

Statement Toni Muzi Falconi

Berlin, October 10, 2007.

My dear Colleagues,

I wish to thank the Council for this invitation and promise to try and make these 15 minutes as short as possible, and will begin by informing you that today's event and, more specifically, the experience you are here to celebrate, has recently attracted much attention amongst the global public relations community.

To the point that, only a few weeks ago in Paris, precisely on the 14th of September, the annual general meeting of CERP -the Confederation of European public relations associations (which comprises, besides the German one, another 16 national associations) approved -by proposal of the Italian Ferpi , of which I am a member and responsible for international relations- to set up a task force to evaluate the feasibility of a Pan European council along the lines of your experience and to advocate that all other national associations strive to create a similar organism.

For your information, back in 1988 -I guess just after your Council was created- Ferpi had convinced advertisers, journalists and other communication related associations to sign a declaration of intent to create a similar Council, but.... the paper remained in the drawers. Only to prove once again that in any organization one can sign any document.... but nothing happens unless individuals get cracking and move directly. Now Ferpi, under a new leadership, has decided to try again, hopefully with more success.

I am speaking to you today as Principal Advisor to the current Chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), formed 5 years ago which now includes 62 professional associations from as many countries in all continents. The German association is also, of course, an esteemed member. Members of the GA also include non national organizations such as Cerp, Confiarp,. Fapra (regional) IABC and Ipra (individual). Basically it is the umbrella organization of the global public relations community.

The Global Alliance (GA)'s first assignment in 1992 was to undertake a comparative analysis of its members codes of ethics (then 16) and from there, by applying the generic principles and specific applications paradigm, formulated an ethics protocol which has since been approved (1993) , signed by its members and is now a prerequisite for any new member to join the organization.

I am well aware of the criticisms my host Mr. Avenarius expressed towards this protocol in a very interesting article recently appeared in the Journal of Communication Management, but -as much as I agree with some but not all of those criticisms- this is clearly not the occasion to continue the discussion. I just wanted you to know that I am well aware.

Basically it seems to me that there cannot, and should not, be today anything which looks like a universal code of professional ethics. The recent explosion of the concept of diversity, which is paradoxically a produce of a communication-driven globalization, makes it so that -on one side- public relations has become pervasive in every corner of the world and is a feature of every possible form of organization; and -on the other side- it is widely accepted that each territory has its own public relations infrastructure which mandates specific applications bearing obvious consequences on patterns of professional behaviour.

Of course, let me be very very clear on this, in no way do I advocate a 'when in Rome...' approach, an approach which has led to the dramatic deterioration of the reputation of our profession in every country. Quite to the contrary: the instantaneous global impact today of any organizational behaviour is such that the adoption of generic principles is absolutely mandatory and, depending on the nature of the organization, these principles, when in conflict, are often more relevant than a territory's specific applications.

I see, in your experience, at least three elements which in my view support the argument that the model is very attractive:

1) first of all the interdisciplinary composition of your organization. There is no way in which public relation associations can operate in isolation. And this:

- a) because only less than 10% of public relators belong to professional associations (all together they count today not more than 250 thousand members, out of an estimated 3 ml operators), but also:
- b) because public relations is, as its very name implies, a relationship activity and therefore it's practice necessarily involves other professions;

2) it's policy to deal with issues of general interest, involving indifferently members or non members of partner associations, as well as individuals or organizations;

3) its policy to operate (may I here paraphrase your concept of Öffentlichkeitsarbeit?) in public, with the public, for the public.

These features are unique and of course, around the world and I suspect also here, many traditionally conservative skeptics abound and ask themselves, amongst other questions, how you can operate effectively and, at the same time, stay away from litigation and not be swamped by very expensive libel suits.

Yet, in my view, your approach is the only way that the professional community can positively respond to the growing pressures in every country for the professional practice to become more socially responsible.

It is only ironic that our community has in these recent years eagerly and excessively jumped on the corporate social responsibility bandwagon, thereby contributing to the weakening of its concept, without even shyly focussing on ensuring amongst its own members socially responsible communicative behaviours.

Personally I must say that , although in the past I have never advocated such a measure, I now believe that today the impact public relations practices on the public interest is so relevant....that licensing procedures have become urgent and necessary: both to relieve associations from operating in isolation from reality as they now do; but most importantly to ensure some sort of protection of our interlocutors and stakeholders from our increasing malpractices.

There is an ever increasing acceleration of hard and soft regulatory constraints which every country is adopting related to, to name a few, specific practices like political, lobby, health, consumer, financial, security, legal public relations... and this without any form of participation from professional associations nor any form of harmonization to ensure common constraints in different markets. This trend only creates much confusion. It is time, in my view, that responsible associations be the first to advocate licensing procedures.

Before concluding and thanking you for your attention, may I underline that this latter position of mine in favour of licensing is personal and a minority position in our community and in no way reflects today's prevailing opinion of the Global Alliance. (end)