

## **Public Relations Laws and Ethics**

### **Laws**

There are many fine lines when it comes to public relations and the law. Today, there are so many rules and guidelines that it is almost impossible to keep up with all of them. Just having the basic knowledge of these areas will help you as a public relations professional in the future. Some of these basic laws are discussed below.

### **Defamation**

Any falsely published communication-- word, photos, pictures, symbols- that create public hatred, contempt, ridicule, or inflicts injury on reputation. Defamation is the act of damaging the reputation of a person by means of false and malicious communications that expose that person to contempt, ridicule, hatred, or social ostracism. In common law, defamation in writing is classified as libel and oral defamation is slander

### **Libel**

Libel is a published or printed defamation. If you issue news releases, house journals, annual reports that are short of adequate truth, you could be summoned by a court if a suit has been instituted against you for libel. It is possible to libel someone both in a photograph and in a caption.

A photograph or a caption is libellous if it exposes a person to hatred, ridicule or contempt; lowers them in the estimation of right thinking members of the community; causes them to be shunned or avoided; or disparages their reputation in trade, business, profession or office. This suggests that you must be careful in captioning pictures that you use in your publications.

For instance if a caption describes two people as Mr. and Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Clinton is in fact Mrs. Katrin, or even Miss Katrin , then that caption is libellous as it could suggest different things to people who know Mr. Clinton and the real Mrs. Clinton. An easy way to avoid this kind of problem is for your photographer to ask questions properly from people he has taken on their proper names and the spellings as well as their designations.

### **Slander**

Slander is not a commonly breached public relations law. This is probably because the bulk of public relations messages today appears in written form. The truth however is that very many public relations jobs involve speech, broadcast and oral presentations. Thus, we need to examine the law of slander else we unconsciously violate it. Slander is a sub of defamation. It is defamation in words, or better put, in oral form. You or your client may be sued for slander if a person thinks that his reputation or image has been falsely or maliciously damaged in the minds of right thinking members of the society. The

implication of this for a practitioner is that he or she must ensure that every oral communication is properly examined and expunged of any slanderous statement. When in doubt, consult your lawyer.

## Some Definitions of Ethics

Various authors have defined ethics in various ways depending on their perception of the subject. An unknown source says ethics is “That part of science and philosophy dealing with moral conduct, duty, and judgment.” According to Lucas (2001), “Ethics is that branch of philosophy that deals with issues of right and wrong in human affairs.”

Examples of ways in which people have been known to compromise their professional ethics include:

1. Lying for an employer
2. Accepting gifts and or bribes
3. Writing misleading press releases
4. Withholding information, and
5. Covering up potentially harmful situations

A practitioner is always thorn among several ends of loyalty. In their book, *Public Relations Ethics*, Philip Seib and Kathy Fitzpatrick talked about five duties of public relations professionals to - self, client, employer, profession and society. Another author referred to these as the five masters.

- **Duty to Self:** If you will ever deceive anyone, never try to deceive your best friend and that best friend of yours is yourself. Therefore, ethical responsibility is a duty to yourself as a practitioner.
- **Duty to Client:** Your client is the one picking up the bill for your services at a particular point in time. He therefore deserves the best of service borne on the wings of ethical consideration that give him value for his money.
- **Duty to Employer:** If you are on the payroll of someone, then it is your ethical duty to do him the service as he deserves. Here we are talking of duties that are commensurate to your pay as well as the calling of your practice.
- **Duty to Profession:** it is your professional duty not only to keep the public relations profession as good as you met it when you joined it, but even to ensure that the standards are improved than it was. This is your duty to your profession.
- **Duty to Media:** No public relations practitioner can be successful without the cooperation of the media. **NO PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER CAN SUCCEED WITHOUT THE COOPERATION OF THE MEDIA.** This does not mean that the media are so powerful that

they can hold you to ransom on your job, but they are such partners in progress that you must do all things ethically possible to protect their interest in given situations.

- **Duty to Society:** The society is to a public relations man what the laboratory is to a pure scientist. Any careless mix of chemical components can trigger such an explosion that can bring down the entire building. This explains why the public relations man must at all times accord the society the ethical duties due to it.

### **Ethical Values**

Below are ten universal values that any ethical-minded individual would embrace. They are the blocks for building ethical values in other areas of the human life

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Promise-keeping
- Fidelity
- Fairness
- Caring for others
- Respect for others
- Responsible citizenship
- Pursuit of excellence
- Accountability

### **Ethical Approaches to Decision Making**

• **Deontology:** Deontology is derived from the Greek word *deontos*, meaning duty or obligation. This system is duty-based and relies on moral obligation. Deontological ethics says that all actions are inherently right or wrong. An act is always good (in and of itself; regardless of circumstances or consequences) and thus ought to be performed. This system depends on the inner-based, self-discipline of each individual public relations practitioner, and because we are all human, and of different environmental backgrounds, it changes from person to person, depending on their own cultural and traditional biases.

**Teleology:** Derived from the Greek word *teleo*, meaning *end* or *consequences*. This system is outcome-based. Teleological ethicists believe that an act is good if it has good consequences; thus consequences determine the value of an act i.e. "the end justify the means."

**Aristotle's Golden Mean:** This system is based on what's best for the majority, the greatest good for greatest number. This is generally the system used in a democracy (rule of the majority with respect for the minority), where the minority sometimes has to sacrifice something of value if it's good for the country as a whole.

**Ethical Relativism:** This system of ethics believes that some acts are good in some circumstances or cultures but not in others. Ethical relativism emphasises contextual appropriateness in making ethical decisions. At the base of this thinking is that moral standards should vary according to cultures, circumstances, times, etc. The advantage of this ethical system is respect for cultural diversity.



