

## The German Communication Code

### General Section

Opinion-forming and democratic decision-making in the highly mediatized societies of the twenty-first century are based on public dialogue and the weighing of different interests, interpretations and concepts. Public relations (PR) makes a major contribution to the articulation of these often controversial positions.

PR and communication professionals act as representatives of their employers and clients. Like other occupational groups, though, they do not carry out their tasks in a legal vacuum, but are subject to specific guidelines. Some of these are legal constraints, which are reinforced with relevant mechanisms of sanction. Beyond these legal constraints, further ethical norms are necessary and useful, and the professional field of public relations has made a voluntary commitment to observe these.

To be successful, public relations relies on the trust of different publics. They are permitted to consistently take the side of their employer or client, but if they do not wish to undermine the employer's or client's credibility and reputation, as well as the credibility of the entire profession, their work must be transparent and eschew dishonest practices.

The members of the public relations profession perform an important social function, as they are constantly conveying information from the organizations they represent to society (and the media), and communicating with groups within society. To fulfill the responsibility associated with this task, it is in the interests of all PR and communication professionals to define the limits of responsible advocacy, to monitor adherence to the agreed norms, and to publicize any violations of these norms.

This code has been established by the German Public Relations Council (Deutscher Rat für Public Relations, DRPR), the institution of voluntary self-regulation supported by the most important industry associations, as a mandatory code of behavior for day-to-day work within the PR industry.

The code thematizes and reflects on the work of PR and communication professionals. With the norms arising from this reflection, it provides orientation and a legitimation of professional activities within the industry as well as towards society. It has been developed in consideration of existing European and global codes such as the Code of Athens, the Code of Lisbon or the ethical protocol of the Global Alliance. It also incorporates the 'Sieben Selbstverpflichtungen' (Seven Voluntary Agreements) of the DPRG (Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft/ German Public Relations Association). The German PR Council's Guidelines (DRPR-Richtlinien), which are subject to ongoing development, give more details on individual aspects of the communication code. The German Communication Code, combined with these Guidelines, provides the most important basis for the decision-making practice of the German PR Council.

## Specific Section

The key norms and target values that PR and communication professionals undertake to observe are transparency, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty and professionalism.

### Transparency

Public relations professionals represent organizations and individuals and in this sense take sides. Here they derive legitimacy not only by invoking the right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed in article 5 of the German Basic Law, but also communicatively, through explicit “sender transparency,” which enables the publics they are addressing to classify and weigh information. The procedure in specific areas is described in detailed Council Guidelines (DRPR Guideline for Online PR, DRPR Guideline for the Cultivation of Contacts in the Political Arena).

*(1) PR and communication professionals ensure that the sender of their message is clearly identifiable. They work openly and transparently, as far as the legal regulations and their duty of confidentiality toward employers or clients allow.*

*(2) PR and communication professionals respect the separation of editorial and advertising content and do not practice surreptitious advertising. More detailed provisions are contained in the DRPR Guideline on surreptitious advertising.*

### Integrity

Public relations professionals operate within complex and often controversial networks of interests. They may therefore face conflicts of interest during their daily work or when accepting a mandate, for example when two contradictory positions or competing employers or clients are to be represented. The acceptance of such mandates is only permissible if this course of action is agreed on with the employers or clients. The rules of conduct regarding journalism and lobbying are set out in more detail in the Council Guidelines (DRPR Guideline on PR and Journalism, DRPR Guideline for the Cultivation of Contacts in the Political Arena).

*(3) Integrity in PR requires reliability, consistency and predictability.*

*(4) PR and communication professionals accept competing or contradicting mandates only after consulting with the relevant employers or clients.*

*(5) PR and communication professionals separate position and mandate. Individuals are not allowed to work on the same matter both as PR practitioners and as journalists or elected political representatives. PR mandates and journalistic mandates must be strictly separated.*

## Fairness

PR and communication professionals persuade by means of arguments as well as fair and respectful communicative behavior. They avoid dishonest and unlawful practices such as bribery or coercion. Regulations for interaction with political representatives and journalists, collaboration with the media, and the giving of guarantees are set out in the DRPR Guidelines (DRPR Guideline for Media Partnerships, DRPR Guideline for the Cultivation of Contacts in the Political Arena).

*(6) PR and communication professionals respect the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, in particular the freedom and independence of the media, and do not compromise these rights with unfair practices.*

*(7) PR and communication professionals do not pressurize their communication partners by threatening them with disadvantages, or influence them by granting them benefits.*

*(8) PR and communication professionals avoid any form of discrimination based on race, sex or religion, and any other practice showing disrespect for human dignity.*

## Truthfulness

PR and communication professionals do not spread wrong or misleading information. They do not abuse the trust of the publics they address. Defamation or the unverified promulgation of rumors is unacceptable. PR and communication professionals do not feign relevance through the misuse of established and well-defined communication instruments. For the especially high information requirements in the area of ad hoc publicity, the DRPR Guideline for Ad Hoc Publicity applies.

*(9) PR and communication professionals are bound to the truth, and do not knowingly spread false or misleading information or unverified rumors.*

*(10) In the area of capital market communication, PR and communication professionals focus ad hoc messages on facts that are relevant for stock prices and are not publicly known, consider their news value, and do not mislead through untrue or non-transparent statements.*

## Loyalty

PR and communication professionals accept mandates from employers or clients and thereby gain insight into confidential information and strategies. This establishes a special relationship of trust, which also has to withstand high external pressure, insofar as this is permitted by law. Within employment relationships or when accepting mandates, PR and communication professionals must consider whether the services required are compatible with the ethical standards of the professional field.

*(11) PR and communication professionals behave loyally towards their employers or clients, insofar as this does not violate legal requirements or ethical norms. They represent the interests of their employers, protect them from harm and defend against illegitimate claims.*

*(12) PR and communication professionals also behave loyally towards their profession. They are aware that violations of legal or ethical norms undermine the foundations of their professional field and damage its reputation.*

*(13) PR and communication professionals respect the necessary confidentiality of information in working or customer relationships, which is the prerequisite for establishing trust in these relationships.*

#### Professionalism

Public relations or communication management is essentially a clearly defined field of work, but the boundaries separating it from other occupations and areas of activity (e.g. advertising, journalism, business consulting) are blurred, and there are no mandatory, government-regulated entry qualifications ("no restrictions on access to the profession"). There is, however, an area of professional knowledge, abilities and skills, which is continually expanding and changing, and which is taught at relevant educational and training facilities.

*(14) PR and communication professionals are proficient in using the instruments and methods of their occupational field, are willing to self-reflect, and demonstrate integrity in their business practices.*

*(15) Knowledge and observance of the codes and guidelines are part of the skills and behavior required in the profession. They are to be taught in educational and training facilities.*