

PR pros are good ethical thinkers, study finds

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For years journalists and others have questioned the ethics of public relations practitioners and firms. People in PR, however, appear to be getting a bad rap. That's what a new study funded by the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication at Penn State University has found.

The research, conducted by two of the Page Center's Johnson Legacy Scholars, Renita Coleman and Lee Wilkins, is the first to measure empirically the moral development of working public relations professionals.

"It turns out that public relations professionals are good ethical thinkers," says Coleman. "They show similarity to other professionals with comparable levels of education such as journalists, nurses and dental students."

PR pros actually scored better than orthopedic surgeons, business professionals, accounting students and veterinary students.

The paper, "The Moral Development of Public Relations Practitioners: A Comparison with Other Professions and Influences on Higher Quality Ethical Reasoning," appears in the July 2009 *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

Coleman, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, and Wilkins, professor of journalism at the University of

Missouri-Columbia, took a random sample from O'Dwyer's Directory of Public Relations Firms which lists the 400 largest public relations firms.

"Although this eliminated very small firms and independent practitioners, the sample included medium-sized firms, public relations departments in advertising agencies and those firms that billed less than \$1 million per year. In total, 118 respondents took the written DIT or Defining Issues Test," says Coleman.

The test poses six ethical dilemmas and asks respondents to rank 12 statements after each dilemma according to how important each was in making a decision. The measure was a five-point scale where one equaled "no importance" and five equaled "great importance." The test measures ethical reasoning in five areas: business concerns, internal motives, truth and respect, religious influences and external influences.

Test scores of the public relations professionals were compared to the scores of 19 other groups whose members had taken the DIT test in the past. Seminarians and philosophers are the runaway winners on the moral development scale as measured by the test. After that come medical students, practicing physicians, journalists, dental students, nurses and public relations pros.

Last on the moral development scale? Junior high school students, one notch below prison inmates.

"But that's not surprising because age and education are the best predictors of moral development - the more you have the better you do," says Coleman. "And it shows why middle-schoolers still need their parents' guidance."

Why are ethics important for PR practitioners?

"Public relations professionals see their role as connecting clients to the larger world, primarily though journalists or to the news media," say Coleman and Wilkins. "To accomplish this function, they need to maintain the trust of both parties, but particularly the trust of journalists who are already skeptical of their institutional role and their individual motives.

"Consequently, honesty and a lack of willingness to deceive those who receive information are critical in effective public relations practice."

Source: Dick Jones Communications

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