

{ Case Study #1: }

As a communications professional representing XYZ Agriculture Company, you have provided information and a list of sources about a new application method for one of your products to an editor at a major agricultural publication. You have checked and confirmed that all of the information is accurate. In a subsequent conversation, you find out the editor has interviewed two university economists who expressed concerns about the profitability of the new method. Your supervisor recommends calling an advertising sales representative or the publisher at the publication to express dissatisfaction and to pull advertisements unless the editor removes negative comments from the article and agrees to use only the sources provided by the company.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

- Is it ethical to use advertising dollars to influence the content of the publication?
- Is it ethical to pressure the publication to present only one viewpoint in the story and rely solely on company approved information?
- Is it ethical to move outside the editorial channel and communicate dissatisfaction to the advertising sales representative?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- Organizational/company policies
- Personal feeling of job security
- Relationship with the editor

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid in providing information to our respective audiences.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer
- Consumers/farmers: obligation to protect the public interest, provide information for informed decision making
- Agricultural Publication: obligation to preserve freedom of expression

5. Select ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Free Flow of Information: Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving our agricultural audiences, constituents and the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials, and the public
- To aid informed decision-making

6. Make a decision and justify:

Communications professionals should protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information. The communications professional acted as a responsible advocate by providing information to the editor about the new application method. Checking to confirm that the information was accurate demonstrated the value of honesty.

Ethical practice requires communications professionals to avoid inappropriate methods of applying pressure or influence that would compromise the integrity and objectivity of the editor/publication. In this scenario, threatening to withdraw advertising is a tactic used to control the content of the article. Attempting to pressure the editor to use only company provided sources infringes on journalistic standards of balanced, objective and fair reporting.

Expressing dissatisfaction to an advertising sales representative instead of the editor is an example of moving outside the editorial channel. While not necessarily unethical, this action is inappropriate, unprofessional and would damage the credibility of the communications professional. A more appropriate response would be to address the concerns expressed by the university economists with factual information and data from the company or other valid sources.

The relationship between communications professionals and editors should be guided by the standards integrity and mutual respect. Information should be shared, but no pressure should be applied in either direction to influence how the information is used or disseminated.

{ Case Study #2 }

XYZ Agriculture Company is hosting a two-day seminar and research facility tour. As a communications professional, you are assigned to organize the event. Invitations will be sent to agriculture journalists to encourage their participation in the event. A travel voucher to cover the cost of airfare, hotel accommodations and meals for the event will be included in the invitations to media personnel.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a company to pay for or reimburse expenses for journalists to attend company sponsored events?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- Organizational/company policies
- Journalistic/publication standards

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to employer/client
- Agricultural Publications: obligation to preserve freedom of expression

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Free Flow of Information: Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving our agricultural audiences, constituents and the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials, and the public

- To aid informed decision-making

Guidelines:

- Preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving or receiving gifts by ensuring that gifts are nominal, legal, and infrequent.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Paying expenses or offering to pay expenses for agricultural journalists is a problematic ethical issue for communications professionals. Companies and clients may have the budget available to cover the cost of travel while publications may have more limited resources.

To preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information, AAEA Affiliate members should exercise caution in giving and receiving gifts including offering payment or reimbursement for travel. Communications professionals should also respect and uphold the ethical standards of agricultural editors and their publications.

The AAEA Active Member Code of Ethics States: “Editors should not accept payment of travel and hotel expenses incurred in the course of performing editorial duties from any source other than their employers.” Communications professionals should abide by this standard when working with AAEA members.

{ Case Study #3: }

As a communications professional representing ABC Agriculture Company, you write a press release announcing the XYZ Retail Chain will now carry the ABC line of products. The press release includes results from a field study completed two years ago that was sponsored by the company but conducted by university researchers. You verify all of the information is accurate before submitting the press release for approval and copy editing by the client. When the edited version is returned to you, the year of the study has been removed and the information about company sponsorship has been omitted. A colleague tells you that those details are not necessary because anyone who wants to find out more about the field studies can contact the university researchers.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a company to remove the year from field study findings?

Is it ethical for a company to omit information about sponsorship when using research to promote a product?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- Company/organizational policies and standards
- Personal feeling of job security
- University disclosure of information policy

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent.

Expertise: We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer

- XYZ Retail Chain: obligation to retail partner
- University: obligation to research partner
- Consumers/farmers/the public: obligation to protect the public interest, assist informed decision making

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Disclosure of Information: Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

Guidelines:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.
- Avoid deceptive practices.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Ethical dilemmas are inherent in the work of communications professionals because access to information carries with it a degree of power. As ethical advocates, communications professionals must exercise responsibility and sound judgment in decisions regarding disclosure of information.

In this scenario, the communications professional demonstrated ethical conduct. Stating the year of the study and identifying sponsorship in the press release was appropriate disclosure of relevant information. Verifying the accuracy of the information showed the value of honesty. The next step for the communications professional should be to provide ethical counsel to colleagues and company personnel.

Honest and accurate communication requires more than just statements that are technically true. Inclusion of all pertinent and necessary information is essential to avoid communication that is deceptive, misleading or lying by omission.

Removing the year from the field study results could potentially mislead consumers or journalists to believe the information is more current. Revealing sponsorship of the study is essential to avoid the appearance of deception and the impression that the university conducted the research independently.

Communications professionals often have to balance the needs of multiple stakeholders. In this scenario, the ramifications of deceptive or misleading communication issued by ABC Company could also negatively affect XYZ Retail Chain and the university.

Full disclosure of information is essential to building and maintaining credibility with the media, customers and the general public. Communications professionals play a vital role in fostering an environment of open communication.

{ Case Study #4: }

In response to growing environmental concerns, ABC Agriculture Company is implementing new sustainability measures at all of its production facilities. As a communications professional representing ABC Agriculture Company, you are assigned to create a public relations and advertising campaign announcing the “green” initiative. The fact sheet provided states carbon emissions will be reduced at each facility and use of recycled materials will double. After collecting additional information, you find out the new “sustainable” production process will be implemented in phases, eventually reducing carbon emissions by 20% over the next 10 years. The use of recycled materials is projected to increase from 4% to 8% within the next five years, but it will require 15% more energy compared to the current production process. Company executives contend promoting the “green” initiative will be good for the corporate image. They insist that the fact the company is implementing sustainable practices is more important to consumers than the specific timeline or statistics.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a company to make claims about environmental practices without providing context and information to substantiate such claims?

Is it ethical for a company to use words like “green” and “sustainable” to enhance corporate image?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Agriculture Company policies and standards
- Personal feeling of job security
- Public opinion and consumer awareness of environmental issues

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer
- Consumers: obligation to protect the public interest

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Free Flow of Information: Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving our agricultural audiences, constituents and the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials, and the public.
- To aid informed decision-making.

Disclosure of Information: Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

6. Make a decision and justify:

The social climate concerning the environmental impacts of manufacturing facilities and the agriculture industry as a whole creates incentives for companies to adopt “green” or “sustainable” practices. As responsible advocates; however, communications professionals must work to achieve consistency between corporate action and corporate communication to prevent “greenwashing.”

Greenwashing is a term used to label unsubstantiated or exaggerated claims involving conservation of resources, energy efficiency and other environmentally responsible practices. A company that spends more resources on a campaign to promote its “green” practices than on implementing them would also be guilty of greenwashing.

In this scenario, the communications professional demonstrated ethical behavior in researching the validity of the environmental claims ABC Agriculture Company wants to advertise.

The company's desired promotion of its reduced carbon dioxide emissions and use of recycled materials without an accurate timeline would be misleading. The

communications professional should advocate for a more ethical approach that discloses how long it will take the company to achieve the stated objectives.

Advertising the use of recycled materials without revealing the tradeoff in energy efficiency would be deceptive. The statement “use of recycled materials will double” is ambiguous even though it is technically accurate. The word “double” does not provide any reference to the proportion of recycled materials in relation to total production.

Additional Resources:

Federal Trade Commission (FTC): Advertising Guidance Documents

“Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing”

-information about environmental marketing claims, best practices, terminology

-available online at www.ftc.gov

-link: http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/energy/about_guides.shtml

{ Case Study #5: }

ABC Agriculture Association has hired six college students to work as interns and cover the New Ag Technology Conference and Trade Show using blogs, social media, podcasts and video. As a communications professional representing ABC Agriculture Association, you are assigned to assemble the training and orientation materials for the interns. One of the documents provides instructions for the interns to identify themselves as New Ag Technology Conference and Trade Show interns in all online posts and in all interactions with attendees or company representatives. Travel, lodging and food expenses for the interns will be covered by XYZ Widgets Company, a major sponsor of New Ag Technology Conference and Trade Show. The interns can also earn merchandise and cash prizes based on the number of times certain products from additional sponsoring companies appear in their coverage.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for interns/bloggers to cover trade shows or promote company products without revealing sponsors?

Is it ethical for companies to offer incentives for interns/bloggers to cover certain products?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Agriculture Association policies
- XYZ Widgets Company policies
- Sponsor relationship between XYZ Widgets Company and ABC Agriculture Association

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Agricultural Association: obligation to employer/client, obligation to members of the Association
- XYZ Widgets Company: obligation to sponsor
- Student Interns: obligation to treat interns fairly
- Consumers/audience: obligation to protect the public interest

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Disclosure of Information: Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

Guidelines:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.
- Avoid deceptive practices.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Disclosure of information is an important obligation for communications professional to consider. Deceptive practice and misleading communication can cause drastic damage to the reputation of companies, individuals and the communications profession as a whole.

In this situation, revealing sponsorship is essential to maintaining the integrity of all parties involved: ABC Agriculture Association, XYZ Widgets Company and the student interns. As an ethical practitioner, the communications professional should advocate for transparency.

Withholding information about sponsorship and the incentive program would create a false impression that the interns are reporting objectively rather than providing promotional coverage. Sponsoring interns and offering incentives for coverage are not unethical if that information is disclosed and the coverage is clearly labeled as promotional material.

ABC Agriculture Association should protect the interest of its members by fostering an environment of open communication. Communications professionals should exercise caution in granting privileges to sponsors and uphold the value of fairness in all business relationships.

ABC Agriculture Association also has an obligation to protect the interest of the student interns as employees. Asking the interns to participate in what might be considered unethical behavior or not making clear that the incentive program for interns was being done for remuneration would be detrimental to them both personally and professionally.

Ethical principles apply to all methods or channels of communications. The fact that the interns are being paid to use blogs, social media, podcasts and video does not change the ethical standards regarding disclosure of information.

Additional Resources:

Federal Trade Commission (FTC): Advertising Guidance Documents

“Guide Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials”

-information about use of blogs, paid bloggers and social media

-available online in pdf form at www.ftc.gov

-link: <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2009/10/091005revisedendorsementguides.pdf>

Word of Mouth Marketing Association

“Social Media Disclosure”

-Word of Mouth Marketing Association statement on disclosure of information in social media

-available online at womma.org

-link: <http://womma.org/ethics/disclosure/>

“Ethics Code”

-Word of Mouth Marketing Association Code of Ethics regarding online marketing communication

-available online at womma.org

-link: <http://womma.org/ethics/code/intro/>

{ Case Study #6: }

The XYZ Agriculture Company operates a website to market and sell products online. To purchase products from the site, customers must create a user account with a valid e-mail address, phone number and mailing address. Customer accounts are password protected and credit card information is encrypted for additional security. The XYZ Agriculture Company has a privacy policy posted on the website that describes security and information use policies. ABC Widgets Company would like to advertise products on the XYZ website. As a communications professional representing XYZ Agriculture Company, you are evaluating the proposed marketing agreement from ABC Widgets Company. The proposal includes language that would allow ABC Widgets Company to use cookies to track customer demographic information, purchase history and other online activities. The information would be used to generate profiles and target advertising based on customer preferences.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for XYZ Agriculture Company to share customer information with a third party?

Is it ethical for XYZ Agriculture Company to allow a third party to gather customer information and use it for targeting advertisements?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- XYZ Agriculture Company organizational policies
- ABC Widgets Company organizational policies
- Consumer privacy rights and information security regulations

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer

- ABC Widgets Company: obligation to potential advertiser
 - Customers: obligation to protect privacy of individuals
5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Disclosure of Information: Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

Guidelines:

- Be honest and accurate in all communications.
- Avoid deceptive practices.

Safeguarding of Confidences: Client and employer trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information.

Intent:

- To protect the privacy rights of clients, employers, organizations, and individuals by safeguarding confidential information.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Ethical practice regarding information gathered electronically should include proper disclosure about the intended use of the information and the security measures in place to safeguard confidences. The use of tracking cookies is not inherently unethical and is recognized as standard practice in online marketing and advertising.

In this scenario, XYZ Agriculture Company should update its privacy policy to include use of tracking cookies and use of information by a third party. The privacy policy should clearly identify what information will be gathered, who will have access to the information and how the information will be used. Existing customers should be notified of the change in policy.

Failure to disclose third party access to information would be deceptive and a breach of customers' reasonable expectation of privacy. New customers should be informed about the use of tracking cookies during initial account set-up. Many websites offer users the ability to control or limit tracking cookies through account privacy settings.

The technical capability to monitor users' online activity offers an effective method of market research. As ethical practitioners, communications professionals must use responsible judgment in protecting the privacy of consumers.

{ Case Study #7: }

ABC Agriculture Company has announced plans to acquire XYZ Ag Supply internally to corporate office employees. Both companies are publicly traded. Company employees are instructed to keep the acquisition plans confidential until the public announcement. As a communications professional representing ABC Agriculture Company, you are assigned to develop a promotional campaign for the proposed acquisition. Despite the measures in place to protect confidentiality, rumors of the possible merger reach the financial industry. Before the information is made public, a stockbroker contacts you seeking confirmation of the planned acquisition.

7. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a communications professional to release unauthorized, confidential information?

Is it ethical for a communications professional to comment on market sensitive information?

8. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Agriculture Company organizational policies, nondisclosure policy
- XYZ Ag Supply organizational policies, nondisclosure policy
- Personal/professional relationship with the stock broker

9. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

10. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer

- XYZ Ag Supply: obligation to partner in business transaction
- Stockbroker: obligation to tell the truth
- Shareholders: obligation to protect the interest of shareholders
- Consumers/public: obligation to preserve the public interest

11. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Safeguarding of Confidences: Client and employer trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information.

Intent:

- To protect the privacy rights of clients, employers, organizations, and individuals by safeguarding confidential information.

Guidelines:

- Safeguard the confidences and privacy rights of present, former, and prospective clients and employees.
- Protect privileged, confidential, or insider information gained from a client or organization.

12. Make a decision and justify:

Communications professionals often have access to market sensitive information before it is announced publicly. Client and employer trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information.

In this situation, the ethical dilemma arises from the conflict between the obligation to tell the truth and the obligation to safeguard the proprietary information of the client/employer. Not answering the question is the ethical choice for the communications professional in this situation.

ABC Agriculture Company and XYZ Ag Supply are both publicly traded. The announcement of the planned acquisition could affect the value of company stock. If the communications professional confirms the rumored acquisition the stockbroker might use the information to purchase stock before the probable increase in value. This would be considered insider trading.

Insider trading involves the use of nonpublic, proprietary information to buy or sell stock in a company. The term is usually associated with illegal activity, but insider trading can be legal if the transactions are properly disclosed to the Securities and Exchanges Commission.

The SEC enforces insider trader regulations and prosecutes violators. Misappropriation of inside information includes providing tips to individuals outside the company in addition to employees using the information for personal gain.

Insider trading is unethical because it undermines public confidence in the integrity and fairness of exchange markets. Sharing the privileged information with the stockbroker would be a breach of fiduciary responsibility to company shareholders.

The conduct of communications professionals should honor the obligation to safeguard the confidences of clients and employers. Protecting sensitive and privileged information builds trust, establishes credibility and fosters a competitive business environment.

{ Case Study #8: }

As a communications professional, you interview for a position in public affairs at XYZ Agriculture Company. In the course of the interview, the hiring manager learns that you recently worked on a product launch for ABC Ag Supply, a major competitor of XYZ. A few days later, the hiring manager calls to offer you a position on the XYZ Agriculture Company marketing team where the “inside knowledge would be a real benefit.” The contract with your former employer, ABC Ag Supply, included a nondisclosure agreement but it did not have a non-competition clause.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a communications professional to accept a position based on knowledge of proprietary information from a former employer?

Is it ethical for a company to ask a communications professional to disclosure proprietary information about a former employer?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Ag Supply policies
- XYZ Agriculture Company policies
- Personal feelings about ABC Ag Supply
- Personal need for employment

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Expertise: We acquire, and responsibly use, specialized knowledge and experience. In conjunction with the AAEA, we advance the profession through continued professional development, research, and education. We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Ag Supply: obligation to previous employer/client
- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to potential employer/client

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Competition: Promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals preserves an ethical climate while fostering a robust business environment.

Intent:

- To promote respect and fair competition among affiliate members, their organizations and related agricultural marketing communications professionals.

Guidelines:

- Follow ethical hiring practices designed to respect free and open competition without deliberately undermining a competitor.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Communications professionals should practice ethical principles in the application, interview and hiring process. Promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals and the agricultural companies they represent preserves an ethical climate and fosters a robust business environment.

In this situation, it would be unethical for the communications professional to use specific company or product information from a previous employer to benefit a different company. Job skills, training and experiences are transferable but inside information should not be used for personal gain.

Communications professionals should always read contracts carefully and abide by the stipulations. Non-disclosure or confidentiality agreements are typically legally enforceable contracts that require employees to safeguard proprietary information. The agreement normally specifies what information is considered confidential.

A non-competition agreement limits an individual's ability to work for a competing company. Contract law regarding non-competition agreements varies by state, but most states recognize and enforce such agreements. Generally, a non-competition agreement defines specific terms of the agreement and sets a time limit.

In this scenario, the communications professional did not sign a non-competition agreement with ABC Ag Supply. While he or she is not legally barred from employment with XYZ Agriculture Company, the communications professional still has an obligation abide by the nondisclosure agreement with ABC Ag Supply.

Ethical practice regarding job searching and career changes also includes honest representation in resumes, applications and interviews. Communications professionals should avoid exaggeration and adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in stating abilities, experiences and skills.

{ Case Study #9: }

XYZ Agriculture Company wants to use social networking as a tool in its internal communications strategy. As a freelance writer, you are asked to write a blog posted on the corporate intranet for the company's chief executive. Company employees will have the ability to read the blog and post comments. You are also asked to post updates on public social networking sites on behalf of the chief executive. The name and picture of the chief executive will appear in the profile section on each site. The e-mail address listed in contact information will bear the chief executive's name but you will be responsible for monitoring the account and responding to messages.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a freelance writer to ghostwrite a blog for a corporate executive?

Is it ethical for a freelance writer to pose as a corporate executive on public social networking sites?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- XYZ Agriculture Company policies
- Relationship to chief executive

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid in providing information to our respective audiences.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer

- Chief executive of XYZ Agriculture Company: professional obligation to boss/superior
 - XYZ Agriculture Company employees: obligation to treat employees fairly, communicate truthfully
 - Consumers/general public: obligation to protect the public interest
5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Enhancing the Profession: AAEA affiliate member professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession and the agricultural industry.

Intent:

- To build respect and credibility with agricultural audiences and the public for the profession of public relations and agricultural marketing/organizational communications.

6. Make a decision and justify:

The conduct of communications professional should enhance public trust in the profession and the agriculture industry as a whole. Ethical standards for online modes of communication require transparency regarding the identity of the author.

In this scenario, the freelance writer was asked to ghostwrite a blog for the chief executive of XYZ Agriculture Company. A ghostwriter is a paid professional who writes books, articles or other content which is officially attributed to another person, presumed to be the author. The ghostwriter remains anonymous.

A key element in determining the proper course of action is examining the intent of the communication and the awareness of the audience. The name and picture of the chief executive in the profile section of the blog would create the impression that he or she was the author of the content.

To avoid misleading company employees, the blog should be appropriately labeled. And the freelance writer should be properly identified. The name of the freelance writer could be listed as an editor or content contributor to avoid the transparency issue.

Social networking sites offer a forum for individuals to communicate and interact online. Again, the name and picture of the person in the profile is presumed to be the author of the content. If a communications professional is posting the information, it would be more appropriate to have a business page on the site rather than an individual site.

Communications professionals should avoid the appearance of deceit in online communication. Expectations and perceptions of the audience regarding authorship should match reality. High standards of ethical conduct in online communication promote public trust and enhance the profession.

{ Case Study #10: }

The communications team at ABC Agriculture Company initiates a large marketing communications campaign leading up to a major new product launch. As a communications professional representing ABC Agriculture Company, you are managing the product launch campaign. One of your colleagues discovers a misleading element in the package design three days before the scheduled launch. The words on the front of the package imply a higher level of effectiveness than established by product test results. The package was designed by an outside consulting company. A redesign would cost ABC Agriculture Company a substantial amount of money and delay the launch of the product at least six weeks. The launch date had been selected for the product to hit the market during a peak purchasing season. Your colleague suggests you wait until after the product launch to share the information about the package design problem and then fix it as soon as possible.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for communications professionals to withhold information from a client/employer?

Is it ethical for ABC Agriculture Company to launch a product with a known package design issue?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Agriculture Company policies, internal atmosphere
- Industry standards/regulations for package design

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid in providing information to our respective audiences.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:
 - ABC Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer
 - Consumers/public: obligation to protect the public interest
5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Enhancing the Profession: AAEA affiliate member professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession and the agricultural industry.

Intent:

- To build respect and credibility with agricultural audiences and the public for the profession of public relations and agricultural marketing/organizational communications.

Guidelines:

- Counsel subordinates in proper ethical decision making.

6. Make a decision and justify:

As ethical advocates, communication professionals must work diligently to ensure corporate responsibility and compliance. Ethical conduct for communications professionals includes counseling others in appropriate decision making. Advocating ethical choices in business decisions builds respect and credibility for the agricultural communications profession and the agricultural industry.

In this scenario, the communications professional should advocate for telling the appropriate personnel at ABC Agriculture Company promptly about the problem with the package design. Withholding the information would be unfair because the problem could potentially damage the reputation of the company.

Despite the cost, the ethical choice for ABC Agriculture Company would be to correct the misleading element in the package design before launching the product. If the product design issue violated any industry standards, regulations or guidelines, releasing the product with the package design issue could result in fines, lawsuits or a product recall.

Choosing to release the product with the package design issue could also negatively impact any retailer who sells the product. The damage to the retailer's credibility could cause a decrease in business. If the product is a farm input or used in the production of other goods, misleading information could affect the production process.

In the agriculture industry, many products and product labels are highly regulated. Safety precautions and guidelines serve the best interest of consumers because almost every aspect of the agriculture industry affects the food chain.

{ Case Study #11: }

The public affairs team at XYZ Agriculture Company is monitoring legislation pending in the United States House of Representatives regarding an important element of their manufacturing process. The proposed law would increase restrictions and decrease efficiency of production. Supporters of the new regulations have organized a lobbying campaign which is building support on social networking sites. These supporters recently created a website and adopted the name Consumer Safety Coalition. Yesterday, the group posted a video on their website directly attacking XYZ Agriculture Company. As a communications professional representing the XYZ Agriculture Company and a member of the public affairs team, you must respond to the situation. One of your colleagues suggests creating a website using the name Safety Advocates Coalition to counter the negative claims. The organization would appear independent and offer XYZ Agriculture Company the opportunity to lobby against the proposed legislation under the name Safety Advocates Coalition.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a company to fund a lobbying effort without disclosing its support?

Is it ethical for a company to create a fake consumer group to advocate for its interests?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: organizational policies

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Advocacy: We serve the best interests of our employers, clients, organizations and the agricultural communications industry as a whole by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid in providing information to our respective audiences.

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Independence: We provide objective counsel and dedicated, ethical service to those we represent. We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Agriculture Company: obligation to client/employer
- Consumers/public: obligation to protect the public interest
- U.S. House of Representatives: obligation to preserve the democratic process

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Disclosure of Information: Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society.

Intent:

- To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making.

Guidelines:

- Reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.

Enhancing the Profession: AAEA affiliate member professionals work constantly to strengthen the public's trust in the profession and the agricultural industry.

Intent:

- To build respect and credibility with agricultural audiences and the public for the profession of public relations and agricultural marketing/organizational communications.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Communications professionals should work to strengthen public trust in the profession and the agriculture industry. The use of front groups constitutes a major source of public distrust for corporate communications and public relations.

A front group is an organization that attempts to appear independent and unbiased in supporting a cause or agenda. In reality, the hidden sponsors of the group have a vested interest in the issue. The term astroturfing is used to describe a sponsored lobbying effort disguised as a spontaneous, independent grassroots campaign.

In this scenario, Safety Advocates Coalition is an example of a front group. Creating a website and a lobbying campaign under a fake name to disguise corporate sponsorship would be deceptive and unethical. Communications professionals should always advocate for transparency and full disclosure in identifying sponsors for causes and interests represented.

In a democratic society, communications professionals should honor public expectations of honesty, transparency and integrity in all political or lobbying efforts. The use of front

groups can not only damage the reputation of a company, but also reflect negatively on the politicians who interact with them.

Even if XYZ Agriculture Company disclosed sponsorship, use of the name Safety Advocates Coalition could be considered misleading because it implies independence. XYZ Agriculture Company should carefully consider the pros and cons of this tactic before making a final decision.

Communications professionals should avoid the appearance of deception and carefully analyze relationships with front groups to avoid misleading tactics. While the AAEA is not naïve to the fact that marketing communications agencies have represented and continue to represent many organizations that some might label “front groups,” careful consideration is needed in this area.

Tactics involving front groups and astroturfing tarnish public perception of marketing communications. The conduct of communications professionals should build trust, respect and credibility for the agriculture industry and the profession.

{ Case Study #12: }

As a communications professional, you are employed by ABC Marketing Communications Firm. You also have joint ownership of a large livestock production facility operated by your spouse. The livestock in the facility is under contract with Ag USA. ABC Marketing Communications Firm signs a contract with a new client Farm World, a major competitor of Ag USA. ABC Marketing Communications Firm offers you a promotion to account executive and the opportunity to manage the Farm World account.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a communications professional to represent a company that directly competes with a personal financial interest?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- ABC Marketing Communications Firm policies and standards, conflict of interest policy
- Ag USA policies and standards, conflict of interest policy
- Farm World policies and standards, conflict of interest policy

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Expertise: We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Independence: We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- ABC Marketing Communications Firm: obligation to employer
- Ag USA: obligation to business partner
- Farm World: obligation to client

- Spouse: obligation to business partner

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Conflicts of Interest: Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers, and the public.

Intent:

- To earn trust and mutual respect with clients, media, employers and the public.

Guidelines:

- Act in the best interests of the client, company/organization or employer, even subordinating the member's personal interests.
- Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.
- Disclose promptly any existing or potential conflict of interest to affected clients or organizations.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Conflicts of interest arise when personal and professional interests overlap. As ethical practitioners, communications professionals should avoid real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest to maintain personal integrity and professional propriety.

In this situation, the communications professional's involvement with Ag USA is a conflict of interest with the opportunity to represent Farm World. **The ethical choice would be to promptly disclose the potential conflict of interest and decline the promotion offer.**

Even if the communications professional did not have joint ownership of the livestock production facility, the personal and financial interests of spouses or close family members can also be perceived as conflicts of interest. Communications professionals should avoid actions or circumstances that would compromise good business judgment, corrupt motivation or create bias.

The presence of a conflict of interest does not constitute impropriety in and of itself. Full disclosure to all involved parties is necessary to allow each party equal and adequate opportunity to object or express concerns. In some cases, business transactions may proceed despite a conflict of interest as long as all parties reach a mutually satisfactory agreement and all relevant information is disclosed publicly.

The top priority in mitigating conflicts of interest should be full disclosure to all stakeholders. In some cases, communications professionals might need to recuse themselves from the decision making process or remove themselves from a situation

entirely. In all situations, communications professionals are accountable to employers, clients, constituents and the public for their actions.

{ Case Study #13: }

XYZ Marketing Communications Firm represents the forestry products division of Ag USA. As a communications professional employed by XYZ Marketing Communications Firm, you are assigned to develop a pitch and presentation to solicit new business from Farm Products USA. The objective of the pitch and presentation is to add the lawn and garden products division of Farm Products USA as an account. The forestry product division of Ag USA does not directly compete with the lawn and garden products division of Farm Products USA, but the two companies are major competitors in other product areas.

1. Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict:

Is it ethical for a marketing communications firm to represent competing companies simultaneously?

2. Identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision:

- XYZ Marketing Communications Firm policies and standards, conflict of interest policy
- Ag USA policies and standards, conflict of interest policy
- Farm Products USA policies and standards, conflict of interest policy

3. Identify the key values: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Honesty: We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with our agricultural audiences and the public at large.

Expertise: We build mutual understanding, credibility, and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Independence: We are accountable to our employers, constituents, customers and the public for our actions.

Loyalty: We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve our employers, our industry and the agricultural community.

Fairness: We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public.

4. Identify parties that will be affected by the decision and the communications professional's obligation to each:

- XYZ Marketing Communications Firm: obligation to employer
- Ag USA: obligation to current client

- Farm Products USA: obligation to potential client

5. Select the ethical principles to guide the decision: (from the AAEA Affiliate Code of Ethics)

Conflicts of Interest: Avoiding real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest builds the trust of clients, employers, and the public.

Intent:

- To earn trust and mutual respect with clients, media, employers and the public.

Guidelines:

- Act in the best interests of the client, company/organization or employer, even subordinating the member's personal interests.
- Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.
- Disclose promptly any existing or potential conflict of interest to affected clients or organizations.

6. Make a decision and justify:

Communications professionals or companies that represent multiple clients simultaneously must exercise caution to avoid conflicts of interest. Companies that are large and complex with numerous products and services present a challenge in identifying competitors and potential conflicts of interest.

In this situation, the owner or leadership team at XYZ Marketing Communications Firm should promptly inform the current client, Ag USA, of the marketing communications firm's intent to compete for business from Farm Products USA as a client. Farm Products USA should be informed of the potential conflict of interest before the signing of any contractual agreements.

Full disclosure to all involved parties is necessary to allow each party equal and adequate opportunity to object or express concerns. Ethically, XYZ Marketing Communications Firm could manage both accounts simultaneously if both companies agree. Non-disclosure agreements and adequate "walls" of separation could be used to protect the interest of all parties.

Ideally, marketing communications companies should address potential conflicts of interest between clients and appropriate business conduct preemptively through organizational policies. Rather than dealing with a situation as it arises, an enforceable conflict of interest policy would serve the best interest of communications firms, employees, clients and the agriculture industry as a whole.