

All PRSA members pledge adherence to the [Code of Ethics](#). As issues arise relating to the practice of communications, the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) provides guidance within the framework of the Code. The PRSA Board of Directors then announces these guidelines through an Ethical Standard Advisory (ESA). ESAs are for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice. Please consult an attorney to obtain legal advice regarding your specific situation.

DECEPTIVE ONLINE PRACTICES AND MISREPRESENTATION OF ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

ISSUE: Misrepresentation by organizations and individuals using blogs, viral marketing and anonymous internet postings with undisclosed sponsorships and/or deceptive or misleading identities or descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants. PRSA members are reminded that open communication is essential for informed decision-making in a democratic society.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE: At least three Code provisions and three professional values relate to this issue. They are:

Code Provisions

- **Disclosure of Information.** Open communication fosters informed decision-making in a democratic society.
- **Conflicts of Interest.** Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers and the publics.
- **Enhancing the Profession.** Public relations professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession.

Professional Values

- **Honesty.** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.
- **Fairness.** We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.
- **Advocacy.** We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES

- The CEO of a company poses as a stock analyst and makes glowing remarks about her company's performance on a popular financial blog and recommends the stock.
- An agency creates a fake identity and uses the identity to post favorable comments about a client's social responsibility activities on a number of blogs and social networking sites.
- A member of a political candidate's staff disguises his identity and posts negative comments about the opposing candidate on a number of political sites.
- A public relations executive at a corporation wants to obtain the phone and text records for a public relations assistant who they suspect is leaking information to the media. The executive pretends to be the assistant and requests a summary of calls from the assistant's cell phone provider.

- An agency representative impersonates a client's online critic and posts favorable comments on a blog.
- A political campaign staffer sets up some web pages on a popular social networking site that look like they were created by the opponent. The pages misrepresent the opponent's position on a number of issues and make inflammatory statements about other candidates.
- A competitor's staff intentionally enters incorrect or misleading information about their own products or their competitor's product on a popular online encyclopedia.
- A public relations firm is hired to post favorable comments on Wikipedia about a number of clients and poses as a neutral, third party to post the comments.
- A public relations practitioner, to curry favor with a reporter, allows access to a client's private text conversations, email and pre-release web/blog comments.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE: The use of deceptive identities or misleading descriptions of goals, causes, tactics, sponsors or participants to further the objectives of any group constitutes improper conduct under the PRSA Code of Ethics. PRSA members should not engage in or encourage misrepresenting organizations and individuals through the use of blogs, viral marketing, social media and/or anonymous internet postings.

Created: 2008

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