

German Communication Code

General part

Forming opinions and making democratic decisions in the highly media-centric societies of the 21st century are based on public discourse and the balancing of different interests, interpretations and concepts. Public relations (PR) play a significant role in articulating these often controversial positions.

PR and communication professionals act as representatives of the interests of their employers or clients. Like other professions, however, they do not exercise their mandate in a legal vacuum but are subject to specific regulations. Some of these are of a legal nature, which are reinforced with corresponding sanction mechanisms. In addition to these legal requirements, further ethical standards are necessary and useful, to which the public relations profession commits itself voluntarily.

In order to be successful, public relations depend on gaining the trust of different public groups. They are permitted to consistently take the side of their employers or clients. If they do not want to undermine their credibility and reputation as well as the credibility of the entire profession, they must be transparent in their work and refrain from dishonest practices.

Members of the public relations profession fulfil an important social task, as they continuously provide society (and the media) with information about the organisations they represent and communicate with social groups. In order to fulfil the responsibilities associated with this task, it is in the interest of all PR and communication professionals to define the boundaries of responsible advocacy, to monitor compliance with agreed standards and to make violations public.

With this Code, the German Council for Public Relations (DRPR), as a body of voluntary self-regulation supported by the most important industry associations, sets a binding framework of conduct for daily work.

The Code addresses and reflects the work of PR and communication professionals. With its standards developed from this reflection

it provides orientation and legitimisation of professional action within the professional field as well as towards society. It was developed taking into account existing European and global codes such as the Code d'Athènes, the Code de Lisbonne and the Ethical Protocol of the Global Alliance. In addition, the Code continues the 'Seven Commitments' of the DPRG. The DRPR Guidelines, which have been developed and are to be updated by the DRPR, specify individual aspects of the Communications Code. The Communications Code, together with the DRPR Guidelines, forms the most important basis for the DRPR's adjudication practice.

Special part

Transparency, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, loyalty and professionalism are central standards and target values to which PR and communication professionals commit themselves.

Transparency

Public relations professionals represent organisations and individuals and are thus considered to be a party. They legitimise themselves not only by invoking the freedom of opinion guaranteed by Article 5 of the Basic Law, but also communicatively by making the sender explicitly transparent, which enables the public which is being addressed to classify and weigh up information. The procedure in specific areas is described in more detailed DRPR guidelines (DRPR guideline on online PR; DRPR guideline on contact management in the political arena).

(1) PR and communication professionals make sure that the sender of their messages is clearly recognisable. They do their work openly and transparently, as far as this is permitted by the legal provisions and the confidentiality obligations towards the respective employer or client.

(2) PR and communications professionals respect the separation of editorial and advertising content and do not engage in surreptitious advertising. The DRPR guidelines on surreptitious advertising provide further details.

Integrity

Public relations professionals operate in complex and often controversial networks of interests. Conflicts of interest may therefore arise in their work or when taking on mandates, for example if conflicting positions or competing employers or clients are to be represented. Taking on such mandates is only permissible if the procedure has been agreed with the employer or client. The rules of conduct in the areas of journalism and lobbying

are set out in more detailed DRPR guidelines (DRPR Guidelines for Dealing with Journalists, DRPR Guidelines for Maintaining Contacts in the Political Arena).

(3) Acting with integrity in PR is also dependent on reliability, consistency and predictability.

(4) PR and communication professionals only accept competing or conflicting mandates after consulting the respective employer or client.

(5) PR and communication professionals separate office and mandate. Individuals may not work in the field of public relations and as a journalist or political office-holder in the same matter at the same time. PR assignments and journalistic assignments must be kept strictly separate.

Fairness

PR and communication professionals are characterised by using arguments as well as by their fair and respectful communication behaviour. They refrain from dishonest and punishable practices such as bribery or coercion. Dealing with political representatives and journalists as well as the organisation of media cooperations and the possibility of issuing guarantees are regulated by DRPR guidelines (DRPR Guideline on Media Cooperations, DRPR Guideline on Maintaining Contact in the Political Sphere).

(6) PR and communication professionals respect the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution and in particular the freedom and independence of the media and do not interfere with them by unfair means.

(7) PR and communication professionals do not put pressure on their communication partners by threatening them with disadvantages and do not influence them by giving them any benefits.

(8) PR and communication professionals exclude racist, sexist, religious discrimination or other inhuman practices in their work.

Truthfulness

PR and communication professionals do not spread false and misleading information. They do not abuse the trust of the public they are addressing. Defamation or the unchecked spreading of rumours are not tolerable. PR and communication professionals do not feign relevance by misusing established and clearly defined communication instruments. The DRPR guideline on proper ad hoc publicity applies to the particularly high information requirements in the area of ad hoc publicity.

(9) PR and communications professionals are committed to truthfulness, not knowingly spreading false or misleading information or unverified rumours.

(10) In the field of capital market communication, PR and communication professionals focus ad hoc announcements on significantly price-relevant circumstances that are not publicly known, pay attention to their novelty value and do not mislead with untrue or obfuscating information.

Loyalty

PR and communications professionals take on mandates from employers or clients and gain insight into confidential information and strategies. This establishes a special relationship of trust which must also withstand high external pressure, insofar as this is legally permissible. Within employment relationships or the acceptance of mandates, the question must be asked whether the required services are compatible with the ethical standards of the profession.

(11) PR and communication professionals behave loyally towards their employers or clients, provided that this does not violate any legal provisions or ethical standards. They represent the interests of their clients, protect them from harm and defend against illegitimate claims.

(12) PR and communication professionals are equally loyal to their profession. They are aware that violations of legal or ethical standards undermine the foundations of their profession and damage its reputation.

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

Professionalism

Public relations and communications management are a clearly defined field of work, activity and profession, whose boundaries to other professions and fields of activity (e.g. advertising, journalism, management consultancy) are, however, fluid and for which no binding access qualifications have been defined by the state ("free access to the profession"). Nevertheless, there is a field of professional knowledge, skills and abilities that is continuously expanding and renewed as well as taught in relevant education and training institutions.

(14) PR and communication professionals are proficient in applying the tools and methods of their profession, are willing to self-reflect and behave with integrity in their business conduct.

(15) Knowing and complying with the codes and guidelines are part of professional qualification and professional conduct. They are to be taught in basic and advanced training.

The German Communication Code was developed by the German Council for Public Relations (DRPR), publicly discussed and adopted by the DRPR member associations Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft (DPRG), Bundesverband deutscher Pressesprecher (BdP), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Politikberatung e. V. (DeGePol) and Gesellschaft Public Relations Agenturen (GPRA). It entered into force on 29 November 2012.