

5

Responsible Advocacy for Nonprofit Organizations

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Nonprofit organizations occupy an important place in American society. Commonly referred to as the “third sector,” after business and government, nonprofits include charitable organizations, social welfare groups, labor and agricultural unions, business leagues, social and political clubs, and other groups that serve a public interest. There are currently more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, and between 20,000 and 30,000 new nonprofits are started each year.¹ Most engage in public relations activities, although the scope of their programs tends to be smaller than those conducted by business and government organizations.²

Most nonprofit groups have fewer economic resources at their disposal than business and government organizations, which can explain their more limited public relations programs. Professional public relations programs can be quite costly, especially if video news releases (VNRs), special events, or other major outreach programs are planned, and corporations and government agencies tend to have the deepest pockets. Nonprofits, on the other hand, generally operate with limited budgets; just 26% of all nonprofits earn more than \$25,000 per year.³ Prior research supports the contention that public relations efficacy is inextricably tied to economic

72 Ethics in Public Relations

resources, and as a result, well-financed corporate and government elites tend to exercise greater influence over the norms and values established in long-term media discourses.⁴

Historically, a relative lack of economic resources has made it difficult for nonprofit organizations to consistently influence media coverage. Today, however, new forms of technology are giving these groups greater ability to contribute to the marketplace of ideas. The advent of electronic communication has made the global distribution of information instantaneous and inexpensive, and many nonprofit groups are seizing the opportunity to expand their public relations programs. They are using the Internet to bring their social causes and concerns, such as deforestation, gun control, and music education, before the world, and to assert a more forceful presence in the public sphere. This outreach effort has attracted attention not only from members of the general public, but also from journalists responding to two different sets of circumstances. First, journalists rely more heavily on public relations materials today due to financial pressures affecting news organizations. Second, journalists are turning away from traditional corporate sources of information, many of whom they no longer find credible. This environment enables nonprofit organizations that conduct public relations programs to heighten their visibility and to make major contributions to public conversation.

As nonprofit organizations initiate more complex programs reaching larger numbers of individuals, new questions about ethical public relations practices and the interests that practitioners ought to serve must be answered. In a sense, nonprofit practitioners have more leeway when it comes to pushing the boundaries of ethical practice. Members of the public are often willing to forgive nonprofits that violate standards of public relations ethics—falsely claiming a celebrity endorsement or overstating member support in group literature—simply because the group is working for the greater common good, and not for private gain. Ultimately, however, practitioners who use irresponsible tactics weaken the organizations they serve. A nonprofit practitioner who means to function as a responsible advocate must place the well-being of the organization before the social or political cause that the organization represents. Although this can require enormous personal restraint when practitioners hold passionate beliefs about such issues as animal rights or public smoking bans, responsible advocacy demands that practitioners prioritize the organization's reputation and relationships with its publics.

Nonprofit practitioners face both opportunities and challenges in their efforts to serve as responsible advocates. This chapter analyzes the environment in which nonprofit practitioners operate, with attention to the

opportunities created by new technology and the economic changes affecting American news organizations. It also examines stumbling blocks to ethical behavior, including the temptation to abandon self-restraint and a lack of role models for ethical public relations practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the promise of responsible advocacy among nonprofit organizations, especially among those whose public relations programs feature relationship management, resource sharing, and dialogic communication models.

Leveling the Playing Field

The British public relations practitioner George Pitcher has described the Internet as exerting a “leveling effect,” by which he means that electronic communication enables resource-poor community organizations to rival wealthy corporate ones in their ability to reach global audiences.⁵ According to Pitcher, the Internet has spawned “a parallel universe of alternative authorities” who hold opinions on every conceivable political and social issue, and whose opinions “tend to prevail” in cyberspace.⁶ Nonprofit organizations that conduct online public relations programs can leverage the power of the Internet to make themselves visible to members of the public, and to journalists, who increasingly view noncorporate sources as more trustworthy.⁷ In other words, the advent of low-cost, high-impact electronic communication affords nonprofits an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to public discourse.

When nonprofit and advocacy groups make themselves easily available to journalists via the Web, they can secure better representation of their points of view and more in-depth coverage of topics that might otherwise be ignored or dismissed as too marginal to report. According to a 2004 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, a majority of journalists view the Internet as a vital source of information and believe that the Internet has improved journalism.⁸ The most commonly cited benefits include the speed of the Internet in delivering information, the ease of securing facts, and the broader range of voices and perspectives available to reporters. The opportunity for nonprofit organizations is clear; their presence in cyberspace puts pressure on journalists to be more innovative and responsive in their reporting, and more wide-ranging in their search for stories and sources. One survey respondent described this change by saying that the Internet has essentially “democratized the press.”⁹

An increasing number of nonprofits are maintaining their Internet presence through blogs, interactive online journals that allow organizations to

post information, commentary, and links to other pages of interest, and that contain forums for readers to post their own comments to create a continuing conversation. This form of electronic communication received a great deal of attention when Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, used a blog as a mainstay of his campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. Dean's blog included essays from supporters and periodic messages from the candidate, and it generated widespread name recognition and donations.¹⁰ Nonprofit organizations such as Oceana, a global network of individuals committed to restoring and protecting the world's oceans, have discovered that blogs are effective public relations tools that attract potential members and journalists alike.¹¹ A recent Columbia University study revealed that journalists are turning to blogs in record numbers, with 51% of those surveyed reading blogs regularly and 28% relying on them for day-to-day reporting.¹² In response to these findings, a media executive observed that blogs are changing the landscape of journalism: "The fact that the media are using blogs for reporting and research also demonstrates that blogs have an enormous potential to not only influence the general public, but to influence the influencers—journalists and the media—as well."¹³ When nonprofit organizations leverage the power of electronic communication as part of their public relations programs, their ability to compete with powerful corporate voices is greatly enhanced.

Economic Pressures on News Organizations

During the last decade, the U.S. public relations industry has grown exponentially while American journalism has suffered a number of setbacks, including a decline in the number of working journalists and widespread budget cuts for news organizations.¹⁴ As a result, the balance of power between journalists and public relations professionals has shifted, leaving many understaffed and financially strapped newspapers, radio and television stations, and Internet news and entertainment sites dependent on low-cost public relations material. Public relations practitioners are enjoying an unprecedented opportunity to wield significant influence over the news.¹⁵ The challenge of responsible advocacy means that practitioners must uphold the public interest even in the face of market forces that might make it possible to bias the news in favor of a client organization.

U.S. Department of Labor statistics bear out the assertion that the field of public relations is enjoying unprecedented growth at the same time that American journalism is experiencing a downturn. The number of individuals working as public relations specialists in 2002 was estimated at 158,000,

compared with just 66,000 news analysts, reporters, and correspondents.¹⁶ Job opportunities in public relations were also predicted to increase “faster than the average for all occupations” in the United States through 2012, whereas employment of news analysts, reporters, and correspondents was expected to grow “more slowly than the average for all occupations” during the same period of time.¹⁷ The Department of Labor cited numerous market factors as causing the stagnant number of journalism jobs, specifically mergers, consolidations, and closures of newspapers, as well as decreased circulation, increased operating expenses, and a decline in advertising profits.¹⁸ Recent communication scholarship predicts little improvement in these economic conditions.¹⁹

The comparative advantage that public relations practitioners enjoy over journalists may be even greater than current government estimates indicate. The Council of Public Relations Firms, a prominent industry trade association, has contested the Department of Labor’s employment figures, arguing that the agency failed to count a large number of individuals who carry out public relations functions such as speech writing and internal communication management, but whose job titles do not specify public relations.²⁰ The Council maintains that the total number of public relations specialists working in the United States today is closer to 600,000 to 800,000.²¹ Other estimates indicate that there may be as many as one million practitioners.²² No matter which set of figures one accepts, it is clear that the number of public relations professionals is far greater than the number of working journalists, one of several conditions that has made the latter group dependent on the free news and entertainment content generated by the former.

The economic realities of American journalism today mean that a reduced corps of full-time working journalists is producing the news with fewer resources, and news organizations as a whole are under tremendous pressure to meet profit goals.²³ The push for profits has resulted in layoffs, hiring freezes, and editorial cutbacks at many news organizations, ranging from local television stations to prominent national newspaper chains like Knight Ridder.²⁴ In a 2004 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, about half of respondents working at newspapers or magazines reported that the size of their newsroom staff had decreased in the past three years.²⁵ Sixty-six percent of journalists polled in the Pew survey agreed that financial pressures were changing methods of reporting in 2004, as compared to 40% in a 1995 Pew survey.²⁶

The effect of these market conditions is evident when one considers the increasing use of VNRs, which are prerecorded television segments created by public relations professionals. More television news organizations than ever before are willing—even eager—to air VNRs in their entirety, as they

eliminate both the production effort and costs that stations incur when they report original stories. Producers can use them to fill airtime without depleting resources.²⁷ Marion Just and Tom Rosenstiel of the Project for Excellence in Journalism surveyed local television stations and found that the pressure to yield high profit margins was driving news producers to incorporate more of this free, prepackaged content. Just and Rosenstiel analyzed almost 40,000 news segments broadcast during local television news programs and found that from 1998 to 2002, the percentage of “feed” material from third-party sources rose from 14% to 23% of all segments. Meanwhile, the percentage of stories that included a local correspondent fell to 43% from 62%.²⁸

Ethical Challenges

For public relations professionals, the financial pressures affecting news organizations constitute a double-edged sword. Journalists need more low-cost, prepackaged fare, which means that practitioners have greater opportunities to contribute to media content, whether through VNRs, news releases made available on an organization Web site, or blogs. At the same time, however, these opportunities can present ethical challenges. For non-profit practitioners, many of whom are passionate about the causes they represent, the temptation to do or say whatever is necessary to draw attention to an issue can prevail, even if it means overstepping the boundaries of responsible advocacy.

Journalists rely on the free news and entertainment content that public relations practitioners supply. Experts estimate that between 25 and 40% of what appears in the daily newspaper or on the nightly news originates with public relations professionals.²⁹ Given these odds, practitioners understand that a passive reworking of public relations material will frequently substitute for original reporting, and that even one-sided or incomplete accounts may be printed or broadcast. For example, a VNR that distorts facts or downplays opposition still has a very good chance of making it onto the air, and even if only a portion of the original footage is retained, its inherent viewpoint tends to dominate the final message conveyed to the television audience. Television news producers who are eager to build audience share are especially likely to air shocking or graphic footage, such as a VNR from the British nonprofit organization League Against Cruel Sports, which showed a bloody foxhunt.³⁰ In many cases, emboldened public relations practitioners overstep the boundaries of ethical practice to publicize their organizations’ efforts, yet still achieve positive results because of market

conditions that favor low-cost, high-impact public relations materials. In other words, current market forces have created conditions ripe for the abandonment of responsible advocacy.

These conditions are particularly significant for nonprofit practitioners, who typically are considered less self-interested and more candid than corporate spokespersons. In a 2005 Columbia University survey, 49% of journalists indicated that they had lost trust in corporations and their representatives over the last year. Seventy-six percent of the journalists polled did not trust corporate spokespersons in times of company crisis.³¹ When reporters turn away from corporate sources, they turn toward individuals representing nonprofit and other community advocacy organizations. Nonprofit practitioners have a tremendous opportunity to use their newfound influence to increase their organizations' visibility and power, but in so doing they must keep the principles of responsible advocacy in mind. Practitioners must be held accountable for ethical decision making, lest the reputations of their nonprofit organizations become as tainted as those of some of the most notorious corporations.

Lack of Ethical Role Models

Practitioners in the nonprofit and advocacy world might expect to find role models for responsible advocacy in the campaigns conducted by other nonprofit organizations and by government agencies, most of which are working for public interest causes. However, a number of recent high-profile cases have revealed that practitioners in both the nonprofit and government sectors can and do resort to unethical practices. In recent years, several U.S. government agencies, including the Education Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture, along with the well-known advocacy group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), have conducted campaigns that violate the principles of responsible advocacy. In each situation, practitioners used irresponsible tactics to achieve particular goals, risking organizational reputation and bringing negative public scrutiny.

Government Missteps

In the spring of 2004, the *New York Times* published an exposé that revealed that a federal government agency had used propaganda-style techniques to win public support for new Medicare legislation. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) hired Ketchum, Inc., a powerful

public relations firm, to produce and disseminate VNRs that uniformly praised President George Bush's controversial Medicare reform program.³² These prerecorded segments applauded the availability of new Medicare drug discount cards for low-income senior citizens and portrayed this change as a victory for America's aging population and a concrete way to reduce seniors' out-of-pocket prescription drug costs.³³ One scene showed Bush in the presence of members of Congress, triumphantly signing the Medicare reform bill into law. Other scenes featured seniors engaged in leisure and health-related activities, including a consultation with a pharmacist who explained that the new law would "help you [seniors] better afford your medications."³⁴ The segments did not address serious concerns voiced by opposition groups who feared that private insurance companies might respond to caps on drug reimbursements by creating restrictive drug formularies that would keep essential medications out of the hands of patients, and interfere with physicians' efforts to deliver effective health care.³⁵

In addition to presenting only those elements of the story favorable to the Bush administration, the VNRs lacked any information that would allow viewers to discern that a government agency had funded or produced the stories. The segments were indistinguishable in format and tone from objective news stories, and they seemed to feature actual reporters. The public relations practitioners who created the VNRs hired actors to pose as journalists who were reporting "facts" about the new Medicare law, and gave them scripts to read that had been prepared by government workers. The story packages were produced in both English and Spanish, and each ended with a traditional reporter's sign-off (e.g., "In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting" for the English-language version; "In Washington, I'm Alberto Garcia reporting" for the Spanish-language version), reinforcing the perception among viewers that the material was independent journalism arising from a nongovernmental source or a neutral party. Forty television stations in 33 markets aired some portion of the VNRs between January 22, 2004, and February 12, 2004. Many stations aired the story packages in their entirety, including WBRZ in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, WMBC-TV in New Jersey, and WAGA-TV in Atlanta.³⁶

The VNRs created an uproar among opponents of the Medicare law and prompted a federal investigation. Critics lambasted the television segments as irresponsible and unethical, and as part of a duplicitous public relations campaign orchestrated to mislead the public. The General Accountability Office (GAO), a nonpartisan agency controlled by the U.S. Congress that analyzes how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars, initiated an inquiry. The GAO issued a report in May 2004 that described the VNRs as a type of "covert propaganda" intended to deceive viewers and obscure the government's role as the source of the material.³⁷ The report described the

VNRs as “not strictly factual news stories” that were marred by “notable omissions and weaknesses” in their explanation of the provisions of the Medicare law.³⁸ The agency report noted that the story packages and accompanying anchor lead-in scripts were designed to be seen and heard directly by the television audience, and that HHS purposely disguised its involvement. The VNRs were crafted to make viewers think the story had been produced and reported by an independent third party. As such, they violated the 1913 Gillett Amendment, which prohibits the use of federal money for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorized by Congress.

Other current examples of the use of unethical public relations tactics by government organizations abound. When the Education Department sought in 2004 to build support for its education reform law, No Child Left Behind, it improperly funneled public funds to a prominent conservative journalist. Once again using the Ketchum public relations firm as a middleman, Education Department officials paid the commentator Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to promote No Child Left Behind on his nationally syndicated television show and in his newspaper column, and to use his contacts with African American journalists to encourage them to portray the law favorably.³⁹ And in June 2005, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) successfully aired three dozen radio and television news segments that promoted a trade agreement with Central America that had been opposed by labor unions, the sugar industry, and many members of Congress. The reports were distributed to broadcast outlets for insertion into newscasts between January and June 2005, prompting a front-page story in the *Tribune* that observed that the Bush administration had taken the practice of public relations “to aggressive levels on issues ranging from the war in Iraq to education and trade policy.”⁴⁰

These intensive efforts to produce favorable opinions among key publics have fueled debates as to whether it is ethical for public relations practitioners to try to exert control over news content and public opinion.⁴¹ Can practitioners working for the USDA be considered “responsible advocates” when they present political statements as objective news, disguising the agency’s intent to advance a specific trade agenda and silence the voices of its opponents? Can representatives of HHS claim to be acting ethically when they authorize the creation and dissemination of biased news segments that misrepresent the facts surrounding new legislation? Can Education Department officials credibly claim to be protecting the public interest when they buy favorable media attention for specific programs and policies? Responsible advocacy requires that public relations professionals pay as much attention to the public interest as they do to their own organization’s interests. The agencies described above violated the principles of responsible advocacy when they presented news organizations with incomplete accounts of public

80 Ethics in Public Relations

response to new and proposed legislation, and when they paid a journalist to try to influence African American audiences to support No Child Left Behind. Responsible advocates respect their publics and strive to provide them with accurate and complete information regarding organizational decisions. In each of these cases, public relations practitioners fell far short of the bar.

The concept of responsible advocacy carries with it the presumption that a public relations practitioner will recognize and honor obligations to both a client organization and the public at large. The “responsible” portion of “responsible advocacy” disappears whenever the public is purposely misled. As such, any attempt to exert control over public discourse or monopolize public conversation through the use of biased news reports, undisclosed paid spokespersons, or similar abuses of power is fundamentally at odds with its core principles. Responsible advocacy also demands that public relations practitioners clearly identify the source of all communication; in the case of the Medicare VNRs, this meant that either the anchor lead-in scripts should have mentioned that the story originated with a government agency, or a disclaimer should have been superimposed on the visuals to alert viewers to the partisan nature of the report. In recent years, nonprofit and advocacy groups looking to government agencies for role models for ethical practice would have found disappointing mentors. The risk to the public relations profession is grave; when highly respected public agencies flout the basic rules of ethical conduct, they suggest to other organizations that such behavior is entirely appropriate, and worth the relatively small risk of media scrutiny and exposure.

Nonprofit Missteps

Nonprofit and advocacy groups often champion important social causes, such as environmental conservation or disease awareness, but their principled stances on issues of the day do not always translate to responsible and ethical public relations campaigns. In July 2004, the animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) successfully called attention to abuses in commercial poultry plants, but did so using unethical tactics that were inconsistent with responsible advocacy. Nonprofits may be less likely to raise public ire for employing such tactics because their goals serve the greater social good—as opposed to the financial self-interest that motivates most corporate actions—but there are consequences nonetheless. Nonprofit practitioners who employ irresponsible practices must recognize that they run the risk of undermining their organizations’ reputations and accomplishments, and violating the rights and interests of stakeholders.

Determined to shed light on inhumane conditions, PETA hired an investigator to infiltrate one of the nation's largest poultry plants and to work undercover as a plant employee for eight months. This individual secretly recorded a video that showed employees kicking and stomping live chickens. The graphic footage from the West Virginia plant revealed that workers were "ripping birds' beaks off, spray-painting their faces, twisting their heads off, spitting tobacco into their mouths and eyes, and breaking them in half—all while the birds are still alive."⁴² PETA sent copies of the video along with news releases to major newspapers and television stations around the nation, and distributed a digital version of the video to electronic news outlets. The organization also made the video available on its Web site. Many major news outlets, including the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, carried the story. A number of online news sources created links from their reports to the PETA video, which helped to turn the poultry plant abuse story into national news.⁴³

Without question, PETA achieved impressive results. The concentrated media attention and public outcry forced the plant's major customer, the fast food giant KFC, to suspend its purchasing contract. Pilgrim's Pride, owner of the plant and one of the largest poultry producers in the United States, terminated three managers and eight workers allegedly involved in the abuse. Pilgrim's Pride also hired quality assurance monitors to supervise all shifts, instituted mandatory employee education about animal welfare policies, and agreed to the placement of a full-time KFC plant inspector to safeguard against further abuse. PETA was also able to gain the support of another nonprofit organization, the Humane Society, whose president went on record urging Congress to hold hearings on the incident and to draft new federal laws to protect live poultry.

PETA may have received the media attention it desired, but the organization's approach clearly fell short of the standards of responsible advocacy. When PETA members devised a campaign that required an individual to conceal his true identity and purpose in order to record an unauthorized video, the organization did not behave ethically toward the plant's employees or owners. Whereas some might defend PETA's actions using situational ethics, arguing that the ends in this instance (shedding light on animal abuse) justified the means (secretive tactics), responsible advocacy demands that attention be paid at all times to the rights and interests of all publics. The German philosopher and ethicist Immanuel Kant suggested that one could gauge whether a particular behavior was ethical by applying the following question: "Would I be willing to be the recipient of my action?"⁴⁴ Few people would acquiesce to being secretly videotaped on the job, particularly when the video would bring about termination and public humiliation.

82 Ethics in Public Relations

Responsible advocacy requires public relations practitioners to figure out what action might be fair to all involved in a given situation, as opposed to that which might generate the most publicity, and to act accordingly. This is not always a simple task, as it requires practitioners to rise above self-interest and the interests of any one particular client or group, and potentially to reject tactics that might very well bring about dramatic effects, as they did in the PETA case. At the point that advocacy communication, such as PETA's attempt to inform the world about animal abuse, becomes dishonest communication built on secrecy and deception, responsible advocacy is lost.

Despite the social significance of responsible advocacy, ethical campaigns are rarely reported by the media. Instead, unethical public relations campaigns—when discovered—tend to receive the lion's share of public attention. Although news coverage generally portrays such campaigns unfavorably, practitioners can still be influenced by reports of the effectiveness of deceptive tactics. This in turn may have the undesirable result of promoting such practices and encouraging practitioners to adopt them. When practitioners are confronted by examples of powerful organizations that have successfully used unethical public relations to monopolize the marketplace of ideas and exert influence over public opinion, the temptation to behave similarly may be difficult to resist. In this environment, public role models for responsible advocacy are in short supply.

Public Relations Practices that Encourage Responsible Advocacy

Nonprofit organizations may lack prominent role models for responsible advocacy, and market forces may tempt some practitioners to overstep the bounds of ethical practice, but there are a number of public relations approaches common to nonprofits that tend to encourage ethical practice and accountability. Relationship management, resource sharing, and dialogic communication structure the practice of public relations within many nonprofit organizations and provide a framework for responsible advocacy. Nonprofit practitioners who use these strategies can serve as true advocates for their organizations and can enhance the reputation of their organizations as a whole.

Relationship Management

The view of public relations as relationship management conceptualizes the practitioner's key responsibility as using strategic communication to

manage the relationships between an organization and its key publics. In this model, public relations is a process of continuous and mutually beneficial exchange between the organization and its publics, and practitioners work to develop long-term relationships that feature dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, and mutual investment.⁴⁵ This model is particularly well-suited to nonprofit organizations; members of the public are predisposed to react positively to a group whose main purpose is environmental conservation, workers' rights, or school improvement, as opposed to amassing capital, which is the primary goal of large corporations. This positive predisposition provides fertile ground for relationship building.

The idea that nonprofit groups can use relationship management strategies to advocate responsibly for their organizations has been confirmed by a recent study of the British trade union movement. The public relations scholar Aeron Davis found that British labor unions lacked favorable news coverage and a base of public support in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁶ He attributed these problems to their failure to conduct a sustained public relations program to communicate the union point of view to journalists and other key publics. In the 1990s, union officials hired professional public relations practitioners to improve the organization's communication operations and increase public support. The union practitioners focused their attention on relationship management and initiated strong, ongoing relationships with journalists, civic groups, social action organizations, and local and national politicians. They positioned the union members as a working-class constituency concerned with such public-interest issues as workplace safety and employment discrimination, providing the basis for a strong bond with nonunion publics. Davis concluded that a majority of the unions that deployed these relationship-building strategies were able to achieve important political and economic objectives, such as increasing their membership and blocking anti-union legislation. Public relations operations are now considered "a standard requirement" for larger unions in the United Kingdom, and have become an important priority for smaller ones.⁴⁷

Organized labor in the United States has also recognized the importance of public relations in achieving organizational goals, and many unions have established ongoing programs. This trend accelerated in the late 1990s following a highly publicized Teamsters Union strike against United Parcel Service (UPS). During that strike, union representatives turned to key publics, such as journalists, to tell their side of the story, and the favorable news coverage helped sway public attitudes in favor of the striking workers.⁴⁸ Union representatives in that instance functioned as responsible advocates, leveraging the strength of long-term relationships with organizational publics to communicate their members' needs.

84 Ethics in Public Relations

During this period, a smaller union—the 2,300 member Independent Pilots Association (IPA)—also relied on relationship management to weather a series of difficult contract negotiations with UPS. Through its comprehensive public relations program, IPA leaders developed a strong, trustworthy relationship with their union members, the professional pilots who fly the UPS jet fleet.⁴⁹ As negotiations soured, union leaders turned to the pilots to get the IPA story out to business reporters and other key publics, believing that these individuals could deliver a persuasive union message. With the help of the public relations firm Manning, Selvage & Lee, the IPA trained more than a hundred “spokespilots” to talk directly to journalists about their working conditions. The spokespilots increased the news value of the IPA situation by telling journalists that UPS would face back-to-back walk-outs because of reciprocity agreements between members of the IPA and the Teamsters. In the end, the pilots secured a 29% pay increase and the campaign earned the attention of public relations professionals nationwide.⁵⁰ The Public Relations Society of America awarded Manning, Selvage & Lee a 1999 Silver Anvil Award for its work with the IPA.⁵¹

Successful relationship management is a key element of responsible advocacy. Positive relationships with key publics offer organizations a “credit balance” of sorts that they can draw on in times of need. In the case of the IPA, union leaders built a strong relationship with members that centered on mutual investment and commitment, and were subsequently able to count on those members when the organization required help. When organizations lack these kinds of relationships, they are more likely to turn to unethical means of reaching publics, as was the case when the Education Department paid Armstrong Williams to promote No Child Left Behind. The Bush Administration could not rely in that instance on genuine relationships built on trust and commitment, and instead tried to insinuate itself through Armstrong into the good graces of African American journalists and audiences. The result was fairly disastrous for all involved, and the ethics scandal is likely to tarnish reputations for years to come. Responsible advocacy through relationship management requires practitioners to take the time to build thoughtful and lasting relationships with key publics; such relationships can never be bought.

Resource Sharing

In an effort to overcome financial limitations, many nonprofit organizations have chosen to form resource-sharing partnerships. Instead of each group having to build and maintain its own public relations infrastructure, including paid staff, quarterly publications, and the like, many nonprofits are

creating umbrella organizations with like-minded groups and consolidating their public relations efforts.⁵² Their joint efforts typically result in cosponsored Web sites, newsletters, and special events, as well as media training for spokespersons. Recent studies indicate that such arrangements can enable smaller groups to extend their cultural and economic capital, and to have an impact on media coverage, even in the face of resource inequality.⁵³ This approach also follows the recommendation of scholar Aeron Davis, who argues that collective action among nonprofits is the best way to improve “access, legitimacy, and the ability to set agendas.”⁵⁴

From an ethical standpoint, nonprofits that create resource-sharing public relations partnerships are likely to enhance organizational commitment to responsible advocacy. When organizations join together and present themselves as a united public front, their sense of accountability to one another, and joint responsibility to the public, increases. These partnerships create, in effect, a “checks and balances” system in which practitioners working on behalf of a particular group, or for a coalition of groups, know that their actions and public statements reflect on and can have consequences for allied organizations. The temptation to step over the line in terms of ethical practice may be quelled by the knowledge that fellow practitioners are keeping close tabs and the health and welfare of sister organizations is at stake. In this way, nonprofits can lead the way in establishing a practice model for responsible advocacy; resource-sharing arrangements are likely to promote a commitment to ethical public relations as the reputation and well-being of any one group is tied to those of its partners.

Earth Share of Washington is a Seattle-based nonprofit organization that has pioneered the resource-sharing model, bringing together 65 local environmental groups in a coalition dedicated to environmental education and charitable giving. As part of its cooperative public relations program, Earth Share maintains a blog that offers information relevant to all its member organizations’ publics, such as the dedication of a new bicycling trail or a summary of a new study about pesticides, as well as information particular to each organization, such as an upcoming volunteer opportunity or an award received. As noted previously, greater numbers of journalists are turning to blogs as a source for day-to-day reporting, but most nonprofits lack the manpower to establish and update them.⁵⁵ By pooling the resources of dozens of smaller environmental groups, Earth Share has been able to maintain its blog since 2003, increasing the visibility of all its member organizations and establishing its presence as a major Internet site for environmental education and information.⁵⁶

Earth Share’s blog is the cornerstone of a public relations program that has been successful from both practical and ethical standpoints. On the

practical side, the organization's practitioners credit the blog for driving more traffic to the Web site and increasing public involvement in the member groups' programs.⁵⁷ Earth Share's communication coordinator described the Web site prior to the introduction of the blog as "static and stale," and as failing to attract media attention or to engage people concerned with the environment.⁵⁸ Now, Earth Share's Web site registers as many as 12,000 hits per month, more than four times the average number recorded before the addition of the blog.

Dialogic Communication

From the ethical standpoint, the Earth Share blog encourages members of the public to engage in an open dialogue with one another and with the leaders of member organizations, a condition that is necessary for ethical public relations practice.⁵⁹ When individuals post comments to one of the Earth Share forums, they are participating in what is known as *dialogic* communication, a means of interaction between organizations and publics in which all participants have an equal chance to contribute and no participant exercises control over another.⁶⁰ Dialogic communication is recognized by scholars of public relations as a fundamental precondition for ethical relations between organizations and publics, as it is the sole means of arriving at shared truths and mutually acceptable practices.⁶¹ Blogging allows for a true peer-to-peer conversation in which members of the community can communicate their concerns about organizational practice directly to organization leaders, and organization leaders can respond in kind. Three scholars of public relations ethics recently noted the need for such dialogic communication, observing that "ethical practice for the field of public relations will require practitioners to be facilitators of dialogue and listeners as much as speakers."⁶² In this regard, nonprofit organizations are ahead of corporations in establishing practice guidelines for responsible advocacy; few corporations engage in truly dialogic communication, and many have gone so far as to fire employees who have divulged any connection to the corporation in blogs.⁶³

Conclusion

This chapter has described the opportunities and challenges that public relations practitioners who work for nonprofit and advocacy groups face as they strive to become responsible advocates for their organizations. Non-profit organizations are enjoying unprecedented opportunities to participate in the public sphere due to the convergence of high-impact electronic

communication and a shift among journalists away from traditional corporate sources. These factors give nonprofits new voice, but can also lead to missteps if practitioners place the organization's primary cause or issue, such as animal rights or environmental conservation, ahead of their responsibility to advocate ethically for the organization and its various publics. Many nonprofit organizations, however, are creating public relations programs that encourage ethical practice and accountability. As this chapter shows, nonprofits are particularly well-suited to relationship management strategies, resource sharing, and dialogic communication models—all of which are considered to be building blocks of responsible advocacy.

