

# The Creative Use of Front Groups

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By

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The calls for entries come every year. Just like the inevitable “Oscars” and “Genies” in the motion picture industry in North America, the public relations field has its “Gemstones,” “Silver Anvils,” and the creatively named “Awards of Excellence.” And just like in the movie industry where more and better approaches to the craft can lead to potential awards, so too do public relations professionals ( and non-professionals) strive for the most efficient, effective and creative approaches to solving client problems. But, have you ever considered that there may be an ethical line to those award-producing brain children?

In his book *The Social History of Spin*, Stuart Ewan makes a compelling case for all the world to read that the PR industry steers the public mind, and by doing so undermines the very meaning of democratic principles. And although much of what the average PR persons does at his or her desk on a day-to-day basis seems far removed from these earth-changing events, the more high-profile, and often creative approaches to strategic public relations do, indeed, require an imaginative strategy that may cross the line into the murky area of manipulation.

## Everything old is new again

One example of such a creative strategy is what places like the [PR Watch](#) a kind of watch-dog on the PR industry, calls front groups. As new and creative as this approach might seem, it actually has a rather long and not altogether sparkling history.

In the 1930's, public relations pioneer Carl Byoir, a contemporary of Edward Bernays, was holding his own in the arena of developing new and original strategies to solve corporate communications dilemmas. As if his work as a front man for both the Cuban dictatorship and the German Tourist Information Office hadn't muddied his reputation enough, he went to work back home in the USA for grocery giant A & P. Although the actual facts of the story vary depending upon which source you read such (the [PR](#)

[Museum](#) seems to present it as a legitimate lobby), Carl Byoir is credited with developing the first front group as a PR ploy.

When proposed taxation on chain stores threatened to close down his client's operation, he advised them to go down fighting. His strategy involved setting up what some sources indicate were in fact dummy organizations such as the National Consumers' Tax Commission and Business Property Owners Inc. to do what we might now call indirect lobbying against the tax. To all appearances, these groups were grass-roots organizations echoing the opinions of an often silent majority in a democratic society. At what point, then, does the front group overstep the boundaries of ethics?

Of course, if you are a Bernays aficionado, you might well quote the late PR pioneer when he wrote in his book *Propaganda*: "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society." There it is again: the word "manipulation."

So, when is a front group manipulation and when is it simply a good strategy?

## Defining the "front group"

PR Watch (PRW) has what they call a rogues gallery of front groups. First, there's [ActivistCash.com](http://www.activistcash.com) [[www.activistcash.com](http://www.activistcash.com)] which, according to its web site "...root[s] out the funding sources of the most notorious anti-consumer groups." PRW says it's actually run by a Washington lobbyist, and while claiming to expose the hidden funding behind these environmental and health activist groups, refuses to disclose its own resources. PRW says they're funded by the tobacco, alcohol and restaurant industries.

Then there's the recently deactivated [Global Climate Coalition](http://www.globalclimate.org) [[www.globalclimate.org](http://www.globalclimate.org)], which evidently has successfully completed its job of "contributing to a new national approach to global warming." According to PRW it was sponsored by the auto, oil, coal and other such industries with a mandate to lead you to believe that global warming isn't really a problem at all.

These kinds of front groups have a clear ethical dilemma in the area of disclosure. Is it ethical to lobby for a particular point of view or persuade people to think and act differently without allowing your target public to have basic information on the lobby group – who you are and where your money comes from? If this lack of transparency in any way misleads the audience, the answer is "no". But, where do we draw the line?

## Ethics & front groups

Surely, organizations such as the Canadian Transplantation Society and (many) other similar health-related, professional groups are ethical public relations tools for their financial backers. At least they name their funders and put convenient links to them on their web site. Make no mistake, though, their sponsors are all pharmaceutical and healthcare companies that, in the case of the Transplantation Society, produce drugs to prevent or treat the rejection of transplanted organs. Therefore, the more transplants that are done, (and the more rejections there are) the more money they make. Is this unethical?

If we use the test of disclosure, then the answer is no – this is clearly an ethical public relations approach to enhancing the image of the drug companies. However, not all such organizations clearly indicate to their publics – especially those targeted to lay audiences – that they are in fact, front groups for drug companies. They purport to be in the business of patient education. This could hardly be considered an impartial source of treatment information for a vulnerable public such as patients. This kind of organization falls into that twilight zone of ethical murkiness.

The bottom line is that there is considerable opportunity for public relations professionals to be more innovative in their approaches to solving PR problems or capitalizing on PR opportunities. But in the heat of the creative process, don't lose sight of the potential ethical quagmires into which you may be falling. 🕯️