
PROFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES AND CODES OF CONDUCT

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INTRODUCTION

The fast pace of developments in Public Relations over the years has led to the need to establish some basic principles for this profession, almost a code of conduct that industry professionals and the market can refer to. This has happened - and is ongoing - at international and individual country levels.

Assorel - the association of Public Relations Agencies in Italy - refers to the Code of Rome, drafted at ICCO (International Communications Consultancies Organization) and signed in 1991. Point 4 of article 1 of the Assorel Statute also lists the aims of the Association, which include: "monitoring observance by Members of the FERPI Code of Conduct and fulfilment of their obligations relating to the protection of the good name and reputation of the profession of Members". The increasing role played by Public Relations in the world of business and society in general today and the ongoing evolution in the means of communication available and the scenarios where Public Relations Agencies find themselves operating nowadays, make it necessary to regularly review the documents describing the professional principles and the associated codes of conduct. The fundamental prerequisite for any professional working in Public Relations is to be able to operate in an open society with a democratic climate marked by freedom of expression. Public Relations agencies operate within the aims and parameters set down by this free society; they abide by its laws and rules, they promote conduct inspired by the ethics of communication, and work with customers who have the same approach and principles.

The professional principles that represent the pillars of Public Relations are based on the belief that every point of view and interest has the right to a voice in a free society.

As a result:

- Public Relations consultants benefit from the freedom and open approach that is typical of a democratic society, where freedom of expression is the norm and is a prerequisite in order for them to operate.
- It is in the professional interest of Public Relations Agencies that this freedom and open approach be preserved and extended and for the agencies themselves to make every effort to make this happen.

1. THE PROFESSIONAL BASIS FOR CONSULTING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public Relations agencies help their customers to plan, construct, develop, and defend the relations they hope to enjoy with their priority partners, and their work aims to influence the opinions, approach and conduct of people, giving the public information, elements and tools so they can get a more complete picture about them and promoting more in-depth and aware assessment of the customer's proposal/position. The purpose of the work done by Public Relations agencies depends on the demands made by the customer, whereas the tasks that are carried out and the means used are handled according to the methods adopted in the profession. Public Relations is the correct term to use to describe this sphere of communications. This definition of Public Relations is key for understanding the value of this profession: creating relations with the various segments of the public that an organisation (businesses, associations, institutions, etc.) wants to address, turning to Public Relations agencies in order to build, develop and defend the positive perception of the values of the brand, or of the organisation, or of the end customer. Public Relations Agencies work in a commercial context and are paid by the customer for the services rendered. Public Relations agencies operate in full respect of the rules and laws (international, national and industry) of communications and of the fields pertaining to the customer, applying them in an ethical and responsible manner, as described in this document.

2. THE METHOD

As part of their operations, Public Relations agencies are committed to publishing information that is correct, clearly indicating the customer they are working for, and the sources of the information they are publishing. A Public Relations Agency and the professionals who work there, must not deliberately deceive the public in any way with regard to the information published or the interests they are representing at that time. Furthermore, a Public Relations Agency must not employ improper methods or break any rules or agreements acknowledged by society in general or that govern the activities of the customer, even if it is the customer that requests this.

A Public Relations Agency must know and respect the laws and rules that apply in a civil society, as well as the standards that apply in the field of business of the customer on whose behalf it is operating at that time, such as the standards of the Stock Exchange where the customer is listed or the Code of Discipline for Advertising. Breaking these rules is the equivalent of the agency failing to complete the remit assigned.

3. MANAGING THE COMMISSION

An objective common to all those offering Public Relations consulting services is to ensure that the customer perceives the agency as something more than just a group of consultants. The primary contact for the customer is with the Public Relations agency, not individual professionals. A professional should be loyal primarily to the agency that he or she works for. A Public Relations Agency should inform the professionals working for it, which information they are authorised to reveal about a customer or any other information relating to the work carried out by the agency. The agency should also clarify to its employees and professional partners the nature of any confidentiality agreements that the agency has signed with its customers (see chapter 4. Confidentiality), agreements that must be respected by the professional while working for the agency and after completing the job.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any confidential information, that is not known to the general public, that a customer decides to share with a Public Relations Agency must never be shared with a third party without the customer's consent.

5. WORKING FOR COMPETITORS

Public Relations agencies may work with customers who have competing interests with other customers but all

the parties involved must be notified before the start of any activity. In case of conflicting jobs, the rule of confidentiality described in chapter 4. (Confidentiality) may need the addition of more restrictive terms. In order to safeguard strict observance of confidentiality in the case of jobs that have potentially conflicting interests, the management of the Public Relations Agency should ensure that observing confidentiality is normal practice also within the agency, making sure that no one searches for unauthorised information and that the people who are potentially privy to information about both jobs understand the importance of ensuring such information remains separate and confidential. The Public Relations agency has the final word whether to accept conflicting jobs, both in general and for a specific customer.

6. REFUSAL TO TAKE ON A JOB

A Public Relations Agency may decide to refuse a job on account of his personal opinion or of the nature of his specialisation, or of this professional code of ethics.

7. THE ROLE OF THE CONSULTANT

Public Relations agencies promote complete independence with respect to the issues they handle and they must not harbour any direct interest that could be considered to compromise their role of Public Relations consultant.

8. FEES

Public Relations agencies charge a professional fee in line with the communications to be provided, their expertise and specialisation in a given field, the nature of the aims and results as agreed with the customer. Public Relations agencies receive payment from customers for creating visibility in favour of a specific issue, or for promoting the reaching of determined decisions. Consequently, establishing an agency fee based on the fact that a given publication, for example, publishes a determined article or because a public official comes to a certain decision in favour of a question that interests the customer, is prohibited. This remains the case, even if the personal and unbiased decision of any of the parties involved may be influenced by the professional services provided by the Public Relations agency.

9. CONTROLS AND PENALTIES

Public Relations agencies that are Assorel members acknowledge and comply with the professional principles and codes of conduct contained in this document. The association controls their application and levies penalties should they encounter proven breaches. Anyone (member agency, individual professional, business or other customer, partner or general public) who becomes aware of failures to comply with these principles and codes by an Assorel Member, can report it, providing full details, to one or more of the following Association bodies: the Chairman's Office, the Board of Governors, the General Director, the Ethics and Disciplinary Committee, or the Shareholders Meeting. The body receiving a documented notification will inform the Board of Governors without delay. Should the matter involve a Governor or the agency he belongs to, the Ethics and Disciplinary Committee will also be informed.