

Struggle for Ethics in Public Relations

« To what extent should business respect the basic principles of the democratic process and the right of the people to make up their own minds, rather than attempt to engineer consent through whatever techniques seem to work?

By David Finn

- How honest a picture of its product should a company present to the public?
- What part should the artificial "build-up" play in the field of public relations?
- How far should a company go in exploiting its contacts with influential people?
- Is a company obligated to be truthful about labor policy, pricing, and other touchy problems?
- What role, if any, should ulterior motives play in framing public relations policies?

With the rapid growth of public relations activity on behalf of industry, management is being confronted more and more with the notion that it has a distinct public responsibility and an obligation to serve the public interest in the course of its business activities. Very few executives would consider it wise to repeat today, even behind closed doors, the famous, or rather notorious, words of Commodore Vanderbilt — "The public be damned!"

Whatever the reasons — genuine concern for the welfare of others, or sophisticated self-interest; strengthening of the democratic values in our society, or an increased pressure to conform and be "other-directed" — the climate of business activity has markedly changed.

It seems hard to argue with the real benefits achieved through steadily increasing public relations budgets for scholarships, research grants, art collections, and teaching aids. They suggest convincingly that, at least in some respects, the development of public relations thinking has brought about some improvement in the ethical behavior of corporations in America.

Disturbing Factors

And yet three distinct points of view are becoming increasingly evident that make it difficult to accept too readily this optimistic picture of the social value of public relations:

« There is the absence of idealism in management's motives for undertaking public relations activities. Hardheaded businessmen look for dollar values, not rewards of altruism. Public relations must pay off somewhere along the line — whether in sales, productivity, stockholder confidence, or government support. If doing good deeds will help achieve these objectives, it can be justified. If not, money can be spent more profitably in other activities. This raises the question whether a company's public relations posture is in the last analysis a sham.

« Another conflicting point of view is that put forth by social critics who find the social mores of American capitalism a threat to civilization. To

them, the question of sham is less important than the destructive acts committed by vested interests behind the public relations smokescreen. It is not the posture which bothers them so much as the manipulation which goes on while the pose is being struck.

There is concern that public relations often leads to irresponsible and deceitful acts. Publicity stunts, false fronts, the effort to suppress negative facts, and many similar practices have brought forth a mounting chorus of criticism.

These three points of view make the evaluation of public relations a demanding task. Unfortunately, it is a subject not being discussed openly and straightforwardly in business circles, which in itself is not a good sign. Rationalizations, self-righteousness, and platitudes do not get rid of discerning challenges — nor do untalked-about skeletons in the closet make for well-adjusted consciences.

In this article I shall seek to examine the basic issues frankly and describe a new approach to the ethics of public relations for industry.

Sharper Focus

The social responsibility — or lack of it — of what management does public-relations-wise is only one factor in a total behavior pattern which embraces all company activities. Accordingly, I wonder if it is not shortsighted to equate public relations with publicity, or with defending management actions, or with building good will.

Would it not be better to consider that one of the major functions of a company's public relations activity is to help clarify the company's role in society? Public relations, in that sense, not only can be a tool of management; it can also have an identity of its own, serving both the public community and private industry. It has been called by some a bridge between the two. Actually, it can be more than that. It can be a method of analysis and activity by which the basic tendency of every company to both serve and exploit the community becomes apparent and is expressed.

The question, therefore, is not whether public relations is "good" or "bad." A company's public relations tends to be more ethical when it has a more positive role to play in the community; it tends to become less ethical when its role is less positive or more destructive.

If a company takes a good, hard look at the ethics of its public relations activities, it can gain

an insight into how it is behaving toward the community in general. To the extent that it finds the need to strike an artificial pose when in public view, or to the extent that it finds it necessary to dissemble or keep facts out of the news, it is probably socially destructive; to the extent that it feels free to tell the truth and generate acts in the public interest, it is probably socially constructive. There is a mixture of both tendencies in all companies; learning to face that fact frankly and cope with it can become a vital aid to their health and stability.

Seminars in Ethics

Early in 1957, our public relations firm decided to do some organized thinking about developing an approach to ethics in our public relations work. We initiated a series of seminars among ten of our top executives to undertake this task. Background information on codes of ethics developed in this country and in England and Australia was presented to the group, and we tried to examine our point of view toward these codes.

The initial spirit of the discussions was one of self-confidence. We were very pleased with ourselves for taking time out to discuss the problem at all, and we were convinced that we were very "ethical" people indeed!

By the time the third session rolled around, however, we found ourselves in the midst of a heated, hair-letting-down bout in which each participant was urging the others to "stop kidding ourselves" and "face reality." How could we in all conscience criticize others for their malpractice when, if we looked at things squarely, we would have to admit that we were guilty of pretty much the same sort of thing? In fact, everybody was guilty. To deny this would be hypocritical. And what was more, if we were going to stay in business, we would have to continue letting our consciences play second fiddle to practical considerations.

We became so involved in this discussion that we simply could not let go of it. To help us think more clearly, we decided to look for some professional help.

Developing Sensitivity

Fortunately, a group of theologians, philosophers, and scientists who had formed The Institute on Ethics expressed interest in our dilemma. This organization (interdenominational and interdisciplinary) was actually a part of a

larger undertaking including The Institute for Religious and Social Studies and The Conference of Science, Philosophy and Religion, which had been in existence for 18 years, under the sponsorship of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. While primarily interested in studying the ethical aspects of the major social issues of our day, the members were also interested in relating theory to action. They were eager to help individual groups of practical people cope with the ethical dimension in their own work.

There followed a series of seminars in which different scholars joined our own staff members to pursue the question of ethics and public relations. The conversations were tremendously exciting. We pulled no punches. In fact, many of our staff members became very aggressive about the fact that they felt we had to lie and do other unethical things in order to remain in business. It was remarkable to see the scholars roll up their sleeves and help us think through these problems, rather than express shock and dismay at the "facts of life" that we were talking about.

We have discovered, of course, that there are no simple answers. While we had apparently passed the first great hurdle when we agreed to talk among ourselves frankly and critically, the job could never be finished. We were involved in a continuing effort to develop an ethical sensitivity in decision making.

Because of this, the seminars never did come to an end. Instead, we decided to continue them indefinitely as part of our regular business procedure.

Finding the Threshold

One of the most important aspects of the problem which has become apparent to us over the years and which was re-emphasized in our discussions is the fact that each company has its own threshold of what it is comfortable in doing from an ethical standpoint.

Most companies would agree on certain obvious extremes to which they would not resort. These widespread agreements are frequently expressed in codes. But the difficulty comes in the gray area in which one person feels comfortable about telling certain kinds of untruths, or making certain kinds of bribes, or engaging in certain kinds of moderately deceitful practices, while another person feels entirely differently about it. However we rationalize these actions,

it is clear that each of us has a different breaking point beyond which we would not go because it would make us too uncomfortable, too conscience-stricken. And this is our point of no compromise.

In a corporation, decisions are made continuously by executives on the basis of what they think the company threshold is, as well as their own individual thresholds. The former often exerts a greater influence than the latter. An atmosphere exists in a group in which certain types of irresponsible acts are sanctioned, and one may get the feeling that in business it is all right to have a lower ethical threshold than in private life.

This understanding is usually tacit. There is great value in making it explicit, in bringing out into the open the whole question of what we do or do not feel comfortable in doing. This enables us to examine our corporate ethical threshold in terms of our personal thresholds. If the two can be brought more in line with each other, an important step can be taken in helping individuals to identify with the company and see a value in it to which they can personally respond.

Statement of Policy

Clarification of the company's ethical threshold in public relations is one of the major responsibilities of top management. The top operating executives of a company have to decide how far they want to go in influencing the press, government, schools, public institutions, and the like. If this is left unspecified, management is failing to come to grips with the basic question of the company's role in society.

Ethics is, unfortunately, a bad word to use when executives are sitting around a table struggling with practical problems of the day. Any public relations man who has ever had the experience of counseling his client to do something because it is "ethical" knows this to be true. It is considered a *foreign*, if not embarrassingly *naïve*, word. Most businessmen react more positively to such phrases as "better from a long-range point of view," "sounder business policy," or even "good public relations" than to the idea of doing something because it is "more ethical."

Thus, in a frequently disguised form, public relations performs the role of keeping management itself in line. When functioning well, it acts as the anvil against which management's moral problems can be hammered.

This actually means that when businessmen apply themselves to establishing a public relations policy for their company, they are really concerned with significant ethical questions — without quite realizing it. The trouble comes when top management feels that these matters can be left in the hands of lower-echelon executives to decide, and thereby unwittingly delegates a key corporate responsibility.

Most middle-management executives seem to be in a very uncertain position when it comes to establishing corporate ethical policy. Their responsibility is clearly operational. They must produce results for the company which are as clearly as possible translatable into profits. They are afraid to think of public good because their job is to think of company good. Or, perhaps more accurately, they would like to be more concerned with the public good, but they feel obliged to suppress their personal inclinations and yield to what they think is the company pattern. Oddly enough, this pressure sometimes leads middle managers to undertake activity that, besides being inconsistent with their own ethical thresholds, is equally embarrassing to the top managers it is supposed to please.

Top management can take a significant and constructive step forward by stating clearly, positively that it is seriously concerned with its responsibility to the community. But this cannot be accomplished by a moralistic injunction to avoid unethical procedures, for this would be dismissed by all as simply putting up an innocent front to hide the dirty work. Instead, management must be prepared to face the issues honestly, letting all executives know that while it recognizes that every business decision involves compromise, it feels that the struggle to fulfill community responsibility must be vigorously pursued. Of especial importance, it should demonstrate that it is not afraid to discuss the ethical question openly, with its own employees and even with the public.

This takes courage, but it is worth it. The very process of discussion leads to a catharsis of aggressions, doubts, and guilt feelings, and ultimately to a healthier, better-adjusted, and socially more useful attitude for all employees of the company — and, of course, a deeper respect from the community.

The Major Issues

The ethical conflict in public relations for industry appears to break down into six major

issues. Inevitably, discussion of any one of them boils down to the question of "Where do we draw the line?" Such discussion helps clarify the ethical threshold of the company.

In this article I cannot and shall not try to recommend an ideal ethical threshold which companies ought to develop in relation to any one of these issues. This is an individual corporate task. What follows is intended only to illustrate a method of undertaking such a task. The examples are taken from experience in our own office through the years. They cover a cross section of industry, since when a public relations firm analyzes its own ethical responsibilities, it is in fact reviewing the ethics of all of its different clients.

Artificial Images

To what extent should a company present a frank picture of its business or product, or build a corporate image designed to give the public an invented picture of the business or product, whether it is accurate or not?

There are, of course, many examples illustrating this problem. Tendencies toward artificial image making have appeared to many social critics to be as "Orwellian" as the Soviet habit of rewriting history. It gives one a sense of unreality and makes us (as members of the public) feel that we are living in a hall of mirrors.

On the other hand, public relations professionals feel that their social role can be fulfilled by improving communications in a complicated world. Image making is not supposed to be artificial, but rather clarifying, simplifying, helpful to understanding.

"Independent" Research

To illustrate the temptations, conflicts, and agonizing appraisals that can develop, here is a simple case example:

Company A decided to build an image of one of its major products as being purer than its competitors'. This was actually so. However, advertising claims of purity had been used and abused so heavily in the past by other companies that it decided to undertake a public relations program to get the story across. Accordingly, a complicated scheme was invented involving the development of an "independent" research report that was to provide the basis for newspaper and magazine articles.

The trouble was that the research was engineered; in fact, it was not even to be paid for unless the publicity appeared in print. To ensure the

success of the project, the man who arranged all this had some editors on his payroll as consultants for the research, thus almost guaranteeing eventual publication. It was a neat scheme — effective for the company and profitable for researcher, editor, and middleman.

The question was: *Is this a responsible method of communicating the image of purity to the public?*

In support of the argument was the fact that the image was accurate; the product was a pure one. The public was not being deceived. It was being told the truth. And there was nothing specifically wrong with the plan. No one was being bribed to do something he should not do. The research was being done by qualified scientists.

Against the plan was the fact that it short-circuited the usual checks and balances which protect the public against deception. Normally, if the product was touted as being pure, the public could have the claim checked by truly independent research. This research could again be checked by truly independent editors, who would publish it only if it seemed valid to them. But if the cooperation of these two intermediaries could be secured by special payments, then the way would be clear to present false images to the public. This could be done simply by confining the research to those areas which would bear proof and by omitting negative areas. An aura of research could be created to prove any point, and a public relations smokescreen could be developed to hide the bad while the good shone forth.

In our discussion, the temptation to endorse the plan was very strong, since there was very little doubt that it would accomplish legitimate public relations objectives. It seemed foolish not to go ahead with it. Did not society in general operate in an atmosphere and environment in which efforts to create such disguises were largely condoned? One of the scholarly consultants at our seminar paraphrased Plato to point out that if we make the choice to live in this world where each person primarily looks out for his own gain, we have to be prepared to find some form of deception everywhere. The only way to escape this would be to retire from the world and become an anchorite.

Weighing the Risks

And yet, after a great deal of analysis, the risk of possible exposure of the whole scheme

emerged as the most important consideration of all. If this happened, then the whole claim of purity, which was really based on fact, would be suspect.

Our conclusion was that if research could be conducted on a truly independent basis — and there was no reason to feel that it could not — there would be no danger whatsoever, and results would be just as effective. This was the spirit of the work sponsored by the Tobacco Industry Research Council, where funds were given with no strings attached — from all indications, a fine example of responsible public relations thinking. A prime prerequisite of such an approach, however, is that a company be prepared to face up to the consequences of independent research no matter how the chips fall.

Everybody who participated in the seminar discussion of this case history felt that the conclusion was based upon practical considerations (that is, to avoid the risk of exposure), rather than upon ethical considerations. It was pointed out, however, that Immanuel Kant and other philosophers have argued that one should not concern himself too much about why one makes these decisions, for the pragmatic and categorical imperatives become the same in the long run. Many of our ethical standards today, for example, originated with some very practical decisions made centuries ago.

The Prestige Build-Up

To what extent should a company build its growth on deserved recognition and earned prestige, and eschew the fanfare of artificially stimulated applause?

The accusation that public relations involves an artificial "build-up" is one of the most serious ever leveled at it. This has created concern for businessmen in two ways. On the one hand, some businessmen expect that when they hire public relations counsel, they will become famous overnight; they even complain when they do not. On the other hand, some executives with a sense of modesty are afraid their public relations counsel will inflate their reputation to a point of embarrassment.

The problem has become particularly sensitive with the introduction of public relations into new fields in which, heretofore, recognition has supposedly resulted from merit alone — into the arts, religion, education, science. Many have wondered whether public relations

bastardizes the higher values which man has always striven to maintain in these fields.

Prearranged Award

Here, again, general principles that seem clear enough when stated in the abstract become subject to dispute in the day-to-day conduct of business. To illustrate again from our personal experience:

Company B was seeking special recognition for a new variation of a standard product. To highlight the innovation, a new package had been created. The design was particularly striking, and the suggestion was made that somehow a design award should be arranged. Publicizing this award would help impress both salesmen and customers with the company's concern for high quality and, by association, would bring recognition to the new product's features.

The question was: *Should public relations exploit only means of gaining recognition which would be above influence and partisanship?*

In support of the project was the fact that the design was of high quality and could in all probability command a citation from some authority. The latter would not be asked to give the award unless he really felt the design deserved it; so there was nothing forced about it. Without public relations effort, however, the authorities would probably not see the package design at all, and would have no opportunity to honor it. So there was legitimate reason to arrange to have the package reviewed by as many design experts as possible, with the idea of finding one of them who thought it worthy enough to give it an award.

Against the project was the closeness which this approach came to fixing judges, whether it was for design awards or anything else. To the extent that endorsement from official quarters could be arranged, we, as members of the public, would lose our respect for the standards of the judges and the integrity of their judgment. Quality became less meaningful if awards could be secured by able public relations men.

In our discussion, two different approaches to arranging citations were discussed.

(1) One was taken by a manufacturer who paid a fee to an organization whose business it was to give out awards that could be used for advertising purposes. This seemed to be a complete prostitution of the notion of a merited award.

(2) The other was used by a publisher who sent a copy of his product, a new dictionary, to

outstanding men of letters, as part of his public relations effort. The dictionary was, in fact, a pioneering achievement, and many of the recipients wrote unsolicited letters of praise. These endorsements later became the basis for an effective advertising campaign, which succeeded because the men quoted were obviously above influence.

It appeared to us that making the effort to gain recognition was not wrong. The case of the publisher illustrated this point. His project was a catalytic one in a society grown so complicated that catalysts are necessary. What we felt uncomfortable about was doing something that would undermine the basis for unbiased judgment, which could clearly result in gaining recognition where none was deserved.

Sale of "Influence"

To what extent should a company accept the criticism of editors, government officials, and other public representatives, rather than secure their support through specialists who sell their influence?

A common description of the unsavory aspects of public relations is "influence peddling." Effective public relations is supposed to be a result of knowing the right people. This means knowing the right editors, the right politicians and government officials, the right civic and industrial leaders, the right scientists and artists, and so on. Making a business out of these contacts is supposed to be the shortest road to public relations fame and fortune.

Buying Publicity

At some point, however, this road leads to abuses. For example:

Company C was extremely anxious to gain attention at an annual trade show. One way to accomplish this was through the local newspaper in the city in which the show was being held. The competition for publicity in that newspaper was fierce, with every manufacturer at the trade show vying for it.

A public relations representative of Company C knew a photographer on the newspaper, and spoke to him about the problem. The photographer developed a cute idea for a specially contrived photograph which might succeed in getting the company mentioned in the newspaper. He said he would set up and take the photograph for a small fee, with the understanding that if the picture was published in the paper, he would get considerably more money.

The question was: *Should the company exploit this special "in" with the newspaper photographer to help solve an important problem?*

In support of the plan was the argument that other companies represented in the trade show might be using similar opportunities, or would use this same one if it became available to them. It might be that the photographer himself was being unethical in his conduct, which hardly was the company's responsibility. Besides, no one was being paid directly to publish the picture; it would only be used if it was worthy. The newspaper would not be put in a position in which its standards would be compromised.

Against the proposition was the fact that the editor of the newspaper would not know that the photographer was receiving money for taking the picture or, even worse, was getting a substantial payoff if he, the editor, decided to use the photograph.

In discussing the problem, it became clear that the issue was whether or not this constituted bribery. The scholarly consultant suggested that we should all be able to agree that bribery was "wrong." But defining bribery is a difficult task in all aspects of life. It is not always easy to say where "undue" influence begins.

The conclusion we came to was that in the case of Company C the executive would feel a certain amount of pressure not to disclose the details of his arrangement with the photographer. This would mean that if the details were made public, he would feel embarrassed. This disclosure might actually harm the company and its participation in the trade show. Therefore, it would be wisest not to go ahead with the project. This same guide rule might apply in other instances where special influence is sought.

Manipulating Opinion

To what extent should business respect the basic principles of the democratic process and the right of the public to make up its own mind, rather than attempt to engineer consent through whatever techniques seem to work?

This is one of the most flaming issues in the field of public relations and ethics.¹ It involves the building up of false fronts, such as those used in the historic railroad-truck public rela-

tions battle. It is also a key question in connection with political campaigns, where candidates spend more energy on lining up support through organized public relations efforts than in making clear their position on questions of policy.

There is no doubt that a primary objective of public relations activity is to gain public support for a product, a political candidate, or any cause. There does not seem to be anything inherently illegitimate about this. On the other hand, what is the meaning of freedom in a democracy if public opinion can really be molded? Many books published recently predict unhappy consequences for mankind because of the potentially diabolical uses to which effective persuasion can be put — books with belligerent titles like *The Rape of the Mind*,² *The Hidden Persuaders*,³ and *Battle for the Mind*.⁴

Campaign Tactics

To judge from some of the speeches business leaders give, the less they have to do with government, the happier they are. In practice, however, just the opposite may be true. In such cases the nature of the alliance between businessmen and politicians can be a controversial one. For example:

Campaign D centered around an amendment to a state constitution. Some business interests were directly involved with the campaign. In similar battles in other states, opposing interests on the other side had used "dirty tactics" and won victories although the public never really understood what the issues were. A great deal was at stake in this election.

The question was: *Should "our side" attempt to conduct as clean a campaign as possible and stand a chance to lose the election? Or should it pull out all the stops as undoubtedly the "other side" would?*

In favor of the latter course was the fact that the object of the campaign was to win the election. Those who did not sympathize with the cause did not have to work for it. But those who did, and who accepted the job of promoting it, should bend all their energies on succeeding.

The argument against this approach was that if democracy worked, it was because a well-informed electorate had made a wise decision.

York, The World Publishing Company, 1956).

¹ See Raymond A. Bauer, "Limits of Persuasion," HBR September-October 1958, p. 105; also, Edward C. Bursk, "Opportunities for Persuasion," HBR September-October 1958, p. 111.

² Joost A. M. Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind* (New

³ Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York, David McKay Company, Inc., 1957).

⁴ William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind* (New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957).

Our responsibility to the system of government which we endorsed was to help present the facts to the public, and be willing to accept its vote as just. Waging a dirty campaign would hardly fulfill this responsibility.

Our discussion revolved on exactly what was meant by the words "dirty campaign." In some respects, dirty seemed to mean what the other side was doing — particularly if it was winning. One problem was how far to go in the use of slogans and other emotional appeals. We wondered, for instance, about the validity of campaigning against the other side by pointing out who was supporting it — in other words, not discussing so much whether the amendment was good or bad, but suggesting that the voters could see that the other side was wrong by noticing where the money for the campaign came from. The scholarly consultant quoted Spinoza to support the proposition that one cannot persuade by reason alone; he also pointed out that arguing by imputation is legitimate, though it should not be a substitute for campaigning on the issues themselves. He felt that both should be used.

We all agreed that the line should be drawn at anything that might be considered a smear. This could backfire and lose the election, and therefore was, in practicality, bad tactics. It could also destroy people. The smear emerged as the prototype of the kind of technique which marked a program of persuasion as "dirty" or "unethical."

Truths & Untruths

To what extent does a business have a responsibility to tell the truth to the public — about prices, labor policies, and so forth — and to what extent can it afford to dissimulate?

In public relations, truth is a hard word. Businessmen often make speeches and put their names to articles which have little or nothing to do with their own ideas or words. This has become standard practice. Liberties are often taken when information is given to the public about sales volume, number of employees, cost of products, or size of investments. The result, as in the case of the more general problem of image making, is to give rise to a fairy-tale picture of our times.

And yet, it may be argued, this is part of salesmanship. A certain amount of deviation from the truth is all right because it is comparatively

harmless; it is considered a "white lie" in the business world. The problem is where to draw the threshold. What kind of a compromise, if any, should be made between the practical world and the world of ethics and ideals?

Tempting Deception

The rationalization that a "white lie" is harmless probably had something to do with the development of the following situation:

Company E sold its high-quality product to a few scattered discount houses, but claimed it did not sell to any. This was common enough policy. If the truth were told, the company's regular customers would be very angry. And yet the few discount houses it did sell to brought a great deal of business.

The question was: *Was dissimulation a justified business practice?*

In support of the position was the fact that the violations of its policy were so limited (since, for the most part, the product was kept out of discount houses) that the company was only saying what might be considered true in the broad sense. Against the position was the fact that it led the company to tell a specific untruth when talking to customers or when stating its policy publicly.

The scholarly consultant in our discussion suggested as a "piece of litmus paper" never to do anything you would not want to see published in tomorrow morning's newspaper. He suggested that the case of Company E was an illustration of this point. If key customers discovered the lie, they would seriously consider boycotting the product. He also pointed out that the company has a responsibility, not only in this instance, but whenever it gives out information. If an untruth is told about discount houses, it would hurt its credibility in other matters and therefore ultimately hurt the company's entire reputation.

The more we discussed the problem, the less reason we saw for maintaining the deception. Telling an untruth seemed the easiest way out of this troublesome situation — but by no means the best way. The major market by far for this product consisted of quality stores, and it did not seem worthwhile to jeopardize that market by flirting with discount houses. These practices cannot be hidden from the trade. The attempt to do so would sully the marketing reputation of our client, which in other respects was most highly regarded and trusted by his cus-

comers. It should be worth giving up the discount house business to protect that reputation.

Credit for Good Deeds

To what extent should business consider the ancient ethical calling to do good because it is its own reward, rather than doing good for publicity purposes?

It seems almost naive to ask the question. It has become accepted as good business practice that if acting in the public good will win friends for the company, then it is good public relations. And since this type of thinking seems to bring benefits to society, why question it?

Yet this is exactly the fundamental dilemma raised at the beginning of the article. Does it mean that we no longer wish to have as an ideal the genuine person who behaves responsibly because he *really* has a concern for others, or are we willing to accept the idea that all of us are actors, striking a pose of do-goodness to help us better achieve our ulterior ends? In like manner:

Company F had developed an ambitious R & D department. Many of the projects undertaken by this department were of a pioneering nature. Management was anxious to capitalize on this work, and repeatedly directed public relations activity to call attention to it. Members of the department, however, were unenthusiastic. They wanted to feel free from publicity considerations in planning their research program.

The question was: To what extent should public relations enter into the making of policy; should research be guided by the idea of what has the best chance of winning public recognition or of solving the most significant problem?

The argument for active public relations participation in policy making was that management should be kept constantly aware of public sentiment in making key decisions. Only in this way could it live up to its social responsibility and ultimately succeed in filling public needs. No function, research included, could operate effectively without sensitivity to public reaction.

The argument on the other side was that public relations people wanted to pay special attention to the kind of research which would get the most publicity. Researchers wanted to do their job well and conscientiously, and then to let publicity follow if it came naturally — rather than have the publicity tail wag the research dog.

In our discussion it became clear that any research projects which might be undertaken with public relations benefits primarily in mind would have a poor chance of long-term success. Publicity on such projects would tend to be of the "flash in the pan" variety. A much more serious public relations contribution could be made by helping the research department verbalize its basic policy, and calling public attention to that over-all point of view.

There was a fine line to be drawn between doing research which would win immediate recognition and doing research in the public good. The former might be "gimmicky" and not do the public any good at all, even though it received publicity. The latter would tend to be the kind of research that would do the company the most good, since only if it fulfilled a public need could the company capitalize on it. The conflicts seemed to be among quick publicity, long-term company gain, and public good.

The company good and public good seemed to be synonymous when looked at from the long run. Sound public relations thinking suggested adopting the researchers' point of view and counseling management against trying to force a publicity orientation on the department.

Conclusion

There are no absolutes with which to resolve the basic ethical questions of public relations for industry. There are no clear-cut "do"s and "don't"s. And the issues which bother sociological commentators about the "public relations approach to life" are real. We come to grips with them in many aspects of our business life.

It does not help to try to ignore these questions. They are there anyway, and we have to face them whether we discuss them or not.

When they are brought to light, the dilemmas can be viewed in the perspective of age-old questions and the thoughtful observations of philosophers, theologians, and psychologists on the conduct of life. Such discussion dignifies the questions, relieves us of the anxiety of dealing with them privately, and possibly makes us feel better about the decisions we make.

The responsibility for stimulating open discussion on this subject belongs to top management. Only through its help and active participation in the discussion can the ethical threshold of the corporation be clarified. The most

effective way to organize such discussions is to talk about specific problems confronting the company, rather than broad issues; the latter become clarified in the course of analysis. This inquiry should be conducted by top management together with middle management. The company's public relations representatives should act as a foil against which introspection and analysis take place. Whenever possible, outside scholars should be included in the discussions.

In examining the ethical threshold of its public relations activity, a company is actually analyzing its social role in the community. It

considers what its deeper values are as a social entity. As management sees its way clear to acting more responsibly, it finds its attention focused more on determining the contributions it can make to society rather than on exploiting society to help it meet its own ends.

This process does not serve to repress the aggressions or ambitions of the prime movers in industry. Public relations is still a process by which those drives can be fed — and satisfied. But it accomplishes this end by serving, rather than by destroying; by building, rather than by undermining.

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