

Media Ethics and Law
Public Relations Ethics role plays

Each of these situations involves a particular ethical issue in public relations: media's perception of PR, manipulation of access and information, truth telling in organizational settings, conflicting loyalties, social responsibility.

After discussing the facts and issues involved in each case, the group should produce a three to five-minute "role play" which addresses the ethical concerns involved. Be sure to cover both sides of the issue and the conflicting ethical perspectives.

Before presenting the role play, a narrator should briefly outline the facts in the case. A group must use at least the players specified in the directions, but can expand the roles to include more participants and perspectives. After the role play has been presented, the class will comment and address the questions posed.

Group One: #43 "Mr. Ethics Selling Out?" – Christians, pp. 206-209.

Create a role play involving Richard and two former newspaper colleagues a month after he has begun his new PR job. Richard is trying to pitch a story over lunch, but the colleagues still have a problem with his "selling out."

Questions for class: What are the valid concerns of each side? Is there a superior ethical position here or are all equally valid?

Group Two: "A New Kind of War" – Christians handout.

Create a role play involving a pool reporter who has broken out of the pack and has been caught in a sensitive military area. He/she is being confronted by two groups: the Army PR official who objects to the rules being broken and a fellow reporter who resents being scooped by following the rules.

Questions for class: Does the need for national security and protection of troops ever override the freedom of the press? Was the interest of the Pentagon in the Gulf War to protect troops or control the public's perception of the war by controlling media access and content?

Group Three: "Deception at the Press Conference" – Christians handout.

After the press conference, a newspaper reporter introduces himself to Barb, an intern who has been posing as a reporter at the press conference. Barb is visibly nervous and evasive when he asks innocent questions about her media experience, current media employer, and other "shop talk." Sensing a possible PR plant, the reporter calls Susan over, and continues the conversation to expose an obvious deception.

Questions for class: Is filling a room with planted questions and hangers-on justified to create a positive impression on the media at a press conference? Are there any ethical ways to create a positive image at the press conference that do not involve deception?

Group Four: “All Is Fair?” -- Christians handout.

Sharon learns that Bill has “improved her ideas which he found in her briefcase. Being upset about him using her work to lure away a client from his former employer and her current agency, she plans to confront him over the ethical issues involved. So she invites him over to dinner at her apartment under the pretense that she wants to get back together romantically.

Questions for the class: Is the use of insider information or previous experience with a client ever justified when pitching for a competitor? Are there ethical guidelines to cover using one’s previous work, knowledge or experience in a new job working for the competition?

Group Five: “Pepsi Challenged by Rumors” – Christians, pp. 251-253.

In response to a public relations crisis involving a syringe found in a can of Pepsi, a Pepsico crisis management team mounts a PR campaign. Create a role play depicting the preliminary meeting of the crisis team. Include at least the following points of view: the company wanting a quick, safe response; the company PR person who wants the most ethical approach; a rogue executive from marketing who wants to cover it up; and the outside PR crisis management firm who wants to please the client, yet maintain integrity.

Questions for the class: What was the most ethical approach for Pepsi in this crisis? Did it do that? How and why?

Group Six: “All Too Human” – Christians handout.

George Stephanopoulos was a trusted advisor to President Clinton during his two campaigns and administrations. In this book and subsequent TV career, Stephanopoulos has often criticized Clinton, sometimes using confidential information as evidence. Sources say that Clinton felt so betrayed that he did not want the former aide’s name mentioned in his presence. Create a role play where Stephanopoulos and his actress wife run into the former president and his wife at a dinner. Be sure to include both sides of the ethical dilemma as well as the public interest factor in the administration and its scandals.

Questions for the class: Was Stephanopoulos using confidential information to further his career or to report on public events? What ethical grounds could Clinton cite to justify his feeling of being betrayed?