

Online PR / Guideline for PR in Digital Media and Networks

Fundamentals

The functions of the media include both conveying information and forming opinions, and as such they have always been the target of covert attempts to influence their editorial content, to advance the interests of organizations or individuals. Codes such as the Code of Athens, the Code of Lisbon or the “Sieben Selbstverpflichtungen der DPRG“ (Seven Voluntary Agreements of the DPRG) are intended to ensure, inter alia, the clear separation of journalism and PR. They also offer a means of issuing reprimands or warnings for violations against the requirements of objectivity, independence and transparency.

With the internet, a new medium has emerged, offering a multitude of new communication platforms and considerably increasing the number of actors involved in forming public opinion. Websites, blogs, tweets, forums and social networks enable every citizen to communicate information and opinions to a wide public, or to initiate public discussions about these topics. Here the identity and the professional interests of the sender are often not obvious. Companies and organizations use this lack of transparency to make professional lobbyists play the part of private individuals in these media; or they pay private individuals to communicate institutional interests as their personal opinion. These private individuals are thus effectively performing a professional PR function.

The German Public Relations Council therefore considers it necessary to supplement the existing guidelines and codes with a specific guideline dealing with PR in digital media and networks. Its purpose is not to regulate the freedom of private individuals to form opinions. Instead the aim is to provide a mandatory rulebook for anyone who professionally represents the interests of companies or organizations in these media and networks. This explicitly includes private individuals who are paid in cash or in kind for their communication activities.

It should always be easy for users of internet services to tell whether they are dealing with independent editorial content, the opinion of private individuals, or with PR as the professional, interest-led management of information and communication processes. Professional communicators themselves must therefore proactively and explicitly point out when comments are being made in a professional context. Companies and organizations should define their online behavior in written form as part of their corporate governance, and publish this code of behavior.

The DRPR will deal with online media in the same way as traditional media, issuing reprimands or warnings for violations against this transparency requirement on its own initiative or on the basis of complaints. This applies particularly to individuals or companies that actually advertise the provision of these prohibited services.

I. Sender transparency in online media relations

1. Online media relations have long since become part of the day-to-day communicative business of companies and PR service providers. When receiving a digital submission, the editors decide whether they will use the material or not in the same way they did when receiving a traditional press release. However, the sender must also be obvious in digital media relations, for example the company on whose behalf an agency sends documents to an online media outlet.
2. Even though transparency and sender clarity are central for PR, this is certainly not intended to prevent surprising elements in campaigns. A common campaign structure, for example, is to initiate a “mystery phase” ahead of a product launch, building up some sort of mystery about a product or service. As a general rule, the solution to the mystery should be revealed and the sender identified within a short space of time.
3. If paid PR contributions are being offered via supposedly independent editorial offices, editors or private individuals, as apparently autonomous editorial content or private opinions, this is an unacceptable deception. It is also misleading when supposedly neutral institutes or similar institutions are established without communicating who is paying for or supporting these institutes.
4. If websites offer both editorial content and paid PR releases, this has to be distinguishable and comprehensible for the user.

II. Sender transparency in comments

1. On the internet, various platforms give the option of posting comments or discussing the comments of other people. These instruments of public opinion formation include blogs, tweets, test and comparison platforms, forums, social networks and the evaluation systems of online shops or auction sites. The transparency requirement from article I also applies to these platforms.
2. Transparency is also required of people operating on the internet who appear to be private individuals, and who give the impression that a “grassroots” movement is developing, while actually running a professional campaign. If, for example, a company’s head of marketing engages in a discussion – in this function – anywhere on the internet, and argues for his/her product, then he/she must clearly identify his/her function and name in whatever form is normal for that medium. The same applies when, for example, the spokesperson of a politician sides with his/her superior in a blog or a tweet. Here again, name and occupation must be made transparent in the post or at least on the profile of the sender. Obviously, these people are not subject to the same requirements when they communicate online outside their occupational field of interest. The crucial question is always whether a person is acting privately or professionally, be it during the practice of their profession, an advisory mandate or a paid assignment.

III. Sender transparency on mobilization platforms

1. In real life as well as on the internet, it is common practice for companies, parties and other organizations to appeal to their members, segments of the public or the population as a whole to contribute to a cause by expressing a particular opinion. However, this call must not include any encouragement to express this opinion anonymously. Calls for participation must always require that supporters use their real names and, if relevant, clearly communicate that they are a member of an organization or a company related to the issue in question.

IV. Sender transparency regarding sponsorship and product mailings

1. It has become common practice for companies to incorporate blogs and similar platforms into the development and marketing of products. This is in keeping with the idea of “open innovation,” and gives the public an opportunity to participate in the development of innovative concepts. Here too, the sender must be unmistakably clear.

2. Companies or professional service providers that fully or partially finance blogs or other online platforms, and then have their products tested or their topics discussed on these platforms, must clearly communicate their role as a sponsor. If product tests or reviews take place because of a free product mailing, the client must disclose this fact.

V. Collective responsibility of client and agency

1. If companies or other organizations engage agencies or individuals to carry out PR activities on the internet, the obligations from article I apply equally to the client and the contractor. Both sides bear equal responsibility.

2. In practice this means that clients need to define the tasks of their contractors precisely and monitor their implementation. It is not acceptable to use vague phrasing to shift the responsibility for attempts to deceive in online communication towards the contractors.

3. If agencies work “pro bono,” the agency must be clearly recognizable as such.