

Good corporate ethics

It pays to be honest, even in PR

BY KATHY O'BRIEN

A reporter calls seeking your company's reaction to a competitor's announcement. You know the announcement was a phoney piece of news. Do you respond in kind, with trumped-up details about your own activities?

In conversation, your client mentions that the product performance you're bragging about in his print ads really isn't accurate. "But no one will know," he assures you.

Your CEO needs to look good. You know you could exaggerate a few details and he'll be lauded as a hero. Isn't it worth doing to keep your CEO happy?

We live in an age that knows nothing of job security. Displease the boss, and you may give him the excuse he needs to reduce headcount. It's no wonder people are looking over their shoulders more now than ever.

So when faced with these potentially ethical questions, many of us squirm. Of course we're self-respecting people! Of course we tell the truth! But 'truth' seems to have more grey area around it now than ever before. A lot of communications experts are still writing the press release based on what the CEO said — full stop.

We have no better example today than the White House — how many people turned a blind eye to the weapons of mass destruction 'facts' and wrote the speech, the press release, and the propaganda?

In the days when hierarchy ruled in companies, and the communications person would never dare tell the CEO what to do. Today, a good PR person doesn't hesitate to give advice to the CEO when it comes to his area of expertise. And a good CEO listens.

Today, the communications expert needs to be aware of all the issues facing the organisation and savvy about what's right and wrong in corporate behaviour. There are no excuses for not knowing — stock



exchanges publish their rules for listed companies openly, trade associations have codes of conduct, and the media is chock-a-block with expert commentary.

Over the past two years, we've watched men in suits

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FOUR STEPS TO PROTECTING YOUR CAREER

- 1. Investor relations:** Learn from the dotcom hype disasters and don't confuse openness with propaganda production.
- 2. Advertising:** There's a reason why Truth in Advertising came about. Don't be foolish enough to attract their attention. And don't use your competitors' exaggerations as the excuse for your own. They'll get their due one day.
- 3. Collaterals:** Picture the brochure being read by your industry regulator, your competitor and your clients. Will they nod in agreement on your claims or rub their hands with glee over a nasty lawsuit?
- 4. Media relations:** Always check your facts with several sources before issuing the release or giving the statement. Press your internal sources for precision - and explain that this is in their interest. And remember: journalists are in this for the long term, and they have great memories.

being arrested for securities violations and suddenly realised we ourselves could be party to corporate fraud. If the PR person for an offender was promoting stories that he knew were untrue, shouldn't he be held accountable for the thousands of people harmed by that fraud? I say yes.

Being smart enough to keep your job doesn't equal abandoning integrity. If we want to be taken seriously as corporate advisors, then we have to step up to the plate and assume responsibility for the integrity of our actions.

I once had a debate with a group of PR folk around this question: If the CEO told you to give certain details to a journalist, but you knew they were not true, would you do it? Many said yes, of course — the CEO is the boss. And if they didn't obey him, they wouldn't have a job. But by 'saving' their job in the short term, they were ensuring unemployment in the long term.

One of the most valuable qualities a PR person brings to the job is credibility with journalists. If they don't take his calls, he can't do much good work for the company.

So if the PR guy tells lies to the journalist, he seals his fate. The journo doesn't care about the CEO pressure — she counts on her sources to be trustworthy, and if the PR gives her a bum steer, she will never forget it. Her own credibility is on the line here.

One journo I know got burned once and took decisive action: she publicised the name of the offending PR person and made sure that guy never got a warm welcome from a journalist again. Like I said: you can seal your fate in a moment like this.

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