THE ETHICS OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: AN INTRODUCTION

What constitutes unethical conduct in strategic communication?

Actions deliberately taken by PR, advertising, and marketing professionals that may include any of the following:

• deception (including lying and withholding information to create a false impression)
• faking corporate social responsibility (CSR), as in “greenwashing”
• creating misleading images in message construction to imply something that may not represent reality
• lack of transparency in word-of-mouth marketing and social network public relations
• conflicts of interest
• using persuasive techniques that violate the integrity of the audience

What’s the difference between PR and Advertising?

Although many people don’t understand the difference between public relations and advertising, those within the business see a pretty clear distinction. Here are a few of the primary differences.

Paid for or publicity

• Public relations doesn’t usually have to pay for placing messages in the media. Although a good deal of money is spent in PR on such things as “corporate advertising” (basically promoting the image of the company, not its products), the bulk of its messages are
publicity. Publicity is basically free coverage provided usually by the media and instigated by such message vehicles as press conferences, press releases, and product publicity (trade magazine articles, etc.). Of course, this turns over control of the message to the media in which it will appear. They may edit it as they wish, run it where and when they wish, or not run it at all. This is called “uncontrolled information,” and is both the blessing and the bane of public relations. What this also means is that public relations practitioners must be acutely aware of how news is produced and what it’s requirements are.

• Advertising almost always pays for placing its messages. The advantage is that the advertiser has complete control over what the message will say and how, where, and when a message will be placed—because they’re paying for that privilege. That’s the upside. The downside is that advertising costs a lot of money.

### A different primary audience

• Although public relations messages are ultimately targeted to a specific public, they must generally go through the media to reach that audience. Thus, the primary audience for most PR messages is generally the media itself. That’s why these messages are crafted in the style of the medium for which they are intended. A press release written for a local paper will mimic hard news style (inverted pyramid). A release for an entertainment industry magazine will be more feature oriented.

• Advertising is aimed directly at the potential adopter of the product, service, or idea. Although the advertising message is crafted to fit the medium, it is actually designed to appeal directly to the audience that uses that medium. For example, major network news programs attract older viewers, so we tend to see commercials for health aids, insurance, travel, and other interests specific to that target audience.

### Repetition

• Most public relations messages have a short life span. Press releases are about something that is happening right now. After that, they become old news. And because their effectiveness depends so often on the news media, old news is basically no news. In addition, there is generally no repetition factor as in advertising. A press release will only be run once in the local paper. That’s why PR people try to expand coverage by placing information in as many media as possible. This is called using a “media mix.” People who don’t read newspapers may get the message from television, or from the radio, or on the internet.

• Advertising is based on repetition. Think of how many times you watch the same ad on TV, or in a magazine. The theory is that the more you see it, the more the message is reinforced. Of course, the advertiser pays for all those repetitions.

### Transparency

• Public relations messages are not always as transparent as they could or should be. You never know, for instance, whether that news story about a local company was produced entirely free of influence by the company or not. It could have been stimulated by a press release, furthered by an interview with the company president set up by the PR person for
that company, and fleshed out through a carefully prepared backgrounder on the company produced in-house by the PR staff.

- For the most part, advertising messages are recognized by consumers are being what they are—sales pitches. That allows the consumer to take these messages with a grain of salt, setting up the necessary defenses talked about in the last chapter. This doesn’t always sit well with advertisers who are already complaining that television viewers can now “zap” their commercials out with digital recording devices. The result is an increased reliance on not-so-transparent methods, which we’ll discuss later.

**Much of what is transpiring in advertising today, especially on the internet, is actually public relations.**

That’s the claim from marketing consultants Al Ries and Laura Ries, whose book *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* is based on the premise that public relations has the ability to generate discussion about a product, as publicity (which is generally free). This is referred to these days as “buzz.” They make a number of salient points.

- Advertising draws attention to a product. It tells you what it is. PR insinuates messages about the product into the conversation going on in the real world outside of advertising. For example, you may see an new product advertised heavily on TV, and then start to see seemingly unprompted blog postings from users talking about the product. Chances are, the postings aren’t entirely unprompted. They’re part of a PR product publicity campaign.
- Advertising shouts its message. PR whispers. It’s about information, albeit usually intentionally filtered, that aids the consumer in making a purchase decision. This is part of what is known as the *diffusion process*.

The theory of diffusion suggests that the adoption process goes through several stages ranging from the initial attention-getting stage through to the final reinforcement stage (following adoption). Advertising usually takes care of the first stage and the last. Everything else can, and often does, involve public relations. An important part of the process involves talking about the product or idea with other people who are asking the same questions or have already tried it themselves.

- Public relations tends to be “other directed.” That is, its messages are passed on—through the media via positive publicity, and, increasingly, through word of mouth via consumers. Because public relations messages are often passed through intermediaries to end-users of the information (consumers), the credibility is usually higher. If you hear about a new product through the news media, you will attach more credibility to the product itself. The same goes for if you get it from friends and neighbors, even if they are only “friends” in a broad, MySpace-sense.

When a small-town newscast includes information about a local company hiring 200 people, it is news. When the bulk of the story comes from the local company, including interviews with the CEO, other officers, and new employees, public relations is going to be involved at some point. Because the new company gets positive press makes the story successful public relations.
Because the story is newsworthy, it’s news. The danger comes when journalists and editors rely too heavily on public relations-generated information.