

Ethics in PR

Common sense reapplied

Agenda

- What is ethics?
- A model for PR ethics?
- Why should you care about ethics?
- Case studies
 - CJD
 - Buncefield



What is ethics? (meta-ethical discourse is dull)

- **Ethics means learning to put aside everything you think you know, what your client wants to hear and looking at everything from a balanced and unbiased position:**
 - Utilitarianism
 - Rawls' *Veil of Ignorance*
 - Aristotle's practical wisdom
- **Ethics reflect society's values at that point in time**
- **The right thing to do changes according to:**
 - Time
 - Place
 - Situation
 - People involved
- **What is right here and now, may not be right next door in five minutes time.**

Communication vs. spin

- **Stakeholder (not just shareholder) interests becoming more important**
 - Operate in a wider marketplace
 - Seen as part of the wider community
 - Expected to contribute to the wider community i.e. CSR
- **What do we do?**
 - Act as information gatekeepers and disseminators
 - Encourage constructive dialog with the public
 - Advise our client/organisation
 - Represent their best interests
- **Practitioners should take an active role in promoting ethics**
 - Internal communications (values and culture)
 - Stakeholder management (trust and shared interests)
 - Crisis management (if it all goes wrong we have to clean it up)

A basic model for discussion

- **Who** will be affected?
- **What** is the effect?
- **When** are the impacts likely to appear?
- **Where** are you likely to be exposed?
- **Why** are you doing what you're doing?
- **How** are you going about doing it?

Why ethics?

- **The things organisations fear the most are all reputational issues (Senate/TNS research)**
 - Failure to deliver product or service to the expected standard
 - Exposure of unethical practices
 - Bad management of a crisis
- **Companies believe ethics is important**
 - Exposure of unethical practices was considered one of CEOs' and communication managers' biggest fears
 - Half of those surveyed thought that the biggest threat came from bad news spreading rapidly through media channels
- **Reputation is considered the second biggest risk to any organisation.**

Unethical behaviour is bad news

- **The public believes ethics is important (TGI Surveys)**
 - 67 per cent of respondents agreed “It is important that a company acts ethically”
 - 75 per cent of respondents have boycotted a brand or chosen to buy a brand because of the way the company behaves
 - Consumer respect for corporations is sliding
- **Advances in media technology mean bad news spreads fast**
 - Wire services
 - RSS feeds
 - Google News, blogs and podcasts
- **Regulators and the public expect companies to behave ethically and punish those that don't.**

Unethical behaviour is bad company practice

- **Companies need to align with society's values**
 - Unhappy staff:
 - Leave
 - Perform poorly
 - Treat customers and clients badly
- **Acting out of step with society opens you up to ongoing risk**
 - Solid Energy vs Save Happy Valley
 - Mercury Energy
 - Air NZ and the Erebus Disaster (“An orchestrated litany of lies”)
 - Pan Am and Lockerbie (and yes it's spelt with a k)

The Nicky Hager test

- How would you or your client stand up if Nicky Hager, or someone with an opposing view, had access to all of your emails?
- How would you stand up if the media or public knew what you knew?
 - It's likely somewhere, someone will find out
 - Being caught in a lie makes things much, much worse



The crossover between ethics & crisis management

- **Ethics aligns with existing practice**
- **The media and public aren't (always) aware of the facts**
 - By taking the front foot you control the story not the media
 - Tell it
 - Tell it now
 - Tell everywhere and often
- **Meet your responsibilities quickly**
 - Help the victims or those involved
 - Investigate, be seen to investigate and be open about those investigations
- **In a crisis, the truth often makes for the most boring story.**

Auckland City Hospital & CJD

- Patient identified with symptoms of CJD
- Patient pool identified (surgeries with same equipment)
- Risk of concerning or worrying patients unnecessarily vs. need to inform
- Commⁿ plan developed & holding statement developed (never used)
- Spoke to other hospitals, ethics committees, medical ethicists - all recommended telling patients
- Get original patient's families consent to talk with other patients (balance their rights versus the rights of others)
- Make sure patients informed first (personal phone calls and follow up correspondence)
- Put counseling in place for patients and families
- Advise ministers and Ministry of Health and other key stakeholders
- Media informed last when all other arrangements made

Buncefield

- Largest peace-time fire in European history
- Heard the explosion over 40km away in France and Holland
- 40 people injured and more than 2000 evacuated
- Delayed flights in and out of Heathrow, disrupted fuel supplies to UK
- Injured and those affected first priority
- Liability not accepted, but arrangements made for those dispossessed
- Arrangements made for Jet A1
- Complete cooperation with investigation
- Doing the right thing killed any ongoing story
- Ethics aligns with crisis management

