

MEDIA ETHICS RESOURCE LIBRARY

Public Relations Case Studies

The following cases are organized by topic:

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SPIN:

The Weather is Here. Wish You Were Beautiful.

Several of the islands in the Florida Keys were hit by a devastating hurricane several weeks ago. The main industry for these communities is tourism, and they are headed into the height of the tourist season as winter approaches. While the beaches are still in decent condition and are certainly uncrowded for a change, 90 percent of the buildings on the islands have suffered damage, including the many hotels and restaurants. Many people are homeless and still in need of basic supplies and shelter. Residents are also wondering how they will earn a living. This recent catastrophe causes a dilemma for you as the head of the tourism department. The community is depending on you to ensure they have some much needed income from tourism, but many businesses haven't reopened and a lot of work needs to be done to get basic survival needs met. You aren't sure how much the town has to offer tourists this season.

QUESTIONS:

1. Is there a potential ethical issue here?
2. Explain which guidelines or codes for persuasive communication/PR could help the tourism department in knowing how they should proceed in communicating to the public.
3. What advice would Kant give and how might that differ (if at all) from what John Stuart Mill would say?
4. Explain how you think this situation could be handled most ethically by the tourism PR team.

Weathering the Storm at the Ski Lodge

Normally you love your job and can't believe your good fortune at getting to spend all your days promoting a fabulous ski lodge, as well as enjoying the place yourself. The majority of the time the place sells itself due to the gorgeous Colorado mountain landscaping and deluxe lodge accommodations. There are other lodges in surrounding communities who are your competition, but you feel the style of your lodge and its luxuries makes it the best choice for skiers on vacation.

However, a tragedy has struck one of these tourists and your lodge, as a young man was killed in an avalanche while skiing yesterday. While there have been other injuries and several close calls in the eight years the lodge has been open, this is the first fatality. The young man was an up and coming television actor starring on a new sit com, so in addition to local news crews, you have celebrity reporters from all over the nation descending on the town. You handled the initial flood of press in the last 12 hours by being very upfront about all the details of the accident and expressing the lodge's deepest sympathies to this young man's family. Several members of his family were on vacation with him and are still here at the lodge at the moment. You have provided grief counseling services, cancelled all their charges, and have been trying to be as accommodating and helpful as you can while they are dealing with the aftermath. Clearly, this accident has affected the normally cheerful mood of the lodge, and most other guests are either staying in their rooms or checking out early. Some are asking for reimbursement.

The lodge owner is devastated on both a personal and professional level. He is worried that this accident will ruin the fine reputation of the lodge, resulting in serious profit losses this year and possibly some layoffs. You are trying to raise his spirits and assure him that the lodge can survive this catastrophe and negative media blitz, but you aren't quite sure how to proceed with publicizing the lodge and dealing with the press in the wake of this sudden disaster.

QUESTIONS:

1. In planning your PR strategy for the immediate future, what types of options do you have for communicating about the lodge in the wake of this incident? Which types of actions can you rule out for ethical reasons. Explain.
2. Explain which theory provides the best guidance for you in the situation and how so. (Virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, utilitarianism, or the ethic of care).
3. Is the most ethical option also the one that will provide the lodge with the greatest chance of remaining profitable this season...or might some financial sacrifices be necessary? Explain.

Serious Speeches Pose a Serious Problem for a Speechwriter

You are communications director for a city councilwoman, Marina McMannis, who is running for mayor of Bend, Oregon. She is a reference librarian at the community college, noted for her promotion of sustainable development and support of the arts. You are proud to be working for her and sincerely feel Bend would benefit from her leadership and values.

The main public relations challenge you have with Marina is that she is overwhelmingly serious, which makes her come across as dry and a bit dull. On the other hand, her Republican opponent, Lloyd Thompson, the current mayor, is quite charismatic and has been a successful businessman in Bend for many years. Marina's platform poses significant challenges to Mayor Thompson's business as usual stance on city management and planning.

Since the beginning of the campaign Marina has insisted on writing her own speeches and relied on you just for publicity. Her speeches, while filled with important content and good points, are not getting good results, as she cannot keep the audience's attention because her delivery is dry. You sat her down last week and told her the hard truth about her presentation weaknesses and poll results. You suggested we hire a public speaking coach and tell her you would like to take a stab at writing her remaining speeches to improve their audience appeal. Knowing her stance on the issues like the back of your hand, you wrote her a speech to deliver to the local teacher's union tomorrow. You, she and the public speaking coach begin working on her presentation together. Marina expresses her discomfort with some of the ideas the coach has for being more "expressive" and some of the humorous commentary you added to spice up her speech. She explains that serious issues deserve serious speeches and wants to go with her traditional speech.

You are afraid that she will not win this challenging election if she continues to deliver the serious speeches that are natural for her personality. And you know that Bend will be much better off with Marina as Mayor, and even if they find her a bit boring, they will appreciate her leadership and high ethical principles...but she has to be likeable enough to get elected first. So you are torn between letting her "be herself" and sacrificing the election. The election campaign is heating up as you have your first town hall meeting this weekend and a debate with Thompson the following week. How should you proceed in advising Marina as her Communications Director?

QUESTIONS:

1. What guidance can you get from both Kantian theory and Utilitarian theory on this case? On what points do they differ and on what points do they agree?
2. What ethical principles of ghostwriting most apply as strengths and as weaknesses in this case?
3. Most ethical issues relate to promoting truth and avoiding harm? Which of these principles most applies to this case, and how so?
4. What specific advice do you end up giving to Marina as far as how to proceed with the communications portion of the campaign, and how do you ethically justify this?

5. What problems do you see in the future as a possible weakness of this choice? And why do you still feel your decision is the best option, despite this weakness?

TRANSPARENCY: Blogger Identity Crisis

Kim had just finished presenting her public relations strategy to her newest client, Carl Jenkins, of Jenkins Wireless. He seemed thrilled and complimented her for her clever ideas of helping his company make a name for itself in the competitive high tech market. But he felt they could make better use of high tech blogs.

“I visit them weekly,” Carl informed her, “and I see a lot of online conversations about new products. Sometimes I join in and mention my products just so we don’t get left out. But I don’t have time to post all the time, so I was hoping you guys could incorporate some weekly posts on these blogs.”

“Sure, we can add that component to help you to create a buzz for Jenkins on these key sites,” Kim replied as she took note of the new idea.

“Great,” Carl laughed. “I waste so much time trying to come up with ambiguous online names that don’t let people know I work for Jenkins.”

Kim set down her pen and showed a look of concern. “Well, actually, Carl, we will have to let people know we are working on your behalf when we post online.” She said.

“What good is that?” Carl questioned. “If they know who we are, they won’t listen because it’s no better than an advertisement.”

“Well, your name is still getting out there, and we can use it as a starting point to get unsolicited testimonials for your products,” Kim replied.

“I think our products are top notch, of course,” He smiled. “But there’s always a chance that someone chooses to slam us and then other bloggers won’t care what our reply is because we work for the company and seem less candid.”

“You can use this information to help improve your products so that very few people will ever have anything bad to say,” Kim said. “Besides, people will give your company credit for being honest about who you are when posting. That adds to your credibility.”

“True, but I don’t know if that outweighs the benefits of our advice appearing unsolicited,” Carl replied, still skeptical. “After all, you know tons of my competitors are probably posting anonymously, and it’s only fair to compete on the same ground. Heck, the guy who badmouths our company’s products online is probably not who he says he is. He’s probably a competitor in disguise! We have to be able to defend ourselves and compete, so if your agency doesn’t feel comfortable doing it, then perhaps I could just get one of my employees to do the posts.”

QUESTIONS:

1. What should Kim's next response be to this new client?
2. Is she correct in not wanting to post anonymously on Jenkins' behalf? What do codes of ethics from WOMMA and PRSA have to say?
3. If Carl wants to post anonymously himself, and doesn't involve Kim's agency, is that a fair solution? What are the problems or benefits with this idea if you are Kim?
4. Looking at this communications ethics issue on a macro level, what are the implications for society as a whole?

Coming Clean with Green Energy

After a long tenure working in the high tech industry, Jeanne was hired less than a year ago as the Public Relations Director for National Petroleum (NP), a major oil company in the United States. Due to her ability to make complex technical issues comprehensible to the public, National Petroleum felt she could help them with a new campaign to represent their endeavors into clean and alternative energy, entitled “Green Energy.” Jeanne has developed a fairly good working relationship with the President and Vice Presidents of NP since she started and is included as a key member of the executive team in weekly meetings.

However, lately, as Jeanne is working towards a roll-out of NP’s alternative energy campaign in a few months, she has been uncertain about the direction some on the executive team want to take the Green Energy campaign. The following aspects make her the most uncomfortable:

- The use of direct numbers instead of percentages. For example, NP wants to publicize how many millions of dollars are going into research for alternative clean fuel sources, like wind, solar, and hydrogen. But while that sounds like a lot, it is only 10 percent of their total R&D budget. The bulk of the budget goes to improve extraction of oil, whether from the earth or from other less clean sources, like coal.
- The secrecy of NP’s position on drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. National Petroleum has lobbied heavily to drill in the refuge, but because that is considered anti-environmental and doesn’t have the support of the majority of the public, it is ignored in NP’s Green Energy campaign. Most of the lobbying money has gone through contributions to conservative think tanks, so it hasn’t been public. There is a line in the Green Energy campaign brochure that mentions the advantages of getting fuel domestically to decrease dependence on foreign oil.
- There are other issues of secrecy, such as NP’s lobbying against the production of hybrid vehicles and trying to discredit science condemning gas CO₂ emissions as a key cause of global warming. The latter issue of the threat of global warming is also glossed over in the PR campaign with what you consider to be shallow rhetoric that pays lip service to the threat by focusing on NP’s attempts to promote alternative fuel sources.
- The issue of “peak oil” (hitting the peak of oil reserves worldwide, indicating we will run out of oil eventually) is a concern publicly for environmentalists and nation-states, but the oil industry keeps its concerns on the subject private. The Green Energy campaign doesn’t mention the term “peak oil” and instead talks about keeping energy affordable for Americans by improving the alternative fuel technologies. However, you know that NP is not investing nearly enough money into alternative fuels to keep energy costs from increasing significantly in the next 10 or more years. While you understand that NP has a huge investment in the infrastructure related to oil/petroleum, they are not adequately protecting the public, the environment, or national security by conducting business as usual in continued support of oil as America’s dominant energy source.

QUESTIONS:

1. How would you describe the heart of the ethical issue presented here, if you had to distill it into a sentence?
2. Which points of concern (listed in the case study above) do you see as more important or crucial than the others, and why?
3. Explain at least three viable options/plans for how Jeanne could resolve the ethical issues presented with the current Green Energy campaign.
4. Explain which option/plan is preferable and why and what specific things Jeanne must do to make it work?

Ghostwriting Glitches for the Monthly Newsletter

As the Communications Coordinator at a county Chamber of Commerce, you are in charge of writing and typesetting the monthly newsletter that goes out to all the business people who are Chamber members. There are many details to juggle each issue, as the newsletter is filled with information on the many upcoming Chamber events, member profiles, accomplishments, and economic development issues. Each month, the inside cover is dedicated to the message to the members from the Chamber President, Bill Shultz. As a busy man, who claims writing is not his best skill, Bill always relies on you to translate his thoughts into a well-crafted message. When he finally gets around to reviewing what you wrote for him each month, he usually accepts what you write with just an edit or two at the very last minute. While he is a likeable guy with many great personal attributes and leadership traits, organization is not one of them.

This month's newsletter is especially important, as it details the specific registration info and deadlines for participating in the Chamber's annual trade show, which attracts at least a hundred booths and several thousand visitors. It is a high profile event for the Chamber as well as an important business networking event upon which many local businesses rely. For this month's message from the President, Bill talked with you two weeks ago about his feelings on trade show innovations for this year, a tax amendment affecting businesses, and a controversial proposed new business park in the county.

Unfortunately, Bill has not responded to your emails with the copy of his message that you wrote, even though you sent it to him via email a week and a half ago and then reminded him again a few days ago. He is out of town at a board of director's meeting and the deadline to take the newsletter to the printer is today. The V. P. of Programs, Belinda Conner, is adamant that the newsletter must go out on time in order to give people enough time to make the tradeshow registration deadline, as well as the deadline for the monthly Chamber After Hours event in just two weeks. Your trusty printer states that they are holding the press for your usual timeslot, but that on Monday they have several other jobs, so if you don't bring in the newsletter for printing today, Friday, then it won't be printed until Wednesday morning. You are very uneasy about printing it without Bill's approval, as you have never had to do that before, even though he always cuts it very close and on a couple of occasions you have had to delay printing by a day or two because he was tardy in getting back to you. You don't want to consider changing printers, as your printing company is a long-time local chamber member who gives you a discount and knows exactly how you need the paper to be printed.

Belinda is Bill's second in command when he is gone, so she also tries to get a hold of him, but the conference activities have him behind closed doors all afternoon. Belinda and you are both frustrated with Bill's lack of response, to say the least. However, she feels waiting until Wednesday for printing is not an option because of tight event deadlines, plus it looks unprofessional to get the newsletter out late and it inconveniences your several thousand members, so she tells you either to leave his message in as is (without his specific approval/proofing) or take it out completely because it needs to go to print today. You have never put out a newsletter without the President's message before, and you are afraid the absence of his message would seem like a red flag to the readers and seem unprofessional, plus you don't know what you'd put in its place, but yet you feel uncomfortable printing it without his specific approval.

You aren't quite sure what's the best thing to do in this predicament, but all you do know is that you unfortunately have to make a decision ASAP...

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the top three options you could consider, and what are the pros and cons of each (from an ethical and professional standpoint)?
2. According to ethical guidelines for ghostwriting, what are the biggest issues here?
3. Obviously, Bill is largely at fault, but what part of this predicament do you blame yourself for and what improvements could you make in the future?
4. What is the best option in this case, and how will you justify that to all parties as the most ethical decision?
5. Do you think the most ethical option in this case is also the best business decision? Explain why or why not.

Paving Over the Truth

Assume that you are the president of PR Results, Inc., a Las Vegas-based public relations firm representing the National Cement and Asphalt Contractor's Association (NCACA). NCACA has been closely monitoring high-growth communities across the country, like Las Vegas, that are preparing to vote soon on regional transportation and road improvement plans. NCACA has hired your firm to organize and manage a citizen's group in Las Vegas called Las Vegas Citizens for Active Road Expansion (LVCARE). The group's sole purpose is to persuade voters to pass Las Vegas' aggressive road expansion plans (and bring more business to local and national cement and asphalt companies). A reporter from the *Las Vegas Tribune* learns about LVCARE and contacts you for information regarding the individuals or organization(s) funding/backing the group. Your client asks you to keep their involvement confidential. Your "gut" tells you to disclose the information; however, you are concerned about losing the business if you go against your client's wishes.

QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, is ethically problematic about this case?
2. Who, if anyone, is potentially affected by this issue and how?
3. What ethical guidelines apply in this case?
4. What options are available to you?

PR and the gun lobby

Because you won a local Public Relations Society of America chapter award for your successful effort at organizing a statewide coalition of interest groups to deal with the AIDS threat, you have been approached by a small-arms industry association to organize and serve as Executive Director for a new group to promote the claimed “constitutional right to bear arms” of non-militia citizens, as well as to counter the growing threat of “gun control legislation.”

They have in mind a national membership organization which would eventually draw a large proportion of needed revenues from member dues, but in the mean time the industry association will provide generously for the financial needs of the organization, including your salary in excess of \$100,000.

They also suggest a name for the organization giving prominence to the “constitutional right to bear arms” theme, and further specify that in order to avoid negative connotations, any connection with the small arms industry not be divulged.

QUESTIONS:

1. Would you take this job? Why or why not?
2. Does this situation violate any professional codes?
3. Justify taking this job. Now, justify not taking the job. Which would you do and why?

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: A Little Help from your Spouse

You head the public relations department of the state's largest bank. The department is responsible for putting together a quality service recognition program. Your bank's public relations agency is designing the advertising specialty components for the program targeting the bank's 10,000 employees.

Your spouse owns Large Promotions, the largest advertising specialty firm in the state. The company offers the best prices for large orders. Large Promotions has supplied products for a number of other accounts of the public relations firm. This is the first time, however, that the public relations firm has used Large Promotions for a bank project. The public relations firm does not know that your spouse owns Large Promotions. You have not suggested the use of Large Promotions.

The public relations firm has made its recommendations to you, including using Large Promotions as the vendor for the quality service recognition program.

QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, is ethically problematic about this case?
2. Who, if anyone, is potentially affected by this action and how?
3. What ethical guidelines apply in this case?
4. What are your next courses of action? With the public relations agency? With your management team? With your spouse?
 - Do you inform your bank's management about the potential conflict of interest?
 - Should you ask the public relations firm to select another vendor?
 - Should you let the public relations firm pick the vendor? After all, you didn't force them to pick your spouse's company. Large Promotions did have the best price.

WITHHOLDING INFORMATION: PR Crisis at the Chamber: How Open is Too Open?

You are the head of communications for a Chamber of Commerce in a small to medium-sized city in the Midwest. You are on your way back to your office after just hearing some very disturbing news. As you close the door, your mind starts reeling as you ponder how to best recommend a public relations strategy for this crisis. The Chairman of the Board (a volunteer position filled annually by a local business leader), Cheryl Johansen, has just informed you that the President of the Chamber (the head of the paid staff and your direct boss), Jeff Talon, had to be fired due to questionable business practices. You are the only staff member who knows of the termination.

Jeff had worked at the Chamber for five years, after the retirement of Miles Engel, who had been a beloved President with a tenure of over 20 years before that. It turns out that Jeff had been accepting gifts and extra perks from the local Wal-Mart and a major development company, as he was friends with their head guys, and had waived their membership fees for a few years in exchange. And in reviewing Jeff's position on local issues voted on by the chamber, Cheryl realized that Jeff had been voting in ways that were more favorable to Walmart and suburban retail development than they were to the long-time small business members who made up the heart of their historic downtown shopping and business district. There were also rumors of questionable sexual relations with one of his female staff members, but he denied that.

It is true that Jeff was not your favorite boss, and you didn't always agree with his positions, but you were surprised that he would be that dishonest. Cheryl, who is your new boss-by-default at the moment, had not gotten along well with Jeff, and she was happy to see him go under her tenure as Chairman. She was the one who did most of the investigation to uncover the unethical business dealings that led to his termination. Cheryl tells you that she feels the Chamber needs to be upfront with the public and fully reveal all the details to the press and to our membership, but she wants you to make a recommendation to her and the board tomorrow about how we should handle the PR on this.

Your first reaction to her idea of full disclosure is one of apprehension, as you are worried that the image of the Chamber will be harmed by all the sordid details being dragged through the press and possibly being exaggerated. Certainly, the press must be informed that the Chamber will be seeking a new President, however, we could just tell them that he was let go due to poor performance or inability to fulfill his objectives, which in a way is true. What you don't want is the community getting the impression that the whole Chamber is corrupt in favor of big business or that everyone in the office is sleeping with each other on the job. You need to continue to have the respect and support of the many small businesses that make up the heart of the business community. Your Chamber has worked diligently to support the whole community for over 50 years, and you don't want good reputation that Miles worked so hard to build come crumbling down because of Jeff's bad choices in the last year or two.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the Chamber's obligation to the public as far as the public's right to know about all the details of why the President was fired? Is that obligation different than it is for the Chamber's membership? Consider whether or not there is a way to separate your membership from the general public. Note: You are a non-profit organization that is fully-funded by membership fees, not public fees, but you work with public officials to represent business interests in your community. Your members are all local businesses.
2. Is there a way to be truthful without being completely open in this case – or is truth inseparable from full disclosure?
3. Explain what you think Kant would do if he were in your position and why. Explain how that might be different, if at all, from what John Stuart Mill would do.
4. Explain what specific recommendation you would make to the board for how the Chamber should handle the public relations around this crisis and why.

A Smelly Decision

You are the public relations professional for a housing developer. Your company's next project is multi-family housing for middle-income families. In gathering information related to the project, you find that the land for the complex was the site of a landfill. An EPA report shows very low levels of contaminants that are not life-threatening hazards. You discuss this information with your supervising boss, who is not a public relations professional, and recommend ways to explain the landfill history in promotional materials. Your boss tells you that the landfill information is not to be included in the materials. He does not want this issue proactively discussed.

QUESTIONS:

5. What, if anything, is ethically problematic about this case?
6. Who, if anyone, is potentially affected by this action and how?
7. What ethical guidelines apply in this case?
8. What options are available to you?

Too Good to be Told

Assume that you are the director of public relations for Megabucks Energy Company, a Houston-based Fortune 500 oil and gas exploration and production company. Megabucks has been experiencing declining profits due to drops in oil and gas prices. Recent drilling on one of the company's properties in the Java Sea has produced promising results of a significant new oil and gas reservoir. Although geological testing is incomplete, rumors are flying in the marketplace about the potential of this new well to significantly increase Megabucks' profits. Senior management asks you to prepare a news release that responds to these rumors and downplays the significance of the find. As part of your research, you discover internal reports that show that this new well is, indeed, a major discovery and that further testing is planned simply to determine the size of the reservoir.

QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, is ethically problematic about this case?
2. Who, if anyone, is potentially affected by this action and how?
3. What ethical guidelines apply in this case?
4. What options are available to you?

MORAL CLAIMANTS:

A Walk-A-Thon that Walks the Walk

As the public relations specialist for your region's first chapter of the American Cancer Society, you have decided to put on the first annual walk-a-thon to raise money for cancer research, as many other chapters across the country do for a fundraiser. You are four months' away from the event and have lots of sponsors and volunteers lined up, when you hear from several grassroots community activist groups who have problems with the sponsorship of the walk-a-thon. The community group is made up of some diverse constituents, including mothers, environmental activists, local farmers, business owners and a city council woman. Their representatives were polite in their meeting with you enthusiastically proposing their ideas.

They expressed concerns about several aspects of the walk-a-thon which they call "hypocritical" in light of the Cancer Society's mission of promoting health. For instance, they propose that all the food served should be organic so that is free of pesticides/herbicides and not genetically modified, as both of these might contribute to cancer. They inform you that farm workers (mostly immigrants) who are around these pesticides and herbicides often have higher cancer rates. The activist groups also don't like the idea of handing out hot dogs to walkers for lunch and suggest that the food should be vegetarian (like soy dogs); they quote the American Dietetic Association's position paper on the disease-preventive qualities of a plant-based diet. Even fish, which has some healthful nutrients, often is a problematic food because of its potential for containing mercury and other toxins. The groups also complain that one of your sponsors and food providers, Kraft Foods (which has one of its manufacturing plants in your state), is owned by cigarette manufacturer Phillip Morris. The activists' overall message is that the walk-a-thon needs to "walk the walk" and not just raise money to research cures but also promote a healthy lifestyle and diet that is cancer-preventive.

You acknowledge some good points that they have made, but you say that the American Cancer Society isn't as strict in their lifestyle guidelines, which simply recommend people eat a lot less animal proteins and more vegetables, but they don't specifically state everyone must eat only plants or that all those plants must be organic. The American Cancer Society does not yet have a position on genetically modified foods, as more research needs to be done on the long-term health effects. Also, while the Cancer Society would never have Phillip Morris as a direct sponsor or in any way advocate smoking, Kraft (one of their subsidiaries) is a huge and popular food manufacturer with ties to the community. You can't be responsible for the fact that many big companies (tobacco companies included) merge and acquire lots of other companies with unrelated products. Besides, Kraft is donating its foods and financial support; the Cancer Society is not directly supporting them.

The local activists have a list of alternative companies in town who are health conscious (like local organic farmers, vegetarian restaurants and health food stores) and have volunteered to provide sponsorship and food for the walk-a-thon to replace Kraft and certain other questionable

food vendors. However, when you do the math based on what these “healthier” vendors can provide, it ends up equating to only 65% of the support you currently have from the regular food sponsors. That would mean if you went with the activists’ plan as is, your walk-a-thon would likely not reap quite as much profit to help fight cancer, not to mention the fact that these health-conscious decisions, while pleasing some would surely also annoy others; many big companies would feel slighted as if you are accusing them of causing cancer. It would set a precedent that most other Cancer Societies have not followed as well as dictating a limited or stricter set of requirements for sponsors in the future.

The activists say that they want to work with you, but if the walk-a-thon isn’t authentically health conscious then they will publicly raise their objections about the hypocritical sponsorships and perhaps even do their own “competing” fundraiser.

You are worried that no matter what you decide, the walk-a-thon may not be as successful as you had once hoped. While this may be an opportunity for better community relations and some new innovations for the Cancer Society’s walk-a-thons, it also seems like a bit of crisis.

QUESTIONS:

1. Use the TARES ethical principles to help determine what ethical issues are found for the PR practitioner in this case.
2. From a utilitarian standpoint, would making more money at the fundraiser equate to the greatest good? Why or why not.
3. How could a Kantian/duty-based perspective guide you in this decision?
4. Is it ethically problematic for the walk-a-thon that Kraft is owned by Phillip Morris? In this age of complex corporate consolidation, is it realistic to set standards of avoiding sponsors who are owned by conglomerates that also own cancer-causing subsidiaries?
5. How should this chapter of the American Cancer Society handle the fact that certain health effects of ingesting pesticides or meat or genetically modified foods are not completely proven to cause cancer?
6. What is the best solution in this situation? If it is a compromise of sorts, please explain.

A Win/Win Proposal for the Local News

Rick is the Communications Director for the Electric Company, which is a major employer in the county where it is located in West Virginia. Lately there have been some labor issues at the company and threats of strikes, so the local news has been calling him daily for information. The Electric Company executives' policy has been to be very selective with what information they have been giving to the press. However, Rick sees a possible opportunity here to get more positive exposure for the company's community service to help improve their overall image. Rick had proposed a plan six months ago to the most popular local TV news station where he would come in to the station weekly or bi-weekly for a regular segment on energy-saving tips. The news station did not buy into the idea before, as they thought it might be too much exposure for the Electric Company, which may be unfair to other energy providers, such as the Natural Gas Company. Rick feels he has a bit more leverage now, so when Emily, the news director from the TV station, calls Rick for a comment on the negotiations with the union today, Rick proposes a deal to her, off the record.

Rick offers to convince his bosses at the Electric Company to give the station an exclusive interview and generally to be more forthcoming with information in the future in exchange for a bi-weekly segment on the news station promoting energy-saving tips. Emily still has reservations, but Rick promotes the idea by saying "both the community and the environment will benefit from these energy-saving tips, and your station and viewers will benefit with more access to a major employer for more in-depth news stories."

"Think it over, Emily," he says. "It's a win/win!"

QUESTIONS:

1. Explain the main ethical issue you see in this scenario, or if you don't feel there is an ethical issue, explain why not.
2. Explain whether or not you feel this proposal is a win/win as Rick states and if you feel Emily should accept this offer.
3. If you were in Rick's position, explain if and how you would have handled this situation any differently.

Is the Customer Always Right?

By Jessica Silliman

Paula Eng was a junior partner at a Bay Area public relations firm when she was asked to assist in publicizing an event for one of the firm's top clients. The client, a large-scale software company, was sponsoring a talent competition where local men and women would compete for the chance to win a fourteen-day cruise for two. The company hoped the event would be a huge success so that the media attention would give wide mention to its name.

After nearly five months of preparation, Paula thought she had it all planned to perfection. She had secured celebrity judges, contacted all the local news organizations and could already envision the press release she would write and the broadcast coverage it would gain after the competition. It was going to be great publicity for the software company.

When the talent competition was finished, Paula was behind stage tallying the votes to determine the winner when the head of the software company, Mr. Johnson, frantically approached her. It was a close competition and two contestants—one "average Joe" and one up-and-coming actor—were the final two left. When the votes were tallied the actor won, but Mr. Johnson wasn't pleased—he wanted the "average Joe" to win because he thought that it would make for a better news story and, hence, more publicity for his company. Mr. Johnson asked Paula to take "creative liberties" in determining the winner. The fine print in the rules said the final decision was ultimately up to the company and not the judging panel and he made it clear who the winner should be.

"I had spent four and a half months preparing for this event and the decision was reduced to 10 minutes," said Paula.

Paula's manager was the one in charge of deciding whether to honor Mr. Johnson's request or to go with the judges' choice. Her manager chose to side with Mr. Johnson and announce the "average Joe" as the winner, but did verbally express disapproval of the process and disappointment of being put in such an uncomfortable and compromising position. But they did settle on somewhat of a compromise—while the "average Joe" was named the winner, both received the cruise package prize to recognize both of their talents. Though Paula strongly disagreed with the decision, she didn't have much control as a junior partner. She was never asked her opinion and she never offered it.

"If I were in charge, things would be different," she said. "We weren't doing the right thing by rewarding the person who didn't actually win. But we settled on a compromise that was as good as it could have been and that tried to appease all people involved."

The press release mentioned that the "average Joe" was the single winner; news of the other "unofficial" winner was not mentioned, however he was named as the first runner-up. The actor wasn't featured as prominently and he didn't get some of the local media coverage that the "average Joe" received, however he did receive media coverage in his hometown.

"It felt a little rigged," said Paula. Even the judges seemed surprised with the outcome, but none raised serious complaints.

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think Mr. Johnson's request to favor the "average Joe" is unethical? Why or why not?
2. Publicists represent the client's interests, but is the customer always right? Where should the line be drawn?
3. Should Paula have spoken up at the time of the decision to alter the results of the contest?
4. Could Paula have avoided the situation in the planning process of the event? How or how not?