

# Stronger Confidentiality, Better Client Relationships

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As communications professionals, what is our responsibility to our clients? Early in my career, my client roster included entities from tobacco, genetically modified food and chemical industries. Did I believe in, use, or endorse all their products? No. It's not my job to "like" my clients or believe in their products.

Some may disagree with this point and argue, to do the job you need to in some way have a passion for your client and their products and services. To that I ask, do you think every defense attorney believes in their client? Or do they believe in the rule of law and due process?

It is my job to provide exceptional, unbiased communications counsel along with tools, resources, and opportunities for my clients to share their stories. To do my job, I must become a trusted advisor. This necessitates my clients have the confidence and assurance they are in a safe space and whatever they say to me or my colleagues is confidential.

Which brings me to the recent issue with John Schnatter, former CEO and chairman of Papa John's Pizza, and a question I haven't heard raised: How did comments made in a private, confidential role-playing session find their way to the media?

As we consider the role of communications in helping people and organizations with messaging, what is our responsibility in keeping client conversations confidential?

## **Trust**

It goes without saying, trust is imperative to our work. Trust

allows our clients to rely on us to help them navigate difficult conversations and create the right kind of messages.

For example, a few years ago, I was working on a diversity messaging opportunity. In a role-playing session, my client said: "The blacks were fighting for equality." He went on to talk about the importance of civil disobedience. After the statement, I said: "Let's revisit the last message," explaining the use of a phrase like "the blacks" could be divisive.

My client was shocked. He genuinely believed that turn of phrase was okay, but according to linguists, the use of "the" in front of a group is a way of highlighting the group's otherness. If you use distancing language with a group that has a history of being oppressed and marginalized, you run the risk of being seen as exclusionary. He changed his message. That's the job.

It is clear John Schnatter needed help with messaging. By no means am I excusing what he said. However, if our clients don't trust us to keep their confidences and work with them through their issues and communication missteps, we'll be kept out of the inner circle and be relegated to cleaning up messes that could have been avoided.

### **The next horizon for communications professionals**

Today, the moral fortitude of a group of people who decided to fire the client because they were offended by comments made is being lauded. As communications professionals, we have every right to fire our clients just as they have every right to fire us. However, when work done under the guise of non-disclosure agreements and confidential exchanges see such a bright public light, the consequence is a long term, chilling effect on the industry.

Our reputation has taken a hit. Now, people and companies may think twice before engaging communications professionals. I

don't doubt, at this very moment, there are lawyers advising executives against communications training and saying things like: "We don't want what happened to Papa John to happen to us. We just can't trust those people."

What can we do to repair the damage? I am reminded of the scene from the movie, *The Firm*, in which attorney Mitch McDeere explains his ongoing duty of confidentiality. Of course, consequences exist for attorneys who break confidentiality, but what about communications professionals?

PRSA, the nation's largest professional organization serving the communications community, sets out a professional code of ethics for its 30,000 or so members which includes principles and guidelines for upholding the core values of the profession. There is an entire section on safeguarding confidences, which states: "...trust requires appropriate protection of confidential and private information." The section goes on to list guidelines for protecting privacy rights including, a member shall:

- 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; and
- Immediately advise an appropriate authority if a member discovers confidential information is being divulged by an employee of a client, company, or organization.

The guidelines are there, but so what? Communications professionals aren't losing their jobs, being disbarred, or being brought up on charges in a court of law for breaking a client confidence. It is the client whose suffers.

As communications professionals, we need to be prepared for a tough conversation when we sit down with clients. Before entering discussions, perhaps we should take a sworn oath and boldly profess, "Everything you say to me, even if I don't

like it and am horribly offended, will be held in confidence.”  
Perhaps this could be the first important step in restoring  
trust in us, what we do and our industry.