

Forging an Ethical Foundation

By David Von Behren, MPH, APR

Molten metal tends to get your attention. Taming a beast burning at two thousand degrees keeps the senses razor sharp. Safety, tools and training become paramount. When my grandfather worked the steel mills in Pittsburgh, he gave rapt attention to the task at hand. The lives of the foundry workers and the quality of the finished product depended entirely upon knowing the rules, the tools and how to react to the unexpected.

For public relations professionals, the raw material doesn't look like a liquid dragon. But the difference between unpredictable fury and perfect form depends on tools and training just the same. In the age of 24-hour news, Blackberries and iPhones, the molten metal is information.

Without a plan and a process in the foundry, white hot steel oozes through the cracks and flows in all directions. Without a plan and a process through public relations, information flows into email, blogs, newspapers, television, radio, and the court of public opinion unchecked and out of control.

Ethics provide the foundation and the plan public relations professionals need to serve their clients and the public to the highest standards. Members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Southern Arizona Chapter of PRSA in Tucson are dedicated to serving our clients and their interests with accuracy and integrity. As members of PRSA, we adhere to a Code of Ethics designed to anticipate and appropriately manage the challenges of the information age. Ethics are at the core of public relations as outlined in the PRSA Member Statement of Professional Values:

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.

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.

Expertise

We acquire and responsibly use specialized knowledge and experience. We advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Independence

We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.

Loyalty

We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

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.

Responsibility, accuracy, mutual understanding, accountability, service and respect are only the beginning. The PRSA Code of Ethics goes further to provide a detailed framework for information age professionals. The Code helps ensure the free flow of information, encourages fair competition, manages disclosure issues and covers conflicts of interest and more.

But a tool is only as good as the person trained in its proper use. Public relations practitioners and business leaders can acquire ethics expertise locally through the Southern Arizona Chapter of PRSA. At the September PRSA lunch meeting, a panel of professionals will address ethics issues in both public relations and legal terms.



Linda Welter Cohen, APR, president and managing partner of The Caliber Group in Tucson, and Chair of PRSA's National Board of Ethics and Professional Standards will share her expertise in managing ethics situations along with resources available through PRSA nationally.

Mark Konrad and Jamie Heisler Ibrahim, attorneys with Snell & Wilmer in Tucson, and leaders of that firm's award-winning ethics committee, will share their ethics experiences from a legal perspective.

To acquire your ethics tools and training and to learn more about the September 18th PRSA ethics discussion, please visit www.prsatucson.com.

An ethical foundation will serve you well when the next batch of molten information pours across your desk.

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