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Top of Mind

Perspectives and Commentary

Time to Convene the Ethics Committee

AS AMERICANS watched or read about the unravelling of Washington big-gun Jack Abramoff, it's safe to say they turned a judgmental eye toward politicians and lobbyists—two jobs that need no help in the low-public-esteem department.

What's more distressing, however, is that the same judgmental eye was likely also turned on those of us whose job it is to assist clients in our own version of the art of influence and persuasion.

If only the bad news were confined to Mr. Abramoff. Sharing the recent headlines was the revelation that James Frey's stunning 2003 bestseller, *A Million Little Pieces*, contained a lot of little fabrications, which in turn uncovered how many publicists willfully encourage a blur between truth and fiction. Then, most recently, came the allegations by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich that a pr firm representing General Motors had sought his support of the auto giant's buyout plan—with an offer of cold hard cash. These unfortunate (and unfortunately timed) incidents have all provided a behind-the-scenes glimpse at how some of today's consultants are pivotal players in the scandal *du jour*. The events also exacerbate what, in the public mind, is already a mounting suspicion of the public relations and consulting fields.

As strategists and practitioners, we view these same events with our own set of instincts—reasonably, one that calls for staying quietly backstage and waiting while a scandal plays itself out. But that strategy is mistaken. The success of our profession, after all, is dependent on our winning back the public's respect. For that to happen, it's up to us to reverse the trend of judgement and cyni-

cism, and take a far more proactive approach. It's time to pull back the curtain all the way, turn the spotlight on the issue of ethical behavior (or lack thereof) and address it directly.

As consultants engaged in helping clients become more influential players in their industries, we share (and, more pointedly, shoulder) the responsibility for setting and adhering to ethical standards. But defining and practicing ethics in this realm can be a murky endeavor. Against the theoretical guidelines provided by professional societies clashes the daily reality of making complex decisions within a competitive, profit-oriented business climate. It's one that, as we all know, often encourages greed, self-interest and a need to win at any cost. On these slippery slopes, questions of ethics may arise but never be answered; the work moves forward, sometimes with dire results. How are we supposed to be successful and yet address the ethical issues of which the public is all too aware, thanks to the evening news?

We must acknowledge the problem with a wide-open dialogue among colleagues and fellow workers at every opportunity. There are numerous topics and virtually endless applications to discuss. We can start with our fun-

damental role: We are consultants to our clients, not their agents. Our clients' interests should come first, of course, but only when those interests can be pursued with integrity. Big and small decisions should all be subject to an ethical litmus test made up of unflinching questions. Do we conduct and use research responsibly, or do we manipulate those findings to further a predetermined goal? Do we tell clients the truth about their company or product, or do we simply tell them what they want to hear? Perhaps most important: Do we tell the public the truth, or do we bend it to serve our, or our clients', purposes?

Asking and answering these questions honestly is not easy, but it is possible. Moreover, the self-examination must begin at the top. For

ethical standards to succeed, they must be woven into the fabric of the company culture, not just printed on the pages of the employee manual. Are these goals unrealistic or naive? No. This same level of accountability is what companies around the world demand regarding project management, financial decisions and corporate performance.

In addition, ethical standards and profits are not mutually exclusive. My experience has shown that clients appreciate the truth. If we believe their approach cannot work and tell them so, they will ultimately be grateful we had the courage and moral fiber to tell them outright, rather than pander to them. Building clients' reputations based on authentic research and solid facts is a proven strategy for success; shaving facts often leads to disaster.

Ethical decisions lead to sustainable results; unethical ones produce the scandals that the public sees in the media.



By Mary Phelan

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