



UN-SPUN

Ethical communication practices serve the public interest

by Dean Williams

This is the first in a series on ethics in business communication.



“Because hundreds of thousands of business communicators worldwide engage in activities that affect the lives of millions of people, and because this power carries with it significant social responsibilities, the International Association of Business Communicators developed the Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators.”

—Introduction to IABC’s Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators

Let’s start with the basics. IABC’s Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators defines ethics as “the criteria for determining what is right and wrong.” Can you tell right from wrong? Of course you can. The difference between the two has been embedded in our psyche from early childhood, through our parents, teachers, clergy and the media.

In business communication, however, knowing right from wrong doesn’t always mean that doing the right thing is either obvious or easy.

Michael Valpy, ethics and religion columnist for the Toronto-based newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, observes that, in a less complicated bygone era, it may have been easier to know right from wrong. Back then a wall of morals surrounded every society—conventional morals held in common and enforced by religious and societal institutions. Within those walls, people benefited from knowing that there were absolute values.

BLURRED EDGES

Valpy believes that multiculturalism and globalisation helped break down those walls, creating a more complicated world where value systems became blurred, testing our notions of right and wrong. “The challenge is to live an honourable life in a world that no longer has absolute values,” he says.

With the advent of globalisation, corporations enjoyed the freedom of opportunity provided by unregulated

markets and retreating governments. Unfortunately, says Valpy, too many corporations became less honourable in their business practices in this free-for-all environment.

New York Times business columnist Gretchen Morgenson recently echoed Valpy’s sentiments when she wrote: “Whatever happened to the idea of everybody pulling together, setting aside self-interest for the sake of a wounded country? Is grabbing for all you can now so imbued in corporate culture that executives don’t remember what it is to act with honor?”

Recalling how Nancy Oliveri, M.D., was one of the few speakers who received a standing ovation at last summer’s pricey, celebrity-filled ideaCity conference, Valpy believes the public hungers for heroes who rise to the challenge of being honourable. Oliveri, a medical researcher at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children and the University of Toronto, made headlines in 1998 after she published a study critical of a drug for thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder, despite the objections of the pharmaceutical company that funded part of her research.

DUTY TO CLIENT AND PUBLIC

But business communicators aren’t in the hero business. Our job is to advance our employers’ or clients’ communication objectives—to get their message out. Right? Well, yes and no.

IABC’s code of ethics reminds us that the activities of business communicators “affect the lives of millions of people” and that “this power carries with it sig-

nificant social responsibilities.” The first article of the code states that communicators must practice “honest, candid and timely communication and [foster] the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest.”

Does this mean you have to choose between duty to your employer or client and duty to the public?

“No,” says Tom Niles, corporate practice director at the Toronto-based public relations firm Langdon Starr Ketchum Inc. “Our duty to the client and the public is totally consistent. Communicators serve their clients best when they are the voice of the public. Good communicators, especially on the front line, will be sensitive to the public interest and will rein in the client when the client’s goals exceed the credibility point.

“We need to remind our clients that they’re not in business for the short term,” Niles continues. “Excess might win you victories in the short term, but it’ll come back to bite you in the medium and long term.”

Honour, honesty, credibility. Unfortunately these qualities aren’t the ones used to describe business communicators. For an increasingly media-savvy and cynical public, the stereotypical view of what we do for a living isn’t very flattering. Words such as *PR* and *spin* have increasingly come to stand for deceit, manipulation and lack of integrity.

Robert Dilenschneider, founder of the New York City-based public relations firm The Dilenschneider Group Inc., defended his profession in the op-ed

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ent to the viewer. The man at lower left appears thoughtful, perhaps even doubtful. The abstracted hands of the person holding the Bible seem confident and expressive. The shots below convey an emotional range—more abstracted hands, this time those of a woman, are backed by a colorful sari and graced by beautiful jewelry. They are clutched in repose, while the radiant man to her right appears to be at prayer—or is he simply saying thank you for the spiritual insights he has received?

Such pictures as these are typical of *The Commission's* imagery. In my view, this magazine consistently works at a more thought-provoking visual level than any other organizational publication I see.

Philip N. Douglass, ABC, is director of The Douglass Visual Workshops, now in its 31st year of training communicators in visual literacy. Douglass, an IABC Fellow, is the most widely known consultant on editorial photography for organizations. He offers a comprehensive six-person Communicating with Pictures workshop every May and October in Oak Creek Canyon, near Sedona, Ariz. For current openings and registration information, call Douglass at 602-493-6709, or e-mail pnd1@cox.net. He also welcomes tearsheets for possible use in this column. Send to The Douglass Visual Workshops, 2505 E. Carol Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85028.



Supporting Change

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learning maps give Scotiabankers the opportunity to be part of the whole process. It is nice to be informed.”

EMPLOYEE BUY-IN PAYS OFF

In the year since implementation of the new business strategy, results have been outstanding. The most impressive indication of success was the speed at which employees across Scotiabank's retail bank implemented a new sales delivery model. Every branch in Canada completed implementation on or ahead of schedule.

Fiscal 2001 was the most successful year in Scotiabank's 170-year history, with net income up 13 percent over the previous year. Scotiabank was also rated the No. 1 bank in Canada in overall quality of customer service. And 83 percent of employees reported in the annual satisfaction survey that their branch was a great place to work.

Scotiabank's experience demonstrates that in an increasingly dynamic marketplace, the knowledge employ-

ees have and how they apply it to their jobs create competitive advantage and increase shareholder value.

Communication with employees is not a nicety; it's essential to success. To be most effective, communication must be viewed as a process that creates a direct line of sight between the organization's goals and what people do every day. Without a disciplined communication process, change can become a painful exercise that undermines employee morale, impedes business effectiveness and erodes shareholder value.

Tracey White is senior manager, employee communication, at Scotiabank in Toronto and will be a speaker at IABC's international conference in Chicago this June. She can be reached at tracey.white@scotiabank.com. Scotiabank is a 2001 Gold Quill Award of Merit Winner.

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pages of *The Wall Street Journal*: “In today's parlance, spin stands for fabrication: Spin doctors try to alter the facts through a deliberate and reckless disregard for the truth. Spin is to public relations what pornography is to art.”



IMAGE STARTS AT HOME

Ironically, for a profession dedicated to image building, reputation management and communication, we haven't done enough to help ourselves. IABC's Code of Ethics is our moral compass—a guide to help us make decisions and act honourably, not just in the interest of our employer or client, but also in the public interest. Using the code as a guide for our daily actions enables us to promote ethical behaviour in the businesses we serve while changing public perceptions about our profession.

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