

Is staying on message—regardless of the questions asked—in line with PR codes of ethics?

The Ethics of Not Answering



by Eric Bergman, ABC, APR, MC

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I was surfing the Internet recently when I came across an interesting article in the January-February 2004 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Under the headline "Answer the &#\$%* Question!" author Trudy Lieberman outlines her perspective of the current sad state of affairs in exchanges between reporters and corporate spokespeople. She lays the blame for this dysfunctional relationship squarely at the foot of media training.

"Media training," she writes, "teaches people all the fancy steps they need to answer the questions they want to answer, not those of an

inquisitive reporter. The result: In too many cases, interviews become excuses to practice public relations, and instead of shedding light, they cloud public discourse."

As I was reading Lieberman's article, two questions came to mind: Is it common for spokespeople to be taught not to answer questions? And if so, is that ethical?

Common practice

To examine the first question, I conducted a quick Google search of "key messages" and "media training" and found numerous web sites for media trainers in North America, Europe, Asia and



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Australia. From each of those continents, I found the following advice:

- Get your key messages across clearly and repeatedly no matter what questions a journalist asks.
- Remember, your goal is to take control of the interview in order to consistently—and credibly—deliver the key points that your organization must get delivered.
- No matter what questions the reporter asks, find a way to deliver your key messages. Proactively drive your own agenda of key “must air” messages.
- Study techniques on how to maintain your agenda and convey key messages throughout the interview.

In life, they say, timing is everything. About the time I was pondering the ethics of staying on message, I was sitting in a client’s office waiting for him to finish a short meeting with a staff member. While waiting, I was flipping through the 14 February 2005 issue of Canada’s *Marketing* magazine when I came across an article titled “Talking the Right Talk: Media Training Helps Your Brand Be the Focus in an Interview.”

Reporter Eve Lazarus described how she had sat in on a media training session and listened to a consultant provide the following advice: “Get your message out, don’t let a reporter interrupt you, try not to speak too quickly, and try not to get

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off track with what you are there to talk about.

"They are going to ask you a question, you are going to answer with your key message, they are going to ask you another question, and you are going to have a second or third key message."

These examples certainly seem to support the idea that spokespersons are commonly advised not to answer questions. Now let's take a look at the ethics of this issue.

Is it ethical?

Comparing the various codes of ethics and professional standards governing our business to the concept of not answering questions is an interesting exercise, one that I personally believe is long overdue. When making this comparison, it's interesting to keep a couple of questions in mind. Do we consider our codes of ethics to be minimum standards? Or do we look to them for something more?

A member shall practice the highest standards of honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth, and shall not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information.

—Article 3, Code of Professional Standards, Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS)

If you examine the first half of Article 3 of the CPRS code, you can see that not answering questions in favor of driving home key messages would probably not meet the highest standard of "honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth." If we think of someone in our personal lives whom we believe has integrity—someone who exemplifies the traits of honesty, accuracy and truthfulness—we probably don't think of someone who doesn't listen to us, refuses to answer questions and is interested only in conveying what he or she would like to say.

The second half of Article 3, which tells us to "not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information," could be used as an escape clause by some, particularly those looking for an ethical back door. They could say that as long as the key messages are honest, accurate and truthful (leaving aside integrity for a moment), those messages must be OK, and sticking to them, regardless of what someone asks, is acceptable.

This perspective only works if you skip over Article 2 of the same code, which says that a "member shall deal fairly and honestly with the communications media and the public." To me, not answering questions would be neither fair nor honest. But I must concede that as long as reporters believe it's OK, what's the harm? But are we certain that reporters think it's OK?

The code of ethics of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), under the heading "Honesty," offers the following:

We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and

truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

—Code of Ethics, Public Relations Society of America

If I'm a media trainer operating under this standard, I could say that as long as the key messages are accurate and truthful, and as long as they advance the interest of my clients, what's the problem if my client stays on message regardless of the questions asked?

Well, there is a problem. To have this mind-set, you need to skip over an earlier section of the code that says that "the level of public trust PRSA members seek, as we serve the public good, means we have taken on a special obligation to operate ethically." It seems to me that "public trust," "public good" and "operate ethically" are critical phrases in that particular section of PRSA's code. If so, then ideally an exchange of questions and answers with a spokesperson taking those phrases into consideration would result in clear, concise answers to at least a few of the questions asked.

And that brings us to IABC's code of ethics, which reads:

Professional communicators uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by practicing honest, candid and timely communication and by fostering the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest.

—Article 1, Code of Ethics, International Association of Business Communicators

I suppose it is possible for someone to maintain his or her dignity while not answering questions, but it is virtually impossible to maintain credibility. No matter where in this world we live, we've all seen politicians, bureaucrats and corporate executives "do the dance" that Trudy Lieberman describes in her article. And we have all asked, "What are they hiding?" I've worked with many organizations that believe they've endured years of persecution at the hands of journalists. Yet, at the start of a media training session, I can't get a straightforward answer to even the simplest of questions from anyone attending the workshop. Is there a cause-and-effect relationship here? Possibly.

But the real issue is "the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest." When people ask questions—whether they are employees, clients, taxpayers, ratepayers, reporters or others—they are doing so because it is theoretically in their interest to get the answers. If an organization's decision making is logical, reasonable and ethical, why wouldn't it want as many publics and stakeholders as possible to ask every question they can, if for

Survey: Communicators seek ethics guidance

by Gloria S. Walker,
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In 2004, the IABC Research Foundation funded a team of researchers led by professor Shannon Bowen at the University of Houston (Texas) School of Communications to undertake an in-depth study of ethics and communication. In the team's proposal, Bowen stated, "Business communication ethics is a timely and vital area of research. Calls for corporate rectitude and total responsibility management, management integrity, and trusting relationships are prevalent in current scholarly literature. Recent corporate scandals, such as Enron, have heightened the urgency of re-evaluating the ethics of business communication."

Bowen and her team focused on the communication professional's role and responsibility in developing a culture of ethical behavior. Based on issues investigated through a literature review, the team developed an online survey, which was sent to 11,000 communicators; 1,800 responded.

Practitioners see evidence of ethics in their organizations, but they may not be prepared to handle situations that arise in their day-to-day work.

Significantly, respondents indicated that, while going through academic training, they had not studied ethics at all, or had had just a few lectures or readings. Only 20 percent had completed at least one course on ethics. Furthermore, only one-third indicated that their current employer provided any study on or training in ethics. This lack of training is particularly interesting when noted that 77 percent of respondents reported to the CEO, president or other senior manager. Given this reporting relationship, communicators need to be prepared and confident in offering advice and counsel on sensitive issues to the CEO and the leadership of the organization.

The research team focused on three particular issues: the practitioner's role, the ethics climate and ethics values.

Respondents agreed or strongly

agreed with the seven items that related to the practitioner's role. They agreed most strongly that ethical considerations should be a vital part of executive decision making and that practitioners should advise management on ethical matters rather than merely communicate the decisions of others.

On the three items that measured the ethics climate, respondents indicated that their organizations maintain clear standards, are open about ethical conduct, and encourage conversations about ethical matters and issues.

On the five items for ethics values, respondents reported that they generally agreed on the positive nature of their organizations' ethics values. It is interesting to note, however, that unethical behavior resulting in personal gain was seen as worse than

similar behavior that resulted in gain for the organization.

In summary, then, practitioners feel favorably toward ethics and see evidence of it in their organizations, but they may not be well prepared to handle situations that arise in their day-to-day work.

Recent cases in the business world have clearly demonstrated that ethics for communication professionals is not an abstract subject. We are faced with choices every day. Yes, there are codes of ethics. All professional associations publish one, but compliance is voluntary. Communicators often seek guidance so they can confidently lay out ethical paths for communication programming and, more important, understand and outline the consequences that ethical communication dilemmas present. Where can practitioners find this guidance? That is the issue we must begin to address.

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no other reason than to prove that the organization is transparent and has nothing to hide?

The ramifications

It is common practice for spokespeople to ignore questions. That advice is out there. In fact, it's too common. And there are ramifications to this approach, as research is starting to indicate.

A study conducted by Towers Perrin in 2002, as reported then in *Communication World* by Mark Schumann, ABC, discovered that "employees are hungry for the truth from their companies, but only half are satisfied with what they're being fed." In other words, half of those surveyed in a poll designed to find "the average worker" said they do not believe their company tells the truth. Why? Schumann believes that it's too much internal spin. And where does that spin originate?

As for whether the process of ignoring questions is ethical, the answer is "It depends." As a profession, if we look to codes of ethics to provide an

absolute minimum standard by which we operate, and actively seek ways in which to work around ethical issues, then we could make the case that staying on message regardless of the question asked is ethical. But if, as individuals and a profession, we seek a higher standard, then it is time we started asking some hard questions about what we're teaching others.

A soon-to-be-released study from the IABC Research Foundation confirms that, as communicators, we believe we should be advisers to an organization's leaders on the ethical choices the organization faces. Well, ethical is as ethical does. I believe you can only advise on ethical matters if your own house is in order. Teaching people to stay on message, rather than to answer questions whenever possible in a clear and concise fashion when stakeholders ask, or when reporters ask on their behalf, is not a professional house quite yet ready to advise management on ethical matters rather than merely communicate the decisions of others. **CW**

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