

Experts for Hire?

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by

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How do you know when a tried and true public relations tactic runs amok? When have you stepped over that fuzzy line between an acceptable practice and one that tumbles over into the quagmire of the ethical transgression? It's a tough call, but someone has to do it. In the case of a PR tactic, that someone is you.

If you've been in public relations for more than a week or so, then you've probably used this technique at one time or another. Based on the belief that certain individuals with whom your particular target public can identify will have credibility with that public, you engage a third party to endorse your message. They've been used to promote everything from running shoes, to diet regimens, to safer sex and even to get you to donate money to worthy causes. And they can be very effective. So what's the ethical problem here?

In the December 14 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, an article was headlined "Some Professors Take Payments to Express Views." Naturally, being a professor myself (and never having been offered payment for my views, darn it), the article piqued my interest.

The lead read as follows: "If a professor takes money from a company and then argues in the media for a position the company favors, is he an independent expert – or a paid skill?" Perhaps the next question the reporter ought to have followed up with is this: And why is there something wrong with this? Because there is.

Kinds of Endorsements

One of the most commonly used third-party endorsements is the testimonial garnered from past customers or clients. As you develop the new campaign you might ask happy customers to comment on their experience. It's even better, though, when they come forward on their own. This lends even more credibility to the statements.

But, it's the second kind of endorsement that is the focus of this discussion. It's one thing to hire a sports star or a celebrity to promote your sneakers or your weight loss program; it's quite another to hire a so-called expert and have it look to the public like this person had independently chosen to support your message – because this is the conclusion that they will draw and if I know anything at all about PR, I know that this is exactly what you're banking on. Therein we find the ethical problem.

A Case in Point

A couple of years ago, I received a telephone call from a local journalist who had interviewed me in the past (and no, I wasn't being paid by anyone to give the interview!). This Halifax reporter had received a media kit from a Toronto-based PR firm that was working for a pharmaceutical company. It announced the pending release of a national survey that showed that three-fourths of Canadians were unaware that specific, common, over-the-counter pain medications caused an increased risk of ulcers and GI bleeding. The survey had been conducted by a public opinion research firm and paid for by the drug company that had also hired the PR firm to publicize the results. Naturally, the drug company in question was also the producer of another common, over-the-counter drug that did not fall into this category of those causing stomach problems.

The reporter's question to me was two-fold: What was the real point of doing such a survey? That is, could it have been simply to enhance awareness of the alternative? (Of course the answer to that was, yes.) But the second question, or to the point of our current discussion was this: Who were these physicians and pharmacists listed as regional spokespersons? Were they independent experts or paid shells? He thought I might know because of my long-time association with the local medical community as a healthcare communication consultant.

As it turned out, I did, indeed, know the local contact doctor, and what I did know was that he was a family physician, not a pharmaceutical expert – but that may not have been the point. I also knew him socially and knew that he had worked for drug companies in the past. I suggested to the reporter that he ask this question of the doctor, which he did. The answer: Yes, he was being paid by the drug company -- but of course, it was only for his time, he said.

This is very much the same as a situation that was described in the *Chronicle* article where, in one cited case a business professor was hired by a US steel company to argue in favor of steel tariffs that were put in place by the federal government. By all accounts, this professor earned his money – he wrote dozens of letters to editors and was interviewed by and quoted in many newspapers. Evidently, he was not identified as working for the steel company in most media reports.

The Ethics of it All

One of the most important pillars of public relations ethics is the concept of truth-telling. Admittedly, the profession can't seem to agree on what it means to tell the truth (big lies versus little lies; lying by omission versus lying by commission; misleading by implication and the list goes on), but most PR professionals in Canada today would probably tell you that it's important to be honest. And, of course the Canadian Public Relations Society's [Code of Professional Standards](#) states that we should, "...deal fairly and honestly with the communications media and the public." So, we can all agree, then, that honesty is something to aspire to in public relations strategies.

The question is: How honest is this approach? Presumably there would be nothing at all wrong with an expert working with a PR firm whose message was congruent with the expert's beliefs anyway. There wouldn't seem to be anything dishonest on the part of the professor or expert, or, indeed, the PR firm.

However, if the fact that the expert is being paid by the company were made public, and this fact could materially change the way the media or the public perceive that expert's credibility or the credibility of the message, then here is where the problem arises. This is because there is a difference in perception when the public receiving the message believes that the expert might have independently come to the company in support of the message rather than being paid for that message. In addition, it would be only logical anyway for a company to seek out those experts who support them, ignoring the possibility that there might be other experts who disagree. Whereas this is to be expected, it also muddies the public's perception of the message.

The bottom line is that any PR tactic that misleads the public into believing something on false or even fuzzy pretenses, can rightly be considered, if not unethical, then moving slightly over that ethical boundary. The important thing is that as a PR professional, we consider these potential consequences when we're developing strategies and tactics. 🍷