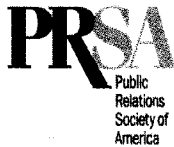


# Implications for the profession: A letter to PRSA members from the Board of Directors

Earlier this year, PRSA's Board of Directors wrote to PRSA leadership regarding the Society's own policy for dealing with attack journalism. The letter is reproduced below.



ADVANCING THE PROFESSION

AND THE PROFESSIONAL.

Dear PRSA member:

We wanted to write to you about a situation that is of great concern to us, and has implications for our profession. For those in the spotlight, an accepted practice in media relations has been to make their organizations available to reporters promptly and as often as needed to ensure the "free flow of accurate and truthful information." In fact, the PRSA Member Code of Ethics lists as its first core principle that "protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision-making in a democratic society."

Today, determining how best to support the free flow of information has become more complex than ever before, since the definitions of "reporter" and "media" are being continually redefined. There are no clear answers to basic questions: Who is a "legitimate" citizen reporter? What are the blogosphere's standards for accurate and truthful reporting? Who holds commentators accountable for their writings?

Take a close look at the PRSA Member Code of Ethics and you'll see that it takes no position on an organization's decision to work with some media and refuse to engage with others. The key words in the first core principle of PRSA's Member Code of Ethics are "accurate" and "truthful." Those two words are fundamental to whether individuals, politicians or corporations have abided by our code. Just as important — and a key element within PRSA's mission and vision — is that communications be "respectful." A disregard for respectful communication has been an issue in this year's presidential campaign, and it should be a concern in all public dialogue.

PRSA has itself been confronted with these very complex issues in recent years. One publisher, Jack O'Dwyer, has repeatedly stepped far beyond the bounds of accurate and professional reporting. For years Jack O'Dwyer has, in PRSA's view, subjected PRSA's leadership and volunteers to innuendo and personal attacks in his print and Internet publications. But it's not just his writings. He has also pursued these attacks on PRSA volunteers through calls to employers, associates and the hometown media of volunteer leaders who agreed to serve PRSA on the national, regional and local levels, calling into question their ethics or professional standards in choosing to associate with PRSA.

That happened most recently last month, when O'Dwyer took his campaign against PRSA beyond the pages of his publications and began calling and e-mailing work associates and supervisors of a volunteer committee chair. O'Dwyer shared his personal and very negative views on PRSA with several of this individual's workplace associates, questioning how the organization could want to be associated with PRSA through the work of a volunteer who was employed by the organization. This telephone and e-mail campaign made it so uncomfortable that this individual chose to withdraw from the committee rather than take valuable time to mount a defense of PRSA with all of the people O'Dwyer contacted.

Were this but one example of O'Dwyer's techniques for attacking PRSA and its leaders, it would probably be worthy of response. But calling associates, supervisors, local media and others to criticize PRSA is all too common, and has occurred repeatedly. He has even called reporters in host cities for PRSA International Conferences, again delivering his attacks on PRSA. In our view, it is not the normal role of an objective reporter, nor a part of respectful discourse, to rally other media to an attack campaign or to call a PRSA volunteer's business associates to challenge a co-worker's service to the profession. The ongoing lack of respect for PRSA volunteers and staff has made any attempts at dialogue unproductive for the Society, which is why PRSA has decided to limit its contact with O'Dwyer. For the thousands of members who are committed to PRSA, we are pleased to report that PRSA's membership level continues to reach new heights, with good membership experiences bringing new members to the organization every single day.

As an organization, PRSA is facing one of the more extreme examples of attack "journalism" — but this is also an example well worth remembering. In today's world there are more and more passionate but discordant voices that, as a result of technology, seize a bullhorn to create their own bully pulpit. As public relations professionals, how should we advise our organizations and clients in such situations? At PRSA, we think it is our responsibility to live up to our Member Code of Ethics by working with those who are committed to advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information.

The 2008 PRSA Board of Directors

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