

COMMITTING TO ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Ethics are the accepted principles of conduct that govern behaviour within a society. Ethical behaviour is a companywide concern, but because communication efforts are the public face of a company, they are subjected to particularly rigorous scrutiny from regulators, legislators, investors, consumer groups, environmental groups, labour organizations, and anyone else affected by business activities.

Ethical communication avoids deception and provides the information audiences need.

Ethical communication includes all relevant information, is true in every sense, and is not deceptive in any way. In contrast, unethical communication can distort the truth or manipulate audiences in a variety of ways. Examples of unethical communication include;

- **Plagiarism.** Plagiarism is presenting someone else's words or other creative product as your own. Note that plagiarism can also be illegal if it violates a copyright, which is a form of legal protection for the expression of creative ideas.
- **Omitting** essential information. Information is essential if your audience needs it to make an intelligent, objective decision.
- **Selective misquoting.** Distorting or hiding the true intent of someone else's words is unethical.
- **Misrepresenting numbers.** Statistics and other data can be unethically manipulated by increasing or decreasing numbers, exaggerating, altering statistics, or omitting numeric data.
- **Distorting visuals.** Images can be manipulated in unethical ways, such as making a product seem bigger than it really is or changing the scale of graphs and charts to exaggerate or conceal differences.
- **Failing to respect privacy or information security needs.** Failing to respect the privacy of others or failing to adequately protect information entrusted to your care can also be considered unethical (and is sometimes illegal).

Transparency involves giving audiences access to the information they need in order to make effective decisions.

The widespread use of social media has increased the attention given to the issue of **transparency**, which in this context refers to a sense of openness, of giving all participants in a conversation access to the information they need in order to accurately process the messages they are receiving.

In addition to the information itself, audiences deserve to know when they are being marketed to and who is behind the messages they read or hear. For example, with stealth marketing, companies recruit people to promote products to friends and other contacts in exchange for free samples or other rewards, without requiring them to disclose the true nature of the communication. Critics, including the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), assert that such techniques are deceptive because they don't give targets the opportunity to raise their instinctive defences against the persuasive powers of marketing messages.

Aside from ethical and legal concerns, trying to fool the public is simply bad for business. As LaSalle University communication professor Michael Smith puts it, "The public backlash can be long, deep, and damaging to a company's reputation."

Stealth marketing is considered unethical by some observers because it prevents consumers from making fully informed decisions.

DISTINGUISHING ETHICAL DILEMMAS FROM ETHICAL LAPSES

If you must choose between two ethical alternatives, you are facing an ethical dilemma.

Some ethical questions are easy to recognize and resolve, but others are not. Deciding what is ethical in complex business situations is not always easy. An **ethical dilemma** involves choosing among alternatives that aren't clear-cut.

Perhaps two conflicting alternatives are both ethical and valid, or perhaps the alternatives lie somewhere in the grey area between clearly right and clearly wrong. Every company has responsibilities to multiple groups of people inside and outside the firm, and those various groups often have competing interests. For instance, employees generally want higher wages and more benefits, but investors who have risked their money in the company want management to keep costs low so that profits are strong enough to drive up the stock price. Both sides have a valid ethical position. Unlike a dilemma, an **ethical lapse** is a clearly unethical choice. With both internal and external communication efforts, the pressure to produce results or justify decisions can make unethical communication a tempting choice. Telling a potential customer you can complete a project by a certain date when you know you can't is simply dishonest, even if you need the contract to save your career or your company. There is no ethical dilemma here.

MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES

Responsible employers establish clear ethical guidelines for their employees to follow.

Ensuring ethical business communication requires three elements: ethical individuals, ethical company leadership, and the appropriate policies and structures to support ethical decision making. Many companies establish an explicit ethics policy by using a written code of ethics to help employees

determine what is acceptable. Showing employees that the company is serious about ethical behaviour is also vital. Even the best codes and policies can't address every unique situation, however. If you find yourself in a situation in which the law or a code of ethics can't guide you, answer the following questions:

If company ethics policies don't cover a specific situation, you can ask yourself a number of questions in order to make an ethical choice.

- Have you defined the situation fairly and accurately?
- What is your intention in communicating this message?
- What impact will this message have on the people who receive it or who might be affected by it?
- Will the message achieve the greatest possible good while doing the least possible harm?
- Will the assumptions you've made change over time? That is, will a decision that seems ethical now seem unethical in the future?
- Are you comfortable with your decision? Would you be embarrassed if it were printed in tomorrow's newspaper or spread across the Internet?

Think about a person you admire and ask yourself what he or she would think of your decision. If you ever have doubts about the legal ramifications of a message you intend to distribute, ask for guidance from your company's legal department.