

Introduction to Ethics in Public Relations

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Key concepts, principles, and practical guidelines for ethical practice

1. Why Ethics Matter in PR

Reason	Explanation
Credibility	Trust is the currency of PR; ethical behavior builds and protects it.
Legal compliance	Many ethical standards overlap with laws (e.g., false advertising, privacy).
Stakeholder relationships	Honest communication sustains long-term relationships with clients, media, the public, and employees.
Reputation management	Ethical lapses can cause crises that damage brand equity far beyond the original issue.
Professional standards	The PR industry has codified codes (PRSA, IABC, CIPR) that set baseline expectations.

2. Core Ethical Principles in PR

Principle	Definition	Typical Application
Truthfulness	Provide accurate, complete, and verifiable information.	Fact-checking press releases, avoiding exaggeration.
Transparency	Disclose the source, purpose, and any conflicts of interest.	Identifying sponsored content, naming the client in advocacy campaigns.
Fairness	Treat all parties equitably; avoid deceptive tactics.	Giving equal opportunity for comment, not cherry-picking data.
Responsibility	Accept accountability for messages and outcomes.	Issuing corrections promptly, owning mistakes.
Respect for Privacy	Protect confidential or personal information.	Securing client data, obtaining consent before using personal stories.
Integrity	Align actions with stated values and professional codes.	Rejecting gifts that could influence judgment, refusing to spread misinformation.

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3. Ethical Decision-Making Model (Step-by-Step)

1. **Identify the dilemma** – Clarify the conflicting values or obligations.
 2. **Gather facts** – Collect all relevant information (legal, contractual, stakeholder perspectives).
 3. **Consult codes & policies** – Refer to the PRSA Code of Ethics, employer policies, and any applicable laws.
 4. **Consider stakeholders** – List who will be affected and how (clients, public, employees, media).
 5. **Evaluate alternatives** – Weigh each option against the core principles (truth, fairness, etc.).
 6. **Make a decision** – Choose the course that best upholds ethical standards.
 7. **Implement & monitor** – Execute the decision, then track outcomes and be ready to adjust.
 8. **Reflect** – Document the process and lessons learned for future reference.
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4. Major Professional Codes (Quick Reference)

Organization	Key Highlights
Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)	– Advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, fairness. – “Free Flow of Information” principle.
International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)	– Commitment to truth, accuracy, and transparency.
Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR – UK)	– Emphasis on integrity, respect, and responsibility to the public interest.
Institute for Public Relations (IPR)	– Research-driven ethical standards, focus on evidence-based practice.

Tip: Keep a copy of the relevant code on hand; many organizations provide an “Ethics Checklist” for quick use.

5. Common Ethical Issues & Best-Practice Responses

Issue	Example	Recommended Action
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Misleading information

Exaggerating product benefits in
a press release.

Verify all claims with data; include
qualifiers; avoid hyperbole.