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“Ethical Dilemmas in Communications”

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For many years a group of people involved in book publishing have been getting together once a month for lunch at what they call "The Book Table." I've been a member of the group for some time -- not because of my work as a public relations man but as an author and photographer for books, most of them on art. The fact that I am also in the public relations business, however, sometimes makes for lively conversations.

We had such a conversation recently, and it was very relevant to the subject of ethical dilemmas in communications.

The subject was O.J., and it was just after the verdict of "not guilty" had been rendered by the jury. The question was asked around the table as to whether those present would publish a book by him telling his side of the story. Some said "No" because they were convinced he was guilty, and others said "Yes" because the book would surely be a money-maker.

Since I was not a publisher, I was not asked whether I would publish such a book but whether I would publicize it. I was even asked whether I would be O.J.'s public relations adviser. This led to a discussion about the possible difference between publishing and public relations and the ethics of each.

I expressed my personal belief that being public relations counsel to a client carries with it the responsibility to believe that what one's client says is in fact true. If my name is on a press release, I should stand behind the legitimacy of what is stated in the release. I know that I would not like my name to be associated with someone who advocated positions I find abhorrent -- such as claiming that the Holocaust never happened, or that certain races are inferior, or that the government should not support the arts.

It so happens that my wife is convinced O.J. is innocent, and I really am not sure how I feel about it, so I don't know what I would do about a book by him. But to me the principle is clear -- there are times when I believe public relations people should draw the line and refuse to represent a point of view they personally oppose or find reprehensible.

Some book publishers said they felt as keenly about this as I did. But I noticed that they tended to be people who owned their own company and those who were less concerned tended to be

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people whose companies were owned by large public enterprises where profitability was the primary measure of performance. That meant to me that the more business becomes institutionalized, the less likely it is that personal ethics will play a role in decision-making.

When our own name is made public in connection with a cause, we are likely to give that some special thought. That is how I think a public relations person feels when his or her name is on a press release. Because we are conscious of that in our firm, which carries my name as well as Bill Ruder's, we talk about ethics fairly often in what we call an Ethics Committee. We always have an outside "ethicist" present as our adviser -- usually a clergyman or academician interested in the subject. When we talk about ethics, it is often about clients we are not sure we want to work for. One of our major problems is how do we make up our minds about what we believe and what we are willing to work for?

My favorite story is about one of our once favorite clients, the Greek National Tourist Office. Greece has always been a magical place for me, with its unique cultural heritage and awesome natural beauty. I have published two books on Greek art -- one on the "Sculptures of the Parthenon" and one on "Greek Monumental Bronze Sculptures." Years ago when one of my young partners was found to have terminal cancer, I arranged for him to go to Greece on a special project a few months before he died in keeping with an ancient tradition that everyone should see the Parthenon before leaving this world. So Greece was far more than just another client for us. Then one day three colonels seized power and established a military dictatorship in that great country. We were stunned and wondered if we should resign the account. We even asked the advice of the American Ambassador to Greece who sympathized with our dilemma. Eventually, we decided to go to Athens and see for ourselves whether we could continue to work for the government.

I went together with our then ethics adviser, a Professor of Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and we met with the colonel in charge of information. On the way to his office we noticed the newspapers on the street with big white spaces on the front pages indicating stories that had been excised by the censor. Friends of ours had also talked to us privately about the pain of being denied free speech and the presence of the military everywhere. When we met with the colonel we told him that in view of what was happening in his country, tourist promotion would be much more closely tied to politics than in the past and that we might not be the best public relations firm for the assignment.

The colonel insisted that this was not the case. He knew we had been doing a fine job for the country and insisted that we continue to work on the program. "The only thing that troubles us," he said, "is that the *New York Times* keeps printing lies about what is happening in Greece." Our most important responsibility, he said, would be to get the *New York Times* to print "the truth" about Greece. He understood that if one took enough advertising in the *Times*, it would print the truth, and he wanted us to know that he would make available whatever funds were necessary to make sure that happened!

That did it for us. I explained as best I could that he had been misled, that that was not the way the *New York Times* worked, that we were, indeed, the wrong public relations firm for him, and that we would recommend some other excellent firms that might be interested in the

account. We politely -- and quietly -- resigned, made our recommendations, and were perfectly comfortable when another firm was retained to take our place.

In retrospect, that seems like a relatively easy decision for us to have made. What has been tougher over the years have been those instances in which the balance between "yes" and "no" was so close we could well have made our decision by the toss of a coin. On some issues I have felt 49 percent to 51 percent one way while one of my fellow managers felt 49 percent to 51 percent the opposite way. We did make decisions, but I don't know to this day whether we were right -- which means right for us in relation to our fundamental beliefs.

For instance, here are some examples of border line questions:

- The safe limits of dioxin in effluent from industrial processes have long been a subject of dispute. Industry leaders have been convinced that scientists supported a lower limit than that requested by environmentalists. Government authorities have not been so sure. They recognize that it would cost tens of millions of dollars for industry to meet the higher standards that were proposed, but they also worry that lower minimum levels might lead to deaths in the surrounding area. We represented the corporate point of view. Were we right?
- Acid rain falling in the northeast of the U.S. is thought by most environmentalists to be caused primarily by coal-burning plants in the Midwest. Modifications in those plants to meet new standards would be extraordinarily costly -- and these costs would be passed on to the consumer. A coalition of industries urged Congress not to take action until further study could be made -- which might take years. Opponents said that this was merely a stalling tactic on the part of industry. We represented industry's point of view. Were we right?
- Textile manufacturers and cotton growers believe that all necessary measures had been taken to eliminate the dangers of lung disease from cotton dust in the production process. Investigators who have studied current conditions disagree. "60 Minutes" among others challenged the cotton growers' and textile manufacturers' position. We represented the companies and the farmers. Were we right?
- A major real estate development that would bring an economic boom to a declining community was opposed by environmentalists. The developer brought to public attention extensive research supporting his position; the opposition offered data to contradict the claim. The struggle went on for years. The developer was convinced that an environmentally responsible development could be built that would protect Nature and revive the community economically. Opponents were convinced it would be an ecological disaster. We represented the developer. Were we right?

I could give other examples related to finance, employee and community relations, health care, politics, the arts and many other subjects. So could anybody in the public relations business who worries about such matters. The trouble too often is that one's opinion is so slippery that we can all too easily be swayed by the position of the client who retains us. This is not only a question of money and that old saw "He whose bread I eat, his song I sing." It is because

public relations people are so well trained to see different sides of a story that it is often hard for us to decide where we stand ourselves.

I recently came across a passage in Pascal's "Pensées" which describes in a remarkably perceptive way how we public relations people tend to approach a controversial issue.

"When we wish to correct with advantage," Pascal wrote, "and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides. Now, no one is offended at not seeing everything; but one does not like to be mistaken, and that perhaps arises from the fact that man naturally cannot see everything, and that naturally he cannot err in the side he looks at, since the perceptions of our senses are always true."

One of the problems about looking at issues from all sides is that it can lead to a paralysis of thought. I remember a course on Comparative Literature I took in college in which the professor described the endless deliberations of writers he called Germany's lyric pioneers -- Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo Von Hofmanstahl, Stefan Zweig and others. They were so sensitive to the dilemmas implicit in every decision that one day when standing on the side of a street one of the writers became mentally frozen and found it impossible to decide whether or not to cross over to the other side. Recently a friend of mine, John Kiser, wrote a brilliant little book suggesting that Stefan Zweig, one of those writers, committed suicide after escaping from Nazi Germany and living in Brazil because he had lost touch with his roots and had no ground of belief on which to stand.

How are we persuaded to believe what we believe? Dan Yankelovitch thinks that a top-of-the-head response to a question posed in a public opinion survey may be meaningless. He suggests that people should be surveyed only after they have been exposed to reliable information and responsible arguments on different sides of an issue. But anyone who has listened to one of the debates on television pioneered by Fred Friendly may well have come away more uncertain than ever. As Pascal put it, everybody is right from his or her point of view.

There is a terrifying passage in Yeats' great poem, "The Second Coming", in which he writes:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

When the best of us lack all conviction, the worst of us will be filled with passionate intensity and loose the blood-dimmed tide upon the world.

We cannot permit ourselves to lose the ability to have real convictions, no matter how difficult that may be.

I think this is one of the most significant ethical challenges faced by anyone in the communications business.

One of my favorite quotes from our series of "Thoughts & Images" which we publish together with a photograph of sculpture as a way of conveying an idea is from the poet Adrienne Rich who wrote "No one tells the truth about truth." We in the public relations business are too ready to believe "the truth" we are told by management. Yet, if we are to be people of conviction, if the center is to hold and things not fall apart, we must make a monumental effort to focus on what we honestly believe is true, and to maintain our beliefs as strongly as we can in the values and principles that define our character.

Can we trust ourselves to be honest with ourselves about those beliefs? I thought of that nagging question recently when I came across a book entitled "Critics and Crusaders." The author argued convincingly that the critics and crusaders he described were among those who made America a stronger, better and more just society. Many of them were rabble rousers, fanatics like the abolitionist John Brown who, several years before the Civil War, led an armed "invasion" of Harpers Ferry and was hung for his crime. Others were sensationalist writers like Lincoln Steffens who was dedicated to uncovering corruption in American politics and believed that the successful businessmen in our society was the "source and sustenance of bad government." I asked myself what part public relations people might have played to deal with such characters. It's not hard to guess that we would have been asked to represent the defenders of the establishment and argued against those calling for radical change.

I found the book disturbing. Is it the nature of our role in society, I asked myself, to be defenders of the status quo? And if so, is that a role we feel comfortable playing? Or is there another perspective in which we can view the function we would like to perform?

We like to view ourselves as moderators in disputes, helping to be the voice of reason with and for our clients, to avoid clashes and resolve conflicts. That's why "crisis communications" has become such a key phrase in our business. We would have been impressed with President Theodore Roosevelt's famous speech in 1906 when he was trying to find the middle ground on a critical issue.

"In Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress,'" Roosevelt said, "you may recall the description of the Man with the Muckrake, the man who could look no way but downward, with a muckrake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muckrake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor... [He] typifies the man who in this life consistently refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing. There is filth on the floor, and it must be scraped up with the muckrake; and there are times and places where this service is the most needed of all the services that can be performed. But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes save of his feats with the muckrake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces of evil."

Although the term "muckraker" turned out to have a positive connotation, the investigative reporters at the time were not happy with Roosevelt's remarks. Nor are investigative reporters today very happy with the way public relations people often seem to stand in the way of their getting at the dirt. They know that we see our job as trying to calm the waters by emphasizing the good and minimizing the bad -- or as they might put it, "covering up" the bad.

Journalists often think they can keep us and our clients "honest" by telling it like it is. We can certainly learn from critical articles if the criticism is legitimate. But journalists can go overboard in the interests of getting a good headline and it is clear that the media has its own ethical problems. Their "truth" is often no better than ours in the public relations business.

There is some fascinating personal testimony to this in a new book "Living Ethics: Developing Values in Mass Communication" by Michael J. Bugeja. Many reporters worry at least as much as public relations people about what "the truth" is in stories they are covering.

Some also worry about the consequences their stories have on the lives of people they write about. What sometimes tips the scale for them in the wrong direction is the professional reward of sensational exposés -- journalism awards, personal promotions, job offers from higher paying media; and those considerations can weigh heavily in the balance when writing a story that might hurt others. We in the public relations business know how devastating that harm can be -- not only to organizations but to individuals.

Since I am involved in the art world, I am particularly conscious of how destructive harsh criticism of an artist, an author, a musician, an architect can be. In a little book entitled "Rotten Reviews," there is a collection of scathing press comments on such authors as Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Herman Melville, D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and others. I think the book should be kept by the bedside of any writer or artist who suffers from such indignities. And politicians ought to keep by their bedside a copy of Roger Butterfield's history of "The American Past" as seen through the eyes of critical journalists from the days of George Washington onward, with vicious attacks against virtually every president and public figure in our history. Businessmen cannot so readily be consoled since those who have been vilified in their time rarely become enshrined as heroes by later generations as does happen from time to time with writers and politicians.

Clearly the ethical dilemmas faced by public relations people, publishers and journalists are difficult to resolve. In over forty years of trying to find the best way to make responsible decisions in the public relations business, I have found no formula which can assure right action. The Ten Commandments or any version of them embodied in codes of ethics may be helpful as guides, but the problems most of us have to face are different from those that are universally thought to be morally wrong.

The best advice I can offer is to be sensitive, be concerned about others, be troubled by the difficulty of arriving at a decision when you are faced with an ethical dilemma. But don't give in to the temptation of having no convictions. When possible, ask the advice of someone who is not affected by the practical considerations that influence your judgment -- money or career advancement or pressure from someone you want to believe is right. Consider the importance of

your name, your reputation, and what others whom you admire will think of what you are doing. Make every effort to be true to yourself.

Know that in most instances there is neither right nor wrong, or even true and untrue. There is only what may be right or wrong or true or untrue for you in the light of your beliefs, your character, the kind of person you are. The toughest decisions are those that are on the border line, and with those the best any of us can do is deliberate with the confidence that the more carefully and honestly we do so, the better chance we will have of answering to the dictates of our conscience.