

**Cases in Public Relations: Translating Ethics into Action**

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Cases in Public Relations: Translating Ethics into Action

Author: Brunner, B., & Hickerson, C.

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In *Cases in Public Relations: Translating Ethics into Action*, Brunner and Hickerson collected 36 cases that highlight public relations scenarios from various industries and sectors. In the publisher's description, Oxford Press writes that the book "presents the complexities and challenges of public relations in today's ever-changing world" (Oxford University Press, n. d.). The 2019 book accomplishes this goal with cases that remain relevant to its readers even today despite a global pandemic and the advent of generative artificial intelligence.

**Structure and Organization**

This case study text is divided into four sections and 13 chapters. In the first section, the authors include chapters on the case study method, ethical frameworks, and professional ethics codes. The brief chapter (Ch. 1) on the case study method will help students, especially those who have had a professor who uses a facilitator instructional style, which is typical of case

study discussions. In the chapter, the authors ask students to prepare, question, and look forward to participating in the classroom dialog. The chapter also provides guiding questions students may outline before each course meeting to dissect the cases and organize their thoughts.

The second and third sections of the book contain the bulk of the text and address public relations functions and contexts. Functions include crisis communication, social media, and corporate social responsibility. Contexts focus on consumer and community relations, sports communication, health, government, international, nonprofit, and education. A scant fourth section looks toward the future of public relations.

Each chapter begins with learning outcomes, definitions, and a three-to-four-page introduction to the main topic approached by the subsequent cases. For example, the chapter on corporate social responsibility (Ch. 5) leads with a refresher about CSR before launching into cases about Patagonia, Coca-Cola, Belk, and Harris Corporation. Each case is followed by a handful of discussion questions. Chapters employ three to four cases to help readers grapple with decision-making around a public relations context or function.

### **Contribution to Public Relations Education**

The text provides educators with a curated set of cases reflective of today's public relations landscape. Cobbling together cases can be tedious, especially when trying to represent diverse voices, public relations scenarios, and both positive and negative outcomes. The collection of cases and their authors are

diverse. The authors, a mix of academics, accredited practitioners, and even a former NFL player, reveal cases from primary research, personal connections, and current events.

The style of the book lends itself to both new and more experienced students. For first and second-year public relations students, it offers a survey of public relations in concrete cases. Upper-level students could use the cases as discussion starters, and launch into deeper conversations with instructor facilitation and additional readings and resources. Partnered with primary sources and seminal readings, graduate students could tie the more practical cases with theoretical underpinnings.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

A strength of the book is the applicability of cases. While cases about current events tend to age quickly, the topics are broad enough for today's readers to make connections. The chapter (Ch. 10 – Government Relations) about Hurricane Sandy remains applicable as a study for more recent and future natural disasters. Cases also highlight positive examples where readers can see how a stronger decision is made. The examples may not have the “can’t look away from a train wreck” appeal, but illustrate that organizations can and are making ethical decisions. Cases reflect brands readers will recognize and then a few more regional cases, where a reader will easily connect with a similar organization like a family-run grocery chain. Cases are brief at about six pages, making it easy for educators to arrange the curriculum in chunks.

Single cases can be licensed by the publisher. While the bulk of cases is strong, the number and variety give instructors room to curate the ones they value most within the text. For example, a sports communication professor may only want the chapter devoted to sports communication. For upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, the text could be a companion to more theoretical and seminal works. Cases and campaigns courses would benefit from the cases in part or whole, or the text would serve well as a complementary text in a communication ethics course.

What looks to be an effort to create bite-size cases left some concepts needing additional resourcing and direction from an instructor. A handful of cases included appendices with valuable information. For other cases, readers may need to scour the web for key artifacts mentioned in the scenario. More space has been devoted to public relations concepts than ethical philosophies. Readers will require additional support for ethical frameworks. For example, virtue ethics receives two paragraphs, and communitarianism is largely overlooked. Some chapters have overt discussions of how the case connects to codes of ethics and ethical principles, and others require facilitation and scaffolding to lead novice public relations practitioners to major takeaways. This book represents the kind of text where student reactions in the first semester will drive how cases are incorporated in the next semester.

*Cases in Public Relations: Translating Ethics into Action* provides future PR practitioners with a sampling of the decisions they may face in their careers. The text is well-balanced on positive and negative cases, types of

organizations, and PR functions and contexts, enabling ample options for students and educators to discuss ethics in action.

### **References**

Oxford University Press. (n. d.)

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