

## What we value: A Delphi study to identify key values that guide ethical decision-making in public relations

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### Abstract

This study recommends that the Public Relations Society of America expand its professional values list to include respect and trustworthiness. This addition also shows the value this study's public relations participants place on mutually beneficial relationships with their clients/employers, customers, communities, and society as a whole. The findings contribute to the growing attention to and value of relationship management theory for effective public relations.

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When the Public Relations Society of America issued the eighth iteration of its ethics code 6 years ago, it incorporated a statement of professional values to serve as the code's foundation. "These values are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviors and decision-making process," the statement reads. "We believe our professional values are vital to the integrity of the profession as a whole" (PRSA, 2000). The six core values identified in the code are advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness. The essence of these values is woven throughout the code's six provisions that describe specific behavioral expectations.

Much has changed, however, since PRSA unveiled its updated code and accompanying statement of values. For example, public relations practitioners recently were publicly chastised for inadequate sponsor disclosure of video news releases (Brown, 2005; VNR controversy, 2006) and pay-for-play schemes by freelancers and consultants (Creamer, 2005; PRSA statement, 2005; Reeves, 2006). Practitioners went on the offensive to re-establish credibility, and companies such as Merck, Coca-Cola, GE, and McDonald's have sought to enhance their public images through corporate social responsibility efforts (Ferguson, Popescu, & Collins, 2006; Merck's new AIDS drug, 2006; Mishra, 2006).

In light of such occurrences, the purpose of this exploratory study is to revisit whether the six values identified by PRSA still adequately serve the profession, or if others might be considered. Since PRSA represents only a fraction of public relations practitioners in the United States, assessing values identified by practitioners regardless of association membership may provide additional insight about important values for the ever-evolving public relations profession.

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## 1. Reputation management and mutual values

Ethics means applying core values to interpersonal relationships (Linzer, 1999). Effective relationships also reflect the best practices of public relations as identified through relationship management theory (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000), which emphasizes a reciprocal and balanced approach to public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004) that benefits organizations and their publics (Ledingham, 2006). Rather than focus merely on communication output, this theoretical concept emphasizes the impact of public relations programs “on the quality of the relationship between an organization and the publics with which it interacts” (p. 466). Dimensions – or values – of the relationship management theory are trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment, which reflect what Sullivan (1965) referred to as mutual values; that is, those values that are common to and reciprocal among organizations and their publics.

While current PRSA values (2000) – advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness – encompass some elements of mutuality, the focal point is decidedly on an individual practitioner’s professionalism. Fairness and honesty reflect the mutual needs of both the organization and its publics. Trust, cooperation, understanding, and other reciprocal values are not currently reflected among the PRSA’s statement of professional values.

Using relationship management theory as a foundation, this study addresses two research questions:

- RQ1 What values do public relations practitioners believe are most important to practice their craft ethically?  
 RQ2 Do these values reflect mutuality and reciprocity as advocated by relationship management?

## 2. Method

A Delphi study was conducted to answer the two research questions. According to Kendall (1996), the Delphi study approach is “a multistep ‘discussion by mail’ procedure” (p. 86) among experts who may help researchers reach a consensus on a particular topic or issue. The advantage of this approach is the ability to gather viewpoints from a variety of practitioners without risking the bias and influence that can occur in group decision making (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1973; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafsohn, 1975; Morgan, Pelissero, & England, 1979).

With today’s technological advancements, this study’s “discussion by mail” (Kendall, 1996, p. 86) was conducted via Internet surveys, which shortened the distribution and response time. The questions were presented via the Survey Monkey Web site ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)), allowing the respondents to access the Web site at their convenience, and the researcher to collect their responses efficiently.

The Delphi process involves two or more sets of feedback from a group of participants. Responses to an initial questionnaire are compiled and summarized. In the subsequent questionnaire(s), respondents are provided compiled responses, and are asked to assess their initial positions with those of other study participants, and provide additional feedback (Delbecq et al., 1975; Kendall, 1996). The assessment can be quantitative and/or qualitative. For this study, the initial questionnaire incorporated one open-ended question: What values do you deem most important for public relations practitioners to employ in their jobs? The list of responses was compiled alphabetically and posted on a second survey that asked the respondents to review the list of values and select those they deemed most important. A second question asked the respondents to select and rank what they believed to be the top 10 values from the list. Because of the sheer quantity of values submitted, the values were grouped according to similar themes (e.g., synonyms of honesty were grouped together). A third survey asked participants to verify that values were grouped appropriately.

A total of 83 public relations practitioners and academics with a minimum of 5 years of experience were sent, via e-mail, the Web address to the initial survey. Of those contacted, two individuals replied and declined to participate, and nine e-mails were returned with inaccurate addresses, resulting 72 practitioners receiving the three surveys. A total of 26 responses were garnered from the first questionnaire, 28 responses from the second questionnaire, and 25 from the third questionnaire. These results fall on the low end of acceptability for Delphi study response rates (Kendall, 1996). The researcher also acquired input from public relations professionals and academics attending a highly regarded public relations conference. Thirty conference attendees provided feedback on the thematic grouping of values. Respondents to all three surveys represented a variety of public relations fields: nonprofit organizations; agencies; for-profit businesses in areas including insurance, pharmaceuticals, and high technology; hospitals, regulated industries, and academia.

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