stations actively denied disclosure to their news audiences by editing out on-screen and verbal client notifications included in the original VNRs.”<sup>33</sup> The researchers found that it was not smaller-market stations that used the VNRs without extensive editing but stations in top-fifty Nielsen markets.<sup>34</sup>

The Radio-Television News Directors Association guidelines for the use of noneditorial video and audio call for stations to “clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by corporate or other noneditorial sources.”<sup>35</sup> The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has issued a statement asserting that organizations that produce VNRs should clearly identify them as such and disclose who produced and who financed the work when they are distributed. Then, the PRSA says, the station has responsibility to identify the source of the footage when it is aired. But the PRSA also asserted, “Excessive government regulation on the production and dissemination of such materials could have a chilling effect on open communication and work against providing the public with vital, interesting information from myriad points of view and sources.”<sup>36</sup>

Should viewers also expect to see some sort of disclosure when it comes to government-funded communications that may be inherently persuasive—or even propagandistic—in nature? The Department of Education during the George W. Bush administration drew attention for such a campaign. The department worked with Ketchum PR, which had a \$1 million contract with the department, to promote the Bush administration’s educational policies by contracting with conservative commentator Armstrong Williams to promote the No Child Left Behind Act. Williams was paid \$240,000 to promote the act in his columns and in television appearances, but he did not acknowledge the arrangement in the communications.<sup>37</sup>

The Department of Education also paid for the creation and distribution of a VNR narrated by actress Karen Ryan that promoted educational policies. Other agencies also used this tactic. Ryan narrated two Medicare drug plan VNRs promoting the Bush proposal; each ended with this tag line: “In Washington, I’m Karen Ryan reporting.” None of the VNRs disclosed the government sponsorship.

News of the unacknowledged sponsorship and the public relations campaign broke in late 2004, prompting sharp criticism of what some saw as domestic propaganda efforts from those working in public relations and the White House. Ketchum announced that it had adopted guidelines for disclosure of sponsorships. Reaction also came from the PRSA, which sponsored an ethics

summit in March 2005 and issued an advisory in April.<sup>38</sup> More reaction came from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which issued a public notice “reminding broadcast licensees, cable operators and others of requirements applicable to video news releases” and sought comment on the use of VNRs. The FCC argued that audience members were “entitled to know who seeks to persuade them with the programming offered over broadcast stations and cable systems.”<sup>39</sup> FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps said the agency had received what he called “tens of thousands” of contacts asking the FCC to investigate the failure of broadcasters to disclose the use of government-generated VNRs. Copps stated, “In this era of huge corporate media, it has gotten just about impossible to tell the difference between news and entertainment or to differentiate between legitimate information and propaganda.”<sup>40</sup> FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein, while noting the dispute between the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Department of Justice’s Office of Legal Counsel about the appropriateness of the government-originated videos, said that the FCC would enforce its existing rules about disclosure.<sup>41</sup>

Following an investigation requested by two senators, the GAO concluded in what *The New York Times* called a “blistering report,” that the Bush educational campaign was “covert propaganda” that violated U.S. laws, although the Department of Justice found the practice appropriate if the information reported was factual.<sup>42</sup> The GAO also found that the VNRs developed for the Government Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Department of Health and Human Services used techniques that made them appear to be standard news (e.g., using actors who posed as reporters) and were distributed without attribution on screen.<sup>43</sup> ♦

VNRs are a worthwhile service for broadcasters because they provide access to video footage of events, information, or activities that otherwise might be unavailable for coverage. Along with an edited “package,” a VNR may contain supplemental video, a sample script, narration and voice-overs, and additional information. All this makes it easy for a station to use the material in its entirety or edit the VNR to appear as though it were local in source and origination.

Total usage of VNRs is unknown. The Center for Media and Democracy’s study analyzed only a small number of VNR airings, when considering the total number of news and information stories broadcast by seventy-seven stations. So the breadth of the VNR issue is hard to determine. However, VNRs have been produced and distributed by practitioners for more than twenty years, so there must be some positive outcome associated with this medium.

Does disclosure of the source of video or audio footage matter? While lack of direct attribution may aid in increasing credibility, is it an ethical breach to use such material without direct attribution? Using material from a print news release in a newspaper or magazine article without direct attribution has been commonplace for years. Corporations and organizations seek to make it as easy as possible for reporters to gain access not only to written materials but also to photos, graphs, tables, and streamed video. Is there an inherent difference between using an unattributed video clip and reproducing a news article without a byline—or with a reporter’s byline inserted?

Some people argue that knowing the source, writer, and editor of a VNR allows audience members to make more informed decisions about believability of the information and about how the issue is being overtly or covertly framed, particularly when a government source is creating the message. The interactive context of a typical newscast, the familiarity of anchors, and the routine of stand-up reporting may create a sense of friendliness and professionalism between the newscasters and audience members. If anchors or other reporters frame the VNR to imply local creation, the implication is that the material has undergone the same gatekeeping processes as other news and features presented. Audience members may watch—and be persuaded—by the material without exercising critical cautions that might be aroused if the lack of such editing were cued by having the source of the information signaled verbally or visually with a source line.

However, the context of a newspaper or magazine also denotes that such gatekeeping has occurred, so audience members may be equally deceived. Thus, the issues actually may be the same for print and broadcast releases. Both formats allow the creators to determine which viewpoints will be communicated.

This case provides opportunity to apply the Potter Box method for locating ethical behaviors. The definition of the situation here is important. For example, what is the source of the VNR or print release material? Is the original source trustworthy? Is the material available any other way? Is it possible to augment the information presented? Values pose particular issues. Take, for example, the value of fairness—allowing all sides of an issue to be voiced in the public forum. Can objectivity be achievable if a VNR or a print release has only one source with one perspective, often commercial or partisan? Is it fair for federal dollars to support the creation and dissemination of such messages without some notification or without allowing critical debate in a public forum? What about truthfulness? Does an unquestioned government source affect believability? Is it possible to verify the information presented in the release, or is the source so trusted that one can assume that it is truthful? These values may clash with the material values of the medium: Perhaps the low cost of using materials shot, written, and edited by someone else overrides the price of loss of editorial control or independence.

Presenting an unedited and unacknowledged VNR or print release may well demonstrate where the loyalties of both the creators and the editors lie. Are they with the audience or with the client or employer? Is there a public-service obligation involved, as in some medical or scientific information (often provided through releases) or in the use of government-funded materials? If the information is deemed to be in the public interest, wouldn't that value be enhanced if the source were clearly identified? From a practitioner's perspective, the question of loyalty and the value of truth-telling may seem unanswerable. Those who send releases that are clearly labeled and identified as such cannot control how they are displayed or handled by the media editor. A sponsor's logo might be included on screen throughout a video, but the situation is different in a print release. Thus, the ethical responsibility ultimately may rest with the receiver rather than the distributor.

Kant's reasoning provides insight here. The categorical imperative would dictate that editors and broadcast managers use the same standards for verification, accuracy, and objectivity with VNRs as with any other content. Opting out of the editing and gatekeeping process simply because it is easier or more economical will not satisfy this imperative. Kant's guidance would indeed call for more scrutiny to be brought to the editing of these materials rather than less. He also would acknowledge the public-service nature and the propagandistic appearance of some of these messages. The duty communicators have to share important messages with their audiences truthfully should compel them to provide such information, even if it takes effort.

## 51 POSTING #TRUTH @TWITTER

Who is behind the posts on Twitter—the celebrity who hundreds are following or someone hired to write the 140 characters that fill inboxes and recount details about events, emotions, and promotions? Is the account being followed the actual account, or is it a pseudoaccount established by someone impersonating a celebrity or organization out of admiration or mischief?

*The New York Times* reported in March 2009 that singer Britney Spears had advertised for a writer for her Twitter and Facebook accounts and noted that other celebrities from rapper 50 Cent to candidate Ron Paul and corporation executives relied on others to create content for their pages or accounts.<sup>44</sup> *Forbes.com* cited other celebrities who rely on staff members to post updates on their accounts, noting that such practices seemed to contradict the personal nature of the microblogging site.<sup>45</sup> *The Independent* of London noted, "Many celebrities are employing

agents, social media experts and others to filter their tweets (Twitter postings) to the point of pointlessness."<sup>46</sup> However, *The New York Times* explained that on Spears's account, posts not written by the singer have bylines, which should clarify the actual source of the information on the account.<sup>47</sup>

What if it is not authorship in question but the authenticity of a celebrity or organizational account? Creating and posting material to a faked account is not uncommon, according to press reports. Tony La Russa, manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, sued Twitter in 2009 arguing that the establishment and content of a faked account bearing his name created emotional distress; the case was settled out of court.<sup>48</sup> The Associated Press reported that fake accounts with false information had been established for other athletes, including DeMarcus Ware and Ben Roethlisberger.<sup>49</sup> The *Hartford Courant* reported in an October 2009 editorial that the state Republican Party had created such fake accounts for well-known Democratic politicians in the state and had posted fake messages. The editorial concluded: "The truth? Republicans get an A for innovation but a D for ethics."<sup>50</sup>

During the spring 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, those seeking news from BP may have begun following posts from the faked public relations account BPGlobal PR, instead of the actual site BP\_America; reportedly, more than four times the number of followers had opted for the pseudoaccount than the real one.<sup>51</sup> No disclaimer was posted on the pseudosite.

In spring 2010, Twitter experimented with an attempt to authenticate accounts by offering a "verified account" feature that could be posted on accounts it had checked, but Twitter said that it would be impossible to verify each account.<sup>52</sup> Twitter suggested that users wondering about authenticity should check the official websites of personalities they are following to see if there is a Twitter link posted that would verify the actual account. Twitter noted, however, that having its verified account feature on the site would not guarantee the identity of the actual writers of the posts. ♦

When is it ethical to use a ghostwriter? Public relations practitioners have for years been employed as speechwriters to articulate the ideas of politicians, leaders, and celebrities. Others craft quotations for inclusion in news releases or publications, quotes that usually are approved before publication by the named source. Scripts for advertising endorsements are written to highlight the sponsors' benefits and features before; then the scripts are voiced by charismatic spokespersons.

Are these public relations practices deceptive? When is it necessary to explain that someone other than the speaker or the bylined author had written some, or all, of public or promotional content in order for the information itself to be deemed truthful? Creating a pseudo Twitter account, Facebook page, blog, or website seems to be clearly unethical; even when intended as satire or parody, some sort of disclosure is required. But when a site is authentic, the disclosed authorship of specific content seems to have far less impact on the site's truthfulness than the actual accuracy of what is reported there. Readers do not expect to see every section of a corporate brochure carry a byline, nor do audiences expect to hear speechwriters acknowledged periodically during a CEO's address at a meeting of shareholders. In fact, many news reports from wire services carry no individual bylines; it is the credibility of the organization that underlies the believability of the content.

Perhaps the immediacy of the content of social media creates an assumption in its readers, friends, or followers that there are no intermediary assistants at work helping to craft the language or the presentation of ideas. The shortness of a Tweet or the timeliness of a blog post may seem to imply that no one has intervened between the reported source and the audience. The Spears approach that offers a byline for each Tweet posted on her celebrity site may be one way to address

this issue; another would be for the account owner to explain in his or her profile who will be responsible for posts and updates.

From an organizational standpoint, Twitter and other microblogging and audience-generated sites may seek to assure users that sites are accurately identified. The rapidly expanding and constantly shifting digital environment, however, is one in which audiences—followers, friends, and readers—also have an obligation to understand that the identity of any digital poster may be unverified. Trust in a site or a source's truthfulness may only be developed through experience. In the end, it may be that it is the content—as well as the authors—of digital posts that must be held to ethical standards of truthfulness, fairness, attribution, and decency.

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## Conflicting Loyalties

Consider the following situations:

- A major corporation decides it must reduce its workforce by thousands, and its communication department is told it must release the news.
- A public relations agency decides to accept a controversial new client who may be offensive to previously held clients or some of its employees.
- A consulting firm is asked to represent a political candidate with extreme views certain to arouse strong reactions.
- Beleaguered public affairs officers at a nonprofit agency are asked to explain the decisions of its executive officers to throngs of investigative reporters.

In each situation, practitioners and managers are challenged to find an ethical way to balance what may be strong personal values and loyalties with the values and interests of their various organizations.

Journalism ethicists have frequently dealt with conflicts of interest from the perspectives of news editors and reporters, warning against the lure of freebies, relationships with sources, and involvement in community or activist organizations. Although these issues may have some relevance for practitioners, their professional conflicts may present a different set of challenges. Practitioners are expected to be partisan in their loyalties yet equitable in their actions. They are expected to represent the leadership of an organization and at the same time to serve as a boundary between that organization and its varied internal and external publics, ideally seeking to promote harmonious, beneficial relationships among them. Certainly, this may create situations in which clashing interests occur.

In an early analysis of public relations ethics, Albert J. Sullivan identified this conflict of interest as one between “partisan values” that are “highly personal and serve as a measure of the relationship between the managers of an enterprise and the men who serve as public relations counsel” and “mutual values,” a concern that each group’s rights and obligations are “carefully defined” and honored, with management but one of the groups considered. Sullivan said, by applying a mutual value system, “public relations may be called . . . the conscience of the institution.” Partisan values involve commitment, trust, loyalty, and

obedience to management. When practitioners become overly partisan, Sullivan warns, it may lead to a “my country, right or wrong” mentality, a utilitarian ethic, and one-way communication flow. Mutual values, Sullivan says, ensure the honoring of each person’s right to true information and a right to participate in the decisions that affect him.<sup>1</sup>

In such a complex professional environment, how does a practitioner emphasize values that lead to mutual benefit with key publics, rather than personal or one-sided partisan values within the daily workplace? How might one balance numerous conflicting loyalties? What principles offer guidance toward arriving at an ethical solution?

The case studies in this chapter provide hypothetical and actual examples of ways practitioners, clients, associations, and corporations have struggled to balance conflicting loyalties and values. The pressures faced by individual practitioners as they decide which clients to represent are explored in Case 52, “New Clients.” Case 53, “Indictments Indicate Corrupt Lobbying,” questions the clash between conflicting client interests and legal and public standards. The pull of loyalties experienced by a corporation facing an expensive recall is discussed in Case 54, “Accelerating Recalls.” Case 55 examines the film *Thank You for Smoking* and provides an ironic analysis of the long-term implications when individual profit is allowed to outweigh loyalties and obligations to consumers. The values and loyalties called on during times of human tragedy are recounted in Case 56, “Tragedy at the Mine.”

## 52 NEW CLIENTS

In the following two hypothetical scenarios, public relations practitioners face common conflicts of loyalties and values,

### Scenario 1

The ambassador begins: “I know this would be a first for your agency, Ms. Snyder, but we’ve studied your work carefully during the past few months. We have been very impressed with the creativity of your campaigns, and you were highly recommended to us by High-Tech, the firm that is working with us to update the telecommunication system in our country. They said you have deep insight into the most effective way to approach lobbying and that you were highly respected by everyone in Washington.

“Our country needs help from the United States to rebuild our economy. Passage of the Tripartner Trade Treaty would mean a new day for our businesses and government. We face many media and political contacts before the treaty will be considered by Senate committees.

“Of course we will pay whatever your excellent service would be worth. Please tell us that you will accept our nation as your client. We need your expertise. Can we have your response by tomorrow? We will then offer all the support possible as we engage in this campaign together.”

Snyder had worked for more than twelve years to position her agency as expert counselors in government affairs. Because of the nature of the work, Snyder–Holletts was not well known outside Washington, but they were regarded by those in the know as reliable, savvy practitioners. Over the years, the small agency had represented such diverse groups as trade unions, chambers of commerce, major professional associations, and of course, High-Tech. Snyder was flattered that the ambassador had learned of her agency. She knew of a number of larger, multinational firms that would be eager to accept this very lucrative client.

However, she was hesitant about accepting. Although the current government appeared stable, its leadership had only been in power for nine months. The previous government had been extremely critical of the United States, and there certainly would be those on Capitol Hill who would remember some of the bitter rhetoric and would doubt the sincerity or goodwill of the new leadership. From a professional standpoint, that could make the job of selling the Tripartner Trade

Treaty tough. Beyond that, however, Snyder was not sure how she felt about the ethics of representing another government, especially one that had been recently been openly hostile to her own nation, in a lobbying campaign. Would the current government remain in power, and if it did, would it uphold its obligations under the proposed treaty? She knew the legalities of representing international governments; there would be no problem with registering her agency's activities. She just didn't know if she could or should accept this international client.

She thanked the ambassador gracefully for his kind comments and told him she would give him a definite answer tomorrow. Then she sat down to consider her options. ♦

Is it ethically justifiable for practitioners to seek to persuade Congress to take action on behalf of another nation? Would such a persuasion campaign cross an ethical line about public service? Snyder's agency had been active as a player in that system, but it had always represented clients with causes that she could support or with issues that she felt at least deserved a fair hearing on Capitol Hill. She was somewhat wary of the publicity the client could bring the agency, although she knew that some agencies had represented international clients successfully. In fact, several agencies had won awards for their work with other governments during times of political crisis. The attention her small agency could receive, if the campaign were well designed and executed, could help its client list. Should political relations with the country turn harsh, however, her connection and representation could have a different impact on the agency's reputation.

Snyder had no personal disagreement with the treaty. Increased U.S. trade could only help the people in the ambassador's country, and certainly building businesses would provide more effective help for the future than would a short-term aid bill. Increased trade would benefit the United States, too. Snyder-Holletts could incorporate such a win-win strategy in its communication plan.

After weighing the arguments, Snyder decided her initial hesitation was unfounded. By acting to represent this client, she reasoned, she would not interfere with the process of government or prove disloyal to her own nation. She would follow her agency's typical campaign procedures and adhere to its usual standards of behavior, doing her best to avoid any misrepresentation or deception. The outcome of the campaign would not be harmful to the United States or its allies; in fact, it could be helpful. She would call the ambassador tomorrow and agree to represent the nation as it pressed for passage of the Tripartner Trade Treaty.

## Scenario 2

Bill had been with the agency for about a year and a half. He had spent sixteen months as an assistant account executive before being promoted to his current position as account executive. Now he had more responsibilities and was excited to hear that he was in line to be assigned to the new client for the agency. But Bill's excitement faded when he got the memo announcing the new client, Blue Valley Vineyards, a winery that had opened outside the city three years ago. He had heard it was doing well in sales and in reputation. Now its owners were seeking an agency to plan and execute a regional campaign to enhance the winery's image as a select label and as a tourist spot.

Bill knew that he should be excited about the trust the agency was placing in him by assigning him to the new client as the account executive, but he was not. As the child of a recovered alcoholic, Bill was well acquainted with the dangers of alcohol abuse and was not comfortable promoting the use or reputation of any alcohol product, even a regional wine. He talked about his concerns with his vice president, who told him: "It's just a wine label, Bill. It's not like you're promoting vodka to children. This is a table wine, marketed and sold to adults to enhance their dining experience. These folks are responsible with their advertising and want us to be responsible with our public relations efforts. And the primary thrust of the campaign is to position their winery as a tourist site. This town could use something that would draw more tourists in." ♦

Bill spent a long evening in thought following his discussion with the vice president. He knew that he must decide if and how he could represent a client or product with which he felt conscientious disagreement. He had to reconcile long-held personal values and loyalties with the legitimate desire of his agency to serve the needs of a valuable new client. Somehow he had to identify where he could find virtue in this situation. Bill knew that he had experienced one extreme of alcohol use; he acknowledged that his assumption that all alcohol use inevitably leads to abuse was probably another extreme.

He thought of one option in balancing his views. He could ask to have the client's campaigns divided. Bill could assume responsibility for promoting the vineyard (and the town) as a tourist site, and thereby avoid having to actually promote the wine itself as a product. Giving his full attention to what the vice president had identified as the primary thrust of the campaign should prove his loyalty to his employer and the client, he thought, while at the same time it would relieve him of having to promote directly the sales of a product he was not comfortable promoting. Of course, though, it was inevitable that increased tourism would support sales. So that probably was not the best option.

Bill wondered who would direct the campaign if he did not. Perhaps his sensitivity to the dangers of alcohol abuse would make him a better manager of the campaign than anyone else. He could use the campaign to encourage wine lovers to be responsible, smart consumers rather than abusers of alcohol. He had resented some of the promotions he had seen other alcohol producers use and believed that he could use this campaign to balance some of their kinds of messages. The vice president had indicated that Blue Valley wanted to be positioned as a tasty social beverage and promoted in such a way that alcohol abuse was discouraged. Therefore, this approach was feasible.

"I'll agree to act as account executive," he told his vice president the next morning. "I know I can trust myself to plan a responsible campaign, and I trust Blue Valley to work with us in communicating a positive message about their label and the vineyard. How soon can we get started on planning?"

Bill found this solution comfortable. Was his decision a rationalization or an ethical judgment? Might he have arrived at a different position if the new client had been a brewery or a distillery rather than a winery, or if the client had a different positioning strategy in mind? Or, imagine a scenario in which one of Bill's parents had died of lung cancer and his agency was asked to plan a tobacco company's sponsorship of a series of athletic events. What loyalties and values would Bill have to weigh in deciding whether he could work on such a campaign?

## 53 INDICTMENTS INDICATE CORRUPT LOBBYING

The indictment and guilty plea from lobbyist Jack Abramoff in 2006 marked the apparent end of one of the most influential lobbying careers in contemporary Washington. *The Washington Post's* Susan Schmidt, James V. Grimaldi, and R. Jeffrey Smith were awarded the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting for their coverage of the scandal. Their time line detailed the following key events in the story<sup>2</sup>: In 1994, Jack Abramoff joined Preston Gates & Ellis, a lobbying firm, and developed a political relationship with Representative Tom Delay (R-TX). Two years later, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians was solicited as a client. In 1999, Abramoff recruited Ralph Reed to organize antigambling campaigns in the South to help ensure less competition for the tribal casinos.

In 1997 Abramoff arranged for trips to the Marianna Islands by lawmakers and their staff members, and in 2000 Representative Delay went on a week-long trip to England and Scotland aboard a corporate jet. The next year, Abramoff changed lobbying firms. He and partner Michael Scanlon charged extraordinary fees to their tribal clients: In one duplicitous case, Abramoff and

Scanlon worked with Reed to lobby Texas to shut down a tribal casino and then persuaded the tribe to pay them \$4.2 million to lobby Congress to reopen it. A 2003 internal audit of the Louisiana Coushatta Tribe showed that the tribe spent \$18 million in one year on lobbying and legal fees, most paid to Abramoff and Scanlon.

Abramoff used charitable giving to hide some of his activities, asking clients to make donations to his charities and nonprofits rather than to his lobbying firm or to give to charities linked to important politicians.<sup>3</sup> He also reportedly hosted fund-raisers for lawmakers at a restaurant he owned in Washington and held other campaign events in luxury boxes at sports arenas paid for by his tribal clients.<sup>4</sup> In December 2005, Doug Bandow, syndicated Copley News Service columnist and Cato Institute Senior Fellow, admitted that the service had been paid by Abramoff to write commentaries favorable to some clients.<sup>5</sup>

*The Washington Post* reported in February 2004 that Abramoff and Scanlon had received at least \$45 million from tribes with casinos. Abramoff resigned from his lobbying firm the next week, and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) launched an investigation of the Indian lobbying efforts. In August 2005, Abramoff and Scanlon were indicted in Florida on fraud and conspiracy charges linked to the purchase of a casino. Three months later, Scanlon pleaded guilty to conspiring to bribe a congressman and other public officials and agreed to pay back the almost \$20 million he collected from tribal clients. In January 2006, Abramoff pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe officials and agreed to cooperate with further investigations. He was sentenced to five years and ten months in prison and fined.

Others involved with Abramoff also faced indictments. An aide to Representative Robert W. Ney (R-OH) pleaded guilty to conspiring with Abramoff in May 2006, and in October following an indictment, Representative Ney pleaded guilty to conspiring to engage in multiple political actions in exchange for contributions, trips, and other items of value. Then White House aide David H. Safavian was convicted of lying and obstructing justice in June for his involvement in Abramoff's dealings. Many in Congress responded to the investigations and convictions by returning campaign contributions received from Abramoff and his partners or by donating the funds to charitable groups.<sup>6</sup> ♦

Although the ethical and legal lapses of Abramoff and his partners may seem obvious, they are worthy of discussion. The attempted perversion of the political process through this labyrinth of fund-raising and influence illustrates the problems that arise when the values of good citizenship and truthfulness are overcome by the values of money and personal power. The willingness to exploit clients such as Native American tribes in negotiations with a powerful federal government rejects the Rawlsian call for fairness when dealing with those who have unequal social power. Similarly, the use of real or fictional charities as a cover for raising undocumented donations and influence violates the principles of Rawls.

Yet, it is not only Abramoff, Scanlon, and their employees who apparently failed ethically and legally. The willingness of elected politicians and their aides to cooperate with the lobbyists is further evidence of misplaced loyalties and values. Although the pressures to raise funds continue to escalate with each state or national campaign, trading one's influence and reputation for a trip, an earmark, or a contribution cannot be blamed solely on the lobbyists who may be involved. Within a democracy, the integrity of elected officials has to be regarded as too valuable to be sold—even at the high dollar amounts noted in this case.

A governmental culture that tolerates and rewards falsehood, exploitation, and corruption should face the indictment of media and public opinion. Congress passed new restrictions on lobbying in August 2007, seeking to bar lawmakers and their staffs from accepting valuable gifts, meals, or trips and imposing stiff fines and penalties on lobbyists who give them.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the legal attention being paid to this arena will help to reinforce the ethics of practice as well.

The rules also illustrate the need to reassert the values of honesty and integrity in moral rules that take the form of laws with punishments for their breach. If the principles of Kant were applied, the categorical imperative would maintain that even sophisticated Washington deal making would not be above moral scrutiny. Indeed, the pursuit of government power must not violate the moral imperative of public service in an open, equitable democracy. Morally sophisticated public relations practitioners recognize these imperatives as first-order obligations. The task of a practitioner is not to ignore moral values to advance the interest of a client—or oneself—but to help clients and constituencies acknowledge and pursue mutual obligations to the common good.

## 54 ACCELERATING RECALLS

How should a corporation faced with a series of negative events balance its responsibility to regulators and its loyalties to customers, employees, and shareholders as it responds? What are its ethical options in communicating about the issues? International automaker Toyota had to make such decisions as it responded to questions about the safety of its most popular models from 2007 through 2010, while it was experiencing record growth in international sales.

*The Wall Street Journal* detailed the time line of the 2007–2010 acceleration-related recalls.<sup>8</sup> In March 2007, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) began investigating five complaints about the gas pedals in the 2007 Toyota Lexus ES 350; the pedals seemed to cause sudden acceleration. Following a fatal accident involving a 2007 Camry, the NHTSA notified Toyota that it should recall its all-weather floor mats as they apparently could interfere with proper control of the gas pedal. Toyota announced a recall of its all-weather floor mats on September 26, 2007. However, two years later in September 2009, a horrific accident occurred in which a California highway patrol officer, his wife, daughter, and brother-in-law were killed when the Lexus ES 350 they were in reportedly raced to more than 100 miles per hour and crashed. On September 25, 2009, the NHTSA notified Toyota that it should do more to address the acceleration issue. On October 5, Toyota recalled almost 4 million cars because of possible pedal entrapment from the floor mats.

Yet, in January 2010, Toyota told the agency that there may be a defect in the pedal itself, prompting the NHTSA to call for quick action. On January 16, the automaker recalled 2.3 million cars. The NHTSA then told Toyota to stop selling cars with the suspected defect, and Toyota complied. An additional 1.1 million cars were then recalled.<sup>9</sup> The NHTSA was later to assert that Toyota had known of the pedal issue since at least September 29 when it notified European distributors, but Toyota had not instructed its American division to stop installing the pedals.<sup>10</sup> Even though U.S. customers had also complained about the problem, Toyota did not notify the NHTSA or its customers of the potential problem.<sup>11</sup> Following a review, the agency fined Toyota \$16.4 million, the largest fine possible, which Toyota paid in May. Numerous other lawsuits have been filed in the United States against the automaker.<sup>12</sup>

However, problems with model safety continued. In April, 2010, Toyota recalled the 2010 Lexus GX 460 because of stability problems reported in *Consumer Reports* magazine, and a month later, Toyota announced it would recall the 2010 Lexus LS sedans with variable gear ratio steering for repairs.<sup>13</sup>

Apparently there had been some internal debate about Toyota's slowness in addressing the problems publicly. The Associated Press reported that Irv Miller, the group vice president for environment and public affairs, had told the executive coordinator for corporate communications that Toyota needed to make the issue public several days before the public recall announcement. According to an e-mail message reported by the AP, Miller wrote: "We are not protecting our customers by keeping this quiet. The time to hide on this one is over."<sup>14</sup>

The recalls generated tremendous publicity in traditional media and in social media conversations and posts—most of it negative. Akio Toyoda, the president of Toyota, finally appeared at a news conference in Nagoya, Japan, February 6, 2010, and apologized for the concerns raised by the safety issues. He also apologized to shareholders for the drop in the value of the corporate stock.<sup>15</sup> On February 24, he testified before the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. In prepared remarks, Toyoda said:

“We pursued growth over the speed at which we were able to develop our people and our organization, and we should sincerely be mindful of that. I regret that this has resulted in the safety issues described in the recalls we face today, and I am deeply sorry for any accidents that Toyota drivers have experienced.”<sup>16</sup>

When some criticized Toyota’s diagnosis of the acceleration problems, Toyota responded quickly to those statements. In one incident, ABC News broadcast an investigative report by Brian Ross on February 22 that Toyota charged included inaccurate footage of a tachometer on a Toyota. The network later admitted that a higher reading on a tachometer taken from another demonstration conducted under different conditions had been edited into the segment. Toyota responded with a release arguing the broadcast was misleading.<sup>17</sup>

Toyota further sought to counter criticism from Sean Kane, a safety consultant, and David Gilbert, a Southern Illinois University automobile technology professor, who had testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in February. Kane had asked Gilbert to conduct an experiment to determine if the acceleration problem might be linked to an electronic issue in the autos, rather than to sticking pedals. Toyota reported to the Congressional committee that it had hired a testing firm, Exponent, to investigate the problems. Exponent issued a fifty-six-page report defending the corporation, and Toyota streamed a video of Exponent information on its website. However, *The New York Times* reported that Exponent had originally been hired by a Toyota law firm to conduct research to protect the corporation in the lawsuits it was facing. Exponent had received \$11 million in consulting fees from Toyota from 2000 to 2009.<sup>18</sup>

The corporation also consulted the public relations firm of Robinson, Lerer & Montgomery and commissioned a poll called the “Kane/Gilbert Debunking Message Test.” The House subcommittee then asked for all documentation related to the poll, questioning whether the poll was intended to intimidate the two been witnesses.<sup>19</sup>

Toyota also began to address newer consumer complaints. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Toyota had put together SMART groups (Swift Market Analysis and Research Teams) to investigate and dispute consumer complaints. After a driver complained of sudden acceleration in his Prius, the SMART team called media to Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego to contest the charges. It also countered another Prius complaint in New York. However, another SMART investigation of a complaint about a Camry found that the consumer was correct; the recall-prompted repair supposedly completed on her car had not been completed.<sup>20</sup>

Toyota sought to reengage its U.S. consumers after the recall forced the suspension of sales. It conducted a national print and broadcast campaign to explain what actions car owners should take to have their models repaired. The corporation placed national ads on January 31, 2010, announcing suspension of sales of the recalled models.<sup>21</sup> Full-page newspaper ads on February 5, 2010, then acknowledged the publicity that had ensued about the gas-pedal recall: “There’s been a lot of talk about the recall. Here are the facts for our customers.” The ads explained the four steps the corporation was taking in response to complaints about sticking accelerator pedals: (1) sending letters to the 4.5 million owners of the eight various Toyota models involved in the recall asking them to set up an appointment with a Toyota dealer; (2) extending the hours at dealerships so repairs could be completed quickly; (3) offering repair training to service personnel at the dealerships; and (4) halting production of the models involved in the recall.<sup>22</sup>

Toyota also turned to digital and social media to communicate with consumers. On February 8, 2010, Toyota Motor Sales USA President Jim Lentz engaged in an online interview on the Digg Dialogg site where he responded to the 10 questions selected by Digg users from some 1,400 questions that were submitted. The interview garnered more than one million hits in its first five days.<sup>23</sup>

TweetMeme, a Twitter aggregation service, hosted “Toyota Conversations” that provided the official Toyota Twitter feed, other Twitter feeds about the issue, and links to news coverage.<sup>24</sup> Denise Morrissey, a member of Toyota’s Motor Sales USA social media team, explained that the site was designed “as both a listening post and an opportunity for interested consumers to continue those conversations.” Toyota also communicated through a Facebook page, Twitter posts, and its YouTube account, along with a special recall webpage linked from the corporation’s landing page.<sup>25</sup>

In March, 2010, the corporation announced the creation of a global quality-initiative committee that would be asked to help it improve its communication about safety.<sup>26</sup> Toyota offered zero percent financing on many vehicles and cut lease prices on others in March, and buyers responded favorably. Sales rose 70 percent from February, back to the normal level before the recalls started.<sup>27</sup> ♦

The Potter Box method for analysis may help clarify the ethical options Toyota could exercise in communicating in the United States about these safety issues. The situation itself was complicated. Aggressive growth had placed Toyota as the world’s automotive leader. Its brand had long been regarded as a symbol of quality; yet complaints about safety issues appeared to be recurring with consistency. The U.S. regulatory agency was engaged in cautioning Toyota about its obligations, and Toyota had apparently begun to make changes in its European operations. The primary values operating in this case are tied to situational factors: As the global economy slowed, the economic values of profitability and brand equity were increasingly important, although truthfulness and concern for others demanded consideration as well.

Clashing loyalties may have affected how these values were weighed. The national pride accorded the corporation from its Japanese employees and the need for profits felt by global shareholders had to be balanced against the trust placed in the manufacturer by numerous global consumers and the demands of U.S. consumer safety regulations. U.S. employees of Toyota were dependent on the manufacturer not only for wages but also for long-term security.

To whom are the highest duties owed when choices about disclosure might affect people’s physical safety and others’ economic security? The Kantian categorical imperative that prioritizes truth-telling and providing duty to others would prompt Toyota to disclose problems as promptly as they are known, regardless of the economic costs that may result. The actions finally taken by Toyota, such as halting sales of new cars until problems could be corrected, would be applauded. Moving quickly to recall new models as issues were identified after the initial huge recalls would also be endorsed. Conversely, waiting to communicate about problems until forced to do so by regulators would be discouraged; countering critics would be recommended only if it promoted the disclosure of truth.

Interestingly, utilitarian analysis might lead one to a similar recommended action. The principles of Mill suggest that the more quickly the corporation addresses the problem, the more quickly it can be solved and put behind the corporation—benefiting consumers, shareholders, employees, and management. Delaying disclosure adds to the magnitude of the potential harm to many. However, once the recalls were instituted, the actions taken by Toyota to communicate through a variety of media with consumers to encourage them to seek repairs would be seen as an ethical way to minimize harm.

Toyota seemed to grow far more eager to be accountable to its consumers and its regulators as this situation unfolded. CEO Toyoda may have been reluctant to become engaged in the

discourse as the crisis began, but he did become more active in articulating the corporate viewpoints and was humble enough to apologize in different settings to different audiences for the problems caused by the accelerating cars. Changing the tenor of communication within a huge multinational corporation may be difficult, but Toyota has demonstrated that such change is possible.

## 55 THANK YOU FOR SMOKING

Have you seen this film?

A handsome public relations spokesperson counters the talk-show appearance of a teen dying from cancer by asking why the tobacco industry would want to kill its best customers—those who are young and could buy cigarettes for years to come. Representing the Academy of Tobacco Studies, a lobbying group supposedly devoted to researching ties between tobacco and health, Nick Naylor works to counter proposed national legislation that would impose a skull and crossbones symbol on all tobacco packaging.

To accomplish this, Naylor bribes—with a suitcase of cash—the cancer-stricken cowboy whose image had become synonymous with tobacco use to drop his lawsuit. He convinces a major Hollywood producer to promote smoking in films as a way of gaining popular support, particularly among young people. Along the way, Naylor is shown lunching weekly with representatives of the alcohol and gun industries—the “M.O.D. Squad” as they call themselves, the “Merchants of Death.” After a television debate with the sponsor of the skull and crossbones packaging bill, Naylor is kidnapped and is almost killed by having numerous nicotine patches placed on his body. He is saved only because he has developed enough tolerance of nicotine through his smoking habit to survive the poisoning. Any more exposure to nicotine, even by smoking one cigarette, however, will kill him.

Naylor’s no-holds-barred tactics are revealed in a tell-all newspaper article written by a reporter with whom Naylor has been having an affair. In disgrace, Naylor is fired by the academy. But he is not done yet. Just as the kidnapping did not kill him physically, getting fired does not destroy his career. He turns the table on his ex-lover and destroys her reporting career by revealing their relationship. Summoned to testify at a Senate hearing about the proposed packaging legislation, he turns in a stellar performance in which he appeals to libertarianism in his cry against the regulation. At the end of the film, he has recovered prominence and is shown at the helm of a prosperous public relations firm about to take on other causes.

The plot of the 2006 film, *Thank You for Smoking*, directed by Jason Reitman and produced by David O. Sacks, was drawn from a novel by Christopher Buckley.<sup>28</sup> The film was nominated for a Golden Globe award. ♦

The film provides a satirical—and darkly comical—look at the interplay of lobbying, public relations, health communication, and newspaper sourcing. It also shows what may occur when careerism and client loyalty come before public interest and when dangerous products are promoted without much thought about consequences. The plot provides us an opportunity for two levels of analysis of public relations and social responsibility.

The Potter Box method is a useful tool in analyzing the ethics of the public relations practices depicted in the film. The definition of the situation is easily summarized. What loyalties are felt by Naylor, the public relations practitioner? Loyalty to his employer and to his M.O.D. Squad friends is demonstrated. Loyalty to his lover, the reporter, is shown to be ill-advised. What other loyalties are demonstrated through plot interaction? What about Naylor’s values? He obviously values money and influence but asserts that he values personal freedom. What philosophical principles might guide his behavior? Is he relying on utilitarianism, asserting that the greater good is served by maintaining the freedom of market choice? Or is this assertion a subversion of utilitarianism

because the consequences of increased tobacco use, particularly by the young, are strongly linked to ill health and high costs? Or is Naylor applying a balancing analysis, accepting some regulation of his client's products as an effort to protect by informing but opposing any more efforts at either warning or increased regulation?

The philosophy of care and the respect for human dignity is noticeable by its absence. Throughout the film, Naylor manipulates or is himself manipulated by those seeking to maintain economic power. Neither he nor his employer cares about the real medical and financial needs of the cowboy; they offer money only as a bribe, not as a gesture of compassion. The reporter uses her sexuality to gain trust and a huge byline.

The film itself also may be analyzed for its impact as a public relations message. Its central theme—that people should be free to make bad choices if they want to—omits many of the other issues within the debate: the pain and suffering of others who have not chosen to smoke but who have become ill or whose loved ones have been ill, the costs of providing health care borne by those who have and who have not smoked, and the differences between the critical choice-making abilities of minors and adults. The definitions and locations of vice and virtue in an Aristotelian analysis may shift emotionally as the audience grows to sympathize with the unscrupulous leading character as the “good characters” of the crusading legislator and reporter are shown to have flaws. In *Thank You for Smoking*, no groups emerge as worthy examples of public servants—not the politicians, the reporters, the industrialists, or the public relations practitioners.

## 56 TRAGEDY AT THE MINE

It was likely lightning that ignited the January 2, 2006, explosion at the Sago Mine in Tillmansville, West Virginia, in which twelve miners were killed and another critically injured, according to a report commissioned by West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, although the United Mine Workers of America contest that cause.<sup>29</sup> The disaster was exacerbated by the spread of incorrect information both locally and nationally that mistakenly reported that the twelve miners had survived.

The search and rescue mission began around 5 P.M., nearly eleven hours after the explosion in the mine. The first body was found by rescuers at 9:10 P.M. on January 3. It took several hours more for the rest of the men to be discovered; rescuers discovered the men about two miles inside the mine, and eleven of the group were already dead. The information was transmitted by the team using a series of five underground relay stations because their radios could not transmit through the rock. In a tragic manner, the message apparently was misunderstood and relayed over a speakerphone to the control center as “Twelve alive!”

The crisis command center was not secured, so information was not kept confidential until it was confirmed. CNN went live with the announcement. Cell phones then spread the word to the family members and friends who had gathered in the nearby Sago Baptist Church. The report to the governor said that family members were given erroneous information, such as that when the miners were rescued, they would come to the church before seeing medical providers. Family members and friends of the missing miners stayed in the church, waiting for their arrival.

Within the hour, however, rescuers informed the command center that there appeared to be only one survivor. Several hours passed before the news was relayed to family members.<sup>30</sup> The tragic news was delivered to the church around 3 A.M. by Ben Hatfield, president of the mining company, who was escorted by state troopers. After the announcement, the miners' families and friends left the church, some angry and yelling at the mining company and media, others crying.<sup>31</sup> Hatfield told reporters the next day that he had known within twenty minutes of the rescuers discovering the miners that a mistake had been made, but he did not inform the family members at that time because he did not know the extent of the deaths.

CNN corrected its story around 2:45 A.M., apparently the first medium to provide the updated information.<sup>32</sup> Headlines in morning dailies across the country carried the erroneous information, and newspapers had to correct the stories in later editions.

The governor's commissioned report stated that rescue leaders should have been more cautious in confirming information before it was shared. According to the report, no officials from the Mine Safety and Health Administration and the state Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training briefed the families of the miners during the entire rescue mission. The report said, "In any rescue situation, the highest-ranking federal, state and company officials on site must be personally responsible to ensure that miners' families receive timely updates of accurate and confirmed information." Apparently, the mining company had no press officer, and its president, Ben Hatfield, was responsible for conducting the press conferences.<sup>33</sup> ♦

Facing such a tragedy would pose a challenge for any organization. Delivering tragic news is difficult, even more so in this instance because of the original misunderstanding. However, the communication or lack of communication in this incident by the mining and government organizations almost certainly compounded the pain for those involved and raises ethical questions.

The agape principle calls for each person involved in such a crisis to be treated with dignity and respect; the operational principle calls for each individual involved to treat others as they would want to be treated if they were in the same position. From this ethical perspective, the actions taken or not taken by the mining company and the state officials are questionable. The time lapse between receiving the accurate information and informing the families at the church is hard to justify. Loyalty to the employees and their families and friends should have compelled communication. Providing avenues for families to receive prompt updates throughout the search would have demonstrated compassion and truthfulness. Creating a secure site for reporters to receive information regularly not only would have helped ensure accurate reporting but also might have helped to protect families and friends from the intrusion of reporters and cameras during their time of high stress and great grief.<sup>34</sup>

While the full extent of loss may not have been known early on, allowing jubilant but false news to circulate raises false hope and then increases suffering and anger. The call to minimize harm to others should raise questions about process and planning. Whose best interests were considered here? Why was there so little preparation for a disaster like this when mining, after all, is among the most dangerous work in the country? The ethics of caring demands an investment in planning and preparation, thereby enabling organizations and employers to respond to tragedy in a more dignified, accurate, and compassionate manner. Planning-communication for a crisis calls for organizations to make certain they pass along only confirmed and accurate reports. Frequently this involves designating spokespersons, holding briefings, and organizing a communication center where information flow is controlled.<sup>35</sup> Reports of life or death never should turn out wrong because of lack of the preparation required to handle crises competently, compassionately, and professionally. At Sago, a nation was praying, and families were trembling. Every piece of news carried immeasurable value—as did the lives of the miners and those who loved them. Accepting responsibility for sharing accurate information is a duty owed.

## NOTES

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# The Demands of Social Responsibility

**P**erhaps one of the overriding ethical quandaries for a public relations practitioner is defining what is meant by the term *public*. One may define *public* narrowly from the perspective of the organization's or client's most critical stakeholders—those networks of interdependency and mutual benefit that demand ongoing attention, focus, and resources. Yet the tug of the greater *social public*, or society, also must be acknowledged. From the professional codes of ethics to the expectations that professionals will act on behalf of a greater good, this obligation is usually articulated by codes and practitioners as a first-order priority and is frequently eloquently tied to the responsibilities of citizenship. Yet the boundaries between acting in the best interest of the more narrowly defined publics and that of the larger public are not clearly marked, forcing practitioners to search for ways in which somehow to balance or meet obligations to all.

To balance these interests, practitioners and the public must weigh issues such as these:

- What are the ethical considerations when the public good can be served only at great expense to the business, nonprofit, or client?
- Are time or financial constraints ever an acceptable rationale for compromising ethics? In other words, how much should these constraints be considered when choosing what should be done?
- In an increasingly pluralistic society, how does one conceptualize the general public and then decide what is best for it?

One could describe this ethical quandary as one in which the principles of Kant meet those of Mill. One must decide when and how categorical duty and utilitarianism intersect or overtake one another. When does a practitioner have to decide that “the greatest good for the greatest number” becomes a categorical imperative for ethical behavior, and how does the practitioner's recommendation impact the decisions of the organization or client? The mere question implies that it is possible to predict the consequences of behaviors taken on behalf of or with the discrete publics on the general social public in a timely manner, so that changing or stopping behaviors could mitigate harm or expand the benefit. One also might argue that understanding the socially responsible action requires a commitment to accepting

the ethics of caring as a fundamental obligation for both corporate and individual practices. Actions that honor the dignity and worth of individuals almost certainly result in socially responsible outcomes.

The cases in this chapter prompt you to consider different aspects of social responsibility from different philosophical and ethical perspectives. “One for One: Helping Consumers Become Heroes” highlights how TOMS Shoes has used its charitable outreach as a major component in its consumer relations. Case 58, “Promoting ‘Hope for Haiti Now,’” describes what happens when individuals demonstrate a willingness to put aside their own fame and fortune to pursue a greater social good. The last two cases examine how two organizations faced different types of crises. The classic case, “Pepsi Challenged by Rumors,” recounts the approach taken by a corporation needing to control rumors about product safety, and Case 60, “Swept Away in a Storm,” discusses the challenges the Red Cross faced in serving victims of Hurricane Katrina.

## 57 ONE FOR ONE: HELPING CONSUMERS BECOME HEROES

*“With every pair you purchase, TOMS will give a pair of new shoes to a child in need. One for One.”<sup>1</sup>*

Buy one, give one. For each pair of shoes purchased from the company, a pair of shoes is donated to a needy child at an event called a Shoe Drop, which allows volunteers, often celebrities and shoe customers, to participate on-site in the distribution as Friends of TOMS (see <http://www.friendsoftoms.org>). The corporate website explains, “Thanks to the emotional rewards of conscious capitalism, customers cease being consumers and become heroes.”<sup>2</sup>

By spring 2010, the company had given away more than 600,000 pairs of shoes to children in 15 countries. TOMS (short for “Tomorrow’s Shoes) sells espadrilles and cordones. The shoes are constructed in factories in Argentina, China and the United States.<sup>3</sup> According to the corporate website, “We require that the factories operate under sound labor conditions, pay fair wages and follow local labor standards.” The shoes are sold through the corporate website and in department stores and boutiques.<sup>4</sup>

TOMS Shoes was founded in 2006 by Blake Mycoskie, an entrepreneur who started his first business while a college student and had appeared as a contestant on the reality program *The Amazing Race*, and Argentinean business partner Alejo Nitti. Mycoskie says he was inspired to start the company and its foundation once he learned the grave diseases caused by parasites that enter through bare feet and saw firsthand the numbers of children and adults in the world who had no shoes. He told the *South China Morning Post* in a 2009 interview, “I’ve seen numbers that say a billion people worldwide are at risk of getting this disease and a pair of shoes is the most effective and simple solution.”<sup>5</sup>

In another 2009 interview, Mycoskie told CNN that beyond the health benefits, owning a pair of shoes may allow children to attend school in areas where proper uniforms are required. Describing the reaction to a shoe drop, Mycoskie said, “the most common response we get from the kids and from their parents is that this shoe represents a passport to a better life.”<sup>6</sup>

The social entrepreneur has been recognized for his creativity and best practice. Mycoskie received the People’s Design Award from the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in 2007, an award presented each year in recognition of sustainable design achievements.<sup>7</sup> In 2009 TOMS Shoes received the Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence (ACE). The U.S. Department of State presents the ACE awards each year to U.S.-owned businesses that exhibit good corporate citizenship, promote innovation, and advance democratic principles around the world.<sup>8</sup>

Others have been inspired by the TOMS example. To help raise awareness of the need for shoes, TOMS invites individuals and organizations to become involved in an annual observance titled “One Day Without Shoes,” a day in which walking in bare feet reminds participants of the challenges of life without shoes. College students are encouraged to form organizations to promote the foundation,<sup>9</sup> and a “One Day” toolkit is available on the corporate website. The one-for-one model has been adopted by at least two other corporations that work with TOMS: Ralph Lauren’s cobranded Rugby TOMS line donates a pair of shoes for each pair sold,<sup>10</sup> and Element gives one skateboard to a child at the Indigo Skate Camp in Durban, South Africa, each time a consumer buys a skateboard and TOMS shoes from its collection.<sup>11</sup>◆

Doing good by doing well has become a mantra of corporate social responsibility statements, but TOMS Shoes offers a noteworthy example of developing an entrepreneurial response to human need that is, as Mycoskie often explains, sustainable because it is based on a for-profit model. In uncertain economic settings, it might be easier for a corporation to draw back from committing so openly to philanthropy. The rewards for donating shoes in underdeveloped areas are indirect at best. However, TOMS has demonstrated that a viable link can be established between good corporate citizenship and economic benefits and that committing to doing good may become a compelling consumer motivation. Indeed, TOMS has shown that its model can compel private individuals and organizations as well as other corporations to engage in charitable activism.

Organizations that choose to act for others rather than just for shareholders or employees may exemplify the best of citizenship behavior. Acting on the basis of stated corporate values in such a public manner demonstrates an ethical commitment to living truth as well as telling truth—that ideal of Aristotelian *phronesis* of both knowing what is virtuous and how to practice it. Recognition of the positive efforts of such corporations is also ethically worthy. In a culture cluttered with what can be overtly negative views of corporate profiteering, identifying corporations that are financially successful *and* socially responsible offers moral exemplars that support continued belief in the possibilities for socially responsible capitalism.

## 58 PROMOTING “HOPE FOR HAITI NOW”

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, caused an estimated 200,000 deaths, many injuries, and structural damage.<sup>12</sup> The need to respond quickly prompted actor George Clooney to organize an international telethon with all proceeds going to support Haiti relief. The project, “Hope for Haiti Now: A Global Benefit for Earthquake Relief,” provided celebrities and citizens from around the globe an opportunity to act to help address the suffering and destruction caused by the quake.

The telethon, simulcast on Friday evening, January 22, 2010, was watched by more than 80 million people worldwide, including more than 24 million U.S. viewers and 1.9 million video streams,<sup>13</sup> through the cooperation of broadcasting, cable, radio, mobile, and Internet companies. It aired on all four major U.S. broadcast networks, the Canadian Broadcasting Network, and many cable networks, including HBO, MTV, and PBS. International viewers could watch on BET International, CNN International, National Geographic, and MTV Networks International. The event was also streamed online on sites such as YouTube and Hulu, and it was also available on mobile networks and on radio. Donors were offered a variety of options for giving. They could donate online at <http://www.hopeforhaiti.org>, by texting “Give” to 50555 on a cell phone, or by mail.

Viewers saw a pantheon of celebrities engaged in encouraging them to contribute. Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder, Taylor Swift, Alicia Keys, Coldplay, and Sting were among the musicians who performed. Vignettes of the devastation and bravery in Haiti offered by celebrities ranging from former President Bill Clinton to Meryl Streep to Halle Berry<sup>14</sup> were interspersed among the musical performances. Live news stories and interviews from Haiti were provided by CNN's Anderson Cooper, and snippets of conversations from donors who called the phone bank staffed by stars such as Julia Roberts, Steven Spielberg, and Reese Witherspoon (some of the more than 100 actors, athletes, and musicians who answered phone calls)<sup>15</sup> were aired. Few of the musicians or speakers were identified directly, and their dress and demeanor were somber and restrained; *The New York Times* called it "a study in carefully muted star power."<sup>16</sup> What was not shown or reported on camera were the major donations given by stars such as Clooney; news reports indicated he and several others had donated \$1 million or more to the fund.<sup>17</sup>

The impact continued after the broadcast itself concluded. Music from the telethon, sold as a digital-only album, debuted at number 1 on the Billboard 200 chart, according to the Associated Press.<sup>18</sup> In only two days, more than \$3 million was raised by iTunes sales of the album.<sup>19</sup> The website (<http://www.hopeforhaiti.org>) offered opportunities for donations and volunteer involvement, news and information about recovery efforts, and reports on how donations were used.

The more than \$61 million in donations raised by the telethon<sup>20</sup> was routed through the non-profit Entertainment Industry Foundation. An eight-member advisory committee, which included presidents of nonprofit groups such as The Rockefeller Foundation and The Council on Foundations, was formed to work with the Entertainment Industry Foundation to distribute the funds raised to groups such as Partners in Health, Oxfam America, UNICEF, the Red Cross, the United Nations World Food Programme, the Yele Haiti Foundation, and the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund.<sup>21</sup>

By late February 2010, the first grants of \$35 million were distributed to help address the immediate needs in Haiti.<sup>22</sup> ♦

A disaster such as the earthquake in Haiti can prompt hope or despair—or inspire a sense of apathy among those who say, "There's nothing I can do to make a difference." Yet the ethics of care demand some response, a response that emphasizes the "cared for" rather than the "one carrying." The Haiti telethon and its related relief activities provided many with the opportunity to care, and the self-effacing behavior of the celebrities involved exemplified how power and influence can be used to benefit others.

Celebrities and mass-media telethons have been linked since 1966, the first year comedian Jerry Lewis hosted a national telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.<sup>23</sup> But the Live Aid fund-raising concert in 1985, which raised millions for famine relief in Africa, moved the focus from a national event to a global movement, while demonstrating the power of multiple performers working together to gain publicity and raise funds for a worthwhile cause. Its organizer, Sir Bob Geldof, has become a respected international voice for social justice and garnered a British knighthood in recognition of his years of activism.<sup>24</sup> In the United States, Geldof's example sparked the Farm Aid Concerts organized by musicians Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp, annual concert and activist events that raise funds for and awareness of the economic and policy issues faced by owners of small farms.<sup>25</sup>

But choosing to get involved in such a large fund-raising effort reflects ethical reasoning—both from featured celebrities and from individual donors. From a Potter Box perspective, perhaps the situation is clear, but what values and loyalties had to be considered? In almost every case, the value of personal financial gain and professional commitments had to be weighed against the values of altruism and communitarianism. Each musical performer and many narrators likely had

contractual obligations. Networks and outlets deciding whether to clear schedule times had to weigh the loss of advertising and programming revenues and their obligations to shareholders and programming contracts. Celebrities asked to answer phones and talk with individual donors rather than to appear in a more highlighted area of the telethon likely had to balance ego and careerism against public service and cooperation. Potential donors had to assess the trustworthiness of the aid organizations and the individuals involved. The value given to the celebrity in contemporary culture certainly had to be weighed: Was the incentive for giving the opportunity to make a difference for others, or was the incentive the chance to talk with a celebrity, perhaps even during the broadcast?

Certainly, the ethical choice is sometimes the most professional choice as well. The diversity of the media used—the skillful integration of traditional and emerging media designed to reach the broadest spectrum possible; the age, ethnic, and racial diversity of the performers and participants; and the varied ways in which audience members were challenged to become involved exemplify excellence. That such an undertaking was conceived and achieved in such a short time makes it even more impressive and suggests that setting the highest standards in acting to care for others is not only possible but achievable.

Clooney as organizer did not choose to brand the event with his name, and the names of those performing or speaking were not provided during the broadcast. Those famous enough to be recognized by audience members may have benefited from the cachet that comes from public service, and advance publicity did highlight the personalities who would be featured. Performing on a global broadcast and associating oneself with a socially responsible cause can bolster images and lead to greater sales or box-office support. But no one on this telethon or on its related website was shown with an oversized cardboard check made out to the charity, and no one received public acclaim for personal giving. Identification and personal stories were reserved for the Haitians and caregivers featured in the interviews and stories on air.

Being described as almost too low-key by *The New York Times* is a rarity for contemporary celebrities whose names have become personal brands or for events in which they appear.<sup>26</sup> The focus of this endeavor was rightly on the crisis itself and the receivers of the support, not on those providing it. “Hope for Haiti Now” did bring hope, not only to those who received support through funds raised by the telethon, but also to audiences and the performers who were again reminded of the potential for selflessness in acting on behalf of others.

## 59 PEPSI CHALLENGED BY RUMORS

The full-page ads proclaimed: “Pepsi is pleased to announce . . . nothing.” The ads, which Pepsi-Cola placed in newspapers across the country in June 1993, culminated a one-week rumor-control campaign conducted by the soft-drink corporation. The crisis began on June 10, 1993, when a Washington State couple claimed they had found a syringe floating inside a can of Diet Pepsi. The next day, a woman in a nearby city reported finding another needle inside a can. Within a few days, reports of needles found in cans came from states as far away as New York and Louisiana. Stories about the claims and about a warning issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ran as lead stories in news outlets across the country, including the broadcast network evening news programs.

The first day, the corporation did not react to the allegations publicly, but then Pepsi responded. A crisis management team that was formed with Pepsi CEO Craig Weatherup as its leader began by investigating the claims internally at its Seattle bottling plant. Within two days, it issued an internal advisory reporting on the security of its bottling process, and it continued issuing employee advisories throughout the crisis.

The corporation then began an aggressive media campaign, disseminating four video news releases (VNRs) by satellite to news stations across the country that showed the canning process, the initial arrest for a false claim of tampering, and a cut from a convenience store surveillance video showing a woman apparently inserting a syringe into an open can. The VNRs were seen by more than 365 million viewers on more than 300 stations.<sup>27</sup>

Weatherup and a company safety expert appeared on network evening newscasts and talk shows describing the safety of their bottling processes and the corporation's desire to maintain openness throughout the crisis. Weatherup was quoted on National Public Radio as saying, "We have to share everything we know, not only with the FDA, but with the American public and let them know we take this, obviously, incredibly seriously."<sup>28</sup> The corporation fully cooperated with the FDA and other government agencies during the investigation. In fact, Weatherup appeared with FDA Commissioner David A. Kessler on an ABC *Nightline* broadcast when the FDA announced a product recall was not needed.

The crisis ended with a June 17, 1993, press conference where the FDA called the allegations of tampering unfounded. Eventually, more than twenty suspects were arrested in connection with the claims.<sup>29</sup> The company's response did not end then, however. The promotion involving the announcement ads led to a July discount opportunity touted as a "Thanks America" campaign. Consequently, sales of the soft drink increased during the summer. The company's innovative use of VNRs during its crisis campaign earned it and Robert Change Productions a Silver Anvil Award in 1994 from the Public Relations Society of America for excellence in crisis communication not involving accidents or national disasters.<sup>30</sup> ♦

Perhaps no situation tests the ethics or credibility of an organization like a product-tampering scare does for a manufacturer. The survival of the business depends on consumers who trust a product enough to buy and use it. Real or rumored safety hazards, however, can shake consumer and employee trust. Organizational and personal instincts may prompt a corporation to hide until the controversy passes, but a duty to public interest calls for prompt confrontation and resolution of the problems.

In this case, Pepsi had several choices about responding to the initial tampering claims and the subsequent charges. It could have chosen to avoid the media inquiries, hiding behind the stone wall of "no comment on advice of our attorneys." It could have initiated a smoke-screen campaign by ignoring the complaints and launching its discount campaign early as a diversion method. It could have appointed a less visible personality to head the crisis team to protect the CEO from media questions and public scrutiny. It could have evaded the government inquiries, hoping the controversy would die down, or tried to develop a scapegoat by blaming any product tampering on the outlets where the products were sold or on the media for creating a climate ripe for copy-cat claims. Each of these options might have been successful in diverting some of the attention from the claims themselves.

Instead, the Pepsi corporation chose to exercise its duty to the public by opening up its processes to media and public scrutiny in an innovative and aggressive manner. Its VNR campaign invited and enabled the public to view the bottling process and law enforcement actions for itself. Leaders in management served as representatives and advocates for all employees publicly; CEO Weatherup's willingness to be interviewed live on CNN, ABC, and PBS was evidence that the corporation was not afraid of scrutiny. Cooperating with government investigators also reinforced the company's claim about the safety of its products. Pepsi successfully calmed a communication crisis in this case. Certainly, the safety of its bottling procedures provided a strong defense against the false claims, but its open communication campaign helped to ensure that its defenses had credibility with its various publics. This case demonstrates that the ethical response of truthfulness and candor can reconcile the best interests of the organization and the best interests of the general public.

## 60 SWEEP AWAY IN A STORM

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought heartache, tragedy, and loss to the Gulf Coast. They also tested the ability of the Red Cross to manage response to another widespread disaster, and the efforts on the part of America's leading charitable organization were commendable, although not without some problems.

The ferocity of the storms and the damage caused by them were unparalleled. Shelters were needed in twelve states, from Utah to Florida.<sup>31</sup> Crisis relief involved more than one quarter of a million Red Cross relief workers. In all, about \$1.5 billion was distributed to more than four million people, and shelter was provided for almost half a million survivors.<sup>32</sup> The huge effort was supported by a flood of gifts as well. Almost \$2.3 billion was raised for Katrina relief,<sup>33</sup> although for the first time in its history, the agency had to borrow funds to cover disaster relief—some \$340 million to cover its costs.<sup>34</sup> The Red Cross did not have a central national financial management system, which made it hard to coordinate aid and then to audit how it was used. Even accepting gifts was difficult—the online donation system was not capable of handling the volume of posted donations.<sup>35</sup>

It may have been the widespread nature of the relief effort that was the greatest challenge: the hurricane, the collapse of the levees, and then the second hurricane; residents driven from their homes at different times; the disparate responses from federal, local, and state governments. It is not surprising that the Red Cross encountered problems distributing supplies, coordinating logistics, using volunteers, and reaching minorities, as an internal 2006 report noted. No disaster-wide shelter database was available, so it was difficult to keep track of the conditions and needs at each shelter. Some who needed help did not receive it, at least not in a timely or regular manner. Others who perhaps did not need help took advantage of the crisis. Allegations of some fraud were investigated, and at least forty-nine people eventually were indicted.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the storm swept away some personal ethics with the fury of its rain and wind.

Despite its heroic response efforts, the Red Cross was criticized<sup>37</sup> not only by those in Louisiana and other Gulf states but even by the British Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>38</sup> To address these concerns, the Red Cross added a link on its website for anyone wishing to report fraud, waste, or abuse (<http://www.redcross.org/contactus>) and developed a code of conduct that included a ban on anyone seeking financial advantage or gain as a result of affiliation with the American Red Cross.

The criticism may have prompted management changes within the agency, according to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Marsha J. Evans, chief executive, resigned in December 2005. In April 2007, the agency named Mark W. Everson, who had served as commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, to the position. In April 2007, Congress passed legislation that reduced the Red Cross board from fifty to a maximum of twenty members by 2012, hoping to streamline decision making and oversight. The expectations for the role of the agency also shifted. The Red Cross would no longer have responsibility for coordinating shelter, food, and first aid to disaster victims under the country's National Response Plan. Instead, the Federal Emergency Management Agency would be in charge. The agency also would prepare disaster-response scenarios in conjunction with other emergency officials rather than having to prepare to cope with all types of disasters alone.<sup>39</sup>

But the Red Cross was not willing to give up on its humanitarian mission. Determined to apply the lessons learned through Katrina and Rita, the Red Cross took steps to improve and to prepare for future disasters. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the Red Cross spent \$80 million to move supplies and food closer to vulnerable coastal areas and tripled its warehouse space around the country. One million debit cards have been prepared so that they can be activated quickly for distribution to victims. Telephone service has been expanded to handle greater call volume. Greater ethnic, racial, and age diversity within its volunteer base has been sought.<sup>40</sup> ♦

Disasters provide agape moments when the need to provide care for others is urgent. Measuring an agency's efficiency and precision in such a time is an awkward—perhaps irrelevant—calculation. In situations so dire, ethical decisions always must be other centered, with care of the suffering afforded the highest priority. The care should not be parceled according to a victim's status, nor offered mechanically or without compassion. Empathy, effort, and sacrifice are involved when individuals or groups rush help to those in need, hoping that those who are involved will act virtuously. Yet nothing goes perfectly, and fatigue may take physical, fiscal, and emotional tolls.

Hurricane Katrina was a real worst-case scenario that pushed agencies and leaders at every level. Many appeared unprepared, overwhelmed, and entangled in bureaucracy. Nevertheless, heroic efforts saved lives and provided hope. Despite some problems, the Red Cross was there helping, coordinating, and providing disaster relief during and after Katrina. Had the thousands of volunteers not been willing to help, what would have happened? The agency was there—a known and trusted organization around and through which contributors, volunteers, residents, and officials could rally and respond.

In a disaster of this magnitude, ethical questions are everywhere. Who gets help? What is the best way to provide help when systems are overstretched and overstressed? How much effort should go into monitoring help and auditing quality when time and quantity are insufficient? The Red Cross, one hopes, operates above the indecision, mismanagement, and selfishness that the breakdown of civil order invites. The Red Cross is the symbol of life and help. How do symbol and reality maintain integrity in such conditions?

After the disaster, the organization held itself accountable, conducting an internal investigation that it made public. It cooperated with legal officials to identify and pursue those who had abused the privilege of helping others. The Red Cross demonstrated its commitment to truth-telling, even when the truth was somewhat painful or embarrassing, and then demonstrated a willingness to change as necessary to improve.

This case provides several key areas for discussion, both from an organizational perspective and from an individual perspective. What are the ethical obligations of a social-service organization that depends on volunteers and donors? How and when might such an organization admit its shortcomings without losing public trust? How should it weigh its obligations during times of great crisis? How is the greater good served? When working with volunteers, how may an agency best ensure that its volunteers will act honestly and be dedicated to public service? The ethical issues associated with verifying need also should be explored. How does one treat a suffering victim “as one would want to be treated” and still ensure accountability?

This case does not demonstrate issues faced just by the American Red Cross; rather, it raises the ethical issues faced by anyone interested in volunteering or donating to disaster relief. What questions should be asked or what knowledge should be obtained by the donor or volunteer before funds, supplies, time, or work is given? What standards of ethical behavior should be required of those willing to volunteer?

Ultimately, the virtues of action must be judged after the fact. Other-centeredness is inherently action-based. Agencies such as the Red Cross have been exemplars for decades because they are willing to take the risk of serving—and not even storms like Katrina and Rita could sweep away their commitment.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER IN PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS

Relationships lie at the heart of the practice of public relations. In many ways, the same character traits and practices that support the creation and maintenance of healthy, supportive interpersonal relationships are required for ethical public relationships. Who wants friends to lie to them or to

misrepresent themselves? Who wants friends to betray loyalty or trust? Who wants friends who work only toward their own best interests, not toward mutual interests? No one—and while we likely do not consider a corporation, a nonprofit, a celebrity, or a politician a personal friend, we do expect to be treated with equality, justice, dignity, and respect in our communications and interactions. Similarly, we may not consider our clients or our employer or our shareholders as a traditional friend, but once we step into the role of public relations practitioner working for them, we accept the moral responsibility of *caring for* in which their needs, rights, and expectations become as important to us as our own.

Public relations is not marketing, although marketing is a valid and respected field of its own. Unlike marketing, public relations does not consider its interactions to be solely commercial transactions with consumers of our products, goods, and services. By defining groups as publics, practitioners acknowledge that there is mutuality, not just exchange. Mutuality will last only as long as both parties find benefit, whether that is manifested through profit, service, knowledge, recognition, or meaning. Such relationships are risky. Balancing various loyalties may be difficult. It is possible to become so focused on the need of one client, for example, that we disregard our responsibility to care for others, or to become so focused on the need of one client that we are unable to balance our duty to our profession, our nation, or even our best selves. So, what characterizes the *heart of the matter* for ethical public relations practice?

*Practice truthfulness.* Ethical practitioners should engage in communication that is accurate, honest, and contextualized. Seek to be honest *about* sources and honest *with* sources. Be unashamed of your partisanship and frank in disclosures. Seek to maximize transparency and minimize subterfuge. Only exaggerate in a context where such hyperbole is understood for what it is—and one in which no one is harmed or misled. At the heart of the practice is the ability to know and share the truth in an engaging manner.

*Practice in humility.* You are the spokesperson or the representative, not the organization or the client. Do not be tempted to confuse roles. Be willing to listen to the suggestions of others and to respond to their criticisms, whether the person offering input is a client, a supervisor or a philosopher. Gaining attention for your messages in what is both a diverging and converging media world is not easy, so don't oversell your abilities. Public relations is typically a profession without bylines. At the heart of the practice is the willingness to focus on the other, not on yourself.

*Practice with respect.* Understand the power of the communications and organizations you are involved with. Persuasion and influence are powerful forces. The work of politics and public affairs, nonprofit service, industry and business, and the influence of public relations in them, has real consequences. Take your work and yourself seriously. Each member of your publics and, indeed, each of your stakeholder groups or segmented publics, deserves to be regarded and treated with dignity, deserving full participation in the public forum, even as you prioritize each in your communication efforts. The events, activities, and campaigns you plan and execute may be creative and clever, but don't allow the punch lines to ridicule or belittle. At the heart of the practice of public relations is an understanding of the value of the work being done—and the higher value of those for whom and with whom it is undertaken.

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